

Fitzsimmons Clifford Interview pt 2 3-16-99

[Speaker 1]

Right. And basically, these things are edible. These things are not, you know, that type of thing as far as what we did.

I mean, they didn't take us out and dump us out and say, you've got to get back here in three days. We'd already been through that type of thing. We knew how to read maps and compasses and figure out where we were and what not.

That was not the type of survival it was. It was, here, now we've got you in this tropical climate. Here is what you can survive on and here's what you can't.

And those type of things that we were learning there. And I don't remember how long it was. It seemed like it was maybe a week, maybe ten days, I don't remember.

[Speaker 2]

What did you think about being put in this tropical environment all of a sudden? I mean, the heat, the...

[Speaker 1]

That didn't really bother me.

[Speaker 2]

The bugs, the snakes, the...

[Speaker 1]

You know, I expected it. We already knew enough about that area to know that we could expect that. But you've got to remember that Vietnam is not all wet, damp jungle.

There are highlands and what not. And the areas that surround Vietnam are not all dense jungle. There are different types of terrain.

Like down in the south part, where I never was stationed, there was what they called the Delta. It was a lot of flooded swampy areas where up in the north part where we went out, it wasn't. There was some along the river basins and what not, but there was not as much as what there was as far as swamp.

But it was all hot and it was all... Don't get me wrong, there wasn't a lot of temperature variation.

[Speaker 2]

It was hot. Hot and hotter.

[Speaker 1]

And it was wet, damp, muggy climate.

[Speaker 2]

When you got to Vietnam, you got off the plane, I assume you went on a plane. What was the first impression that you had when you got off the plane over there?

[Speaker 1]

I think you look around wondering where the war is because there's always people going here and there not paying attention to anything. I mean, it's just like a regular base that might be in the United States as far as what people are doing.

[Speaker 2]

Where did you go into when you landed in Vietnam? Where was it?

[Speaker 1]

We went into Cam Ranh Bay, Tan Son Nhat area, and then we went north. But we had some briefing, what they call in-country briefing there. And my group went to an Air Force intelligence headquarters in the Nang area.

[Speaker 2]

I've heard a lot of people say that one of the most vivid memories of getting off the plane was the smell. You didn't have a problem with that where you landed?

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, you could smell.

[Speaker 2]

There were some places that people said it was so horrendous that it would almost make you sick.

[Speaker 1]

It was offensive until you got used to it, then you just didn't notice it anymore. It was offensive probably for a period of a couple of days or maybe other times it seemed like it was worse, that you might notice it again, but it was there all the time. It's just that you got acclimated to it.

You learn to acclimate yourself physically to separate out the things that are normal. It causes you to distract yourself, so you learn to accept what's normal and you aren't distracted by it. Therefore, you can smell a man smoking a cigarette 100 yards away if you're used to the odors that are going to be normal.

[Speaker 2]

Right. So you got over there. What did you start to do when you went over there?

You didn't go through any other training. Once you got there, you just left your unit?

[Speaker 1]

Once I was assigned to my unit, which was the second Black Tiger unit, Second Black Tiger? Yeah, we were called the Black Tigers. The Air Force Special Forces were called.

And maybe because our berets were black, I don't know. But my briefing was by CIA and intelligence people as to what our missions were, which we were to establish safe villages for downed pilots who were going to be flying missions over the north. And we were establishing safe villages in Laos and Cambodia for those people to get into if they were shot down.

[Speaker 2]

What did you do? You said establish a safe village. What did that involve?

[Speaker 1]

We would go into the village, and usually we were carrying a CIA person with us who we were his support. He was to talk the village leader into letting their village be a safe village.

[Speaker 2]

That was a CIA person?

[Speaker 1]

Yeah. We would give them certain supplies, rice. We would give them meats.

We would give them some weapons to protect themselves from communist troops. We would give them a means to communicate with us by radio if they got a downed pilot. They would be told if there was a downed pilot in the area to seek it out and try to find him and get him back.

He was supposed to be trying to find them. They were supposed to try to find him and get him into their village where he could be hidden safely. And that doesn't necessarily mean he was actually in the village.

He might be just outside the village being hidden, but that they knew where he was so that we could come and get him. And some of the villages that were agreeable to doing this were actually agreeable because they were politically sympathetic to our side of the cause, and some were agreeable to doing it simply because the leader said you will do it. The village leader said you will do this because he was getting paid by us to see that.

None of them were safe as far as we considered them actually safe. They were safe only as much as it was a place that we felt like we could make a contact and get the pilot out quickly because there was always somebody in that village who was sympathetic to the other side.

[Speaker 2]

Sure, I would imagine that there would be. That's what I was going to ask is how, I mean obviously the CIA person had some intelligence on which villages were more likely to cooperate, but you still think there's probably also going to be people in any village that are from the other side.

[Speaker 1]

Right. And that was basically why we had to get them out fast. If somebody from that village was going to tell the other side that there was an American pilot in this village, it would still take time to get that message to them and they would respond to it trying to capture that pilot.

We had to be there first in getting that. And that's why we were located the way we were in quick strike teams, usually five to seven men, and located, I would be out for 12 to 14 days in a position to reach any one of three or four villages very quickly once we knew there was a downed pilot in the area. And we would call in our escape to a certain LZ to get out of there with that pilot, a lot of times before we even had the pilot in hand.

[Speaker 3]

Wow.

[Speaker 1]

Because it took a while for the choppers to get to us. Once we were lifted, we had a pilot in hand, that village may never be ever used again.

[Speaker 2]

It would not be?

[Speaker 1]

It may never be.

[Speaker 2]

It may never be.

[Speaker 1]

Most likely would not be, but it could be.

[Speaker 2]

Okay.

[Speaker 1]

But see, once you lift one out, then they probably already know that that was a village. And the villages were roped over. They were actually attacked by the Pathet Lao.

And the NBR, when they were in that area, they would attack those villages and make them pay a heavy price for having helped us. So if we went back to that village looking for support again, we might not find it. Most likely would not.

However, if we were able to bring that pilot out quickly and nobody knew that we got him out of there, that village would say, we got another pilot down in the area, we're going to go get him because we're going to get some money out of you all. And we bought pilots back. We carried in as high as \$25,000 in gold bars to bring back pilots.

[Speaker 2]

Oh my goodness. You carried that with you?

[Speaker 1]

Yes.

[Speaker 2]

Out in the jungle, gold bars.

[Speaker 1]

We didn't have it there until they told us we're going to have to buy this guy back.

[Speaker 2]

How would you know if you would have to buy the pilot?

[Speaker 1]

The contact made by the villagers. Sometimes pilots were down two or three days before they would make it to a village because they went down in the north and got across the border to Cambodia or Laos to a safe village. The pilots were made to memorize safe village locations that would be in the vicinity that they would fly.

In other words, if you're flying over in this quadrant, if you're on a mission and whatnot, they're going to put you in this quadrant. Your closest safe villages are here, here, and here. Memorize these locations because they couldn't carry any information on them as to where a safe village was.

Because if they were killed and crashed and that information was on them or in their plane, so they had to just memorize these locations. Well, they go down. It might take them two or three days of moving at night and hiding during the day to get to a safe village.

But if the safe village knew they were down, they would go across the border into the north Vietnam side and burn them out.

[Speaker 3]

Okay.

[Speaker 1]

And if they did this, they expected more money.

[Speaker 3]

Sure.

[Speaker 1]

And a lot of times money for just a village leader was paid in gold where the village itself, if they were all involved, might be paid in commodities of rice, food, goods, and whatnot. And it was up to us to get to that pilot before any opposing forces might turn him over to the north as a POW. And they were out buying our pilots too.

[Speaker 2]

The other side was?

[Speaker 1]

Yes.

[Speaker 2]

Okay, highest bidder. Do I hear \$2,000?

[Speaker 1]

Sometimes they were buying him by intimidation and sometimes they were buying him by cash or food goods or arms. Arms was a big market thing because they were sellable everywhere. So you didn't have to trade in money.

You could trade in arms. And believe me, our CIA did that.

[Speaker 2]

Did they? I can't say that I'm surprised.

[Speaker 1]

And don't forget that at that time, though that I was not aware of for some time, there was a lot of drugs moving through. And the CIA was taking advantage of that.

[Speaker 2]

A lot of drugs. Did you have a problem with drugs at all in your unit?

[Speaker 1]

The one guy that I knew in my unit, the second time I was over there was involved in drugs. The other guys, myself included, I tried a little of that smoke weed. It freaked me clear out.

I was in Da Nang at the time. And we were on a chopper pad just right outside of Da Nang called Ventura. And I decided I'd try this shit.

And we were sitting on a bunker and Charlie threw a few rocks in and we just sat there and laughed.

[Speaker 2]

After smoking a stack? After smoking a stack.

[Speaker 1]

And the next day I thought how stupid I was that I didn't even go inside the bunker or nothing, just sat there on top of it and laughed at Charlie. But I thought, you know, I don't think I'll do any more of that shit. And I never did.

[Speaker 2]

Good, good for you.

[Speaker 1]

But there were people who I'm sure had real drug problems that I was aware of, the people, but they weren't necessarily in my outfit.

[Speaker 2]

The relationship that you had with people in your unit, what was it like, like your relationship with both your peers and your superiors?

[Speaker 1]

The relationship was very difficult. At first you wanted everybody to be pals, but as you lost guys and had to replace them, you began to feel like you didn't want to feel that way about the next guy that died. So you were close, but you were keeping a push away distance.

You didn't say, I don't want to be your friend, but you didn't actually become as close as you were with the first guys you were with.

[Speaker 2]

What about the officers? Did you think they were generally competent? Did they treat you well?

Were they generally incompetent?

[Speaker 1]

Well, they were competent in the sense that they knew what we had to do and they were a part of it. And there were some officers who went through the same special forces training that we did. But they were not as, I guess, I don't know, how do you describe it?

They weren't as mission oriented as we were. We were mission oriented in the sense that we felt like that what we were doing was the difference in life and death from somebody out there. But they never gave us their opinion that that's what they felt like.

They felt like that we were just doing a job.

[Speaker 2]

I'm surprised because most of the pilots that wouldn't be down were officers. So you think that they would be...

[Speaker 1]

I know, and I know what you're saying, but it just didn't seem that way. But you've got to remember that most of these guys were intelligence officers. They weren't really looking at things the same way as we.

We were in an intelligence outfit doing a job that really wasn't intelligence. We weren't just gathering intelligence. We did that, but we weren't just doing that.

To me, our real mission was to be able to maintain control of a village or several villages within a certain area that we could depend on them to help us bring those pilots home.

[Speaker 2]

How much, if ever, did you come actually face-to-face and have to do any face-to-face combat with the other side?

[Speaker 1]

Shooting somebody at 50 yards is not hard.

[Speaker 2]

No, but if they're right up probably fairly close to you...

[Speaker 1]

You try to avoid that. You try not to let them get that close to you.

[Speaker 2]

Yeah, I'm sure.

[Speaker 1]

But if it happens, and it does, you tend to change how you feel about what you're doing in the sense of when you're killing somebody. The man that stuck his knife through my arm right there, he died face-to-face with me. And it changed how I felt about when somebody dies.

It's one thing to look at a dead body that's already dead, but it's another thing to see them die. And that changed a little bit about how you feel about it. It doesn't change the fact that you're killing somebody.

It's just that they tend to have more of a face once you kill somebody up close. They tend to become more human.

[Speaker 2]

Did you have to do that very often?

[Speaker 1]

Only twice. I never actually killed somebody that close. I tried to avoid that as much as possible.

You kill them before they get close to you.

[Speaker 2]

Yeah. So your first time there, were you there for a full year?

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, full year the first time.

[Speaker 2]

Doing the same thing, doing the safe villages and stuff?

[Speaker 1]

That was all I did in the first time that I was there, was the safe village duties.

[Speaker 2]

Then you came back to the States?

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, then I came, I rotated back, and I had been promoted to a staff sergeant, B-5. I went to Fort Polk as a training instructor, as they told us that some of us would.

[Speaker 2]

So you trained new recruits?

[Speaker 1]

New Air Force recruits. We're using the Army facilities, but we're training Air Force recruits. And they don't have to put up with being called by the drill instructors.

And we are no longer basically under any Army command at that point. We are using their facilities, we're sharing facilities with them as far as the barracks and the obstacle courses and the classrooms and whatnot. And our guys are going to some of the same classes with Army instructors, but the actual training instructor in charge of that group is Air Force, and the Air Force is providing some of the classroom people.

[Speaker 2]

So that's what you were supposed to do, is train?

[Speaker 1]

Right, I was in charge of a group of trainees. And you are then somewhat responsible for who makes it to a school and who doesn't. And you try to give them the benefit of your experience.

And I was not good at that. And after a few months, I knocked a troop on his ass, and I got busted back to the D4.

[Speaker 2]

You knocked somebody who was somebody you were supposed to be training?

[Speaker 1]

Yes. He had a smart attitude. He had already been through enough training when I got there to believe that he was kind of a badass, and he didn't realize that he wasn't ready yet for what he was going to face.

And I tried to get the point through, and he ran his mouth too much. He would have been a person who might have gotten somebody killed by not following orders, thinking he was smarter than the rest. And I had to do something to get this boy to realize that he could cause somebody else's death by his stupidity, so I ended up putting him on his butt.

And because that's technically illegal, I got busted.

[Speaker 2]

So you went from an E-5 down to an E-4?

[Speaker 1]

Yeah.

[Speaker 2]

Lucky you only lost one, right?

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, I just lost one. And they asked me for reasons why, and I told them reasons why. And then they informed me that my commander informed me that he was going to have to take a strike away in order to keep me from getting court-martialed.

And if I was agreeable to that, he would see that that's as far as it went. And I said, okay, do it, and send me back to Vietnam.

[Speaker 2]

So you asked the second time to go back?

[Speaker 1]

Yeah.

[Speaker 2]

Why?

[Speaker 1]

I felt like that if these pricks that I was trying to teach in this school were what we were going to be sending over there, I better get over there first and see if I could save a few bucks before they got there.

[Speaker 2]

Get over there and stop the war before the next one comes over.

[Speaker 1]

And at that time it did not occur to me that at one time I was that dumb and naive. It didn't occur to me that I had been like them. What occurred to me was that I didn't think those guys would ever be prepared for what they were going to face.

And I thought, it's better for me to go over there, I can survive this. I know what's going on over there. They don't.

And not that my going would stop any of them from going when they were through training, but more that I felt like that I could do something that they couldn't do. It would take them too long to learn a lesson, and too many of them would die trying to learn that lesson. Because once you've been through enough to survive, you've lost a lot of your numbers already.

[Speaker 2]

Yeah, yeah, I'm sure. So when you went back, did you go back to the same basic unit or do the same job?

[Speaker 1]

No, I was in with the first Black Tiger unit instead of the second. And my mission was changed. I was in more of an intelligence capacity.

I was still in Cambodia and Laos most of the time. I went into North Vietnam several times. We were locating supplies going up and down the trail and calling in bomb strikes.

It was a little different type of situation in that we had to observe what damage was done and decide if there was another strike to be made. And that left us in the area fairly close to where the bombing was going on. Certainly we tried to make sure that the pilots didn't put it on us, but it also left us vulnerable because they know the bomb strikes were being put there because somebody was observing what was going on.

So they're out hunting for you. And it was smaller teams, three to five men, and it was much more strenuous mentally and physically because you were a lot of times under pursuit, being pursued, trying to get to an LZ to get the hell out of there or trying to get to a place where they had lost you and couldn't find you. And that was very difficult to do.

They were better at what they were doing in their own jungle than we were. So most of the time it was trying to get to an LZ where you could get out. And that meant getting far enough ahead of any pursuit to get a chopper in.

And that was difficult, and we lost a higher percentage of our people in that type of work than we did in returning down pilots.

[Speaker 2]

When were you there again the second time for a full year?

[Speaker 1]

No, I was there for about eight months.

[Speaker 2]

Eight months.

[Speaker 1]

And we were on our way upriver. We had been back to Bentulli. To be brief, spent a couple of days there, and were going back upriver to be dropped again.

And we had a chopper. There was two choppers going up, two choppers, both of us. And our chopper was hit by a hand-held surface-to-air missile, rocket actually.

And it started spinning. It was going down. We were over the river.

My attempt was to jump into the river, but the spinning motion threw me out to the river bank. And I lived in the river bank, and the impact was enough to cause me to have a, what they call a compression factor in my back. And I was partially paralyzed.

The second chopper didn't go down. It actually landed on the river bank and picked up those of us who survived. Two out of the nine on that chopper survived.

Only two. Yeah, and they got us out. And I was taken to Third Field Hospital, and from there I was airbagged to Japan.

They did a surgery on me in Japan. It was a minor surgery just to try to relieve the pressure that was causing. Part of the paralysis was from the swelling and whatnot from the fracture.

And they immobilized my back. And put me on a, I don't know, I always call it a wheel bed. It was a bed that had a big wheel thing over the top.

[Speaker 2]

Oh, I've seen those.

[Speaker 1]

So they could stand me up.

[Speaker 2]

Yeah, I've seen those before.

[Speaker 1]

I was strapped to a board, but they could stand me up on this thing. And they put me on that and put me on another airbag plane and brought me to Walter Reed.

[Speaker 2]

That's in Texas, right?

[Speaker 1]
It's in Maryland.

[Speaker 2]
Oh, Walter Reed in Maryland, okay.

[Speaker 1]
And I was there for 13 months.

[Speaker 2]
At Walter Reed, recovering.

[Speaker 1]
Recovering. And then they told me I was no longer fit for military service and discharged me.
And I really had intended to stay.

I had already re-up and had intended to stay.

[Speaker 2]
And so this was, by then, what was the year? When I finally got out was 1969.

[Speaker 1]
But I had already re-upped. My first enlistment, I still had time left on it when I re-upped.
And you could do that then, and you got a little bonus for doing it.

[Speaker 2]
So when you finally got out of the hospital, where did you go? Go home?

[Speaker 1]
First, I went home for a few weeks. I had been visited while I was at the hospital by some friends of mine who had gotten out of the service prior to my time. And they were going to school at the University of Tennessee, and they came to visit me up there and said, man, when you get out, why don't you come down to UT?

Go to school. And that was really my intent, was to come down here to go to school and then maybe go back home or something. I didn't know what I was going to do at that point.

But I came here, and they were renting a house up off of Kingston Park. And I went to, enrolled in school. I had already sent my application in before I was ever discharged from the hospital and the service and whatnot.

And had been accepted and all that, and started to go to school at UT. And I kind of liked Knoxville, too, when I first got here. What was here and what was, where things were, what was going on, I thought it was a pretty nice town.

I would have probably stayed in school, but I felt very uncomfortable. The political climate here had changed so much, and people were so anti-war that I didn't feel comfortable.

[Speaker 2]
Knoxville was bad in Knoxville?

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, this was in, I started school in January of 1970.

[Speaker 2]

January of 1970.

[Speaker 1]

And it just didn't, I didn't feel like I belonged there. I didn't like the attitude of the people. I didn't like the baby killer thing.

Even though I was approximately still close to the age of the group of people that I'm talking about, I felt like an old man in the midst of them. They were so young and full of shit that they didn't know.

[Speaker 2]

Yeah, and you had so much experience that they couldn't even begin to understand.

[Speaker 1]

And they had no idea what they were talking about. They were just, they were having theoretical life is what they were doing. They were theorizing that life should be like this.

They didn't know what life was. They didn't know what death was. They didn't know shit.

[Speaker 2]

Still don't.

[Speaker 1]

And they don't, and they didn't realize how close they were to finding out. Especially those that were a little too vocal or a little too pushy to somebody whom they knew to be a veteran. And we were easily identifiable.

We had short hair. We had different carriage. We carried ourselves differently.

We were military. We didn't slump. We didn't swagger in the sense that we just walked.

And then we didn't have, we had what they call military bearing that made us easily identifiable. And some people made the mistake of saying too much and they don't know how close they came to finding out what real life was.

[Speaker 2]

By you personally, right?

[Speaker 1]

By me personally. And I found it. I found myself in a position I felt like I was going to hurt somebody.

And I didn't need to be in that environment. So I left school.

[Speaker 3]

How long?

[Speaker 2]

March 16, 1999. Interviewed with Clifford Fitzsimmons, a Vietnam veteran. The interviewer is Leslie Zimmerman.

Cliff, would you tell me just a little bit about your background, your family background, where you're from?

[Speaker 1]

I was born and raised in a small rural community in Palmer, Washington.