

Interview with Dennis Bell
January 4, 2016
By Wyatt Bell

WB: What year was it when you were seventeen years old or a teenager?

DB: What year was it? Well, it woulda been... you know, in high school years, 1964-1967.

WB: Where were you living at the time?

DB: I was born and, uh, went through school in Dodge City, Kansas.

WB: How many siblings did you have? What were they like?

DB: I have an older brother a year older than myself, who was very active in sports, wrestling and, uh, outdoor activities. I have a brother that was four years younger; he was very active in, uh, motorcycles, go-karts, things like that, and horses, things like that. I have a younger sister that is ten years younger, who was spoiled rotten and active in anything she wanted to be. (laughs)

WB: What were your parents like?

DB: My dad was blue-collar worker. After he got out of the Navy in 1945, after the war ended, he came back and became a finish carpenter and did that for a few years. Then opened his own plumbing business and had that until he passed away.

WB: What about your mom?

DB: My mom was a housekeeper that raised the four kids and took care of the books for my father's plumbing company.

WB: Were they strict around the house?

DB: My mom was very lenient to make up for my dad being so, so, uh, non-lenient.

WB: Did you participate in any high school sports or clubs?

DB: I was in the drama club, I was in the choir, ah, in high school I was only in track for one year and I didn't participate in any other sports; it was mainly music.

WB: What were your favorite school subjects?

DB: Well, I really wasn't thrilled about being in school at that time. I didn't understand and see the necessity and the need for further education. I didn't get it. I didn't have a teacher that turned on my light bulb about anything. I...I uh, looked forward to being out of school.

WB: Who was your best friend in high school and what was he/she like?

DB: I did. I had several. Cleo Reynolds, one of my friends I went all the way through junior high and high school with. Donny Cecil, I went all the way through grade school and high school and have since been around quite a bit.

WB: What is your most valued memory from high school?

DB: Oh man, there is so many.

WB: One in particular?

DB: I don't know really. I don't know that I can pull one out. There were a lot of things that were great memories that we shouldn't have done and I certainly wouldn't want to talk about on tape. (Laughing) But, you know, I think on one the most fun things that I did and remember in high school was participating in, uh, several musicals.

WB: What made you want to join the Navy and when did you join?

DB: Well, after high school graduation I enrolled in Dodge City Junior College. Mid-semester I... I realized that wasn't for me you know. (Coughs) Excuse me. Which I think a lot of people should realize college, you know, isn't for everyone, but it is

very important to the people that should be there and I knew it wasn't for me. That was in 1967...1968 early. The war in Vietnam was going strong, and I had a brother that was in the Navy and had been in for about a year. I just felt that I needed to get out of this town to do something with my life because I want going to go to school, so that I didn't stay in this town and ruin my life.

WB: From what you can remember, what was the basic training like and what steps did you have to go through to be in the Navy?

DB: Well, basic training was, for me not a big deal, because my dad was such a disciplinarian and such a strong-armed person of raising us, the boys, that for me boot camp was just a walk in the park. They tell you to do something and you do it and you do it to the best of your ability and make it right and everything goes smoothly. But for a lot of kids that were in boot camp that had never been raised with any discipline, it was extremely difficult because they didn't know how to follow directions or an order, and they thought they could buck the system or they could refute the person giving the orders. So for them it wasn't fun. They literally got beat up on.

WB: So like the physical aspect, was that a tough part?

DB: Well, it wasn't in basic training, it's not if you're halfway fit. You have to pass a physical exam to get in. There is marching everyday, there's some running everyday, at that time you had to go to class. Part of some days you had to go to the shooting range to learn how to shoot better; other times you would go to the gas chamber to learn how to react in case you got into a gas situation. Then just doing the things

that you would normally do, doing your own laundry, going to chow, following directions. I think at that time it lasted 12 weeks... I believe.

WB: Was that the only training you had to go through?

DB: That was your first step of training, so then after that and while you're in boot camp they give you what is called a Basic Battery of Tests that checks your aptitude for what you are best suited to do in the service. I got selected to be, in Navy terminology, a radioman. Which a radioman is on every vessel the Navy has, on every station the Navy has, on every base the Navy has. They are the direct line of communication with other squadrons, with other bases, with other ships, with other submarines, or other planes. So that is what they said I was best suited for. So then at that point after boot camp, then you go to three months of what they call "A School," which was to become taught to be a radioman: basic electronics and electricity, Morse code, learning circuitry, and how to make receivers and transmitters work properly.

WB: How many years did you serve?

DB: I was in almost 11 years. I... I was lucky or unlucky enough (laughs), depends how you look at it. Lucky enough to be selected to a portion of a communications area of the Navy that was called VLF, which is very low frequency, and worked at two, of only two in the world, transmitting facilities that transmitted a megawatt of power, which is a million watts that those transmit, and that communication was very guarded in security that it sent information to our submarines locating other submarines. So it was a great duty that allowed me to spend some great time overseas and have my family overseas.

WB: Where were you stationed and where was your favorite place?

DB: I was stationed in, uh...San Diego, from there I went to Naval Air Station in Patuxent River, Maryland, which is about 60 miles south of Washington, D.C., at a communications station... at a communications area of a Naval Air Station. From there I went to Hawaii to a Navcomsta in Honolulu and initially started there at a little outpost from Honolulu in Wahiawa, which was a communications center and from there got sent down to a transmitting facility, which is where I got lined up with the VLF sites that I further worked with. After three and a half years in Honolulu, we got sent to a Navcomsta in Harold E. Holt western Australia, which is a very isolated base, which is 850 miles north of Perth, and only had one dirt road in and only one dirt road out. So, there was no radio or television. There was on the base an armed services radio, but that wasn't current television or radio. So you either adapted to liking outdoor activities, which my family did. We did a lot of diving and fishing and hanging out on the beach. From Australia I came back to San Diego for six months of more Cryptology type school for the Navy and from there got stationed at a Naval Air Station in Whidbey Island, Washington, which is about 60 miles south of the Canadian border up in Washington on an island, and that is where I got out of the service.

WB: When you were around my age, what were some things that were on the news that really stood out?

DB: You know... the number-one thing on all news was the Vietnam War, of all the kids that we were losing, which was over 50,000 service members got killed over there. So there was a lot of protest and a lot of people not wanting us to be there. So

making large protests in the streets, and disliking service members, calling us baby killers and all kinds of things, but they didn't want us to be in Vietnam and protested anything that had to do with it. That was the main news.

WB: How did you first meet Martha?

DB: (laughs) I was... that was the semester I was enrolled in JuCo in Dodge City. My friend Cleo Reynolds and I were going up the stairs-by the way that building was what is now the USD 443 administrations building-the old junior college, which is across the street from the library here in town. But we were going to class that morning and I saw this... beautiful woman standing on the steps that had legs to die for, and I told my friend Cleo that I was gonna marry her. That's how I met her; I went up and introduced myself.

WB: When did you get married to Martha and where?

DB: We got married July 6th of 1969, in Copeland, Kansas... in a church where the air conditioner didn't work.

WB: Did you notice anything about the Civil Rights movement?

DB: Well, yeah, the Civil Rights movement was a big deal at the time. I noticed it not until I went into the service and was in A-School, which woulda been, ummm, mid-year of 1968, and on the base in San Diego there were groups of African Americans that were walking around the base causing problems, and I didn't understand why; I didn't know why. Truly coming from Dodge City at that time, in that era, we didn't have racial issues that I was aware of; I certainly didn't have any. We had a few black families, a few Hispanic families that lived here then, but you know we went to

school together, we played ball together, we hung out together. So I didn't know there was a racial issue, but it became evident pretty quick.

WB: So at the different places you were stationed, was it evident that there were racial issues everywhere you went?

DB: I only noticed it in San Diego, because after that you learned, in the service, that a man's color of his skin doesn't matter at all. How that guy treats you and how you treat that guy is all that matters, because you know when you're in need of somebody to watch your back, you shouldn't be asking what color he is; you depend on him taking care of you as you're gonna take care of him. Color wasn't an issue for me.

WB: Where were you during the Kennedy assassination? What was your reaction?

DB: Well, I was in school, but I wasn't aware of it until I got home from school and I was pretty young, I don't recall the year right now, but I walked into the house and my mother was just so distraught and weeping and crying, and I didn't know why. The television was on and I got to understand what she was so upset about.

WB: Did you watch the first man land in the moon?

DB: Yes, I believe I...I know I saw it either right after of during. I'm not sure which.

WB: Do you remember hearing anything about the Cold War?

DB: Oh, yeah, that was on a lot of the news... the issue with the Russians and the wall and we were in a cold war and everybody was concerned that that other one was gonna push the button on the other one and have nuclear holocaust. But, luckily, enough people had their wits about them to not let that happen.

WB: What did you hear about the Watergate Scandal?

DB: I do... I didn't get it at first; I didn't understand really what happened. It took a few days for me to figure it out, because the news was kinda slight of whatever I was listening to. But, it became obvious that there were people doing crooked things and they shouldn't of, and it certainly became obvious to Nixon in a short time.

WB: Did you ever hear or see anything about Woodstock? Or was it a big deal?

DB: Oh sure...well, it wasn't with me. I was in the service. You know the era that I was in the service were...were the '60s, were the '70s, were the drug years, were the big deal. But, I was so sheltered, by being in the service and being afraid to even go near any drugs because you lose your security clearance and therefore you lose your job. But, uh, we heard all about Woodstock and certainly the music; we all were aware of the music and it was a big deal to the people that were there.

WB: So at the time what was the type of music you listened to or liked to listen to?

DB: Oh... I liked a lot of the rock. I liked Janis Joplin, I liked The Doors, ah, I liked the heavier stuff.

WB: So those were some famous artists during that time?

DB: Mmmhmmm... and The Beatles of course.

WB: Was there a special type of dancing that was popular?

DB: (Laughs) the Twist you know... the Mashed Potato. Some of us danced, but we didn't know what they were called.

WB: What were some of your favorite TV shows and movies?

DB: Oh, The Lone Ranger, uhhh, any Western show back then. In my younger years of course all we had was black and white television. So, after I came back and color

was prevalent and there were remotes and things like that, then everything was my favorites, (laughing) and still is!

WB: So to sum it all up, was there on particular thing about the '60s that you really enjoyed the most?

DB: I think truly I enjoyed the travel in my early Navy years, because I was able to have Martha with me and my oldest son Shane, who was born in Hawaii, and my youngest son Trevor, who was born in Australia, so I got to see a lot of the world with them that I probably would have never been able to see.