

Oral History Transcription

Interviewer: Madison Stacey

Interviewee: Bob Gray

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Bob Gray: I have a radio operator and a recon sergeant. My radio operator, I had either four or five of those, and they were all killed. And so, it maybe was just four but it was an excessive number. My recon sergeant I had four of those either wounded severely and moved to the rear and in the case of one- that day I alone had my radio operator killed and then he- um, trying to get where he could help me adjusting fire, uh, he lost his leg. It was shot off by a 50 caliber machine gun. So, the job that I had and those two other men that helped me, it was precarious and it was difficult and it was absolutely dangerous. But uh, while you're doing it you don't think about that. You're thinking about what it is that I have to do. I have to get out there in the front so that I can see the enemy up close and kill them all, and uh, if I do that, then all those other guys around me and behind me will survive and they can go home to their families at the end of that year. So, I had a lot of responsibility and I took it very seriously and um, I even developed my own method for adjusting artillery fire in the jungle. There's three canopies in the jungle and uh, you fire right on top of that where there's three canopies, nothing happens to the people below. You gotta somehow get down- wherever it is, artillery, whatever comes in. You gotta fight its way through all that jungle, and, um, so what you do, you do things like put a delayed fuse so instead of coming up here at 250 feet and blowing up, and explode right there, it gets down much further and has a chance of killing, uh, a lot more north Vietnamese. And there's even times when they're in the trees so you kill some of them on the way down. But I uh, I- I used the method of having delayed pallets at the end of the shell and it was about this long and there was a little thing you could turn like a dial and when it hits it doesn't automatically explode it says defused and then it uh, two-tenths of a second later it explodes so it gets much deeper. And, uh, it wasn't my creation but I used it a lot and everyone knew it. Another thing I did a

little bit different, I, uh, it was- when you're out like that and you're firing artillery you sometimes- you're so far away from the artillery base that you don't even hear the artillery go off when it's fired from the battery. And so, what you do is, uh, listen very carefully and I adjust my artillery by sound. I didn't know exactly where it was going, I hoped it wasn't on top of me. That's a good thing you try and solve and I'll do that. But I on the map know the [library's] here and here's my target and if I've done it right, it's going to come this way and end right there so I listen for it and give a warning to all my men that I'm working for to sorta get your head down low and here it comes and you don't have a chance to have that much preparation for each time you fire a couple of rounds but you- that's the thoughts- that's what's going through your head. And it's uh, I always thought that those guys that were out there that were infantry, I'm field artillery, they're still my guys, I still care about them. And if I'm affective I'll save their lives by killing these other people. Or better is just lure them, because it takes two more guys to get them out so you tie up more people. Um, let's see. I even developed a method of fire with smoke. You can fire a round, a smoke round, and you can go out to a certain area if there's no foliage, no trees, it'll get out there and light smoke but when you're in triple canopy jungle there is, what happens, this smoke it's coming this way and when the round gets close to the ground, like 100 meters away it makes a pop, you hear the cartridge from being exploded. Right here the smoke starts right here and goes through the canopies, and you know where it's at. But you listen for the pop to know exactly where it is when you hear the smoke pop too close to you, you cut it too close and that's when you tell everyone to get down real low. But, um, I developed a way of calling in artillery and uh saving lives and it was called the Bob Gray method because no one else did it this way. Everyone else did it where you fire it above where the target is and you keep trying to see it and find out where it is and I was a very good map reader, I took that map and I was able to figure out everything the map tells me. So I listen for a pop or things like that and I ended up getting very accurate artillery fire because you go from just firing one round at a time, sometimes two, but usually one and then when you find out where you are then you do what is called a fire for affect. That means you want all six guns to fire all at once and you may even say six rounds so I may even be putting 36 rounds of artillery right into that small area. And that usually causes a great deal

of pain, and um, and as I did that without adjusting I'd use the smoke round to know where it was and I'd skip up and what you do in an adjustment you say, okay I fired a round well that was short 100 meters and more left and next is drop back 50. And when you get within 50 meters of your target you say fire for affect. And that means the full battery will then fire. There's an intricate system there you have to learn all of that and then use it effectively and it saves lives. Um, sometimes you're in a situation where you can't do much of anything. You have to be real quiet and you've been out somewhere you're not supposed to be. And so after, everyone has to be quiet all 140 guys have to be quiet. They can't eat anything that takes cooking because they'll smell that and you just have to do things, um, open a can of peaches and eat those they don't make much noise eaten them. Get some crackers and then you'll just survive on doing that. And then all of a sudden what happens usually is a platoon of enemies soldiers comes right into your sphere and they don't know anything about you being there and they come into a trap and then you just throw everything on top of them. That's fun when you can do that because you don't usually have any of your men wounded or killed. And yet you took them by surprise. It's a contest, it's a game, but it's a deadly game. Uh, and you soon learn a lot about the guys that you're with. Not just your three man team but all the other guys you interact with and you feel a great deal of responsibility for them. You want to do everything you can to get them to be able to go back to the states. Um, and not in parts but together. It turns out the 101 airborne took a bunch of them and gave me the flag that you put on your shoulder and everything. I found out that I knew people in different ways. I knew that some guy, if he walked over here from here to there I could see him and it could be almost dark but I could see by the way he walks I know who the guy was. And, um, you just, um, you learn them and, uh, I made it a point of, everyone in that company, 150 or so, that I talked to all of them and uh, none of them had a reason to dislike me. As a matter of fact I was everyone's friend because I saved lives if I was to be affective. And uh but I really put a high value on every man's life. And then the lieutenants where out there with their infantry lieutenants, those guys really have to get close to those fellas and that's, um, that's the reason why those lieutenants are wounded usually was their extending themselves and uh those guys, a lot of

them get killed. A lot of them thankfully just get wounded, not killed, and we have medics out there and they take care of ya. It's hard to see but you see the little cut somewhere on my chin?

Q: Yes, sort of on that side.

Bob Gray: Yeah that was a grenade fragment. And I've got a, in this leg, they used to put these stakes out there and uh, cut a good sharp point on them and put them in the ground so when you go down an exit path, uh, you go with the grain. But if someone were to come in there to attack you, and I'm talking about the north Vietnamese, uh, that you're one of the- it'll rub, it'll go against you. Now I put a stake in one side and out the other and didn't know it. Cause the adrenaline was going so fast and it was next day, I sort of got up and walking around and one of the guys said, "What're you limping for smokey?" That was my nickname- my call sign- was Smokey Bob Gray. But, they can't call me by my first name because I'm a commissioned officer, but they abbreviated it to just smoke, they called me smoke. But I said, "I'm not limping," and he says, "Yes you are. You're limping on your right foot." And so I said, "Nothing's wrong with me, I'll prove it." I pull it up, I bring it up, and sure enough there the stake was broken off on both ends, it was through my leg. But that was nothing. I didn't even know that I did it when it happened and I didn't know it all night long. Well then the medic says, "Well Bob, we gotta take that out and we can't take it out, we have to continue the direction of however it was supposed to be going through," and that way it will leave less pieces of wood through there. Now there's one more thing I didn't tell you though. These stakes they're called pungey stakes it's made out of bamboo but they put them in there and then they urinate on them and defecate. So you talk about infection it's really high risk but evidently it'd been in the ground a while and a bunch of the hazardous material had washed off but then he still had to take it and pull it through, all the way through. And he says, "this might hurt a little bit, but you're a paratrooper you'll just take care of it." And I told him, "okay, fine, but don't you hesitate because if you do that slow I'm gonna knock you out." I threatened him. So he just got in there and got it all good, and next thing I know it was just out he did it so good. But it's things like that, those guys, they're doing their best to take

care of you. I had another grenade frag in my arm somewhere and I had a, uh, mortar shell that grazed my head and it's scarred less every year and just stuff like that I put up with. Now my recon sergeants I had four of them killed, and the fifth one when he was trying to help me out, and he had to cross this trail, there was a 50 caliber machine gun aimed right down there and I told him, "I need you to come over here with your radio from this position, from a little bit higher on the hill." And so he did, but in the process the third one lost his leg from going in that but it's what it took to do the job and I recommended him for an award for that and we never talked after that. He got sent to the rear and he couldn't come back and he got a job in the rear area and didn't like that either because time flies when you're in the forward area. There were also good moments, I think, that. This lieutenant coronel that was commander of all those infantry troops he later became a lieutenant general, a three-star general, but he was my battalion commander when I was with my forward area and he prided himself in being a very good bridge player. Well my company commander of the infantry didn't know squat about cards, especially bridge, and it can be a very complicated game. But he had another captain and my captain and myself wanted to play some bridge this one evening in the rear area, and this guy's call sign was gunfighter and he carried an extra pistol unauthorized. [Some of this interview was excised at the interviewee's request.]

But at Ohio state, in my early years, I was the best bridge player at Ohio state and I came to Alabama and the couple of years I was here I made a good name for myself. But anyway, in Vietnam gunfighter and I are now partners and this usually happens; it's three or four o'clock in the morning and we're playing bridge in a very forward area. It was like \$500 bet in the U.S. which you'll win if you and your partner win and gunfighter wanted to win and so I'm his partner and he was okay. He wasn't good but he wasn't bad. But we're half way through the game and they split the \$500 over to us because they knew it was over and there were good times like that. Later on we had some entertainment. The U.S.O's brought in and had me escort Martha Ray, you probably don't know her, but just a lovely lady. Before, I was her escort officer, and I picked her up where her plane landed and got her a jeep and her piano player and myself and the driver for the jeep. We stayed together for all of the day and a half almost two days. She

was going to do the show and she wanted to be in the most forward area where the most people would listen to her. She would yell and it got everyone's attention. She was the main one I escorted, who else; the guy with cbs, the anchor for cbs news, Charles. Anyway I escorted him, and got on the chopper and I was his guard, his security, and we went to the forward area and met a lot of people and then another forward area. He was told by the general, "This guy is going to take care of you and do what he says or you won't live long to even think about it." And so the guys they did trust the general that he wouldn't put a flunky captain with them that isn't going to, is going to know something. I always had a 45 pistol I had on my side and an m16 and a bayonet that I used as a pocket knife. It was fun, you're on your own. You didn't have to worry about anything, but you had to take care of those guys, they had to come back alive. So I always did things out of the ordinary. I had contact with them for a year or two but they never forget what I did the different things and all. That was nice. If you're a good person, a good observer, a good platoon leader, the company commander picks you to be the next commander, a lot of responsibility. I was picked to be a company commander as a second lieutenant which is unheard of. When a company commander comes forward they expect at least a captain. And I was the one who came forward, but they knew about me. They had all the company commanders in to take off on the assault, they just had to look at me and see if I understand what's right which if it means taking my life that's okay I'll do that.

Q: I wanted to ask to, what was it like being around the southern Vietnamese and the locals?

Bob Gray: Okay, I had the chance of being in the areas where we took back the land. And there's largely Vietnamese and Chinese influence on the race. And then the other group that are called Montagnard's, they're sort of like in Australia the people in the remote areas are not yellow people, they're almost white but they are mountain people. In south east Asia those were the people in the mountains that were not Orientals they were Caucasians but very rough around the edges. And I found I got to walk around the operation and through a lot of villages and isolated areas and we got to meet a lot of Montagnard's and I

have a lot of respect for them and they earned it. The average Vietnamese didn't have moxy, they didn't have much of anything, and they didn't have the demeanors that you could follow. As an overall reflection, the Vietnamese are very pleasant, they're beautiful people, and you have to love them, you have to care for them. The Montagnards take care of themselves better and there's an antagonism between them. The Vietnamese think the Montagnards are lower class and not that much else. But this was their land, we were here to help them.