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Orita Kirkman – Life During the Vietnam War

By Orita Kirkman

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Oral Interview conducted by Rebecca Kirkman

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Brigham Young University – Idaho

Rebecca Kirkman: Ok, please for the record, give us your name, and some background information, like where were you during the Vietnam War?

Orita Kirkman: Ok, my name is Orita Powell Kirkman, right now I reside in Olathe, Ks. During the Vietnam War I lived in different places. First in Missouri, Jackson County, and helped support the war effort there by making cookies and sending them to the troops, getting companies to donate pens and pencils and small toiletry items. My friend, Carol, sent packages over to the troops addressing them to different people...no one in particular. That was in the early part of the war. I was in Azores, Portugal on a US Air Force base.

RK: What was it like living on an Air Force base during Vietnam?

OK: Well, I was based at Azores Portugal Field. The Portuguese censored information that we would receive except directly through mail and a lot of things we didn't know about and were not concerned about because we were all part of the Air Force community. And we were very patriotic in supporting our country. Everyone there and most of the men had been to Vietnam or back and forth to Vietnam. And there were no anti-war sentiments there; we did see some from the papers that we received; I do know a lot of young men that wouldn't support the war effort. They would go to Canada or disappear rather than support their country. And all of our family has been supporting our country and fighting in wars. It is not up to us whether or not the war was right or wrong, if the country calls we need to support it. We wouldn't have a country that is why we enjoy the freedoms that we do. The men fought in Vietnam fought for the rebels that went to Canada or skipped our on the country. They fought for the right for them to do that too.

RK: How limited was your info from the US? How much did you hear? Did you hear about Kent State and the Jackson State?

OK: Some of those happened while I was in the States. We were in the heartland in the middle of the country and most everyone supported the war effort. There were very few who didn't. I was here when some of that happened and some was when I was overseas. It wasn't like now days where we have twenty-four hour cable news and when something happens the news crews are right there. There was only ABC, NBC, and CBS. There was no CNN and so they would have to send a news crew to where the stuff happened. A lot of it was just broadcast on small local channels. And sometimes picked up by newspapers but it wasn't instantaneous news like it is now. So it would take longer to get out to the people. Maybe Newsweek or World Report would report something and have info on things. But it wasn't instant news like we have now. And when someone was there you would go for weeks or months without hearing from them and you wouldn't know. If they were dead or alive...captured...they got to send letters back for free. They couldn't write about where they were there were camera and newspaper there but not very many. So it took a long time to get reports back about what was going on.

RK: What are your feelings with your husband in the military? He was a paratrooper man can you tell more about that and how you have felt having your husband going behind enemy lines to rescue people?

OK: Before we were married he served two tours in Vietnam and so did two of his brothers. Both of his brothers were pilots. And John was in para-rescue and was in the front lines. He would be the one to go back and rescue. Pilots are people who went down behind enemy lines a lot. When we were overseas in the Azores he didn't go to Vietnam then but he still went on a lot of missions that were top secret because they were getting pilots out or other people that were hurt of something. Well you never knew being married to someone in the armed forces you got to take over and take care of the family while they are gone. They are gone a lot. It is pride of your country you got to stand behind them and support them all you can.

RK: According to your understanding what was America's goal in the war?

OK: To free the people from the tyranny of the Viet Kong. And the people who were brutalizing and killing the people in those countries. It was a different type of war. It was jungle and dense and it wasn't conventional warfare like in WWI or WWII. That is what made it difficult.

RK: On the base did you spend a lot of time with the air force pilots? Or with people who were soldiers in Vietnam? What were some of their feelings about the war? Was there any drug use and how did you feel about that?

OK: There was no drug use. There was no way you could do that and be a pilot or even on the air force base. Everyone is very professional when you got a plane that is worth several million dollars you got to follow your job or you will be out. And everyone was very patriotic. If you weren't you wouldn't be there so they all did their jobs and they did their jobs well. A lot of them were over there for two or three tours. Not just for one. Some of them didn't come back and some of them were wounded. And some of them didn't come back whole. But they were proud of what they had done. Their Commander in Chief called them to duty and they went and if they didn't we wouldn't be sitting here now.

RK: Do you think the military was using the best strategy to bring the war to an end?

OK: Well, that would not be something that was up to me, people who run the armed services go to college and also have experience in battlefield and I feel that they know the best. They know the best to do, the troops this wasn't any given situation, this was guerilla warfare, and therefore it was different. Still it was all types of things for that, that would be a call for like any of the other wars, you can sit back after it was over, or while it was going on well I would do this or this. Well you don't know that because nobody has all the facts. The government and the military don't have to tell every tiny little thing that is going on. A lot of things have to be kept quiet, and not let out to the public to protect the service men. So the military knows what it's doing. Not like we're

a three world country, they spent a lot of time analyzing over the decisions they made. They did then, they do now.

RK: What do you think were some of the effects of the Vietnam War on the United States?

OK: Well, I think it brought out a lot of antagonist people who, I felt like if you don't love America, leave it, go someplace else. Don't sit here and whine. They have a right to protest, but I have a real problem with people who do that because if you don't like the country and you are not voting then get out. Go to some other country. See what it is like over there. In other countries, they don't have the freedoms that we have here, to speak out, to do different things. So you have the right to disagree with people here but you don't have the right to thumb your nose at the country and say well, I will take all the freedoms, but I am not going to support or stand behind you.

RK: Just from being in a different country during the Vietnam War, did that change your view of the war?

OK: No, I don't think it did. It changed my view of being an American though. Being in Portugal, it was run by a dictatorship, at the time. He was harsh, and you couldn't go around saying things against that country, when you were out in public. You were censored on that. We have a great many freedoms that we take for granted. Others don't have those freedoms in other countries. You can't go talking against the dictators, the people who run the government or you find yourself six feet under. It made me appreciate the freedoms that we have to choose and to disagreement and argument with each other as long as it doesn't involve bloodshed. We do have those freedoms to do that we have lots of freedoms here. But we got to protect them. People start picking away at them and taking them away and then we won't have any. So being overseas was a great eye opener. I always have this saying that I say, some kids think that they have it so bad, and don't like the country, I say send them over to Siberia for six months, they will come back and kiss the ground, because over there you don't have any freedom. You have no rights.

RK: For the soldiers in Vietnam do you think it was a great eye opener for them?

OK: There may be some who disagreed because they were fighting and sick of it. There we like the ones in Iran or Iraq like now, but they were in the jungle. There was a terrible loss of life. A lot of them because of Agent Orange got cancer and things like that, but it is just like my own father in WWII, he went over and served his country proudly. He was never the same, he had injuries for life. He came back blind. He came back crippled. He came back bent over. He had been almost blown apart. He had shrapnel. But he never complained. He just continued to work after he was out of the military. And just before he died they took shrapnel out of his eyes and out of his back and there was still some they couldn't get out. And he walked around like that all those years. But him and all his buddies, they all fought in the Battle of the Bulge. They gave their all for their country. We need to support our veterans. My understanding was, I wasn't here

when the war was over, a lot of veterans came home, they were booed, and spit on and everything else. That should not have happened. They did what the country asked. They should be rewarded for that. Not scorned. Those who scorned them should be ashamed of themselves, because they ran away like little cowards.

RK: When did you first learn about draft dodging and the anti-war sentiment? Did you find out early in the war or later on? Was there a certain period when you noticed it more?

OK: At first there was only a few soldiers going over, and advisors, well they called them "advisors". But when they started drafting and the war effort picked up a lot. That is when the dissident, started. I knew about that, but it wasn't really happening in our area of the country. It was in some bigger cities and things, but we weren't really that affected by it. We would hear about it. But none of us agreed with it, and we just ignored it. Then when we were overseas, we would hear bits and pieces about it. But we were completely removed from the situation.

RK: Going back to the Army/Air Force base, what was it like raising a family on an Army base during the Vietnam War?

OK: Well, I already had one son when we went over there, and then I had two children born there in the Azores. It was great! We were on an island, and so we were like in our own little world there. We had everything on the base. We had movies and things like that. The school was on the base. We had our commissary, and clothing and stuff like that. The island was semi-tropical, and we had flowers and beautiful scenery, even though it was small. And at certain times, during leave, we would get to go to Europe, and travel around there. When in Europe we didn't see any war protest, either. It was enjoyable; it was the days before terrorism. Before a lot of terrorists, never any threats of any kind. We enjoyed the island. We enjoyed the local people, made lots of Portuguese friends. The air base was very like one big family. I think most bases are like that. So everybody sticks together, and helps everybody. If somebody or a family needs something, the husband is gone, others pitch in and help. It was a very good experience. While we were there, President Nixon came over, and meet with Charles de Gaulle of France, and the President of Portugal.

RK: Did you get to see President Nixon?

OK: Yes, he stayed on the base, which was the safest place. He and his entourage, we didn't see him up close, we saw him get off the plane, Air Force One. The motor brigade went by our house, to where he was staying and back.

RK: Did he (President Nixon) give any speeches to give morale to the troops?

OK: He may have, but I would have not have been a part of that. I just worked for the government. I was not part of the Air Force.

RK: What kinds of jobs did you do for the government?

OK: I was an accounting technician, taking care of the commissaries, the clothing sales and hospital accounts.

RK: Do you have any interesting experiences working?

OK: Well there was some kind of political thing with Portugal on one of the years we were there. In the wintertime, the weather would be really bad and the winds would get really high. Sometimes planes couldn't come in. And all of our supplies would come in by boat. By a big ship and be unloaded and the commissary would be restocked and everything. The Portuguese had something going on and they refused to let the ships come in with all of our goods on. We were getting very low on our supplies for babies and certain supplies for women, toilet paper and things like that. Baby food and diapers and things, just everyday things you needed. Finally the winds let up enough that the Air Force flew a couple of big planes in with supplies until they got rid of the problem, whatever it was with docking the ships there. It got kind of nerve-racking, because everyone was wondering when we were going to get supplies. But they fly some in, and they finally go the problem solved, whatever it was with the Portuguese government, so the ships could dock.

RK: Did you have any more problems with The Portuguese government?

OK: No, just that one.

RK: When you were traveling in Europe, did you have any other problems with any other European governments?

OK: Once we were on a train, near the Austrian border, we were on leave, we had our passports. They stopped the train, and soldiers boarded the train, and pulled all the blinds down and locked the doors. Took our passports away. They spoke either Russian or something, I couldn't understand what they were saying, I didn't know, what was going to happen, they kept us there for a few hours before they released us. And let us go on our way, or rather let the train go on its way. I don't know what it was about, some kind of border dispute, and that was during the Cold War. Tensions were kind of high.

RK: Going back to the base, what was daily life like? Were there other children your children could play with?

OK: There were many children. You had to wait to secure a base housing before you could bring you family over. We had to wait a couple of months before we came over. There was a lady whose husband was part of the Air Force was a registered teacher who taught regular school through twelfth grade. We were lucky because some of the bases would have kids go somewhere else for school. But right on the base they had a school, with teachers and everything. They had a good time. There was no television per say. There was television for an hour a day, they had a half of an hour for cartoons, and a half

and hour for other programs. So you didn't have to worry about your kids watching too much TV. Everything had to be brought something like a videotape to be transcribed, we had Armed Forces radio. People did a lot of entertaining, playing golf, playing cards, watching movies. There was a movie theater on the base. They would have one movie for a week at a time. They had a nice golf course in the hills. There were other things you could do?

RK: Earlier when you were talking about the naval base, and a family like atmosphere, have you seen anything like that again? Do you think that was a unique situation to the Vietnam War?

OK: No, I do not think that was a unique thing. I think it was always like that. We were on several other Air Force bases and no matter if Air Force, Army, Navy, or Marines, all the families were close-knit and stick together. There is a comradery, very exceptional and very special. It is like you are a member of a very special, unique, group. A lot of people in all of the services could make a lot more money elsewhere. A lot of them love their work, and love their country. And are dedicated to working and protecting our freedom.

RK: Sorry, back to your family life back at the base, what happened when your kids got sick?

OK: There was a hospital on base that was run by American doctors. The military has a hospital wherever they go. And so we would go to the American hospital for treatment or anything. If your kids got sick you would take them to the hospital. If someone got really ill they would put them on a plane and take them to Germany or to the States.

RK: So they wouldn't take them to Portugal?

OK: No, no. If you were an American citizen to Germany, Frankfurt Air Force base, or taken you to New York. Most things could be taken care of there, like I had two children there. We had a full medical facility; they could do operations of whatever was needed. The kids had plenty of opportunity to play with American kids because of all the families there. They would play with each other. They would also play with the Portuguese children.

RK: How much interaction did you have with the Portuguese?

OK: A lot on a daily basis. I worked with a lot of Portuguese people in my job. When we came back to the states on a visit, Neal (the youngest child), he understood English a little bit but he understood Portuguese better. His grandparents were upset because he wouldn't respond to them if they spoke English. So it was easy for the children to learn, to have both languages.

RK: Did you have a harder time with the Portuguese language?

OK: Yes, I could understand it, and I learned all the main words that you would need to know to be polite. I could understand them when they spoke, but I could not speak it well. But pretty soon, if you are there all the time, and talking to them, you just start thinking like them. It is just absorption of the language.

RK: Did you enjoy enacting with the Portuguese?

OK: Yes, I did, it was the best experience of my life. Because I have never been out of the central part of the United States, and out of the farm. It was a great learning experience. The kids on the base had all the things they would have in the United States. They had their toys, interaction with playmates, birthday parties, Halloween parties, and Christmas parties everything like that. The older ones would have dances and things like that. Just on that small of an island, the place to go shopping was only a couple of places, there were no malls, no big shopping stores. Shopping you did at the commissary on base. Sort of like a grocery store, but different. And then if you shopped off-base, you get bread baked fresh that morning, fresh-caught fish, every kind of vegetable and tropical fruit on the island. Oranges came into season twice a year, pineapple all year, and a lot of other fruits and vegetables. They had tiny little restaurants all throughout the island. The food was fabulous because it was made fresh. They had really good recipes. In the wintertime, December and January, two months were it was really rainy, and but colder than usual, and really high winds. But other than that, it was always very pleasant weather; it never froze, always above freezing. On an island completely surrounded by water, you always couldn't get off when you wanted to. That bothers some of the ladies who were felt claustrophobic of something. But most made it really well.

RK: Was there one event that really stands out in your mind during the Vietnam War?

OK: Was there one event that really stood out was when they said it was going to end. That was it. The men that were there would be coming home.

RK: Where were you when the Vietnam War ended?

OK: ...I am not quite sure...

RK: Where you still in Portugal?

OK: We were in Portugal until 1972, then we were in Spokane, Washington Air Force in 1973. I am not quite sure, because they started pulling the troops out, and then it took a while. I don't know exactly where I was when we were exactly pulled out.

RK: The Vietnam War ended in 1975.

OK: Ok, I would have been in Washington then, at Fairchild Air Force base.

RK: Where you still in Portugal then when Nixon started pulling out the troops?

OK: Well, we were in Portugal until 1972.

RK: He started pulling out the troops in 1969.

OK: In Portugal our information was limited. At that time the Cold War was going on. I was going pretty strong everyone was more or less concentrating on that. They were making sure that Russia didn't do something really bad.

RK: So was there more tension about the Cold War on the Air Force base than the Vietnam War?

OK: Yes because with everything you just don't know what was going on with Germany and Russia there was a lot of covert activity and spying. Most of it was not let out to the general public if you were in the service you knew more about what was going on than the general public. There were a lot of spy places flying and different operations going on. At that time my husband was involved in a lot of those rescues and a lot of them were classified and we didn't know if they were coming back or if they would be shot down or captured or what. Sometimes they went out on diversions when a sailor might be injured or something for another country and they would try to get them medical attention. They would jump in the water and give aid to the person who needed it and then let them off at the nearest port.

RK: Do you remember a certain time when you were really worried about your husband's whereabouts or you found out about a mission he had been on?

OK: Well there was one time that a sailor cut his hand off and they requested aid from everyone who was around and so they jumped out and the seas were really high. The waves were twenty feet tall and it was winter. They got on board the boat and they saved the man's life but it was flying an Olympian flag and all the sailors were Chinese sailors but they were under an Olympian flag. It was communist time and they let them out at one of the small islands and they were very, very grateful to them because they saved this man's life. They put them off on the closest port which was on a very, very small island and then the Air Force had to fly in and pick them up and bring them back to our island. There were some where they went after downed pilots and they were sticky situations. One of them and some of them are probably still classified and we never knew where they went, what happened, when they were coming back or how long they would be gone. It was always nice to see them come home.

RK: How did the other wives handle their husbands going on missions and not knowing if they were coming back?

OK: The same way because you all stuck together as a squadron. It was like your family away from home. You had a thirty of forty brothers or sisters of something. So all the women lived very close and if someone had sick kids some of the others would com and take care of the kids that weren't sick if somebody was lonely, despondent, or pregnant the other wives would rally around and help them until their husbands got home. It was

just the thing you did and everybody was in the same boat because everybody was away from home and so we all stuck together.

RK: Do you know someone who had lost a husband while you were at the base?

OK: Yes they weren't at the base. They were people I knew back in the US that lost a husband or a fiancé or something.

RK: How was their reaction to the war then they lost their loved one?

OK: Well it was extremely sad. It didn't make a difference it was war or not. If you are in the military it didn't make a difference if they were on ship or flying plane there could be an accident anywhere. And some jobs are more dangerous than others. You just know that it could happen. You don't want it to happen but you just have to go on. The ones I felt really, really bad about were the prisoners of war or missing in action and some of those people still don't know what happened to their loved ones. They don't know if they were captured or dead or what. That's worse. There are things worse than death. Not knowing what happened to your loved one. Knowing if they are still alive or a prisoner or whatever, I think it was John McCain, and I have a great deal of respect for him, I think he ran for President, he is a senator and I think he has some problems with temper and stuff because of the war. But he spent five years as a prisoner of war...the man was tortured. His legs were broken, his body was beaten but he came through it. He is a miracle. They were worse on him than on the other prisoners. So these men who were tortured and prisoners really went through hell for this country and as far as I am concerned they be held up in great esteem and should get life-long pension because they did so much for their country. They went beyond the call of duty they didn't buckle under to the enemy or anything.

RK: Did it change the perception, of people who lost loved ones, of the war? Did they still feel as patriotic? Even after they found out that their loved one had been captured or was missing in action?

OK: The ones that I knew didn't make any difference. It didn't change their perception of the war. If anything it made them more determined to make them more steadfast and they were behind the military and government. And it is hard when you lose a loved one or a cousin or brother or whatever. It is hard. But when you are in the military, from the minute you sign that paper, you are always aware that something could happen to you. No matter where you are. You could be a desk clerk and get hit and killed in the military so your life is constantly on the line just like our policemen and firemen here at home do much the same way and you learn to live with that and many people in the military live to serve twenty or thirty years and never injured or hurt but you just go with that assumption but when you are in war bad things happen to good people. It is like my husband both his brothers were over there and his mother spent quite a bit of time in trepidation because three sons were over there at the same time and they all refused to come home. They wanted to serve their country. They were there and in the war zone all the time, in different jobs but they were all there at the same time. It happens. No one wanted to lose

their loved ones or anything or maimed or hurt a lot of them came home very bad mental or physical conditions but they did come home. It is something that you hope doesn't happen but if it does you live with it and you go on.

RK: Are there any final thoughts that you would like to share? Anything you would like to teach your children about the Vietnam War?

OK: I think that maybe in another twenty or thirty years in can be analyzed by people who weren't a big part of it that objective and they can look at these military strategies and see if there is anything that could be done different I know politics sometimes enters into war too but it is just like our latest war, there war a dictator that was very bad that was taken out so history will have to look back on the Vietnam War and see if it was or wasn't a good war but the people who served in it and fought for their country...the honor was not a dishonor because they did what the country asked. I can't personally say whether I agree or disagree whether is wrong or something like that...that will have to be something for the historians and military strategists, in later years, to decide. But I am very proud of our military and I support them in anything they do.

RK: Thank you so much for your time and participating in this interview Ms. Kirkman.

OK: Thank you.