

**Jay Clyde Wright** interviewed October 10, 2007  
E4, US Army, November 1972 – October 1974

Jay had just been accepted as an electrician apprentice in a one year program when he received his draft notice. Jay then enlisted to try to get more control over his military destiny. Before he went in, he



received calls from the Air Force, and they'd asked him to enlist there and they would have guaranteed him an electrician's job, but he would have had to commit to three years for the guarantee. Because he had just been accepted to the apprenticeship program, Jay decided to enlist for two years with the Army.

Boot camp was at Fort Dix, NJ. The men were given hair cuts and shots and were issued uniforms. The next day, training began. There was a lot of marching in the sand. They were told to bring along an extra shirt on the march to the rifle range. By the time they arrived at the range, their shirts were wet with sweat even though it was early November. Reveille was around four or five in the morning and they would run before breakfast, then have physical training. They didn't go out on bivouac because the weather was too cold. Jay recalls that the experience was not very grueling.

#### A Predetermined Fate...

They were given aptitude tests, but the results weren't very important because there was a big need for Military Police (MP). The men were given the opportunity to fill out a dream sheet of what they wanted to do and where they wanted to be stationed. Jay knew none of this mattered and he would end up as an MP. The Vietnam War was winding down and the military prisons were full. Fort Gordon, GA is where MP training took place and this is where he was sent. MP school lasted for eight weeks and the training involved learning to fire the .45 pistol and stopping riots. Next was Correctional School which continued the training with more courses on riot and traffic control.

Jay's assignment after Correctional School was Fort Leavenworth, KS. Leavenworth was a full military base which also had a military prison. There were about 1,000 inmates there, all of whom had been in the military. Out of the 100 men who were with Jay at MP school at Fort Gordon, about 50 were assigned to Leavenworth. The MP's were all interviewed upon their arrival in order to assign them to a job at the prison. Because of Jay's size, he was given the job of working in maximum security.

The prison building was laid out in a spoke arrangement and included a basement, called "the base." There was even a sub-base underneath where an electric chair was located. Bases 4 and 7 were for inmates and this is where Jay worked. The building was surrounded by a 40' high wall that was 5' thick and had guard towers. The cells in maximum security were 5' x 8', held one inmate and included a sink, toilet and bunk. There were three shifts for the guards to cover the prison around the clock. Jay chose to work the third shift from 9 pm to 5 am. He chose this shift because the inmates would most likely be sleeping during this time. He soon changed to the second shift, from 1 – 9 pm, as this would allow him to get off base more in the nighttime with his friends.

Each shift consisted of two guards on duty in each base. Guards could not leave until their relief arrived. Then, they would give the arriving guards a turn over report to let them know about anything important such as if an inmate had been acting up. The guards were un-armed to prevent the inmates from gaining access to weapons. Inmates in maximum security were only allowed out of their cells one at a time and only had one hour of recreation a day. Part of the guard's job was to feed the prisoners at meal time by sliding the food tray through a slot in the cell door. Sometimes, the tray would be shoved back out and onto the guard. Everyone ate the same except the Muslims who received a special diet in accordance with their religious beliefs. Guards also had to administer medications and make sure that the medications were taken so the inmates could not save up their pills for a few days.

Guards were only permitted to defend themselves and could not initiate any contact against the inmates. Even the guards in the towers on the wall were only armed with shotguns loaded with bird shot. They were told to make sure if an inmate was shot going over the wall that he fell outside of the wall instead of inside so it would be clear he had been trying to escape.

A Celebrity Inmate...

One famous inmate in maximum security was Lieutenant William Calley who had been found guilty of the My Lai massacre in Vietnam. Calley was later pardoned by President Nixon, but spent a few months at Leavenworth. He was kept in his own area to avoid problems with the other inmates. Some of the guards had Calley autograph the book he had written; this was something the prison administrators were not too happy about.

Some of the inmates would talk to Jay and tell them their stories. One claimed that he had been sentenced for stealing \$.32. If inmates could prove that they were mentally ill, they could be moved to the psychiatric area where the accommodations were better. To prove their illness, one inmate set his arm on fire and another ate a light bulb. In these situations, it would be up to the guards to save the inmate. There was always a fear by the guards of being attacked by the prisoners. They knew that the Army would not negotiate if they were taken hostage. Jay tried to get assigned to the base electrical shop which would do repairs along with trusted inmates, but didn't get the assignment.

For recreation, there was a golf course and tennis courts on the base as well as a wood shop the men could use. Jay and his friends would also go to some Kansas City Royals baseball games. At first, Jay lived on the base in barracks, but later moved with some friends into an apartment off base. While Jay was at Leavenworth, his grandfather died and Jay was going to fly home for the funeral. The morning he was to leave, the apartment building caught fire and they had to evacuate wearing just the clothes on their back. They were not allowed back in to collect their belongings. The uniforms were re-issued by the Army and the Red Cross and Army relief funds gave each man \$150 to replace their belongings. Jay never did make it back for the funeral.

At the end of Jay's enlistment, the Colonel tried to talk Jay into re-enlisting. He was offered an increase in rank and \$12,000. Jay was anxious, however, to get back to his apprenticeship and declined. There wasn't a ceremony, but Jay did feel relief upon his discharge. He had been counting down the days.