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Interview with William Franklin Mitchell

William Franklin Mitchell

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**LOUISE PETTUS ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS
VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT**

**Interview VHP #011
MITCHELL, William Franklin**

MITCHELL, William Franklin

Enlisted: 1935 January 30 -1970s

Interviewed: February 24, 2004

Interviewer: Georgia Williamson

Index by: Michelle Dubert-Bellrichard

Length: 00:44:03

Abstract: In his February 24, 2004 interview with Georgia Williamson, William Franklin Mitchell describes life as a volunteer chaplain for the army during WWII. Specifically, Mitchell shares the reason why he joined the service and what his duties were in war. This interview was conducted for inclusion into the Louise Pettus Archives and Special Collections Oral History Program.

Keywords: Army, Reserves, Hawaii, basic training, mass, correspondence, seminary, chaplain

Interview Session (February 24, 2004): Digital File

Time	Keywords
00:00:00	[no question] Biography. Attended Erskine College. Citizens Military Training Camp (CMTC) 1935. Basic Training at Fort Bragg. After CMTC, went back to Erskine, graduated 1938, taught school, went back to Erskine, became a pastor, and volunteered to become an army chaplain. Graduated from Harvard University.
00:03:10	<i>Question:</i> What were your instructors like? <i>Answer:</i> Reserve officers on duty to train privates. Highest grade officer Mitchell saw was a captain.
00:04:13	<i>Question:</i> Why was training difficult? <i>Answer:</i> Mitchell was skinny. Couldn't "chin himself". Every Friday there was a retreat – troops formed and had to march. Learned customs and courtesies of the service.
00:06:50	<i>Question:</i> Other boot camp stories? <i>Answer:</i> In chaplain school, Mitchell would march the Charles River in Massachusetts. Cold weather. Studied military law, history, and organization.
00:07:58	<i>Question:</i> Active duty when at Harvard? <i>Answer:</i> Went to classes in the morning and drilled in the afternoon.
00:08:25	<i>Question:</i> First stationed? <i>Answer:</i> McCoy, Wisconsin. Talks about being in the upper

- peninsula of Michigan. Mitchell became ill – said he was lucky to get a bath.
- 00:09:45 *Question:* Did you serve as a chaplain at that time? *Answer:* No. Chaplains back then were primarily made up of Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant people. Mitchell is Presbyterian.
- 00:10:50 *Question:* Did you join to military to serve God? *Answer:* Mitchell says he had a conviction to be a minister and felt the same conviction to be a chaplain in the military. All chaplains are volunteer in the military. When a chaplain is on duty, he or she is under the command of the military and their church. Paid just like any other captain – salary came from the army. Mitchell’s church sent him newsletters.
- 00:13:09 *Question:* Day-to-day duties of a chaplain? *Answer:* Go to breakfast and say the blessing. Went to mass after breakfast. Visited the “sick, sad, and suffering.” Mitchell shares story of helping a man who was imprisoned.
- 00:15:38 *Question:* Where were services held? *Answer:* Chapels on bases. On the field, Mitchell held services anywhere. Hospital visitation. Mitchell mentions soldiers who suffered psychosis after years of combat and came to Hawaii to receive counselling.
- 00:18:00 *Question:* Did you pray over men who were dying? *Answer:* Wasn’t in battle. Mitchell shares story of a man severely burned and praying for him.
- 00:19:20 *Question:* What kind of sermons? *Answer:* Like the sermons at home, but Mitchell would adapt them to the surroundings. Mitchell tried to preach messages that fit the needs as he saw them.
- 00:20:40 *Question:* How did you end up in Hawaii? *Answer:* Amphibious training. Training in Hawaii was aimed towards invasion with Japan. Mitchell says there 12 million soldiers on active duty. There were 1200 chaplains. A chaplain was assigned to 1,000 soldiers.
- 00:22:35 *Question:* Was that number of men ever a burden? *Answer:* Not a burden – wonderful opportunity. “Even though I was exempt from the draft, I was not exempt from the call of God.”
- 00:23:35 *Question:* How did your mother react to your enlistment? *Answer:* Mitchell clarifies that chaplains volunteer not enlist. Mitchell was one of four – other brothers were in WWI and the Korean War. Mitchell oldest brother.
- 00:25:22 *Question:* How did you stay in touch with your family? *Answer:* Letter. Mitchell had a wife and child – wrote to them once or twice a week. Soldiers didn’t have to pay postage.

- 00:26:08 *Question:* Did you always get your wife's letter? *Answer:* As far as he knows. Mitchell tells story of his colonel asking Mitchell to continue serving – offered him a house.
- 00:27:05 *Question:* Date back home? *Answer:* February 1946.
- 00:27:25 *Question:* Helping black soldiers? *Answer:* Men coming home by train to Atlanta. Mitchell in command of troops from Atlanta to Augusta – Mitchell never in command before. Mitchell wanted the highest ranking enlisted man in charge as well.
- 00:30:05 *Question:* Did you enjoy being in command? *Answer:* Mitchell says he will do whatever God wants him to do. Chief of chaplains in Washington D.C.
- 00:31:25 *Question:* Interaction with black soldiers? *Answer:* Meal tickets issued to soldiers in Atlanta. Restaurant wouldn't serve black soldiers. Mitchell recalls the segregation black soldiers faced.
- 00:33:28 *Question:* What did you do after the war? *Answer:* Attended Columbia Seminary. Served two churches in Atlanta. Worked at a church in Charlotte.
- 00:34:55 *Question:* How did you apply your time in service to your work after service? *Answer:* Mitchell was able to connect more with veterans and it gave him a better understanding of life.
- 00:36:25 *Question:* What stressful activities? *Answer:* Trying to do more than you can do.
- 00:36:55 *Question:* Joined any veteran organizations? *Answer:* Yes (can't recall). Mitchell never discharged – transferred from active to reserve. Promoted to colonel in 1976.
- 00:37:57 *Question:* What do you do in the reserves? *Answer:* Continuing training. Ran a local chaplain school. Mitchell says, "I'm sure I did what the lord wanted me to do."
- 00:38:47 *Question:* Did you get called for Korean or Vietnam wars? *Answer:* No.
- 00:39:28 *Question:* Do you still have contact with anyone from WWII? *Answer:* Occasionally. Mitchell used to go to chaplain activities.
- 00:40:24 *Question:* Any other stories? *Answer:* Mitchell characterizes his father and talks about the lineage of Presbyterians in his family.
- 00:42:40 *Question:* How would you compare being a chaplain to being a civilian minister? *Answer:* Mitchell won't compare. Mitchell says chaplains and civilian ministers both

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did important work.

00:44:03 *End of interview*