

Interview with Bill Martin

VRV-V-D-2015-076

Interview # 1:

Interviewer: H. Wayne Wilson

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Martin: My name is Bill Martin, and I live in North Pekin, Illinois.

Wilson: All right, and Martin is spelled?

Martin: M-a-r-t-i-n.

Wilson: Okay. You were going to high school where, and when was this, and how did you transition into the service?

Martin: I went to Woodruff High School. And I graduated in '65. And that December 13th, I joined the Army. I went in from there and I went down to, did my, Fort Polk, Louisiana, did my basic training and AIT down there in Fort Polk.

Wilson: And your AIT was in?

Martin: I started out in infantry, and then after I got finished with that, I got into commo, kind of like a commo thing, but it was crypto. And I learned crypto down at Fort Polk. We had a nice special little thing there all wrapped up in barbed wire when we went in to do our top-secret crypto machines. By the time we got done and I got ready to ship to Vietnam, they had discontinued the machines. They were no longer of use for anything.

Wilson: So no crypto for you?

Martin: No crypto. It was an old system, and I don't know, it was a secret, real secret system. I don't even talk much about it now because I don't even know if they want the word out on it, but it was funny machines.

Wilson: So did you use anything from your AIT training?

Martin: Nothing whatsoever. I worked a little bit on, as a lineman over there, but you didn't stretch much wire over in Vietnam either.

Wilson: So when did you ship out, and where did you end up in country?

Martin: I shipped out from, out of, down there at Fort Irwin, California. We went down there and did some of our jungle training in the desert. And then from there, they shipped us out on a ship, USS *Barrett*, out of Oakland. And we went from there to Okinawa. We spent twenty-four hours at Okinawa,

resupplied the ship, troop ship, and then we shipped from there and went to Quy Nhon. And I got, hid in country in Quy Nhon.

Wilson: And those of them, the people who are watching that don't know where it is, where in country is that?

Martin: That's in, just almost about in the middle of Vietnam somewhere. Just maybe a little south of the halfway mark, I guess.

Wilson: Do you recall how long it took to get over on a ship?

Martin: Over thirty days.

Wilson: Thirty days to get?

Martin: Thirty-two days, if I remember right. We did do the whole ceremony of the demon of the deeps and all that crap, got my little certificates, being initiated and everything.

Wilson: Did you, this is jumping ahead for a moment, but did you fly back then, when you were done with your tour?

Martin: When I come home, yeah, I flew out of Cam Ranh Bay.

Wilson: So you arrive in country, and you have an MOS, but you're not going to use it. So what happened?

Martin: It was just, circumstances I guess. My MOS was, started out working with, because I was a communications in that, so I was working with artillery units,

and we worked as an FO [forward operating site] basically, or spotters and stuff like that. And the unit I went over with, I hardly ever spent any time with whatsoever because everybody, all the FOs in that was kind of mixed up. You might go out under your unit, but you'd always use somebody else, somebody in the unit did most of your firing for you, when you needed to fire. We didn't, it's not like bang, bang, shoot them up all the time, like a lot of people think. It just, some days were boring. Some days you just spent all day trying to hide to get to where you want to go and stuff like that.

Wilson: Could you explain to us what an FO does, and how you coordinated with, and this was with artillery units, right?

Martin: Artillery units, yeah. Well, when you went out, we were embedded with infantry units mostly when we went out or small squads. It wasn't always big ones. And whenever we found the enemy or some infantry unit needed support, we had our job. I was with the lieutenant and an RTO [radiotelephone operator] and me. And our job was to call back to the artillery unit, which is in the rear, and send coordinates to them. And the coordinates we took off the map and we'd give them the coordinates from the map, and they'd put it into their map, and they'd plot the map and turn it into other numbers, and they would give it to the, send it to the guns with an azimuth and everything, and then they would set their guns. They would fire one round for a spotting round, which was a smoke round, usually. Well, it wasn't usually always. And then after that, we just tell them, fire for effect. And they just start dumping iron on them.

Wilson: So what did you do specifically? Did you have to go out into the, a secure area, so to speak, and spot?

Martin: No secure area. We were with infantry. We were within sight of the enemy all the time.

Wilson: So you stayed in a place where you, hopefully, would not be spotted.

Martin: Yeah, we would try to hide in the jungle, that's where we were at. So we could get down. If they seen you, you were in trouble because you wouldn't be able to get your artillery out in time. And that did happen sometimes. You'd get spotted, and then you, cause the first thing when they start hearing the rounds coming in, the first thing they start looking for is an FO, cause somebody had to be close enough to get the coordinates of where they were at. So then they'd start looking for us.

Wilson: And you were spotted on occasion?

Martin: On occasion we were spotted, and we were doing some pretty good foot beating.

Wilson: So you had binoculars, et cetera?

Martin: Oh yeah, we had everything we needed. We had binoculars, we had ammo. Most of the time there was just three of us. Sometimes, we had maybe be four.

Wilson: And then when you called in the smoke round, and then you told them?

Martin: Yeah, that was the marking round.

Wilson: Little long, little short? Whatever?

Martin: Right, and then you'd send them a minute adjustment, and either short so many, or long so many. And then they would adjust on their maps, and I had my map. And then, usually after one, no more than two adjustments, you're getting them. And sometimes you're lucky. You really, for some reason, who knows, sometimes we dumped our first rounds on them. That's usually, usually you shoot one gun unless you're really pressed. You fire one gun, and that's your base gun. And that spots the first round, and from then you adjust over or under, left or right, to bring it in. And if you don't have time, then you just, whole battery, fire for effect, which means dump it all on.

Wilson: Did you spend your entire time as an FO?

Martin: Yeah. But that doesn't mean I was in the jungle all the time, every day, day-in-day-out. You'd be there, sometimes I'd go days with just being back at the base camp or would be bouncing around. I did quite a bit of highway security with convoys that would go up and down the highway from Quy Nhon, that's where all the supplies come in. And then we'd have to, they would send them on off to the different, other, larger LZs and that they could convoy them into. And they always needed gun jeeps and that to protect them. And spent a lot of time, when there wasn't a unit to go out with and be an FO, we worked with a gun jeep, protecting a convoy.

Wilson: And on these convoy trips, what exactly were you doing?

Martin: Usually we had our jeep, we had a lieutenant and me, and then my RTO, and either me or the RTO would be standing in the back with a machine, it was an M60 machine gun. And the other of us with be in the front seat with the LT with the rifle.

Wilson: You were there for how long?

Martin: Eighteen months.

Wilson: And the normal tour of duty was twelve months. Why did you choose to do eighteen months?

Martin: Don't know. Guys had been jumping into it, and so I went ahead and signed up. And also helped me that when that time was up, my tour, my enlistment was up. And I thought after being over there, I wasn't going to putting up with stateside. So I just went ahead and extended out. Actually, I went past my DEROS [Date of Expected Return from Overseas]. Four days.

Wilson: Is there a way of explaining because, when I came back, I still had time left, and my duty was right at the end of the war. I got out in December '72, and I didn't want to be stateside. I wanted to be over there, but the war was ending, so I didn't have an option. They, fortunately, they said, "The war's winding down. You're a Vietnamese translator, we don't need you." So I was able to get out of the Army at that point in time. But is there a way of explaining to the general public why you don't want to come back stateside after having served in a warzone?

Martin: Back at that time, when we come back. When we got, I come back to Anchorage, and then from Anchorage to Fort Lewis, Washington. And when we landed, we come in through the back door. And they bussed us out with blacked out windows in the bus at night because at Fort Lewis, Washington all the protestors were still there and they would beat on the bus and that. So they decided, they started running the buses out the back gates with all the windows blacked out so nobody could see who was in the buses. And that's how they got us out of there, but all the protestors were still there. And when I spent two days getting all my paperwork and my medical and all that together for me to be released to go home and went to Fort Lewis, Washington. All I had to wear was, I had my greens, the new clothes they give me. And we went to the airport, and you kind of just had to sit back and hide and stay away from everybody because protestors was all over the airport still. I flew into Chicago in the middle of the night and O'Hare was closed and I had to sleep in a chair and wait to fly out the next morning to get home.

Wilson: You mentioned your medical papers. You were injured in Vietnam.

Martin: Yes.

Wilson: Could you tell us how that happened?

Martin: A mortar round. We got hit. And mortar round, I didn't realize it at first. It was up at LZ Tom, and I think we took three rounds. I got hit. The CO got hit real bad, he took a hit, a head wound, which I found out years later that he survived it. And I took one in the leg and a couple of other guys, Sergeant

White, I think is what his name was, if I remember right, he took a hit. It was all shrapnel, but you only sent one mortar in and they got lucky they got three people.

Wilson: Was that, were you on the base?

Martin: That was at LZ up there, LZ Tom up north. That's where I worked at all the time, or not all the time, I spent a lot of time up there. It was an artillery firebase. We had to usually, the road up there, it was Highway One, and it was always mostly blocked off. And before we could get a convoy or any vehicles up, the infantry, not the infantry, I'm sorry, the engineers come in and swept the road looking for mines. We got lucky one day and they found an eight-inch round laying there buried. And we followed a commo wire out, probably the length of a football field. Come to the end of it, we thought were going to find a detonator but there was no detonator on it which meant they wasn't going to fire the round. Nobody knew we were coming and we got by. We pulled all the wire up. Engineers dug it out. And they come to the conclusion as hard as the ground was they had no clue how long it had been buried. And we thought maybe the Viet Cong buried it and forgot it was there. I don't know how many times they went up that road. You always had to sweep the road going up and how many times they missed it, I don't know. It was scary.

Wilson: You stop and think about that, yes. Your injury was to your leg?

Martin: Yes, left leg.

Wilson: And shrapnel injury, obviously.

Martin: Shrapnel.

Wilson: You carried that, parts of that shrapnel back to America?

Martin: I, for quite a while there, I used to set metal detectors off when I'd go in certain places where they had the metal detectors to go through. I'd have to sit there and take my shoe off to show them my leg, that there was a scar there. Then they'd take that handheld wand go over my leg and it'd burp a little bit.

Wilson: And you've had some surgeries?

Martin: Oh yeah.

Wilson: As a result of more than just the shrapnel?

Martin: More than just the shrapnel. Lot of a, I've had, lost half of my lung, got that taken out. I've had, found a tumor, tumor taken out of my left ear. Tumor removed from my larynx, and a tumor removed from my nose.

Wilson: Was there any diagnosis?

Martin: The doctor, when he first started on it, when he found the thing in my lung, he passed away now. He passed away not long after I'd had my surgery. And he asked me about my, if I had a trip over to Southeast Asia, because it was, I come home, and I'd already been home like six years when all this stuff started popping up. I told him that I'd been over in Southeast Asia in Vietnam. And he flat told me, he says, "I'm not going to talk about that. I'm not going

to get involved in that mess.” And he says, “I could help you, but I won’t discuss it.” That was all he would say. I tried to contact him a few times to see if I could get him to say something because I was thinking about trying to get something, maybe proof that that’s what I had for disability for the government. And he wasn’t going to get involved in it. I don’t blame him. But then later on, he passed away, died from lung cancer. Then when it finally come down, then I thought a-ha, I was right. When they started checking people out, and finally admitting that Agent Orange was more than what they thought it was.

Wilson: And you’re now on disability through the VA?

Martin: Yeah, yeah, cause I’ve had more surgeries since then.

Wilson: A total of?

Martin: I don’t know. About twelve.

Wilson: A dozen.

Martin: If you count all, yeah, probably a dozen. If you count some of the little bitty surgeries and stuff. And some of them, I’m not saying it was all connected to my time in the service overseas. I can’t prove any of it, well, I. It was proven a few years back there, they, there was a presumption that if you were in Vietnam and you had certain things, it was service connected. And that’s where my service connection comes from.

Wilson: You, generally speaking, you consider yourself fortunate after your service in Vietnam?

Martin: Oh, yeah. I spent a lot of time drunk.

Wilson: Was that self-medication?

Martin: Yeah. Yeah.

Wilson: And how'd you get by that?

Martin: A few years ago, I just quit. It was just, I don't know. I was one of those guys when I drink, I drink. If I started drinking at five o'clock, I was drinking at five o'clock the next day. My weekends would start on Friday, they would end on Sunday sometimes. I drank all through. Sometimes I drank twenty-four, around the clock.

Wilson: Yet you consider yourself fortunate? You had some friends who didn't make it back?

Martin: Correct.

Wilson: How many?

Martin: Eight or nine.

Wilson: That didn't come back? And these were people you knew personally? I mean, from high school, sports.

Martin: I went to school with some of them.

Wilson: When you look back, and this was '65 you went into the service? And you got out in?

Martin: '68.

Wilson: When you look back, are you proud of your service?

Martin: Yes.

Wilson: You did the right thing.

Martin: Mm-hmm.

Wilson: And so did the fifty-eight thousand plus that didn't come back. And so you, the reason I ask if you were proud is because you came back in, you may not have talked a lot about it, but you certainly did something about recognizing veterans. Can you tell me a little bit about your service to your fellow Army members, and the organizations you've been participating in?

Martin: Well, I finally, after all the years, I'm a member of just about all of them. I was on the committee to build the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Springfield. When it first started, I don't remember when that was, twenty-eight years ago? Twenty-nine years ago? I'm still affiliated with that. I'm still a committee member. I go down there every year. We do a full weekend vigil for the POWs because who knows, they're not all home yet. And we do that from Friday to Sunday. We have a Saturday ceremony, then we close it down on Sunday. But we recognize a twenty-four-hour vigil watch down in

Springfield. And we got guys from all over the state. Some of them have been there as long as I have, and some of them will come and they will be around for a few years, and then you won't see them again. But it means a lot to me because I was on the original committee. I was on the original fundraising that we did. I went around and did some fundraising for it.

Wilson: How long did it take you to get that memorial put up?

Martin: Five years.

Wilson: Five years?

Martin: Yeah.

Wilson: Other organizations that you've been participating in? How else have you helped fellow veterans?

Martin: Well, I volunteered, for a long time there, I volunteered down at the VA for a Medal of Honor recipient from Peoria here, Lieutenant Colonel Hal Fritz. I volunteered down there, helping him out when he needed a hand, worked in his office and that. Served in the offices in the VFWs and that I still, to this day, now and then, somebody'll, a veteran needs something, or needs a little bit of help, I'll go help him out. All they got to do is let me know and be honest about it, and not being, just trying to get something free. I don't mind helping somebody and giving something free, but freeloaders I don't, I can't handle.

Wilson: You, for many years, were on the executive board for what was called 92 Bravo.

Martin: Yes, yes.

Wilson: Can you explain what 92 Bravo was?

Martin: Well, we named it 92 Bravo because it started in '92. I'm not sure, Bravo comes from just bravo, I guess. But we put on a veterans' ball for, what, ten years, I think we got through it, didn't we?

Wilson: I think it might've been eleven, twelve.

Martin: Yeah, something like that. But yeah, we put on a nice formal ball. You didn't have to wear, you didn't have to be all gussied up. The girls loved it because they got to put new, clean clothes and all the good fancy stuff on. And we always brought a good speaker in from out of town, best we could find easily. And all the money we raised, we give it to the local ROTC units to help the scholarships for the kids that were in the ROTC. And we let them pick who their top cadet was, and that's who we give the money to.

Wilson: I want to talk a little bit about the photos. I don't want to, there are some photos of...

Martin: Oh, in my book?

Wilson: You, and in your book. Could you tell us where those, I mean, where were most of these photos taken?

Martin: Well, they're all taken up in Central Highlands. I spent all my time, I never needed to go down south, but the Central Highlands was close to, up, at times you get real close to the DMZ. Like LZ Tom wasn't too far from the DMZ. But spent all my time in that area, either back at a base camp somewhere, where they had an artillery unit, spending a few days.

Wilson: We've been talking in acronyms here. Can you explain to people about LZ, FO, RTO.

Martin: LZ's a landing zone. And you needed that because a lot of times, mostly where I was at, you couldn't get there in a vehicle. So everything was choppered up. They'd bring all your equipment up. They'd bring you in. And FO was forward observer. The guy that was out being snoopy, and trying to find the enemy, and then you'd call them in. And the artillery unit set back at the firebase, called the firebase cause that's where they're based at and they're going to start firing from there. I guess. Did I miss any?

Wilson: RTO?

Martin: Oh an RTO, yeah. The RTO is what basically I was. A radio, they called it a radio telephone operator, that come from way back in the World War II time. Radios weren't all that good a lot of times and they really communicated with these field telephones with telephone wire. Very few cases I ever saw of that over 'Nam except in large, LZ or something. They'd use it within the LZ, and then the artillery guys would use it within the fire communication center, and

each gun had a telephone on it. And they'd use that telephone there, and it was just a closed-circuit phone.

Wilson: We talked about your service in Vietnam. We talked about some of the veteran-related participation that you've had. What did you do when you got back to country?

Martin: Got drunk, first day.

Wilson: And we've discussed that, too.

Martin: Yeah, I did that, and I think it was six months later, I was married with a kid coming.

Wilson: And then, for employment?

Martin: Oh, employment? I had ninety days, I think it was, before I had to back to Caterpillar, and I used every one of them. And then went back and worked at Caterpillar, retired from Caterpillar with close to thirty-seven years.

Wilson: So had you worked at Caterpillar prior to going into?

Martin: I went in and I got my, I went in before I went in service, I went in and got thirty days. At Caterpillar, at the time, you work thirty days, and you were in the union, and you had a job. And if you left to go to the service, your job was guaranteed. So basically that's why I went and got into Caterpillar and got my thirty days in, so that if I survived Vietnam, I come home, I had a job, cause they had to take me back.

Wilson: And what did you do at Caterpillar?

Martin: I started, when I first come back, I just pushed a broom for quite a while. And then I got in with the millwrights, and I was a millwright.

Wilson: Is there anything that I haven't asked you with regard to your service in country, or your services after coming back that you'd like to share with us?

Martin: No, we about covered it all. Other than, I, took me a while to, I spent a lot of time trying to get over anger. I still have a problem at times, but I don't drink anymore, and that helps.

Wilson: What were you mad at?

Martin: I don't know. Sometimes it was me. Sometimes somebody could just do something, and here I am. Or if I seen somebody, now and then, I'd see people picking on some little guy or something, drunk at a bar, spent a lot of time tending bar. You know how the littlest drunk in the bar and passes out, how everybody messes with him, well, I. That made me mad. I don't know if it wasn't so much whether I was going to protect him, or get me the opportunity to get a hold of somebody, just get some of my anger out. I can't really say. I wasn't an angel. I wasn't nobody's guardian angel. Just somebody can't defend himself, it'll mess with you.

Wilson: Did some of that anger, I mean, do you know that that came from, at least in part, from your service in Vietnam?

Martin: I don't know. I never did blame it on that, but I wouldn't doubt that.

Wilson: Bill Martin, thank you so much for sharing with us.

Martin: Thank you.