

U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION
Transcript of National Archives History Office
Written History Interview
Subject: Kim Coryat
Interviewer: Erik Moshe

Segment 1: Jogging Memory:

MR. ERIK MOSHE: Where were you living at the time you enlisted?

MS. KIM CORYAT: Oneonta, New York, 1974.

MR. MOSHE: Why did you decide to join?

MS. CORYAT: Small town, dropped out in my senior year of HS so I wasn't going to college, needed a way out of there. I took the ASVAB and scored high enough that I had my pick of jobs and didn't even need a high school diploma. This was the first time I did well on any test, and I felt like I might actually be smart.

MR. MOSHE: Why did you pick the service branch you joined?

MS. CORYAT: My mother served in the USAF when it was first opened for women during the Korean War. Seemed like a logical choice.

MR. MOSHE: Do you recall your first days in service?

Absolutely, basic training was insane. So much confusion, people yelling at me, trying to understand what was going on, etc.

MR. MOSHE: What did it feel like?

The first couple of weeks (it was 6 weeks long) were surreal. I was really scared most of the time.

MR. MOSHE: Tell me about your boot camp/training experience(s).

MS. CORYAT: I remember this was the first time I ever was made to eat breakfast in my life. Also, the regimented meal procedure, everyone stays standing at the table until all four seats are taken and then they sit down at the same time. You had to eat what you took. I had a cough throughout the time I was in Basic, and sleeping in an open-bay barracks with like 50 other women meant that people would yell at me every night when I would start coughing. We were given periodic smoke breaks and allowed to fall out of formation if we smoked. Some people actually started smoking so they could fall out when we did. I found out I could fall asleep standing up.

MR. MOSHE: Do you remember your instructors?

MS. CORYAT: Yes. I don't remember their names (I think I blocked them out) but there was one tall blond woman and a short black one. The blond found out she was expecting in the middle of our training, and she was nice after that. I was most afraid of the black lady. They weren't allowed to swear at us but she invented words that took the place of conventional swearing. She would get right in my face and yell.

MR. MOSHE: How did you get through it?

MS. CORYAT: I think most of us had it figured out by week 4. We found ways around some of the strictest rules, made good friends who helped. I even joined the church choir so I could get some free time on Saturdays.

Segment 2: Experiences:

MR. MOSHE: Which war did you serve in?

MS. CORYAT: I entered service in 74, so I was a Vietnam-era vet but never had to go there. I went to the Persian Gulf, Desert Shield in December 1990, which became Desert Storm in January 1991.

MR. MOSHE: Where exactly did you go?

MS. CORYAT: My first posting was with the 1st Desert Airlift Wing (1st DAWG) at Al Ain Airbase in the United Arab Emirates. I spent four months there and then two months in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, at USAF headquarters.

MR. MOSHE: Do you remember arriving and what it was like?

MS. CORYAT: It took us three and a half days to get there from Kirtland AFB in New Mexico. Commercial plane, then C-5 military airlift from Dover, Delaware, to Frankfurt, Germany, then another C-5 to Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. The final leg was by C-130 to the UAE. We had anywhere from 6 hours to a full day at each stop. Only one of those nights (the first one in Dover) did we get an actual bed; the rest of the time we were sleeping on floors or in chairs. By the time we got to Al Ain, I was so exhausted I was hallucinating. We were in processed and shown to our tents, where we collapsed.

MR. MOSHE: What was your job/assignment?

MS. CORYAT: At the 1st DAWG I was in charge of the wing commander's office. I worked for him and the squadron commanders in the Headquarters tent. Basically their secretary. When I moved to Riyadh I was NCOIC (noncommissioned officer in charge) of the Air Post Office.

MR. MOSHE: Did you see combat?

MS. CORYAT: Nope.

MR. MOSHE: Were there many casualties in your unit?

MS. CORYAT: My unit flew the C-130s that transported personnel and material all over the AOR (Area of Responsibility), which meant they went as far north as Kuwait and as far south as Yemen. Some of our crews were shot at, but we didn't lose any aircraft or personnel. My old unit, the 16th SOS, which was a special ops AC130H squadron out of Hurlburt Field, Florida, suffered a terrible loss in the waning moments of the air war when call sign Spirit 03 was shot down. I knew every person on that plane. I lost 14 friends on January 31.

MR. MOSHE: Tell me about a couple of your most memorable experiences.

MS. CORYAT: Waking up before dawn on January 17 to the sound of my commander reading President Bush's war declaration over the base intercom and knowing that we could never go back to the way we were before.

MR. ERIK MOSHE: Were you awarded any medals or citations?

MS. CORYAT: Sure, all of them that everyone got. National Defense Medal, SW Asia Service Medal, Kuwait Liberation Medal. Because I was the admin person, I also prepared decoration packages for our personnel, about a thousand of them. Mostly Air Medals and Air Force Commendation Medals, and for the higher ranking folks, Meritorious Service Medals. Prepared and submitted the Outstanding Unit Award that everyone at Al Ain received. I was told that my gaining unit after I left theater would take care of my wartime service medal. Never happened. Still kind of annoyed at that.

Segment 3: Life

Wartime:

MR. MOSHE: How did you stay in touch with your family?

MS. CORYAT: I wrote letters and received them.

MR. MOSHE: What was the food like?

MS. CORYAT: Our chow hall wasn't bad, the food service was contracted out to a local company. I was leery of the meat they served, you really didn't know what it was. I don't remember much about eating there. One thing that does stand out in my mind is everything we ate with and off of was plastic and Styrofoam, which went into the local landfill. I'm still haunted by the thought of all that forever garbage in the middle of the desert.

MR. MOSHE: Did you have plenty of supplies?

MS. CORYAT: Al Ain AB was run by the active duty military but was mostly staffed by the Air National Guard. Thanks to them we had it better off than most. My tentmates were all from the TX ANG out of Dallas, and they were able to get coolers, actual beds, and plenty of lumber to build a screen porch on the front of our tent. At work I was expecting an IBM Selectric but had a real computer, thanks to the Japanese. I used a mouse for the very first time in that Headquarters tent.

MR. MOSHE: Did you feel pressure or stress?

MS. CORYAT: Of course. The job wasn't that bad, I spent most of my career dealing with demanding officers so they didn't bother me much. Sexual harassment was incredibly rampant and borderline frightening. There were 5000 people on Al Ain and only 50 of us were women. While that may sound like fun and great odds you pretty much needed a bodyguard everywhere you went. Put men under stress of possibly dying and only a few women to talk to and things can get scary really fast.

MR. ERIK MOSHE: Was there something special you did for "good luck"?

MS. CORYAT: Nope.

MR. MOSHE: How did people entertain themselves?

MS. CORYAT: We were allowed to RON (remain overnight) in the local city, which had some very nice hotels catering to Westerners. Right before the war started, they opened up an R&R (rest and relaxation) site in Bahrain on a cruise ship anchored in the harbor. You had to travel with your chem gear though, as Bahrain was within SCUD range while we are outside of range at Al Ain. We didn't really

start sending people until after the war was done. Mostly we hoarded our two rationed beers a day until we could get enough to get drunk (6 pack).

MR. MOSHE: Were there entertainers?

MS. CORYAT: Not where we were.

Non wartime:

MR. MOSHE: Where did you travel while in the service?

MS. CORYAT: I was stationed (in order) at Hurlburt Field, Florida; 3-year break in service; Hurlburt Field, Florida; Spangdahlem AB, Germany; Kirtland AFB, New Mexico; 6 months at the Persian Gulf War; Kirtland AFB; NAS Keflavik, Iceland; and Ramstein AB, Germany. I retired in 1994 as an E-7 with 16 years in service.

MR. MOSHE: Do you recall any particularly humorous or unusual event?

MS. CORYAT: When I was in the NCO Academy (a 6-week in-residence course an NCO has to complete to be able to be promoted to E-7), I was a squad leader by virtue of my line-number for promotion to E-7. My squad had a “friendly” rivalry with F squad, and we were always pranking each other, trying to get an edge. The squads had reveille and retreat duty, raising the flag in the morning and lowering it at night, on a revolving schedule so you always knew who was responsible on what day. The rival squad was on the reveille schedule for a Tuesday morning and I came up with a plan to really embarrass them once and for all, and my squad was all in. We purchased a large women’s support undergarment at the BX, wrote “F Squad Sucks” on it in big letters, and in the middle of the night on Monday we ran it up the main flagpole. At dawn we were up watching and waiting for the reveille ceremony to get our laugh. Imagine the horror when we saw approaching the flagpole not F Squad but a formation of Junior Civil Air Patrol kids (10 years old) who were in an encampment nearby and had requested the honor of posting the flag that morning. And it was even worse when I saw the base commander was in attendance to support the CAP. I can still see the puzzled looks on the kids’ faces when they lowered the lanyard to find our surprise package and the thundercloud on the colonel’s when he realized that the Academy students were responsible. I carefully dressed, making sure everything was perfect on my uniform, and went straight to the Superintendent’s office to confess to the prank so no one else would get in trouble for it. One of the main lessons of the Academy was that good leaders take responsibility for their actions. It’s the only reason I wasn’t expelled from the school.

While stationed in Germany in 1993 I took a 10-day solo dream vacation to the Greek island of Iraklion. I was lucky enough to know someone who had a brother living in the little coastal town I had chosen for a destination, and he agreed to let me sleep on his couch. For several days it was the best vacation I’d ever been on, perfect weather, beaches and ancient ruins, bars and restaurants that were open virtually all night. On the evening of the fourth day, my host had the night off from his job so he took me to a little restaurant for dinner. I vividly remember having veal piccata and a salad, everything was delicious. We partied very late and I woke up sick a few hours after getting back to his place. At first I thought it was all the booze but no. I will spare you the gory details but suffice it to say that if there had been a hospital in that town I should have been admitted. This violent illness continued for the rest of the time I was in Iraklion, my poor host came home from work every day worried that the American would be dead on his couch when he opened the door. I don’t remember much from the start of my illness to when my host called a cab to take me to the airport, it’s pretty much a pain-laden and sleep-deprived blur. By that time I was finally able to stand and walk and get out of sight of a bathroom for 20 minutes.

Long story short (I know, too late), the hospital back in Germany said I had one of the worst cases of E. coli they had ever seen. It took me several months to completely recover from it. The worst part? Six weeks after I got back I had to go TDY with a base closure team to—you guessed it—Iraklion AB. I did not touch a morsel of solid food for the three days we were there. The likely culprit, the doctor told me, was the salad which was probably washed in local water but I can tell you to this day I have never eaten veal again or any kind of piccata sauce. But I can brag that I went to the Greek isles and only spent \$49 in 10 days.

MR. MOSHE: What were some of the pranks that you or others would pull?

MS. CORYAT: I was a squad leader in my NCO Academy class—we were feuding with another squad and conspired to embarrass them by running a piece of female underwear up the flagpole for them to find when they did reveille (our squads took turns raising and lowering the flag). We wrote the squad name and some other stuff on the underwear and ran it up the flagpole, then got up early the next morning to watch what happened. Unfortunately, the Junior ROTC was tasked with doing reveille that morning, not the rival squad. We were helpless to watch in horror as these 10 year olds and their captain realized the halyard was at the top of the pole, lowered it to find the underwear. I went to the commander's office later that morning and took responsibility for the prank so no one else would be punished. Needless to say I didn't earn honors from the school, even though my grades were among the highest in the class.

MR. MOSHE: Do you have photographs?

MS. CORYAT: Yes. And video.

MR. MOSHE: Who are the people in the photographs?

MS. CORYAT: We won't go into that.

MR. MOSHE: What did you think of officers or fellow soldiers?

MS. CORYAT: Some were stand-up folks. Many tormented me. I entered the Air Force as a carpenter just as many new career fields were opening to women. I did well in tech school and was subsequently assigned to Red Horse at Hurlburt Field in Florida. This unit is a mobile heavy construction squadron, think SeaBees but Air Force. They build bare base runways and put up hangars. It had NO WOMEN assigned and had NEVER had any women. They didn't even have a women's bathroom in their compound. They did NOT welcome me. I was 19 years old, and all I wanted to do at that point was to get along and do my job, I wasn't a feminist or a crusader. I spent 18 harrowing months suffering the worst sexual harassment on the job that you can imagine from everyone, from the highest to the lowest. I finally snapped one day and tried to kill one of my worst tormentors with a hammer (I have no memory of this). I was quietly transferred from the career field and moved to the orderly room. I pretty much spent the rest of my career in administration. The 70s were the "bad old days" when it came to women's rights. The Air Force turned me into a feminist.

MR. MOSHE: Did you keep a personal diary?

MS. CORYAT: I did while I was in the Persian Gulf. No, you can't see it.

Segment 4: After Service:

MR. MOSHE: Do you recall the day your service ended? Where were you?

MS. CORYAT: I do. I left Germany on terminal leave and went to Albuquerque to make the decision where I would retire. I stayed with a military friend who was pregnant at the time (the “baby” graduated college this past spring), went to bartender’s school, and decided to move back to Vermont (we’d lived there when I was a teenager and one of my brothers was currently living in the state). My last day was just an out-processing appointment on Kirtland, and then I was free to go.

MR. MOSHE: Did you work or go back to school?

MS. CORYAT: Both. I bartended for several years after getting to Vermont. I settled in Bennington. I had an associate in personnel/administration from the Community College of the Air Force, so in 1995 I applied for admission to Southern Vermont College. Completed my bachelors in Liberal Arts in 1997, graduating summa cum laude and third in my class. Went on to graduate school for U.S. history at the University of Vermont in Burlington. I didn’t graduate, I was ABT (all but thesis) and had a dispute about my thesis with my adviser and left school in 2000. Really hate that the degree was never finished.

MR. MOSHE: Was your education supported by the G.I. Bill?

MS. CORYAT: Yes. I used up everything but the last two months, I believe. Still had to take out loans so I ended up \$45K in debt.

MR. MOSHE: Did you make any close friendships while in the service?

MS. CORYAT: Absolutely. Some of my closest friends still.

MR. MOSHE: Did you continue any of those relationships?

MS. CORYAT: The friend from Albuquerque is in Dallas now, and I just saw her last month. There are numerous people I’m still in contact with daily, thanks to social media.

MR. MOSHE: Did you join a veterans organization?

MS. CORYAT: I was a member of the VFW and the American Legion for a while but dropped them both because of their right-leaning politics. Same goes for the Spectre Association.

Segment 5: Later Years and Closing:

MR. MOSHE: What did you go on to do as a career after the war?

MS. CORYAT: I felt my future was with government service, so starting in 2002 I applied for everything and anything I was remotely qualified for, trying to get my foot in the door. In 2003 I got a GS-5 position as a secretary to the USAF military recruiter for the state of Vermont. I kept applying and 18 months later I was hired by the Clinton Library in the volunteer and visitor office and moved to Arkansas. My two years of history grad work was good enough to eventually qualify me for a job as an archivist, which is probably what I should have been my whole life. I’m glad I found my true calling while I was young enough to make a career of it.

MR. MOSHE: Did your military experience influence your thinking about war or about the military in general?

MS. CORYAT: Yes, I think I look more at the bigger picture than most people when it comes to aggressive action against another country. I am also against cuts to military spending because they usually impact the military member and family rather than a weapon system. I personally hate the automatic “thank

you for your service” that you hear everywhere now. I don’t believe most people really mean it, and most don’t understand what they are thanking a military person for when they say that. It’s politically correct crap, but I am gracious because at least they aren’t calling me a baby-killer.

MR. MOSHE: Do you attend reunions?

MS. CORYAT: I used to, with the Spectre Association (this is the unit that lost Spirit 03). I was even on the board of directors for three years. But when President Obama was running for the first time, some key members of this group said totally unforgivable racist things about him and black people in general. I had to cut all ties.

MR. MOSHE: How did your service and experiences affect your life?

MS. CORYAT: If I hadn’t gone into the military I wouldn’t have turned out to be the person I am now. I don’t know if that’s good or bad. Maybe if I followed a different path I might have been a better, more accomplished person, maybe I might have died as a junkie, no one knows. I have a healthy respect for all life, believe that everyone deserves equal treatment, and want to save the planet from the excesses of its human occupants. I’m happy and reasonably successful, so I think I probably made the right choices for myself.

MR. MOSHE: Is there anything you would like to add that we have not covered in this interview?

MS. CORYAT: Nope. This has actually been pretty cathartic. If you have any questions please let me know.