

Interviewee: Bliss, Elizabeth
Interviewer: Robin Sellers
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[original tape recording was defective]

Sellers: Okay, let's just start out again with: do we have your permission to tape record this?

Bliss: Yes.

Sellers: Tell me where you were born and where you grew up.

Bliss: I was born in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, in my father's hospital, Hubbard Hospital, and I went to school and went to college all in Oklahoma.

Sellers: And you had told me on the last go-round that you had met your husband on campus at Oklahoma State, which was at that time Oklahoma A & M.

Bliss: Right. He was the pots and pans boys in the kitchen. It helped pay for his tuition.

Sellers: Oh yeah, I remember a number of those when I was going through school.

Bliss: And all I could see was the back end of him and I thought it was kind of cute.

Sellers: [Laughing] Does he know that?

Bliss: Well, I told him, yeah.

Sellers: All right. You were married in the early '50s?

Bliss: Yes.

Sellers: And he was an ROTC, and so he went on into the Army from college?

Bliss: Correct.

Sellers: One thing we didn't cover, tell me some of the places that you were stationed before you went to Okinawa.

Bliss: Ah, it seemed like we were always stuck at Fort Benning, but when he went into

aviation, it was at Texas. Alabama, at of course Fort Rucker; two times at Fort Rucker. Two times at San Marcus, Texas, then back to Fort Hood. He was a platoon leader in a armor division. And then to Germany. Iceland was shortly after that.

Sellers: And you were able to go along on all of these?

Bliss: Iceland was called an “undesirable tour.” You couldn’t take your family, but I paid my own way over and got an apartment in Keflavik, and lived with the Icelandics. They didn’t like us.

Sellers: Oh! I was going to say that must have been interesting. I guess it was *really* interesting.

Bliss: It really was. They threw bricks through our window, bedroom window.

Sellers: For heaven’s sake, why did they not like us?

Bliss: Because after the Second World War when the British left Iceland, they bombed it. They took out all of the buildings they had built, and everything. And I was told that’s the reason they hated us, because the British bombed and got rid of everything.

Sellers: Didn’t make the differentiation between Americans and British?

Bliss: But I got along fine until I opened my mouth. They thought I was Icelandic, being tall, blonde.

Sellers: Oh, but when you started to talk —

Bliss: [chuckles] They knew I wasn’t, because I couldn’t speak Icelandic at all.

Sellers: I can imagine that that would be a pretty difficult language to master.

Bliss: Well, it was very similar to German, and I had learned quite a bit of German in Germany – household German – because I had a full time maid in Germany and Don and I took off for two weeks. We traveled all over Europe. When I came home, Rusty didn’t speak a word of English.

Sellers: So you had to learn German in self-defense.

Bliss: Yes, so I had to go to school to find out what he was talking about.

Sellers: Well, that’s the equivalent of bringing him back a tee-shirt, huh? He’s going to bring you a new language.

Bliss: I couldn't believe it. He would not speak to me in English.

Sellers: Well, kids pick up languages like a sieve, I know.

Bliss: They do. They do, and he did.

Sellers: Well, I guess it was a good experience for him.

Bliss: Of course, he doesn't remember it.

Sellers: Oh, that's too bad. Let's move on then to when Don was sent to Okinawa. You didn't follow immediately. Tell me a little bit about staying behind and then being moved to Okinawa.

Bliss: I'm trying to figure out where I was. I did stay behind because he was waiting for a place to come open on the island, a home, and when it came open, then I went over. I think I was at Fort Hood.

Sellers: And had he been assigned to Vietnam duty at that point?

Bliss: No, no. That was just going to Okinawa, and it was not the 173rd.

Sellers: I thought that was he had some time in Okinawa before he joined that group.

Bliss: Yeah, then the 173rd was reactivated while he was there. It was deactivated after the Second World War is what I've been told.

Sellers: And he had, in the meantime, become a helicopter pilot?

Bliss: Oh, yes. Helicopter, fixed-winged, he had it. He also had the twin engine, too, fixed-winged.

Sellers: So when you came out to Okinawa, had he gone to Vietnam yet?

Bliss: No. I arrived in July, 1964, and Don left for Vietnam in May, 1965.

Sellers: So during the time that you were there, while he was still there, you lived off base?

Bliss: Off base.

Sellers: And you stayed in the same housing situation when he went to Vietnam?

Bliss: Yes, but eventually, quarters came available and I moved on base.

Sellers: Was it preferable to be on base?

Bliss: Oh yes.

Sellers: Always?

Bliss: Always, yes. Yes.

Sellers: I've talked to some people who've said they didn't want to live on base. But I've never quite understood that, if you it provided for you.

Bliss: The quarters were very, very nice. You know, it wasn't substandard housing on Haboo Hill. It was quite adequate.

Sellers: But that was when you were off base?

Bliss: Uh-huh, but the military housing was so much better.

Sellers: The other wives that were there with you, can you run down the names of some them again for me, please.

Bliss: Okay: Martha Beasley, Irma Bachali, Betty Watson, Maslin – Maslin, she was Maslin LeMay then. (Now Maslin Kain)

Sellers: I can track that down.

Bliss: Dirk, her husband, was killed the second time he went to Vietnam, in the Cobra. (Shot down in the Cobra helicopter)

Sellers: Were you all still on Okinawa when that happened?

Bliss: No, I was home. I was home, and I got the call from Maslin saying he was missing and was there anything I could do.

Sellers: That you personally could do? Why would she ask you that? Did you have some pull somewhere?

Bliss: Well, maybe she thought I did, and I don't know. The only pull I had was Martha Beasley's husband, Rod Beasley, was in the Pentagon, and I called him. And I called the Red Cross, too.

Sellers: Were those things that most anybody would do or did you have some inside track?

Bliss: No, I didn't have any inside track, but I was just wanting to help her. She went

weeks and weeks – Missing in Action. But Rod Beasley knew, Don Bliss knew, that he was dead, but they couldn't tell me until they retrieved the body.

Sellers: Oh, oh, how awful.

Bliss: It was terrible. And she had asked, too, for Don to bring Dirk's body back, but they wouldn't let him because he had earlier brought back a body of a friend of his in his home town.

Sellers: And so you're only allowed to bring back one body?

Bliss: I guess. They wouldn't let him bring back Dirk at all.

Sellers: What kind of gathering together — how do you deal with that? Did everybody come together with her?

Bliss: Yes, we were all there; we were all there. No, I'm wrong. Rod Beasley and I were the two that attended the funeral and we flew to D.C.

Sellers: Is he buried in Arlington?

Bliss: Buried in Arlington. And there was a military sedan waiting for us (that never happened to me before) which drove us right to Maslin's home, and then we all went to the funeral. And walking up the hill at Arlington, it was incredible, to where that the site where he's being buried, there was this huge monument stone with "Bliss" on it, and it was General Bliss.

Sellers: And General Bliss is some relation of Don's?

Bliss: No.

Sellers: No? Oh, it's just coincidental.

Bliss: And we went a few more feet and we saw a headstone for Watson. And it just really hit home. It was awful.

Sellers: That you don't need at a time like that. When Don was in Vietnam, you said that he was able to stay in touch with you by the radio.

Bliss: The Jeep radio.

Sellers: I'm just curious. Did he run out to the Jeep and gear up the radio so that he could call you? You didn't have a certain time that he would contact you?

Bliss: No.

Sellers: Did you ever have that inner kind of feeling where you know something is happening and you expect him to call?

Bliss: No.

Sellers: I've had some wives, but they were from World War II, say that that had happened to them. When Don was in Vietnam, did he get R and R?

Bliss: Yes. Yes, and it was my idea for him to go to Hawaii and I would meet him there. And, I don't know, but from that moment on, it stuck. All the troops went to Hawaii.

Sellers: So you're responsible for the tourist boom in Hawaii?

Bliss: I could have been. I don't know for sure, but I went, and my mom and dad went, and brought Rusty and Gary, because I couldn't afford all of it.

Sellers: The boys were with them?

Bliss: No, but they took them to Hawaii.

Sellers: You mean the military didn't transport you for things like that?

Bliss: No, nope, no.

Sellers: You had to do it on your own?

Bliss: I had to do it on my own. Now, they did Don. But not me. And then the second time, we did it again – the same thing – and I took his mom and dad.

Sellers: So kind of payback? Well, I think that was really nice that the whole family was able to get together like that. Did you live with you heart in your throat the whole time that he was in Vietnam?

Bliss: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. Scared to death.

Sellers: What'd you do about it? Just kept busy?

Bliss: Just kept busy, you know, and raising two teenagers the second time really kept me busy. [chuckles]

Sellers: Yeah, better the first time because you don't know what's coming. When did you leave Okinawa and what were the circumstances?

Bliss: Well, let's see. Now I don't know — it was October, and I don't even know what

year, but it must have been '65, maybe '66.

Sellers: Well, I'm thinking he went to Vietnam in '65. So if he was there for a year, you were in Okinawa for a couple of years, maybe?

Bliss: When the PCS orders came down, I don't know when that happened. Don would know. And then from that moment on, I had five months to get out of Okinawa, and I took the full five months, and that made it October.

Sellers: Tell me about being moved from Okinawa back to the United States.

Bliss: It was just such a smooth move, everything was taken care of for us there in Okinawa, to get the furniture shipped, to get even the dog back. The only thing we couldn't take was our cars; we had to sell them. And when I got on the plane and flew to San Francisco, when we arrived in San Francisco, there was a sergeant waiting for me.

Sellers: And apparently this is unusual?

Bliss: It was very unusual. It had never happened to me before.

Sellers: Usually the military just kind of turns you loose?

Bliss: Right.

Sellers: Why was it so different this time?

Bliss: Because, I guess, we were dependents that were left on an island half a world away from home.

Sellers: Was there someone in particular that was responsible for it?

Bliss: General Williamson.

Sellers: What's his first name?

Bliss: You know, we called him Butch, but I don't know. And Mrs. Williamson, she also was instrumental in seeing everything went smoothly for us.

Sellers: Why do you suppose they were different from the run of the mill military commanders? Was it just kind of the people they were?

Bliss: I think it was just the kind of people they were and the situation we were in.

Sellers: So it was a combination of things, maybe?

Bliss: Yes.

Sellers: So you got back to where?

Bliss: I was at San Francisco. I checked into the BOQ, we spent the night there, and the next morning the sergeant took us to our plane to fly to Oklahoma City, which was my home, and there was a sergeant waiting for me there.

Sellers: And that was unusual again?

Bliss: Very unusual. Very. And I thanked him. I said, you know, "My family's here. I want to spend time with them, but then I'm going to Fort Hood." And so when I got to Fort Hood, there was a sergeant waiting for me there.

Sellers: I bet you wished that happened all the time.

Bliss: Oh yeah! [chuckles]

Sellers: How long did you stay in Fort Hood? Where to from there? How many more moves did you make?

Bliss: From Fort Hood, Don came home and was sent to Benning. And I couldn't go because there was no housing available, then, and I really don't know how long it was.

Sellers: You eventually got there, yes?

Bliss: Yes, eventually.

Sellers: He didn't go back overseas? You said he had been in Vietnam twice.

Bliss: Yes, Yes. He was there at Fort Benning for about a year, and he got orders to go back with the 101st.

Sellers: But this time you didn't go?

Bliss: No, well, this was to Vietnam.

Sellers: Right, so you didn't go to Okinawa or any place like that. You stayed where you were. It was just happenstance that you were on Okinawa with him when he was sent to Vietnam the first time?

Bliss: The first time, yes.

Sellers: So it was just a normal posting and then he was sent into combat?

Bliss: Yes, he was sent into combat.

Sellers: So it worked the same way this time but you stayed where you were?

Bliss: No, I went home.

Sellers: You went home?

Bliss: Yes, because then I had the two teenagers and the two two-year-olds.

Sellers: Was he still able to be in touch with you in the same fashion?

Bliss: No, no.

Sellers: Was that because of the distance?

Bliss: Yes, absolutely.

Sellers: Not the situation or his duties, but just the extra distance. How did you keep up with him then, other than not watching the news on TV?

Bliss: Just through mail.

Sellers: How often did you send letters or did you get them back from him?

Bliss: Oh, I would practically every evening write a short note and mail it. He of course didn't have that many coming my way. Busy.

Sellers: Was that just because he was busy doing other things?

Bliss: Yes, doing other things. But I can recall sitting in the chair after I got the kids to bed, just writing.

Sellers: Just about what had gone on during the day?

Bliss: Yes, and some of the problems I was facing.

Sellers: Did he respond to your letters? I mean, if you told him about a problem or something, did he offer a solution?

Bliss: I'm sure he did. I just – I mean, we worked in harmony with the kids, no doubt about that.

Sellers: But it wasn't like immediate response like they have today, so probably by the

time you heard back from him, you'd already solved the problem.

Bliss: Right. [chuckles]

Sellers: Sort of a running commentary on your daily life.

Bliss: That's right. That's right.

Sellers: How long was he in 'Nam that second time?

Bliss: A year.

Sellers: A year, again? When he came back, where did you meet him? Or did he come to where you were?

Bliss: He came to Oklahoma City.

Sellers: Did you make him promise he would never go back again?

Bliss: No. I don't know why, why I didn't. But then we went to Fort Benning again. It's like we spent our lives in Fort Benning.

Sellers: It sounds like it, too, yes. Well, it can't be too bad.

Bliss: No, I always liked it, and I could hardly wait until I could get in those field-grade quarters.

Sellers: In field-grade quarters? Tell me what that means. I'm not military, as you can tell.

Bliss: Field-grade quarters are for major and up, and at Fort Benning they were these huge homes. Brick – not brick, stucco. Beautiful homes on beautiful streets! And we finally got on Rainbow Avenue – 117 Rainbow Avenue.

Sellers: And how long did you get to stay there?

Bliss: Well, we stayed there until he went to Pennsylvania.

Sellers: So you actually got to enjoy life for a little while?

Bliss: Oh yes, really did, had a wonderful time there. The kids loved it. Well, no, we went to the Pentagon. We went to the Pentagon, and I didn't like that. I didn't like D.C.

Sellers: Why not?

Bliss: Traffic. Waiting in line for everything, it's not me.

Sellers: Where did you live in D.C.?

Bliss: In Springfield.

Sellers: So you weren't right downtown, but you were –

Bliss: A suburb. And you know, we had a nice home, nice neighbors, but I just hated that traffic.

Sellers: Well, that was kind of one of those nuisance postings, I guess, that you have put up with. Can you think of anything else relevant to the history that we're trying to document of Casper?

Bliss: No, just make sure you tell them about General Williamson.

Sellers: I will do that. It will right in your information.

Bliss: Because I know he took care of us, and I appreciate that so much. And you know that he quite ill right now.

Sellers: I have inferred that, yes, from things that I have seen on the website and from things that some of the other people I've interviewed have told me. Okay, let me ask you again if we've recorded with your permission?

Bliss: Yes ma'am.

Sellers: Okay, I'll turn it off.

End of interview