

Interviewee: Kobes, Gene
Interviewer: Robin Sellers
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Sellers: Okay, Gene, if you'll tell me a little bit about where you were born and where you grew up?

Kobes: I was born in Sioux City, Iowa, and lived there for a period of ten years. Actually during World War II, then I remember it, before my family moved to Orange City, Iowa, a small Dutch community in the Northwest corner of Iowa.

Sellers: Dutch Community? I guess a spill-over from the Pennsylvania Dutch?

Kobes: Well, yes!

Sellers: German ancestors?

Kobes: Oh, not German, Holland. In fact, not just our community but our whole county was settled by Dutch.

Sellers: Sure – Orange City!

Kobes: Oh, yes, House of Orange. There is where I went to school. I went to Christian school, parochial school. Most of the city was Dutch Reform, Christian Reform – First Christian Reform, Second Christian Reform, Trinity Reform. We probably would have had one church if we could have all fit inside the structure, but that was the reason for the other churches. Small high school I attended. We only had approximately thirty-nine or forty in my graduating class. So it took almost all the boys from the two upper classes to make a football team and a scrimmage team. The area, I will say, was quite conservative; it was a farming community and the county seat. The people were very friendly, still remain that today. You don't walk down the street without saying, "Hello" or "How you doing?" to everyone you meet, because there were not many strangers. Even though there was a small junior college there, which I attended after high school —. But very friendly. People knew each other and you knew each other's business as well. So if you were breaking curfew for the football team, you were reported if your father's car was seen around town.

Sellers: Couldn't get away with anything.

Kobes: That's right! Even the time I threw a snowball at – this is in a lower grade – I

threw a snowball at a car and the individual stopped, and I was with a friend, and here we are in galoshes because of the snow and lunch pail and books, trying to run as fast as I could. Anyway, the end of the story was my friend got caught and the sheriff shows up at my father's house about six o'clock at night and picks me up, takes us to school. And we're writing on the blackboard, "I will not throw snowballs at cars."

Sellers: That's great. You don't find too many of those nowadays.

Kobes: Well, it was a town where you left not only your doors open of your house, but left your car keys in the car. That was amusing, too, because some woman drove my father's car home and asked her husband when he had a compass put in the car. He says, "Well, I don't have a compass in the car. You drove the wrong car home." And it's still that way. They have a tulip festival every year, every spring when the tulips are blooming.

Sellers: Do you go back often? Do you still have family there?

Kobes: My family's passed away, my mother and father. I have a cousin that lives in a neighboring town. He teaches at another small school, Dordt College.

Sellers: Have you been back in that last few years?

Kobes: Oh yes, we have small reunions with my brother and we'll go back.

Sellers: What year did you graduate from high school?

Kobes: I graduated in '57, and started junior college, but I was injured in football. I know, I'm not very large, but I played football.

Sellers: Back then you didn't have to be very large to play football. A lot of it was skill, not bulk.

Kobes: So I dropped out of school. As soon as I was healed, I went into the military. I served three years enlisted service from '58 to '61.

Sellers: Which branch?

Kobes: I was in the Finance Corps and stationed, better part of my three years, in France. And that's where I met my wife. My wife is a French citizen. After that I came back and was enrolled in the University of Iowa.

Sellers: Did your high school and community college background qualify you for the Finance Corps? Were you going into accounting or something like that?

Kobes: Yes, I was. I was studying accounting.

Sellers: So this was a natural progression for you. They didn't just swap you and put you somewhere like the Army so often does?

Kobes: Well, if you enlist, you have an opportunity to choose your field after a certain battery of tests. They gave me what I think I did well in.

Sellers: So it was a good fit with you?

Kobes: It was. Yes, it was.

Sellers: Where in France were you stationed?

Kobes: Poitiers. That's midway between Paris and Bordeaux. I was serving in the Finance Corps there. That's when the military was stationed in France. It was called BASAC – the logistical backbone of the forward troops in Germany. Met my wife at a dance. She was in the university studying to be a nurse. We were married there in Poitiers. To return back to the United States, I was enrolled at the University of Iowa.

Sellers: Did you have any problem bringing her back in or was it automatic as the wife of —?

Kobes: Not automatic. Prior to getting married, you have to be approved with a background check, and of course all that. But she remained a French citizen up until the mid-90s. It was kind of an agreement we had when we got married, that she would join me in my church and she could keep her citizenship.

Sellers: The United States doesn't offer a dual-citizenship arrangement with France?

Kobes: Well, she retains a dual citizenship, although when you become an American you are to renounce your other citizenship. But that doesn't mean that the country recognizes that. So she could, although she travels on her American passport now. She could use her French citizenship because once French, always French, something like that.

Well, to continue on, it was my sophomore year, I was getting into my major area to determine what I was to do when I graduated. My wife and I talked it over and thought that going back in the military would be the best opportunity to go between Europe and the United States. So I elected to join ROTC in my junior year. Because I had prior service, they waived the first two years. I went through ROTC at the University of Iowa and was commissioned a 2nd lieutenant in 1965, when I graduated.. I chose infantry. I thought if I was to go back in the military, the primary purpose of the military is fighting and any of the support elements, although important, are like a civilian job. So what would be the difference? And there was another reason, but then I'll leave that for another time. I was commissioned a 2nd lieutenant in

the Infantry and my first assignment was Fort Lewis, Washington. One of the things that I did when I was in ROTC, though, was to go through the ROTC flight program that they had at that time. So I was flight designated. Before I had my first year, which is required prior to going to flight school – that is first year of your basic assignment, mine being infantry – our division was alerted to go to Vietnam. So I didn't know if I was going to flight school or to Vietnam with the infantry. Because I didn't have a year, I went with my division to Vietnam as an infantry officer.

Sellers: You knew when you went into ROTC and when you chose infantry, your thought was that it would be a better way to go back and forth between Europe and the United States. But somewhere you must have known, because you seem like somebody who looks into everything you are going to do before you do it, that something was going on in Southeast Asia. Did you have in mind that your plans for Europe might be messed up by that?

Kobes: Or they'd be delayed, yes.

Sellers: Did you have any thoughts about that one way or the other?

Kobes: No. I did want to go to flight school. I was disappointed that I didn't go then.

Sellers: Going into active combat —

Kobes: No, I chose infantry —

Sellers: Right. I know you'd chosen that. So you're obviously aware that was very much going to happen, possibly. But when it actually smacked you in the face, did you second guess yourself maybe?

Kobes: I wasn't going to touch upon this point because it's quite personal and spiritual.

Sellers: Don't then, if you don't want to.

Kobes: That's okay. It has to do with a spiritual aspect of it, and that was that I felt that I didn't have the gift of the arts or the gift of music, the gift of any of these types of things. So what was it that God was calling me to do? The only thing I came up with at the time was my gift would be my life if called upon. And that's one of the reasons I chose infantry as well.

Sellers: To make yourself available.

Kobes: Yes. So I think that addresses it. And it did come about while I was in combat that there were some unique situations where I was not there when one of the larger battles occurred or when one did occur that there was a change of assignments.

Sellers: And you were aware that that was happening for a reason?

Kobes: Oh yes! Not at the time, but when I reflect back on it, and I could cover it now and it's written in this book that I brought down, *War of Innocence*. In fact the author was there for this particular battle. He was right behind me. Normally in the Central Highlands where we were located, you set up a base camp and patrol out from that base camp in three different areas. The area that I was scheduled for was to re-trace an area that we had come from, to make sure that we weren't being followed. At the morning meeting in the assignments we were having for our company commander, the 2nd Platoon leader said that he wanted to take that patrol because the following day the whole company was going to re-trace back to an area we had come from. His name was Charlie Barrett. I said, "Charlie, tell you what, why don't you take two squads and I'll take two squads and we'll both patrol it," leaving two squads back from each platoon at the company base to protect that area. He said, "Well—," he told the company commander, he said, "I'd rather have my whole platoon to patrol." So the company commander said, "Well, look, Gene, you stay back at company base and let Charlie take that patrol." Well, it just so happened that a North Vietnamese regiment was following us, and Charlie's platoon was overrun. Two men survived from that platoon. They came through and hit the company base where I was, and it was a significant battle. Had we not been backed up by another company, B Company, which was 2000 meters behind us, we would have been overrun as well. That battle is written up pretty much in Charlie Flood's book, *War of Innocence*, because as I said, he was present during the battle. It gives a lot of detail on that.

Sellers: Where were you stationed at the time? Where was your base?

Kobes: In the Central Highlands? We were on Pleiku, the 4th Division. I was in the 3rd Battalion, 8th Infantry, and my company was Charlie Company. During that battle I had just had gotten down from screaming at my machine gunner to hold his rate of fire down because he was going to burn up his barrels of his machine gun. Well, he did.

Sellers: He held it down or he burned up his barrel?

Kobes: He burned up two barrels. And he went out and he got an enemy machine gun to use.

Sellers: Was that common?

Kobes: No. I wrote him up. I had just gotten down, I think, after one of those times, and my foxhole was sprayed with machine gun fire. Shot off my antenna just above my head. But it was a significant battle. Over 5,000 rounds of artillery were fired in our support, attack air, attack gun ships, as well as air force.

Sellers: After something like this, was there any chance that you would be brought back out of the field for any kind of decompression, or did you just keep going?

Kobes: They pulled us back to battalion base because we'd suffered so many casualties. I

didn't have any killed in action, but I had a number of wounded, besides our company losing a whole platoon. So yes, until we had replacements come in, we were pulled back. And that normally took anywhere between a week to ten days until our replacements were in and acclimated to our company.

Sellers: When you came back to your base in a time when you were waiting for replacements, was there — I know after air battles in World War II when the pilots came back, then they brought them in and they gave them whiskey and they found out what had gone on and then they were given some time off. Was there any kind of assistance for you at the base where if what you had seen might have been more horrible than what you saw the last time, that you could kind of have some help dealing with it and preparing to go back out?

Kobes: No. Well, our chaplain, our battalion or brigade chaplain was — in fact, we did have a chapel service following that battle, at the battalion headquarters. And as often as this occurred throughout say the division or the brigade, was there individual counseling? No. After a period of time (and I know this has been covered in other interviews), you become more acceptive — you accept, rather, more of the conditions as opposed to one event that's very shocking. It starts to blend. In fact, when I was let back, the chances you take become seemingly more frivolous, almost. It's not that you're not vulnerable, it's just that your mind has accepted it more. And that might be a significant factor in a year being enough. Anything more than that, like in World War II where there may have been more combat fatigue. Not that we didn't have it. I did have some people that went off the deep end. They were evaced, of course. Reflecting back on it, it's terrible. But during the time that you're there, it's not as terrible, I guess, is what I'm trying to say.

Sellers: I've heard it described as "you have to keep going from day to day" and you're so focused on doing that, that you don't have time for the other —.

Kobes: Well, that's true. That, and the mission. Reflecting back on it, also, combat is the most confusing thing that can ever occur in your life. Things are happening, and not trauma, but the confusion of it all — and that's where training comes in. You do the things that you've trained to do. Automatically you do these things. It's hard to believe, thinking back on it, how or why, but it's training that comes through. That, and I think faith in God. I'm proud of what's going on with our troops in Iraq with the number of people that have accepted Christ as their Savior. I think a higher percent than what we had in Vietnam. From reports that I've read, it's well over 100,000.

Sellers: Well, there are no atheists in foxholes. That still holds true, I'm sure. And that is not to demean what you're saying.

Kobes: No, no that's very true.

Sellers: But I think a lot of people who might have sluffed off that possibility, when they

actually find themselves in a situation, realize that they do need a sustaining force.

Kobes: And it's just not a foxhole. On my second tour, when I was flying reconnaissance — we're the people that are called on to orchestrate the battlefield, at least in those conditions during Vietnam. Now a lot of it's done electronically, but then it was done by a person at the site. I was called one night, and it seems like it was maybe midnight or one o'clock in the morning when one of the South Vietnamese units was under attack with American advisors up along the coast. As soon as I got on site from being called up, that location, the Air Force was calling me, the artillery, the Army gun ships, the man on the ground, the American advisor, where to put all the fire.

Sellers: So you were directing the fire.

Kobes: I was directing it. I thought, "this can't be anything more confusing, what's going on." Trying to orient myself to where the unit was. The seacoast was running east and west there as opposed to north and south, because of the indentation. And it was another very, very confusing thing to put — firing when you can't see — at least by daylight. I was asking Air Force C-130 to drop flares, of course, but still, it was confusing. The point about that battle was I was flying back afterwards, and I started to weep. "Thank you, God, that I was not responsible for the deaths of any of our forces," because it was that confusing. I thought that was so — trying to fly, and this is going on. But surely He was there.

Sellers: When you were sent originally to Vietnam, tell me a little bit about getting over there, your transport over there, the equipment that you went with, and what your impressions were when you first disembarked.

Kobes: I was one of the senior 2nd lieutenants in our unit, so I was on the advanced party of our company, the representative of the company, with the battalion that went over. So I flew over as opposed to surface transport. We set up the base camp.

Sellers: Did you fly from Fort Lewis?

Kobes: Fort Lewis, yes.

Sellers: From Ft. Lewis, did you have a stop along the way?

Kobes: Yes, I think we stopped in the Philippines, if I'm not mistaken.

Sellers: For refueling or overnight?

Kobes: No, refueling. It was a long trip over. And we landed at Nha Trang. From Nha Trang we got on a C-130, everyone that was on a 141, and went to our base camp at Tuy Hoa. This is where the 1st Brigade of the 4th Infantry Division was initially stationed. Because we

had about close to thirty days before our troops arrived, there was a number of us lieutenants that were volunteering to go out with the 101st Airborne Division, which was situated right next to us.

Sellers: Go out on recon with them?

Kobes: Go out on patrols and combat with them. It was good that we got that experience, because we were going to use that. In the Tuy Hoa area, we did not have the combat those first three or four months we were there that sister brigades had up in the Highlands, because we were dealing mainly with Vietcong and it was small unit actions. Yes, we were receiving some casualties because of small unit action, but because of the heavy warfare that was going on up in the Highlands, our brigade was moved up there to Pleiku. This is where the NVA had significant forces, regimental size and division size forces, that were coming across the border from Laos and Cambodia.

Sellers: What kind of cooperation were you getting at that stage from the South Vietnamese?

Kobes: I don't want to qualify it, but there was cooperation. But I'd like to go back to the coast. In regards to what gave me an impression, and answers your question, in regards to, perhaps, why we were there and what we were doing. The reason for being there – I just happened to come back from a trip to Saigon and I was flying in, and there was a radio reporter from the Des Moines radio station. Being an Iowan, I recognized the station, and I started up a conversation. So he decided to interview me, and he asked me those questions. "Why are you here and do you know what you're doing and do you think its important?" I said, "yes," because being on the ground, I got to experience the contact with the villages along the coast. Many of them were Catholic villages. They had moved with whole families from the north to the south after the armistice in 1954, I believe, separating the North and South Vietnam after the French had left. So that gave me a sense of purpose. Not "it was good versus evil" – it was Christian versus non-Christian. And that gave me a deeper reason or purpose for being there. And then when you come back and you study or read that, it's not written up that much – the millions of Catholics that moved south after the demarcation. Then after the United States left Vietnam in '72, the number of Christians or Catholics that were persecuted – many, many more than are written up (significantly, that is) in history. So whatever many, many people may have said, that we're over there for oil or we're over there for this reason or that reason, or we're over there to fight Communism, that was it. Vietnam being on the crossroads of history from the East to the Middle East had a lot to do with that. You may say, "Well, the French were colonialists." Well, they also brought religion.

Sellers: We were all colonialists.

Kobes: Well, that's true, but they brought religion with them, and that was good. I think some of the Vietnamese that are in this country today are staunch Catholics. I wanted to fill that

part in from your previous question.

Sellers: I appreciate that. You were there for a month before you —

Kobes: '66 to '67, and then '68 to '69.

Sellers: When your battalion arrived – is that the right term? It was your battalion that you had gone out ahead of?

Kobes: Yes, I was in the advance party, yes.

Sellers: When they arrived, and you had had some experience and were ready to go, how did that get set up and how did you all start into the Highlands?

Kobes: Well, we started going out on operations right away. The 101st Airborne that had joined us had moved out after we had established our initial base camp. Our operations were in – I think the province was Phucac. I think that's the province. My goodness, I didn't come that prepared to remember all these — the towns, I can reflect on and refer back to, but the provinces, not.

Sellers: The men that came to you, that you were leading, what were their ages?

Kobes: The 4th Infantry Division was, I think, initially blessed in the fact that we had hearty men from the Northwest. That is, Washington, Oregon, Montana, Idaho and Alaska.

Sellers: Were these enlistees or were they mostly draftees?

Kobes: These were, I think, a mixture. But the 4th Infantry Division had a chance to train a year in the United States before deploying. And so it was a train and retain division.

Sellers: It wasn't like the later ones where they grabbed you —

Kobes: No, nor was it like the replacements that we got. And it's not to reflect negatively on our replacements, but they weren't from the Northwest. I mean, when we were in the Highlands and had to clear landing zones for helicopters, we had loggers that did that for their livelihood, that grew up in the forest. They not only felled the trees but they'd ask us, "Where would you like them?" It was sad, as I reflected flying home, that those people that I spent two years with now, training them and then retaining them in a year in combat, that the number was being reduced. And that those young privates were now seasoned sergeants.

Sellers: They had to grow up very quickly. I can see that it's emotional to you even now. Was it your responsibility to write letters home to families whose sons had been wounded or killed?

Kobes: Yes, if the officers had time at the time, or it went to a more senior officer to get the details and write the letters.

Sellers: But you knew the men better.

Kobes: Oh, yes. But let me say this, that while I was in combat – my first tour and my second tour – while I was with my men, I only lost one killed in action. I had wounded. And that one was not killed in action, it was an accident on my second tour, where one of my crew chiefs was killed.

Sellers: You were remarkably lucky.

Kobes: No, I wasn't lucky. I don't look at that as luck. God's hand.

Sellers: Well, then you were lucky that you had that to hold you.

Kobes: I understand.

Sellers: As you're over there and your tour ended and you were coming back, what kind of thoughts did you have? You said that you were concerned that you had seen the men grow up so quickly and it dismayed you.

Kobes: Well, after my career course, I went to teach ROTC. On our staff at Florida State

Sellers: What brought you here?

Kobes: Well, that surprised me. Most of us captains that were in the career course were getting their new assignment from that nine month course. I was fortunate that the assignments officer in Washington D.C. for captains was my instructor in ROTC at the University of Iowa. So I called, and he was using my first name, "Gene, what would you like to do?" This is very cool.

Sellers: Where was your career course?

Kobes: Fort Benning, Georgia. So I said, "Well, you know, Colonel Cosby, my wife is French; I'd like to get back to Europe." And he said, "Well, let me go check and see where we've got you going." He came back on the phone and he says, "We have you going to Florida State University." And I didn't answer quickly because I was shocked. I didn't know where Florida State University was. I didn't know where Tallahassee was. And he said, "Well, look, you go down there and check in and if you don't like it, what you see, call me back and I'll get you Europe." I thought, "Wow! This is too good." So I got my flight suit on and flew an aircraft down to Tallahassee and changed into my Class As and went up to the ROTC

Department and told them that I was being assigned there, but then I wasn't sure if this was the best thing for me. Well, the Colonel said —

Sellers: Who was the Colonel?

Kobes: Colonel Frauenhiem. And he is in town.

Sellers: We've interviewed him. That's why I was asking.

Kobes: He is a fine gentleman. I've never had somebody come in and tell me he might not want to be in my unit. So I certainly made a first impression on him. But he convinced me that I needed to be there. I think he was happy to have an aviator and a combat infantryman on his staff.

Sellers: At this point, your only experience with humidity has been Vietnam and Fort Benning. The rest of the time you were in the blessed cooler climes, even if it was only Iowa.. What did you think about the weather here?

Kobes: I thought it was pretty nice. I thought to myself, "Why, if I was any smarter, I would have gone to school in the South, not at the University of Iowa."

Sellers: What season was this that you arrived here?

Kobes: July.

Sellers: Oh, well, if you think its pretty nice in July here —

Kobes: Maybe it was August, just in time for school.

Sellers: And where were you quartered?

Kobes: Where did I live in Tallahassee?

Sellers: Did they quarter you or did they —

Kobes: Oh, no, no. We lived in the community. I lived Maplewood in Town and Country. It used to be the north end of town.

Sellers: And this was – the year?

Kobes: This was '70 to '73.

Sellers: Did you know in advance what was going on in Tallahassee as far as

demonstrations?

Kobes: No, no.

Sellers: How did you find out? What was your first rude awakening?

Kobes: When they took our classrooms over was quite the – should I say “take them over?” They entered our ROTC building and sat down. I don’t recall there being anything that was damaging. The only thing I do recall, though, is that some students did try to take down the flag. Like I explained to you, two ex-Marines stood guard.

Sellers: Did any of your ROTC students (as I recall, they wear uniforms on Thursdays for drill) – was there —

Kobes: We did, until I suggested to our PMS that during these times, why don’t we not wear uniforms the first two years, because they do not have a commitment until they are being paid and sign a contract their junior year. That way they could blend in with the rest of the students and not have to cut their hair. Because if you remember, long hair was in. And then let me convince them that the military is a good career path.

Sellers: And as I recall, ROTC was required.

Kobes: It was required up through 1966, because I was in ROTC when they took the requirement off. I had prior service, so I wasn’t required to go into it. And in ‘65, had I not had prior service, I had would have been required ROTC. But I believe it was 1966 or ‘67, that they waived the requirement for those state schools that were land grant schools.

Sellers: So you removed a target from the student body?

Kobes: Yes. And our staff started wearing civilian clothes so we wouldn’t – not necessarily that we weren’t proud, but that it just reduced the friction, you might say. Because I was going through graduate school at the time as well, to get my Master’s degree. And to appear in uniform wasn’t ideal, really, in your relationship with your professor at that time.

Sellers: Depending on your courses, yes. What was your field?

Kobes: Education.

Sellers: So we got through from 1970 to 1973. What were some of the things that happened on campus, besides trying to take the flag down, and how did you deal with them?

Kobes: It was just demonstrations in the building itself. To be honest, I don’t know really if the students knew exactly what was going on. It was just something to do, to be honest with

you.

Sellers: I think there were some leaders, and then an awful lot of people just followed because it was a time to rebel.

Kobes: Exactly. That's exactly what it was. They were a lot of followers, because when you asked them questions about different aspects, they couldn't answer.

Sellers: They just knew that it was fun.

Kobes: Not only that, but there were high school students involved as well. How they got out of high school, I don't know, but they were mixed in with the college students. But when I did wear a uniform, I don't recall – at least in the South – that much of a negative aspect. Not like, say, that was going on say at Kent State or what was going on in —. I don't want to make a division between the North and the South, but I just believe —

Sellers: But there is one.

Kobes: — there was more respect for elders in the South and more respect for the military in the South. There was more respect for politicians in the South. I guess I was the token Yankee on the staff, because everybody else had been to a southern university. How or why they assigned me to Florida State from the University of Iowa —

Sellers: They just thought we needed some seasoning here. Who knows?

Kobes: Normally they try to send you back to your school.

Sellers: '73, you were here until? And you had another stint then?

Interview ends