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Billy Holmes, 2008

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Paris Westbrook: On behalf of Crossroads, we'd like to say thank you for taking your time out to do this interview with us today and for the record, could you state your name, please?

Billy Holmes: Billy Holmes.

Paris Westbrook: Billy Holmes, okay, and your date of birth?

Billy Holmes: 4/12/38.

Paris Westbrook: Okay and the city you were born in.

Billy Holmes: Lexington.

Paris Westbrook: Lexington, okay. Were you raised in Lexington?

Billy Holmes: I was.

Paris Westbrook: Okay and what's your occupation?

Billy Holmes: Huh?

Paris Westbrook: Your occupation.

Billy Holmes: What is my occupation now?

Paris Westbrook: Uh-huh.

Billy Holmes: Retired.

Paris Westbrook: Okay and for the record –

Billy Holmes: I do drive part time.

Paris Westbrook: Okay, you drive –

Billy Holmes: For the drugstore, yeah, pharmacist.

Paris Westbrook: Oh, okay. Okay. For the record, could you also state your parents' names?

Billy Holmes: Joe V. and Trudy Mae Holmes.

Paris Westbrook: Okay and do you have any siblings?

Billy Holmes: Children?

Paris Westbrook: Siblings.

Billy Holmes: Brothers and sisters? Yeah.

Paris Westbrook: Yeah.

Billy Holmes: Eddie Holmes and Charlotte Sullivan.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. Can you tell us what it was like growing up in Lexington?
[00:01:00]

Billy Holmes: What was life like?

Paris Westbrook: Mm-hm.

Billy Holmes: Well, it was pretty peaceful. We didn't have any streetcars, city buses or anything like that. It was just a peaceful town.

Paris Westbrook: Okay.

Billy Holmes: We had a green _____ sometimes.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. Where did you go to elementary school?

Billy Holmes: When?

Paris Westbrook: Where?

Billy Holmes: Lexington _____ – well, it was Lexington City School at the time.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. Okay, did you also attend middle school and high school here in Lexington?

Billy Holmes: Well, back then all you had was like the grammar school and then go to high school. There wasn't any middle school.

Paris Westbrook: Okay, can you tell us what your high school experience was like?

Billy Holmes: Well, I enjoyed it very much. I was in the band for two or three years. That was in the seventh and eighth grade and especially in high school. Then I started playing football and I forgot about the band.

Paris Westbrook: Okay.

Billy Holmes: And we just – I played basketball some, but football was my game.

[00:02:03]

And I had a bunch of great classmates. They were all good.

Holly James: Did you live in town when you were younger?

Billy Holmes: When I was in – yeah, I lived on North Main Street. Montgomery School was a black high school and the black school was not far right behind my house.

Paris Westbrook: Do you remember what race relations were like growing up here in Lexington?

Billy Holmes: Like what now?

Paris Westbrook: Race relations, like how people of the different races interacted when you were growing up.

Billy Holmes: No, not really.

Paris Westbrook: Oh, okay. Okay. What did you do after high school?

Billy Holmes: What did I do at the high school?

Paris Westbrook: After high school?

Billy Holmes: I just went to class. As I said, played football and basketball some and I finally got out.

[00:03:00]

Paris Westbrook: Did you stay here once you left high school after graduation?

Billy Holmes: I went to Murray State for two years, Murray, Kentucky.

Paris Westbrook: Oh, okay.

Billy Holmes: I went up there for two years.

Holly James: Did you – what did you study at Murray State?

Billy Holmes: What did I study in college?

Holly James: Mm-hm. Yeah.

Billy Holmes: Not much of anything. (*Laughter*) I was taking PE courses.

Holly James: Okay.

Paris Westbrook: After you left college what did you do?

Billy Holmes: I came back here and went to work for my dad.

Holly James: And what did you do? What did your father do?

Billy Holmes: He had a grocery store and a feed mill and had a farm and I worked at all three places. I probably worked on the farm more than I did anywhere.

Holly James: What kind of farm was it?

Billy Holmes: What kind of farm was it?

Holly James: Mm-hm.

Billy Holmes: We had cattle, hog, row crop. It was kinda mixed up.

Holly James: Okay.

Billy Holmes: Hogs and cattle. I didn't have any goats.

[00:04:00]

Paris Westbrook: At what time did you join the National Guard?

Billy Holmes: I believe it was 1959.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. Was there a specific reason why you joined?

Billy Holmes: Well, not really. I had three friends that were fixing to join and they asked me to join with them and so I did.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. Do you remember what that process was like, joining and I guess being in the National Guard and things like that?

Billy Holmes: What was what like now?

Paris Westbrook: The process of being – the process of joining the National Guard.

Billy Holmes: Yeah, we had to go to Ft. Jackson, South Carolina, for six months and then we came back here and just met with the guard once a month and then every two weeks – I mean in the summertime you had two weeks of summer camp.

Holly James: And what kind of training did you go through when you were in North Carolina?

[00:05:02]

Billy Holmes: Infantry.

Holly James: Infantry training?

Billy Holmes: Mm-hm.

BEGIN CLIP 2 00:05:05:00

Holly James: Okay. Can you tell us a little bit about what that training consists of? I'm not very familiar with the military.

Billy Holmes: Well, what you want to know, about the infantry?

Holly James: Yeah.

Billy Holmes: Well, you're a foot soldier really and you carry a weapon and you're the one that gets on the front line and does the shooting and are getting shot or killing somebody or whatever. That's what the infantry is.

Holly James: All right and once you came back, how did you stay involved with the National Guard?

Billy Holmes: Well, I was really involved with the National Guard when I went to the six months. That was mandatory. We had to spend six months in the United States Army and get our training and then came back and we were with our unit then until our – let's see. We had six years we had to sign up for.

[00:06:01]

Holly James: Okay. So what did you do once you were back in Lexington? Like what kinda duties were you assigned?

Billy Holmes: What kinda what now?

Holly James: What kinda duties were you assigned at Lexington in the National Guard?

Billy Holmes: I was still infantry. We had a infantry outfit here.

Holly James: Okay.

Billy Holmes: Only we were armored infantry. We had armored personnel carriers.

Holly James: And did you have any activities before you were sent to Memphis?

Billy Holmes: Before I what?

Holly James: Before you were sent to Memphis, did you –?

Billy Holmes: No. Only thing, we had our training. We had trained for it.

Paris Westbrook: What was that training like for going to Memphis?

Billy Holmes: Oh, I don't know. It wasn't all that bad. It was pretty calm.

Holly James: What kinda things did you learn?

Billy Holmes: Huh?

[00:06:59]

Holly James: What were some of the new things that they had taught you in order to prepare for Memphis other than regular infantry training?

Billy Holmes: I don't know. What would you do?

Holly James: So when was it that you were sent to Memphis?

Billy Holmes: Seem to me like it was '68.

Paris Westbrook: Do you remember the reason that they gave you guys for being sent to Memphis? Like do you remember what you were told?

Billy Holmes: To go to Memphis?

Paris Westbrook: Mm-hm.

Billy Holmes: Yeah, because Martin Luther King got killed. The first time, he wasn't killed, but then the second time they killed him.

[00:08:00]

Paris Westbrook: When you went to Memphis for the first time, do you remember what that experience was like, like what the city was like and everything like that?

Billy Holmes: It wasn't too bad. When we got there, the people from Memphis had already got everything settled down and it wasn't all that bad.

Holly James: Was the – had you gone to Memphis often before then?

Billy Holmes: No, no.

Paris Westbrook: You had never been in Memphis before you went?

Billy Holmes: Un-unh. I'll take that back. We came from camp one year. We came from Mississippi up to Memphis and stayed for three days.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. Had you heard anything about Memphis prior before going, like what the city was like or had you heard about the sanitation strike or anything like that?

Billy Holmes: Yes, ma'am. I had.

Paris Westbrook: Do you remember like what you heard or I don't know what –?

Billy Holmes: No, mostly that they were just – well, they'd had hard words with each other and then they finally got in – broke out in – got to fighting down there.

[00:09:04]

Paris Westbrook: Do you remember what it was like when you had to go back to Memphis for a second time, like after Dr. King was – had been assassinated?

Billy Holmes: That's when he got killed, the second time I went back.

Paris Westbrook: Mm-hm. Do you remember what the city was like then or if there was any difference?

Billy Holmes: It was a mess. It was a mess. But within two or three days it got settled down.

Paris Westbrook: Oh, okay. Okay. How many National Guardsmen was it that had to go to Memphis?

Billy Holmes: Oh, man, let's see. Well, we had all the battalion here, which would be three or four companies, and there's about 200 or 300 people in each company, so you can figure that out from there.

Paris Westbrook: Do you remember what your feelings were when you had to go?

Billy Holmes: Yes, ma'am. I didn't want to go, but we didn't have any choice.

BEGIN CLIP 3 00:10:02:00

Holly James: Would you say that most of the people that you were with didn't want to go as well?

Billy Holmes: No, some of them didn't mind it and they said we wouldn't have weapons, but every one of us, we had a weapon. We brought one from home, but then when we got down there, they gave us live ammunition to go in our weapons.

Paris Westbrook: Was there any particular reason why you didn't want to go?

Billy Holmes: Well, not any – not really. I just didn't much want to go.

Paris Westbrook: Okay and you said there was – it was like a mixture. Some of you wanted to go; some of you didn't want to go and some of you just didn't –

Billy Holmes: Right. Yeah.

Paris Westbrook: – care either way. Okay.

Holly James: So do you remember what the trip there was like and like once you got into the city like where did you stay?

Billy Holmes: Stayed at the airport. That's where we camped and stayed at.

[00:11:00]

Holly James: Did you use like military camping equipment or did they have –?

Billy Holmes: We use – yeah, we had our own equipment, had M-1s, .45 pistol, .45, had the bayonets, had gas masks. We had everything.

Paris Westbrook: How long did you stay the first time, like the first time you guys –?

Billy Holmes: A week.

Paris Westbrook: And how long did you stay the second time.

Billy Holmes: A week.

Paris Westbrook: Okay.

Holly James: Do you remember any specific incidents that occurred or experiences that you had while you were there?

Billy Holmes: Let's see. Well, I know the first time we went down there that at midnight we left and we went to town and at 5:00 the next afternoon we were supposed to have gotten to leave. I was a lieutenant and I was in the A company.

[00:11:58]

Billy Holmes: And headquarters company had two officers and they refused to go on duty. One of them said he was too tired and the other one just flat refused to go on and so I had to stay on another 24 hours. I stayed on 48 hours without any sleep.

Holly James: Did you have a lot of interaction with the people of the city while you were on duty? Did you hear anything from members of the community or did anyone cause trouble for you?

Billy Holmes: Never did. All that happened before we got down there. Now they had the march before Dr. King got killed and it was peaceful and then they had one the next week when he got killed and it turned out to be peaceful; didn't have a lot of trouble.

[00:13:00]

Paris Westbrook: Did you go back to Memphis or have you been back to Memphis after the second time you had to go back and patrol _____?

[Crosstalk]

Billy Holmes: Yeah. Oh, you mean in the National Guard?

Paris Westbrook: Oh, no, just in general.

Billy Holmes: Oh, no. Going down there? Yeah, I used to drive a truck down there once or twice a week.

Paris Westbrook: Oh, okay. Okay. Had you – did you have to go back while you were in the National Guard?

Billy Holmes: Un-unh.

Paris Westbrook: Oh, okay.

Billy Holmes: We never did.

Paris Westbrook: Okay. What did you do after you were done with the National Guard? I don't know if the right word is "done," but after you were – after everything had happened with Memphis and everything had calmed down.

Billy Holmes: Well, we just came back home and we'd meet once a month, but we still kept taking riot training. We still kept taking riot training.

Paris Westbrook: Okay.

Holly James: Did you ever have to use what you had learned in riot training in Memphis?

Billy Holmes: Mm-hm.

Holly James: What was that experience like?

[00:14:00]

Billy Holmes: It was just more or less for riots, keeping people calm.

Holly James: Mm-hm. What was a situation where you had to use it? Was it an actual – was it a full-blown riot or were people just –?

Billy Holmes: Now when we got down there, it was not a full-blown riot. They had gotten it all pretty much settled down.

Male: Since you were the lieutenant, what kind of responsibilities did you have?

Billy Holmes: Do what now?

Male: Since you were the lieutenant, what kind of – what was your job while you were in Memphis? What –?

Billy Holmes: I was in charge of my platoon.

Male: Okay. So were you just overseeing –?

Billy Holmes: I was out there with them all the time.

Male: Okay. Did you go on patrols with them?

Billy Holmes: Uh-huh, I did.

Begin clip 4 00;14;49;16

Male: What were the patrols like?

Billy Holmes: Well, I'd be in a jeep most of the time and then my platoon would be in a deuce and a half and they just followed.

[00:14:56] We'd all just run up – drive up and down the streets and usually had a police officer with us and he had a radio with the Memphis Police Department and if they needed us somewhere they would call him and we'd go, but we never did have any – a whole lotta trouble.

Male: Okay. Did you have to arrest anyone or did you –?

Billy Holmes: No.

Male: Okay.

Paris Westbrook: How did you get to become lieutenant?

Billy Holmes: Huh?

Paris Westbrook: How did you get to become lieutenant?

Billy Holmes: I went through OCS. I stayed in five years as a enlisted man and then I went to OCS and got a commission.

Paris Westbrook: Okay.

Male: Do you remember being afraid at all while you were in Memphis?

Billy Holmes: Did I what?

Male: Was there ever a moment when you were afraid while you were in Memphis?

Billy Holmes: Not really. Not really. I had a .45 and it was loaded and I had a M-1 and it was loaded.

Paris Westbrook: Do you know if anybody in your platoon or any other National Guardsmen had to use their weapons or teargas or anything for that matter?

[00:16:03]

Billy Holmes: The only fired – only shot I heard fired was a boy was loading in – getting in the back end of a deuce and a half and he pulled the trigger and the gun went off. (*Laughter*) Shot a hole through the tarp.

Paris Westbrook: Oh, okay. Okay.

Male: Mr. Tyler was telling us about that story.

Paris Westbrook: Yeah.

Billy Holmes: Huh?

Paris Westbrook: Mr. Tyler told us about that story.

Billy Holmes: Did he?

Male: Yeah.

Paris Westbrook: Mm-hm.

Billy Holmes: We heard some gunshots but they would be at a distance, you know. They wasn't shooting at us.

Holly James: Did you ever hear what they were shooting at?

Billy Holmes: Ma'am?

Holly James: Did you ever hear what they were shooting at or did you ever follow up, didn't –?

Billy Holmes: No, no. They would just probably shooting.

Holly James: Mm-hm. Did you – you said that you had to go on rounds with police officers. Did you go on rounds with like the same police officer? Did you –?

Billy Holmes: No, we had – probably have a different one every time.

Paris Westbrook: Do you remember what the police officers' thoughts or feelings or if they had expressed anything about the riots?

[00:16:58]

Billy Holmes: They didn't like it, the black ones or the white ones didn't and we had several black police with us and I had one black National Guard boy or man and we wouldn't let him get out of the deuce and a half because we knew they'd be after him worse than they would anybody else, so he stayed in a deuce and a half all the time.

Paris Westbrook: Were any of the National Guardsmen in your platoon afraid or scared or anything like that?

Billy Holmes: Nope.

Paris Westbrook: No. Okay.

Billy Holmes: I just knew that one that refused to go. He was scared and they kicked him out.

Male: Was he a member of your platoon?

Billy Holmes: Huh?

Male: A member of your platoon refused?

Billy Holmes: No, he was a lieutenant from headquarters company.

Male: He was scared of it or he was too – just –

Billy Holmes: He was afraid. He just flat refused to go.

Male: Really.

[00:17:58]

Billy Holmes: And they kicked him out.

Male: Was he from Lexington?

Billy Holmes: No, he was from Henderson and, like I said, I'm not gonna tell you his name 'cause I wouldn't want to embarrass him now.

Male: Right.

Paris Westbrook: Mm-hm.

Billy Holmes: That's been, what, 40 years ago almost, hadn't it?

Paris Westbrook: Mm-hm.

Billy Holmes: Sixty-eight? Yeah.

Paris Westbrook: Yeah, 40 years.

Holly James: So do you remember what it was like when you came back from Memphis? Do you feel like that changed you at all having to see all that?

Billy Holmes: Didn't bother me a bit. Couldn't tell any difference.

Paris Westbrook: You said you've been back to Memphis through driving trucks and everything. Have you seen a change in the city or a difference or anything like that since then?

Billy Holmes: I can say that I've seen a lot of change, yeah. Memphis is not all – wasn't all that bad.

[00:19:00] It got a bad name for that, but it wasn't all that bad.

Paris Westbrook: Okay.

Holly James: So how long were you in the National Guard after the – after you went to Memphis?

Billy Holmes: Not long. I think about six months to a year, somewhere about that.

Holly James: Okay and what did you end up doing after that?

Billy Holmes: Well, like I said, my dad had a farm and a feed mill and I came back home and I really farmed most of the time. I'd work at the feed mill on some days when it was busy.

Holly James: Okay. So did you have a wife or anything?

Billy Holmes: Uh-huh, had a wife and one child.

Holly James: Did you – were you married when you were in the National Guard?

Billy Holmes: I was married in '64.

Begin clip 5 00;19;54;00

Holly James: Okay, so how did you being sent away affect your home life?

[00:20:00] Was your wife really concerned about you going into Memphis?

Billy Holmes: Not really. Not really. I hated to leave her and the little boy, but, you know, you gotta do what you gotta do and it wasn't too bad. I'd call her every night, so it wasn't all that bad.

Holly James: And can you state your wife's name just for the record?

Billy Holmes: My wife's name?

Holly James: Mm-hm.

Billy Holmes: It's Carolyn.

Holly James: Okay.

Billy Holmes: Carolyn. She's a county court clerk now.

Holly James: Okay.

Paris Westbrook: And you said you had a son.

Billy Holmes: Huh?

Paris Westbrook: You said you have a son.

Billy Holmes: I had three.

Paris Westbrook: Oh, okay.

Billy Holmes: One of them got killed and I've got a daughter, too.

Paris Westbrook: Oh, okay. Do you have any grandchildren?

Billy Holmes: I have four.

Paris Westbrook: Mm-hm. Okay.

Billy Holmes: No, I take it back, got three and another one on the way.

Paris Westbrook: Oh.

Holly James: Really?

Billy Holmes: Yep, got three and another one on the way.

[00:21:01]

Paris Westbrook: Okay.

Billy Holmes: And they're all boys.

Paris Westbrook: Oh, okay. *(Laughter)* Okay.

Holly James: Just out of curiosity, where did you meet your wife?

Billy Holmes: At the snack bar in Parsons.

Holly James: So were you married before you went to Murray State or was that –

Billy Holmes: No, no. No.

Holly James: Oh, yeah. That would be after, yeah.

Billy Holmes: I didn't get married – see, I went in the Army in 1959.

Holly James: Fifty-nine.

Billy Holmes: And I got married in '64.

Holly James: Oh, yeah. Quite a bit after.

Paris Westbrook: Well, is there anything else you'd like to tell us about your National Guard experience or just anything in general?

Billy Holmes: No. I mean I enjoyed it, my time that I spent, and I stayed in ten years and I just wished I'd a stayed ten more. I'd be drawing a retirement now, but that's water under the bridge.

[00:22:00] Hindsight's 20/20.

Holly James: So what would you say is the greatest thing that you learned from being in the military?

Billy Holmes: What did I what now?

Holly James: What would be the greatest thing that you learned from being in the military?

Billy Holmes: That I've learned?

Holly James: Mm-hm.

Billy Holmes: Oh, me. Well, you learn to be more independent, I think, when you get in the military and especially after you get out because they tell you what to do when you're in there and when you get out you feel that [REDACTED] when you're independent, but the military – in my opinion, every 18-year-old boy ought to have to spend six months in the military.

Paris Westbrook: Can you elaborate on –?

Billy Holmes: If he's physical able. Huh?

Paris Westbrook: Can you elaborate on why you think every –?

[00:23:01]

Billy Holmes: Well, they just learn a lot of things.

Paris Westbrook: Okay.

Billy Holmes: They – when you're in the military, when you go in there, you get up in the morning at 5:00, 4:30, and you got to clean up your own. You make up your own bed, clean up your area, and it's just – I think it's a good thing for any 18-year-old boy. They ought to have to go.

Paris Westbrook: Okay.

Billy Holmes: I don't think that'll ever happen, but –

Paris Westbrook: Okay. All right.

Holly James: Well, we'd just like to thank you for coming in and talking to us about your life experience and helping out with the Crossroads to Freedom Project.

Billy Holmes: Okay and I appreciate you asking me and I hope I've done a halfway decent job.

[End of Audio]