

Interview with
WILLIAM “BILL” LLOYD ALEXANDER

November 28, 2018

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WILLIAM “BILL” LLOYD ALEXANDER

William “Bill” Lloyd Alexander was interviewed by Randall J. Bunn on November 28, 2018 at the Southern Utah Veterans Home, Ivins, Washington County, Utah. He related his military experiences.

RB: “Bill” has agreed to share some of his life story and particularly his military experience. Before we start on that, where were you born?

WA: [I was born in] Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

RB: Your parents were living there. What did your father [do] for a living?

WA: He was a painter.

RB: You had one sibling, your sister. What was her name?

WA: [Her name was] Jane [Alexander].

RB: Was she older or younger than you?

WA: [She was] older.

RB: At some point [the family] moved to Arkansas. Right?

WA: Yes, we all moved. [It was] one big mass move to Rio Grande Valley [Arkansas] because they bought some orange groves.

RB: Your parents bought some orange groves?

WA: It was a bad move because they didn’t know what they were doing. [Laughter]

RB: Well, that is different than painting!

WA: Yes, but he was still painting. [There] was a freeze that killed most of the trees. So that didn’t turn out too well.

RB: Yes, because oranges [are] harvested in the winter and this is when the weather can literally kill them at the end [of the growing season].

WA: Yes, that was a bad move. That was the worst move they made, but they soon wore off. They didn’t have any choice, [which] was it. My mother bought a restaurant. [Laughter] I think it did okay.

RB: Was she a good cook?

WA: She cooked with her mouth and they found out [how] good of a salesman she was. She had six [fellows] under her [when she went to sell insurance]. She got in there and boy, she sold insurance. It was amazing! She would take me around and show me how to do it and so forth.

RB: She bought a restaurant, but then she [also] sold insurance?

WA: She bought a restaurant, [but] it was too hard.

RB: It was a lot of work?

WA: Yes.

RB: So she sold insurance?

WA: She sold insurance.

RB: Wow! She was a pretty good saleswoman.

WA: Yes, tough ol' German! She wouldn't say no. She wouldn't let any of them hood-wink her. She ruled the roost.

RB: [Laughter]

WA: She was tough!

RB: Tell about your childhood. What was [it] like growing up in Iowa or Arkansas?

WA: I had grandparents in Marion, Iowa which was about twelve or thirteen miles [northeast of] Cedar Rapids, Iowa. [It was] near the Quaker Oats [factory]. I think that is the largest, at the time, cereal [company] in the world. [Laughter] To get rid of me, she [my mother] sent me off to different relatives. I was sort of a [move about].

RB: Did you get to know your cousins, at all?

WA: What?

RB: Did you get to know some cousins?

WA: Yes, a few of them. [Inaudible]

RB: What did you like to do when you were growing up? Did you play sports or anything?

WA: I made the football team at East Little Rock Junior College [Little Rock, Arkansas].

RB: You did? What [position] did you play?

WA: I [played] tight end. I hurt my shoulder [very] bad, so that was the end of my football career. [Laughter]

RB: Yes, football has a way of doing that because it is pretty physical.

WA: If you are not physically fit you're not going to make it.

RB: Were you a big [youngster], little [youngster] or what?

WA: I was average size — six feet.

RB: That is big! [Laughter]

WA: I probably [weighed] 175 [pounds], I think. I won the boxing and wrestling championships at Little Rock Central, which was the largest high school in the South. I won them both.

RB: Wow! Good for you!

WA: This one [fellow] was a Golden Glove and he taught me how to fight. Boy, I was having fun! [Laughter] I would walk around the hall [and the other fellows would stay away from me].

RB: [Inaudible] [Laughter] Watch out for ol' "Bill" Alexander!

WA: I was the rooster — [the 'cock of the walk']. [Laughter]

RB: That must have felt good.

WA: [I] was the big cheese! [Laughter] It sort of went to my head a couple of times, but one fellow straightened me out pretty good. I thought: I don't like to get hit. [Laughter]

RB: I don't blame you.

WA: When I was in [military] service, I had a colonel who was into this Tang Soo Do defense. [Tang Soo Do is karate-based Korean martial art.]

RB: What was it? Say that again.

WA: It was the Korean art of self-defense.

RB: What was it called?

WA: Tang Soo Do. T-A-N-G S-O-O D-O. This colonel was in an operation right next to the general. We had an Air Base Group and an Air Division. The division was the 831st Air Division. That was what the general was the 831st Air Division. The general liked the Tang Soo Do. [Laughter] He sort of promoted it. "Get all your belts!" [Laughter] I got to where I could break boards.

RB: With your hands? That was great!

WA: I broke blocks. We went on tour with the general from another base. [Laughter] Mainly, just to —.

RB: To show off?

WA: Show off!

RB: [Laughter]

WA: He wanted to show his other commanders [what we could do].

RB: The tricks you could do! That was great!

WA: Any time they could.

RB: Yes. So having experience in wrestling and boxing helped you with the Tang Soo Do?

WA: I was in great shape. The trouble was, I was all skin and bones, but I was tough. I was! I was really tough!

RB: Tell about high school. You went to Little Rock Central [High School]. That was kind of in the middle of a lot of [issues] going on in the mid-1950s.

WA: Yes, 1954 - 1956.

RB: What happened? Was there some civil rights movement going on at that time?

WA: Yes, it was in the middle of all of the racial movements. They were bombarding the city all the [men] from the north. Boy, there were people ready to kill each other. [Laughter]

RB: Was it a segregated high school? No?

WA: At the time it was.

RB: They had to change it? But at one point it was an all-white high school?

WA: It was an all-white high school and I was right in the middle. They started to — I remember one [fellow] [laughter] — I had to laugh at the time.

RB: He said what?

WA: Wyosa Bord, [which] was one of the [fellows]. [Laughter]

RB: [Inaudible]

WA: You can imagine what a mess that was. It really was! There were [fellows] laughing at him. There were fights in the alley after school.

RB: Did you stay out of the thick of things?

WA: I was ready to go, though. [Laughter]

RB: Oh, gosh! Okay. [Laughter]

WA: If they came after me I [would defend myself].

RB: You were pretty smart with your abilities to box and defend yourself.

WA: We would go out and make tours of the bases. I would break boards and concrete blocks.

RB: When you were in Korea?

WA: Yes. The general liked that. He used me as [a soldier to throw in the ring]. [Laughter] He was a pretty neat [fellow]. He helped me out. He said, “Remember, when you write endorsement letters always write in the third person, never in the first.” He taught me how to write endorsements. I had to make out all the letters for him.

RB: You became kind of like the “secret general” behind him.

WA: Yes.

RB: That was good.

WA: He would say, “Here are three letters going down to 479th TAC [Tactical Air Command and the] 31st [Tactical Fighter Wing].” We had the only 104th Fighter Wing in the [United States] Air Force. It was interesting.

RB: [Laughter]

WA: It was interesting because then I started — the other officers would come up and kid me. They would say, “Are you going to hold your speech for the general?” [Laughter]

RB: [Laughter]

WA: I would say, “Okay. I see you [fellow] up here. Oh, by the way, do you know when your next date for officer of the day is?” [Laughter]

RB: [Laughter]

WA: I had the [whole schedule for that].

RB: You were an important [fellow]!

WA: Everything changed. [Laughter]

RB: [Laughter]

WA: I had them over the barrel. [Laughter]

RB: Tell how you got into the Air Force.

WA: I was in the [Arkansas] Air National Guard.

RB: After high school?

WA: After high school, I went right into the Air National Guard.

RB: In Arkansas.

WA: Because I knew that eventually [I] would be called up. I [wanted] to get one step ahead of them. I realized afterwards what a foolish move I made not to stay in the service because with my Air National Guard time, I had it made! I was getting maximum pay in each grade I went into.

RB: Wow!

WA: I couldn’t get any higher. I had that as an ace in the hole, but also the fact that I could go out there and had a general as an endorsing officer for all of my letters and his letters. Anyway, I had that and the 12th Air Force commander was my endorsing] companion.

RB: Wow! You were right under the general.

WA: General Trusdale was a pretty neat [fellow]

RB: He was the general you worked for?

WA: No, he was —.

RB: He was the commander of the 12th Air Force. The Air Force general?

WA: Yes.

RB: The 12th Air Force Commander, Trusdale.

WA: Everyone out ranked me. [Laughter] Generals and colonels. I was the lowest rank! [Laughter] We went up Yakima, Washington for a joint [United States] Army and Air Force exercise at Fort Lewis, Washington. That was something else, too! [Laughter]

RB: Do you need your pillow?

WA: [What]?

RB: Can I move your pillow up?

WA: Yes.

RB: You are kind of slipping. How is that?

WA: Yes, that is good. Anyway, he went ahead and — I lost my thought.

RB: You were talking about the joint Army — Air Force exercise at Fort Lewis.

WA: Yes. I got on to that because they needed an administrative officer for that. So I got to go with him as the admin officer for the Air Force to support them. He got their attention. H [Laughter] The general got up and scared the devil out of those officers! [Laughter] He said, “Joe, get your ass over here!” [Laughter] He said, “Joe, get your ass over here!” [Laughter] All of a sudden — he got their attention.

RB: You said you were an admin officer. When you went in — you were in the [Air] National Guard, did you get called on active duty at some point?

WA: No.

RB: You were always Air National Guard?

WA: Air National Guard — that was it. [Inaudible] When the commission ceremony came up, I qualified for that to become a second lieutenant.

RB: So you went in an enlisted airman?

WA: Yes.

RB: Eventually, you became an officer?

WA: Yes. [Laughter] He was just kidding me! All of these other “second lieus” [second lieutenants] — they said, “You have it made! You have the general right here!” [Laughter]

RB: That is true!

WA: Boy, I did have it made!

RB: You were in the Air National Guard from about 1956, or so, until sometime, maybe, about 1969, 1970. You said during Vietnam?

WA: Yes.

RB: Did you do some tours in Korea?

WA: No, I didn’t go overseas.

RB: When you learned Tang Soo Do that was in the states?

WA: That was in the states. Colonel Butterwick had already [received] his belts. He was really gung-ho. He would work you to death. I told the general, “You are going to have to wait on [some assignment because a colonel needed me].” Then he thought ‘I better wait because it will benefit him too. [Laughter] Everyone works for him so it’s about who scratches whose back. That is the way it works.

RB: You were in during the Cold War period, when the Cuban Missile Crisis happened —.

WA: Everything was happening at that time.

RB: Do you remember the Cuban Missile Crisis at all?

WA: A little bit. We were sort of detached from that because we had no operation going on and didn’t do anything with that. That is something the Air Force would have done through the division.

RB: Yes. How about when President [John Fitzgerald] Kennedy was shot. Where were you?

WA: I was there, [laughter] where was I? Isn’t that funny! You don’t even think of that.

RB: Were you in Alabama? Or were you in Arkansas?

WA: Let's see. Where was I in 1956?

RB: Kennedy [was] shot in 1963. So in 1956 —.

WA: It was later.

RB: Were you in the Arkansas Air National Guard the whole time?

WA: Yes. I was in ROTC [Reserve Officers Training Corps] also. In fact, I was the highest ranking, if you could call it that, officer in the ROTC in Alabama. [Laughter] I was a colonel.

RB: When did you go to Alabama?

WA: I graduated in 1954.

RB: [In] 1964?

WA: Not 1954, yes, it was 1954.

RB: You graduated from high school in 1954?

WA: Yes, I graduated from high school in 1954.

RB: That makes sense, because you were born in 1936. You would have been eighteen years old in 1954. What took you to Alabama?

WA: My parents, at the time. They moved down south, [with] the orange grove [deal] fell through, that was when they starting getting their own business. [My mother] got the restaurant going.

RB: In Little Rock [Arkansas]?

WA: He was still a painter. That was about it.

RB: Did they move down to Mobile [Alabama]?

WA: They moved down there, because he had some trees left. [Laughter] He [found] a pretty good job. I forget now [what it was]. Some kind of a higher [level], like a paint contractor. He got into that. My mother is the one [who] was the real tiger. I have seen her working [a lot]. I learned a lot from her. She didn't take any [flak from anybody]. My dad said, "Yes, she is a tough ol' German!"

RB: I think you told me that she bought a restaurant and ran [it] for awhile. Then she started in the insurance business?

WA: Yes.

RB: What kind of insurance did she sell? All kinds?

WA: Yes, weekly payment insurance. The black, mostly black, those were poor people. In fact, I would go [with her to their houses]. You know you are in the southern section of the state when you smell kerosene. Kerosene lamps is all they used. If they wanted to save money, they used kerosene.

RB: For lights, heat and cooking?

WA: For everything. Those people amazed [me]. I don't see how in the hell they did it.

RB: Your mom was selling insurance in Arkansas?

WA: Yes.

RB: So what took them down to Alabama? The orange [groves]?

WA: The reason they came south was for the orange groves. What was left of them.

RB: You said you graduated from the University of Alabama.

WA: Yes.

RB: In Mobile? Or Tuscaloosa? And you studied geology. How did you end up in Tuscaloosa, Alabama?

WA: [Laughter] I worked for Republic Steel for two summers. That was a good paying job. They gave you top [wages]. A friend of mine, needed a job and he was [paid pretty poorly]. [Laughter] Not the unions. They took me in and interviewed me and set me up. I had to go out and learn things [about my duties]. They knew I was only going to be there [until school started]. I had to go to the university and get my degree. I did such a good job, I did extra work. When the work trucks came in, I made sure if the fuel was low, [I filled the tank]. I made sure everything was clean.

RB: What kind of business was it?

WA: It was Republic Steel. I was working in the mines, 1,800 feet underground.

RB: You were? In Alabama?

WA: [Laughter] Yes, in Alabama. In fact, I pulled out a lot of fossils down there

RB: What was [it] like working down below?

WA: When summertime came, you were glad to get [underground] — it was like air conditioning.

RB: That was true! Cool underground!

WA: I was hoping I didn't have to go to the pit mines, because that meant you had to [work above ground].

RB: That would be hot!

WA: Oh man, that was murder! There was a man named Tommy Castelett; who was the mining engineer. He took a crew with him. I would go with the crew. It was so funny! Clint and Orville were the two [fellows] like cartoon [characters]. We were down by the creek in the summertime doing a section line. We were not in the [area] with the ore boys. [Laughter]

RB: I am not sure.

WA: We, I can't think of the name of it. It has been a long time. I got this [fellow] a job. "Thank you for getting me a job." "They needed someone and you were there. You were going to the university, so that was [who] they were looking for." Anyway, he [Tommy] kissed the ground I walked on. [Laughter] He was making about double what the others were. When you work for the unions you make good pay

RB: You told me that Vietnam was going on [while] you were in the guard. What happened that you didn't go to Vietnam?

WA: The reason that I didn't go to Vietnam because I had my time in the National Guard.

RB: Your time with the guard? You decided not to [re-enlist] because you were an officer at that point. Right?

WA: They sent me down to special services as soon as I graduated. They sent me down to Special Services. [Laughter]

RB: What is special services?

WA: Everything —.

RB: Just all kinds of administrative work?

WA: All of the — what would you call it — sort of a catch all [kind of work].

RB: Various other tasks.

WA: Something people needed, they got it.

RB: You didn't like that so much?

WA: I didn't like it [at] all. It didn't seem like anything was tied together.

RB: That was still with the Arkansas National Guard, but you were living in Alabama. So you would go back [for] duty in Arkansas?

WA: Yes.

RB: You were living in Alabama and would go back to Arkansas when you had your duty?

WA: The main thing is, I — what was it? It was so long [ago] and my memory has gone down-hill ever since.

RB: Okay.

WA: I would have to go back and look at my papers.

RB: Do you still have your discharge papers, your DD214?

WA: I do, but I don't know where they are. [Laughter]

RB: When you [were discharged] —.

WA: I thought I was through. That was it.

RB: Tell about your wife [Barbara (Moore) Alexander]. You married your wife, Barbara. You met her in Mobile?

WA: I met her at the university, I think. She [received] a degree [from the University of Alabama.

RB: How did you meet her?

WA: [Inaudible] I don't recall that.

RB: You don't remember. But sometime in the 1960s you met her.

WA: I had too.

RB: You were going to school. Later, you became an officer and you [were discharge in 1969 or 1970, so it must have been you were [attending the university]

sometime in the 1960s. You were married to her until she passed away about three years ago [2015]?

WA: It was awhile before she passed away. She was in the service with me. She graduated and that was it. What is funny, I am thinking about Clem and Orville — this is something you wouldn't believe.

RB: That is what their names were? Clem and Orville?

WA: Yes. Laying section lines and in the pits.

RB: Clem and Orville were in the Air National Guard?

WA: No.

RB: They were Republic Steel [employees]. Okay, I have to keep it straight!

WA: Come payday, he made sure he had the money to get some "White Lightning." That is what they lived on. [Laughter] I tried some, but [it tasted awful].

RB: That was awful! When you left the guard, what did you do for a living?

WA: That is when I bought the business.

RB: That is right. You said you were in the automotive business and it was —.

WA: It was tire supplies and wheel weights.

RB: You traveled around the southeast.

WA: The [previous fellow] went bankrupt, so I got a [very] good deal on it.

RB: You bought his business and equipment?

WA: Yes. Boy, I had to learn everything from day one. There was a lot to learn! You think you know something, [but no].

RB: What you did in that business, you would go around and buy used weights —

WA: [I would pay] so much per pound. We just measured by the pound. If it was lead, that was it.

RB: You would buy that. What would you do with it?

WA: We would melt it down.

RB: You would melt it down and then sell it?

WA: When we melted it down, we also had molds where we made certain kinds of wheel weights. For quarter ounce to —.

RB: Oh, I see!

WA: Up to three and a-half ounces.

RB: Then you would sell those wheel weights?

WA: Yes, we sold those wheel weights.

RB: Where did you have your business?

WA: In North Miami [Florida]

RB: [Did you] have a smelter that would melt them down?

WA: We had pots where you put the lead in and melt them down.

RB: Oh, gosh!

WA: When it was melted down, we would take the molds —. That was basically it.

RB: You would pour the molten lead into the molds and make the weights. [Inaudible]

WA: You had to be careful [about getting] moisture in there because [it could] explode and put a hole right through you.

RB: Oh, gosh!

WA: There is another danger that I found out the hard way. One of my employees almost got — it just missed his eye by a small amount. I said this is too dangerous and too hot. I had to get out of this business. Even though I was making money. It was not worth it. One slip and you are dead.

RB: You ended up selling the business?

WA: But no one else sold weights like that. I had captured the market. I really did and I wanted to stay in it as long as I could.

RB: How long did you have that business?

WA: I have pits in my arms. I made sure they wore goggles.

RB: Protective gear. How long did you have that business?

WA: About two or two and a-half years.

RB: Did you like living in Miami? Or not?

WA: At first I did, but it got worse and worse.

RB: There probably were a lot of Cubans coming in too.

WA: Oh, yes, there were. Here comes a flotilla with all the Cubans. [Laughter]

RB: After you sold your business, did you stay in Miami? Or did you move?

WA: I stayed for awhile still selling wheel weights. I was also selling repair kits and anything to do with tires. My partner was Jewish. He got some good deals for us. I came out alright. [Laughter] I can't think of anything more ridiculous than what happened there with Clem and Orville. They would play tricks on each other. [Laughter]

RB: They were a couple of funny co-workers, [right]?

WA: Yes, from the north. We were in as Deep South as you can get.

RB: And Tommy Castelett sounds like an Italian name.

WA: They were 300 feet down and run into these giant rats. [Laughter] They were [really] big. Tommy left his lunch there and the rats took it all.

RB: Rats took his lunch pail and everything? [Laughter]

WA: [Laughter] That was so funny! Clem and Orville would mimic Tommy.

RB: Making fun of the way he talked?

WA: Tommy had a high pitch sound [to his voice].

RB: Sounds like you had a good time working!

WA: In the heat of summer you wanted to be done in the mines. We went down to [about] 1,800 feet [and] wanted to make sure [you] got everything okay. If something happened down there, you would have a hell of a time getting out.

RB: That is for sure! After you sold the business, what kind of work did you get into?

WA: I was selling tires. The partner I was with, the two Jews — we called ourselves, Two Jews and a Gentile. [Laughter]

RB: [Laughter]

WA: I learned the business. I knew how to balance them right. I knew [all] about tires. That is one key to your success. Learn all you can about the product you are selling.

RB: That makes sense.

WA: I knew the product forwards and backwards. I could look at a tire and say what kind of wear it had on it. I knew all of this.

RB: Good for you.

WA: I even made my own alignment rack. It was better than the ones you could buy.

RB: Wow!

WA: I got into it [very] strong.

RB: Was this in Miami?

WA: In Miami. If you know the product and know it [very] well. I could put a set of four tires on in just a few minutes. No one else could do that.

RB: Good for you!

WA: I was proud of it. [People would refer to me as an expert.]

RB: Was that someone else's shop or your shop?

WA: He was right next door to mine.

RB: You had your own shop?

WA: Yes. It was a good deal for all of us, it really was.

RB: Tell about your family life with your wife, Barbara and daughter, Robin [Alexander]. What was it like raising a family? Did you enjoy that?

WA: Yes. We seemed to do pretty well with it. We had our separation. We got a divorce.

RB: You and Barbara [were] divorced?

WA: Yes. That was my fault, I think.

RB: It happens. You stayed in Miami until when?

WA: I just stayed. [Laughter]

RB: What brought you to St. George, Utah?

WA: I can't remember. Why would I come here?

RB: Of all places, why here?

WA: Actually, I found out one thing. I have lived in just about every state in the Union.

RB: Have you?

WA: I just about have. I have been in the East, Northeast, South. You name it, I have been there.

RB: How come?

WA: I don't know. I went around because of my wheel business.

RB: You just moved around?

WA: My tire business —.

RB: That is true.

WA: I went around looking for deals for my tires.

RB: You traveled a lot.

WA: I knew everything about the tire business. I knew how to do this and that. I knew how to align them, how to tell when [they] are out of alignment just by looking at it. I could spot a car out of alignment a mile off. I was really good at it. Art Gothelp, he was one of the Jews.

RB: What was his name?

WA: Art Gothelp.

RB: Art Gothelp.

WA: G-O-T-H-E-L-P. To see these two Jews banter back and forth was hilarious and was a lot of fun. [Laughter]

RB: [Laughter]

WA: It was so funny about Clem and Orville. Just like a bunch of [youngsters].

RB: You don't recall what brought you here to St. George, Utah?

WA: What?

RB: How did you end up here?

WA: Here?

RB: Yes, here?

WA: I guess that was it.

RB: You got to Utah somehow. Were you living here?

WA: No, Utah. It was — when was it? I was retired at the time. I couldn't take the heat anymore. I had to get out of the business.

RB: You ended up, at some point, coming to Utah?

WA: Yes. I don't know when.

RB: How old are you? You were born in 1936, so you are eighty-two [years old]?

WA: [I am] eighty-one or eighty-two.

RB: Kate [Oursler, the activities director] said you had been [at the Southern Utah Veterans Home] for awhile.

WA: Yes, I have. There is a block of time that I don't remember where I was.
[Laughter]

RB: Is that right?

WA: Yes.

RB: A little foggy? That is okay.

WA: It is weird. You don't forget, it is just a blank, a complete blank.

RB: I am just trying to refresh your memory a little bit, but I know it is kind of hard, so don't worry about it.

WA: It is just confusing for me.

RB: This has been fun! Thanks for sharing your story with me. We will stop –the interview] right here.

[END OF RECORDING. END OF INTERVIEW.]