

I interviewed Jim Keller, who was a U.S. Air Force pilot during the Vietnam War. Captain Keller mainly flew C-124Cs with the 4th Air Transport Squadron based in Tacoma, WA, which was a worldwide flight operation including many flights in and around Vietnam. One of his main routes was from Clark Air Base in the Philippines to Tan Son Nhut Air Base near Saigon.

Captain Keller grew up in Baton Rouge, LA, and dreamed of becoming a pilot. He attended LSU, then moved to California to attend USC. In 1961, at age 23, he joined the U.S. Air Force and began his year-long training in Selma, AL. He said training was very difficult and challenging, but it was a lot of fun learning how to fly a jet all by himself. He trained on a Cessna T-37, a small twin-engine aircraft. He also completed three months of training in Oklahoma City, OK, to get qualified to fly a Lockheed T-33 Shooting Star. From there he went to survival training in Reno, NV, where he was taught how to survive in jungles, mountains, and in prison camps. He said it was a lot of work but extremely interesting. He then went into an active squadron transporting cargo in a C-124C.

He said survival training taught him to be independent and self-sufficient. "You come out of there as a young kid thinking you're a tiger, that you can handle anything, you're tough, and no matter where they send you or what they do, they can't make it too tough, right?" He said survival training and pilot training were experiences that enabled him to handle a lot of things in life that came up.

Captain Keller said the first real shock came when he first flew to Vietnam. He thought, "My God, this country is gorgeous, it's just beautiful, and suddenly they started shooting and I couldn't figure out why everyone was mad. I was kind of enjoying the scenery. All of a sudden I had a rude awakening."

I asked Captain Keller if he remembers the men that he served with. He said, "You make lifetime friends that never go away." He still keeps in touch with a number of friends and they try to have a reunion every so often. "There's not too many of us old guys left!" he said. He knew a few men who were taken prisoner and spent 7 1/2 years in the prison camp known as the Hanoi Hilton. He also lost several friends over there, including his roommate Cliff Cushman from North Dakota. Cliff was a Silver Medalist in track at the 1960 Olympics. They became good friends during training. "My roommate had taken his camera up on a flight when we happen to be flying formation together. He took a picture of me flying right next to him, which was kind of fun!" They stayed in touch after training but were assigned to two different squadrons in two different parts of the country. Cliff was shot down over Hanoi on September 26, 1966, and they never recovered him. A number of years later he called Cliff's mother. He told her, "You know, there's not a single day that has gone by since then that I haven't remembered your son and thought about him." He said it made her happy to know that people still thought about her son and remembered him. Besides his roommate, he lost some other close friends as well. "I'm sitting in my home office here and I've got an etching on the wall of a couple of guy's names that are on the Vietnam Wall in Washington D.C. and I've got some pictures hanging around here of the guys....it's a deep part of your life."

Captain Keller got out of the Air Force in November 1965. He ended up flying for American Airlines as a pilot for 34 years. He said he got the job primarily because of the training he received in the military. He said back then the vast majority of airline pilots were ex-military pilots. He said that's not true today because the military doesn't produce as many pilots and they don't release that many. He had quite an impressive list of jets he had flown for American Airlines, including the DC-6, DC-7, BAC 111, B-707, B-727, MD 80, DC-10, MD 757, MD 767, and B-747 domestic and international. He said, "I always wanted to be a pilot, I loved it, I had a great time, and it was a great career!" He said he is proud that he served in Vietnam. "Admittedly, we were young and naive, and we just kind of believed what we were told. We went out and did what we had to do, and most of us didn't think much about it until we started losing some friends. That kind of affects you over the years and to this day."

Interviewing a veteran of the Vietnam War was a very eye-opening experience for me. I gained a new appreciation for the sacrifices made by those who served. They were young men who traveled across the world to stop the spread of Communism. They served with patriotism and dignity. They had tremendous courage as they did not really know what danger they faced or how long it would last. They did not know if they would live or die, or if they would ever go home to see their loved ones again. During the interview I realized that he was just five years older than I am now. It must have been really difficult to face all of the challenges that he faced. The impact of losing friends must have been enormous, not only to suffer such a great loss, but also because of the realization of how precarious his own situation was, and he had to face that uncertainty everyday.

When I started reading some of the statistics about the Vietnam War, I was surprised to learn that most of the men who served were volunteers and were not drafted into the military. They were the best-educated forces ever sent into combat, as 79% had a high school education or better. I enjoyed reading about the resourcefulness of the soldiers, and some of the methods they used to survive. For example, I found out they used superglue to control bleeding, duct tape to repair helicopter blades, and Slinkys as mobile radio antennas to extend the range of radios.

I hope I get the opportunity to visit the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall again, as I know it will have a greater impact on me after interviewing Captain Keller. I think it is so important to show respect for Vietnam veterans, recognize their sacrifice, and honor the memory of those who lost their lives.