

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
RAYMOND G. BOLAND
Helicopter pilot, Army, Vietnam War
2000

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Boland, Raymond G. Oral History Interview, 2000.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 83 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 83 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Video Recording: 1 videorecording (ca. 83 min.); ½ inch, color.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Raymond Boland, a Chicago native, discusses his career in Army aviation, serving with the Wisconsin National Guard during the Berlin Crisis, joining the Army and flying two tours of Vietnam as a helicopter pilot, working with the National Guard, and serving as the Secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Veteran Affairs. Serving with the 32nd Division Infantry during the Berlin Crisis, he touches upon training at Fort Sill (Oklahoma), active duty at Fort Lewis (Washington), developing an interest in aviation, and decision to transfer to the Regular Army. Boland comments on the difference between Air Force and Army aviation and also the integration of Reserves and National Guard into the different branches of the military. He talks about his first tour flying a De Havilland Otter, bringing supplies and personnel to small Special Forces bases all over Vietnam, and the appreciation of Vietnamese villagers for the supplies the aviators brought. Serving with the 101st Airborne Division for his second tour, he flew the Cobra Gunship stationed in the north along the DMZ and the boarder with Laos. Boland describes life on a military base including 24-hour alert status, pilots needing to refuel and reload their own helicopters, flying air cover for medical evacuation helicopters, and stress and lack of sleep because the airstrip was constantly under fire. Boland comments on the armament and maneuverability of different helicopters, the benefit of air fire versus artillery fire, and danger of rocket-propelled grenade fire. He discusses several of his missions including preparing a landing zone which included aerial fire on the area and another when his helicopter was hit by ground fire while attempting to destroy a downed American craft. Boland mentions working alongside Air Force planes, destroying downed aircraft so the Vietnamese soldiers couldn't use it, and positive opinion of the 1st Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) Division. He offers an evaluation of the Tet Offensive, saying it was a major defeat of the Viet Cong and led to the direct intervention of the North Vietnamese, and examines the long-term outcomes of the war. Boland compares the Vietnam War with the attack of North Korea on South Korea, saying the difference was in the United States' response. He touches upon retiring as the Post Commander of Camp McCoy and his work as the Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs in Wisconsin, and he discusses the decline of organized veteran movements.

Biographical Sketch:

Boland enlisted in the Wisconsin National Guard from Madison, Wisconsin and served on active duty for thirty years. Upon his retirement from the military at the rank of colonel, he served as the Secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs from 1992 until 2003. He resides in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin.

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 2000.
Transcribed by Patrick F. Gould, 2009.
Checked by Channing Welch, 2009.
Corrected by Katy Marty, 2009.
Abstract edited by Susan Krueger, 2009.

Interview Transcript:

Jim: We're interviewing---alright, seem (??) pretty there at Veterans Center. Alright. We're interviewing Raymond Boland, and ah, tell me when you became involved in the military, Ray.

Ray: Well, I began military service when I joined the Wisconsin National Guard in January of 1956. Ah, originally went to basic training and advanced individual training as part of the six month training program that was initiated at that time. A couple of years later, ah, I, my commander recommended that I attend officer training and I began an officer candidate school, so I attended that.

Jim: Where was that?

Ray: It was here in Wisconsin. The Wisconsin National Guard. I was a member of the first class as what was then established as the Wisconsin Military Academy and now is some forty some years later is still, operating.

Jim: Where was that?

Ray: Well, the program then was a combination of attending weekend sessions here in Madison and---

Jim: Oh, my goodness.

Ray: Two summer sessions at Fort McCoy. It was a year-long program which gave you your basic commissioning qualifications. Then you had to attend your branch basic course which in my case was field artillery at Fort Sill, Oklahoma.

Jim: Right, but this wasn't a job that you could, really a job you could live on though?

Ray: No, it was a part time---

Jim: It was a part time deal.

Ray: Originally I was a school teacher, and it wasn't until 1961 when we were called to active duty because of the Berlin Crisis. That was the entire 32nd Division of Wisconsin.

Jim: Right, where were you born, Ray?

Ray: Born in Chicago.

Jim: Grew up there?

Ray: Grew up there. Finished high school there, moved to Wisconsin right after I finished high school.

Jim: I see. So when the 32nd Division was mobilized for Berlin, that's when you left the country?

Ray: That's when I left Wisconsin and not to return for thirty years as it turned out.

Jim: Oh, my goodness.

Ray: I ah, became interested in flying while we were serving our tour of call-up duty at Fort Lewis, Washington. I was afforded the opportunity to extend indefinitely on active duty with the regular Army. So I decided to do that. Applied for flight training, was accepted, completed flight training and that started a whole new, ah--

Jim: Career.

Ray: And a whole new path for my lifetime that I had not previously planned on or expected.

Jim: Mm. So---

Ray: Never intended in the first place to remain in the Army for the long term.

Jim: I see. So when you were in this, did you transfer then to the Air Force?

Ray: No, I, I was in Army aviation. And remained in Army aviation for all of my career. There's a lot of misunderstanding about Army aviation and Air Force.

Jim: Yeah, we need to have that explained.

Ray: Well, it's an interesting story, I think. At the end of World War II when the air force was formed as the United States Air Force, not the U. S. Army Air Force, ah, the, the decision was made at the same time to keep a small amount of aviation in the Army primarily for the purpose of artillery observation and liaison type missions and a few small Piper Cub aircraft that the commander could have directly available to him for those kinds of missions. Ah, somewhere along the way I learned that when that occurred General Hap Arnold, who was the first daddy of the Air Force, made the comment that if you let those Army guys (Jim laughs) keep any airplanes at all then one day they will have more aircraft than the U.S. Air Force. And that prophesy came true during the Vietnam period. At the height of the Vietnam period with all of the helicopters the Army had in excess of 12,000 aircraft, I believe, which exceeded the numbers of Air Force at that time.

Jim: What type of aircraft did you fly?

Ray: I started in the next thing up from the Piper Cub which was the Cessna L19 “Bird Dog”, not much different than a Piper Cub other than having more power primarily. And artillery observation was my trade initially. And, I went from there over the years, eventually switching to helicopters and then remaining in helicopters pretty much for most of my career.

Jim: And helicopter training at a different location?

Ray: Ah, no, actually I took all of my training at Fort Rucker, Alabama. The original fixed wing training there began there in ‘63. Later into helicopters in ‘69.

Jim: I haven’t, okay, I have not interviewed anyone about helicopter training so I have to spend some time with that. How did you -- how do you become a helicopter pilot? I mean, what are they, you start in, what kind of an aircraft do you start out in?

Ray: Ah, well, most of the helicopter training, basic helicopter training that was done in the time frames I am talking about was in---

Jim: Right.

Ray: Ah, reciprocal engine aircraft, although turbine engine aircraft were, were there. So the H-13, the Bell H-13 was the first helicopter I flew. So it was kind of one you see in the MASH movies with the bubble ---

Jim: Right.

Ray: In the front and two people---

Jim: I’ve flown in one of those.

Ray: Litters on the side. That was the first helicopter I ---

Jim: That was a Bell.

Ray: It is a Bell, yeah. Um huh.

Jim: Was that hard to fly?

Ray: Yeah. Ah, mostly because those aircraft had a manual throttle. And so, RPM adjustment with a helicopter with a manual throttle was a very, (laughs) labor intensive task and as you climb, or descend, and turn and so forth you have to constantly adjust the throttle to maintain constant RPMs. So they were real easy to get an “engine overspeed” without careful attention to the throttle.

Jim: And “engine overspeed” means what?

Ray: Well, it means --

Jim: You lose control?

Ray: Damage to the engine. And potentially catastrophic circumstances although normally an “over-rev” would result in some kind of engine repair being necessary.

Jim: Ah. So, it’s a – and my previous friends of mine who have done this say that you are busy all of the time --

Ray: Yeah.

Jim: Flying a helicopter. Is that a correct statement?

Ray: Most certainly with the --

Jim: Hands and feet, both?

Ray: Yeah, both hands, both feet. It’s a --- it’s a whole different thing, and ah, as I mentioned earlier, I started out earlier flying airplanes, the, the, ah, was quite a bit of difference although their basic procedures and so on are the same. So there was an adjustment to make there in going from the airplane to the helicopter, and most of us who were airplane pilots originally really didn’t want to fly helicopters, and we deliberately avoided such duty. However, it reached the point where we were in the Vietnam period (??) where everybody was sent to the helicopters. It just wasn’t a choice anymore.

Jim: Will a helicopter if you just shut the power, did it wind down comfortably and quietly and safely?

Ray: Yeah, if you, I mean eventually you fly helicopters enough you become convinced it is more safe than flying the airplane because emergency landings with a helicopter can be accomplished most anywhere that there is at least a little bit of an open area whereas an airplane, of course, you need some kind of landing row --

Jim: Power.

Ray: Ah, at distance after you touch down to stop the aircraft. So, you can make an autorotation with a complete loss of engine power. If you do it properly, you can set the aircraft down nicely and walk away from it.

Jim: You can control that descent?

Ray: Sure.

Jim: So then losing the rotor and the --

Ray: Engine.

Jim: Engine, is that in the back? I don't know what you call the propeller behind the back. Must have a name for it.

Ray: Well, you had the main rotor blade system --

Jim: Right.

Ray: That's the one that's, that's still enabling you to fly and it's, the aircraft is called rotary wing. You, the main rotor blades are wings which are giving you the same lift effect that fixed wings do except that they are just turning around and creating airflow and Venturi effect and lift as that happens.

Jim: Now, the rear engine, is that, is that the two separate engines in a helicopter, is that right?

Ray: Well, most of them that I flew only had one engine.

Jim: Is that, that runs the propeller in back?

Ray: Right, the---

Jim: That keeps it from spinning around.

Ray: You have the tail rotor.

Jim: Tail rotor, that's the word.

Ray: Is actually called the anti-torque system --

Jim: I understand what it --

Ray: Which enables the aircraft to remain straight rather than --

Jim: I understand --

Ray: Spinning around like a top.

Jim: Right, okay. So, it didn't take long before you were qualified then.

Ray: Yes, ah, transitioned to the helicopter. The first basic part was twenty-five hours and then another twenty-five hours were the “Huey” if you started going into that. So it didn’t take a lot of time.

Jim: The Huey is two man?

Ray: Ah, the UH-1 can be flown by one person. It normally had a two person crew, whereas the “13s” and the “23s” and so forth that preceded it were usually one pilot, ah, but the UH-1 can be operated by one person.

Jim: Okay. So, then your, your, your first assignment and use of this helicopter was where?

Ray: My first helicopter assignment was in Vietnam. After completing the transition training in 1969 I went to the 101st Airborne Division in, ah, in the northern part of South Vietnam in November of ‘69 and eventually a few months later wound up being trained in the Cobra helicopter, and that was actually done in Vietnam. That was another twenty-five hour transition program, and then, for my last eight months of that year, commanded a Cobra attack helicopter.

Jim: Now that’s a hot, hotter craft. That went a lot faster. How fast would that, ah--

Ray: Well, ah --

Jim: The UH-1 go?

Ray: Straight and level, the UH-1, ah, 80-90 knots was a normal airspeed range. With the Cobra, normally en route point A to point B it would be more like a 100 knots, 110 perhaps. Ah, in dives, attacking targets, it was, I mean, I think as I recall, it was redlined at 180 knots and it was not uncommon to get on up in the 150 range certainly in dive maneuvers and so on. So it was nowhere near as fast as we have today with the Apache and the --

Jim: Right.

Ray: Blackhawk, but for its time it was sophisticated, it was advanced, and it was rather exciting to fly.

Jim: Was it more difficult to fly than the older ones?

Ray: Ah yes, in some aspects it was more difficult, although earlier generations of the UH-1 were similar, it was kind of, it was the first aircraft built to be specifically an attack helicopter, but it borrowed heavily from the Huey technology. Ah, so the power plant, engine, transmission and in fact the main rotor blade system was taken from the C model Huey which was the Huey gunship, until the primary

Huey gunship, until the Cobra was fielded. So it was called the 540 rotor system. It was a much wider rotor blade, and it was a rotor system that was designed to have much flex and coning capability so that it was --

Jim: Oh.

Ray: Able to accept more "Gs" in extreme maneuvers and be able to unload those "Gs" through that main rotor system. It was pretty tricky --

Jim: Yeah.

Ray: But ah that was an important part of being able to engage targets and fly the aircraft the way we did.

Jim: Did it take long to get them up from cold? How'd ya, how long--- would they start and go up quickly?

Ray: Actually, the unit I commanded had the requirement to have, ah, we always had two aircraft on immediate launch standby that was twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. They had to be in the air in not less than two minutes. That's from the time you were told to launch. So, it was ah, you'd be within the air in two minutes.

Jim: Right. Now that rescue helicopter they used, and when you were in Vietnam at the same time, that was a different helicopter.

Ray: Well, the medevac helicopters, if that is what you are referring to--

Jim: Yes.

Ray: The Army had, were all UH-1 helicopters, and we often flew cover for --

Jim: Right.

Ray: Medevac missions --

Jim: But you had no room in that with the Cobras?

Ray: No, Cobras were tandem cockpit, pilot in command in the rear seat and pilot or co-pilot gunner in the front seat.

Jim: The Marines used a different rescue helicopter. They used a bigger one. I wonder why that was?

Ray: Well, the Marines, ah---

Jim: They used a twin, twin rotor.

Ray: And the Air Force had, I think, the CH-46 aircraft. Now you're getting into the, I think the Boeing series of tandem rotor, main rotor system aircraft, the CH-46 and CH-47 Chinook. The Air Force had Sikorsky "Jolly Green" type search and rescue aircraft. So there was quite an assortment of them, and again, the Vietnam period, helicopters of all kinds came into their own.

Jim: Right.

Ray: Yeah.

Jim: Yeah. Okay. So when your first assignment was with the 101st, in the northern part of South Vietnam?

Ray: Yes, this was in, well it was actually most of 1970. I took command in the end of March of '70 and remained in command into November of that year before I came back to the States. That was a time of intense combat activity against main force North Vietnamese units coming into South Vietnam down the Ho Chi Minh trail through Khe San, down through the A Shau Valley down across the DMZ itself. So that was a very, ah very difficult time in terms of engaging. I mean we're talking some significant force on force warfare at this point, not just guerrilla type skirmishes.

Jim: Ah, who would direct your, your helicopters? The artillery? Somebody in --

Ray: In our case it was primarily the artillery, and as matter of fact, our unit was assigned as an artillery battalion within division artillery. It was called the Ariel Rocket Artillery Battalion.

Jim: How many aircraft we talking?

Ray: We had, the battalion had thirty-six aircraft and each of the three firing batteries had twelve. So I---

Jim: How many would you put up at a time?

Ray: It varied. Minimum response was two aircraft. It was not uncommon to have four to six aircraft on a particular mission. It just depended on the nature of the mission, how much advanced time there was, whether there was an immediate response and so on. But we, we responded to calls for fire just as our other artillery battalions---

Jim: And each helicopter would have a zone that was -- he would circulate within?

Ray: Regardless of the number of aircraft, the mission was usually led by a flight leader, and the other aircraft would respond to directions from that leader and engage targets as a, as directed. Typically the flight leader would take the mission from the forward observer on the ground, ah, make an initial assessment of the nature of the target and what it required, and then give instructions to the other aircraft as to how to engage the target area.

Jim: But, was your in attack mode, the helicopter, that cobra?

Ray: Yes, that's all we did. I mean, we did not do any reconnaissance or --

Jim: None of that. Just attack only.

Ray: Attack only. And, and, and it was always when a target had been identified by someone.

Jim: Ah, okay.

Ray: I guess the exception to that as I mentioned were the, the cover missions we flew for the medevacs where in many cases we would not fire if they were not engaged. And we did a number of missions where we would prepare a landing zone area before the troops would land and that would be part of the artillery prep of the landing zone.

Jim: By prepared, does that mean blanket, ah--

Ray: That means shoot it up so that when the helicopters landed they were not engaged by enemy, enemy forces on the ground.

Jim: But, how did this -- how did you protect the periphery of whatever zone you picked? I mean, you know, you could only go out so far to cover.

Ray: Well, ah---

Jim: There must have been some reasonable amount of space that you---

Ray: Usually we would, we would, we would initially engage only the area, the specific area where the helicopters were going to land. And --

Jim: You're talking about-- what's the dis-- the distance here? A hundred yards by a hundred yards.

Ray: Football field.

Jim: A [Unintelligible]. Mm hmm.

Ray: Size area, and, and then what we would do is remain in the area until the troops had landed and dispersed on the ground and, ah we would loiter in the area for varying amounts of time to determine whether or not this force would become engaged by either direct or indirect fire from the area. And, of course, the same time, artillery and mortar support was in place to support them. So we were not the only means of fire available.

Jim: Yeah, okay. I'm getting it, slowly here.

Ray: So, what we did really was fill in between the other means of fire support available to the troops. We didn't replace anybody. We would just fill in, and the one thing we could do that other means could not do was fire very close to the friendly forces because we would directly engage the con--, the target visually as we would fire it whereas an artillery unit that's sitting here is firing indirectly, and they are approximating based on instructions. We would look directly at the target area and have -- know where the friendly forces were at.

Jim: In real time? (laughs)

Ray: Yes.

Jim: What did you, what was your armor?

Ray: Well, the aircraft, the way we were configured, had four large rocket pods. The large rocket pods contained nineteen firing tubes each. So, if you have four big pods that means you have a total of seventy-six rocket tube capability which was quite a lot. Then the nose turret was also armed with the mini gun and the 40 mm grenade launcher, and those weapons were used for suppressive fire usually as when we were breaking from a target. The main delivery system were the rockets, a combination of ten pound and sixteen pound warheads in those rockets. The bursting effect of those compared similarly to a 105 ---

Jim: 105.

Ray: Howitzer round.

Jim: Okay. And the Gatling gun. Did you have a Gatling gun in front of that?

Ray: Well, it ah, yes--

Jim: or something similar.

Ray: A chain gun, a multi barrel gun, a mini gun.

Jim: Shooting .50 calibers?

Ray: No, ah, ah 7.62.

Jim: Oh.

Ray: And then the 40 millimeter. Which is a grenade.

Jim: 40 millimeter, does that go out a little further?

Ray: Shorter. Short range, slow velocity, but the bursting effect of a hand grenade.

Jim: Ah, equivalent to a hand grenade. I wondered how, what was comparable to that. Okay. What was the biggest danger you found from ground fire? Was that just small arms fire?

Ray: Small arms fire we took the most hits from on a regular basis, and normally, I mean in most cases, they were survivable, and you could still get the aircraft on the ground or to safety. Our most commonly feared weapon was a 50 cal. machineguns---

Jim: Right.

Ray: Which were everywhere and of course, could give you more trouble both with volume of fire and the impact of being hit by that size round.

Jim: That would penetrate your---

Ray: Yeah, so I'd say day in and day out 50 cal. were our biggest concern, although a rocket propelled grenade, shoulder fired RPGs, were also a major concern and all of these were in the hands of frontline forces on the ground most anywhere.

Jim: Well, if you entered a zone and you saw this kind of fire coming at you, you knew that there was something---did you know that sooner or later you were going to get hit and moved off to come in at another angle or something, or did you try to get it done and then get out? As fast as you---

Ray: I would say more, get it done and get out. Ah, get in and get out. There's a lot of variables here. It depended upon who else was involved. We often worked side by side or hand in hand with Air Force jets. And, ah, we would engage part of the target and they would be putting in 500 lb bombs at the same time. The artillery would be going in somewhere. We tried to coordinate all of these fires---

Jim: (laughs) Wow, that's a busy time.

Ray: And it wasn't often that we went in alone and did this stuff without other people being involved although there, there were instances of that.

Jim: Okay. Now, when you have a situation where the Air Force is putting 500 lb bombs out there and the artillery from the Army around you is working. What, specifically could you add that they couldn't?

Ray: Well, that's a very good question. Ah, if you, and each of these weapons systems had different characteristics and capabilities. Now again, this area, the area I was involved in is in the northernmost part of South Vietnam. Very mountainous. And ah, it was a process of fighting battles from one ridgeline to the next. And, and the North Vietnamese troops often were dug in along these ridgelines and with some amount of overhead cover and so on. So, the, the, the field artillery, very difficult to hit a hill top with field artillery. Field artillery ground effect is most, is best the more flat the terrain might be because you've got indirect fire, and the trajectory and ballistics of all that -- typically if you are trying to hit the top of a ridgeline field artillery will either---

Jim: (unintelligible)

Ray: ---go over it or short of it. Ah, an Air Force bomber can hit the top of a ridgeline. So normally, if we're on the ridgelines themselves, the Air Force, the bombers would initially open the targets up and then we would come in underneath that and our weapons systems were very effective against exposed personnel.

Jim: Ah. Okay. Now --

Ray: The rockets, the machine guns, the, so what you'd want to do is get the enemy unearched from their dug-in positions and then---

Jim: Starting to move on their way.

Ray: Get them on the move and then engage them with the systems we had.

Jim: The Air Force would bomb with B52s, are we're talking?

Ray: Well, ah, I saw F4s more than I --

Jim: F4s.

Ray: B52s, but I saw plenty of B52 strikes in our area also. Normally, those were not joint operations.

Jim: No, wouldn't imagine (??).

Ray: Normally, when a B52 strike was coming in, we tried to get as far---

Jim: I was going to say --

Ray: (laughs) Away from the area as possible because the shock effect of those strikes, was as you know, enormous.

Jim: The shock effect?

Ray: Ah, right, I mean just the tremors and shock waves coming off the ground from a B52 strike. It would be the kind of place you would not be hovering around with a helicopter to see what happened.

Jim: Oh, now I didn't know about this. So this is, I didn't realize that you could feel that.

Ray: Ah, you could see, hear, and feel the effect of a B52 strike at a fair amount of distance. I mean --

Jim: You mean it would push your helicopter up, straight up?

Ray: Well, it's just a blast, a total blast effect, could do that. Yeah, if you were real close to it. You just didn't want to be very close to that. Enormous amount of blast.

Jim: And noise?

Ray: And noise. And, and shock wave. I mean it's almost like a, mini nuclear attack.

Jim: I understand.

Ray: Ah, it's just difficult to describe what one B52 strike looked like, awesome.

Jim: Well, did you judge them to be effective? Ah, you know, did they seem to put 'em generally where they wanted 'em?

Ray: Oh, absolutely. Their radar system and guidance system was extremely accurate and ah at the battle of Khe San, for example, the B52s saved the day.

Jim: Saved those [unintelligible].

Ray: Defeated the enemy and, and, and killed very large numbers of enemy forces that were surrounding Khe San.

Jim: Mm hmm. Yeah, okay. Yeah, I had a friend who flew an F4. He was there, went through two tours in Vietnam in an F4.

Ray: Well, they were more frequently -- I mean, you get to remember, recognize voices on the radio. I mean they were -- many of the same aircraft flew same areas often as we did and, ah, and we did develop a lot of teamwork.

Jim: Okay, now, did anyone in your group get shot down?

Ray: There were several. I don't remember exactly how many. We, I do recall that of the twelve aircraft that I began, that tour with, there were only two remaining at the end of the eight months that I served as commander of that unit. So they had all been either shot down or destroyed on the ground during rocket or mortar attacks.

Jim: Okay, then you lost many pilots?

Ray: We lost several, but in those cases where they were shot down, I am trying to remember, that was a long time ago, ah, I think, in, in most every case, they survived the crash.

Jim: Okay tell me what the drill was when one of your helicopters went down. How did you protect them and how did you set up saving them?

Ray: Well, we, we of course as I had mentioned earlier, always had at least two aircraft -- So you always had another aircraft there, and ah, and then usually there were other aircraft in the area that we were involved with, the UH1s, medevacs, whoever. So ah, it was typically the wing aircraft and anyone else who was available would provide fire support on the ground as needed, if needed, until we could get a rescue type helicopter in, a UH1.

Jim: You stayed, the other helicopter stayed on station until---

Ray: Sure, sure. In once instance we had one shot down in the A Shau Valley, and the situation was so bad that there wasn't time for waiting for a rescue aircraft, and so the wing ship went in right behind the one that went down and flew out the crew hanging onto the Cobra.

Jim: I was going to say, there was no room inside the --

Ray: There wasn't any extra --

Jim: Just hang onto the skids?

Ray: Well, one guy, actually one of them straddled one of the rocket pods.

Jim: Wow!

Ray: And the other one, they popped the -- there's an ammunition door underneath the belly that opens up where you get in to load the ammunition. So they popped that door open and he laid on that door and hung on to the cable support. So they had one guy on the door, the ammo door, and one guy on the rocket pod and they flew

both of them out. Taking fire all of the way. As it was, they were very fortunate to get out.

Jim: Yeah, it was fortunate they weren't hit, being so exposed.

Ray: Right, right.

Jim: And how far back would be your base then?

Ray: 'Bout a half an hour.

Jim: A half an hour.

Ray: From that particular site, thirty, about thirty minutes.

Jim: That's a tough deal.

Ray: On that particular day we almost got two more aircraft shot down because – **[End of Tape 1, Side A, Ca. 30 min]** I, I and another aircraft went out, -- they called back, that this emergency was in progress. We immediately launched two more aircraft and headed out there to see how we could help. Ah, by the time we got there we saw this other aircraft coming at us with the two guys hanging on to it and we landed on a firebase that the artillery had that was kind of halfway in between. Checked with them. They were okay. They briefed us on the situation where the aircraft was and so on. So we proceeded on out, and our next concern was to either remove or destroy that aircraft because the weapons systems on it and other stuff on it we did not want to fall into the hands of the enemy. So, ah, we got out there. I located the aircraft, we went into a orbit overhead, radioed back to our command and controls center which by that time had got the, hold of the division commander, the assistant division commander, my commanders and they ordered me to, destroy the aircraft, if possible. So we rolled in to destroy this Cobra that's down on the ground, and after the first or second pass my aircraft was hit. Then my wing aircraft was hit, and we were still flying, but I radioed back and suggested that another means of destruction be considered because, ah---

Jim: It's started adding up down there.

Ray: I said, "If we keep this up, the rest of us are going to be down there, and this is a job for something bigger than what we can do," and I specifically requested that they launch the Air Force and bomb the, bomb the area if they ever do that, which is what they did. They --

Jim: With an F4 or something like that, put a 500 lb bomb on it?

Ray: Yeah, they agreed with my recommendation, fortunately---

Jim: Sure.

Ray: Called us back, sent the Air Force in, and they, they finished it off.

Jim: What is it that you didn't want to fall in the hands of the enemy?

Ray: Ah, we had some classified ah equipment on board and ah, I believe, I can't remember if they got out with their radio codes and so forth when they exited the aircraft and ah,---

Jim: [Unintelligible] is forward. Okay. Ideal, okay.

Ray: I'm, ah, all for that.

Jim: Alright, let me see if I can get this cranked up now. There you go over (??). It moved just a bit. That's all right. We can solve that. We're, we're running okay. So you want to back up for a second about the operation of the aircraft, is that --

Ray: Well, I, I maybe back to my first experience in Vietnam, which, ah---

Jim: Oh.

Ray: Occurred in June of '66, and ah, so I, I, I've served there from June of '66 to June of '67. And then I go back two and half years later and serve from November of '69 till November of '70. So I not --

Jim: That's what we just got through talking about was your second experience.

Ray: Yes.

Jim: Okay.

Ray: With the Cobras. First time I'm flying airplanes, I'm in a different time frame, entirely different mission and different perspectives and, and so forth of what was going on. And then in the end the result of *both*, I think I can say today that I have as good a total perspective of the war from its tactical point of view, less strategic and political, but certainly from a tactical point of view. In the combination of those two tours I saw almost all of South Vietnam. I flew in and out of almost every airstrip in South Vietnam.

Jim: What aircraft?

Ray: Ah, the first tour I was flying the Otter, the De Havilland Otter.

Jim: The one I used to take in Canada to go fishin'.

Ray: Still can.

Jim: I know that.

Ray: Ah --

Jim: Excellent airplane.

Ray: Excellent aircraft, and designed specifically for short takeoff and landing in bush type flying in Alaska---

Jim: But you didn't have pontoons?

Ray: No.

Jim: Yeah. But the same aircraft.

Ray: What we did with the Otters was go into all of these little special forces camps and local defense camps where often was just a little dirt strip. Elephants wandering across it --

Jim: (laughs)

Ray: And about the only thing that could get in and out was an Otter.

Jim: So your biggest hazard in landing was running into an elephant?

Ray: Elephants, water buffalo--

Jim: I suppose they wouldn't move either.

Ray: No, and an occasional tiger, in some areas over near the Cambodian border. Well, anyways, I was based in, originally in Nha Trang. Then I moved to then I moved to Wui Nhon. All of which was in the central part of II Corps area. But in the process of that I had the opportunity to fly missions from one end of the country to the other, mostly for Special Forces. It was Special Forces Headquarters in Nha Trang and one day you could fly down to the farthest end of the delta, down to Can Tho, and the next day you could go all the way up to Khe San, up near the DMZ. So, over that, that period, that year, I got to really see what all of the country looked like, and I got a feel just listening to different people that I met, that I talked to and so forth, as to what was going on, ah throughout the country.

Jim: What was your mission in that Otter?

Ray: It was ah, light cargo and ah---

Jim: Personnel?

Ray: Personnel liaison type support. A typical day we would spend six to eight hours just going from one camp to another delivering mail, food, people, communications equipment, whatever they needed.

Jim: This was before there was a large amount of military, huge amount of military there---

Ray: With the buildup was taking place at this time. The, the '65, '66, ah, you know, lots of people were coming in, but so there was really I've, I thought, in looking back its really three different dimensions, tactical dimensions of this war. The one was the coastal defenses which everyone was pretty much familiar with and the idea of defending the main cities, all of which, almost all of which were on the sea coast. Another one was, out in the farthest, the boondocks, all these little villages and camps that were learning how to defend themselves and we had these small teams in there training them to do that, assisting them and so forth. It was kind of like a whole separate world. And then, a couple of years later, I'm involved in the almost conventional type warfare engagements with main force units coming out of North Vietnam. So, coastal defense, the main force units from the north and then all these outlying areas with the camps and so forth. Got to see all of that.

Jim: Now, you flew with another pilot?

Ray: Ah, we always had, occasionally we flew with just one pilot, but normally there was a pilot and co-pilot. And then, ah --

Ray: Ah – (laughs)

Jim: Compared to your other experiences?

Ray: The otter is, ah, oh I guess I could say both. Ah, the biggest challenge we had with the Otter was doing two of the, and take offs from short fields, ah, because you got one engine and you have this big aircraft –

Jim: Right.

Ray: And ah, it was very slow getting off the ground and very slow once it got in the air. In fact, the motto of our unit was “Low, slow and reliable.”

Jim: (laughs)

Ray: This kinda sums –

Jim: So once you got it up, it was okay.

Ray: Once you got it up, it was okay, but you'd climb, it would take forever to climb. And so we actually, ah, got to where, I mean we really didn't sit down and do a complete computation of weight and balance every time we were, I mean we were in too much of a hurry.

Jim: Sure.

Ray: But we had a pretty good feel for whether or not we could take one more person or not. And I have, I have actually sat there, looked at the conditions, looked at the end of the runway and gone back and kicked one person off.

Jim: (laughing) I can't handle ya, huh?

Ray: Yeah, I mean it would be that tight.

Jim: I understand.

Ray: Ah---

Jim: But at the --

Ray: The other, excuse me, the other very difficult thing was landing in a crosswind. Very difficult to control because you've got his huge tail section --

Jim: That's right.

Ray: And, ah, a limited amount of rudder control and a crosswind would just want to grab that big old tail and just---

Jim: Spin ya.

Ray: Push you around. So, so you wound up, using aileron for directional control sometimes on takeoff as well in a crosswind. And it was very tricky to get in the right kind of slip or crab aileron, full rubber and be able to get down without --

Jim: [unintelligible]

Ray: Yeah. So it was tricky, but it was kinda fun. It was comfortable once you got in the air, and we got an *awful* lot done with that (laughs) aircraft. It was just amazing what we were able to do each day.

Jim: You mean you'd carry a lot more than a person would think? Would that be a---

Ray: About two thousand pounds was the normal cargo capacity.

Jim: So --

Ray: That could be people, it could be ammunition, it could be food. Ah, carried caskets on several occasions for the Vietnamese. Whatever, pigs, I mean---

Jim: Pigs?

Ray: I can recall just about a little bit of everything being hauled at one time or another.

Jim: (laughs) Pigs?

Ray: Yes.

Jim: Why were we taking pigs?

Ray: Well, to these villages, that, I mean these were very remote tribes people---

Jim: I guess so.

Ray: In some of these villages, and so occasionally weird kinds of things like that --

Jim: (laughs)

Ray: Would be---

Jim: How would you keep the pigs under control?

Ray: They'd be in a cage.

Jim: Oh, hopefully they wouldn't get out.

Ray: And stick 'em in the back end and hope they wouldn't get out.

Jim: (laughs) I have to stop and [unintelligible].

Ray: Ah --

Jim: I'll have to --

Ray: Ah, I would, I mean I would -- there is neither time nor willingness to tell all of the---

Jim: Oh, sure.

Ray: Things I ever did with an aircraft (laughs) I expect as most pilots could --

Jim: Right.

Ray: Could do, and, ah, but the special forces camps, I mean you could haul most anything in to those guys, too. It was just whatever, whatever they wanted. If we could get it on the aircraft we took it.

Jim: Did you have any communication with the natives? At these places or was that somebody else's problem?

Ray: Well, I did not communicate directly with them. I mean, but it was very interesting. I took a lot of pictures at different places of native people and village people and so forth. It was very, very interesting, and it was interesting to see, this is a part of the war that people haven't heard about much, how much effort went into helping people survive in the, in the remote areas. And –

Jim: Apart from the war.

Ray: Well, I mean it was war related---

Jim: Yes, I --

Ray: I mean the guerilla forces would attack these villages and ah, you know, forage upon them for, for food and support, and ah so there was and the, and the courage shown by these villagers to try to defend themselves, and I mean to them, their world, the politics of their world was their village. I mean what happened here and there sure (??), but, but they were still vulnerable to the guerillas and ah, had a strong sense of ah, patriotism of their own to ah, to defend themselves and protect what they, what was theirs.

Jim: Did you feel that they appreciated what you did for them?

Ray: Very much, very much. Ah, I can remember, you know, a smile is a smile in any language, particularly with children and I remember a lot more smiles among those villagers than I do frowns when we show up and bring them whatever we were able to, to bring them. Interesting, that friend of mine who recently visited South Vietnam, someone who's had great difficulty since the war with PTSD and was wounded and so on, a lot of nightmares. He started in the north and got to South Vietnam and found when the bus stopped the kids' war all smiling and glad to see Americans. I mean you could tell.

Jim: Sure.

Ray: And it hit him –

Jim: Sure.

Ray: That none of these kids were there when he was there. Why did they feel this way towards us? And, ah, that kind of put him at ease with himself about a lot of things because he realizes that the children that are being born today are being told positive things about what the Americans did in South Vietnam.

Jim: Not all, I mean most were bad?

Ray: Pardon?

Jim: Most went bad. Against – anti-American?

Ray: No, quite the contrary.

Jim: Oh, well that's a---

Ray: Very positive.

Jim: Oh.

Ray: And, ah, he told me about the sharp difference he saw going from North Vietnam to South Vietnam with the attitude of the people, particularly the children. The children in South Vietnam were glad to see the Americans.

Jim: Excellent. Well, that's nice. It's comforting to know that something good came out of that.

Ray: Absolutely.

Jim: Yeah. The, so when the Otter business, you had, that was, you're – what am I trying to, oh, you had a prescribed amount of time that you're supposed to be there. After X number of months you knew you were gonna to go home?

Ray: One year. It was --

Jim: That was standard?

Ray: Yes, one year, regardless of how many hours you flew or missions you flew or anything else---

Jim: Mm hmm.

Ray: That was the standard --

Jim: Did you count missions, particularly? Just [unintelligible] when you reported?

Ray: I, I didn't. We, we --

Jim: You flew everyday?

Ray: Kept track just about everyday, kept track of flying hours, and I think the two tours combined I had 800 and some hours of flying, that relates to a, with the Cobra. I mean, on the average of two missions per hour and I had about 350 hours so I'd probably be somewhere 700 – 800 missions with the cobra, something like that. And ah, lesser with the Otter because the missions were longer –

Jim: Longer.

Ray: In duration. So –

Jim: With the Cobra you might fly, have several on in a day.

Ray: In the day, sure.

Jim: Because it was half an hour away from trouble and---

Ray: Right. Typical, an hour. Actually, fifteen to twenty minutes to the target area, ten to fifteen minutes on the target, you know, within an hour.

Jim: Right.

Ray: Usually you'd completed a mission.

Jim: Mm hmm. Now, when you came back, a typical mission, let's talk about that for a moment.

Ray: Right.

Jim: When you'd come back, you'd land the helicopter and you'd have a crew chief would go over your plane?

Ray: Well –

Jim: Or did you do that yourself?

Ray: Two different situations. Ah, often, after completing a mission we would go to the nearest place where we could rearm and refuel. Which often would not be our home base.

Jim: Oh.

Ray: And, you did your own rearming and you did your own refueling. There just weren't people to do that. They usually – we had what we called “hot refueling

points.” They’d be a place that was set up where there was all these gas pumps and you’d land and you’d grab a gas pump and –

Jim: (laughs) Do it yourself?

Ray: You’d keep the aircraft -- keeps running. You’d stick, yeah, you’d refuel. Ah, usually to rearm we’d have to shut down. But then you’d usually hover over to another spot where they had all the ammo piled up and you’d shut down and you’d put more rockets in the tubes and---

Jim: You did that all yourself also?

Ray: Sure, yeah.

Jim: I suppose it was more practical (??),

Ray: Sometimes there’d be a few people to help you, but you had to do most of that yourself. So---

Jim: Was that difficult?

Ray: Ah, no. More time consuming than what we liked. We wished there would have been better technology and better ways of more quickly doing that. It took time to completely reload seventy-six rockets or however many we reloaded---

Jim: I’m sure.

Ray: Ah, so that was one scenario where you knew you had to return to that target area, or anticipated you would so didn’t want to, you wanted to get, be ready to get [unintelligible]. back O when you – [Approx. 15 sec. gap in tape]

Ray: Ah, and if you did they would attend to those immediately. Otherwise you’d again ah rearm, top it off again with fuel, and be ready to go again.

Jim: If you needed repairs, would there be somebody there to bring any pieces of equipment?

Ray: We had our own maintenance. The way the Army units operated the support maintenance was part of the unit and not somebody---

Jim: Right.

Ray: Separated. So we had all of our own maintenance people right there and we could deal with whatever we had to deal with.

Jim: You were self-sufficient. What about food?

Ray: We had, ah, food was done at battalion level.

Jim: Which was how far?

Ray: Well they were -- the battalion head -- in my case the battalion headquarters was collocated with my battery.

Jim: Oh.

Ray: The other two firing batteries were at other locations where they satellited with other units for food. So the battalion headquarters had a mess hall just -- not far from where we were and, ah, often we would transport the food into our ready area -- so that we could stay right by the aircraft.

Jim: When you were flying, did you carry any food with you?

Ray: No.

Jim: Didn't want it, didn't care for it or didn't need it because the missions were rather, rather short?

Ray: Well, we had a little bit of stuff in the survival vest, but the main thing we concerned ourselves with having along was water. It was very hot and the original Cobras had no, didn't have air conditioning so you had a greenhouse effect inside those things. It was, there was not -- you always wanted to try to have two canteens of water with you. Ah, and if you were going to be into the situation of rearming and refueling and being out for more than an hour, during the course of a day you drink a lot of water.

Jim: I was going to say. That's necessary. Did you have a hospital there?

Ray: We had an aid station at battalion, but there was a more of a, larger aid station there in the base camp. There was not a hospital in the base camp. The nearest hospital was about fifteen miles away.

Jim: So any wounded would not stay there --

Ray: No.

Jim: Would just go right on to the hospital.

Ray: Anybody that had anything significant would usually go down to Da Nang because they -- had a major hospital there.

Jim: Oh, that was quite a ways down.

Ray: Yeah, ah, about thirty to forty minutes.

Jim: Apparently, the Da Nang was the only large medical unit that we had up (??) there?

Ray: In the northern part of the country.

Jim: In the northern part of the country --

Ray: Yeah.

Jim: And ah, did they have a physician at your base?

Ray: Yes.

Jim: One physician, two?

Ray: We had a flight surgeon in the battalion – and then there were other physicians there at the base camp. I just can't remember what, it wasn't even a MASH that was there, kind of a field station of some kind that may have been part of the Da Nang Hospital.

Jim: Yeah. Nurses?

Ray: I don't recall any nurses at our base camp. No.

Jim: My recollection was that the hospital at Da Nang would send out small teams of --

Ray: Yeah.

Jim: Of physicians out into the bush and they would be there for a period of time.

Ray: On the other hand, another very common, I forgot, I almost forgot about this. Our, often our closest hospital capability was at sea. Ah, the hospital ship, ah, the Sanctuary, I recall particularly used to cruise up and down the coast in our area, was out there almost all the time. I landed on the Sanctuary –

Jim: Did you? Did you ever see De Haven out there? That was my ship.

Ray: No.

Jim: Yeah.

Ray: No, the Sanctuary –

Jim: I don't think De Haven was in --

Ray: And the Repose I recall, but we landed -- I landed a couple times on the Sanctuary. It was pretty interesting to see --

Jim: There were three hospital ships in Korea --

Ray: Okay.

Jim: And I was on one of them.

Ray: Okay.

Jim: Yeah. I know about them. Did you have any trouble landing on the Sanctuary? That was a small area you were asked to land on. (laughs)

Ray: Right, I, much more difficult than I, I would have ever imagined and then doing that and thinking about the jets landing on carriers made me realize that I was content to be an Army pilot, and ah, I, I just, I mean, that's tough, with the ship going up and down---

Jim: And at night.

Ray: Yeah.

Jim: That's the world's most difficult experience in the service.

Ray: You got my vote.

Jim: I'm convinced.

Ray: Yeah, I agree.

Jim: Wow! Okay, they, ah, so back, the Cobra -- you were there almost a year you said, April to November?

Ray: It was November to November.

Jim: November to November?

Ray: '69 to '70, yeah.

Jim: Right. The a, now, in looking at the resume here, you were wounded. What's with, tell me about that experience.

Ray: I, ah, (laughs) you mentioned before about aircraft being shot down,. Ah, the ah, probably the more difficult direct threat to us was rocket and mortar attacks at our base camp. We had a lot of them, and they usually occurred at night, and the majority of them were a 122 mm rocket, which is a nasty bullet.

Jim: That's a long –

Ray: Big bullet, and our area, because our particular Cobra unit was the primary rapid response for that base camp particularly at night, we were the only ones that, that launched at night. We were prime targets. So I kinda lost count of how many rockets we took in that area over that time. On one occasion we got hit so hard it almost wiped out our entire area.

Jim: Planes too?

Ray: Most of the planes that were there – fortunately we had a number of them gone that night just by sheer luck. Ah, we had five or six gone that night, but the rest three or four were destroyed on the ground, and I think one we salvaged. Ah, so these rocket attacks were not only physically damaging but very difficult psychologically because to be flying these missions all day long –

Jim: Right. You're tired.

Ray: You're exhausted. You are trying to get some sleep and it was very difficult to sleep wondering when the next rocket attack is going to take place. So, during when, it was not the one where we got wiped out, it was a later one, ah, the one where we got hit so hard it was the 3rd of May. Ah, we had several of them after that and there was one in the months of July where a rocket landed, well, there was a couple of them landed right alongside this little hut I was sleeping in, and in the process of trying to get to the bunker from my cot, one of them landed close by, knocked me down, the blast knocked me down the embankment. I had minor wounds that were treated and released. It was no big deal, but that's how that happened.

Jim: Minor? What do you mean, shrapnel wounds or --

Ray: Well, --

Jim: Not really.

Ray: Not really --

Jim: Just blast --

Ray: I got a cut back here and my arm and, you know, just – whether it was the blast or whatever [unintelligible], you know.

Jim: Nothing that required any change –

Ray: No.

Jim: Change.

Ray: No.

Jim: Okay. A--, now, when those large rockets, how far, would they -- those come in from?

Ray: A long ways, ah --

Jim: Because they must have quite a distance.

Ray: They, I'm tryin' to remember the maximum range of those and I can't. I seem to recall that they were – the range within the area that they were firing it from was probably ten to fifteen kilometers from --

Jim: Wow!

Ray: My location.

Jim: Was this one of the reasons you had trouble controlling them? Because their, you couldn't get at where their origin.

Ray: Well, I, I, we were amazed at the incredible accuracy they seemed to have because we were convinced they were definitely aiming (laughs) at us and they were definitely hitting us. So ah, I, it was remarkable how--

Jim: It didn't appear to be random at all?

Ray: No, oh no.

Jim: But you must have made some effort to control your perimeter so that base --

Ray: Well, the perimeter, yeah, but we never --

Jim: You only go out so far.

Ray: Got attacked on the ground at the perimeter. They were firing from, you know, mortars and rockets from farther up. And that was very difficult to deal with. We had patrols. We had air surveillance. We did lots of things but, ah --

Jim: You could pick up and move easily with a---

Ray: Sure, they, they had these sort of tripod, A-Frame racks that they fired these things off of.

Jim: Carry 'em right on their backs.

Ray: But they had surveyed spots out there that they knew that if they set up right there and had --

Jim: Where it would come down. (laughs)

Ray: Had whatever amount of elevation which they probably did with a hand --

Jim: Right.

Ray: Transit thing, and that they would, they would hit the target. So that was very difficult to deal with and something that really weighed on us over time. I, I think the cumulative psychological effect upon everyone in my unit was the most difficult thing I dealt with as a leader and, ah extreme mental and physical fatigue. Always short handed as units always are in combat.

Jim: Sure.

Ray: I had pilots who, I think the record was twenty-one days of never leaving the ready hooch at the edge the ramp. Never --

Jim: There must be some limit beyond which that person is no longer effective.

Ray: There was, and it varies among individuals. There is no formula for that. You just have to, you have to know your people. You have to keep track on a daily basis of how they're doing and what they're doing and you have to know when people are at the edge.

Jim: Now as a leader, did you interview these people on a regular basis?

Ray: Sure. Daily.

Jim: Daily?

Ray: I, I--

Jim: "How did it go today, what'd you do?" and blah, blah, just small talk type?

Ray: Well, I, small talk, but when you know people that well you can tell from small talk where they are. I mean, I don't think I ever remember asking anybody, "Well,

you think you can fly your mission today?" Because they'd always say, "Hell yeah."

Jim: He'd give himself away

Ray: But you discovered (??) tell tale signs of, of fatigue and stress that you could---

Jim: And what'd we do then?

Ray: Well, you'd have to --

Jim: Tell him to stand down?

Ray: In fact I would -- yes, I mean, it was not uncommon to direct someone, to take them off of flight status for a day or two or whatever.

Jim: How'd they respond to that?

Ray: Ah, ah, usually, very cooperatively (laughs).

Jim: They did?

Ray: Oh, yeah.

Jim: They didn't feel that they were letting the team down?

Ray: Ah, that would happen occasionally, but when somebody was really dogged out, number one they didn't want to admit it, but number two, when you called them down on it, there wasn't much argument.

Jim: Yeah. Well, they realized it hurt the cause rather than help.

Ray: Yeah.

Jim: Did you have any impression about the North Vietnamese as soldiers?

Ray: Ah, well, I, I guess one of the things I remember is how misinformed they seemed to be, often about the circumstances that they were going into coming out of North Vietnam. I mean, there were several occasions when we, ah, located main force regiments (laughs) walking down in the open in bright daylight. I mean it was like they --

Jim: I'll be darned.

Ray: Almost thought they were just walking, to, ah, to victory and all they had to do was --

Jim: Show up. (laughs)

Ray: Show up, I mean, as – so what – and then you always wondered. Well, what were they telling these guys that they were sending down into the jaws of the likes of B52 strikes, artillery, Cobras, F4s.

Jim: Right.

Ray: And I guess they were telling them that this is a – you're going down to free your comrades and just go down there and do that, I, I don't know. On the other hand, they fought very well, but the South Vietnamese did also, and I think that's another misconception about the war. The area that I fought in the second time there with the ARVN Division they were tenacious, extremely well led. They planned their oper – operations carefully. They carried them out well. I enjoyed supporting them and working with them.

Jim: They were well trained. The Americans did a good job in training them?

Ray: Well, I, I think, **[End of Tape 1, Side B, ca. 30 min.]** ah, in the case of the 1st ARVN Division, they had pretty much trained themselves. Now, but these are, these are units that have been together for years and, most all of their leadership had, had gone to school, had been trained in, in the, the States.

Jim: Oh.

Ray: At Fort Benning, Fort Sill, whatever. I mean, when I went through the advanced course at Fort Sill before I went back for that second tour, we had six or eight South Vietnamese officers in our advanced course, course.

Jim: Mm hmm

Ray: Ah, so they were schooled and trained in the basics of things, but they carried out their own training with their soldiers and for the most part did a, did a very good job.

Jim: What happened to those guys at the end of the war?

Ray: Well, ah, I, I suspect those who did not flee the country, most of them wound up in reeducation camps and, had a tough time of it. But, I think that they are beginning to emerge from all of that and I think there's as time goes by we will see a more of the, ah, what was the original leadership born during that time frame is going to emerge again.

Jim: Reemerge.

Ray: And as will their, their children and families, and this was part of what I remarked about a minute ago, I the apparent attitude of those people to this guy who had served there. I saw a clip on a, a network broadcast on the occasion of the 20th ah, that was '95, the twentieth year of the ending of the Vietnam War in '75, and one of the guys who was in my advanced course at Fort Sill was in that clip. He happened to be a guy who finished number one in the class and beat out everybody including the Americans as the top student in the class.

Jim: Oh, terrific.

Ray: A brilliant guy, a very strong leader. He went back and commanded an artillery battalion after that when I went up north to the 101st, so I had a little bit of contact with him, but then I lost it. But, in this film clip he was shown, that, they were talking about the growth of industry and commercial activity and so forth in Vietnam. This was in the Saigon area apparently, and he had his own company. Manufacturing and --

Jim: Sure.

Ray: So on. So, there's a lot of these folks still around.

Jim: Now, tell me about the Viet Cong. What are these, these political animals primarily? Who were taught to infiltrate or?

Ray: I, I'm convinced beyond any personal doubt that that was the case. That this was a, the, so called insurgency or Viet Cong was a movement carefully orchestrated by North Vietnam. And, ah, the idea of this being a civil war in the south I think is pretty ridiculous.

Jim: Yeah. That was --

Ray: And, ah, this was all carried out by higher authority in the north and of course you see if you track carefully the evolution of the war the point at which the effort in the south is succeeding including that of the South Vietnamese themselves, in the villages, in self-defense, all that stuff is starting to work. And that's when North Vietnam decides they have to start sending main force units down there 'cause it's --

Jim: 'Cause they're losing.

Ray: The insurgency itself isn't making it. Yeah.

Jim: They're not making it, right. That was my understanding. That it started out like they might have a chance to do something, but then eventually they sort of spent themselves out.

Ray: Yes.

Jim: And, ah and what was the other? The Tet Offensive, were you there then?

Ray: I was not. That was in '68, and I returned in – I left in '67 and came back in '69. I was in the Hue area when I returned in '69 and heard a good bit about it. And of course, the big Marine, the Marines had been mostly responsible for that area up there from Hue on up to Quang Tri and Dong Ha and so forth. That was almost all Marine occupied territory. By the time I got there in '69, the 101st Airborne occupied that whole area and the Marines had pulled out.

Jim: Was that a failure of reconnaissance that allowed that to happen?

Ray: The Tet Offensive?

Jim: Right, around, at least around Saigon?

Ray: Well, I, ah, I think, I don't know if a failure of reconnaissance is quite it. I think the magnitude of a country wide orchestrated effort was probably not anticipated. But I think there were signs enough here and there that something was about to happen. I think they reacted particularly well in, in Saigon. And of course, in the end, the, the Tet Offensive was a terrible defeat for the North Vietnamese and for the Viet Cong, but it, it, politically became a, a, a--

Jim: Major victory.

Ray: Major victory because of the impact it had upon the American people and public opinion back here in the States, but in fact they suffered terrible losses. That did end the Viet Cong --

Jim: That was the end of the Cong

Ray: Completely. That was the end of the Cong.

Jim: Yep.

Ray: And from that point on it's all North Vietnamese forces.

Jim: Yeah. Then the war seemed to change from that moment on, didn't it? So was this a war we should have been in or should not have been in? Should have been conducted from the start in a different way, what's your feeling about that?

Ray: Well, my personal feelings are that, ah, I, I don't see much difference between our underlying reasons or worth or value or morality of us participating in this war being very much different than Korea.

Jim: Mm hmmm.

Ray: I think that, ah, I mean you can debate that, but basically this was an invasion of a sovereign nation by communist forces, just as we saw in Korea. We should have responded, ah, in a way that was aimed at a military and political objective outcome. That is, a victory strategy from the beginning. We, we sort of wandered into this one step at a time and never had a plan, never had a real objective and so on. And so the most unfortunate part of this, well, certainly all of the people we lost, but the manner in which this was all handled is, a bigger failure than whether or not we should have been there in the first place, I believe.

Jim: Mm hmm.

Ray: Ah, lastly, ah, when all is said and done, what happened and how -- the popular story is that we lost the war and that this therefore was a useless effort on our part. I think that that, the final chapter to that story is still left to history. I think that, ah, I've begun to accept personally that the judgment of battles won and lost is not nearly as valid when it occurs as it may be later when you have a chance to see what really happened. And I guess my favorite example of that is the end of World War II. I mean, we all agree that World War II was the great victory, as saving, saving democracy from these other forces and so on. On the other hand, when you look at the fact that most of Eastern Europe was locked up involuntarily under communist rule for another forty to forty-five years.

Jim: (laughs) That was hardly a victory in that regard.

Ray: At the end of this great victory. You, you kind of wonder, what do you really call that? If you look at today, the trends that seem to be taking place in Viet Nam, now only twenty-five years removed from the end of this war, ah, you could make the case that the outcomes, may even occur more quickly than they did in Eastern Europe. Outcomes moving toward self-determination and democracy. I, I'm convinced that communism is a -- it's just a matter of time. This is not a system, or a form of government ah, that can endure. Ah, and so, the whole idea of self-determination of a people, particularly when they, and these days when you --with technology and communications and so forth, you don't keep people fooled as long as you used to be able to by telling them how good you got it.

Jim: Right.

Ray: Ah, people, I mean the pace of rising expectations among societies, cultures, and so forth is, is rapidly increasing so I think it's just a matter of time when we will see, a democratic government and life and so forth come to that region, and when that occurs will be a better measuring stick perhaps of what did we really accomplish there in the '60s and '70s---

Jim: Right.

Ray: Than what we have thought thus far.

Jim: Repression is going to be difficult with, with television sets in everybody's face. Ah they can't sell that much anymore. I think the Chinese are finding this out right now. These companies, companies that are sprung up in China are very independent and they're not going to be controlled by governments very much. They can't do that to them.

Ray: Well, I, I guess my other thought about that -- Viet Nam is a very unique part of the world and culture. It's a culture unto its own and I have looked a lot and tried to draw my own comparisons of Viet Nam or Indo-China as it was once known to say ah, Korea, ah, the Philippines, Japan, China, so forth and they are a, unique people, and have some very important qualities that I think particularly will cause an acceleration of democratic life and so forth.

Jim: Mm hmm.

Ray: Once the timing is available to them to do that. Very creative people, very resourceful people, very intelligent---

Jim: Extremely (??) hard working, all those Asian peoples, gosh.

Ray: Hard working. I think it's just it's just been very unfortunate that there has been a bum rap on, on any of those people because they are much harder working than what people realize.

Jim: Yeah, it's certainly impressive to see these Asian kids come over here and end up being valedictorians. When they arrived they couldn't even speak English.

Ray: Right.

Jim: That's impressive.

Ray: Very impressive.

Jim: Oh! What else did I -- oh, we didn't, go ahead.

Ray: I recall --

Jim: Oh, go ahead.

Ray: A couple of years ago the Commandant over at the St. John's Northwestern Military Academy, very elite prep school, all of their top students over there now are from Asia.

Jim: (laughs) Well, yeah, right. Well, they're willing to work and they're basically bright.

Ray: Yeah.

Jim: Ah, have you been back to Viet Nam?

Ray: I have not, I have not, nor have I had any burning desire to do so. I would say, some amount of curiosity, but there is nothing I, really need to see or whatever and I guess, I, I want to hold out, and hopefully live long enough, to go back and see it at a time when some of the expectations I have, have come to be.

Jim: (laughs) Sure. The a – now when you got out, you never, you stayed now in the service now right in here as a regular. When did you do your discharge from service or did you just put a number of years in and then it's automatically retire, how'd that go?

Ray: It's mandatory retirement at thirty years.

Jim: At thirty.

Ray: So --

Jim: You draw your, retire at full pay at thirty?

Ray: Seventy-five percent.

Jim: Oh, I thought full pay was---

Ray: No.

Jim: Oh.

Ray: No, seventy-five percent is the maximum for---

Jim: I see.

Ray: For military retirement.

Jim: So when you retired, than what did you do for a moment? (laughs)

Ray: Well --

Jim: Before you jumped back in (laughs).

Ray: (laughs) I, ah well, first thing that happened was at a retirement ceremony at Fort McCoy where I was post commander, and this is '91, thirty years after we'd come to active duty in '61, and even before that I'd been at Fort McCoy as a soldier, so
—

Jim: Right.

Ray: So the ceremony ended, and ah, didn't realize – I was still standing on this parade field. (Jim laughs) And my wife said, somewhere there she said, "Well, honey, I think it's time to go."

Jim: (laughs) Right.

Ray: And I guess it was at that moment that it really did hit me that this was the end of this part of my life that, ah, ---

Jim: A large part.

Ray: Although I had thought about it a lot, I think I was generally prepared for it, but in the moment I felt compelled to remain standing at attention on this parade field. Well I, the first thing we did was take some long vacation and traveling and so on which we really wanted to do and visited our children and grandchildren and then ah, settled down. I'd been given the opportunity to come into state government and initially did that over at the National Guard Headquarters. And within six months, I, I, I received the opportunity to be, appointed as Secretary of Veterans Affairs for Wisconsin.

Jim: You took over from, from whom?

Ray: Secretary Mauer.

Jim: Oh, yes. John.

Ray: Retired, John Mauer retired in January of '92 and I was appointed Secretary in February.

Jim: Mm hmm. Yeah, well this turned out to be a very productive time for you.

Ray: It has. I feel that we've accomplished a lot for Wisconsin veterans. I've enjoyed it. And it is a good feeling to come here each day and know that we're, I personally am able to give a little something---

Jim: Sure.

Ray: Back to all those who helped me for all those years. Ah, it's very gratifying.

Jim: One last thing. The VFW, I understand, is an organization disappearing from view. Have you read anything about that?

Ray: I have.

Jim: What's your feeling about this? Is it age and running out of bodies or what?

Ray: Well, there, there are times when we sit and talk among veterans groups and we say that our, our mutual goal is for all of these organizations to go out of business. Ah, the VFW particularly. If we reach the point where we have, we are no longer engaged in foreign war, that would be something that every VFW member who ever --

Jim: Should applaud, right.

Ray: Ever belonged to VFW --, in the meantime, I think that the, the decline of the organized veterans movement is something a little different. And the question of whether, but this is just not with veterans organizations, as you know. Community service organizations in general are seeing a decline in participation and so on. Ah, and I, this is something I talk with veterans about a lot. We talked about it in here just the other day. Ah, I think there is still a need for veterans, particularly the Viet Nam era veterans to be more engaged in their veterans organizations in their communities. And there are places in the state where that is very much the case. Very active posts that have leadership of the Viet Nam era vets, and they're doing good things in the community and so on. I, I think we will see more of that. I think that as each year goes by there is a changing perspective among Viet Nam veterans about their service, more of them feeling good about the fact that they did serve their country just as everyone else has throughout our history. And that that they did that honorably and to the best of their ability and so on. So, I think the veterans movement is going to be with us for awhile. I would guess that at some point we'll see some more merger of effort among organizations for small towns that continue to have both a legion and a VFW post.

Jim: Those are both social and political organizations, really, aren't they?

Ray: Yes, and, and traditionally have been an important part of community life.

Jim: Right from the very start.

Ray: In both small and large communities. Ah, I think that that will continue, but I think it will change in its shape and form somewhat.

Jim: The American Legion used to have a big impact and that's reduced considerably, now.

Ray: Well, are you referring to Washington or national government?

Jim: Just Washington – well, this is – the Legion itself –

Ray: Yeah, in general. Yeah.

Jim: It seems to have lost its political clout.

Ray: I think there's still --

Jim: As far – maybe you don't think so?

Ray: Still quite a bit there, but I would agree it is nowhere what it used to be.

Jim: Yes.

Ray: Ah, I think in the, in the earlier, days following WWII, very powerful and very powerful in making sure that veterans have received their benefits and so on. But, ah, yes, I think the strength of that has been lost.

Jim: Even though the WWI guys never got theirs.

Ray: Right

Jim: (laughs) Yeah, the veterans organizations are -- I grew up with that. My great grandfather George McDougall was sheriff of Dane county during the Civil War.

Ray: Really.

Jim: Yeah, and another was a captain in the 10th Wisconsin Volunteers, so I grew up listening to this from my parents and my grandparents talking about their parents. Matter of fact I recall, in 1930, I guess, I was sitting on the square watching the Memorial Day Parade and watching these old Civil War veterans, 90 year old men, struggling down the street. It was, you know, it's a vision that, you know, you always carry with you. Impressive.

Ray: I think that, ah, in, I think the different ways where the traditional veterans community is looking more to and, and being more appreciative of, the role of our national guard and reserve forces.

Jim: Yeah, I'd like to see that.

Ray: Ah, and we have several developments with that that is beginning to give more status and credibility to guard and reserve people, who of course today are serving all over the world. So, I think that the traditional criteria for who can belong to a post and so forth may liberalize and include more participation of guard

[unintelligible], which to me would make all of the sense in the world because they are in the communities, too.

Jim: Exactly.

Ray: I mean, in a lot of cases you've got an armory right down the street from the VFW post. Doesn't it make sense that they should be really tied together?

Jim: Now, the Army Reserve is one organization and, and the National Guard is another. How do---I don't understand their relationship, why there's two separate organizations here.

Ray: Well this, that's a question that's debated (Jim laughs) and has been for a long time. And it goes back a long ways. Ah, the, the National Guard or militia as it is commonly called is a, a, primarily state forces, commanded by the state. The governor of the state so forth, and, and exists to be able to provide support to local disaster and, and so on. They also have a federal mission which has really grown in recent years, where they can be called to active duty---

Jim: Right. We saw that---

Ray: And, and performance. The Reserve is an entirely federal branch, controlled by the federal government, and reservists can be called to active duty directly by the federal government. Ah, and are, in that sense more readily available to the federal government for whatever activity that may require. They can be called as individuals or as units where normally it requires special action to activate a national guard unit and so forth. I think that they're, in reality are growing more and more to be similar, but these basic differences of state and federal control are still there.

Jim: Now, the Army Reserve, but their pay is the same?

Ray: Yes.

Jim: A youngster in either one, the amount of duty time is roughly the same

Ray: Yes.

Jim: Assuming no crisis, I would --

Ray: Yes. That's correct.

Jim: They have to spend two weeks in the summer to do something in the field, probably?

Ray: That's correct.

Jim: Yeah.

Ray: That's correct.

Jim: And attend the monthly meetings otherwise.

Ray: That's correct. One weekend a month and then the summer, training [unintelligible] In, in recent years, there has been through mutual agreement among the Army that ah, the National Guard has assumed most of the combat type units---

Jim: Oh.

Ray: And the reserves have most of the support type units --

Jim: Oh, see, now, this is -- I learned something.

Ray: And, so there is more, more of a division of mission responsibility---

Jim: Right.

Ray: In that regard. Ah, so that has been part of this evolving process over time. And, here in Wisconsin we have both guard and reserve units, but typically, they are different kinds of units with different kinds of missions.

Jim: Is the Air Guard separate from the National Guard?

Ray: The Air Guard is part of the National Guard, but it has more of a direct federal mission.

Jim: They're called in frequently, aren't they?

Ray: And so they are used on a regular basis---

Jim: Right.

Ray: As part of the Air Force mission, so there is really more integration of active and guard there than what we have on the Army side. Ah, I think, personally, that the Army ah, should take more effort, to be more integrated in the manner that the Air Force is than what they have been. And I think we will see some of that in the years ahead.

Jim: Integration between services has never been a very popular thing, you know.

Ray: Well, the Army is I think kind of a holdout with this at keeping this distinction between the active Army and the reserve component Army.

Jim: Mm hmm.

Ray: Where both of the Marine, the Marine Corps and the Air Force have pulled that together in a way --

Jim: They sure have.

Ray: That you really can't see those lines. Ah, and the amount of fulltime personnel that you have, cadre type personnel in the units and so on, this is something that the Army has resisted, but I think, I really think they should do more.

Jim: Yeah. One last thing. There's one person I know who was in the regular Army, said that generally they look back at the men coming into the National Guard with disdain and they feel that they are poorly trained. Is that unfair?

Ray: It is unfair, and it is real. I mean this was the case when I was called to active duty in 1961 and I as a National Guard officer making a living in the regular Army saw forms of discrimination all along. I think it has improved quite a bit in recent years and I think the answer is that the more integration there is, the more that the Guard units are used for real-world missions, the more these barriers go away.

Jim: They need more training, really. Isn't that what we are talking about?

Ray: More training, more opportunity, more resourcing, and more support from the establishment in, in the total sense.

Jim: All right. Okay, I've run out of questions to ask. (Ray laughs) Thank you so much.

Ray: Okay, I had a couple of---

[End of Interview, total time ca. 83 min.]