

Loomis, James US Coast Guard

[00:00:12.38] MARC HENDERSON: When and where were you born?

[00:00:13.85] JAMES LOOMIS: New York City, 1941, April 16.

[00:00:17.93] MARC HENDERSON: And what do you consider your hometown?

[00:00:22.64] JAMES LOOMIS: Rhinebeck, New York.

[00:00:25.28] MARC HENDERSON: Any family members that were influential or you want to mention?

[00:00:29.63] JAMES LOOMIS: No, just my brothers are deceased. My parents are deceased. So it's my children, grandchildren. It's them.

[00:00:40.43] MARC HENDERSON: Sure. How old were you when you first went to Vietnam?

[00:00:44.12] JAMES LOOMIS: 28.

[00:00:44.78] MARC HENDERSON: When did you enlist?

[00:00:47.46] JAMES LOOMIS: [EXHALES] October 31, 1965. I put in to voluntarily fly with the Air Force Rescue. And I did it primarily to just test my skills to the max.

[00:01:11.41] And what happened was, from the time I volunteered to the time I was called, my opinion had changed quite a bit. I never was very hawkish, but I was even less hawkish at this point. But I truly believed in the mission. Combat rescue, you just can't get more noble than that. So, that's where I was.

[00:01:40.33] MARC HENDERSON: Sure. So in 1965 when you enlisted, the draft was still underway. What was your impression of the draft?

[00:01:49.39] JAMES LOOMIS: You mean draft dodgers and such?

[00:01:50.74] MARC HENDERSON: No, I mean what influenced your decision to enlist? Did the draft?

[00:01:56.38] JAMES LOOMIS: Oh.

[00:01:56.98] MARC HENDERSON: Were you worried about being drafted?

[00:01:58.27] JAMES LOOMIS: Well, sort of. I tried to get into the Coast Guard Reserve. I had a cousin who was in the Coast Guard and talked about how good it was.

[00:02:06.01] And so, I was going to come in as a reserve. But the door was being knocked down by draftees, primarily, or people trying to avoid the draft. And so, I didn't want to wait any longer, I thought-- not because of the draft, I just wanted to get on with my life.

[00:02:25.18] MARC HENDERSON: Why the Coast Guard and not one of the other services?

[00:02:27.65] JAMES LOOMIS: Well, like I said, my cousin was-- and he's a pretty close first cousin-- he joined. And before him, I wouldn't have known who they were from Adam. JAMES LOOMIS: Graduated from boot camp, I was a seaman apprentice.

[00:02:45.34] I was stationed in Cape May pending my electronics technician school in Groton, which was coming who knew when. But, in any event, we did things like we had an apartment, which was right next to a recreation area where the undergraduates were allowed to go on Friday nights. And we sold them beer out the window.

[00:03:11.92] Cape May was-- boot camp was pretty interesting. It was pretty stringent. They had us mow these-- row these lifeboats-- weighed a ton, I mean literally a ton. And we'd race these up and down, I guess the inlet there. And whoever won got extra liberty that weekend. So it's pretty--

[00:03:32.86] MARC HENDERSON: Competitive.

[00:03:33.52] JAMES LOOMIS: Yeah, you got it. There's a great tavern, downtown Cape May. And it was called the Ugly Mug by a bunch of guys back in the '20s. And they all had their mugs made with their names on them. And everybody who died, the mug was turned the other way.

[00:03:51.25] So there must be still-- I was there a couple of years ago. They were still there. There must be 300 of them that are turned the other way.

[00:04:00.71] MARC HENDERSON: Can you tell us about A-school?

[00:04:03.52] JAMES LOOMIS: It was Electronics Technician School. And it was pretty tough. It wasn't as easy as I thought it was going to be. But I struggled through it and graduated.

[00:04:15.67] MARC HENDERSON: What was the school preparing you to do? Or what is an electronics technician in the Coast Guard's job?

[00:04:21.79] JAMES LOOMIS: Everything. It's electronic repair of radar and, on land, it's LORAN and, oh, anything that's electronic we were expected to be able to repair.

[00:04:37.25] MARC HENDERSON: OK. Did the training prepare you for your first assignment?

[00:04:41.34] JAMES LOOMIS: Mm-- We needed a lot of additional training after. It wasn't quite as simple as they made it out to be.

[00:04:53.00] MARC HENDERSON: Where was your first assignment? And did you have a choice in where you went or did the Coast Guard?

[00:04:57.05] JAMES LOOMIS: No, I chose ET School. That was my first assignment there. When I got out of there, I went out to Point Arena, California, to a LORAN station.

[00:05:09.37] The LORAN station was interesting duty. We didn't realize how critical it was. You're serving all its ships at sea and all the airplanes and everything else. And, to us, we're just changing tubes and doing this and that, whatever we had to maintain the equipment. But I didn't appreciate until later on how much they entrusted to everybody in that service.

[00:05:37.31] MARC HENDERSON: What was LORAN?

[00:05:38.99] JAMES LOOMIS: Long Range Navigation. They're-- Coast Guard had stations all over the world. And what they did was they would transmit between stations. And the time it took these to cross, they could measure the times and tell you what your longitude and latitude was.

[00:05:56.54] MARC HENDERSON: From that first assignment, where did you go from there?

[00:06:03.02] JAMES LOOMIS: I went to Japan. And that's generally what they did. They'd send you to a stateside unit and then-- to prepare you for heading off overseas. And I did that.

[00:06:19.04] When I went there, I was a senior electronics technician. I mean, you talk about being thrown into it. It was really demanding work.

[00:06:28.01] MARC HENDERSON: What was your pay grade by this point?

[00:06:29.93] JAMES LOOMIS: I was an E-5. Promotion in that rate was off the charts because they were expanding these LORAN stations all over the world. And each station had to get, depending on the size of the station, anywhere up to 10 electronics technicians. And you put that on a couple of hundred stations, that's a big training requirement.

[00:06:53.34] MARC HENDERSON: Big demand.

[00:06:54.24] JAMES LOOMIS: Yeah.

[00:06:55.13] MARC HENDERSON: From there, did you go to OCS or did you have another assignment before?

[00:06:58.16] JAMES LOOMIS: I went to the Coast Guard Supply Center in Brooklyn. And it was the supply center for everything-- nuts and bolts and what have you. And it was also the LORAN refurbishing home. And they put me on that.

[00:07:16.49] And I kind of rebelled against that because here I'd been in for four years and a lot of touches on LORANs, and I'm being expected to go out on the cutter and fix the radar in the

middle of the night and just-- So I complained about it because my time to ship over was fast coming. And the chief thought I was trying to, I don't know, put the muscle on him or something.

[00:07:46.31] And I said, no. I said, it's just I want to be feeling competent in what I do, and I just keep doing this. He said, OK. So he put me in another section of the maintenance section, and I was happy camper.

[00:07:57.83] MARC HENDERSON: What were you working on then, if not LORAN?

[00:08:00.11] JAMES LOOMIS: Say we were going to make a change to a piece of electronic equipment, we would get it on paper. We would, from the paper, we would make it into a working either a box, a square box, or something like that, plug it in and hope that it worked. Usually it did.

[00:08:19.10] MARC HENDERSON: A lot more job satisfaction?

[00:08:20.90] JAMES LOOMIS: Yeah.

[00:08:22.13] MARC HENDERSON: And did you go to OCS from there?

[00:08:26.75] JAMES LOOMIS: Yes, I did.

[00:08:27.68] MARC HENDERSON: So did they tell you you were going to OCS or did you apply?

[00:08:31.55] JAMES LOOMIS: It's a kind of funny story. The personnel officer, or human resources as they call them now, called me down to his office one day. He said, how would you like to go to OCS? I said, me? And he said, yeah, you.

[00:08:45.72] I said, well, OK. And he said, would you rather go to sea or would you rather fly? I said, the Coast Guard has airplanes? And he says, yeah. So they sent me over to Floyd Bennett Field, nearby Floyd Bennett Field, to go out on a flight to see if I liked it, and if the guys who were flying the airplane thought I had the potential, and what have you. And it was a good fit, so I went from there to OCS.

[00:09:11.51] And, as a second class-- I don't know if I'd made first yet then or not. I think I was still second. Second class-- this is how hurting they were for pilots, and two years of college, could qualify for admittance, or three years of college and one year of experience.

[00:09:36.12] So I made it into that on that guaranteed point. We were guaranteed. It was rare because we were guaranteed aviation going into OCS.

[00:09:46.82] MARC HENDERSON: Well, where did you go for OCS?

[00:09:49.10] JAMES LOOMIS: Right up the river here in Yorktown.

[00:09:51.38] MARC HENDERSON: Yorktown. Can you tell me about Coast Guard OCS and what year?

[00:09:58.07] JAMES LOOMIS: Well, I don't have anything to compare it to except it was-- I thought about it when I was driving up the Bay Bridge here and how many times I ran into that top on that bridge on Friday mornings during exams. Every Friday morning was navigation exams. I didn't really hit it. I'd come close a couple of times.

[00:10:20.08] And it's touch and go a little bit. But it was a real challenge, navigational challenge. And we knew it was coming every Friday.

[00:10:26.11] MARC HENDERSON: Sure. What year was this?

[00:10:28.00] JAMES LOOMIS: I'm sorry?

[00:10:28.39] MARC HENDERSON: What year was this?

[00:10:29.59] JAMES LOOMIS: That would have been '65.

[00:10:30.88] MARC HENDERSON: OK.

[00:10:31.69] JAMES LOOMIS: And if you had a quartermaster in the class, that was unfair. That's all these guys did, was navigate. And navigation was the nut of OCS. If you could navigate, you were golden. So we had to work extra hard.

[00:10:47.77] MARC HENDERSON: Did OCS adequately prepare you ultimately for follow on as an aviator?

[00:10:55.84] JAMES LOOMIS: Well, they had very little mention of aviation at all, as I recall. So I can't really say that they did.

[00:11:04.99] MARC HENDERSON: How about as a Coast Guard officer?

[00:11:08.14] JAMES LOOMIS: Yeah, we had some good ones and we had some not-so-good ones.

[00:11:12.76] MARC HENDERSON: Sure, sure.

[00:11:14.11] JAMES LOOMIS: Like anywhere else.

[00:11:15.53] MARC HENDERSON: And so, from there, did you go directly to flight school or was there some other training before flight school?

[00:11:20.74] JAMES LOOMIS: That's one other thing. I was just talking with a guy here who graduated a year before me in OCS. I first really started thinking about OCS when-- or Vietnam

rather-- when our nav instructor, they called him out of class one day to tell him he's going to be driving an 82-footer in Vietnam.

[00:11:41.29] Wow, we're in a class and-- pack your bags, you're going. I said, wow, this is real. So that was when I first really became cognizant of it, personally.

[00:11:54.08] MARC HENDERSON: And--

[00:11:54.73] JAMES LOOMIS: So then, yes, from there I went on to flight training.

[00:11:58.03] MARC HENDERSON: And what was flight training like for the Coast Guard?

[00:12:01.90] JAMES LOOMIS: Well, it was Navy flight training. So it was pretty standard. We usually fared pretty well.

[00:12:13.12] I chose helicopters, I could have gone either way, fixed-wing or helicopters, because I thought that's where the action is. That's what you can do the most good. And I was accepted for it. And, as it turned out, I got transferred to the air station in San Juan, and we had both helicopters and airplanes, and I got to fly both, which was great.

[00:12:37.96] MARC HENDERSON: What were you flying initially?

[00:12:41.80] JAMES LOOMIS: Initially was the H-52, a single engine helicopter.

[00:12:45.55] MARC HENDERSON: H-52? And then what type of airplanes?

[00:12:47.73] JAMES LOOMIS: It was the old Albatross, the big seaplane. Great airplane.

[00:12:53.74] MARC HENDERSON: Sure. And how long were you stationed there at your first assignment?

[00:12:57.79] JAMES LOOMIS: I was probably there about two years.

[00:13:00.31] MARC HENDERSON: You went on to be part of a Coast Guard exchange program with the Air Force. Could you tell me about how you learned about the program, how you applied for it or if you were chosen?

[00:13:11.17] JAMES LOOMIS: Well, the Air Force had about-- I forget how many helicopters. They were seriously understaffed after Korea because flying a helicopter was not a good way to get promoted in the peacetime Air Force, in the Air Force. You want to tell lies at the O-club, you know?

[00:13:34.78] So they had-- they needed us. Not that they weren't going to make it without us, but we certainly helped. We gave them three instant aircraft commanders with a fair amount of experience. So we were accepted. We were welcomed.

[00:13:55.12] I read about it in something from headquarters where they put our general information. I said, wow, that sounds interesting. I'd like to try that. And so I did.

[00:14:09.91] And the requirements to get accepted-- there were three of us who went. You had to be a lieutenant commander or lieutenant or-- well, you had to be a captain, an aircraft commander. If you weren't an aircraft commander, you weren't eligible.

[00:14:32.41] So later on down the road, a couple of months or so later-- I don't know what the time was, but on June 8, 1968, the commanding officer comes into my office-- me, with an office-- and he gives me a-- I guess they were telexes in those days, instead of faxes and everything else. And it told me that Lieutenant Jack Rittichier had just been killed in action.

[00:15:05.69] And it was kind of like getting punched in the gut because deep down I didn't think I was really going to go. It wasn't that didn't want to go. I just-- I don't know. Probably if I had to make the choice over again, I may not have.

[00:15:16.93] I don't know. But they took all of us, all three of us. And it worked out pretty well for everybody.

[00:15:27.01] MARC HENDERSON: What was the training like with the Air Force before they shipped you over to Vietnam?

[00:15:32.56] JAMES LOOMIS: Well, they sent us through a lot of training. The first thing they sent us to was Transition School, to the CH-3 helicopter, which is sort of like the Jolly Green, only it didn't have in-flight refueling, and armor plating, and drop tanks, and what have you, but it flew exactly the same. It flew a lot like the Coast Guard helicopter. So we had a real step up on the Air Force guys because they were coming in cold from whatever they were flying. So it was kind of a snap for us going through that program.

[00:16:07.18] From there, we went to two survival schools. One was POW and survival training. And that was interesting.

[00:16:17.98] MARC HENDERSON: What made it interesting?

[00:16:20.47] JAMES LOOMIS: The best way to explain it? A couple of examples. One of our guys, his name was Rob Richie-- great little guy and terrific pilot. Because when we were going through a POW training, they would interrogate us. They'd pull us out and put us in some-- They'd put us in some box and tightened it down. And then, anybody who really excelled in it, they turned him.

[00:16:43.63] So here he was. I'm coming out into the yard after my interrogation, and he's standing on a soapbox saying he's in the Coast Guard, he doesn't have to do this, and what have you. And I'm going [LAUGHS]. You take it pretty seriously. It's a pretty dark moment.

[00:17:00.37] And the other one was, there was a Navy guy. And they would-- This box, they'd put you in it and they'd slam some board or something down there and keep you in there. And then, they come by, they tap a baton on the top of it and say, are you OK in there? Are you OK?

[00:17:15.70] So this guy doesn't say anything. And they start getting-- not panicked, but they take open the thing, and the guy's sitting there and he says-- He said, why didn't you answer? He said, I didn't hear you. I must have been in the other room.

[00:17:34.21] [LAUGHTER]

[00:17:35.52] So they had a sense of humor and that sort of thing. But it was good training.

[00:17:41.40] MARC HENDERSON: Good. So survival training, they taught you how to fly the new airframe. And then--

[00:17:48.06] JAMES LOOMIS: Well, no, survival training was separate. That was a POW and--

[00:17:56.40] MARC HENDERSON: SERE school.

[00:17:57.45] JAMES LOOMIS: Sorry?

[00:17:57.79] MARC HENDERSON: SERE school.

[00:17:58.56] JAMES LOOMIS: Yeah, SERE. And the other one was called, I don't know, Aviation something or other. It was the best school I ever went to. They were just--

[00:18:14.13] MARC HENDERSON: What did they teach you?

[00:18:15.85] JAMES LOOMIS: They taught us combat flying techniques. And anybody who thought they could fly before that, had a thing to learn. And we had a lot of fun. And it wasn't guys climbing all over you. They were really trying to help you, teach you, what have you. It was a really, really good program.

[00:18:37.02] And from there they sit you all down in a hangar or what have you. There were probably about 12 of us. And the first thing they say is, well-- and they're going to name who are going to be aircraft commanders and who didn't make the cut.

[00:18:49.29] And they said, well, the Coasties are all aircraft commanders. [CHUCKLES] So that was the first thing right off the bat. And everybody knew we were going to get in. The Air Force guys knew that we were a cut above them, for now, until they caught up to our speed.

[00:19:09.22] MARC HENDERSON: Did you know what squadron you'd be going to in Vietnam?

[00:19:12.65] JAMES LOOMIS: Yes.

[00:19:14.38] MARC HENDERSON: So you knew where you were going before you went over there?

[00:19:16.48] JAMES LOOMIS: Yes, and it was prejudicial because they thought because we were the Coast Guard, we wanted to be near the water. And they had these two stations, one over in Northern Thailand, another one in Thailand. And those were no rocket attacks at night and just peaceful, and they go out and fight the war, same as we did. But they always put the Coasties in the water unit in Da Nang.

[00:19:45.25] We took a Coast Guard plane from San Francisco up to Hamilton Air Force Base, where the Coast Guard had their C-130s based-- or not C-130s, it was HU-16s. They flew us up to San Francisco. There we got on-- I can't remember if it was a Coast Guard or a Navy plane or a charter. But we flew from there to-- via Hawaii to the Philippines to a jungle survival school. Oh, it was crazy.

[00:20:16.96] It was Air Force training, and they would give us evasive techniques and this sort of thing. And then they send us out to try to avoid these Filipino natives called Negritos. And they would give us 3 bags of rice. And any time they caught you, you'd give up a bag of rice. And if you coughed up three of them, it was back to the beginning and you start the school all over again.

[00:20:46.27] And we also had a Marine in our class who-- he wound up, when he got to Vietnam they put him in hack for I don't know how long because he embarrassed the Air Force-- the Marines. He had E&E'd all the way to Manila, and that was outside the boundary.

[00:21:03.22] MARC HENDERSON: What's hack?

[00:21:05.20] JAMES LOOMIS: It's like jail for officers.

[00:21:08.29] MARC HENDERSON: OK.

[00:21:09.75] JAMES LOOMIS: You stay in your room-- bad boy.

[00:21:13.72] MARC HENDERSON: Yeah. What were your first impressions of Da Nang?

[00:21:18.70] JAMES LOOMIS: We had a guy, an Air Force major, who was a maintenance officer and a beefy guy, and the night we get there, they bring us in, they introduce us. And the big beefy guys says, oh, the Coasties are here. Good. We got somebody to empty the garbage. [LAUGHS]

[00:21:39.13] But before that, we had to go to Saigon to check in with the Coast Guard muckety-mucks. And they didn't have any control over us, but they wanted to think they did. Anyway, we did that. And then we were taking a C-130 up to Da Nang the next day,

[00:21:56.71] flying along, and I remember I'm reading a magazine. I had a book and an attaché case with me. And all of a sudden this boom. And smoke starts coming out of the cockpit down into the bay where we all are. And I'm thinking, well, here it is-- day two and it's all over.

[00:22:14.47] And I wasn't scared. I just I picked up my briefcase, opened it up, put my magazine in, and closed it, put it back there. And this guy comes staggering out of the cockpit holding his hands over his ears.

[00:22:24.82] And what had happened was one of his antennas had blown out of the belly, and the airplane rapidly decompressed. So they had to make an emergency descent down to a lower altitude. And they found us another airplane, and we went there uneventfully.

[00:22:39.53] The other thing we had that was interesting, we showed up, the three of us, and the little guy, Rob Richie I told you about, he liked his drinks. [CHUCKLES] And we went out on the town in Saigon. And myself and the third guy, we stayed out a little while, and then we went to our beds in Tan Son Nhut to get ready for our flight.

[00:23:00.37] And he wakes me up about, I don't know, oh-dark-hundred in the morning. And he says, Jim, can you take the upper bunk? He says, I can't get up there.

[00:23:08.05] I figured he couldn't get up there because he was drunk. No, he had commandeered a motor scooter from the motor scooter drivers who rented-- who took you for rides. And he said, I'll only go if I can drive. [CHUCKLES]

[00:23:22.66] And he crashed it into-- you can't make this up. This is like the old Army show. He runs into an MG Jeep and gets busted.

[00:23:40.27] So, they find out where he's from, what squadron he's in. And they give the charges to our commanding officer there. The commanding officer gives it to the senior guy, who was a lieutenant. He says, take care of this. You guys are in charge.

[00:23:58.20] That was the end of that one. But here he got-- here's the first day this guy shows up, and he's in a sling like this, and we're the three guys representing the saviors from the Coast Guard.

[00:24:12.72] MARC HENDERSON: What were your living conditions like?

[00:24:14.93] JAMES LOOMIS: It was the Air Force. It was terrific. Air-conditioned quarters.

[00:24:19.92] MARC HENDERSON: How many officers to a room?

[00:24:22.14] JAMES LOOMIS: Two.

[00:24:23.03] MARC HENDERSON: OK. Running water? Flush toilets?

[00:24:27.17] JAMES LOOMIS: Yep. Running nurses, as we called it. We lived right in a compound where they-- It wasn't a hospital. It was a huge medical facility. But we had a lot of nurses there. I had friends in there. And it was nice living. It was as decent as you could have and not be back home.

[00:24:50.91] MARC HENDERSON: How was the food?

[00:24:52.91] JAMES LOOMIS: It was OK.

[00:24:54.85] MARC HENDERSON: What made it OK-- just OK?

[00:24:56.89] JAMES LOOMIS: It was military food. [CHUCKLES] You ever had good military food?

[00:25:00.34] MARC HENDERSON: Chow hall? Or was it MREs?

[00:25:03.13] JAMES LOOMIS: We could eat-- no, no MREs, no. We could either go to the O club or we go to a chow hall. It was good living.

[00:25:18.60] JAMES LOOMIS: I'd say there's no difference. They're human beings-- some you like, some you don't like. And we all got along fairly well.

[00:25:28.56] And I had some problems because we had a lot of-- what the Air Force used to do, because they didn't have helicopter pilots, they would take fixed-wing pilots, send them to a helicopter school, and expect them to come over and fly as aircraft commander with a squadron. That wasn't going to happen because they're not ready.

[00:25:47.88] It was always catching a baseball airplane because they'd have to fly for six months as a co-pilot before they'd become useful as an aircraft commander. Six months later, they're headed back home. So it was a constant turnover. And we would get some resentment because we were flying with co-pilots who were lieutenant colonels, majors. And most of them took it really well.

[00:26:12.46] We had one guy, Charlie Bond, he was a West Point graduate. And he was senior to all of us, but not in the cockpit. And he handled it as graciously as anybody could. But we had guys who just-- they couldn't handle the fact that a lieutenant is bossing a major around. And we weren't bossing them around. [CHUCKLES]

[00:26:37.98] The helicopter that we got had a boat hull on it. It was amphibious. And the Air Force never used it on the water. They never trained for it.

[00:26:50.50] So we got there and said, you have this capability. Why not use it? And I was one of the schedules officers, so I got maintenance to set us up with two helicopters. We go down to Da Nang harbor and do approaches, what have you.

[00:27:09.12] Well, the assistant ops officer was one of the ones who really had it in for us, particularly me. And he said, who gave you permission to do that? And blah, blah, blah. And like, hey, this might be good for us, you know? Let's see what you got going here. So we had to train them on the sly.

[00:27:30.73] JAMES LOOMIS: Never flew by yourself. We always had a co-pilot. We always had a crew of four, minimum. We had a pilot, co-pilot, pararescueman, and flight mechanic, and hoist operator with us also.

[00:27:45.79] And we had to fly a certain number of flights to get checked off by their previous check airman that we were ready to fly-- aircraft commander. And it didn't take long. We were pretty well-qualified.

[00:28:00.52] The basic task force for a rescue was two Jolly Greens-- H-3 helicopters-- at least two A-1E Korean War vintage fighter-bombers who were just amazing. These guys had kids-- 21-year-old guys-- flying them, single-pilot. And what their job was-- the one thing we didn't have in rescue is we never had the element of surprise. Because where an airplane went down, there really wasn't a helicopter around. Very rarely. We'd be off either back in alert someplace else, or on another mission, or what have you. So, we never had the advantage of surprise to get on them.

[00:28:42.64] So we had to make up for that with-- the A-1s would try to sanitize the area, the recovery area, and try to beat down any enemy resistance. And the beginning of the war, they were very, very good with it. But the Vietnamese got-- weren't dumb by any stretch of the imagination. And they learned how to do what we called helicopter traps.

[00:29:17.11] They would not fly at the A-1s. They would just fly at them-- pop, pop, pop stuff, nothing serious. And then, when the helicopter came in, it hit the hell out of them. And that's how Jack Rettichier got killed.

[00:29:32.89] Another one of the guys in the first group, Lance Egan-- he almost got killed. He had a PJ who got a Medal of Honor for a mission he was on. Incredible.

[00:29:42.67] He was up in North Vietnam and he had to hoist for something like 13 minutes, waiting for the PJ to drag this colonel out of the woods, get him on the helicopter, into the helicopter-- all the time, they're getting shot at. Once again, it was a helicopter trap because there were many, many airplanes there for them to do it.

[00:30:03.05] But I wouldn't say that was typical. That was-- very rarely did one go exactly as you planned. If one went exactly as you planned, we called it a safe save or something like that-- unopposed save.

[00:30:20.08] You'd go in. Either-- if the guy wasn't injured, he'd come up the hoist by himself. If he was injured, the PJ would go down and get him, pick him up, and everybody lived happily ever after. If it was opposed, they had to, as I said before, you had to beat down the enemy before you'd commit the helicopters.

[00:30:41.17] 37 millimeter shotguns or-- shotgun-- machine gun that-- this guy was like a one-armed paper hanger, the flight mechanic. He had to run the gun and the hoist, and coach the pilot into position to do the hoist. So that was more often the case.

[00:31:05.20] If a pilot was hurt on the ground, then you had to put the PJ on there, who-- these guys were, I don't know if you heard about them. They were just unbelievable. They were just kids and they were brave. And you can imagine, they'd go into that stuff all the time.

[00:31:25.36] They went through a very intensive training program. They'd go through medical training, they went through mountain climbing, they went through diving. They were the real deal. These guys were SEALs with wheels. I can't say enough about them.

[00:31:44.05] The PJ was medically qualified. He was always a big help. And you'd try to keep them face down on the floor so they're not going to get any shells coming in the side, that sort of thing. And that's pretty much it

[00:32:05.82] JAMES LOOMIS: Boxer 22-- it was an F-4, I forget where they were out of. But they were dropping bombs in a place called Mu Gia Pass. And it's a particularly gnarly area because it's the gate between North Vietnam and Laos. So it was a high-priority target.

[00:32:32.35] And in South Vietnam, we probably picked up more guys out of Mu Gia Pass than any other place. Maybe not. It was close though.

[00:32:42.22] And they came in and they lost-- they had to punch out. They had to eject. So they ejected and it was over a river. And one wound up on one side of the river and one on the other, which is not good. You like to have all your eggs in one basket.

[00:33:04.60] I wasn't out there yet. I was on my way. But they made several attempts, took a lot of hits. One Air Force PJ got shot, killed in his helicopter, and-- just a rifle shot, a lucky shot.

[00:33:23.74] And we couldn't get them out the first day. So they tried to camp out for the night. The co-pilot in the back of the F-4 tells us that he thinks the pilot is dead. He heard gunfire and yelling.

[00:33:41.06] So the next morning, they send out a forward air controller to try to locate them. Sure enough, they locate the back seater but not the front seater. So the second day, numerous attempts again, and I was out there for a while. And I never really got a good chance to make an attempt, but we had a lot of guys who did. And-- just driven off, and driven off, and driven off. It was crazy.

[00:34:12.41] The third day, we got out there again. And I was supposed to be the lead aircraft on that but, for whatever reason, things always change. The C-130 orbiting overhead said, send so-and-so, we got you all together for the tankers at different times. So they'd send somebody else besides me.

[00:34:32.19] OK. As long as we get them, I could care less. But we didn't get them that second day. The colonel [CHUCKLES] comes in, and he's right over the guy and he can't find him.

[00:34:45.53] And he's moving around and he backs into a tree. And this helicopter was an H-53, not a 3. It didn't come down, which just amazed me. So I had to go follow him to make sure he made it back to safety, back to the base in Thailand.

[00:35:03.86] And I go up and look at him and, boy, I see a hole in it like the size of a softball. And I said, do what you want, but here's what I see. And he says, well, it's flying OK. I want to keep it going. And he made it back and that was fine.

[00:35:19.40] But that kill that day, that was the end. Or that was that the third day? Did I say the third day?

[00:35:23.63] Somebody else went in behind both of us. My high bird went in. That's when the high bird becomes the low bird. I left because I had to cover the other aircraft. The other one came in by himself, and they got the guy up.

[00:35:34.76] But it was three days of knock-down-drag-out. I forget how many airplanes. But one thing they did in that war, they would go to any extreme to get somebody out. They'd shut down the war. That was their objective.

[00:35:55.86] MARC HENDERSON: 1968, 1969 there was a lot of social turmoil going on in the States. Did any of that make its way over to where you were?

[00:36:02.46] JAMES LOOMIS: Oh, sure. Yeah.

[00:36:04.38] MARC HENDERSON: Can you give us an example?

[00:36:08.42] JAMES LOOMIS: Well, we didn't have any risk, any fracking or anything like that. And there weren't that many guys who were disenchanted. I was one of them.

[00:36:23.83] Prior to signing up for Vietnam, I was gung-ho for the war and all this stuff. And it took a year before we finally got selected. And watching the news for a year, plus my brother was a very big influence in my political thinking, my desire for that slipped, but not my desire to do that mission. That was the real deal.

[00:36:54.99] MARC HENDERSON: How much time did you have to yourself?

[00:37:00.50] JAMES LOOMIS: We did a lot of-- we had a lot of helicopters, but we had a lot of pilots, too-- or not a lot of pilots. And we pretty much-- you pretty much flew every two days at least, sometimes every three days or one day. But it was mostly flying and just hanging out.

[00:37:23.03] We had a movie theater. It's the Air Force. We had a swimming pool.

[00:37:28.85] We had a hooch, or a cabin, a very large cabin that these two guys came on. There were two Air Force majors, and they were real cumshaws. They could talk the skin off you.

[00:37:44.33] And the currency of trade in that part of the world was-- what did they call these things? They were camouflage blankets. And you could trade those.

[00:37:59.21] You could trade booze to the grunts out in the boonies for these things. And then, those things, we traded them to RED HORSE, which is like the Navy Seabees. It's their construction thing.

[00:38:14.12] And I come home from work one day, and there it is. The fence is down, the foundation is poured, and they're building a building for us-- all coming from these blankets. So that was our own little-- it turned into a nice little place to hang out.

[00:38:31.56] MARC HENDERSON: So, sort of an officers club or was it an all hands club?

[00:38:35.63] JAMES LOOMIS: It was officers in the-- but don't feel sorry for the enlisted men. They did just fine. [CHUCKLING]

[00:38:42.18] MARC HENDERSON: So, I noticed you're wearing a uniform. Was that your uniform of the day?

[00:38:48.47] JAMES LOOMIS: No, this was a party suit. And we wore these for-- and, by the way, this is my first time in 52 years that I'm putting this back on. We would have parties for-- well, we can have almost any reason for a party, just to have a party.

[00:39:09.44] But every once in a while, if there was a big mission, if the whole squadron was involved, then we'd have a rip-roaring party, and everybody would get out their special outfits and what have you. And if a guy was going home the next day, we'd have a party. And they were just ways to chill.

[00:39:31.01] MARC HENDERSON: Can you give us an example of a mission that the whole squadron participated in?

[00:39:37.52] JAMES LOOMIS: Well, the whole squadron didn't. See, what would happen-- the one I was on-- the biggest one-- it was one of the biggest ones of the war. It was midway between Da Nang and the two bases in Thailand. So we had helicopters coming from every direction.

[00:39:56.57] That was probably the biggest one I saw. We almost had the whole theater involved in it. We only had three helicopter units in the whole place, and we were probably using almost all of them. Many times we didn't have a helicopter because we had so many of them shot up.

[00:40:14.01] MARC HENDERSON: OK, what was that situation or that scenario that necessitated participants from all over Southeast Asia arriving?

[00:40:24.25] JAMES LOOMIS: It wasn't all over Southeast Asia, but we had a triangle of units. And the one in Da Nang was, oh, it was adjacent to NKP, probably about 75 miles. Then another one up in Udorn, Thailand-- another 50 some odd miles.

[00:40:48.41] And we had all kinds of airplanes coming out of everywhere. But most of the time, it was a basic rescue. And I don't think I broke down the whole formation. We would have two H-3s, we'd have a minimum of two of the Skyraiders, and we'd have a C-130, and we have a forward air controller. And that was a team.

[00:41:22.55] And if everything went well, the team would work as designed. If it didn't go well, well, you had to improvise, which is what happened to Jack Rettichier. We would have two helicopters. One would be designated the low bird, who was the primary rescue helicopter of the day on the mission. And you'd have the high birds, who covered the low bird.

[00:41:48.74] And Rettichier was a high bird-- started out as a high bird on this mission. And they were just getting a Marine A-4 pilot. And it was in a place called the-- oh, that valley, it's just I can't think of it.

[00:42:08.42] MARC HENDERSON: The A Shau Valley?

[00:42:10.61] JAMES LOOMIS: No-- A Shau, yeah. And they went in there, and we were getting helicopters beat up left and right, but none of them fatally. So the guy on the ground-- once again, it was a helo trap. And they didn't even know if he was still alive.

[00:42:30.44] He originally said he had a broken leg and a broken arm. And, obviously, it would require a PJ. And by the way, the PJs were great, but they did require more time.

[00:42:41.22] You had to go down and set up, pick the guy up, get back in. Worth their weight in gold, but it was also a downside in some situations. But that was pretty much it.

[00:42:55.32] MARC HENDERSON: Can you describe the quality of the leadership in your unit?

[00:43:00.42] JAMES LOOMIS: I thought it was decent, except for that friggin' major.

[CHUCKLES] We were pretty much all equals. It didn't make any difference if you were a colonel or a lieutenant. You didn't have any more or less authority, and you worked together.

[00:43:21.57] JAMES LOOMIS: The first big one was in-flight refueling, which the Air Force, to their credit, put together in a really, really short amount of time. And it increased our range infinitesimally. We could go as far as we wanted. And I was really impressed with how well that worked. It's cool. [CHUCKLES]

[00:43:46.28] The 130, it was a challenge because the 130 is sort of hanging on his props because he has to go slow. And the helicopter is going as fast as he can so he's like this, trying to keep up with the 130. So what we would have to do is 130 would be flying along like this, we'd come here, and he'd slow down.

[00:44:06.89] And then, we'd dive down into his-- the air that he was forcing from his propellers were actually giving us lift. And our requirement to maneuver was greatly reduced. And we'd come in, we'd pick up the hose.

[00:44:24.58] It had a big basket. You hit the basket. You pick up the hose, you move off to the side, and then you watch the show. And it was a fantastic program. My hat does really go off to the Air Force on that one.

[00:44:36.34] We also had-- they put on the HH-3E-- I think they didn't have any other helicopters-- were drop tanks, were F-100 drop tanks, on the side of this little winglet we had. So that carried more fuel that we could get rid of in a hurry. Any time you lost an engine, you punch that off and you gain 3,000 pounds of weight, which was going to make the difference.

[00:44:58.30] But they flew two H-3Es to Paris to demonstrate the refueling capability. And they went all the way across the Atlantic to Paris in these two helicopters. So they obviously had to refuel from bottom to top a number of times, I forget how many.

[00:45:23.06] JAMES LOOMIS: Any time you go out offshore at night to pick somebody up, that's always exciting. Could be an adventure. Some, you hope it isn't.

[00:45:30.77] MARC HENDERSON: Sure.

[00:45:31.85] JAMES LOOMIS: But those were pretty challenging. I had a fair number of those.

[00:45:34.73] MARC HENDERSON: What made it challenging?

[00:45:37.55] JAMES LOOMIS: Well, you're in a different element. You don't have anything underneath you except water. And it's easy to get disoriented, depending on if you have any daylight left, or moonlight, or what have you. So it was just, not impossible, just a little bit more taxing.

[00:46:04.79] JAMES LOOMIS: I don't think I had too many. I lost a couple of gin games. I didn't have any really bad days, I don't think--

[00:46:13.63] MARC HENDERSON: How about your best--

[00:46:14.12] JAMES LOOMIS: --except when my major, you know--

[00:46:16.88] MARC HENDERSON: How about your best day?

[00:46:19.38] JAMES LOOMIS: Best day was probably when we got that guy out of Boxer 22.
JAMES LOOMIS: No, not the military guys at all. We had domestics clean rooms and do stuff like that.

[00:46:37.11] And I was in a train station-- I don't know why, I can't remember why--

[00:46:42.18] but this Vietnamese family, Navy family, is sitting there. And the sailor's in his sailor suit, and he's got these two cute kids and his wife. And I'm saying, damn, they're just like us. What the hell are we doing?

[00:47:00.08] MARC HENDERSON: How much contact did you have with your family back home?

[00:47:04.64] JAMES LOOMIS: Very little. We did very little talking about the war. We didn't write much about it. My favorite souvenir-- my sister-in-law had a friend who was a third grade teacher. And she sent us-- everybody in her class sent me a letter.

[00:47:30.50] And one of them said, "We won the kickball game 14-2. The Yankees won the pennant. Or no, the Mets won the pennant. What are you doing in Vietnam?"

[00:47:42.41] [LAUGHTER]

[00:47:44.18] So I, of course, took that in a way, like-- I just thought it was so cute. I have it hanging up somewhere.

[00:47:49.73] MARC HENDERSON: How much news about the war you were fighting in made its way to you over there?

[00:47:56.00] JAMES LOOMIS: You know, it was funny because the year I was there, '69 and '70, there weren't any of the so-called battles-- the Tet Offensive in '68. And that raged on for a couple of more months, and then it slowed down again when I got there, and there wasn't a lot of activity. And we'd go to these intelligence briefings. Intel-- we had a ready crew, and we had to go to intelligence briefing and they'd brief us on what the Vietnamese are doing now, which they were, and what have you.

[00:48:29.13] And so we knew that but we didn't believe any of it. And we were probably closer to the truth than they were. When I got there in April of 1969, I left there in April 1970, and I didn't see any difference.

[00:48:45.29] There were no battles. There may have been-- the grunts were involved in some stuff, obviously, because they kept turning up dead. But there wasn't any progressive action, I didn't think, that was happening.

[00:49:03.23] JAMES LOOMIS: I wanted to stay another six months because I wanted to fly the H-53, which was a big, heavy aircraft. It could take a lot more punishment than the H-3 and I wanted to try it. But they wouldn't let me. They wouldn't let me go do it for six months. They said, maybe a year but probably not. I don't know why, but--

[00:49:20.98] MARC HENDERSON: Was it the Coast Guard that wouldn't let you or the Air Force?

[00:49:22.96] JAMES LOOMIS: Well, both. I think they both got together and said no.

[00:49:26.05] MARC HENDERSON: You sure?

[00:49:26.89] JAMES LOOMIS: Because I got a letter from each of them, saying basically the same thing. You've done enough, blah, blah, blah. We left out of Da Nang in an American Airlines seven-- probably 707. And a Marine band was there playing "California Dreamin'." [CHUCKLES] And we went from there to Honolulu, where a couple of our friends from the squadron came out to see us at 2 o'clock in the morning. We were just passing through.

[00:49:56.23] I got home. Two days later, I was at a Grateful Dead concert with 77,000 people. [CHUCKLES] So life was unaffected, essentially. I knew a couple of guys, of course, in my squadron got killed, but I didn't know anybody out in the world who got killed.

[00:50:18.49] MARC HENDERSON: What was your reception at home like?

[00:50:22.75] JAMES LOOMIS: They pretty much took it for granted too, you know? Saw I was in one piece and it was uneventful.

[00:50:31.74] MARC HENDERSON: What did you do after? What did you think? You still had time left in the Coast Guard. What did you go on to do afterwards?

[00:50:37.95] JAMES LOOMIS: I went to Mobile, Alabama as an H-3 instructor. We had H-3s in the Coast Guard-- a little different than the Air Force ones, but the same airframe, boat hull, no in-flight refueling. Good helicopter.

[00:50:52.29] I did that for three years. And then I went to Air Station Brooklyn, New York, which I loved. Got thrown in the old briar patch. I loved New York. And from there, I went to Cape Cod, finished it up.

[00:51:08.25] MARC HENDERSON: And how much contact have you had with fellow veterans?

[00:51:11.58] JAMES LOOMIS: With other veterans? I talk pretty consistently with my former roommate and a couple of the PJs I flew with. These were my guys that I had to protect. They were my crewmen. So I've gotten pretty close to them.

[00:51:25.95] MARC HENDERSON: Did you always fly with the same crew?

[00:51:27.75] JAMES LOOMIS: No. But there were only so many. And you keep going round and round again.

[00:51:37.65] MARC HENDERSON: What do you think the Vietnam War means to your generation?

[00:51:45.14] JAMES LOOMIS: I hate to say it, but I think nothing. They've moved on or never did know.

[00:51:53.73] MARC HENDERSON: So--

[00:51:54.17] JAMES LOOMIS: You've got a tough nut to correct there.

[00:52:00.05] MARC HENDERSON: Why?

[00:52:02.18] JAMES LOOMIS: Well, to get your message out there, to see that it gets received.

[00:52:06.65] MARC HENDERSON: Were there any lessons that you drew on, that you learned in Vietnam, specifically, that you would like to pass on to future generations?

[00:52:17.65] JAMES LOOMIS: Don't trust the politicians [CHUCKLES] because their record wasn't too good in that war. JAMES LOOMIS: Well, it's very emotional, and it just seems like how unnecessary the whole thing was when you looked down and you see 50,000 of these things.

[00:52:41.11] MARC HENDERSON: Lieutenant Commander Loomis, I want to thank you for coming in and sharing your experience with us.

[00:52:45.84] JAMES LOOMIS: Thanks a lot.