

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
ROBERT GRAVES
Machine Gunner, Army, Korean War
2002

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Graves, Robert F. (b. 1929). Oral History Interview, 2002.

Approximate length: 30 min.

Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.

Abstract:

In this oral history interview, Robert Graves, a native of Janesville, Wisconsin discusses his Korean War service with, primarily, the US Army's 1st Cavalry Division, 5th Cavalry Regiment.

With an older brother in service, and a girlfriend college-bound, Graves volunteered in 1946. Assigned to the transportation corps in Yokohama, Japan, his two years was spent in driving the base commander and his wife. He remembers the assist his financial fortunes received aboard ship heading home for the States. Graves states that in 1950, employed back in Wisconsin at Allied Van Lines, a staff car pulled up in his driveway and its occupant invited him to reenlist in the Army. With the knowledge that the 1st Cavalry Division was stationed at Yokosuka, and desiring a posting in Japan, Graves joined the 5th Cavalry Regiment, with specialty in heavy weapons, as a machine gunner. War on the Korean Peninsula broke out soon after his arrival in Japan, and his was the second division to go to Korea. Graves admits that he hasn't looked at a map of Korea since the war, but places his first footsteps near Seoul at Yong Dong Po. He assesses the ready state of his regiment, and reflects as being overconfident the initial approach of the Americans toward the North Koreans. Lack of organization meant that the GI was "going through your own minefields." Graves sustained shrapnel wounds twice in Korea, a month apart, in the late summer of 1950; the latter wounding meriting a return to the US. After convalescent leave he was sent to Kentucky to train recruits and to Alabama to train National Guardsmen. Requesting to be returned to Japan he was sent to CBR School to be trained in chemical, biological, and radiological warfare. Graves tells of his schooling being aborted because of the need for more fighting men in Korea. His last tour in Korea lasted for one year, during which, as he recounts, he bore witness to the vagaries of war.

Biographical Sketch:

Graves (b. 1929) served in the US Army, 1st Cavalry Division, 5th Cavalry Regiment during the Korean War.

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 2002.

Transcribed by Samuel Swanson, and Steve Schecher, 2012.

Abstract by Jeff Javid, 2016.

Interview Transcript:

McIntosh: Okay, talking to Robert Graves. Where were you born, sir?

Graves: Janesville [WI].

McIntosh: When was that?

Graves: 1929, 1st of January, 1929.

McIntosh: Okay. And when did you enter military service?

Graves: Ah, I went in in '46. 1946.

McIntosh: In the Army?

Graves: Yep.

McIntosh: And you weren't drafted?

Graves: No, I enlisted.

McIntosh: Enlisted.

Graves: Yeah.

McIntosh: And how did that happen? You couldn't get a job or—

Graves: Well, I had an older brother in the service, and I guess I kinda wanted to emulate him maybe, you know. And, ah, then I was going with a girl in high school, and she was gonna go to college, and I said, "Well fine, I'll go in the service, and in three years when I come out you'll be done with college, and then we'll talk about things."

McIntosh: That was confidence. [Graves laughs] Boy, most girls I know would say, "Well so long, pal."

Graves: Yeah, well, no, it was all right with her, but it ended up different, you know.

McIntosh: Always does.

Graves: Yeah, and I didn't worry too much about it. So I went in in 1946, went to Japan. I was stationed in Korea, I mean in Yokohama

[Japan] for a little over two years, came back, and got out. And was lookin' for work, and this thing, and one day this staff car drives in the driveway and said, "We'd like to have you back in the service." That was in 1950. So I said, "Well, why not?"

McIntosh: What did you do in the service in '46?

Graves: I was with the Transportation Corps in Yokohama. It was, uh—

McIntosh: You just drove vehicles there of some kind?

Graves: Yeah, yeah.

McIntosh: How did you enjoy living in Japan?

Graves: I liked it, yeah, I liked Japan. In fact when I reenlisted, I reenlisted for Japan. In fact I reenlisted for the 1st Cavalry because I knew where they were stationed.

McIntosh: Were you in the 1st Cavalry there in Japan?

Graves: When I went to Korea I was in the 1st Cav, yeah.

McIntosh: Oh, but when you were in Japan?

Graves: I was, yeah, I was in the 1st Cav in Japan, on my second enlistment.

McIntosh: Oh I see, in 1950 you re-upped.

Graves: 1950, I reenlisted.

McIntosh: For two, three years?

Graves: Three. And I went to Japan and they put me with the 1st Cav, 5th Regiment.

McIntosh: In Japan originally, what was your outfit?

Graves: 5th Cav.

McIntosh: Oh, 5th Cav.

Graves: Yep. In 1950.

McIntosh: Your MOS [Military Occupation Specialty] was what?

Graves: 1812, Heavy Weapons.

McIntosh: What exactly did you do?

Graves: I was a machine gunner.

McIntosh: But in Japan in 1946 and '50 you didn't do that?

Graves: No, I was in the Transportation Corps. We were stationed right close to the docks in, uh, Yokohama, and we were what you call "ship supply." We had everything from anchors to what have ya, and uh—

McIntosh: That's pretty easy duty.

Graves: Yes, it was. It was good duty, and then I got lucky and was assigned to the commanding colonel of our TC [Transportation Corps] Depot, and all I had to do was drive him and his wife around.

McIntosh: That's pretty nice.

Graves: Yeah [McIntosh laughs].

McIntosh: Spend all your money in Japan, buying things to send home?

Graves: Not really, not really.

McIntosh: Oh, you saved money? [Graves laughs] You're the only person I ever talked to who was stationed in Japan that wasn't saving money by spending it.

Graves: Well I, uh, I knew a little Japanese girl that was a secretary in our department, and she told me, she said "Don't you go out and spend American money on stuff." She said, "If you want it, let me know, and I'll go get it." And she could buy it a whole lot cheaper than I could, you know. And I used to like to play a little poker, and I'd send money orders back home to myself.

McIntosh: Oh my.

Graves: Yeah.

McIntosh: You must be a good poker player [Graves laughs].

Graves: Some months [both laugh]. And, uh, some months not. Course when I got on the ship, when I came back from Japan the first time, I got on the ship and I had about \$300 because I bought a personal jeep over there, and I sold it to a friend of mine, and, uh, he gave me \$200, and then he was gonna send me the other hundred when I got home, and I thought “Well, that’s the last I’ll see of that.” But he did, he sent me a hundred. But I got on the ship with \$300 and went broke practically and started playing penny ante poker, and then I got a little money, and I was betting side bets on the dice games, and then I built it up a little bit. When I walked off the ship I had \$3,000.

McIntosh: You were better with the dice than the cards?

Graves: No, no, I made money bettin’ on the side with the dice.

McIntosh: Oh, I see.

Graves: But I never cared to shoot craps, I like to play poker. But then you could get into no stakes poker games, you know.

McIntosh: You could gain or lose quite a bit.

Graves: Yes, when I walked off the ship, like I said, I had \$3,200.

McIntosh: My, my, my, that’s great success.

Graves: That was a nice little nest egg.

McIntosh: Your buddies hated you by that time.

Graves: Ah, yes, but I didn’t much care both laugh].

McIntosh: So what [both laugh]!

Graves: It’s mine now! [laughs].

McIntosh: Right, exactly. We can discuss that any time you want [laughs].

Graves: And then, uh, like I said, then I came home and I got out in September, and I went to work for Allied Van Lines movin’ furniture, and that was not exactly what I planned on, and I, oh I dunno, I was gonna go to school, get some more education, and then, I dunno just—in February then a staff car drove in the driveway and said, “We would like to have you back in the service,” and I said, “Well, is there any chance of getting’ to

Japan?” And they said, “Yeah,” and I said, “How about if I go into 1st Cav because I know where we were stationed.”

McIntosh: You know all about Japan by then.

Graves: Yeah, and where they were stationed, you know, between Tokyo and Yokohama. And, of course I had a little friend in Yokohama so I thought, “Well”—

McIntosh: Sure, your mama-san on the beach.

Graves: Yeah.

McIntosh: Yeah.

Graves: So I went with the 5th Cav. We were stationed in Yokosuka, right outside of Yokosuka, the Navy base—

McIntosh: Yes, I know. I spent a lot of time in Yokosuka.

Graves: Did ya?

McIntosh: Yeah, I was on the ship [as a surgeon on the hospital ship *USS Haven*].

Graves: Well, we went up on Mount Fuji on maneuvers. And then we come back off and—

McIntosh: Was the same girl there?

Graves: Yes, but she had a—

McIntosh: Another friend.

Graves: Another friend, yeah, that kinda of outranked me so I didn’t—

McIntosh: Oh, well, you found another one.

Graves: Yeah, they’re easy to find over there. So then we come off, from talking about Yokosuka, we come off of Mount Fuji, and we went into—a bunch of us went into Yokosuka that night. And we got in a big fight with the Marines.

McIntosh: Wonderful.

Graves: Naturally. The next day the whole battalion was on report and restricted to the base. Not long after that we went in to Korea.

McIntosh: And then the war started?

Graves: Yeah.

McIntosh: How long after the war began did they move you over to Korea?

Graves: Well, I think we—

McIntosh: A week?

Graves: I think we were the second division to go in there. I think the 24th went in—

McIntosh: Pret near [??] right away.

Graves: And then I think the 1st Cav went in.

McIntosh: I forgot to ask you. Where were you born?

Graves: No, no, you didn't. I said Janesville, Wisconsin.

McIntosh: Oh, that's right. I did [Graves laughs]. I got that. I was looking at the wrong line. This is not a sheet I usually use. Okay. So, your job then in Korea was heavy weapons.

Graves: Yep. I was a machine gunner, and we went into Korea.

McIntosh: You landed at Pusan, and where did they drive you?

Graves: Ah, I don't know. But I can remember like Yong Dong Po.

McIntosh: That's up near Seoul. I went through there.

Graves: The fact, I don't even know where—I haven't even looked at a Korean map since I've been home. I wouldn't know where we were situated.

McIntosh: It's not important [Graves laughs]. It's not important.

Graves: Yeah [laughs].

McIntosh: What kind of an outfit was it? Was it a small outfit or a large?

Graves: The 5th Cav?

McIntosh: Yeah.

Graves: Well, it was a—

McIntosh: Is that a regimental size?

Graves: Yes, it was a—yeah, 5th—

McIntosh: A regiment's about 600 men?

Graves: I suppose.

McIntosh: Yeah. Okay.

Graves: And of course we were small. Heavy Weapons is smaller than the Rifle Company.

McIntosh: Yes. I understand.

Graves: But we were support for a rifle company.

McIntosh: Did your company only manage the machine guns, or did you also have mortars, too?

Graves: No, we had mortars and 75 recoillesses, too.

McIntosh: Mounted on jeeps?

Graves: No, hand carried.

McIntosh: Hand carried?

Graves: Yep. In fact [laughs], one recoilless rifle that I saw over in Korea was stamped right on the top, "For practice use only." [Graves laughs] When we first went in to Korea we didn't have much.

McIntosh: Right.

Graves: We didn't have field jackets. We didn't have anything.

McIntosh: Everybody rushed over there—

Graves: Well, I think what they thought was, as soon as the Americans get over there the Koreans were going to back up.

McIntosh: And we'll quit.

Graves: Are gonna back up.

McIntosh: Yeah, sure. So you were short of everything right off the bat?

Graves: We were. Yeah we were actually short of everything right off the bat.

McIntosh: You didn't stay in Pusan, though. They moved you up the line fairly quickly?

Graves: Yes, they did. And one night, I dunno, we walked all night long. Huh! And the next morning we were in combat, I guess.

McIntosh: Right.

Graves: We didn't really see a whole lot of Chinese at that time, not to begin with until we got on line—we must have been on line, what, a couple weeks. And then we got hit a couple times.

McIntosh: Mostly North Koreans early in the war.

Graves: They were North Koreans, yep.

McIntosh: Right. Did they move you back? Push you back or—

Graves: Oh, well, they didn't—we got orders to retreat, yeah.

McIntosh: Okay [Bob laughs].

Graves: We wanted to stay up there, but that wasn't the way the war was planned.

McIntosh: I understand. Was everything kind of hectic then? I mean confused—

Graves: It was helter skelter.

McIntosh: Nobody knew what the hell was going on, yeah.

Graves: Yeah, it was. Nobody knew—

McIntosh: That's what others have said.

Graves: Nobody knew—nobody knew where they were.

McIntosh: Nothin' organized.

Graves: You'd be here one day, and the next day you'd be somewhere else. You'd be going through your own minefields.

McIntosh: Jeezus.

Graves: I remember one time we went through our own minefields with a heavy weapons carrier and blew the front wheel off of that.

McIntosh: Wonderful.

Graves: Yeah, and the guy hollered that, "Hey, you're in the minefield." Well, you step off lightly [laughs] when you come out, you know. We had plenty of food. We always had food.

McIntosh: The weather was still warm. It hadn't turned cold then?

Graves: No. This was in July and August.

McIntosh: Right.

Graves: And I got hit—the first time I got hit, I think it was the 15th of July.

McIntosh: From a mortar attack?

Graves: A mortar round, yeah.

McIntosh: Shrapnel, where'd it hit ya?

Graves: Uh, in the head. I got a piece embedded in my skull, and it nicked the bottom of my ear, went in. And I had a piece in my back, and they sent me back to Japan to a hospital.

McIntosh: All the way back?

Graves: Yep.

McIntosh: For that, I'm surprised. Where'd they operate on you?

Graves: Ah, they didn't. They didn't.

McIntosh: Oh, they didn't take that metal out?

Graves: They didn't take it out, no. I was back there about two weeks, and they sent me back to the 1st Cav. And on— let's see—

McIntosh: Now, that was before the 5th Cav?

Graves: Well, that's the 5th Cav. It's the 1st Cav Division, 5th Cav Regiment.

McIntosh: 5th Cav Regiment. Okay.

Graves: Yeah. Let's see here. Shrapnel, oh, that was the right arm. Shell fragment, head and chest. 15th August, 1950. And I went back to Japan, and I came back. And on the 16th—

McIntosh: What'd they do for ya in Japan? Anything?

Graves: Just bandaged it up and give you penicillin every four hours. I remember one night, this Japanese nurse come in. There was, I think, about six of us in the room. And of course we kept the nurses well supplied in candy and all that stuff, you know. We had one black guy there that used to put bottle caps between his toes and tap dance for us. We had a nice little room there. We all got along good. Then I went back to Korea. And then again on the 16th of September I got hit again.

McIntosh: Mortar shells?

Graves: Mortar shells again. And that time I got a piece in the right arm. And they took me back and sent me back to the States.

McIntosh: You didn't even stop in Japan?

Graves: Nope.

McIntosh: Did they operate on you at a MASH [Mobile Army Surgical Hospital] unit?

Graves: Well, they bandaged me up in a MASH unit.

McIntosh: Right. But they didn't try to take the metal out?

Graves: Nope. When I got back to the States, they said, "We'll get you the closest hospital to home." And I live in Wisconsin, and I ended up in a Navy hospital in Jacksonville, Florida [both laugh].

McIntosh: Well it's nice to know the service hasn't changed.

Graves: No, it hasn't changed a bit. [McIntosh laughs] And I woke up the next morning when the doctor come through, and I said, "You know, Doc," I said, "I think that there is one bed and one hospital somewhere between Jacksonville, Florida and Madison, Wisconsin [both laugh]."

McIntosh: There has to be.

Graves: Yeah. I said, "There's gotta be one bed." And then he said, "Well, we treat your kind of wounds down here." And I said, "Well why didn't they tell us that in California when we landed?" We landed in [McIntosh laughs] Okinawa. They changed our bandages. Then we landed in—

McIntosh: Guam?

Graves: No, that Air Force Base in Honolulu. And they changed our—

McIntosh: Wheeler Field.

Graves: Huh?

McIntosh: Wheeler Field?

Graves: Yeah, Wheeler Field. They changed our bandages again. And then they gave us each \$200 so we would have money when we hit the States. And then we flew into California. From there into—

McIntosh: To Florida.

Graves: Florida. And they operated on my back, and they took that piece of metal out of my—

McIntosh: Shoulder.

Graves: No, out of my back.

McIntosh: Oh. In Florida?

Graves: In Florida, yeah, because they were afraid it would puncture a lung.

McIntosh: Yeah.

Graves: That's what their premise was there. But I still have shrapnel in my right arm, and I still have shrapnel in my head. Well, in my right arm it went right in through the muscle, and you can see where it went in there. And they said it would probably cause more damage if they went in after it than to leave it. So they just left it there.

McIntosh: So they finally sent you home?

Graves: Well, they sent me back to the States, yeah.

McIntosh: Well, I mean from Florida.

Graves: Yeah, give me a thirty day convalescent leave, and then I went to Camp Breckinridge, Kentucky to train recruits. That was the 101st Airborne. After about a year there I put in for a transfer to Camp McCoy, Wisconsin. And they sent me to Camp Rucker, Alabama, to train National Guards out of Minnesota [both laugh]. Like you said, "The Army never changes." I'm Regular Army. I didn't want any part of National Guard, you know what I mean. The company commander's the first sergeant's uncle. So, I don't know what made me do it, but I was walking around the post looking for the PX [Post Exchange].

McIntosh: In Alabama.

Graves: Yeah. And I come past a personnel office. Before that, I asked the company commander, I said, "How long do I have to stay here before I put in for a transfer?" He said, "Six months."

McIntosh: Jeezus. But they had no duty for ya?

Graves: Oh yeah.

McIntosh: Was this just training recruits or?

Graves: Well it was trainin' National Guards out of Minnesota. But I hadn't been assigned yet, you know. Well, I'd been assigned to the company. The old man said, "Take your duffle bag and put it up in the squad room." I said, "When do I fall out for duty?" He said, "0600 [6:00 AM] tomorrow morning." I said, "Fine." But I took this little walk around the post, and I come by personnel. I don't know what made me walk into personnel, but here was my old first sergeant from the 101st Airborne [McIntosh laughs] that had made warrant officer. He was from Minnesota.

McIntosh: I see.

Graves: And Nelson said, “What the hell are you doing here?” Mr. Nelson, then warrant officer. And I said, “I’m trying to get out of this chickenshit outfit,” I said “If you got-- [both laugh].” Excuse me. I didn’t—

Woman:
[Unknown] I’m sorry [Bob laughs]. Didn’t mean to interrupt anything.

McIntosh: She won’t bother—

Woman:
[Unknown] You’ll cut us out, right?

Graves: And I said, “Do you have anything leaving anywhere out of Camp Rucker, Alabama?” “Well,” he said, “I got a levy [group of drafted troops] leaving for Japan.” He said, “I don’t know if you want to go back there.” And I said, “Well, I’ll go back to Japan.

McIntosh: A third time?

Graves: Yeah, why not? Japan is fine [Graves laughs] And I got into Japan. At that time, oh, they reassigned me. At that time the 1st Cav had been pulled out of Korea, and it was stationed in Hokkaido. And they put me back in the 1st Cav, 5th Regiment. And I was talkin’ to the company clerk when I got assigned to 1st Cav, and I said, “You know I was with this outfit before.” I said, “We were on Mount Fuji, came off of there, and went into Korea.” And he said, “We got some pictures guys taking on Mount Fuji.” And he said, “When were you up there?” And I gave him the year, you know, and he drug it out of their file somewhere. And I said, “There it is.” “By God,” he said, “You were, weren’t you?” Ah, we were playin’ soldier over there. Then they sent me to down to the southern part of Japan to CBR [Chemical, Biological, and Radiological] School, Chemical, Biological, and Radiological warfare. Because they had sent two or three guys down before me. I think it was a two month course. No, it was a one month course. But after the end of the first two weeks, you took a test, and if you didn’t past the test they sent you back to your company. So the old man asked me if I’d go down there, and I said, “Yeah, why not?” So I went down there, and I come out with a eighty-seven or somethin’ average. One of my duties would be to give an orientation to the troops on Saturday morning, you know, ‘cause that was our orientation day. At noon we got off for the rest of the weekend, and I never made it because a couple days later somebody came through the barracks, or Quonset huts we had up there, and said the 31st Division had just

got the hell kicked out of 'em and they wanted volunteers to go to 31st Division.

McIntosh: Where were they?

Graves: Korea.

McIntosh: I know, but where?

Graves: Don't ask me. Hell, I [??]—

McIntosh: All right.S

Graves: [laughs] And I went back with the 31st Division.

McIntosh: That's the second time you were in Korea.

Graves: Yup.

McIntosh: That was what year? '51?

Graves: That was '52.

McIntosh: '52.

Graves: Yeah.

McIntosh: With the what—

Graves: 31st Infantry.

McIntosh: 31st.

Graves: Yup. And they assigned me to a line outfit.

McIntosh: As a rifleman?

Graves: Yeah, at first. No—they temporarily—platoon sergeant, you know.

McIntosh: Platoon sergeant, yeah, but in the rifle company.

Graves: Yeah, Rifle Company. And I told 'em, I said, "I don't know a hell of a lot about a rifle company." "Well, he said, "It doesn't make much difference. You were over here before. You know the terrain. You know what's happening." So I said, "Fine." But I said, "I would like to transfer into a heavy weapons company." So they

moved us on line. They were in reserve at that time, and they moved us on line a couple days later. I was with this line outfit, and things were pretty quiet, and by God, they sent me back to G Company, Heavy Weapons again. We got hit a couple nights later, and the company that I was with just about got wiped out as a rifle—

McIntosh: The one you just left?

Graves: Yeah.

McIntosh: Just in time, boy.

Graves: Yeah. Well, we knew because we had a lot of action with the machine guns that night, too. So the next day, after that, the company commander of the rifle platoon came over to G Company and asked me if I would go to graves registration office with him to see if I could identify any of these guys out of the rifle company that I was with. And I said, “Well, I really wasn’t with them that long.” He said, “Well, but you might know somebody.” So him and I went up to the graves registration office, and they were laid out in canvas bags. I looked at a lot of ‘em, but I didn’t—I knew some of them by sight but not by name, you know, and went back to my own outfit.

McIntosh: And how long were you in Korea then?

Graves: I was over there for a year that time.

McIntosh: No more trouble getting shot at again?

Graves: Yes. Oh, yeah, a few—one time they pulled us off the front line, and for about two weeks all we did was run up and down this hill. Then the battalion commander brought out this big sand table, and he said, “We’re going to go up this hill and take a prisoner.”

McIntosh: We are.

Graves: Yeah, we are, yeah, mm-hm [McIntosh laughs]. He said, “We’re going to have artillery here and were going to have this in here, here, here.” He said, “You’re going to leave the MLR [Main Line of Resistance] at 0600 [6:00 A.M.] tomorrow morning.” He said, “We’ll go across this valley in APC carriers, Armored Personnel Carriers, and hit the base of this hill and go up and get a prisoner and come back off.” I said, “I beg your pardon, sir [laughs], you make it sound awful easy. You know, these people are going to be

firing at us.” “Oh no,” he said, “we’re going to have so much firepower on this hill that it’ll take an awful brave Chink to raise his head to see that you’re comin’.”

McIntosh: And they got a million [McIntosh laughs]

Graves: I said, “But we’re coming across this valley in APC carriers, and they’re not like a 1950 Dodge”, I said, “runnin’ down the highway.” I said, “They’re a little noisy.” [Graves laughs] “Well, yes, but with all this firepower that we got on this hill—And it ended up—we started out with, I think it was, thirty eight men, and thirteen of us come back.

[End of Interview]