

Captain Smokey Murphy
U. S. Army
November, 1968 – December, 1969
Interviewed by Elisa Marquez

I went to the University of Santa Clara in the fall of 1962 and all land grant schools had mandatory ROTC programs for the freshman and sophomore year. Because the draft was there and I had no firm plans after college, I decided that it made a lot more sense going into the army as an officer as opposed to going in as an enlisted man, so I went ahead with the last two years of ROTC.

My senior year, when it came time to picking a particular area that you were going to get into, I was one of the distinguished military graduates from Santa Clara and, as such, got to pick which area, so I picked armor, thinking that I would be more protected if I was in armor than if I was in infantry. I also got to choose my first assignment because I was a regular army officer, which was like having a West Point commission; you got certain benefits for doing it. After armor officer basic in Fort Knox, Kentucky, I decided to go to airborne school in Fort Benning, Georgia. All those were things that seemed interesting to do at the time.

There were lots of funny stories from my first days in the service. I happened to go on active duty in the summer of 1966 during an airline strike and I had to get to Fort Knox, Kentucky, riding in Air Force planes. The closest the Air Force could get me was someplace in Georgia and you had to have your military uniform on to be on a military airplane and I did not know that officers were not supposed to hitch hike. Actually, it's a crime, a military crime to hitch hike in your uniform if you're an officer, so when I showed up in Fort Knox in my uniform after hitch hiking from this place in Northern Georgia I got lectured severely on how stupid that was.

The very first officer I saw I walked by and saluted and said "Good morning, sir." The officer happened to be a woman. I didn't think much about the difference, but she called me back and put me through these paces about "What did you say?" and "Do I look that bad?" I didn't understand anything she was saying until it dawned on me that I kept saying "Yes, sir," "No, sir," "Yes, sir," and she was a woman and then she said "I hope you've learned your lesson, lieutenant. You may call me ma'am, not sir."

Boot camp didn't seem to be particularly difficult. I had been through a ROTC summer camp which was more like what an enlisted man goes through and it was just the physical aspects like people yelling in your face, so you put up with that or tolerated it. The armor officer basic in Kentucky was much more specific. I was going to be an armored platoon leader and so training was in armor tactics and there were classroom activities and field activities. They taught you how to fire machine guns and man tank weapons. My philosophy always was to pay some attention, but I knew that I was gonna have to pay a lot more attention once I got to a unit and actually found out what I was gonna have to do. The people who put you through your paces at Fort Benning – well, some of them were awfully capable and they certainly helped you learn how to jump out of an airplane – but there was a first or second lieutenant who was one of the most sadistic sons-of-bitches I ever met the whole time I was in the army. I just hated the guy. It had nothing to do with whether or not he was helping me learn to jump out of an airplane – it's just that he was a mean, mean person and he took great delight in being mean as opposed to being strict and helping you to learn the appropriate ways to jump out of an airplane.

I arrived in Vietnam in November of 1968 and served until late November or early December of 1969. I had been assigned to the 11th Armored Cavalry, so I went to their headquarters and was further assigned to the 1st Squadron of the 11th Armored Cavalry and I guess right away we went to the field. I honestly don't remember the very first day or a whole lot about what happened.

An Armored Cavalry unit is a combat unit and we were in combat in one form or another every single day that I was there. I mean, there were days that we were looking for combat and there were days that combat found us.

In an Armored Cavalry unit you are protected by a certain amount of armor, and I spent a lot of time in helicopters. Because of the politics of that time, I spent some time in armored vehicles and in jeeps too. Our casualties were lower than the casualties of an infantry unit. Our mission was a little different, and we had armored personnel carriers and what we called A-Cavs which were armored reconnaissance vehicles that were the forerunners to today's Humvee's. They were a tracked vehicle as opposed to a wheeled vehicle. And of course we had tanks, we had heavy tanks. When I was there we also received the new Sheridan tank which was a light tank that the army was testing, and we were one, if not the only, testing unit for that tank during that particular time period.

The mission was to be in combat every day, but I don't have a recollection that every day someone shot at me and I shot at somebody else, but there's lots of memorable incidents, lots of times that I was scared, so scared that I could hardly see straight. My overall impression is that you're scared a lot in a place like Vietnam and you just have to decide that you have a job to do and you're supposed to do it.

One of the first days a wheeled convoy was taking supplies from Ben Hua out to a forward position where our squadron headquarters was and that convoy had been ambushed. I suppose I was in that convoy, but I don't remember exactly what the ambush felt like. I do remember that as the ambush ended I was standing as close to an armored vehicle as I could because there was still some firing going on and Colonel Patton, who was the son of General Patton and was the 11th Cav Regimental Commander, had landed his helicopter and was walking, sort of just marching through the area. I remember saying "Sir, sir, there's still live fire going on here. You might want to come over here and stand next to me, next to the armored vehicle."

He looked at me like I was absolutely crazy and said "Nonsense Captain, I'm here to make damn sure this area is secure."

I had gone to Vietnam with the notion that the Vietnamese were smaller in stature than other ethnic groups. I'd only been in the country for a couple of days, but my experience had been the Vietnamese that I had seen were relatively small. As we're clearing the battlefield we came across an enemy soldier. And as I discovered and looked at him, he was bigger than I was and I was 6' 2" when I was in Vietnam and probably weighed 185 pounds. This fellow was 6' 4", 220 and it literally scared the taillights outta me thinking that the Vietnamese were that big. He turned out to be a Chinese advisor to the Vietnamese unit we had been in combat with that day and I didn't ever see any other Vietnamese combatants or advisors that big, but it certainly did set me back when I saw how big this fellow was.

I got bronze stars and Vietnamese medals and air medals. I was a captain and I guess in Vietnam a fairly senior captain, although in Vietnam you got promoted very rapidly. The job that I held for a good chunk of the time I was in the squadron was the job of the next position

above captain, major, so my commander put me in for a higher award when I was leaving Vietnam. I do remember that I got another bronze star which was not the award he put me in for because we were told that company grade officers, which a captain was, didn't qualify even though I had done all of the things one would have done to get this higher award. There were a lot of awards given in the field that I would pass on to somebody else. One of the important things, I thought, was that the young soldiers that worked for me were more entitled to those things than I was, so I would make sure they got those kinds of things.

I got injured, yeah, but not in any serious way. Little nickel-dime stuff that as far as I'm concerned didn't count. You know, missed ten minutes here, twenty minutes there, nothing terribly serious. I ended up while I was there with some stomach problems because of stress and worry, which is the way I handle stress. You get really, really mentally tired because you're on the go for long hours day after day and so you get really exhausted. There were certainly times where I knew I was beyond tired.

I stayed in touch with my family through letters. I was married and my wife lived very close to my parents since she went to UC Davis and my folks lived in Woodland. My mother bought this tape recorder and you could make and receive tapes. It wasn't for music, although I'm not sure why it wasn't for music, other than that the quality wasn't that good. I could make a tape and send it home and they could make a tape and send it back. We also had the ability to make phone calls. You could go some place every once in a while and actually call, but I was really hesitant to do that and didn't ever do that because I thought it would be too hard on everybody to just hear a voice. You couldn't talk like you were talking on a telephone. You always had to say "Over," once you finished your conversation because this was a military way of communicating. It just seemed so strained and so unreal, surreal, that I didn't want to do that. I did go on an R&R to Hawaii and met my wife after I had been in Vietnam for about eight months and spent five days there with my wife in August of 1969.

We never ran out of ammunition. We had more machine guns than we knew what to do with. They'd modified these A-Cavs from how we'd used them in Europe. They put armored plating on them and then we'd have M-60 machine guns, which is a 7.62 round machine gun. In combat the kids would just hang onto the trigger practically, they'd burn the damn things up. They'd fire to the point where it would malfunction and nobody ever wanted to be caught without machine guns. I think every A-Cav in our squadron had twice or maybe even more than the machine guns that were used. Part of the time I was the supply officer so I was making sure we'd ordered all these extra things and got them.

Some things that we really needed we couldn't get because the people in the rear area got them instead of us. There were a couple of times where our pilots had a hard time getting what was called Nomex flight suits and gloves that would retard in case the helicopter caught fire and the rear area people had the damn things. There were special kinds of sunglasses that the helicopter pilots had and those of us who flew in helicopters all the time were supposed to get and the rear area people had them sometimes.

We never had good beer. We always got the bad beer. The army bought lots of beer and they would send beer out to the field, but the rear area would get the better beer because they had access to it. Out in the field we got what we sort of thought was junk beer, but it was beer.

I made a promise to myself. I was not really excited about going to Vietnam. By the time I went I had pretty much figured out that the war in Vietnam had turned into a civil war and I was really questioning what the United States was doing there. I had been in the army for over two years and I was already a captain...my chances at this point of saying "Time out, I don't really want to go to Vietnam," didn't really exist. I knew when I went that if I questioned that decision, or if I questioned the morality, the ethics, whatever you want to call it of war on a day to day basis that I'd go crazy. I really did convince myself that I was not going to think about that day in and day out. I had a job to do and if I did my job as well as I could, fewer of the people that were in my command would be hurt, so I really focused on my job and making sure that we did our job. I didn't have a rabbit's foot or any of those things that I remember. It's hard to say I'm anti-army, because you know, I'm a decorated war veteran who was an officer, but I had a hard time with the "Yes, sir," and the "No, sir," stuff. The enlisted men called me Smokey or Captain Smokey and I kind of insisted on that. I know our squadron 1st Sergeant really didn't like that. He kept telling me it wasn't army but I just said I knew it wasn't army and that was just the way it was gonna be and as long as I do my job let's not fight about it.

In night defensive positions we'd have football games, we would put something up that you'd shoot baskets into and we'd have basketball somehow. The kids in the motorpool actually made me a set of weights since they knew that I liked to lift. They took cans that the food came in and put cement in them and took a bar, I'm not sure where they got the bar, it wasn't a perfect bar or anything, and they hooked up these weights and they carried them around every place we went. At night, if we weren't gonna play football or something or if I didn't have anything to do I would literally go out to where the motorpool part of the NDP was and I would lift these weights and run laps inside our defensive position. I actually think that they probably thought Captain Murphy was a little bit wacko, but it was another way of keeping my mind off of what I was doing and trying to keep some sort of normalcy to your life when you're in combat. You couldn't do it every night, but I did it more often than not.

Some stupid things happened while I was there. I remember one night I had taken a helicopter that had gotten damaged back to Ben Hua to get it repaired. I wasn't the pilot but I was the helicopter commander, so we took the helicopter to get fixed and we were gonna fly back the next day and we went into an Officers Club in Ben Hua. I hadn't been around women and there were these really pretty girls from the Red Cross. There was this band playing, and there were drinks, hard liquor – we didn't have hard liquor in the field – so I probably had a smidgen too much to drink because I hadn't had anything to drink in a long time. I asked this young lady to dance and so we were dancing and it was kinda fun. This major came up and did the old Western kinda thing; you know, pushed me aside and said "She's my girl."

I said "Hey buddy, I asked her to dance and she said yes, so why don't you get lost?" He took a swing at me and I took a swing at him and pretty soon there was an old fashioned Western brawl where we were breaking tables as we were trying to hit each other. In retrospect it seems so unbelievably stupid and childish. All of a sudden I got picked up by this very big person and I remember he took me outside and dropped me, or threw me out the door. I had gotten the idea how stupid this was and I remember standing up and dusting myself off and getting ready to go back inside. He asked what I was doing and I said "I'm going back inside. I get it, I was really stupid."

He said "No, you don't get it. You're not going back inside."

I said "Yeah, I am. I get it now. I'm not going to do anything stupid like that."

He said "No, you've been thrown out of the Officers Club tonight. You're not going back in." I realized 'Oh, I've actually been thrown out of this place,' and I don't even remember where I spent the night that night.

Every once in a while there was a group that came through and performed. Nobody had ever heard of most of them. The fancy shows that Bob Hope was a part of, we didn't ever have any of those where mainland people came out and entertained us. I remember a couple of times, way out in the boondocks; all of a sudden we'd find out that there's some group that was gonna perform for us. There would be women in go-go boots and they'd sing and there would be a trailer that they performed on. You'd watch 'em and you'd think it was pretty cool, kinda fun. You'd think about how brave they were because at any moment there could have live action, but these people really performed for us, way out in the field.

Sebastian Cabot was a guy who was on a TV show, a butler if I remember correctly on a show back in the states. He was very, very heavy and my job one day was to fly him out. He really wanted to go out into the field and see the troops. We couldn't get him into the helicopter because he was too big and the other helicopters were needed for combat. We had small helicopters called Loaches and then we had Hueys, but we couldn't afford to let him fly around in a Huey that day because of what we were doing. We tried to push him into that damn Loach and he just wouldn't fit, so he didn't get to go out in the field.

My service ended in a really, really strange way. I was set to get out of the army in June of 1970 or 71. My wife and I and a friend had this plan that we were gonna tour the United States. We'd bought this Volkswagen van and we were all set to go all around the United States, but my orders didn't come. Finally they decided my orders had been lost, so somebody said "Well, why don't you just go? We know that you're out. Check in with military bases as you go around the country and we'll just twix the orders when they come in to you and you can be discharged from that base."

Well, we spent several months going all around the United States and I went into a couple of bases and every time we went in...we were in a hippie bus and maybe they didn't want to spend a lot of time with us...but they would contact Fort Louis and nobody seemed to know anything about orders. I finally got back to Fort Louis a few days before I was supposed to start grad school at UC Davis and by this time I had grown long hair and a beard and moustache. I went in and said "What's the deal? I still haven't gotten out, technically."

They sent me to where they processed you out and they didn't find my orders, so this major says "Show back up here tomorrow at 6:00 in your uniform. And for God's sake, get a haircut and shave!" I didn't want to do that...this was 1971 when the Vietnam War protests were going on and I was going to be on a UC campus in California and I wanted to be a teacher so I didn't want to get a haircut and all that stuff. I asked what my options were because I really didn't want to get a haircut and the major told me in no uncertain terms that I had no options.

I asked for his commanding officer, so I ended up with this full colonel. I explained the situation to him and he was so nice about the whole thing. He said "Alright, look. Everybody else here comes to work at 7:30 and I haven't really helped anybody to get out of the army, but well, I'm in charge, so I sympathize with you. You show up here, and for God's sake, don't wear your uniform, at 6:00 in the morning and I'll process you out of the army." This is now

three, four, five months after I was supposed to be out of the army and we go in and I knew that I was supposed to get out of the army way back when. He was processing me out when all of a sudden he started figuring out my pay because he was gonna pay me through that day. I thought 'Wait a minute, I've been touring the United States,' but he looked at me and said, "Captain, here's your choice. The army has to show you on some duty report, so you can either be on active duty until today or we can put you as AWOL (which meant absent without leave) and somebody can court marshal you. Those are your two choices." I got paid this rather substantial amount of money for the time...two, three, four thousand dollars...which was a lot of money back then. I remember getting it and going back to Davis and putting it in a bank and leaving it there for three or four years because I just knew the army was gonna come back and eventually say "We want our money back," but they never did, so I got out of the army in a very strange way.

I don't see or hear from any of the close friends I made anymore. I belong to the 11th Armored Cavalry Association and I do look at that magazine. I look for names of people that I served with, and once in a while I'll see a name and because of what I do during the summer, I travel around and teach all over the United States and as the International Baccalaureate coordinator I've been to cities all over the United States and Canada, so I'll often look at a phone book and see if I run into a name. I'm gonna retire and I think that's one of the things I'll do, see if I can't find a couple of 'em since I'm sure curious. I taught at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, for a couple of summers and a lot of the young officers from the Armored Cavalry unit seemed to come from the South. I'm not exactly sure why, but they did. I would go through the phonebooks looking for names and I never found them but I was looking in Atlanta and places like that and maybe they just didn't live in those places.

There were lots of things about the military that I enjoyed, lots of parts of the job that I enjoyed. I was given a tremendous amount of leadership possibilities at a very young age. I served for different lengths of time as the executive officer of this squadron and there were 1400 men and all the armor and helicopters to go with it and I was twenty-seven or twenty-eight at the time. That's a lot of responsibility and I feel blessed to have had those opportunities. I really enjoyed being a good officer. Even the Vietnam experience itself was hugely valuable. It really helps you to understand what's important and what's not important to you. I liked being Captain Murphy. My dad had been a police officer and he was Captain Murphy, so that was kind of cool to me, to be a Captain Murphy too. But ultimately I had to deal with the fact that if you stay in the army, especially a combat branch like I would have probably done, you ultimately have to deal with the fact that army units are designed to kill people. I know lots of people who stayed in and they say "You're protecting people" or "You're defending people" but the reality is that the way you protect and the way you defend is to kill people. At least that's what we did in Vietnam. Well, I don't make a lot of value judgments about people that want to do that, I just didn't want to do that. I didn't want to be all of a sudden sixty years old someday and realize that my whole professional life had been trying to be the best possible army officer I could be. I thought it would be better for me to be a school teacher and to be the best possible school teacher I could be.

If you're going to go to war, if you're going to put soldiers in an environment where you have to kill people, you have to be awfully darn sure that what you're doing makes sense and

that it's the right thing to do. I have difficulty sometimes where the people who make those decisions, who are responsible for those decisions, do it without having any experience of war. I had some trouble with Bill Clinton being the Commander-in-Chief. I didn't have any trouble with him being the president; I thought he was a pretty good president. I teach economics and I actually think his economic policies make lots of sense and lots of his foreign policy made sense. It was just the fact that he was Commander-in-Chief of the army and he had been a conscientious objector. I had some difficulties with that. The present President Bush's father was a war hero. When he wanted to talk about whether or not we should go to war at least I had a sense that he knew what he was talking about. Our present President, he was in the National Guard, and I don't even think he was a very good or honorable member of the National Guard if I remember correctly. I think he tried to figure out how to not even go to National Guard meetings, and yet he kind of presents himself as a military commander-in-chief and I have problems with that. I just wish he wouldn't do that. I'm not suggesting that his policies are right or wrong -- I have views about that -- but it's just when he tries to overplay the hand, like when he flew out to the deck of the aircraft carrier and they all cheered their Commander-in-Chief and by connection he somehow was a war hero. I didn't like that.

I had flashbacks from things in Vietnam for a long time. I teach...oh, it's gonna happen to me right now [10 second pause]...I have often times taught units on Vietnam. For the past ten or twelve years I've taught International Baccalaureate classes called Global Studies and it's the history of the 20th century. We look at Vietnam and I've been pretty honest with the kids about the war and it's always really hard when I do that. It's hard to remember some of the things. You tend to compartmentalize or tuck off, the bad things. That's always been a problem. The other side of that has been that it's really helped me to understand who I was and what my values were and that's more important to me. Over time I don't have flashbacks; I just get kinda teary-eyed and emotional talking with the classes that I teach about Vietnam.