

Bridget Kennedy

History 300

Professor Birkner

Oral History Interview with Steve Tracy

Steve Tracy Interviewed by Bridget Kennedy

November 9, 2018

Bridget Kennedy: My name is Bridget Kennedy and I'm sitting here with Steve Tracy and his wife Linda. Today is November 9, 2018 and we are at Gettysburg College in Glatfelter Hall, Room 303 talking about Mr. Tracy's Vietnam War service. Could you start off by telling me when and where you were born?

Steve Tracy: I was born in Washington D.C in July of 1945, shortly before the first atom bomb was dropped.

Kennedy: Can you describe for me the area where you grew up? Did you grow up in the urban part of D.C?

Tracy: No, I didn't. I was born there and shortly afterwards my family moved to a number of different locations because my father was in the service. Right after World War II and up to 1952, we lived in Fort Myer, Virginia in an old converted barracks that was used for family housing; that was a very interesting experience. We were right next to Arlington cemetery. My father worked at the Pentagon, so he took a little pathway underneath the roadway that made getting there very convenient. Then we went to Japan for a year and a half as part of my father's service and that was very interesting too. We got back here to the United States eventually and we lived in Washington D.C for one year and then moved out to Prince George's County, Maryland where I spent most of my teenage years until I came to Gettysburg.

Kennedy: So you spent most of your childhood in Fort Myer?

Tracy: No, I spent four years in Fort Myer before we went to Japan in 1952, when the occupation ended and they established an American Embassy in Tokyo. My father was in the Air Force, so he was there as part of the Air Attaché¹ and we all lived there for a year and a half. Then when the Korean War ended in 1953, the government started cutting back on the size of the military and my father decided it was time to get out. We got on a troop ship going across the Pacific, my parents and five children, and we sailed to California. When we got there, my father processed out of the Air Force, bought an old 1940 Woody Station Wagon, and we proceeded to drive across the country. At that time there were no interstates, of course, so it made for quite a long drive to Washington D.C.

1 An Air Force officer that is part of a diplomatic mission, typically reports on the extent of Air Force infrastructure in a foreign country

Kennedy: You went all the way from California to Washington D.C by car?

Tracy: Yep! 5 kids, 2 adults, in a car with luggage packed on top, in 1953! [laughs]

Kennedy: How old were you when you returned from Japan?

Tracy: I had just had my 8th birthday when we left.

Kennedy: And did your father work for the Embassy the whole time you lived there?

Tracy: Yes, because he was in the Air Force. It was quite an experience I must say. I wish I had been a little older, I could've appreciated it a little bit more. You don't really appreciate things when you're 7 or 8 years old.

Kennedy: But you spent most of your adolescence in D.C and Maryland?

Tracy: Yes, in Prince George's County, Maryland, I went to Bladensburg High School.

Kennedy: Could you tell me your parents' names and what they did for work?

Tracy: My father's name was Frank, and my mother's name was Dorothy, and they had seven kids, although the last two were more like a second family because they were so much younger. My mother was a homemaker for the most part, although she had several jobs throughout the years. She worked at the government printing office and later for the University of Maryland in the office where they handled housing for graduate students.

Kennedy: What did your father do after he left the Air Force?

Tracy: He tried doing a lot of things, but the job he ended up doing most of the time was working for the *Washington Daily News*, a tabloid type paper similar to the *New York Daily News*. It was a Monday through Saturday paper and he worked in circulation, so he would take the papers out to the delivery boys and handled soliciting for new business. He did that until the paper folded in the late 70's.

Kennedy: You mentioned you had six siblings, is that correct?

Tracy: Yes, there were seven kids all together. I'm exactly the middle child, there were 3 before me and three after me.

Kennedy: You said your father served in the military while you were younger. Did you have a family history of military service?

Tracy: Yes, we did. My father's father was retired from the Marine Corps and served from the period before World War 1 until he retired in the mid 30's. My father then enlisted into the Marines just before the war [World War II] started, which my mother wasn't real crazy about. He ended up spending a lot of the war down in Parris Island, South Carolina working in finance, and finally they sent him on orders to Hawaii where he spent the rest of the war. When he came back, we moved to Portsmouth, Virginia and Havre de Grace, Maryland before we ended up at Fort Myer.

Kennedy: Do you think that growing up on different military bases influenced your decision to join the military? Were you also influenced by your family?

Tracy: I think my family was definitely a strong influence.

Linda Tracy: Your sisters would agree [laughs].

Tracy: It was considered an honorable thing to do. My grandfather and my father both served, and later on my brother joined the Marine Corps and served for four years, so we had a history of military service.

Kennedy: So you and one of your brothers enlisted?

Tracy: I didn't enlist, but my brother did. Fortunately for him, he got out right before Vietnam.

Kennedy: Were you in the Marines as well?

Tracy: No, I was in the Army.

Kennedy: Did you know when you were younger that you wanted to go into the military?

Tracy: I probably had a strong inclination in my mind. At one point, I thought I really wanted to go to the Military Academy at West Point; unfortunately, I wasn't savvy enough to know how you did that, you have to get a congressional appointment to be accepted, so I never made it. In retrospect, I'm not so sure it would've been a good thing if I had gotten in.

Mrs. Tracy: We would've never met!

Tracy: [laughs] My wife is also a graduate of the class of '66 and we met here our sophomore year in our introductory to U.S History class in the basement of Weidensall Hall. Our professor decided he wanted to have a seating chart done alphabetically and Linda's maiden name was Tohl, so she sat right next to me; and as they say, the rest is history.

Kennedy: That's a great story! Were you involved in ROTC in high school?

Tracy: No, we didn't have that at my high school, my first experience with that was here at Gettysburg.

Kennedy: So you joined ROTC when you arrived at Gettysburg?

Tracy: Yes, you had to. When you came here as a male student, you had to either apply for the Army or Air Force ROTC program or take Physical Education. It was required, so I decided to sign up for the Army,

Kennedy: But you already had an idea that you wanted to join the Army before that, right?

Tracy: I was probably inclined in that direction, but I wasn't firmly sure of it.

Kennedy: When you joined ROTC, did you immediately commit to Army service?

Tracy: The way it worked was you took the basic course the first two years, so every Tuesday afternoon we would form up on Stine Lake and march out to the fields where the tennis courts are and drill for two hours. We also had a class that started the second semester of freshman year that covered Army history. When you got to your junior year, you could choose whether or not to go into the advanced course. The year I became a junior, Congress passed a new ROTC law called The ROTC Revitalization Act, since they had been having problems with people being in the program for 4 years and dropping out right before graduation. The new law made it that when you entered the advanced course, you had to enlist in the Army reserve; they gave you a service number and everything and you had to raise your right hand and swear your service. If you dropped out for any reason or got kicked out, you would get immediately drafted; and with the Vietnam War heating up, very few people chose to continue into the

advanced course. The number of people in the program dropped astronomically. When we showed up for school in September, they gathered us all up and announced the new change to the program and a lot of people decided it wasn't for them. Now the good thing for me that came from all that was a monthly stipend of \$40, which I know doesn't sound like a lot to you, but it was a big deal for me [laughs]. It really helped ease a lot of financial issues.

Kennedy: They passed that law your junior year?

Tracy: Yep, it was in the summer before we got here, so it was effective when we arrived in September.

Kennedy: Did you have to time decide if you wanted to leave or not?

Tracy: You had to make the decision right then, because once you enlisted and raised your right hand, you were committed.

Kennedy: Why did you decide to stay?

Tracy: I figured I wanted to do it, by that time I knew enough about the program and wanted to continue with it. And the idea of course was to graduate and be commissioned in the Army and commit to at least two years of active service.

Kennedy: When you arrived at Gettysburg College in 1962, what was it like?

Tracy: Gettysburg College was firmly back in the 50's, it was like we had stepped into a time warp; everything was very conservative. They had stopped mandatory chapel the year before we came. You used to have to go 3 times a week to the Christ Chapel. We had to go to a convocation every month or two, but it wasn't as strict as it had been before. Also, they controlled the women. In other words, when you were a freshman girl here you lived in a dorm and you had to sign in and sign out.

Mrs. Tracy: After seven o'clock at night you had to sign out if you wanted to leave.

Kennedy: And the men didn't have to do that?

Tracy: No, no, the men were free to do whatever they wanted! And the women had to be home by 10:30! The whole social scene was also run by the fraternities, there was a lot of them on campus. If you weren't in a fraternity, which I wasn't, there wasn't any social life.

Kennedy: Do you recall why you decided to come to college at Gettysburg?

Tracy: Yes, it's kind of a strange story. I wanted to go to college, I was pretty sure about that. My parents had not gone to college and I had one older sister that had gone to a college in Maryland. The problem was, the only option my parents could offer was to live at home and go to the University of

Maryland at College Park, which two of my siblings had tried, and it hadn't worked out very well. It was a very large school with a lot of students so you kinda got lost in the shuffle. So, I decided I wanted a smaller college. One day I was in the library looking at a list of all the colleges chronologically and I looked at Georgetown University in D.C, it wasn't really what I was looking for, and then the next college

was Gettysburg College. I had always been interested in Civil War history, so I was surprised to hear that there was a college in Gettysburg, I never knew that, and so the more I looked at it, the more I was interested. I sent away for materials and decided to go ahead and apply and I got accepted. That's how I ended up here [laughs]. I did not see the college before I set foot here on the first day.

Mrs. Tracy: Neither of us had actually been on campus before the first day of orientation.

Kennedy: Were you happy with your decision when you got here? Were you surprised by anything?

Tracy: Like Linda said, the fact that things were so conservative here took a little getting used to. We had to wear little beanies on our head the first week and you had these big sign boards you had to wear on your back with your name and where you were from; frankly, it was a little embarrassing but I guess it helped in a way.

Mrs. Tracy: I kinda liked it all [laughs].

Tracy: At least you could see who people were and everything, after that first week people dropped that pretty quickly, although I still think I have my beanie somewhere. So that was an interesting thing, and of course as I said before, the fraternities really controlled the social environment here, they rushed right away. The first week they started rushing, and for the males that was a big deal. There was a bit of an adjustment period getting used to all that.

Kennedy: When you say the college was conservative, do you mean politically?

Tracy: Politically, socially, culturally, everywhere you can think of, it was like if you looked at one of those shows on T.V like *Leave It to Beaver*, Gettysburg was pretty much just like that. And again, the whole thing about controlling women made it pretty apparent that the college took seriously its role in protecting and shaping young women.

Mrs. Tracy: I grew up in New York City, so this was an absolute and total change from what I knew. Going from a Washington suburb to here is not quite as dramatic as what I experienced.

Tracy: The offerings for the courses were somewhat limited as well and were all focused on western civilization; you had to take Classical Civilizations as a freshman and then your sophomore year you took Literary Foundations and studied the great books of western civilization. In the history department, the head at the time was Dr. Robert Bloom, who was the preeminent Civil War historian and we both took Civil War and Reconstruction with him our senior year. The highlight of it was taking a battlefield tour. We'd of course been there before, but he was quite a showman and he really made it very interesting for us. They didn't have the Civil War Institute at that time.

Kennedy: Did the fact that you wanted to be in the military at all influence your decision to come to Gettysburg?

Tracy: When I looked at the college, I saw that they had Army ROTC, but I think the Civil War aspect and the fact that it was a small college was probably what drew me in the most. I was a little worried looking

at the cost of it, even in the 60's it was expensive. I didn't have a lot of money and my parents couldn't afford anything, but I was fortunate that I got a partial grant and a loan. I think tuition was about \$2000 a year, which was a lot of money for my family.

Kennedy: Why did you choose to major in history?

Tracy: I guess there was a kind of process of elimination [laughs]. My freshman year I had somehow decided I would be a Chemistry major, so I took Chemistry 101 and what a disaster that was! I was always the last one to leave every lab, it was terrible! I almost flunked my first semester! I did better the second semester and came back deciding that Chemistry wasn't for me. I avoided Math like the plague because I hadn't done well in it in high school, so I looked towards things that were more verbal like English, which eventually backed me into History. I also got interested later in Economics. I had taken a basic economics course and really enjoyed it, so I decided to minor in Economics.

Kennedy: You mentioned that the fraternities here controlled social life, what was your social life like here as someone who was not involved in Greek life?

Tracy: Well I didn't have much of one [laughs]. I played in the band in high school, so I decided to join Sophomore year because of the lack of social things to do. They really became a group that I got to know really well and we did a lot of things together, so that took the place of being in a fraternity for me. I also ate in the Dining Hall; all the men that joined fraternities didn't eat in the Dining Hall, so I met people there too.

Mrs. Tracy: You were also in the service fraternity.

Tracy: Oh yes, I did join the service fraternity Alpha Phi Omega. There weren't women in it when we were here, but it provided me with opportunities to do service projects and do things around campus. I also was on the college radio station WWGC, it was only an AM thing at that time and you could only get it on the campus, but that was also an enjoyable thing for me. And to some extent, ROTC provided another group of companions. I also had a roommate who had a car, so we used it to tour around the area, but most of the social life was limited. Fortunately, the Majestic Theater was only 75 cents for a movie, so at least you could go see a movie on Saturday nights [laughs].

Kennedy: When you said band, did you mean marching band?

Tracy: Both marching and concert band.

Kennedy: Is that where you learned to play the bugle?

Tracy: No, I had actually learned to play trumpet back in elementary school and when I got into my last year of high school my band instructor converted me to the baritone horn, which is also called the Euphonium, and I really enjoyed that because I got to play melody every once in a while. When I got here my first year I didn't participate in the band, but when I heard later on that they needed a baritone player I decided to join for my last three years. It was neat because we'd come here a week before school started for Band Camp and would have a great time, and then we would go to all the football

games which were a lot of fun too. One of our classmates, Jim Ward, was quarterback and he was very good, so we got to see him win a lot of games our sophomore year. In concert band, we would also take a tour in the Spring to a number of different places here in Pennsylvania.

Kennedy: How big of a role did ROTC play in your college experience?

Tracy: It got increasingly more involved as I reached the advanced course. We had three classes a week with ROTC and started preparing for summer camp junior and senior year, which was basically Army Basic Training. We also started doing field exercises and things of that sort, so it got to be a little more intense as it went on. The idea was that after you completed the summer camp, you would come back your senior year as one of the leaders of ROTC.

Kennedy: While you were a student at Gettysburg, do you recall hearing about the Vietnam War heating up? Did your ROTC instructors talk to you about it?

Tracy: Initially, I really didn't; in '62 and '63 we started to hear rumblings about how we had advisors there but not much more. We had an ROTC instructor, Captain Millard Velarius, who was a real gung-ho guy and an airborne ranger who really wanted to get away from Gettysburg because we were far too tame for him. At the end of our sophomore year, he got his wish and was sent to Vietnam as an advisor. He went to Fort Bradfordson for initial training for Special Forces and then to Vietnam. At the end of our junior year, just before we went to summer camp, we got the word that he had been killed in Vietnam. This came as a real shock because now it was very personal. Before it was people you didn't know but now it was someone we knew and had looked up to as the paragon of the soldier and he still got killed in a helicopter crash. But our junior year was really when we started to hear more concerns about the war.

Mrs. Tracy: I remember this picture in the yearbook that year of somebody sitting in a study with the caption "He's feeling the draft on his back." And they didn't mean the wind.

Tracy: We did have the draft in place and things started heating up. Initially, you could use your college deferment, but if you dropped out for any reason you were probably subject to getting called, so that became much more real. Senior year I remember hearing about some people that were antiwar leaning.

Mrs. Tracy: I don't really remember much political discussion during that time.

Kennedy: You both mentioned that this was a conservative campus, I'm assuming that there wasn't much of an antiwar movement here.

Tracy: I'll be real honest with you, I bought into the war myself. We were gonna go there and defeat those Commies! We were gonna do it! Now I learned somewhat differently later on, but I really believed that whole idea early on and I think that was the attitude most people had.

Mrs. Tracy: I don't know if that was the mood of the whole campus, in fact I think most people either didn't know or didn't think about it. I went from here to Columbia University for graduate school and that was quite a big change [laughs].

Tracy: She was there when they took over the campus buildings in '68!

Kennedy: Considering your attitudes at the time, were you excited to go to Vietnam?

Tracy: I don't know if I was excited, I was really more eager. Going back to your earlier question about my family, it meant a lot that my grandfather and father had served and that I would do the same. One thing that happened that changed the equation though was that I had done well in ROTC, so I was named a Distinguished Military Graduate at the end of my four years. The effect that had was that I received a commission in the regular Army, instead of the reserves.² I took this Army commission as an, "Oh! Look at me!" moment [laughs]. There were seven of us in our class that were granted Army commissions and we all accepted. Unfortunately, they didn't really explain some of the drawbacks to this. Number one was that once you accepted the commission, you couldn't resign; the war was on and they weren't accepting resignations, you were in for the duration, which wasn't made completely clear to us. Another thing was that when you accepted a commission, the day you accepted it here at Gettysburg College you were on active duty. I received orders the day of graduation to report to Fort Hood, Texas in the next five days. It was an immediate move from Gettysburg College to Fort Hood, Texas, just like that, as fast as you could get down there. Of the seven of us that accepted regular commissions, four of us actually stayed on active duty and retired, three of the others didn't for various reasons and Vietnam certainly had an effect on that.

² The regular Army refers to the standing Army while the reserves fill in during emergency situations

Kennedy: When you were in ROTC, did they talk to you about what it would be like in Vietnam?

Tracy: They mainly just gave us general military training. Obviously after one of our instructors was killed in 1965 we talked more and more about it. We were hearing news reports about the action going on and there was a huge battle in '65 [November 14-18] in the Ia Drang Valley where one of the officers killed was from the town of Gettysburg, so it kept getting closer to home. In ROTC they kept talking more about it and saying that there was a chance we might end up there, given the way things were going. The year we graduated was when they really escalated the U.S troop involvement in Vietnam. Before that it had been mostly advisors but starting in late '65 they put actual U.S units in and we took over the battle. Our instructors in ROTC were aware of this and made it clear to us that we would probably be going, and I guess we all knew that, too. Almost everyone, there were a couple exceptions, ended up going to Vietnam. One of them was my roommate who got commissioned in the Chemical Corps and got to go to Germany for 3 years, which worked out well for him.

Kennedy: When you went to Fort Hood right after graduation, was that for training right before you went to Vietnam?

Tracy: No, it was for assignment to a unit. I was assigned to an infantry battalion. When you're commissioned in the Army you're commissioned to a specific branch, like infantry, armor, artillery, etc. My branch was the Quartermaster corps, but because I had been commissioned into the regular Army, there was a policy that you would serve two years in a combat branch, so I was then assigned to Armor. I went down to Fort Hood, Texas, 2nd Armor Division, and they assigned me to an infantry battalion. I

was there for about four weeks and started to perform duties as an officer there; then I was sent to Fort Knox, Kentucky to go through the Army basic course where I learned the basic things you need to know as an officer. Then I went back to the same unit in Fort Hood and stayed there until I got orders to go to Vietnam in the Spring of '67 as an individual replacement. But I was still on this detailed Armor branch, so I was serving in an infantry battalion as a platoon leader initially and then I was the S4 logistics guy. I will say it was an interesting experience living out in Texas. I was surprised because I thought everyone in Texas would have a six shooter on one hip and a whisky flask on the other, but Fort Hood was dry! You couldn't buy any alcohol! Only on post could you get alcohol [laughs]. Boy was that a culture shock. We also had a great battalion commander at Fort Hood. The war was really starting to heat up, so people were getting pulled up and sent off as replacements left and right. When I got back from Fort Knox, pretty much everyone that had been there before was gone, including the officers. They brought in busloads of guys from the induction centers and told me that I was going to conduct basic training. I had no idea how to conduct basic training [laughs]! We didn't know anyone who knew how to do that, so we really just had to do the best we could.

Kennedy: Was it pretty common for people to get called up from Fort Hood to go to Vietnam?

Tracy: No, you had to go through training for whatever your specialty was. For example, if you were an enlisted man you went through basic training, and then advanced individual training which was another eight weeks where you would get qualified in a military occupational specialty like rifling or quarter mastering, and then you were ready for assignment anywhere. Some people did go to Vietnam directly, but for the officers they had a rule that you had to serve in a U.S unit for four months before you could be sent over. That rule was really to avoid a lot of the problems they had during the Korean War where they were sending people directly from entry into Korea and a lot of them got killed, so the idea was that you would spend time in the U.S until you got acclimated before going into combat. So for me, I stayed for a year; I graduated in June of '66 and went to Vietnam in June of '67.

Kennedy: In the background information you sent me, you mentioned that you attained the rank of Lieutenant Colonel.

Tracy: Yes, after 21 years of military service. Because of all the demands of Vietnam, they started speeding up promotions, so after the first year you got promoted to First Lieutenant and then after another year they promoted you to Captain.

Kennedy: A year in Vietnam?

Tracy: No, a year in service. Two years in, June of '68, I came back from my first year-long tour of Vietnam and they promoted me to Captain. I stayed a Captain a long time [laughs]. After they started pulling units out of Vietnam, promotions slowed down. Army promotions are a numbers game, for you to get promoted someone has to either get promoted up, leave the service, or die, so there wasn't as much of that happening after Vietnam. As you get to the higher ranks like Major and Lieutenant Colonel, a promotion board in Washington D.C looks at your records and puts you on a promotion list. I learned all about this when I worked in the Army Personnel Center where we handled the information that the promotion boards looked at. When the board finished the selection process they would give it back to

us and we would run it through a computer algorithm and decide where each person fit on the list, and you got promoted off that list when your number came up. Eventually I got promoted to Major in '76 and then Lieutenant Colonel in '82. After that I decided not to wait for the next one [laughs].

Kennedy: You shipped out to Vietnam in '67, correct?

Tracy: Yes, in June of '67.

Kennedy: Were you and Linda married at that time?

Tracy: No, we weren't.

Mrs. Tracy: We maintained contact.

Tracy: We kept in touch and wrote back and forth. Linda went back to New York City for graduate school and was working for the Social Security Administration.

Kennedy: And you kept in contact while you were in Vietnam?

Tracy: Yes, and it wasn't like today where people get on the web.

Mrs. Tracy: I still have all the letters he wrote me.

Tracy: We would write letters and send them off, although it would take about a week to get to the states. Linda would hopefully answer and then it would take another week or two to get back to Vietnam, so there was quite a bit of lag time between hearing from each other. We couldn't call on cell phones, we didn't have internet, so sometimes it would be a long, long time before we would hear from each other. Some people would record a message on a tape if they were married, but we never did anything like that.

Mrs. Tracy: Nowadays soldiers can talk to their wives and girlfriends every day over video chat, but we didn't have anything like that.

Tracy: When I got back, I was stationed in Fort Lee, Virginia, south of Richmond, and I would take the long drive up to New York City to see Linda and take her on a date. We had to work half days on Saturdays so as soon as I got off at noon I would hop in my car and head up 95 as fast as I could to New York City. I'd have to drive back Sunday night to get back to Fort Lee for duty on Monday, because they counted noses to see who got back [laughs]. After I finished my advanced class for quartermasters, I was assigned as a company commander in the Quartermaster Brigade so every morning we had a command reveille when everybody got back from leave at 5 o'clock in the morning. Oftentimes I would get back from New York a couple hours before that; I was in bad shape those mornings I'm not gonna lie [laughs]. I got sent off to my second tour in February of '70; my branch said, "It's time for you to go back to Vietnam" and I remember thinking, "I just got back, things are finally getting back to normal." I didn't have much of a choice though. I was assigned to the 25th infantry unit at Cu Chi and I was with that unit for 6 months. While I was there, we had the Cambodian invasion in May and June of 1970. We invaded Cambodia to cut off the North Vietnamese in their staging areas. My unit was one of the ones that

invaded and at the end of that they announced that the division headquarters was going back to Hawaii, but that I wasn't allowed to go with them because you had to have been in Vietnam for 10 months to go back with the unit. After that I was reassigned as an Aide-de-Camp to an officer, which turned out to be a very interesting assignment. I mainly helped manage schedules and acted as a personal assistant. We used to call Aide-de-Camps dog robbers because they'd rob a dog to help their commanding officer [laughs]. The general I worked with was in charge of all logistics operations for the Army in Vietnam. He told me my primary duty was setting up a travel schedule for him every day. We'd travel somewhere every single day by plane or helicopter and would visit one the various logistics units. I got to see the entire country directly through that job. The general was also a very dynamic guy and gave me a lot of leadership advice and experience. He had also been in Vietnam for a year and half, so he knew where all the skeletons were buried. He invariably would always go straight to the most dangerous places and had very low tolerance for full colonels and senior enlisted people that weren't doing their jobs properly, so it was quite an educational experience working for this guy, he was really something.

Kennedy: And this was on your second tour?

Tracy: Yes, in '70 and '71. Again, I had done 6 months with the 25th division and then did the Aide job for 6 months. At that point my tour was done, and I was due to go home. I received an alert that I was going to be sent to Fort McClellan, Alabama. When I told this to the general I worked for, he asked me if I really wanted to go and I told him that I really didn't have any desire to go to Alabama, so he asked me to stay in Vietnam working for him. I let him talk me into it, and the good thing about staying for an extra six months was that you got a free 30 day leave, so I was able to go back to the states and ask Linda to marry me, but I had to go back to Vietnam while she was planning the wedding.

Kennedy: When you went back did you do the same job?

Tracy: Yes, I worked as an Aide again. I did that until my final tour was up in August of '71. I screwed up my timing though because I thought they were going to let me go back earlier, so we had to postpone the wedding a couple weeks. But when I got back, I got assigned to Washington D.C in the Army Material Command Headquarters and Linda and I got married in October of '71. Linda had moved down to Baltimore with the Social Security Administration, so it all worked out really nicely. We lived in Columbia, Maryland between Baltimore and D.C where she could go to her job in Baltimore and I could go up to Alexandria, Virginia for my job.

Kennedy: You worked mainly as an Aide in your second tour, but what was your main job during your first tour?

Tracy: My first tour I was a platoon leader in the 11th armored cavalry regiment. We were a mobile unit, mostly tanks and armor, of about 5000 soldiers. When I first got there, a portion of my unit was in the northern part of South Vietnam near the demilitarized zone in Chu Lai. We were up there for about five months conducting search and destroy operations, and then our executive officer got killed in a mine explosion and I was the next senior lieutenant, so I was put into his job as executive officer. We then moved down to the area east of Saigon where our regiment's base camp was and we operated out of there. Later we got sent up to the Cambodian border and we were there for Tet '68 when that all

started. Eventually our unit was pulled back to the area between Long Binh and Saigon because they had almost been overrun by the NVA3 and Viet Cong and we spent a number of months there operating in that area, which I stayed in until I finally left in late May of '68.

3 People's Army of Vietnam, often referred to as the North Vietnamese Army

Kennedy: You were pretty heavily involved in combat during your first tour.

Tracy: Yes, my first tour was all combat. My second tour not so much. I was in the 21st division, but I wasn't in a combat unit. At that point I was a quartermaster and worked in the supply and transport battalion. We had a supply base at Cu Chi and often did resupply operations, especially for the Cambodian invasion. When I worked for the general, we had headquarters in Long Binh and would fly somewhere everyday by helicopter to visit one of the units.

Kennedy: I want to back up to when you first arrived in Vietnam, how did you get there?

Tracy: We flew, thankfully. Some people I knew in the 11th armored cavalry in September of '66 had to go on a boat, they called themselves the Boat People [laughs]. By the time I came, they were sending individual replacements by airplane, so I got on a chartered airliner at Travis Airforce Base in California and flew to Hawaii; then from Hawaii to Guam, from Guam to the Philippines, and then finally from the Philippines to Vietnam. It was an incredibly long flight and I was crammed in with all these guys, talk about a close space! I eventually got to Vietnam and I waited in a replacement unit for a couple of days until they decided what to do with me. It was kind of an odyssey getting to the actual unit I was assigned to. My unit was up in the northern part of South Vietnam, so I had to take a couple plane rides to get up there, it took me almost a week!

Kennedy: Did they give you any training once you got to Vietnam or was it more a figure it out as you go?

Tracy: Usually the units would conduct an orientation for new soldiers that lasted a couple of days where you learned patrolling techniques and how to notice booby traps and mines. For me, the day I got to my unit they told me, "We're going on an operation tomorrow. Here's your helmet, let's get going!" It's what the Army likes to call on the job training [laughs]. I was very fortunate that my platoon sergeant had been with the unit since they arrived in September of '66 and had a lot of experience, so I was able to tell him, "Look, you know more than I do, I'm just going to ride along and listen and learn from you." And I did that for about a week, I let him make all the decisions and do all the commands before I stepped in.

Kennedy: I know that the U.S Army often worked closely with the Vietnamese, did you ever experience any language or cultural barriers when interacting with them? Were there a lot of officers who could speak Vietnamese?

Tracy: Fortunately for me, my troop commander had been an advisor earlier in '63 and '64 and he had learned some Vietnamese. He was a tremendous help to us, because he would be able to converse with people and get various things we needed. Most of the officers did not speak any Vietnamese. We had

very little contact with them. We'd be out on an operation and would go through some of the small villages where we would run into mostly women, children, and old men and we really couldn't converse with them; our contact was very limited. One day when we were on an operation, I was supposed to go from one place to another to form a perimeter for an infantry unit coming in by helicopter. This was during the time of the year where the rice patties were wet, and my unit had to get through. We had eight armed personnel carriers that were track vehicles and completely tore up this rice patty left and right. The first vehicle in got stuck, so I put another vehicle in to get it out; and by the end of it, all my vehicles were stuck in the rice patty. Gosh, we tore that rice patty up one side to the other, I'm sure we created a lot of enemies that day. That was their livelihood and we were tearing it up. I didn't know what to do about it, I really didn't. We had to go across this rice patty, but I really felt bad about it and I'm sure we did not win any hearts and minds that day...probably just the opposite.

Kennedy: You also mentioned before that you got to see a lot of Vietnam when you worked as an Aide; what was the geography and environment of Vietnam like?

Tracy: Well, the heat was certainly a constant thing. With a tropical environment you have one period that they call the monsoon period where it's raining all the time, and then you have another period where it doesn't rain at all, so it's either mud or dust. When it was raining all the time, it actually got pretty chilly and was very unpleasant at times; we would get completely soaked and could never get warm. A lot of the places we were in were rubber plantations. The rubber trees are placed a certain distance apart so people can drive down in between them and collect the rubber, so we often drove between the rubber plantations and actually make pretty good time, so that was different. There were a few areas with big canopy jungle but mostly it was open terrain. There were also some mountainous regions that we had difficulty getting around because we had these armored vehicles that didn't operate very well on steep inclines. But the humidity was there all the time, you really felt it. The funny thing was that after a while you got adjusted to it. I didn't really feel that bad. I mean, we were sweating all the time, but so what [laughs]? I think the people who had air conditioning actually suffered more because the heat really hit them hard when they got out of it. I never had air conditioning, so it didn't make any difference to me. And oh, the bugs of course were just awful.

Kennedy: Did a lot of people contract malaria or other types of tropical diseases?

Tracy: The Army was very conscious of that and made everyone take one pill once a week, a big orange pill, or if you were in certain areas you had to take a small white pill every day. The trouble with the big orange pill was that it had an effect on your digestive system, so the troops right away resisted it and didn't want to take the pill. We had to resort to more forceful means. The troops would be in the chow line, and at the end of the line we'd have a medic standing there with the pill and he'd put it in the guys mouth and make him swallow. It sounds infantile, but you had to do things to get the troops to go along with the program. Malaria was a very serious problem, it really was. They gave us all kinds of inoculations for the other stuff. Believe it or not, there's an inoculation for bubonic plague. I got inoculated twice. They had a lot of problems with animals carrying lice that carried diseases like cholera, hepatitis, and a bunch of others we had to be protected against. Manure from animals and humans was also often used to fertilize the fields so we had to be careful. The environment was also just generally

dirty, everything about it is dirty. You're dirty, everything is dirty. The idea of getting cleaned up was to get a helmet full of water and pour it over yourself. Sometimes we'd be in a base camp area where people would rig up a shower by getting a big water container and an old motor from a vehicle and running the input and output lines to the water tank; they'd crank up the engine, and pretty soon we had hot water! It was amazing!

Kennedy: The Vietnam War has often been described as a war without a front, with it often being difficult to discern who the enemy was; did you experience this in combat?

Tracy: Absolutely, all the time! You never knew where the front was, there was no front. You'd be given orders to go to a certain area and do a search and destroy and you would go out on an operation looking for bad guys, if you could identify them, and you'd sweep through the area. The biggest weapon against my unit as an armor unit was the land mine. We had to be really careful about going through an area twice on two different days because they might come in and plant a landmine for the next time you came through. They were quite aware of the vulnerabilities of our vehicles. The first vehicles when I first got there had gasoline engines, so the enemy learned right away that the gas tank was located on the left side of the vehicle and they would set the mine up so it would explode on the left hand side. Once the gas tank exploded, the thousands of rounds of ammunition we had been carrying inside all went, and when it went, it really went. We rode on top, not inside, so if you were fortunate you would get blown off during the explosion. Sometimes that worked, sometimes it didn't.

Kennedy: Having served in combat and then serving as an Aide, how did your experiences differ and how did you feel as an Aide watching other people in combat? Was it difficult?

Tracy: I obviously had experienced it myself, and I think it's one of the reasons why the general selected me; I think he wanted someone with that experience who could relate to the logistics problems. Serving in a combat unit as a quartermaster taught me what it was like to be in the supply chain. I knew what it was like being down in the far end where you got things with some difficulty. Everyone else back in the headquarters seemed to get all the good stuff, nothing filtered its way down to you in the field, so I think I relayed that experience and really knew what it was like for the people out there in the field. The infantry, armor, and artillery guys were all operating at the end of the supply base just like I had, and it was very difficult for them. I think that was something that I learned the hard way. I think the program the Army had of having you serve in a combat arm really gave you a good appreciation of what the real purpose of the Army was. The purpose of the Army is not pushing supplies, it's what the other people are doing.

Kennedy: To ask a more difficult question, a lot of veterans describe how there was a certain point in the war where they turned against it or realized that it wasn't the kind of war they thought it was, did you ever reach that point?

Tracy: Yes, funny you should ask. As I mentioned, when I first went over, I really believed in what we were doing; we were going to go over there and win this war and do a great job. The unit I was in, the 11th armored cavalry division, had a very high esprit de corps; we were extremely capable and thought we were the best unit ever around. I was very fortunate to have excellent leaders and even though

people died, we felt we were doing the right thing. I guess it was after Tet '68, which was actually a tactical victory for us since we killed many NVA and everything, that our spirits changed because we were still there, we hadn't gone away. By the time I came back in 1970, we were already starting the withdrawal of U.S units. By then it became apparent to me that we weren't winning this thing; everyone's objective was just to survive for 12 months and get the hell outta there. That was the objective. I also became more sensitive to the issues going on at that time, especially the extremely bad usage of drugs that just got worse and worse, and I'm not talking Marijuana, I'm talking hard stuff like heroin. It was available everywhere!

Kennedy: That was something I was surprised to hear from the veterans we had at our Vietnam panel earlier this year. A lot of them talked about how soldiers under their command were using LSD!

Tracy: That was minor stuff compared to what I saw! When I was at Cu Chi we had to man the bunkers every night to keep the bad guys out and we took turns going on duty and making sure the troops were awake. I swear I was almost knocked out by the marijuana smell! I was more afraid of the people inside the wire than I was of the people outside.

Mrs. Tracy: That was the second tour, it was a lot different.

Tracy: Yes, the second tour, and it really was. You had the drugs and the Black Power movement was getting really strong. A lot of the blacks felt that they had been screwed on this whole thing and it was really difficult to maintain a high morale. The troops had also gotten the impression that they were not winning this war and that they were just surviving until they could get out of there. In the time between my first tour and my second tour, I spent time training soldiers in Fort Lee, Virginia who were going through their advanced individual training to become supply technicians and stock control accounting specialists. I was in these old World War II barracks and each week a new class would come in. One day, I get a group of new students all from the South Carolina National Guard. We didn't call up any National Guardsmen to Vietnam, so these were all men who weren't going to see combat. They would go through basic training, advanced individual training, and then they'd go home. Great! So this class came in and they were in the barracks, and it suddenly dawned on me: they were all white guys! I guess you didn't get into the South Carolina National Guard if you were black. These people were clearly using the National Guard to avoid service in Vietnam. Right next to them was another class of guys who were draftees and they were all black. It suddenly dawned on me and I saw what was happening. It was really difficult for me and I had to work really hard to keep those two groups separated in my head. The black guys were realizing that they had been given the raw end of the deal. They were all going to Vietnam, every single one of them. Maybe they would be in a supply job or back in a base camp somewhere, but maybe not, it's hard to say. But the South Carolina National Guard guys were going home to Mama, they weren't going to Vietnam, no way. I resolved right then, if I stayed in the Army or got to a position where I had influence and we had another war like this, the first people to get called up would be the National Guard.

Kennedy: It was clearly unjust.

Tracy: I certainly was starting to realize that myself. As I was there for that year and a half second tour, more and more units were being pulled out and pulled back. We were turning over equipment to the South Vietnamese Army to make them more capable, but it didn't look like that was going to work very well. They did actually hold on for a number of years until 1975 when everything collapsed. There was definitely a tremendous difference though between my first and second tour.

Kennedy: Mainly because of the loss of morale after Tet?

Tracy: The loss of morale, the drug problem was so endemic, you didn't know who to trust, the Black Power movement was becoming a real problem, and units were being pulled out, so there was just a lot of chaos. We had a few occasions while I was there of some units refusing to assault an objective when ordered.

Kennedy: I was going to ask you about that; especially towards the end of the war when the morale was low, would people disobey orders from officers?

Tracy: Yep, we even had some cases of fragging an officer, killing an officer that you didn't like or that you thought was putting you in too many risky situations. They would throw hand grenades in the officer tents. That almost happened in my battalion; we had a commander in the 25th division who was a real jerk, I don't know how he became a commander to be honest with you, but the troops really disliked him intensely and one night they blew his Jeep up. Fortunately he wasn't in it, but within a couple days he disappeared and went off to an assignment somewhere else.

Kennedy: What does the Army do in those situations? Are there punishments?

Tracy: Well, they'll court marshal you if they can find out who did it, but it's an indication of very bad morale if troops are doing that and turning on each other. The situation got worse and worse, it really wasn't very good. I think by the time I left in August of '71, units were pretty much just maintaining the status quo, they really weren't doing any aggressive maneuvers. One of my classmates, Bill Bock, was in the 173rd Airborne brigade and his unit helped take over this hill. They took tremendous casualties, a lot of people were killed and wounded, and as soon as they achieved it, they pulled off the hill and the Viet Cong came back and took it back over! What's the purpose? Where's the purpose in that? We were losing it.

Kennedy: So the prevailing idea was just to stay alive long enough to finish your tour and go home?

Tracy: Yep, that was the prevailing philosophy.

Kennedy: There just wasn't a sense of purpose anymore.

Tracy: Well, we had just lost it completely. Later on, I took a course at the Army War College and we had a Colonel there named Harry Summers who had written a book called *On Strategy* that reviewed what went wrong in Vietnam. He had served in Vietnam and Korea and had been on the team that negotiated the peace treaty with the Viet Cong and NVA. He strongly felt that the basic problem was that we did not have a strategy in Vietnam. Our strategy was to maintain the status quo; in other words, we had this

geographical area of South Vietnam and we were just going to keep it from getting taken over by the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong. That's no strategy at all, there's no objective or anything! I believe he had the right story, we didn't have a strategy. We were just there and we lost 55,000 people. For what purpose? I'm not sure I could tell you what the purpose was anymore. They'd say we had to keep the Communists from taking over the country. Well they took over, and I'm not sure that's such a bad thing now. Anyway, it'd be interesting to go back and see how things have changed.

Kennedy: Have you ever gone back?

Tracy: No. Although one of the guys that was in my unit sent me a picture a year ago of an area east of Saigon where our base camp used to be. It was a dirt road with rubber plantations on either side, with Rome Plows and big bulldozers on either side that would knock down the trees to maintain a long area. We had taken a picture of it in 1967 when it was just a dirt road through the middle of nowhere and compared it with a picture he took in 2012. Now there's a stoplight there! It's a paved road with billboards on either side! Things have changed now obviously, it's quite different.

Kennedy: What year did you leave Vietnam for good?

Tracy: 1971.

Kennedy: Were you ready to leave?

Tracy: Oh yes, I was ready to go. I had seen enough. I thought, "I've done my stint here I think it's time for me to go and head back." They were pulling people out left and right, I think the last units left in early '73, so they were only there for about a year more after I left. There wasn't much left to do.

Kennedy: There weren't a lot of people remaining in Vietnam when you left?

Tracy: By the time I left, the numbers had really gone down dramatically, it was really something.

Kennedy: One final question, a lot of veterans talk about how they felt as if their service wasn't appreciated when they returned to the U.S, did you ever experience this?

Tracy: I don't know that I was ever disrespected, I think we were pretty sensitive to the fact that we had basically lost the war. We had gone over there and not achieved what we thought we would. I certainly felt it more in '68 between the first and second tour. I was down in Fort Lee, Virginia when there was all the turmoil with the Democratic Convention and the assassination of Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy. It just seemed like the country was becoming unglued. Some people would challenge me and ask me what we were doing there and why we were there, and I was starting to struggle to give them a good reason. We definitely felt that it was not a great idea to where our uniforms around much.

Kennedy: How long did you stay in the Army after coming back from Vietnam?

Tracy: I came back in '71 and retired in July of '87, so another 16 years.

Kennedy: Were you in the U.S for most of that time?

Tracy: Except for the four years I spent in Germany with my wife and family, yes. I went to the Army's Commanding Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas for a yearlong class. That was a great time, my son was born while we were there. When I finished there, I was assigned to a position in Heidelberg, Germany. The tour was three years and I volunteered to stay for an extra year. It was a staff job, so I wasn't out in the field. We had a really wonderful time there. My final assignment was at the Pentagon where I worked in the office of the Chief of Staff of the Army and I saw things that I had never suspected went on and really got to understand the innerworkings of the Army much better.

Kennedy: Thank you so much, Steve, for speaking with me today, it was really a pleasure to hear and record your story.

Tracy: No problem, Bridget. I enjoyed telling it.