

Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center

Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with  
**ROBERT COCROFT**  
Infantry, Army, Vietnam War  
2000

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**Cocroft, Robert**, (1946-). Oral History Interview, 2000.

User Copy: 2 sound cassette (ca. 60 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 60 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

**Abstract:**

Robert Cocroft, a Milwaukee, Wisconsin native, talks about his Vietnam War era Army service and activities as an officer in the Army Reserve. He discusses being drafted into the Army while in college, qualifying for Officer Candidate School, and choosing a Military Occupation Specialty. He speaks of basic infantry school at Fort Benning (Georgia), trying to get into Signal Corps or military intelligence but winding up in infantry, and transfer to Fort Ord (California) as a training officer. Offered a position in military intelligence, Cocroft comments that he declined because he believed that as a Black officer he would be used to spy on student demonstrators such as the Black Panther Party. He describes going to Panama for jungle training and becoming anemic due to taking required anti-malaria drug Primaquine, which reacted with his G6PD deficiency. Sent to Korea, he mentions assignment to headquarter Special Troops and processing military personnel with the 8<sup>th</sup> Army. Cocroft touches on racial tension, infiltrators along the Demilitarized Zone, attitudes towards Republic of Korea soldiers, and estimates of military strength. After return to Wisconsin, he joined the 84<sup>th</sup> Division of the Reserve while also working and going to school full time. He describes continuing with military education, including graduating from the Army War College, and climbing the chain of command to his current position of Assistant Division Commander for Operations with the 98<sup>th</sup> Division. Cocroft discusses the requirements of being on active duty with a Troop Program Unit and reflects on the changes in how the Reserve and the National Guard are more frequently deployed due to a decline of active units. He addresses the general complaint that Guard and Reserve forces lack adequate training. Cocroft examines a problem with minorities getting administrative discharges and then having great difficulty getting veteran benefits, and the unfairness of this compared to the amnesty offered to draft dodgers, who were mostly White. He reports that now the segregation problems are not racial, but gender-based, and he addresses the issues of fraternization and different standards for women. Cocroft emphasizes that the American people need to decide what they want from their military.

**Biographical Sketch:**

Cocroft (b.1946) served with the Army in Korea during the Vietnam War and had an active career in the Army Reserve. He served as the Deputy Secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs, President the National Association for Black Veterans, and President and CEO of the Center for Veterans Issues (Milwaukee, Wisconsin). He retired at the rank of Brigadier General.

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 2000.

Transcribed by Jack Carver, volunteer, 2009.

Transcript and abstract edited by Susan Krueger, 2010.

**Interview Transcript:**

Jim: Where were you born Bob?

Bob: I was born in Conway, Mississippi, Nov 16, 1946. My family moved to first Detroit and then Milwaukee before I reached six months old. So for all intensive purposes I was raised in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Jim: How did you enter military service?

Bob: I entered military service via the draft in 1966. I had been a student at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh – in those days it was called Wisconsin State University-Oshkosh. I had gone there and studied for one year and I played football, but during the summer the 2-S deferments reverted back to 1-A and so during the summer of 1966, I was called up by my friends and neighbors to join the United States Army. Some of them ended up being drafted into the Marines and Navy but I was drafted in the United States Army with a report date of 24, October, 1966.

Jim: Where did you go?

Bob: I ended up taking a bus out of local draft board 44 in Milwaukee to Chicago, and then a slow train ride from Chicago to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri.

Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri is where it was determined that based upon a battery of tests that I did qualify for Officer Candidate School or OCS. That was quite unique and ironic is probably a better word -- because my father, who had served in World War II, told me just before I left that if I qualified to go to OCS, why not give it a shot? I told him I would but of course the reality of the situation was I had no concept of what OCS was. But when instructors told me I qualified for OCS and told me what it meant, I recalled this is what my father had mentioned and I told them yes, I would sign up for it.

Of course by making that decision I had to immediately be discharged from the military as far as being a draftee and re-enlist in the regular army for a three year tour as opposed to a two year tour or the status that I had as far as being a draftee, which required me to make a selection as to what military occupation specialty [MOS] I wanted to go into. And since I had been a journalism major in college, I chose what I could to do as close as I could to communications so I asked for the Signal Corps as far as MOS.

That was basically required just to go from what we'd call a draftee to an RA [Ribbon Army soldier] but the real intent was for me to go to Officer Candidate School as soon as I completed basic training and advanced individual training.

Jim: Did they send you to Fort Benning?

Bob: That's kind of a unique story also. At the time I was told that I qualified for any grant or service that the military had to offer and so I asked them naturally, "What are the different branches of service that I can go into as an officer?" So, sticking with the Signal Corps, I asked for my first choice to be Signal Corps, as a branch. And they said fine, they asked me for my second choice and I chose military intelligence and then I was ready to make my third selection and that's when they told me, "Just a moment, one of your choices must be combat arms." And right there I knew there was a joker in the back. But I asked him what were the combat arms – I was informed one of my choices either had to be armor, artillery, or infantry. Not knowing anything about artillery, not having any type of affinity to go into armor, I ended up choosing infantry.

The way it worked back then was you'd go through infantry OCS till your twelfth week, and then you would branch transfer to either the Signal Corps or to the military intelligence OCS. I got to the twelfth week at Fort Benning, Georgia, where I was going through infantry OCS, and I was informed that Signal Corps OCS had closed down, and no longer operated. And so I said, "OK, well then I'll take military intelligence," which was my second choice and they informed, "We see by your records that you only have one year of college." I told them that was correct, and they said the rules had changed and you now need to have two years of college. So my question was, "Where does that leave me?" And they say, "You're in it" [Infantry].

And so I ended up being an infantry officer and over the years I've fought to keep that branch when at times it would have probably been more advantageous to have switched to a different branch, particularly armor.

But all the way until being promoted to the rank of Brigadier General, I did carry the infantry branch. So it stuck with me the rest of my time.

Jim: Did you get into communications as much as you assumed you would?

Bob: Never got into communications and never got into military intelligence. However, I was offered military intelligence after I'd come down on orders from Vietnam. The situation was early in the Vietnam era, there had been a problem with soldiers going to Vietnam, coming back, and being stationed at different posts and then between the time they returned to the United States and being discharged, many were getting into trouble. I mean like the attitude of many soldiers was, "What are ya gonna do, send me to Vietnam? No, I've already done my tour." And this was resulting in a lot of administrative discharges -- with less than an honorable condition – for a lot of soldiers who'd already served honorably in Vietnam.

Jim: Let me stop you there for a second. Now these are people who were drafted and had to fill out the requirements – they couldn't just sort of discharge them and get rid of them?

Bob: Right. They still had the two year commitment. So they'd go to basic AIT, Vietnam, return and then they'd have six months or so left to do.

Jim: So the time in Vietnam was generally just a year?

Bob: Yes. The requirement for servers in Vietnam was also one year. Now there were some longer terms for some of the Marine Corps people, but for the Army – one year. But the scenario that was playing out – many of these individuals coming back home, being assigned to various posts, and they would get in trouble on those posts. And the administrative discharges, without the benefit of a court martial, [left a lot of these people] not being eligible for a lot of the benefits that were provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs.

So I'm bringing this up to make this particular point. The military changed their policy in the late 1967 timeframe to improve that. So what they started to do was soldiers went from basic AIT, they would be stationed in the United States and hit Vietnam shortly before they had one year left in the military. And this was to get rid of the problem of soldiers returning and then having to wait around before their mandatory discharges. But by doing it this way, as an example: a soldier went through basic AIT, they had a two year commitment, would be stationed somewhere for a couple months and then get discharged the same day they were returning from Vietnam. That's why there were soldiers who ended up actually hitting the streets back in the United States with mud on their boots from Vietnam. But the military eliminated that problem of them coming back – of course it created a lot of psychological problems for a lot of veterans on the other side. So in my particular situation, it was time after I graduated from OCS, I went to Fort Ord, California and became a training officer for about seven months before I got the orders to go with the 101<sup>st</sup> airborne to Vietnam.

So that meant I had to go back to airborne school. At that time they offered me Ranger School, which I had applied for previously, but I did not get, and I chose not to get Ranger School, but I did choose to go to Jungle Training. Jungle Training was a three week course in Panama. The way this all would have played out is that then I would have put one year in Vietnam and then returned to the States. It was at that point that I talked to the Department of the Army, before going to Airborne Training and at that point they offered me my second choice in military intelligence. And they told me that I could go back to school, that they would pay for it, the whole nine yards and it sounded like a pretty good deal but if you think about the times – the time, number one as far as personal orientation, I had been well-trained and fully oriented to do my duty for God and country in Vietnam.

The other part of the times – this was late 1967, early 1968 – in about this time frame when I was asked whether or not I now wanted to branch transfer to military intelligence. Being an African-American, it didn't take me too long to

figure out what it was that they would like for me to do in that particular capacity. Those were the days of the student underground, of the Black Panther Party, all of these groups that were bent on civil unrest and a lot of social protests, and there was beginning to be a movement against our involvement in Vietnam in that time frame that heightened and grew and ---

Jim: They wanted you to infiltrate these groups?

Bob: That was my belief. And so I chose no, I was on orders for Vietnam and I chose to continue down that track. However, when I went through Airborne Training, completed that, went back to Fort Benning, and then from there to Panama, General Warfare Training.

But while there in Panama, I got sick, I became anemic – there was blood in my urine – and the issue is that I am an individual that has what’s called G6PD Deficiency [Glucose-6-phosphate dehydrogenase deficiency], and what that is, is there’s an enzyme in the blood, an enzyme that *should* be in the blood, that’s not there. And once again, as an African-American, it’s an evolutionary process – it’s inherited, but it creates a natural preventivity [sic] against getting malaria. The evolution is similar to but not exactly like the evolution of the sickle cell that many African-Americans have. That’s really a natural preventivity [sic] from getting malaria. This deficiency that I have evolves the same way. You have no ill effects from it but I would not be able to contract malaria. This is where the irony comes in, because if you’re going into an endemic malaria area, according to Army regulations, you must take Primaquine or a quinine-based derivative to ward off the effects of malaria. I could not get malaria and taking the Primaquine is to interact with that enzyme that I don’t have in my blood, and therefore it makes me anemic. The irony is that I could have gone to Vietnam and not taken Primaquine, but the regulations state if you go into endemic malaria area, you must take Primaquine.

So I was pulled from Panama, sent back to the United States for several months. I tried to extend for one year to make Captain. I made Captain, or just about the time I was due to make Captain I came down on orders for the Republic of Korea and I ended up going to Republic of Korea and serving my overseas times in 1969.

From there, from Republic of Korea, I was discharged after four years and one month of being in the military, returned to Wisconsin to finish my degree, joined the 84<sup>th</sup> division in the Reserve. Stayed there until 1973, at which time I wanted to really concentrate – I was working full time and going to school full time and doing this [the Reserve] – so I ended up going back to school full time, I got out of the reserve, but while out of the Reserve [this was 1973], I continued on with the military educational requirements.

The military requires officers to go to school continuously, now it's the same thing for the enlisted. So I'd already done what's called the "basic course," in OCS. I had to complete the advanced course, which took a couple years, and in 1980 I went back into a Troop Program Unit [TPU] and this was just about the time I made Major. I made Major shortly after returning to a TPU, which was the 84<sup>th</sup> division. Continued on with the military education as far as a manager on Staff College, which was another two year course. I ended up becoming the Executive Officer of the Battalion, then I became a Battalion Commander, from Battalion Command I went over to Brigade, then I became Brigade Commander and from Brigade Command I became Assistant Division Commander for Support, and from the Asst. Division Command for Support I became the Division Commander for Operations. Along the way, after completing the Command and General Staff College, which takes a couple years, I was accepted to attend and did graduate from the Army War College.

So today I'm still in the military, I'm still the Assistant Division Commander for Operations, assigned to the 98<sup>th</sup> Division, located in Rochester, New York. And we are basically a division that handles initial entry training – those are the Drill Sergeants in Basic Training and engineers on Station Unit Training – all conducted while on annual training [AT] – all this training is conducted at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. So we're going full circle. But we also handle the school houses for all the combat support and all the combat service support MOS's in an eight-state region. We control the region of New York, New Jersey, and the six New England states.

Jim: Are you on active duty at this moment? Or semi-retired?

Bob: Active reserve is what the designation is. When you're on TPU, technically by law, it requires you to spend one weekend a month or sixteen hours a month plus a minimum of twelve days a summer. Now that's what's called your 48 drills. The problem with that notion is that this is defined and is minimum requirement still in the law, for reserve courses that goes back to a Cold War and a reserve force that was there to back up a large standing, active duty force. But we no longer have the active duty forces, you know we're down to ten divisions on active duty, and this is compared to 98 divisions that we had active during World War II. The road and mission of the reserve force has significantly changed in the last fifteen years.

Those who recall the composition of the force during Desert Shield and Desert Storm, ya know, many of the forces that supported that Active Component were reserve forces. That has only intensified in the time period since Desert Storm. Right now in Kosovo the peacekeeping force that is there is a National Guard force. Most of the rotations of the Combat Service Support Units, and the peacekeeping missions are reserve and National Guard forces. Many of the support functions that the active component needs to execute are no longer located on active duty. All of those type forces are in the reserve. Which means



the reserve forces has to be activated and deployed in order for the AC [Active Component] to accomplish its mission. Now what does this mean for the reserve force? It means the operational tempo of deployment has increased significantly. So that when we start thinking in notions and terms of 48 drills a year – it's not that any longer. It's something much, much greater, and the time demands are much, much greater than whatever was conceived during the Cold War. And this is going to necessitate – it's already started – a national debate on the policy that needs to be in place for the deployment of reservists and guardsmen. Because you can't use the same systems that you had in place for the guards and reserves fifteen years ago because it's a whole other ballgame.

Jim: The National Guard and the Reserve are still separate?

Bob: Yeah, the guard and the reserve are still separate. The National Guard – they have a three star [three star general] who heads the National Guard bureau – every individual state adjutant reports to the governor of that state. Therefore, the commander in chief of each state's National Guard is the governor, whereas the Reserve forces are federal forces and the commander in chief is the President.

Jim: So if they [the federal government] want a National Guard unit, they have to go through the state?

Bob: Either that or they have to federalize the troops. And that requires the signature of the president.

Jim: The feelings of some of the guys I've talked to who are regular army, said that the general feeling is that they look down on National Guard units, and thought that they were not well-trained. What's your opinion?

Bob: That was the feeling and that was true. The National Guard and the Reserve were treated like stepchildren and second cousins – and that had been there for quite some time. One of the reasons the Guard and Reserve force, which contained over a million men during the Vietnam era, were never mobilized, was because of the state of their training, and another part was because of the race politics of who made up those particular forces. But nowadays, and General Shinseki, who is now the Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff for the Army, has evolved down to no longer trying to make any distinctions in the force. We recall that under Joe Reimer, the former chief – he talked about the “total army,” which meant the Active Component, the National Guard and the Reserve. But anytime you say “total,” it means there are component parts that add up to it. The new chief, he's saying “*the army*” to remove any notion of separation. Now the reality is – and the AC, especially the senior leadership, fully recognize – they can execute virtually no missions without the Guard and the Reserve. And then, as I mentioned, a lot of the functions in the area of combat support and combat service support – those units are only located in the Guard and the Reserve. Therefore, when you try to say they're not as well-trained as the AC, they're the only ones there, and they're

the only ones doing it, and they are well-trained across the board – that's my feeling.

This is another thing I got to bring out – even on the combat side, usually when there are competitions, gunnery competitions, artillery – generally, quite a few times the Reserve and the Guard units win. Here's the thing, the teams are in place longer than those on AC. And so they work together. I guess what I'm saying to you now is, if you take an AC division, and you want to commit them to the war front right away, and you take a National Guard division – are they ready to be committed to the war front right away? That becomes debatable because it's a longer training period of time to be necessary for that National Guard unit. But when it comes to combat support and combat service support, those units are ready to go – in support of the war fight – right away. There's a whole new ballgame, a mentality, a state of readiness for the guard and reserve that we wouldn't have found fifteen to twenty years ago.

Jim: [Comments unintelligible on new military strategy] OK, let's go back. What did you do in Korea?

Bob: I ended up being the S1 for headquarter special troops – I was assistant S1 for awhile -- Basically headquarter special troops was a large umbrella organization that took care of all of the separate units that reported to 8<sup>th</sup> Army. So like the 55<sup>th</sup> aviation battalion, headquarters and headquarters company, the MI battalions, ya know, all of these battalions that didn't have a parent brigade reported to Special Troops, and I was, in essence, in charge of personnel assistance, in charge of personnel or that umbrella.

Jim: Like combat teams?

Bob: Not so much the combat elements but a lot of those units that supported the combat elements reported [to us]. Because we had the 7<sup>th</sup> division and we had the 2<sup>nd</sup> division – and they all reported to 8<sup>th</sup> Army, we have I Corps, and this unit was located in Yong San [in Seoul], and it was a major support and command also, that took care of all these other units that were in support of the war fight.

Jim: That's where you were stationed, Yong San? And then you're specific duty was the involved in the movement of these units as required?

Bob: You know, we would have higher headquarters all the personnel that I was in charge of – they were stationed in different parts of the country, and they had their mission, their role and we were their higher headquarters so in other words, assume that a battalion reported directly to 8<sup>th</sup> Army, a battalion reported to us as special troops and my boss reported to the –

Jim: But you would never see these people in the field?

- Bob: I didn't have to see them in the field except when I went out to visit them.
- Jim: And then you weren't in charge of their coming and going in their time in Korea?
- Bob: Oh yeah, the individuals coming in to those units would be processed by our headquarters.
- Jim: Did you have any problems with those soldiers coming in?
- Bob: In what respect?
- Jim: [unintelligible] murders and civilians? Is that a problem that you faced over there?
- Bob: We had to face many problems with crimes being committed, because Korea in those days, and still is, was a very dangerous place. The DMZ [Demilitarized Zone] was there, you know. It was functioning under troops. There was no peace treaty. The units that were on the DMZ – and Seoul is not that far from the DMZ – it was very serious business, especially with Vietnam, going on in the South. There wasn't a lot of crime, as it were, that was reported. The people of South Korea wanted us there. It hadn't been so long from the Korean War, during that period of time, that there was a lot of anti-American type stuff. While I was there there were several incidents of racial tension. That had more to do with what was happening back in the United States than what was happening there. It was the days of –
- Jim: We're talking late '60's, 1970's?
- Bob: Yes, that period of time.
- Jim: Disruptive period.
- Bob: Yeah, somewhat disruptive period. But as far as having to handle personnel actions, based on misbehavior, there were court martials for this. Nothing special. Like I said, the biggest thing going on at that particular time was a reflection of what was happening in civilian life and the sentiments towards the war in Vietnam at the time.
- Jim: This is foreign to me because I was there [Korea] so much earlier. I was there in the 1950's. Now the DMZ, I've never talked to anybody about that. Is there trouble along the DMZ?
- Bob: The Demilitarized Zone, there were always problems with infiltration and there was always problems with straying into the DMZ. While I was there were several flare-ups relative to the DMZ, with infiltrators coming around or through the DMZ.

Jim: What's the purpose?

Bob: Well the DMZ is a stretch of land along the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel that separates –

Jim: I understand that but what's the purpose of these infiltrators, what were they up to?

Bob: I don't know because every time they caught an infiltrator they killed him [laughs]. So they never had a chance to interrogate him. But probably the usual thing – to gather intel.

Jim: But there was no terrorism, or stealing or robbing –

Bob: To my knowledge there was none as far as to perpetrate terrorist acts, it was mainly to gather intel, that's my guess.

Jim: And the troops – how did they behave on that line? Did they dislike it a lot or was it just sort of foreign duty?

Bob: Most of the troops had [unintelligible]. They viewed their assignment and mission there very seriously. They were defending democracy. There wasn't a lot of complaining; morale was generally high among the Korean troops – those stationed in Korea. They worked well with the Korean units. So the young men and the leadership there took that mission very seriously and they performed well.

Jim: How about the ROK [Republic of Korea] soldiers? Were they pretty good?

Bob: At that time the ROK soldiers – I was talking about what the AC thought about the guardsmen [laughs] – they thought that the ROK soldiers were slightly less qualified and trained than the American soldiers. But I qualify that by saying that, as time went by, there were many good comments on the qualifications of the ROK soldiers. So, in other words, it may be just a function of your own basic prejudice that you think we're the best, but there were some fine comments about the quality –

Jim: But your regular GI, he had no animosity towards the ROK soldiers?

Bob: No. They got along pretty well.

Bob: There was also KATUSA. Grant [Korean?] Augmentation to United States Army. And they were units, they had units of KATUSA but they did a lot more of the translation and being able to communicate back and forth. Your average ROK soldier did not speak English. Your average ROK soldier – strictly Korean. And same thing for the American soldiers, they didn't go around trying to learn how to speak other languages.

- Jim: When I was there ROK soldiers were totally under-trained [??]. But that's not important.
- Bob: And they were pretty much like us. The ROK soldiers, they were out there doing their own job.
- Jim: How far was the North Korean borderline. 100 yards away?
- Bob: Yeah, something like that. You could look over and see it. I don't know exactly what the distance was.
- Jim: Never any attempt when you were there to make a run at the line?
- Bob: Not that I know of.
- Jim: And if they were going to send troops in there, how would we respond to that? What did we have available?
- Bob: Tanks, artillery, mortars, machine guns. We'd get two divisions up there.
- Jim: You've got everything ready to move. Landmines?
- Bob: Well we got landmines, defensive positions, alternative defensive positions, anything to stop a drive into the South. And you know, they had airstrike capabilities, parts of the interstate were built to be able to land planes coming from Japan in order to help stave off an attack. So you had two full divisions there, plus the South Korean Army.
- Jim: The North Koreans – how many did they have on the other side?
- Bob: I don't know how many divisions they had but they had quite a few.
- Jim: I'm sure they had a lot of people. But I was thinking about equipment.
- Bob: I can't tell you – they have a large standing army, they still do. But how much equipment they have and of what make – I'm not sure.
- Jim: [Unintelligible]
- Bob: Well I think they probably have Russian and Chinese equipment. Given the size of the army, could they have made a credible attack? Well they did in 1950. At that particular point in time [late 60's] they were considered dangerous, as they are today. They're still considered very, very dangerous. Along with some of the Middle Eastern countries. The areas that we look at for as flashpoints are North Korea, India and Pakistan, plus the Middle East countries.

- Jim: India and Pakistan would be one against the other.
- Bob: Yeah, right, they would be against each other, but who else would they pull into the fray?
- Jim: We'll learn more about that next month when the President goes over there. See what kind of trouble he can get into.
- Bob: [Laughs]
- Jim: Wish he'd stay home, I really do. Life in Korea was tolerable?
- Bob: Yeah, it was very tolerable. For me it wasn't that bad. As an officer I had accommodations; when I went to the field there was no problem, I was trained for that. Basically it was fine.
- Jim: You had an apartment in Seoul?
- Bob: No, I lived on-base in a BOQ [Bachelors Officers' Quarters].
- Jim: What kind of base? A division-type base?
- Bob: No, the only thing there was headquarters 8<sup>th</sup> Army. The commander of 8<sup>th</sup> Army wore three hats. A four star general, the three hats were: Commander 8<sup>th</sup> Army, Commander United Nations Command and Commander of All Forces in Korea. So he was commander of all the foreign armies and military personnel stationed in Korea. He was commander of 8<sup>th</sup> Army, that the second and seventh divisions were assigned to. And the United Nations Command, whatever that constitutes, he was commander of.
- Jim: How many foreign troops were there from other nations?
- Bob: I don't know but I know we had some Aussies there, Thai, we had Turks.
- Jim: GIs?
- Bob: Yeah.
- Jim: So you had more just a \_\_\_\_\_[??] of officers.
- Bob: Oh yeah. You got to understand that the United Nations Command – you had a lot of UN soldiers from different nations, serving there in Korea. It was quite international.
- Jim: But it wasn't that large. They didn't contribute much in one way or another, I'm sure.

Bob: Right, but like I said they were there.

Jim: So you didn't have any problems being there?

Bob: No, most of that – You got to remember, when I was there I was a captain. Most of the nations – they all had diplomatic relations with South Korea, so they all had their own embassies and so they worked a lot of that stuff at a level much higher than I was.

Jim: Dealing with the problem soldiers and getting them out of the service –

Bob: There are several ways you get people out of the military. You go through a court martial, in which case a summary or general court martial could recommend discharge or prison time, depending on the charge.

Jim: There are privileges in civilian life compared to the general court martial?

Bob: Not necessarily, it depends on what type of discharge you received. If you receive a discharge that's less than honorable, but not dishonorable, then if the VA adjudicates you as being eligible for benefits than you can still receive benefits. If you get a dishonorable discharge you lose all your benefits. Unless you get your discharge upgraded.

But the other way of getting rid of soldiers was through the administrative discharge. And that became a particular problem for many soldiers, especially for those who were minority or those of lower-education. Because that authority was always delegated to brigade commander. So you have a soldier in a unit and the unit company commander wants the soldier out for whatever reason, attitude problems etc. And what they can do is draft separation under the administrative procedures and it can be signed off on by the brigade commander.

Jim: No hearing?

Bob: Basically no hearing, but what you would do with the paperwork is you would call the individual in as commander. You'd talk to him, he'd be assigned to see a chaplain, be assigned to see psychiatric evaluation – those reports come back, basically saying you know, "personality disorder," [laughs], ya know, something like that. Then you tell the soldier, "OK, you sign this paper and you can be discharged right away, as far as your benefits –"

What most soldiers are told is that after a period of time they'll be eligible for benefits; that's not true. But generally the soldier will sign instead of requesting a court martial for whatever incident it may have been. So the individual will sign off on the administrative discharge and it goes to brigade; the brigade commander signs off on it and this person's out of the military.

The problem with that is now the individual finds out that the military lets him out with a less than honorable discharge. They're not eligible for benefits and then for them to go through the communication process with the VA to find out if they're going to be eligible for benefits – maybe yes, maybe no. They have to go through a separate process to try to get that discharge upgraded. All of this where the soldiers basically sign themselves out; there's not a benefit of a court martial transcript. At least that would be a record. The problem is many, many individuals, particularly minorities, end up with administrative discharges. And that has impacted their ability to receive benefits.

And then the government has done some really ironic things. While Carter was in office, it provided all the draft dodgers with amnesty, and allowed them all to come back home. Well that was great, that's part of the healing process and all, but on the other hand, those who did go into the service and ended up with less than an honorable discharge, there's no mass business – they have to fight each one of those cases on an individual basis.

Jim: That's not fair.

Bob: Right, and what kind of system does that make? Especially since at least these guys did go and serve. And there's a racial component to this too. The majority of the folks who ended up going to Canada were white. And a disproportionate number of those who received less-than-honorable discharges were minority. And those are Dept. of Defense figures.

Jim: Well, the racial tension has changed since you were in the service?

Bob: Uh, yeah, thanks to those who went before me and thanks to President Truman, it's a lot better than it was. You start thinking about the signing of the executive order in 1947 – it really wasn't that long ago.

Jim: That stopped the segregation?

Bob: Yes, that stopped the segregation in the units. And the last segregated unit was phased out in 1954. Today, what you find is there are more problems with gender than with race. Now, you'll hear the stories about the skinheads in Fort Bragg, North Carolina and the shooting of the Black –

Jim: [Interrupts] Those guys are bad news!

Bob: Yeah, and it is. But in general, when you're on a post, and within a unit, race is not that big of a deal anymore, relatively speaking [unintelligible word]. There's more discussion relative to gender in the military than race in the military. And that is to work through this whole issue of gender-based training, number one, but two the army and the other services are really struggling with the "do's and



- don'ts" and the ethics and mores of integrated units [gender integration]. It's a tough one.
- Jim: Do you have any experience with these problems?
- Bob: Oh yeah, one of the things my type of unit does – we have the drill sergeants and therefore we have the trainees. And fraternization is always a problem.
- Jim: How many women are in the army [??]
- Bob: Well in a training environment women are now required to train along with men. So you're talking about trainees. Some men and some women. You're talking about possible fraternizations among sergeants and female trainees. That's a definite "no-no."
- Jim: Well that's what we read about in the paper.
- Bob: That's what went on ---
- Jim: Some of those looked pretty bad.
- Bob: Because it's clearly undue influence. You have a trainee and then you have this position of power. While you have females living with, training with males. Part of what you're fighting is natural law [laughs]. The laws of nature.
- Jim: Just basically look at it – it doesn't make sense. I mean it's okay in an office perhaps, but not on the field! I just don't understand how anybody can think they're gonna put women in a foxhole and get away with it. Do you? I mean [unintelligible].
- Bob: No, no, the [unintelligible] it can be done, uh, but it's awfully difficult, and it's going to remain a difficult –
- Jim: You know, besides the fact that they're a different sex [??], they're sharing responsibility in a combat situation with a female. I'm not sure many, many guys are mature enough, not to either dislike that they're [women] half responsible or will bend over backwards and put themselves at extra risk, trying to protect them [women].
- Bob: That's one of the primary complaints is that there are different standards. And you're talking about a GI or a combat soldier, and this is the standard, either you meet the standard or you don't. And then you start talking about females, and you're saying "but for females, their standard is here." And that's the kind of debate that causes a lot of resentment among the males.

- Jim: It looks unsolvable. I guess maybe in 50 years there'll be a different attitude – but the way I grew up [laughs].
- Bob: Well of course it falls back once again to the American people. What is it the American people want? If the American people say, “No, we want a military that consists of only the best, and those that can do this,” then you let your politicians know and that’s what you get. If you say, “No, we gotta have equality across the board, females have to have equal rights, females should be allowed to do this, but we want to have a military at this level of efficiency and can perform to this level,” – it’s what the American people, through their Congressional representatives have ultimately will have to make up their mind and decided.
- Jim: Now we have the other problem I want you to mention and discuss – the military services are losing people because they can’t pay enough to stay in the service. Their wives don’t want their husbands overseas and they don’t want to be away from their wives.
- Bob: Once again that comes back to the American people. If you want to remain the last remaining super power, if we want to remain the last remaining super power, if we want to deal with all these peacekeeping missions, then we have to do one of two things. Either we’ve got to pay for it or we got to change our notion about taking on those missions. You can’t keep stretching those out there and prescribe the type of missions the military should take on. Or you’re just going to have to reduce what it is you want the military doing. And this is a key problem too. Because the military is designed to do one thing. Fight and win America’s wars. Now, on these other things – peacekeeping, peace making, operations other than war, drug interventions – all these things now, that is not in the base mission of the military. And if you want us to do those kinds of things, then we need to train specifically, train units specifically, to do those kind of things.
- Jim: Will you solve that by raising the pay, getting more people?
- Bob: Raising the pay? Yeah, well they can raise the pay and they’d attract a lot more people, but who’s going to pay for it?
- Jim: Right. We’ve got no alternatives here. We’ve got to have a decent standing army and navy –
- Bob: Yeah, but it’s the sizing of that army and that navy that becomes key. You can attract more young people by raising the pay, you can do that, but then at what level? How high [laughs] do you have to go? I don’t know the answer to that. How high you would have to go.
- Jim: [Unintelligible comment]

Bob: Well, I was reading the Army Times last week and once again it had a comparison of pay of those comparable positions in the military and outside of the military and by and large, many of those that are paid at the lower ranks, middle-enlisted ranks are comparable to they'd get outside [of the military], and the military is in many cases a little bit higher. But that's not good enough – you probably have to have a much larger margin.

Jim: Just being equal is not good enough.

Bob: But the guy who is really underpaid is General Shinseki. He's making \$143,000, whereas his comparable pay on the outside would be \$1.3 million. [Laughs] Not even close. But he's not doing it for the pay, you know –

Jim: Well the level of responsibility is enormous. For this guy who's making a pittance compared to the guys running General Motors.

OK, now there's one other thing – What do you think about going back to a somewhat regular draft? I would like that.

Bob: I basically believe in a National Service Act. I don't think everybody should serve in the military, but I do think everybody should serve doing something.

Jim: That's what I think.

Bob: I think to live in the United States is a privilege and everyone should contribute to the freedoms that we all enjoy.

Jim: And they'd appreciate them more.

Bob: Right, and the only way you can do that is through some kind of National Service Act. I guess I'm not against anybody else but I do believe that a lot of folks who –

**[Interview ends abruptly]**