



# **James Stillman Free**

## **Recollections of World War II**

**Transcript of an interview of James Stillman Free (JSF)**  
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TD: ...it's sad that we're not spending that much time on World War II because, when we are we are studying the effects, but it's still one section in the history books, it's not that big. But I guess this report is just designed to get us, sort of really into the experiences, and really how much it affected the lives of everyone and how it helped out the United States, or changed the United States. I guess we're going to do the same thing for the Vietnam War and we're going to interview Vietnam veterans, so it's a big thing. To start us off, I wanted to know where were you on December 7, when the war started?

JSF: When it broke out? Well I was working over at the *Washington Evening Star* here in Washington at that time. I came here in 1930s in '39, before the war, I was working for some other papers down south and I came to work for the *Washington Star*, and by coincidence in 1939, and 1940, my assignment was covering the war preparations for the War Production Board. They were converting civilian industries into military production airplanes, tanks and ships and all that kind of business, and so I reported on that.

TD: So you knew a lot about the war before, you knew what was going on?

JSF: I knew what they were doing, in preparing for it. Of course they started some build-up for the military forces but not, it wasn't at a very fast pace. There was even some objection to passing the draft, it had some trouble, Congress, it only passed it by one vote in the House.

TD: Yeah that's true. So –

JSF: It so happened that I had had a fair amount of military service when I was going to college. I was down in Alabama, in Tuscaloosa, Alabama where the University of Alabama is, and while I was going to college, at the university as matter of fact the summer before I enrolled, I joined a National Guard company; there it was headquarters company, the brigade headquarters company, of the Army National Guard. It was quite an elite outfit really, because being in a college town they could pick and choose who they took in, and we didn't even have rifles because we were headquarters company, we just had side arms and automatic pistols. But we ran a brigade headquarters and communication between headquarters and the units in the brigade. A brigade consists of a couple of regiments and the regiments of course spill down into companies. And also, in college I was interested in the military as a sideline. I signed up for ROTC, and as a matter of fact it had mutual benefits; the fact that I was in the National Guard and I was also taking ROTC. Three days a week we had ROTC training drill, just

a couple of hours mostly, and every Wednesday night we had drill night at the National Guard headquarters. We also had a crack drill unit in this headquarters company, we would give exhibition drills when we went to camp for both Alabama military, Alabama and Mississippi National Guard trained together in Fort McClellan, down there. My last service, I started out of course as a private and my last service I was first sergeant. You were sort of the personnel director; you do the drilling and wake them up in the morning and make out the payroll; this, that and the other. Anyway, in the ROTC, this is back in the late 1920s, the service I chose was the Coast Guard, and the reason I chose the Coast Guard, instead of going to camp to do their training, six weeks of ROTC camp, you finish it up in your senior year. Ordinarily if you take infantry or engineering, well I wasn't an engineer I couldn't do that, but my choices were infantry and coastal artillery.

TD: Was infantry really hard, I heard infantry was very brutal?

JSF: The reason I didn't take infantry was they trained at Fort McClellan which is inland in north Alabama; it's hot as blazes all over the place. The Coast Guard, on the other hand, trained down at Pensacola, Florida at an Army post down there at Fort Barrancas, and you're on the Gulf of Mexico, so I figured out it was a better deal. But of course the Coast

Guard artillery specialized training was obsolete by the time World War II came along because it was predicated on getting your bearing on a moving ship which were two observations points located a low distance apart, couple of hundred, 300 yards, something like that, and you got your telescopes at each end and where they crossed, that was where the ship was; and you had a gadget for figuring out how far it was and you take a reading every 15-20 seconds or so and you could tell how fast it was going.

TD: It's not very rigorous work.

JSF: There was no occasion for that when World War II came along. As a matter of fact in covering defense as I did for the *Washington Star*, I knew we were going to get in a war; it was just inevitable, it was just a question of time, so in finishing ROTC, I acquired a commission in the Army, second lieutenant's commission in the Army Reserves, just as I graduated. I went to Columbia one year, finished in 1930, and there was no indication at that particular time that war was coming, I didn't do any drilling, I didn't go to camp, I didn't do anything, but I held a commission for four years, but when I saw the war coming when I worked here in 1939-40 so I went down to talk to the Army people to see if I could do something to reinstate my Army commission and they said in effect, "Ole buddy, you had it and you let it go. We don't care about you." So I went down and

applied for a Navy commission, this was 1939, and everything was okay except I was partly color blind. I don't know if you saw these Japanese plate tests or not, you see things you're not supposed to see when you're partly color blind, and you don't see some things you're supposed to see. They were very picky at that time for the officers, so they turned me down. I went to the Marine Corps in 1940 and they were interested in what I had done and so forth and they gave me a physical exam with a doctor, and I had broken my nose years before, and the doctor in fixing it up inadvertently punched a hole in the middle septum, and it's still there, but the Marines somewhere in their literature, they thought that would give me a hellacious handicap in the tropics, so I don't know why, but they turned me down too. So I went on and I got drafted in the early spring of 1942, right after Pearl Harbor, and incidentally, while I was covering, I moved over just before Pearl Harbor working for the *Chicago Sun* here in town, and I was covering the war over at the Pentagon. As a matter of fact at that time they didn't have the Pentagon; the War Navy Department was down on Constitution Avenue. They moved into the Pentagon during the time I was there. Anyway, that was part of my responsibility, to cover the war. I never will forget about four or five days before Pearl Harbor as the *Chicago Sun* was putting out a trial edition, they were thinking they were going to have the first edition of the

paper starting, oh, I think I was roughly the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> of December and one of the stories I turned in for the Denver edition was an interview with an Air Corps general, they called it Air Corps then before the Air Force, and he told me how lousy the Japanese Air Force was, the planes were no damn good, the pilots were no damn good and he just discounted the Japanese Air Force. Well, we ran the story and I tried to get them to rerun it a little after we started publication but they wouldn't do it, they thought it was too embarrassing – to them. Well anyway, I got drafted late in the spring of '42 and I was sent for basic training down near Drew Field, Florida, the Army Air Corps, I was in for training, in for six weeks. I was finishing that up and I wasn't eligible for officer candidate school because of these scores I had had with the Navy and the Army, they ...me for the draft. So I got drafted and was sent down to Drew Field, Florida for my basic training; six weeks. And to show you how unprepared, how short they were with people, we had a second lieutenant who was training three companies, he was commanding the training of three companies of men, they varied a little bit, that would be 300-400 people. I never will forget, I was doing the pay – they saw I had had this experience in the Guard and so forth, so I was doing the payroll for the whole outfit and taking them out to drill and everything else, and next to the second lieutenant running the whole thing, we had two sergeants that were

handling that particular company. One morning we went out to do calisthenics and we got out there on the field to do the calisthenics and he said, “Any of you guys ever do calisthenics?” Nobody said anything, and I held up my hand and I said, “Well, I’ve done calisthenics.” So I got that added to my duties.

TD: They really were undermanned.

JSF: There was no question about it; there was no question about it. And toward the tail end of the training, about the fourth or fifth week, I got a dog-eared letter from the Bureau of Personnel of the Navy and it had been to two or three obsolete addresses, places I had been and moved on, and in effect what this said was, “We’re a little short and that was what we were going to be on people, and we’ll give you a waiver on your color blindness if you’ll come in and be sworn in” and so forth. I went to this second lieutenant who was running everything and showed him this letter and he said, “Oh well, it’s too bad you’re in the Army bucko, you can’t get out of the Army.” After he told me that, I started walking out and there was a sergeant major, a sergeant major is a senior non-commissioned officer . . . whole outfit, he usually does sort of advisory stuff; he doesn’t have any responsibility; lieutenants run everything. Anyway, I was walking out and he just went like this, he said, “He doesn’t know his ass from the hole in the

ground. You take a look... section number so and so," I forget the name of it, and it said an enlisted man . . . [crying baby – Amanda Nooter, James Free's three year old granddaughter] so I knew some people in the Pentagon because I had worked over there, so I called a friend of mine over at the Pentagon and told him what this certain lieutenant said. He said. "The hell with that, I'll take care of that," so two-three days later I got a telegram through the communications system, to let me the hell go and sent me to Washington to accept this Navy commission.

TD: Oh wow.

JSF: So I was a private citizen for a couple of days after I was discharged down there and came back up here and sworn in to the Navy and they assigned me to the Tenth Naval District which is in Puerto Rico, San Juan, Puerto Rico, the headquarters. So I went to Norfolk and got my transportation on a ship and by coincidence it was an old United Fruit ship. It didn't have any water tight holds in it and they put bananas and stuff off in a hold, it had been turned over to the Navy and been turned in a supply ship to supply bases in the south and . . . naval bases and supply them. Anyway the point I'm saying, this, it was an old United Fruit ship before the Navy took it, called the USS Pastores, and the reason I mention it, when I got discharged from the Navy, in August 1945, after it was all over, I got my

transportation back from Pearl Harbor in the USS Pastores. So I served in San Juan, I was commissioned as a first lieutenant, and I was in Naval intelligence. We handled travel control and various aspects of different things, we got reports of suspicious people, we worked with the . . . San Juan though was still a holiday place, we didn't even have blackouts, so it was a little boring there, I got stuck in travel control which . . . airplanes. You interview the people, where they're going, and make a record of who is coming to the States and leaving the States and why . . . [baby crying].

Anyway I got bored with that and I asked for a transfer to Trinidad and the reason I wanted to go to Trinidad was that was one of the main places where the U.S. convoys going to Europe and they come down there to assemble. There is a big gulf between Trinidad and South America, the Gulf of Paria. Our aircraft carriers could go in there and do exercises without being, without a submarine housing, and at that time submarines were very active, and part of our job was interviewing captains of ships that had been sunk. They were trying to get a pattern of how many submarines there were involved and what kind. They could figure out what kind of torpedoes they used from different things and anyway, that was one of my main jobs down there and the number of ships that were torpedoed, it was just incredible.

Anyway I was in Trinidad from November of '42 until, well I got out of

there June...Virginia Beach and so forth, but I got my transfer to Trinidad in November. And in 1944 one interesting thing that happened down there, the first German submarine was captured intact by a Navy admiral called Dan Gallery. He was only a captain then, but anyway, he commanded a task force that had this submarine under attack and he sent a boarding party to get on that submarine before night, what they would do if it got damaged, they would scuttle it. You know, open valves under water so it would sink. This boarding party got there in time. They got down there and shot their way through to the controls and kept the submarine afloat and they brought it into Trinidad and that was one of the things we worked on. We didn't have enough access to German-speaking people to do the whole job, so through interpreters, even the people didn't speak German, my German was very poor, but anyway, that was one of the things we did.

TD: But you gained a lot of information from that submarine?

JSF: I was in Trinidad for about a year and a half, and the only break I had, I got six weeks of training at a New York advanced intelligence school in a hotel in New York. And oh, they gave us the whole works, recognition of enemy airplanes and different types of ships and they would flash these pictures on a screen and you finally got so it was just automatic; when you saw a picture you knew what it was. After I got back to Trinidad I applied, I

tried to get to Europe but as always . . . likely to get something else. I got ordered to the Pacific fleet actually, but they were going to give us some training in San Diego at the Coronado, where Clinton went on vacation, because of the Navy base there. And this training was conducted by the commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Jimmy Roosevelt, the president's son, and he had been in an outfit. Anyway he ran this thing and one of the guys who had played Tarzan in the movies was his . . . and they put us through the paces. They were supposedly training us to be transport scout intelligence officers and the idea was that at . . . somewhere out there where we had a landing, Japanese as part of their resistance they were swift under water swimmers attaching bombs to the hulls of the ships that they could get on undetected, and one of the things we were supposed to do was head them off. We had training in rubber boats and under water operations and demolition, and you name it. And they sent us out to the fleet, we went to Pearl Harbor first, and I was assigned to a transport assault ship, called USS Pierce. It had been in a whole lot of operations out there. Anyway, I joined them in Guam. It was just . . . I beg your pardon, we went to first to Guadalcanal and just finished . . . Guadalcanal we went aboard and the first operation we went into was the Palau, P A L A U Islands, which was, I don't know if you read about it or not, but anyway, one of the islands there the

Japanese had started this business of digging caves and connecting up caves and being able to retreat through a series of caves. We had an attack on that island. The Palau Islands are several islands, and as a matter of fact I was fortunate; the outfit I was on was assigned to a smaller island off the main island of Palau called Angaur Island and we were fortunate, of course the Japs in all those places had machine guns and what not on the beaches, but we had to use the old battleships to come in and use their big canons to try to clean off the beaches.

TD: So you didn't have any light fleet or light boats to maneuver with?

JSF: We had LCBPs they called them, where you go as far as you can on the beach and you plop down one out the front. Well anyway, that is what they used, but they soften up these beaches and try to do with these damn big battleships and what we would do, we would lower the LCBP and we had rope ladders that the troops would go down on and get on the LCBP and go in a line into the beaches, and they had the beaches scouted and marked out for us. We were pretty lucky; we only had one guy who got shot through the arm. One of my duties was, I was assistant beach master on this particular operation, and that means that, you know you are going to stay on the beach, because the whole thing hadn't been cleared out yet, so you dig in

on the beach and prepare to go in early the next morning. And so we dug in. You dig your foxhole, and what not, on the beach, and the rule was: get in your foxhole and by God you stay in that foxhole. Anything moves, it's the enemy and is shot at. And we had one guy that I don't know whether he just forgot where he was and woke up in the middle of the night or something but anyway he got out of his foxhole and got punctured about ten times before he could go ten feet.

TD: Wow, by the U.S. forces?

JSF: Sure, that's part of the deal, you don't let the bastards get into you like that. Anyway we cleared up the beach. The only intelligence duty I had at that time actually, as we got word they had captured the Japs, had hid some maps, and I took the maps back out to the command ship in that particular deal. And we were lucky it wasn't as fierce a resistance there. They didn't have this network of caves that they had in the main island, Palau they called it. Anyway, then the next outfit we went on was the invasion of the Philippines. We went to New Guinea to await, start getting the troops there, and provisions, and all that sort of stuff. And we went into Leyte Gulf. MacArthur, you know, had devised this strategy of not fighting your way through every island . . . and cutting them off and just leave them

stranded there, no, and so he started to attack several different islands between where we had been down at Guadalcanal and so forth.

JD: Attack all the weak islands?

JSF: Go right into Leyte, which he did, and there was fairly stiff resistance there but they didn't have us as close to the beach as they had been at Palau, the Japanese didn't have as much cover and so forth, and that is where MacArthur went on the LCBP and jumped down and got his pants wet and said he had been driven out of the Philippines, you know, and had left on a submarine. He said "I shall return" and as soon as he hit the beach at Leyte, he said "I have returned." I went up to his headquarters a couple of times when we were in New Guinea and it was way up on a high ridge overlooking the harbor and MacArthur was quite a martinet . . . but was a hell of a good commander and a lot of people didn't like him, but what the hell, it didn't make a difference if you liked him or not, if he did a good job. And I thought he did a good job. Anyway, we loaded up at Leyte, and we had our first experience with kamikaze planes. As a matter of fact, this particular one we had trouble with. We put our troops on the shore and had gone back out to the ship, awaiting everybody to get off, go back some place else, and get some more troops and take them somewhere else. And the Japs cooked up this notion of coming in from two different angles, with two

different task forces. I don't know where they got their information, but anyway, of course Halsey had taken a division of carriers up to the north, and so they thought most of carriers were out of the way, so they sent two different outfits in. Some battleships were going to go through some straits and come one way and another task force was going to come down and attack transports like we were and all we had were 3-inch guns and couple of ships had 5-inch guns and most would have 3-inch guns and –

JD: Right, not very big at all.

JSF: And machine guns, 50 caliber machine guns, but anyway they came in but we had these old battleships that had been doing bombardment and our intelligence was very good on what these Japs were doing, so they moved these battleships in a slanted line like this, and one of the task forces that the Japs had for heavy stuff for battleships and cruisers was coming; they had to come in a line, one behind the other. There wasn't enough room in these straits for them to come in parallel, so it did give our people the advantage of crossing the T, we, we're the T here. And all of us can fire and get you one at a time and blast the hell out of it.

TD: But only one of them could fire?

JSF: That's right, so these old battleships just knocked the hell out of this Japanese force that was coming in, and the one that was coming from

our side, from the north, to try to get -- we had some small aircraft carriers out there along with these transports -- and they thought that was going to be great stuff for them. But these small aircraft carriers that we had launched -- all their planes -- and the planes did enough damage to this outfit coming in, so that they never got to the transports, they did a lot of damage to the small carriers but they got repulsed and Halsey was commanding the carriers, he took care of the Jap carriers coming down. Halsey really had sort of just ignored the battle plans. He was supposed to stay there with his outfit and protect the whole fleet, our task force that was there, but he knew this carrier force was coming he wanted to get the Jack Ass up there and fight them. One of my duties was assistant communications officer, and I was decoding messages. I remember, I never will forget this one, this message came through from [END OF SIDE ONE OF TAPE] . . . he was a full admiral, probably a vice admiral, in charge of all the carrier forces at that time. And then we had ordered up some troops . . . and we were forced to take them down in New Caledonia for rest and recreation before they came into the next thing, and we sailed and sailed, to take us down there -- not just our ship -- the whole outfit, and we were within about two days of going into New Caledonia which we were all looking forward to. You travel a long distance and don't see very much . . . we were looking forward to rest . . .

under French control it was sort of parceled out, like we do to Puerto Rico. Anyway, we got about two days out of New Caledonia and the troops were looking forward to everything when we got this message that the Japs were on Leyte, had reinforced them, and MacArthur was having trouble doing the kind of schedule he wanted to run, in getting them out of Leyte. So we got this message, "Bring them the hell back to Leyte." So we had to turn around and take these people back to Leyte, and when we got back there and sent troops ashore trying to save the situation, we had our first encounter with a Japanese plane; a suicide deal although it wasn't technically a suicide plane. What happened was, he went in and was attacking some of the other ships and, as a matter of fact, I think this particular one was in an air fight with one of our planes and he got disabled. He knew he was coming down and he thought, "Well as long I'm down, I'm taking somebody with me." So he tried for another ship, a bigger ship than our transport, but he couldn't make it, so he turned and he came for us. And a whole bunch of us, who at that particular time didn't have any duty, we were up on the deck watching dogfights of all these planes, and we were -- saw this guy trying to hit this other ship and then we saw him turn to us, of course we knew if he got to us he was going to hit the ship, so we hightailed through the control room on the top deck to get to the other side. And fortunately, the guy didn't quite

make it. He just scraped the side of the ship, and fortunately, I don't know what had happened, he must have dropped all his bombs because he didn't drop a bomb, so the only damage was to the side of the ship and we were damn lucky. But the reason I mentioned we all rushed to the other side of the ship, the captain got very angry because we hauled ass to the other side of the ship. I don't know what the hell were supposed to do, all we had were these damn pistols, and one place about ten yards from us there was a machine gun and he was shooting the hell out of -- trying to do the best to down the damn plane. But anyway, the captain was very critical of us for running to the other side of the ship, and I thought that was funny really. And anyway we took some troops back, after that was all over, we took some troops back to New Guinea and got some more troops. The third operation I was in was Lingayen Gulf, this is the main island of Luzon in the Philippines, where the capital is, and where our naval base is at, Clark Field Air Force base, Corregidor, is what I'm thinking of, the Naval Base. Anyway, the Japs occupied most all the island of course, but the place we picked out was up to the north of the capital city, in what they call Lingayen Gulf. And it was a pretty good sized area for the ships to get in, and I don't think we caught them by surprise, but they didn't have that network of caves and all to protect the Japs. And it was easy for a bombardment to work

there. And so we went in and lowered our troops there and they were to sort of fight their way down to Manila, the capital.

TD: [beep] Oh I think it might have been a surge, let me go tell them. . . . about the war before were you enthusiastic about the war or did you believe --

JSF: Well, I don't know if it was a case of enthusiasm, but knowing it was coming, and of course there was some propaganda about it you know, about the German brutality and the Japanese brutality. And of course we knew the Marines had decided that they weren't going to take any prisoners unless they were ordered to. Well, the reason for it was the damn Japs had grenades you know, and they would surrender and then toss a grenade and that kind of stuff. And it didn't take very long for that word to get around. And anyway after the Leyte operation we went back to Ulithi, a circle of islands where we did the bombing, and lay in there for a while and sort of regrouped. And I got orders to go to Pearl Harbor. I didn't know just what my assignment was when I got there, this was in January of 1945. I got orders to go to Pearl Harbor and I was assigned to a magazine that was published where the joint intelligence center for the whole Pacific area was. We had Army personnel, submarine personnel, but it was mostly Navy. They would keep it up with communications and intelligence activities just

for the whole Pacific area, this joint intelligence weekly that we published. There is a Navy captain there by the name Jasper Holmes, who had helped them break a Japanese code. Of course, that was a big operation with a lot of different people connected to it, but he had been stationed there in Pearl Harbor before the war and he was a captain, as a matter of fact, he was getting close to retirement but he was a very brilliant fellow. One of the things he did at the Island of Midway: at one point we wanted to attack, we knew we had Midway and we knew the Japs wanted it and were going to attack it, but they didn't know just when the Japs were going to do it, and one way to figure it out is -- Captain Holmes cooked up this idea -- we knew the Japs were preparing this task force to go out and attack some place, carriers or whatnot, and had been having some problems with the water supply at Midway, so they sent out a message which they knew the Japanese were going to intercept. Something about the fact that we were going to do something about the water supply, and by coincidence, by that time we had most of the Jap code, and by that time, the Japs, when they saw this message, changed some logistics. They thought they were going to capture the island you see, so they changed logistics to assure themselves a new water supply, take in equipment for good water, so that's the only place we had a water problem. So that gave us an absolute knowledge of what they

were going to do. So they sent the carriers to intercept them and that is when they won that big battle of Midway which really turned the tide in the Pacific.

TD: That's true.

JSF: But anyway, on this magazine, the joint intelligence magazine, the main function was to report on the Japanese, as much information we could get about the Japanese, particularly their fleet, their submarines and everything else, put it all together and send it to all our ships and commands to give them as much information as we could get at headquarters you see. And I was there the last few months of the war and it so happened since I hadn't had any duty in the United States except for these trainings periods, I had accumulated enough points to get out in a hurry, so I was one of the first to get out in August of '45, and I came back on that same ship that I had gone down to San Juan on in the first place.

TD: Oh that's true. What was your reaction to the dropping of the atomic bombs?

JSF: I had an opportunity just before I was back here to go into training on the Japanese language and get assigned to the Japanese occupation stuff, but hell I wanted to get on back and get back to work. At that time I wasn't interested in that, but my main concern of the Navy really

had been the fact that they were going to attack Okinawa. The Japs had really put a whole lot of stuff at Okinawa, they also had the advantage of cave formations too, and we were just dreading the fact that we were going to have to go into Okinawa, and when they did go it was hard enough. They knew when they attacked the Japanese mainland, that that was really going to be something and so there was no argument with anybody out there, when it's question of whether Truman was right in deciding to drop the bomb, because as he said, it was to save American lives. And of course, it was horrible to have to do that to the Japs, but he warned them. They couldn't believe that we had anything like we said we had, we didn't tell them just what we had, he just sent these messages to do so and so within a certain length of time or "you are going to be sorry." Matter of fact, even after the first one, they had . . . so that's why they did the second one. Nobody I ever saw in a uniform argued about that; about whether it was right or not. I know a lot of people still do, that we shouldn't have started the atomic warfare --

TD: But it was necessary at the time?

JSF: Nobody knows how many challenges we would have had. After all, you were going into the mainland of Japan and you've got to approach it in surface ships, and by the time they had perfected, as much as you could

perfect, this kamikaze proposition, and it didn't make any difference whether they were skilled aviators or not . . .

TD: Right, I see. I was wondering what it was like when President Roosevelt died.

JSF: Oh, of course it was just a terrific shock. We didn't have the information about his health or anything like that. There had been communications, one of the things we had of course in our intelligence headquarters, which was mostly all military stuff, but we saw the Office of Strategic Services stuff, and there were some hints in there that his health wasn't the best. It wasn't their duty to report on the commander in chief so nobody really knew how bad off he was, but it was unbelievable, we couldn't believe this jerk Truman who, as far as we knew was just a . . . machine product. He's considered a nice guy, been a good chairman of the Senate preparedness committee and all that, but hell, as far as we were concerned, nobody could take Roosevelt's place.

TD: Yeah, that's true, Roosevelt had a lot of support and experience –

JSF: He had a lot of support and of course he had been Secretary of the Navy before and he was partial to the Navy. Of course all the services, I think, highly respected him. It was a terrific shock. There are no two ways about that.

TD: What about disembarkation day in Normandy, D-Day on June 6, 1944?

JSF: Of course we followed the progress of those landings and –

TD: So were you in Puerto Rico or Trinidad at D-Day or were you –

JSF: No, I was back in Pearl Harbor, I came in January and I was there until the end of the war.

TD: Oh, okay.

JSF: Of course after D-Day . . . Japan might be tough, we figured it was really all over, that the decision had been set, it couldn't be reversed. It was just a question of how long the Japs were willing to fight and how long the Germans were willing to fight. There was absolutely very little concern at that time about the . . . relations

TD: So D-Day was, I mean, because you guys were very distant from all the action going on –

JSF: Oh yeah that's right, of course there was still Naval action in some battles, we had the battle for Okinawa, that was the last big battle, that was a pretty damn bloody thing . . .

TD: When did you first hear about the Holocaust?

JSF: I didn't know about that until after the war. We knew that they were killing them, but as far as we knew, the military decision was that it . . .

couldn't get troops there, and if you bombed you killed these prisoners. I've seen these stories about what else we could have done and all that stuff, and it may be true, but I don't have enough information about whether that's really the case or not.

TD: I guess you were really isolated.

JSF: We could see the papers but you had voluntary censorship and there wasn't too much of that stuff in the papers.

TD: I think the news of the Holocaust really, it got out way after the war actually realized to the extent –

JSF: It wasn't really until after the war that you got the full picture of just what had been done and just how bad it was. The people who went into those prison camps to rescue the prisoners just absolutely couldn't believe it; the stench and the horror of it. Of course the bodies were still lying around all over the place, and they hadn't even covered most of them. They had been burning the hell out of them for a long time.

TD: It was pretty shocking. What do you think would have happened if Roosevelt had lived?

JSF: Oh, it's hard to say. He was coming up for a fourth term and his health was very bad, I don't think there was any question that he was physically incapable of being as good a president as he had been earlier, I

don't think there was any question about that. But as a matter of fact, if he had lived, he certainly couldn't have kept up the amazing record that he had stood up at that time.

TD: If he had lived he would have run out time, he would have been too long.

JSF: He was fairly fortunate that nothing disastrous happened because of his failing health.

TD: So you think it was fortunate that Truman took over and breathed sort of new life into the war effort?

JSF: Truman had had this World War I experience and that didn't qualify him for strategic planning or anything like that, but it gave him a pretty basic knowledge of some of the problems that you have, and also Truman had had enough political experience. He headed this committee that had investigated a whole lot of government operations and a lot of them were military, Naval and everything else, so he had a pretty good knowledge of it and he was a pretty competent sort of a guy. Of course a lot of people just thought, he was on an intellectual basis, just sort of middle ground, but at least he had sense enough to know what he didn't know. That's where you get into trouble. I think that's Clinton's main problem, I think he thinks he knows too much. He knows a lot, he's a hell of a smart guy but nobody can

know everything and, particularly, until fairly lately, he seems to be very reluctant to delegate authority.

TD: Yeah, that's true. I guess this is really not a very good question because you were in Pearl Harbor but how did you feel about the Russians during World War II?

JSF: Well, there again it was just what you read. Of course after Stalingrad and all, you had to admire the tenacity and willingness to sacrifice. Of course, they had always figured the way to win a war was to draw an enemy further and further away from -- stretch out the lines of supply -- that those long supply lines and a Russian winter would take care of them. If you have time enough and they had enough time to catch the Germans way inland in the dead of winter.

TD: Yeah I guess the Russians just kept retreating and so winter and time --

JSF: They weren't as conscious of keeping down casualties as most other people do. Their regard for human life -- I won't say they were absolutely callous -- but they would order certain modes of capture and things and do it in a way in which the main consideration was not saving lives.

TD: It was to get the strategic positions or whatever.

JSF: Hit them and if it gets a few thousand, that's it. We've got them to spare. That seemed to be the general idea.

TD: That's true. Did your impression of the Russians change after the defeat of Germany and Japan?

JSF: At least my notions of their intentions certainly did.

TD: Right; in what ways?

JSF: It so happened after the war, of course military services –

Ann Cottrell Free (ACF): “How far you on?”

JSF: We're about done.

ACF: Take your time. Are you in the Pacific yet? Have you gone ashore yet?

JSF: We've been ashore a couple times. We de-militarized pretty damn quick and it was not until 1949, actually, that the armed services really began to rebuild their reserve forces. For example, after I got discharged, I got back to the States in September. I had accumulated enough leave so I could take up until December before I had to go back to work, but they didn't write you, they didn't do anything until 1949, and I got a letter that they were going to get the Reserves organized and “come into the Reserves and get assigned to a unit and get some training” and so forth. So I rejoined the Naval Reserve in 1949 and it was in a public information unit. I had been

in intelligence and I would have gone into it again but I had inquired “what do you do if you come in?” Oh, they say you make security checks on people who want to work in the Navy, or also at the Pentagon, and I said “To hell with that.” I didn’t want to fool with that stuff, but the public information outfit is trying to keep up with everything that is going on and all the Navy, and also having the Pentagon with all the forces out there, you also get some briefings on the Army and Air Force and Marines and so forth. We had very interesting programs and I went on one to a North Atlantic Treaty task force exercise in the North Sea off of Norway, and of course I was back in the press again. My main thing was politics, covering the Congress and politics but since I was interested in military affairs anyway, was with this Navy unit, I did write some stuff about what was going on in the military and I went to Europe for four months to report on what NATO was doing and so forth. When they had the Berlin crisis over there I went to Berlin and I was there for a while doing some stories.

TD: So you were actually in Berlin? Were your views of the Russians, this is during the Berlin crisis and like . . .

JSF: It was dog eat dog, they didn’t trust us and we didn’t trust them, there was no question about that. As a matter of fact, once as a reporter I was doing a series of stories on the difficulties of getting, Berlin of course is way

inside of East Germany, we just got that . . . and air linked, I was doing some stories on going to Berlin by train, and going to Berlin on the autobahn, and I was trying to come in on the autobahn, all the way into Berlin through East Germany. And the way I was going to do it, I went to Hamburg which is back in the main part of Germany, I was going to get a bus coming back in there, I got a visa to make the trip in East Berlin and I went to Hamburg and the fellow didn't want to sell me the ticket, and he said "They ain't going to let you in," and I said "What the hell, I got the visa I'm going to try it anyway." So, I got a bus out of Berlin and we got to the damn border and I think the Russians, they had a check point, they had both Russians and East Germans there. I think if it had been left up to the Russians, they would have let me go through. After all, hell, all I had was a typewriter and baggage and what not, and I wasn't armed and I wasn't going to get off the damn highway, the autobahn. But some of the East Germans were the ones that were nasty about it. They wouldn't let me go through. "No, no, stop." So they put me on a bus and I had to go back to Hamburg and fly. And of course going on a train, every stop you made . . . East Germans troops are saying, mostly East Germans, we did see some Russians, but, and of course on the wall, I made several trips into East Berlin and, Christ, you go through Check Point Charlie and they look you all up and down and if you go

through in a rented car they look under the bottom and open up the trunk and all that kind of stuff, and one trip I made, I made on a bus there. Just before we took off on this bus, some guy came up and started snapping pictures and it wasn't until later that I figured I, he had, they held up the thing long enough so as they could telephone somebody and say how many he had on there, anybody with cameras and this that and the other. I think they wanted pictures of this particular, I wouldn't say they could do it on every bus that went in there, but I think they wanted pictures of this particular bus. One reason was, I think there was a pretty fair number of writers and newspaper people. I made a trip to Russia in 1978, I think it was. The main reason I went was, it one of those one-week propositions; you go to St. Petersburg and Moscow, mostly Moscow, fly in. The main reason I went, this particular trip was sponsored by a guy in Senator Sparkman's office, he was a Senator from Alabama who was chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee at the time, and they were able to work out a few things for a newspaper man that couldn't have been worked out otherwise; briefings at the US Russian embassy.

TD: Right, you had connections.

JSF: I tried to get some interviews with Russian newspapers. They turned me down on that. They isolated you, were in that big hotel, the Rossiya.

TD: I saw that when I went there.

JSF: At that time you took your meals there and they wouldn't let any parties from any other countries get close to you, they segregated you by countries and we had a special table there, and I guess there were about 20-25 people in this outfit and we were segregated and they had [END OF RECORDING]



JAMES STILLMAN FREE

MEMORIAL SERVICE IN CELEBRATION  
OF THE LIFE OF

JAMES STILLMAN FREE

1908 - 1996



"Jim Free's byline was the warranty guaranteeing a full and fair report."

-*The Birmingham News*, April 5, 1996

Saturday, April 20, 1996  
2:00 pm

The National Press Club  
Washington, DC

## JAMES FREE

Reporter, World War II veteran, tennis player, actor, raconteur, sailor, author, husband, father, grandfather, Jim Free was all of these.

Born on November 5, 1908, in Gordo, Pickens County, Alabama, he was the only child of Henrietta Bell and James Sylvanus Free. Moving to Tuscaloosa at age six, he entered the public school system and at age 16, the University of Alabama. Along the way he developed a passion for books, tennis, football, acting, writing, the National Guard and R.O.T.C. In 1930, graduate degree in hand from the Columbia School of Journalism, he could not find a newspaper job. Defying the Depression, he tried acting, sailing the Caribbean, wandering through Central America, selling insurance, working for the WPA and the TVA and running a debt-ridden weekly newspaper. In 1935 he got a job with the *Birmingham News*.

He made his way to the *Washington Star* in 1937 via the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*. In 1941, he joined the staff of the new *Chicago Sun*, but left after Pearl Harbor to become a Naval officer. Sent to the Caribbean for German submarine intelligence duty, he soon moved to the Pacific Theater, often facing enemy fire as a Beachmaster, putting troops ashore.

At the war's end, he rejoined the *Chicago Sun* Bureau, but soon became Washington correspondent of the *Birmingham News*, retiring at age 71 in 1979. His coverage during a period of critical social and political change earned him recognition from the Raymond Clapper Award Jury, the Society of Professional Journalists and the University of Alabama Alumni Association. Long-time historian of the Gridiron Club, Jim authored *The First 100 Years: A Casual Chronicle of the Gridiron Club*. He was a 57-year member of the National Press Club and a former chair of the Congressional Press Galleries.

In 1950 he and newspaper colleague, Ann Cottrell, were married. They co-authored numerous articles and columns and became parents of Elissa Blake Free, now a CNN producer. They are grandparents of Amanda Blake Nooter, soon to enter kindergarten.

Jim was buried on April 17, 1996 with full military honors (he retired as a Captain in the Naval Reserve) in Arlington National Cemetery.

## SPEAKERS

Donald R. Larrabee	Griffin-Larrabee News Bureau Past President, National Press Club
James E. Jacobson	Editor <i>The Birmingham News</i>
Jack Nelson	<i>Los Angeles Times</i> President, Gridiron Club
Dr. Elizabeth Johnston Lipscomb	Goddaughter Professor, Randolph-Macon Woman's College Lynchburg, VA
Edgar A. Poe	<i>New Orleans Times-Picayune</i> Past President, Gridiron Club
Alan S. Emory	<i>Vallenton Daily Times</i> Past President, Gridiron Club
Warren Hardy	Officer, Eternal Light Resident, The Lisner Home
David S. Broder	<i>Washington Post</i> Past President, Gridiron Club
Etaika Wade	Former educator Resident, The Lisner Home
Edward W. O'Brien	<i>St. Louis Globe-Democrat</i> Past President, Gridiron Club
William Ward Nooter, Esq.	Son-in-Law
Ann Cottrell Free	

## OBITUARIES

## Journalist James Free Dies; Covered Capital for 50 Years

James S. Free, 87, who retired in 1979 as Washington correspondent for the Birmingham News, died of a stroke April 3 at Sibley Memorial Hospital. He lived in Bethesda.

Mr. Free wrote from Washington for 50 years, covering 10 administrations and seven national political conventions. His beats also included Capitol Hill and the Justice Department, during a period of civil rights struggles. He also covered the early space program and wrote a daily, syndicated political column with his wife, journalist Ann Cotrell Free.

He was author of a book, "The First One Hundred Years: An Informal History of the Gridiron Club," about an organization of Washington journalists.

Mr. Free was born in Gordo, Ala. He was a graduate of the University of Alabama and received a master's degree in journalism from Columbia University. He served in the Navy in the Caribbean and Pacific during World War II and retired from the Navy Reserve as a captain in 1968.

Mr. Free worked for the Birmingham News and Richmond Times-Dispatch before moving to Washington in 1939 to work for the Washington Star. He joined the Washington bureau of the Chicago Sun in 1941 and later worked for the Raleigh News & Observer. He rejoined the Birmingham paper and established its Washington bureau in 1947.

Mr. Free was honored by the Raymond Clapper Award Committee for his coverage of national affairs and received an outstanding alumnus award from the University of Alabama alumni association.

He was chairman of the Standing Committee of Correspondents of the Congressional Press Galleries and president of the Washington chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists and a member of its hall of fame. In addition to his wife, of Bethesda, survivors include a daughter, Elissa Blake Free of Washington, and a granddaughter.

**FREE, JAMES S.**  
On Wednesday, April 3, 1996 of Bethesda, MD. Husband of Ann Cotrell Free; father of Elissa Blake Free; father-in-law of William Ward Nooter; grandfather of Amanda Blake Nooter. Memorial services will be held at National Press Club, 14th and F Sts. NW, Washington, DC 20045 on Saturday, April 20, 1996 at 2 p.m. Interment private. In lieu of flowers memorial contributions may be made to Vetsuvs Humane Society and Animal Rescue, 360 Aieilado, Vleuesus, PR 00765 or American Friends Service Committee, c/o Albert Schweitzer Animal Welfare Fund, 1501 Cherry St., Philadelphia, PA 19102.

★ FRIDAY, APRIL 5, 1996

Obituaries

James S. Free, 87, local newsman

James S. Free, 87, a longtime newsman and a veteran of World War II, died of a stroke April 3 at Sibley Memorial Hospital.

His nearly 50-year Washington newspaper career, covering politics through 10 presidential administrations, involved him in many momentous events.

He covered seven national Democratic and Republican conventions and traveled on numerous campaign trails.

In 1961, he wrote a series of articles, "Cold War Close-Up," from East Berlin. He covered the early space program and was an opponent of McCarthyism.

Born in Gordo, Ala., Mr. Free graduated from the University of Alabama in 1929 and earned his graduate degree from the Columbia School of Journalism.

He joined the staff of the Washington Star in 1939 after working for the Birmingham News and the Richmond Times-Dispatch. In 1941 he became a member of the Washington bureau of the newly established Chicago Sun.

During World War II he served as a naval officer in the Caribbean Sea Frontier, assigned to Trinidad for the debriefing of captured German submariners and suspected spies.



James S. Free

After returning to civilian life, he retired from the Naval Reserve with the rank of captain.

He returned to the Chicago Sun's Washington bureau, later becoming Washington correspondent for the Raleigh News and Observer and the Birmingham News.

He soon established his own Birmingham News bureau and was honored in 1954 by the

Raymond Clapper Award Committee for "exceptional coverage" of national affairs serving a particular region.

In 1959 he became chairman of the Standing Committee of Correspondents of the Congressional Press Galleries. He was president of the Washington Chapter of SDX-Society of Professional Journalists and later was inducted into the chapter's Hall of Fame.

In 1985, as historian of the Gridiron Club, he wrote "The First One Hundred Years — An Informal History of the Gridiron Club."

He also co-wrote, with his wife, a syndicated daily Washington political column and contributed to national magazines and syndicates.

Survivors include his wife, Ann Cotrell Free, of Bethesda; a daughter, Elissa Blake Free, and a granddaughter, Amanda Blake Nooter, both of the District.

A memorial service will be held at 2 p.m. on April 20 at the National Press Club. Private burial will be at Arlington National Cemetery at a later date.

The family requests that donations be made to the Vieques Humane Society, 360 Mellado St., Vieques, Puerto Rico 00765.



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## Senate

### TRIBUTE TO JAMES STILLMAN FREE SENATOR HOWELL HEFLIN

Mr. HEFLIN. Mr. President, on April 3, James Stillman Free, a native of Gordo, Alabama and for 33 years the Washington correspondent for The Birmingham News, passed away at the age of 87. Jim enjoyed a rich and colorful career as a journalist and historian. Back in November 1993, I had the opportunity to attend his 85th birthday celebration and it was a wonderful experience for his many friends and associates as we gathered with him to celebrate and reflect.

Jim Free attended the public schools of Tuscaloosa, Alabama; earned his bachelor's degree at the University of Alabama; and obtained his master's degree from Columbia University. He was part owner and editor of a weekly Tuscaloosa newspaper shortly before joining the News in 1935.

Jim's 33 years as The Birmingham News' Washington correspondent was the longest tenure for any Washington correspondent for Alabama newspapers. He spent a total of 35 years with that paper, his name and writings becoming synonymous with Alabama political coverage and analysis in the nation's capital. He also served as the Washington correspondent for the Chicago Sun, Raleigh News and Observer, and Winston-Salem Journal during the 1940's and '50's.

His coverage extended from the Great Depression and New Deal through World War II preparations and his own combat duty as a Navy Captain in the Pacific; the McCarthy "Red Scare" era; the Civil Rights movement; the assassinations of John and Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King; and all national defense, medical, educational, and environmental issues that affected Alabama. He was an on-the-scenes, eye witness to much of the social change and history of this century.

His many "scoops" included President Truman's 1946 order for the Army to take over strike-threatened railroads, and he led the national press with his stories on the Justice Department's civil rights decisions. Jim filed overseas reports on the 1957 Berlin crisis and NATO operations in the North Sea, Western Europe, and the United Kingdom in 1966. He served as the historian for the Gridiron Club and was the author of "The First One Hundred Years: A Casual Chronicle of the Gridiron Club."

His World War II service allowed him to bring special insight into his coverage of national defense issues. In an October 1961 article on his time in Berlin, he said, "...our test of strength with Russia in the months and years ahead...will be 90 percent non-military. It will be political, economic, scientific, and educational. It will be a showdown of our way of life against theirs." Indeed, history proved him right.

While covering the Justice Department, Jim relayed messages from Alabama moderates to then-Attorney General Robert Kennedy during the Freedom Rider bus burning crisis. He was also one of the first reporters to question in print the validity of charges brought against public officials and private citizens by Senator Joseph McCarthy.

Jim held a number of leadership positions in his field and received a number of honors. In 1967, he was elected president of the Washington chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists. In 1989, he was inducted into the society's hall of fame. The Raymond Clapper Award committee gave him a special citation for exceptional reporting on national affairs and he received the Outstanding Alumnus Award from the University of Alabama alumni association.

It is a grand understatement to say that Jim Free was a highly regarded and respected figure. He was a well-rounded professional and a genuine person of integrity. Jim never tried to purposely harm anyone's reputation through his reporting. His professional ethics dictated that he would let the facts speak for themselves. He never tried to make a career of finding dirt on government officials. He was not a practitioner of yellow journalism and was not a purveyor of scandal.

Jim was a gentleman who possessed all the traits that one would expect to find in a gentleman--civility, an educated mind, sensitivity, courteousness, and a healthy respect for the views of others.

I was proud to have known Jim Free, who will long be remembered in the dual worlds of journalism and politics for his lifetime of service to the cause of informing citizens about the world around them. I extend my condolences to his family in the wake of their tremendous loss.