

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

WILLIAM CHARLES OAKES

Translator and Intelligence Annalist, US Army, Vietnam War and Cold War

2015

OH
2041

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2041**

Oakes, William Charles (b.1952). Oral History Interview, 2015.

Approximate length: 1 hour 10 minutes

Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.

Abstract:

In this oral history interview, Wisconsin born and current resident William ‘Bill’ Oakes, recounts his experiences serving as a Vietnamese and Russian translator, radio broadcast interceptor, and intelligence analyst in the US Army from 1977 to 1984. Oakes begins by describing his decision to enlist in the Army, his basic training at Fort Leonard Wood (Missouri), and his selection to attend the Defense Language Institute for intensive Vietnamese language training. Oakes covers his posting in Thailand where he learned the Laotian language.

He then details his two year break from the military, his subsequent reenlistment, and training as a Russian linguist. Oakes recalls his three year deployment in West Germany as part of the 415th Army Security Agency Unit and describes his experiences as a radio broadcast interceptor during the annual Exercise Reforger field maneuvers. Oakes then discusses his tenure as a Russian SSM analysis for the NSA at Fort Meade (Maryland) and his post-discharge occupation contracting with the CIA and Department of Defense. He also shares his views on VA healthcare, the public reaction to military service during the Vietnam Era, and the impact the North Vietnamese psychology had on the conflict. Lastly, Oakes ends by discussing the importance of recognizing service members who did not serve in active combat roles.

Biographical Sketch:

Oakes (b. 1952) served as a Vietnamese translator and Laotian linguist stationed in Thailand and later as a Russian linguist in West Germany with the 415th Army Security Agency Unit. Oakes ended his career as a Russian SSM analyst for the NSA and was discharged in 1984.

Archivists’ Note:

Transcriptions are a reflection of the original oral history recording. Due to human and machine fallibility transcripts often contain small errors. Transcripts may not have been transcribed from the original recording medium. It is strongly suggested that researchers engage with the oral history recording as well as the transcript.

Interviewed by Natalie Isensee, 2015.

Transcribed by Audio Transcription Center, 2017.

Reviewed by Tristan Krause, 2017.

Abstract written by Tristan Krause, 2017.

Interview Transcript:

[Beginning of OH2041.Oakes]

Isensee: Today is November 25, 2015. This is an interview with William Charles Oakes, who served with the United States Army from 1977 to 1984. This interview is being conducted at [REDACTED]. The interviewer is Natalie Marie Isensee, and this interview is being recorded for the Wisconsin Veteran's Museum Oral History Program. Bill, welcome.

Oakes: Hi. Thank you.

Isensee: Can you start by telling me where and when you were born?

Oakes: I was born in Wisconsin, 1952 in a little town, Boscobel, over in the west part of the state. But my family, I have no recollection of that. My family moved to Rockford area, Rockford, Illinois area. I was raised there north of Rockford, but moved back to Wisconsin, hmm, thirteen years ago now, I guess. Always thought of Wisconsin as the place for vacations, and it was always pleasant memories up here. Lots of family here and things like that. So as I got closer and closer to retirement, I thought we'd want to settle down in Wisconsin. We gave it a try. We're going to go back to Colorado. [Laughter] It's a little warmer, even in the winter.

Isensee: Very good.

Oakes: That's a few years out yet.

Isensee: And can you tell me a little bit about your family? Any siblings?

Oakes: I have three younger sisters. They all live down South, they're smarter than I am, so two of them in Alabama and one in Arkansas. My parents have passed over the last five, six years. So it's just us.

Isensee: What made you interested in joining the military?

Oakes: I was not, originally. This was back during 1970, 1971. So when I turned eighteen, the volunteer Army was underway, and everyone got a lottery number. And my number was ninety-eight. And the prior year, they had gone well into the hundreds. So I figured I was going to get drafted. So I went down to my local recruiter and said, "If I don't do anything and I get drafted, where will I end up? And what other options do you have for me?" He offered me at that time, he said, "You could enlist, and you could do a two-year enlistment. If you do that, we can maybe guarantee you won't be an Eleven Bravo infantryman." I said, "Well, okay, let me see about doing that."

On a side note, or a tangent, to that, I was trying to get married, and it was hard finding work that could support me and my wife, a new wife, and all of that. And in the military, this was volunteer Army days. So pay raises were coming through, they were beginning to pay the soldiers a lot better back then. So if I could stay out of Vietnam, I didn't figure the Army would be all that bad. It's just that I didn't want to necessarily go to Vietnam. So I did that. I went to the reception station, and they give you all the battery of tests and all. I scored very high on their language aptitude, so I got called in one night after dark to another sergeant's office, and he says, "We'd like to offer you"—first of all, I'm getting ahead of my story—"You scored pretty high on the intelligence stuff," or whatever. "We'd like to offer you a position in the Army Security Agency. And you won't be in Eleven Bravo, you'll be something else in the intelligence area. But you'd have to enlist for three years." Quick call to my mom, she's like, "Yep, that's a good idea."

So signed that paperwork in a few days, I think. Then they called me in again during basic training and said, "Your test scores in language skills were so high, we'd like to see if you wouldn't be interested in becoming a translator." Language translator. Well, I was always interested in languages. I'd taken Latin in high school and enjoyed that. So I said, "Sure. But what languages can I get?" He says, "I guarantee you—you get to pick five, and I guarantee you, you will get one of the five you pick." So I picked German, Spanish, Farsi, Arabic, whatever, you know. Anything but—anything having to do with the Middle East—the Far East. Of course, so about a week before I get out of basic training, I get my orders where I'm going, and it's for North Vietnamese language training.

Isensee: Not one of your top five.

Oakes: It was too late for that, but it all worked out very nice. So I got in the military, started to get married. Thought it might be a two-year thing, and it just expanded into four years. But that first tour ended up being only two years, nine months because the war was winding down, and they didn't really need as many linguists, as many dedicated soldiers to the Vietnam conflict after that.

[00:05:09]

Isensee: Can you tell me about your basic training?

Oakes: I did basic training at Fort Leonard Wood.

Isensee: In Missouri?

Oakes: In Missouri. And it was a eye-opening experience. During high school, I had been diagnosed by a doctor with knee problems, so I never had gym in high school. So I was not the most physically fit guy. I had worked for a bit as a carpenter's apprentice the summer before I joined up, so I had gotten a little bit in shape

doing that. But it was a struggle for me to get into shape, as I just was not physically. Then I ran into the knee problem. The knee problems were real. I was not enough to be 4F, when I didn't want to be 4F. So I wanted to enlist. So I lost quite a few days during basic training, where they said, "You just have to go." My knees were so swollen, they said, "You got to take a day off."

So I missed the M60 range day, and missed some of the cool stuff. I didn't get to ever shoot the grenade launchers and things like that. I missed all the fun stuff. I made all the PT tests. I made all the other stuff, of course. But after that, since I wasn't a real soldier, I was a desk jockey; I was going to be sitting behind a desk for the most part. The physical aspects were only every, what, six months or whatever, and you had to take a PT test. So that was all.

Isensee: Was it—you were there during the summer or during the winter?

Oakes: I went there in October and finished up just before Christmas. So it was—it started out nice, crisp, clear, and ended up cold and wet and muddy.

Isensee: Cold and snowing?

Oakes: Yeah. But it was Army basic, and it was VOLAR basic. So we had a ten-minute break every hour. There was all this new stuff they were doing, it was crazy. They couldn't work us really long—even in basic training; they couldn't work us really long hours during the day without breaks, and stuff like that. So it was really easy basic compared to what—I'm sure what they do today, it's sort of what the Marine Corps did, always did. But it was tough for me. We had a lot of guys that had trouble with it even then. But—

Isensee: And did you go to your job training school, linguist school, right after that?

Oakes: Right. I left there, went home for Christmas, January got my orders, I go to report to Monterey, California, where the Defense Language Institute was. It was awesome. Got to ride in a 747, I'd never been on a plane before. I got to ride a 747 in California. I'm in uniform, so they put you in First Class. It's like, wow, I like being in the Army, right? This is nice. That school was interesting. It was total immersion training. We had Vietnamese native instructors. It was total immersion, so it was six hours a day in class, and then we had homework, obviously. It was the dialog-based instruction, so every day you had to memorize both sides of a conversation and be able to play act with somebody else in the class. You know, you be him this time, and then you be here and swap. So in forty-seven weeks of that, we were fluent. I was actually surprised and impressed and quite proud, actually, that in forty-seven weeks of school, we went up to Treasure Island in San Francisco, sat down with some South Vietnamese sailors and had lunch with them.

Isensee: And you could have a conversation.

Oakes: We spoke Vietnamese. We didn't speak English. We just spoke Vietnamese with them all afternoon. And we all—I remember getting back on the bus getting back to Monterey, and it was, like, we were just blown away. We were all just—how—

Isensee: How much you worked.

Oakes: —how easily it had come, and all. So it was just fabulous.

Isensee: Can you still speak the language?

Oakes: Absolutely not, no. (Laughter) I can sometimes, when I watch an old movie, I'll hear it and say, "Oh, I know what that means," but never going to Vietnam—I mean, I learned the language, and then I never went there. And I never actually used it in my job, either. Which is another story we'll get to eventually. So I didn't keep it for very long, which is really too bad. Because later on, I'm gonna learn Russian, and they did not—they never expected us to converse with a Russian. It was always going to be just radio intercept traffic. So we just learned 600 words, and it was a completely different experience learning Russian.

Isensee: So after you finished the first time at linguist school at Monterey, where did you go after that?

[00:09:56]

Oakes: Since the war was winding down, they sort of shipped us around a little bit. The next thing I had—I was supposed to go for my MOS was to go to Texas, so we went to Goodfellow Air Force Base in Texas. We spent four months there learning how to—here's the job description to go to Vietnam: You get on a helicopter for a twelve-hour shift, you've got a radio, an FM radio on your back. That helicopter's going to drop you on a hill somewhere by yourself, and twelve hours later is going to come back and get you. And during the twelve hours that you're out there, you're scanning the frequencies looking for signals, because everybody's got little five-watt radios, so there's not a lot of coverage.

So we got us dotted all over the country, just sitting under a tree trying to hear. Then we would have to write, handwrite and record—we had little recorders we had to take with us, which was kind of high-tech back then. Then when we got back that night and we'd go back and we'd type up all, if anything, that we had heard that day. So that was the job. We went to Goodfellow Air Force Base to learn how to do that. Most of it was encrypted traffic. So it was five alpha-numeric things you'd hear. Sort of the same thing they were sending over Morse code, but it was quicker if they could just speak it. So we got really good at transcribing, or transliterating numbers and letters, and things like that.

Isensee: And did you understand what you were writing? Or what they were teaching you how to write? Or was there somebody else—

Oakes: If it was in code, we weren't taught how to break the code. We did have instruction in what the codes meant and all that, but it wasn't our job to break it. Just to get it accurately down on paper. And then other people would—this was all manual back then, so other people would transcribe it. But we could tell by the nature of the preamble of the message that we were intercepting; oh, this is a weather report, this is a troop movement, this is a supply—something like that, so we could clue into some of those things.

It was very interesting training, there again, very easy days. We only had six-hour days. We'd come in at 6:00 in the morning, we were done by noon. So I had lots of time off in Texas. It was great.

Isensee: How long was that school? A couple [of] months?

Oakes: That was four months. Four months, and it was really getting to be—our instructor, who was a really great sergeant, he said, "These are the good times. We don't push you guys really hard here, because if you go to Nam"—

Isensee: It's going to be hard there.

Oakes: "You will do this seven days a week, twelve hours a day for six months. Then you get an R&R, and then when you get back from R&R, you're going to do this seven days a week for six months. Then you can come home. I was like, oh. Anyhow, and he would tell about the times when there was a patrol going by, and you just had to be quiet and make sure they didn't find you. It sounded terrifying to me, but, you know—

Isensee: Sounds scary.

Oakes: It sounded scary. Fortunately, none of my class—Vietnam was coming down so quickly, none of my class went to do that.

Isensee: When did you find out that you weren't going to go?

Oakes: After the school there, they sent us for a month out to NSA to learn some advanced cryptographic stuff, so that's where we actually got the cryptographic schooling. And while I was there, I had orders for Vietnam, and then a couple of days later I got orders for South Korea, and then a couple days later I got orders for Thailand. So I don't know—I really don't know if in a couple more days I'm going to get orders for Vietnam again, I don't know.

We were all in the same boat. We were all being sent the same. It was like—it seems like there were six or eight of us in the class. So we were all going to end

up as a unit somewhere, and we end up in Thailand. But we had order—when we got to Fort Meade in Maryland, we had orders for Nam, South Vietnam, around Saigon. Then we got orders for someplace in South Korea, which really blew our minds away, hey, that's safe, right? You know, it was good and bad about it, I suppose. Then they said Thailand, and we're like, there's a lot of fighting going on in Cambodia and Laos. We were flying missions out of—there was a lot of CIA activity that was going on over there. There was just a lot of hostile fire going on.

Isensee: So did you go to Thailand?

Oakes: Yeah, we went to Thailand for a year. Me and all my guys, we all went to Thailand.

Isensee: You went together?

Oakes: Mm-hm. So when we got there, we had a little shop. We had Vietnamese guys, we had Laotians, we had Cambodians.

[00:15:00]

And the Laotian—we'll call it a "desk," it was a rack of radios. You'd sit in front of this rack of radios, and all day you're just turning knobs, manually turning knobs.

Isensee: Trying to find a signal?

Oakes: Yes. Manually. It was crazy. (Laughter) And they only had one Laotian linguist. So they asked for a volunteer from—and we had a couple too many Vietnamese. They asked for a volunteer, I said, "Well, I'll volunteer." So I learned thirty words. The guy taught me thirty words. "If you hear these words, call me," you know? So I sat on a Laotian desk for a year. So I never got to use that Vietnamese training that much, right?

Isensee: Right.

Oakes: But I was looking at what the other guys were doing, and they were just five four six three nine, seven eight nine ten eleven. I was like, oh, they're not doing anything exciting anyway. What we were picking up was actually people talking. And here's one of those things, I think the statute of limitations is over.

Isensee: Yes.

Oakes: But I got a presidential—the Laotian desk there, but I was on duty the day that it happened. Got a presidential—it's locked up somewhere. I'm not allowed to have it. Presidential commendation or something, because that day there had been a

coup attempt in Laos. Some nut was flying over the palace and he was dropping bombs out the window of his airplane, trying to kill the president, whatever. We had intercepted that and got people—told people what was going on, and they were able to go over there and get rid of him and stop that nonsense. That was kind of fun.

Isensee: So you were hearing some of the radio traffic?

Oakes: Yeah, he was quite—and we heard a lot of—

Isensee: And you understood what was happening.

Oakes: Yeah. We heard a lot of the CIA traffic too, and these were Americans. You know, “They’re shot down,” and, “They’re surrounded.” We heard a lot of that.

Isensee: Really?

Oakes: Yeah.

Isensee: Do you remember what year this was?

Oakes: There’s nothing we can do for that. Seventy-three, seventy-four.

Isensee: Did it all happen kind of in one day? Or there were a couple of days?

Oakes: That coup was all in one day, yeah. It happened all in one day. It was weeks later, and then the base commander calls us in and says, “We have a reward for you. It can’t leave the building, but congratulations.” Cool.

Isensee: Wow!

Oakes: Yeah, but no ribbons, no medals. You can’t wear it. It’s all secret.

Isensee: It was secret? Okay.

Oakes: Yeah. The fact that—because it was a method. It was protecting our methods. How did we know that was happening?

Isensee: How did you find out about it. Right.

Oakes: Right. We had to protect that, it’s pretty much common knowledge. We were just listening on the radio. It had this big—it was the seventh RRFS, which is Rock and Roll Freak Show, that’s what we’d call it. It was the Radio Research Field Station, really. And it had what we called an “elephant cage,” which was an enormous antenna, round antenna, probably four stories tall.

Isensee: That's the building you were working in?

Oakes: Yep. That was our antenna array. From that one location, then we could do radio direction finding. We didn't have to get other locations to help us. We could, because of that circular antenna, we could pinpoint pretty much where is the signal coming from. And many times that helps you to figure out, so who is it that's talking.

Isensee: So were you also tracking it on a map?

Oakes: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Yeah. It was a great time. I told you before; we had one inspection the whole time I was there. We paid like, \$5 or \$10 a month, and the local girls would come in and make your bed, shine your shoes, do everything. So whenever the first sergeant inspected, he would just yell at the maids. He wouldn't yell at us. It wasn't our fault. It was not Army, either. So our basic training was not really there. My AIT was really easy.

Isensee: Short days.

Oakes: You know, so—

Isensee: Were you working long days in Thailand? Days and nights?

Oakes: No. We—

Isensee: Twenty-four hour operations?

Oakes: We had enough people that we didn't really need to do that. I remember Sergeant First Class Waters, and he was a master of doing the schedule. We'd be on rotating shifts. And he'd orchestrate it, so you could sometimes get eight days off, because you're going from this rotation to that rotation, that means you don't start up for another eight days. I'm like, what the heck am I going to do around here for eight days?

Isensee: Did you get to walk around town at all, or do any travel?

Oakes: Yes. Actually, I brought my wife over.

Isensee: Oh, you did?

Oakes: Company commander, and the first time I met him, he said, "Are you married?" "Yes, sir." "Is your wife—do you have kids?" "No. We're just newlyweds. Not even married a year yet."

[00:19:57]

“Oh. Oh. Well, you know, I’m not saying this, but if your wife were here, we’d allow her on base. We’d allow her to go to the PX. We’d let the doctor see her if you got sick. I’d do all that stuff for you, but I’m not officially telling you that you should do that.” So come to find out there was a little community there of—

Isensee: Of spouses? Wives?

Oakes: —mostly, you know, we didn’t have any guys, there were no girls there, no female soldiers there. But yeah, all the wives, and some kids, even. And it was a great time. We really were far enough away from hostilities that it was just living in Thailand, it was fun.

Isensee: And were you living on base? Or living—

Oakes: No, we got on a stilt, a house that’s on a stilt, called a bungalow. They called them “bungalows” over there, probably because of the water. It rains a lot. But yeah, we had a couple of different houses we lived in. It was a great honeymoon. My wife always said, “When we first got married you took me there, and then you took me to Thailand.” And I said, “Okay, you’re done. There are no more honeymoons for you. I can’t afford that.”

Isensee: Then what wrapped up your time at Thailand? Was a year up, and that’s when you were done?

Oakes: Yep. And then when I was in language school, I had to sign up for four years to go to language school. I said, “Why is that?” He says, “Because we’re going to send you to school for a year. We want to get three years out of you, right? So it’s no different.” I said, “Okay, that makes sense.” So I had a four year enlistment. I went to language school. One day they said, “All you North Vietnamese linguists, if you come sign a form, we’ll knock a year off your enlistment.” Well, we were all there signing that form. So I went down to a three-year. Then policy was, if you came back in country, you’re between assignments you had ninety days or less, they just let you go. I came in with like, ninety days, ninety-one days, so they just let me go. So out of a four-year enlistment, I actually spent two years, nine months on that tour. And only twelve of those months was actually doing my job. The rest of it was training to get to it.

Isensee: In school?

Oakes: Yeah. It was—

Isensee: And then did you re-enlist?

Oakes: Yeah, I took two years off. I remembered—man, it was so easy! “The Army’s so easy, right?”

Isensee: But then did you get a job? Or go to school?

Oakes: I tried. It was not good. It was not a good time. Seventy-four or seventy-five timeframe was oil embargos, and all kinds of stuff were going on. It was very hard to get a job. I got jobs; I had a few jobs—

Isensee: Around Rockford, or—

Oakes: In Rockford. They were very—soon as they hear I was a vet, they wanted to find me a spot. It was wonderful. But it was always third shift, and physical labor, and all that. I'm still lazy, so, I still wanted the desk job, I guess. So my uncle convinced us, after I did some factory work for a while, my uncle convinced us to come down to Kewanee, Illinois, a little town out in the western part of Illinois, where he was doing some home improvement. He ran his own little home improvement business, part-time pastor, part-time home remodeler. My wife and I worked for him, so we got to work together and do things we thought we would like doing, but we really didn't. So eventually, I just got tired of all of that, and went and talked to the recruiter again. "Any options of my going back in?" He says, "Yeah. Yeah."

Isensee: He could probably find you some work.

Oakes: I said, "I don't want to be in North Vietnamese"—"We wouldn't take you as a North Vietnamese linguist. We don't need you for that. How about Russian?" "Why Russian?" "Well, they're the enemy now, right? That's who we got to worry about now, now that Vietnam's done." I said, "Yeah, that sounds interesting. I'll do that." So I signed up.

Isensee: Did you go back to Monterey?

Oakes: Yep.

Isensee: You didn't have to go back to basic training, no?

Oakes: No.

Isensee: Just back to Monterey to language school?

Oakes: I had to go to the reception center for a week to pick up my new uniform, stuff like that. Then I was out there.

Isensee: And was the Russian school similar to the North Vietnamese?

Oakes: No, they were—I'm glad you asked. No. They were experimenting—some PhD had discovered there was a quicker way to learn a language. They abandoned it after the lawsuit. But I wasn't part of the class that won the lawsuit. So what they

said was, as I already mentioned, you're never going to be actually interrogating a prisoner. We don't expect that of you. You're going to be well behind the lines, and you'll be listening on the radio. And it's very standardized traffic that you'll hear; artillery traffic, or mechanized units traffic, or missile launcher traffic, stuff like that. So we will just teach you to be able to write down, maybe not even understand, but be able to accurately write down what is being said.

[00:24:57]

And then now we've got computers, we've got all kinds things that can help us to get it translated. So yeah, it was a thirty-seven week course instead of forty-seven, so they thought they'd get—

Isensee: Okay, they cut some time.

Oakes: —save some money there. And when we came out, I guess we were qualified to do it, except the Army never changed its standards for proficiency in a language. So those of us who had gone through that abbreviated course, some filed a lawsuit, and they got additional training. And some of us just ended up going to work, and we didn't get additional training. But we were all being measured on the same thing. So constantly in those following years, every year they're telling you your language skills were deficient. I said, "They always were."

Isensee: Yes, because they didn't [inaudible].

Oakes: "They're no worse than they ever were." You know, "This is what you trained me to be." "Well, it's not what we really want." "Would you mind sending me back to school?" "No." "Okay." So that's when '84 rolled around, I said, "I'm done." They wanted to send me back to a unit in Germany without my wife, and without my wife for two years. I said, "Send me to Korea, it's only a one-year separation."

Isensee: One-year tour? So once you finished school, where did you go?

Oakes: That time, we had to go back—we didn't go to Goodfellow again, because we weren't going to do that. So we went out to Fort Devens, Massachusetts. Some of the best training I ever got, and I still, to this day, I remember it because it's as close to real-world, probably real-world training, real-world conditions that we'd ever had. It was a week long—it was only a week long. But we were sleep-deprived, we were food-deprived. We were deprived for the whole week. We had to—they dropped us off one night, and we had to escape and evade all night in the woods. And they were out looking hard for us. And then they would—we'd have little huts on the back of deuce and a halves. That's where we're doing all of our secret work, right? It's a skiff [??], it's a classified area, so not everybody can come in there. Then they're throwing grenades in there and trying to kill us all.

Really high-str—I mean, it’s not real, and after you don’t have enough sleep for a while, it’s like, man, this feels real.

Isensee: Still very high-stress.

Oakes: Yeah. I was, selected, I think because I was older. I’m not sure why I did, but they selected me as a team lead. So it was my first chance at any sort of leadership role. And I really liked it. I really liked being in that role. But it was tough. So we had SitReps coming in all the time, we had to keep up our order of battle. We had to keep up our maps. We had to do all of our job. We had to translate stuff, we had to do all of our jobs, plus these guys were shooting at us. And they were throwing grenades at us, and all this other stuff. It was like, that’s probably what it could be like.

Isensee: It could be like in [inaudible].

Oakes: So they sent us there before they sent us to Germany, because the big deal back in the ’80s was that this was before the wall came down, right? So there’s East Germany and there’s West Germany. We went to West Germany. East Germany had more tanks lined up against the border than we could ever stop, right? And they had surface-surface missiles, and they had all kinds of stuff. It looked like they were going to come through Fulda Gap. That was the scenario. So that was the panic. And they spent a lot of time teaching us Russian order of battle, Russian tactics, and strategies. So I got a real good education around what it meant to be an analyst and—

Isensee: Were you out in the field during that time? Or in an office building?

Oakes: After that schooling at Fort Devens, then they sent me to Germany. I went to a field unit, infantry, attached to the Eighth Infantry. And there were two wings, probably three wings to the company. One group of us had special vehicles and radios that could jam other people’s radios. One group, my group, the group I was in, we intercepted other people’s radios, and then there was another group behind the lines who would translate, do more in-depth intelligence analysis. But they put us—this is the 415th Army Security Agency Unit in Straussberg, West Germany, outside Idar-Oberstein. And they decided that they wanted to mechanize an ASA unit.

[00:29:59]

And when I mean “mechanize,” I mean they gave us track vehicles. We were never trained on track vehicles. We had Dodge pickup trucks and deuce and a halves, right? Things with rubber tires. They thought this would be great, because anywhere that Eighth Infantry Division mech units could go, we could go with them, right? In fact, our job was to be the head of the line, there would always be a head for better intercept and better access to the enemy. So that got to be—it

was really good to be part of that sort of pilot of that, it was kind of cool. But they gave us the oldest, crappiest stuff.

Isensee: And did they train you how to operate them? Or train some people as drivers?

Oakes: Yeah, yeah. They trained us all how to be drivers. But my buddy, Greg, he liked driving better, so I said, "I don't care." So I walked outside and let him. Made sure he didn't run over anybody. They trained our motor pool guys to be able to handle the—

Isensee: Some of the repairs?

Oakes: —the tracks. The track. We never learned how to replace a track, things like that. Funny stories—this is going to the archives. Funny story. We're out on maneuvers. So back then they're doing reforcers, so every year you go out for three weeks or more, and you pretend you're at war. You're sleeping in the pup tent, you're not going to have a meal, you're not going to have a shower, you're not going to have anything, so it made a real man out of me, finally. Or as much as I ever became. And so we had these really old vehicles, and we had really young lieutenants who just don't know much. No offense.

Isensee: No offense taken.

Oakes: And we're out on maneuvers this one night, and one of our intercept—our radio jamming track vehicles is broken down, it's leaking oil terribly. And the enemy's advancing, and they're going to get captured.

Isensee: For this exercise.

Oakes: And being captured for an exercise. It's American units, right? And if they get captured, they'll get harassed and all kinds of stuff, you know. Nothing harmful. But anyway, we're taking this seriously. And the lieutenant tells the guys, "Just sit there and get captured. You'll be fine." And they're like, "That ain't gonna happen." So they grabbed a five gallon barrel of oil, they popped the cover off the motor, off the engine. And one guy's sitting there pouring oil into it while they're driving back to our lines. They're just pouring it in there as fast as it's pouring out.

Isensee: Because it's leaking out.

Oakes: But they made it back. He says, "We are not going to get captured!" And they made it back. And then they towed that thing away. So—

Isensee: That's a lot of oil to heat up—

Oakes: Funny times. Funny times. You know, that was the other thing. We're right in the beautiful West German countryside, and we're just tearing it up. That's usually how they determined how it was time to stop. They would send out over the radio—

Isensee: So the timing is off?

Oakes: —they'd say, "Index, index, index." We're all waiting for "index." Because as soon as it got to be a certain of millions of dollar amount of damage they'd done to the farm land and the roads, they had to stop. I think they had a budget or something. You can do this much damage, and then you have to go home.

Isensee: Which base were you staying on?

Oakes: It was a little bitty base, outside Idar-Oberstein. So Eighth Infantry was headquartered out of Baumholder, I don't know, thirty miles away or so was our little unit. So we were a beautiful, pristine—

Isensee: Out in the country?

Oakes: No, it was a beautiful little town on the river. It was just a beautiful place. Yeah, it was awesome. The apartment we had was incredible. On base—

Isensee: Did you have your wife there?

Oakes: Yeah. Yeah. I came with a child, had another child while we were there. Yeah, it was a good time.

Isensee: That was about two years, you said?

Oakes: We were there four years—three years.

Isensee: Three years.

Oakes: We were there three years. And I really learned, finally, to become a soldier. When I got there, they took us out. Our lieutenant, he says, "We're going to go out on a reforger, and some of you have never been on reforgers, some of you have never camped before," or something, whatever. "We're going to take a week and we're just going to go out and we're just going to learn how to be in the field." So we had bonfires every night. It was hardly being in the field, but we had bonfires every night. But we did learn quite a bit of stuff. And I was such a putz that I just complained the whole time. "I should be at home! I would rather be at home, I don't want to be out here," blah blah blah blah. "It's cold, I'm dirty, I haven't had a shower all week," blah blah blah. At the end of the three years, I used to run some orienteering courses for the new guys when they came over. We had to teach them how to find their way home if they got lost, right?

Isensee: How to use a compass?

Oakes: How to use a compass, how to use a map. And it would be raining. I remember the day. It was raining, it was cold, it was windy. And the guys were out there.

[00:35:00]

And me and a couple of my buddies, we had our ponchos on, we had our thermoses of coffee, we sat underneath the tree, and we were happy. And I'm like, wow, three years ago, I would have just been bellyaching about this whole thing. But look at this. This is nice. This is comfortable. So you really—it just changes you. Good times.

Isensee: How did you find out it was time to leave Germany?

Oakes: Just your assignment comes up, so then you go. I had to re-enlist, my enlistment was up at that time, too. So you're talking to another recruiter guy, right? And he says, "Well, here's what I can offer you. Nice cash bonus," \$16,000 or something. And I says, "Yeah, so where do you want me to go? Where are you going to send me? Fort Hood, Texas, or something?" He said, "No, how about NSA?" I said, "You mean, Ford Meade?" He says, "No, NSA. You'll be in the building. You'll be working at desk."

Isensee: National Security Agency.

Oakes: "You'll be working at a desk," he said.

Isensee: In Washington, D.C.?

Oakes: In Ford Meade, Maryland. Yeah. I said, "Yeah, okay. I'll do that." So I did that. So I had a four year enlistment, so I stayed there for the next four years.

Isensee: What type of work did you do at the NSA?

Oakes: At NSA, so I'm a Russian linguist. I'm a buck sergeant, so I've got more seniority on most of them, because I had my two years prior as well. So I've got a little more seniority in time and grade than most. So I think I lucked out. A good friend of mine was there, and he got put on the artillery desk, there was a Soviet artillery desk. I got put on the Soviet SSM desk, surface-surface Missile desk. I was the guy for that. For those four years, I was the main military person on that desk. There was an old guy, Smokey Rush, from Alabama, who was the civilian. He'd been thirty years. But it was he and me for this whole area.

Isensee: And were you listening to radio tracker?

Oakes: We weren't listening. We would get—our inbox every morning would be stacked up with all the stuff that other people had typed up. So we would look through that and say—and it wasn't like—because most of it's like, move from here to there, shoot from here to there, and do that sort of stuff. We didn't really care about that. We were looking order of battle stuff.

Isensee: The bigger picture.

Oakes: And what we discovered is that they had added a whole extra launcher squad to each of those units. They were trying to hide it very hard.

Isensee: Oh, and you were able to figure that out?

Oakes: We thought there was like three, and they actually had four. It took us a couple of years to prove that. We had a hunch. Smokey and I had a hunch. I'm seeing something that doesn't add up, here. The call signs don't make sense, if there's only three of them. How can—

Isensee: Yes.

Oakes: So we finally did that. We went to a conference in Munich where we told everybody about that, the Brits and Aussies and the French and everybody, and convinced them, yeah, okay, they've changed. They've added another launcher. They haven't increased the number of units, but they've augmented those units with another launcher team, which would be significant.

Isensee: Where were those unit? Were they—

Oakes: Those were all in East Germany. So they were all on the Berlin side of the line.

Isensee: And you got to present all that information?

Oakes: Yeah, it was kind of cool. Smokey and I, yeah.

Isensee: Smokey was there, too.

Oakes: Yeah, he's an old guy. So defer to your elders. He had been around forever. But it was a lot of fun. But that was another easy desk job, and some days the stack in my inbox was really low. You know, well, it's 10:00, or it's 6:00 to 2:00, yeah, it's 10:00, and nothing else going to come in until tomorrow, so I guess I'll go home.

Isensee: And you had your family with you too, right?

Oakes: Yep. Yep, yep. Our military unit there was really just a barracks for—because we worked every day and took our instruction from the folks in the NSA.

Isensee: So you weren't going to the field, you were going in to work every day.

Oakes: Yeah. We had to wear our uniforms every day, but other than that it felt like you were just a civilian at the NSA. They treated you the same, which was really good in those days; lots of parties and stuff. But yeah, that was fun. I really enjoyed that. Then they gave me a team. Things started to get hotter, so I had one or two people that worked for me. And that was fun. But it was really meaningful work, because you know where we are now, we sell insurance, or whatever. Back then it seemed just more meaningful. It seemed more—I don't know the word.

[00:40:00]

Selfless, right? Than just do this because I need a paycheck. I do this because it needs to be done, and I can do it. So I'm going to do it. So that enlistment came up. They said, "Yeah, your language scores really suck." "You going to send me to school?" "No." "What are you going to do to me?" "We're going to send you back to Germany, back to another field unit. We'll make you a sergeant first class, but you'll be two years. It'll be a three-year tour, and two years you have to be unaccompanied. I'm like, "What? What?"

Isensee: Two years without your family back in Germany?

Oakes: "So send me to Korea. At least it's just a year without them." "Nope." That's the deal, and they made no other deals. So I said, "Okay, I guess we're done." That was eleven years. That was eleven years.

Isensee: You made the decision to get out, then.

Oakes: Yeah. My kids were small, and it just seemed—it was not the logical choice to make but it seemed it was unfair options. So many times, I guess, they say we will not take the logical choice if it seems that it's unfair, too. So that's what happened to me. And my wife didn't really care about me being a career man, anyway. Yeah, stay at home. But finding a job? What's your skill, Bill? I'm a Russian translator. Oh, yeah.

Isensee: Is that in demand?

Oakes: It didn't go well. It did not go well. So it was a really lean time.

Isensee: When you left Fort Meade, did you go back to the Midwest?

Oakes: My parents had moved to the Gulf Coast of Alabama, so we moved down there. But we left there; we got there in June, July. We left there in March, because I did have a security clearance. And that was a marketable commodity in D.C. So we moved back up to Maryland after about nine months down in the South, I just

couldn't find work. I was painting condos. I was doing my home improvement again, painting condos and things like that in the heat of Alabama. I don't like working physically, so it was not a good fit for me. So I did a month's tour. I was in inactive Army reserve at that time, and I did a month's tour at Fort Huachuca, Arizona, because it just paid better than anything. As soon as I got back from there, then a friend of mine, that friend who was on the artillery desk, he had taken a job with a civilian "belly bandit," they call them, right, in and around D.C. And he got me a job there.

Isensee: So you worked in D.C. for a while, then?

Oakes: Yeah. We were there until '86, I want to say '86, '87. Then I've always wanted to live out west, so I found a way to a job offer with—at that time—now it's Lockheed Martin, back then it was just Martin Marietta. And they had black projects. My clearance was useful to them, so they paid me to move. They paid all my expenses; they did all that to get me out to Colorado. So that was great.

Isensee: Oh, yeah? Very nice.

Oakes: Yeah. Yeah. So it was a big change. But I liked it

Isensee: What was the hardest part about leaving the military facilities?

Oakes: I think the transition was actually pretty good for me. Other than that nine months in Alabama, where I was just lost, when I came back up to Maryland, I worked for a company who had a contract with the CIA, where actually my Russian and my clearance were both useful. I can't tell you what we did. I don't think the statute's over on that. CIA never says anything. But that was interesting work. So again, I felt like I was doing something meaningful, right?

Isensee: Mm-hm.

Oakes: Then the project that I was on, which I can't talk about, the project I went on out in Colorado was putting surveillance cameras on satellites, but not necessarily military satellites. So my project was building software that would be embedded in those satellites. And it better work, because you can't just log into them if it doesn't work. You can't hit the Reset button. It's a long way to reach. So it was kind of exciting being part of that. Interesting story there, I was on the second floor of the building, and it was a black project, and it was really dark in terms of its secrecy. And we were all—there was, like, three hundred people working on this thing. One day, they said, "You need to go up to the next floor; we're going to read you in on another project."

[00:44:56]

So I went up to the third floor and they read me in on another project, which said that the project on the second floor was a ruse. [Laughs]

Isensee: Oh! It wasn't a real project?

Oakes: So I'm assigned to both of them. Well, what they think they're doing down on the second floor is not really what they're doing. And so there were enough people from the second floor on that third floor project, to make sure that the rest of them didn't find out, but to make sure that the right things were getting done. I was a quality engineer, software quality engineer. So I had to run tests. Mostly software testings on what we're doing. So it was really interesting. So I figured, "I wonder what the fourth floor is," right? "What's going on, on the fourth floor? I think I know everything, I bet I don't. I bet I don't."

Isensee: Oh, that is interesting.

Oakes: That was fascinating to learn. But those were good times. Then I decided to get out of—I decided I liked the Oracle software. I'd become quite good at that. So I took a job with Oracle. Again, they transitioned me. I worked in the DOD practice area, so we did Air Force stuff. We did mostly Air Force stuff, strategic air command, the academy, places like that. Lakenheath Air Force Base, we spent some time in there, Elmendorf. But then gradually I got into I'm a project manager, I lost my clearance, I lost all my languages. So I became a project manager. And that's where I've been stuck ever since.

Isensee: You're doing project management since then?

Oakes: Ever since, yeah. Yeah. Ever since late '80s.

Isensee: Did you take advantage of any of the veteran's benefits after you left?

Oakes: All of them. All that I could find. I bought at least two houses with the VA loan assistance, at least two. I'm thinking of doing another one when I get to Colorado. GI Bill was awesome in Illinois, because Illinois a veteran could go to any state school for free. So I could live on—you know, I could almost live on the monies that I could get.

So when I was in Alabama, although tuition wasn't free in Alabama, it was pretty dirt cheap. And that was nine months I went to school and was able to keep afloat, because of the GI Bill money coming in. I didn't have to take any loans out or anything like that. It was a wonderful benefit. Since then, starting in 2002, I've been under VA medical care. When I got here, when we moved back here, we were kind of destitute; we'd filed bankruptcy and lost a lot of stuff. I knew I had a heart condition, and so I went to the VA and said, "Can you help me out?" They said, "You got a DD214?" "Yeah." "Well, we can help you out." And I've had the best care since I've been with the system here in Wisconsin. I could never ask

for better. So yeah, I'm very high on all those—I hate to hear how people bash the VA and all, the medical system. Maybe Phoenix has problems. And I was in Tomah before they were giving out drugs, apparently. But it's been wonderful to me. And I've had a triple heart bypass, and I'm being treated for cirrhosis of the liver now. I don't know how you afford all that stuff. And it's just free.

Isensee: I'm glad you're having a good experience there.

Oakes: It's awesome. Yeah.

Isensee: Have you stayed in contact with people that you served with?

Oakes: A couple. The guy who was at NSA with me, his name's John. Our wives got to know each other, and our kids got to know each other. So that helped. He lives on Colorado. So every time—he's one of those perfect friends, that you don't have to talk to him for years, and then when you do, it's like, nothing's missing.

Isensee: You're still friends.

Oakes: Right?

Isensee: Mm-hm.

Oakes: So we're that way towards each other. And then there's another one that I served with in Germany, Greg. And he just came for a visit a couple of months ago. He was on his way through town. We've kept close. He and I sat in many a pickup truck in Germany, traveling around in the middle of the winter. He was not a linguist. He was a 98 Charlie, which is just an intelligence, the Military Intelligence Analyst. But yeah, we've kept in touch. Other than that, there's a few people that I know where they are. Facebook has been a huge assist in that. But we were never close back then, either. So it hasn't stuck. I wish I had more. I wish I could find—maybe I just haven't looked hard enough—I wish I could find the alumni groups for the units that I was in. I don't even remember the name of the unit I was in at NSA. We were there—I pulled CQ twice a year, or something. That's probably the only time I ever went over there. Otherwise, it was home to the office.

Isensee: To the office.

[00:50:00]

Oakes: I just don't even remember what the name of the unit was, or the commanders, or anybody else. It was kind of weird.

Isensee: Have you gotten involved in any veteran's organizations or other types of veteran's activities?

Oakes: Several years ago, I tried, I think I did join American Legion up in Northern Wisconsin. But nothing came of that. I just joined again, because I know am friends with the commander's son, apparently. So I figured I'd better shape up. But most importantly, what you're doing here at [inaudible] has really gotten me out of my shell, shown me ways that I can get more involved. So I appreciate that. But yeah, I've been to the wall. I'm not sure I can go again, but I did go. It was difficult, and I never served in Vietnam. But I could have, and I should have, and they did, right? And the wall, the moving wall, the miniature one, that came up to Wisconsin. And I helped guard that. But I couldn't walk it. So the veteran's stuff is near and dear. When I got out in '74, they told us, "Take your uniform off, put your civvies on, do not go out, don't leave this building in your uniform." I was like, well, now I see—

Isensee: Because of public reaction?

Oakes: Yeah. Now you see people getting hugs. The guys coming off the plane, they'll get hugs. Give them a cake. My aunt's giving them all cakes all the time. It's like, I'm so glad that we don't blame the soldier for what the country decided to do. But we did back then. No one thanked me for my service for twenty years, easily twenty years. Not that I needed to be thanked, but it was huge part of my life. And I felt like I made a contribution. Even my family I don't think ever—they were just glad I didn't get killed, or something, as I didn't. No one in my family really ever served, I was the first one. Now a couple of my cousins have served since I sort of broke through. But yeah, it's difficult. And now, but now I'm reaching that age where I want to remember more, maybe. That's why I'm glad to be doing this.

Isensee: Well, I'm glad you're sharing your stories.

Oakes: Yeah. It's nice to remember them again. But your kids don't want to hear about that, or anything. They can't relate, and that's fine. You know, we made the world safer for them, maybe.

Isensee: Looking at some of these other questions. Why did you agree to do this oral history interview? But first let me start by saying, thank you for doing this oral history interview.

Oakes: Oh, you're very welcome. [Laughter] You needed practice. You told me you needed practice, that's honest. But also, I've never had an opportunity to demonstrate the pride I felt from serving. It was, "Shame on you for serving," for so many years, right? So I have some really—well, to me, they're really kind of funny stories, cool things that happened. I was at the tail end of one war, and through the worst of the Cold War, and then the wall came down. Then everything changed, you know? Desert Storm comes and soldiers are popular

again. But all those years that I was in there, they were not. They're baby killers, right? I never saw a baby I killed.

Isensee: It's a unique point in history.

Oakes: Yeah. So I don't think it should be lost, what happened. It was a lull between storms, I'll give you that. What went on in those years, right, Grenada, or small things, Falkland Islands or something like that. But yeah, I wanted to force myself to remember. Maybe that's part of it. And to get it out.

Isensee: Very good. Are there any stories that you're open to share? Or thought it would be good to include?

Oakes: That I haven't already bored you with?

Isensee: That you didn't have a chance to share?

Oakes: [Laughs] There's so many. Most of them are not very tasteful.

[00:54:58]

A day in the life of a soldier, of a grunt who doesn't want to be a grunt. Germany was so interesting in so many ways. For example, we had—when we would go on reforger, it was always in the winter. So many times, you'd have a two-man tent, but sometimes they'd let us set up these little teepee tents, and you could put a pot belly stove in there, burn some diesel and have a nice, warm bed. So we did that one year. And Greg and I were—you could say we were hot-bunking, we weren't really. We had a hut that was probably—you can't see this on the recording, but maybe the hut was six feet deep, and we'd sit three people there in long johns and uniforms and parkas and everything else, because there was no real heat in the hut. And we're all trying to do our work.

So Greg could be in there with two other guys, then he'd come out. I'd be asleep, then he'd come out, we'd swap. We usually worked twelve-hour shifts then, too. So I'm all cozy, and yeah, the fire's sort of gone out in the thing. But I'm in my nice mummy bag, and I'm warm and everything else. Greg, he really hates the cold, so he comes out and he says, "It's time to get up, Bill." "All right, I'll get up." And he turns up the heat. And he leaves. I don't how long it was, because I felt back to sleep, but all of a sudden I wake up and the tent's on fire.

Isensee: Oh!

Oakes: He turned it up so high that the stove pipe got so hot, I guess, that it caught the tent on fire. So he comes running back. I'm just lying there in my mummy bag, I'm not getting up. I'm lying there in my mummy bag, "Get that fire out! Get that fire out!"

Isensee: The [inaudible] was on fire?

Oakes: But I'm not getting out of my nice warm bag! Because I know, all I've got to do is roll underneath this tent flap, and I'm outside. There's no problem. I still remember about that. He's such a pansy. He was interesting. We would sit on those reforcers. We sat one night, one day. We sat twenty-four hours in our truck. Not driving, just sat for twenty-four hours.

Isensee: Were you listening to—

Oakes: In the truck. No. They didn't know what to do with us. They didn't—we kept waiting to hear, okay, "Go here," or, "Go there," or, "Go to this other place." They just left us sitting there. There was a whole convoy of us. We just sat there. Well, it's cold out, so we're running the engine, right? So we're having to refuel the trucks because we're just sitting there running the engines, and we've got the windows cracked, because we all figured we were going to die of inhalation or whatever, carbon monoxide. It was like, is this any way to run an Army, you know? But we don't know what all is going on in these other places. Yeah, interesting times. Because every reforgers, there was reports of this guy stopped his jeep on the side of the road, pulled over, and he died.

Isensee: And froze?

Oakes: No, carbon monoxide. You left the engine running, and these are old jeeps, and they leak. I remember that happened, then they made us take the doors off our jeeps. They had canvas doors. "Take all the doors off." No more doors. Well, that was cold! Riding around in the winter with no door on your jeep. That was cold. But it was good, because we were sleep-deprived, so you need some way to keep you awake.

Isensee: Help you stay awake.

Oakes: Stick your head out the doorway there, and try to stay awake. Interesting times. Go three weeks without a hot meal. Go three weeks without a shower.

Isensee: What did you eat? Was it MREs at that time?

Oakes: No, it was C-Rats then, so it was cans of stuff we had. I'm not sure—I've never had an MRE, so I hope it's as easy. We could take a can of spaghetti, you could put it on the manifold of our generators, and in ten minutes, it would be nice and hot, and you'd just eat it. Pop the can open, and you've got a nice, warm meal. It's a canned meal. To say we never had a hot meal is not really true, but we didn't ever get it—

Isensee: It wasn't fresh.

Oakes: —from the kitchen, right?

Isensee: Right.

Oakes: But yeah, we would eat a lot of those, and you swap and you trade them, right? Things like that. The hard part was no shower for three weeks. It's like, oh, and we're stuck in that hut. Just armpit to armpit—well, you know. Compared to what other guys have done during their service, that was a small price to pay. No big deal. I enjoyed it. Sometimes, I think it must have been probably before Thailand, it's hard to remember exactly the timeframe.

[01:00:02]

But it seems like they sat me at home for a month in between—

Isensee: In between [inaudible]?

Oakes: Because they just didn't know when they were going to put me on a plane to get me out there. And they would just send me home, I didn't do anything, you know? Sent me my paycheck and I'd sit at home. I was with my mom and dad again, they were probably wondering, is he ever going to leave? Is he AWOL? What's he doing here? “No, no, I'll get orders, and I'll have to leave. They just don't know.”

Isensee: Just waiting.

Oakes: Just don't know. Yeah, I've always thought—I told my kids, I said—I think I mentioned it here. Nothing that I had done in my life before my military service prepared me for life like my military service did. If nothing else it just expands—it pushes the envelope on what you can tolerate peacefully. I won't say pleurably, but that's no big deal, right? I've been in worse situations. Maybe sometimes it's good to be in a bad situation so you can have a frame of reference. So I always said, you've got my full support if you want to join the military when you get out of high school.

Isensee: And were they interested in that?

Oakes: No! [Laughter] No. And there was no reason not to, because they were so young when I was in, they don't remember that.

Isensee: When they were living in Germany?

Oakes: Yeah, they wouldn't. When I got out my daughter was four. No, seven. She was six, seven years old when I got out. They had no reason to be that way. But I'm

very high on just the discipline that you get from that. And it teaches you about yourself, so much.

Isensee: Well, thank you. Thank you for sharing. Any other questions that you'd wished I'd asked?

Oakes: Oh, that's always a good question. A good interview question. You could ask me about my feelings about the Vietnam War.

Isensee: Tell me about your feelings about the Vietnam War.

Oakes: I think I had regained—those of us who went to language school got a unique perspective. When we went to North Vietnamese school, it was more than just an education and a language. It was more about learning—than just learning the language. We learned the history of the country. We learned the culture of the country. We learned to sort of see how they—what their world view was, of themselves and what they were around. And the Vietnamese, we learned, were people that had been invaded by China. They had been invaded by Mongolia. They had been invaded over the centuries by everyone, and had never lost. And when that began to dawn on us, is that these people—they will just go too far. They will go way farther than we're willing to go, right?

And we had most South Vietnamese instructors, refugees I guess we'd call them. And they were saying the same thing. Yeah, we would like the South to be democratic, but it's probably not going to happen. If we could just be maybe not be too communist, whenever this happens. But it was fascinating to sort of get an admiration—and I have to be careful talking about this, because they were the enemy—but an admiration for people and what they had gone through. They're the little kids on the block, and yet they are just tenacious. They just would not bend. And great people to have as allies, and terrible people to have as enemies. So it was a unique perspective.

And I think it was lacking—this is one man's opinion—but I think that perspective was lacking in the White House or whatever else. This is not just, you know, if we have more guns than they have guns, then they'll wise up. No they won't. They'll dig little holes in the ground and put sticks in them, right? They will just continue to fight. And we really don't want to fight them. If that's how tenacious they are, we need to figure out a way—so thank God for Kissinger, gave us a way out. And I know that we lost too many guys, and all of that.

[01:05:00]

And yet, if you could roll back time, that's a place you wouldn't want to be. I just this weekend watched my favorite movie, which is Mel Gibson's *We Were Soldiers*, about seventh cav, back in '65. And he shows it there. Before he leaves, he's studying the books. He's studying how the French mission went and how it

failed, and all of that. They pounded it into our head when we were in school; Dien Bien Phu, Dien Bien Phu. The massacre at Dien Bien Phu. That's what you're going to be facing if you come over here. It was, "Oh, we got helicopters, we got this, we got the other thing." It's on the inside of them that's different.

Isensee: How aware were you of the fall of Saigon? Where were you when that happened?

Oakes: I was home. Yeah. It was at summer, '75, wasn't it? So I was home. I don't think it affected me much. I don't remember it being a traumatic moment. I think it was an inevitable—I mean, we've been stepping back from it for years, right? It was just too costly and not enough benefit. But yeah, it didn't affect me. I have some friends who were still in during that time, and it was really traumatic—that was their traumatic moment. I have a cousin who was a commander on the riverboats, the Navy riverboats. He suffering tremendous PTSD even now, decades later from what he saw and witnessed. So, yeah.

I served with a guy from Germany, who was a helicopter gunner. He couldn't talk about his days without just weeping, because he knew he probably had killed some of his own. That's hard to aim those fifty cal's when everybody's on top of one another, right? And he would just weep. So it was a hard time. I was so blessed not to have gone into combat. But I can understand how my grandfather felt. My grandfather, during World War II, volunteered six times. And his health—he had asthma, and health wouldn't let him go.

Isensee: So he didn't serve in the military?

Oakes: Yeah. And he always regretted that. It's almost like, I can relate to that, you know? I was fully trained, I was fully—if it had been two or three years earlier, I would have definitely been there. It was just timing, right?

Isensee: Mm-hm.

Oakes: Yeah. We also got similar sort of insights into the Russian mindset as well. We had a chief warrant officer who was our instructor for that training, and he would always say, "They are just like you are. They just speak Russian." He says, "They view the world the same, they love their family"—

Isensee: They're people. Mm-hm.

Oakes: —"they like partying. Anything you like doing, their sports, they're the same." They're not different, like maybe Orientals would be or something, "They're just like you guys." And that was a sobering thought as well. Why would Ivan and I have an issue, then? Well, it's because of politics and all those other things.

Isensee: After [inaudible].

Oakes: And Putin. KGB. [laughs] But yeah, it doesn't take—it just was—it was very interesting, you know. Too many times it's like the cowboys and the Indians, the savages are the savages and we're in the right, and all that. It's not that clear cut. But you do what you have to do. You do it without asking. Why would I have to take that—another move I like is *Hamburger Hill*. It's hard to watch. Why are we taking this hill? Because we have to. Why do we have to? You don't know how that's working into a larger strategy, a larger plan, right? You're keeping busy over here, and we're doing something else over there. You're just a diversion, and I know you're dying for it, but you're just a diversion. Yeah, the military, the veterans, they really—yeah. Like me, not all of them served in harm's way that much. But we were available. We were there. We were in the toolkit. If you needed us, we were there. We were ready to go. And we need to recognize them.

[01:10:00]

It's not that hard to say "Thanks." Right?

Isensee: Right.

Oakes: Right. Thank you for your service, too.

Isensee: My pleasure.

Oakes: Yeah.

Isensee: On that note, any other thoughts?

Oakes: No. I appreciate doing this. I'm hoping that there'll be—when they get it all done, or whatever, there'll be a link that I can share with my family.

Isensee: There will be.

Oakes: Because none of them have heard these stories. None of them have ever asked the questions you've asked.

Isensee: We'll send you some CDs.

Oakes: Cool! Cool.

Isensee: Thank you. This is the end of the interview.

[End of OH2041.Oakes][End of Interview]