Richard Gray interview

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Richard Gray

(Transcription of Tape 1, Side 1)

KB: Hello, it’s Tuesday, February 14, 2006, and I’m Karen Blair, about to do an interview with Richard Gray. Can you tell us about your background before you came to Central?

RG: Well I came to Central in 1975. At that time I was in the United States Air Force. At that time my rank was a Major. I had been in the service about 12 years, and my background in the Air Force at that time was primarily with the Office of Special Investigations – sort of like the FBI of the Air Force – and I was also involved quite a while in the ICBM program – your nuclear weapons – your Minuteman, and also the Titan. I came out of those programs, and I volunteered to teach ROTC here at Central, so I came here in 1975.

KB: Are you a native to Washington State?

RG: No, I’m actually from the State of Texas.

KB: And did you end up serving in Viet Nam at all?

RG: I did not, no. While the Viet Nam conflict was going on I did a year of duty in Korea. Not the Korean war, but it was Korea at that time.

KB: Okay. Well what did you find when you came to Central? What were your impressions? What was the history of the program that you joined?

RG: When I came here, I actually volunteered for ROTC program – small program in the Northwest. Central Washington University definitely met those requirements as far as size of the University, and also the size of the ROTC program. The ROTC program at that time was only a two-year program. The people were just involved in ROTC during their Junior and Senior years, or at least their last two years of college. Most of the ROTC programs in the United States were four-year programs, but at that time Central was primarily a liberal arts school, and the military was not actually looking for a lot of officers with liberal arts backgrounds. They were really looking for the engineers.

KB: So how many students, how many staff were on board when you got here?

RG: At that time, when I got here, there were two officers, and two NCOs, and I was the Associate Professor of Aerospace Studies, so there was a Professor of Aerospace Studies which was over me. He was a Lieutenant Colonel. The program was not too big. I think we probably had about 12-14 students as Seniors, and 12-14 as Juniors. So maybe 24 to 26 overall.

KB: Any women involved?

RG: When I first came here, no, but as I recall when I left here four years later there were, I think, three that were involved in the program.

KB: So who was your predecessor, and what kind of shape – what kind of priorities did he leave for you to inherit?
RG: Okay. The person that was here before me really knew, because he also stayed on one year longer, and he was a Colonel Charles Greenwood, and I think he was probably here for four years. A very active individual, and very much a part of the community, which he urged everybody out there to also become a part of the community here, because ROTC assignment is quite different than if you were stationed at McCord Air Force Base, because they’re surrounded by military. Here you’re surrounded by civilians, so you’re expected to be part of the community, and part of the college while you’re here.

KB: Mm-hmm. What kinds of things had he done for the program? What did you face when you walked in the door?

RG: At that time, in 1975, of course, we were just coming out of the Viet Nam conflict, so you didn’t have a lot of anti Viet Nam atmosphere or anti-military atmosphere, but I think you had a lot of apathy towards the program. People could care if your were there – could care less if you were there, or not. It didn’t make any difference. But definitely you were not booed on campus, or anything like that. It was just a – I think it was a growing time in the part of the United States, and also a growing time in the part of Central and the ROTC program – because this stayed small for several years right in there. I understand that maybe four years later they started to build back up, but this was true of all ROTC units throughout the United States, I guess. After I left here I was still involved in ROTC in an administrative capability, so I knew what was going on, and I could see, gradually, people became more and more accepting of military as part of the United States once again, and we got away from that anti-Viet Nam era of the Sixties and early Seventies.

KB: So it was your predecessor who faced the early Seventies agitation against the war?

RG: Yeah, he would have come here let’s say probably about 1971, probably spent four years here, and [inaudible], because I recall Viet Nam sort of ended officially in about 1975. So I think at the very part when he first came here I don’t know what exactly happened on campus as far as any demonstrations or anything like that, but I do know throughout the United States there were still problems with people wearing the uniform on campus. A lot of people still did not like that idea, and even today with Iraq you still have problems. They don’t want the military either recruiting for enlisted or the officer training programs on colleges – some of the places, like the more liberal schools. I don’t find that here at Central.

KB: Now was the classroom building in Peterson?

RG: Yes it was. At that time we had the bottom floor, and there was also a flight training program there I’d like to call the Aerospace Studies. And they had just started that program, so we sort of went hand in hand with what they were doing. A guy by the name of Dell Fisher, and – no, Lee Fisher and Dell Simonson. I think Lee Fisher actually started the program here.

KB: Were you – was ROTC the parent of the Aerospace Studies?

RG: No, we were not connected at all with each other. We just sort of went with each other’s coat tails, because a lot of people that wanted to fly in civilian life – one of the best ways to go into military first, get the flight training, then eventually get out and fly as a civilian. So we had several students in the program who were actually in the flight instruction program on the civilian side. That was their major, but then they also took ROTC at the same time, because that was the best route for them to get, eventually, to fly for Northwest, Delta, or whatever it might be. And still today a lot of people take that avenue.

KB: But your students – what was their involvement with the flight program on campus?

RG: Uh, none unless that was their actual major. They could be a History major, an English major, or an Aerospace Studies major.
KB: I see. And what was your role? Did you teach, or were you strictly an administrator, a recruiter, what?

RG: Well there was only two of us – two officers, anyway. The two NCOs, they took all the – care of all the administration, and the two officers were responsible for the training of the cadets, and also responsible for the teaching, and the recruiting also. I made a lot of trips around here to a lot of the community colleges like Wenatchee Valley, or over at Big Bend, or Green Valley, because those people, after they come out of their two-year program, then they would come to Central for their Junior and Senior years, and they were very attractive to the ROTC program. Also we recruited on campus, too, for a look at the Freshmen and the Sophomores, saying, “Hey, do you want a job two years from now? You can come in ROTC, get your – going – put your two years in the ROTC program, you would get commissioned as an officer in the Air Force – Second Lieutenant – and you would go on active duty.” At that time, everybody had graduated from ROTC and was commissioned; they did go on active duty. There have been some changes.

KB: What were the financial arrangements?

RG: I don’t recall exactly what they got. I think it was probably about $100 a month – so definitely it would not pay for their tuition or anything else. Just a stipend more than anything else. I know when I was ROTC program as a cadet my [inaudible] was $100 every three months. So $100 a month seemed like a pretty good deal to me.

KB: Now tell me about the scholastic operation. Did students get actual credits for the courses that you taught?

RG: When I was here they did, yes.

KB: Do they no longer? Or you’re not – you’re not attached to – okay.

RG: I – I don’t know. I would presume they would have to, because in fact they do have to put in a certain number of hours up there in their studies, and if they’re doing that and not getting any credit I think they would fall behind in their other academic work, so I’m almost positive they would. I have not looked at your catalog.

KB: Well what kinds of classes – what were they learning? What was the curriculum?

RG: They were there for two years. One year would be on American Defense Policy, and the other year would be on Management and Leadership. Because every person going into the Air Force is an officer, but is expected to be a leader before he becomes a pilot, a navigator, a missileer, an instructor, or medical. So everybody is a leader, so we teach those people how to be an effective leader.

KB: And is that one course per quarter, or multiple?

RG: One course per quarter, yes. So for one year you’d actually take three courses on Leadership, next year you take three courses on American Defense Policy.

KB: I see.

RG: Just seeing how the Air Force and the American defense policy jives with everything.

KB: And you were teaching many of those courses.
RG: Yes.

KB: So you really got to know those students.

RG: Oh yes.

KB: Can you characterize them? Any reminiscences?

RG: Uh, a lot of boys, they want to become pilots in the Air Force – you know, that was just – small percentage of them – maybe 25%. Because we did – maybe all of them wanted to be, but we did not have that many pilot slots or allocations to actually give out. At the beginning of every year, each University, or each ROTC program was given a certain number of slots. Some of those might be for pilots, some navigators, some missileers, and some for just officers in general. So we would recruit, say, you, and say, “Okay, we can give you this one here. Do you want it or not?” And if you wanted a pilot’s slot and we couldn’t give you one, then you might take one of the others, or you’d say, “Okay, I’m going to walk away.” And that was their option before they ever signed a contract. So when that person came into their ROTC program they signed a contract at the beginning of their Junior year. They knew if they were going to become a pilot, because those slots were hard to come by. They really were. And a lot of people, that’s all they wanted. If they couldn’t get the pilot slot, they were going to say goodbye. Other people would say, “Well, Okay, I can’t be a pilot. Maybe my physical limitation is for eyes. I can’t be a pilot, but maybe I can be a navigator.” Sort of trade around just a little bit on that.

So we worked with all those cadets, and the guys that wanted to be a pilot slot – that wanted a pilot slot and had one – they were gung-ho, you know? A pilot attitude is a little bit different from everybody else, because you have to think that you’re top notch when you’re up there flying in that F-16, or if you’re doing something like that. If you think you’re second rate, you probably – well, you’re not going to get through pilot school to start off with. And then I don’t think we’d want to send up anybody into combat that thought they were second rate going up.

KB: So was the competition for the slots because the places on campus were few, or because the Air Force only wanted a few that particular year?

RG: A combination of both. Each year it would be different. The Air Force would say, “Okay, two years from now this is the number of pilots that we want,” whatever it might be. Then they allocate those out to Universities. So if they wanted, say, 200 pilots, they would spread those out to all the Universities in the United States. And some of the Universities, say, like University of Washington, which has a top notch engineering program – they would get more pilot slots than what we would here at Central, because ideally the pilot would also be an Engineer. And back in the Seventies we did not graduate Engineers. I don’t know what you do right now, but at that time Central did not graduate Engineers. But they would also – [inaudible] we do want a well-rounded Air Force. We don’t want all our pilots to be Engineers. We like History majors in there – whatever it might be – but not a lot of them.

KB: I see. Well you must have gotten to know our flight program. What did you think of it? Can you tell me about it?

RG: I thought it was pretty good. You know, Lee Fisher started the program, I understand, and I know he’s passed away now, and I know Dale Samuelson worked on it very hard, and a guy by name Wes Crum was also there at that time. I think they had a good program. It was probably very small compared to everything else, but the students that were in it seemed to really like it, because they wanted to fly, and that was the route to go.

KB: Now what about students who wanted to become a navigator? Where would they study on campus?
RG: Same thing as everybody else. They would take their regular degree, and they end up with a major in a particular field, whatever it might be, and one of their electives would be taking ROTC programs. See everybody does everything they want to on this side of the campus individually, but then you go to Peterson Hall, everybody took the same thing.

KB: Now have you stayed in touch with any of the students that you had?

RG: I did for a couple of years. In fact, about – maybe six or seven years later when I was [inaudible] in the Air Force, talking to a couple of them on the phone because they happened to be working in the same office where I had known somebody years ago, and you know, you talk about different people. “Yeah, I know him.” But I don’t have any contact with any of them now.

KB: And did your program encourage the students to relax together, too? Did they do a lot of extra curricular activities together?

RG: We had some off-campus activities. A lot of those pertaining – you know, trying to get the individual to grow as an individual, too. Because anybody just studying all the time is probably not a very good situation. So we did have outside organizations where we did try to get all 24 of them to participate in. Most of them would. Of course, some would not. It was not a requirement.

KB: Do you have an example?

RG: We might – at that time we had a military ball every year, you know, once again to try to get these people – Okay, get out of your blue jeans, dress up, and go and actually have a ball. We would have the Air Force Band from McCord would come over. I know we rented the Elk’s Hall one time, and one time we had it here on campus, and you know, they’d have their dates, and they’d all dress up – so like a ball, is what it would be like.

KB: Seems to me I saw in the yearbook that there were women students who had a club that sort of supported the social activities? Did you bump into that at all?

RG: We did not have one when we were here. I know at other Universities, which was quite a bit bigger, they were able to do that. We did not.

KB: Now you were on staff for how many years?

RG: Four years.

KB: And what would you say was the change over time? Can you measure the evolution of the program? What are you proudest of? What were the bumps along the way?

RG: I think the bumps were trying to keep the program viable, because at that time if you did not graduate 12 cadets per year, the Air Force considered you a non-viable detachment and it’s possible they would close you down. We fought that all four years, right on that border line.

KB: That means retention rates were poor.

RG: Yeah. You could retain them once you got them in, because they were under contract. But it’s to get them to – get those 12 people to come in at the beginning of the year was hard to do – and each year you’d, “Oh my gosh, we finally got that one,” you know, because you run across a lot of people out there and you – I thought they would be good prospects to become an officer in the Air Force two years from now. It’s hard to convince a lot of people, though, that – to sign on the dotted line for what you’re going to be doing two years from now. Not very many people do that. So it’s an advantage, but it’s also a
disadvantage to – now there were a few of them that had a scholarship while they were here. The Air Force would pick them up. Paid for room and board, plus their tuition. But not very many of them, because most of – nationwide – of scholarships went to Engineers.

KB: So how did you screen for students? Did they meet a certain average, or did they take a test, or –

RG: A combination of both. You had to have a certain grade point average – I don’t recall what it is. It was not real high. I think – I don’t know at that time if Central was on the three point system, or what. It would be equal to a C average, whatever that would be, and they do have to take the Air Force Officer Qualifying Test. Everybody coming into the program, you do have to achieve a certain score on that, and then they measure your aptitude for being a pilot, and for being a navigator, and then all other. Because most people are not going to be pilots, they’re not going to be navigators, but they’re going to be in the “all other” category there. So you’re looking for an aptitude to be a leader. This is what the test is supposed to measure. And then, in the summer time they would also have to go to a summer camp at some base in the United States for six weeks, and they would also have to successfully pass that.

KB: Was that more physically demanding?

RG: Yes it was. You know, you hear a lot about boot camp, and things like that, which boot camp is usually for the enlisted troops. But summer camp is boot camp for the potential officers. You go there, you get up at 0-dark-30 in the morning, you go out and do your physical training, and do your running, and your physical training – everything like that. Once again, during that six weeks they try to teach you to become a very cohesive unit. [Inaudible] a lot because you’re measured on how you fit in, not just as an individual, but how you fit in with the group, overall. Because if the person is strictly a loner, we don’t want you in the Air Force – because you’re part of the Air Force overall.

KB: But you say that people, once they came into the program, they stay. They succeeded at their courses?

RG: Yes they did. I think a lot of it had to do with the selection process ahead of time, so they knew what was expected out of them. Now if they flunked out of Central, they also flunked out of ROTC. One of the problems that we did have, that first year I was here – during the year, the Air Force changed their minds. They said, “We really don’t need all these pilots two years from now, which you’ve already got under contract, and somewhere in that fine print it says we can take their pilot slot away from them.” So there were a couple of cadets that were very disappointed. We did take their pilot slot away from them, but they did have the option of either staying in ROTC program, receiving their commission and going on to active duty in some other field, or they could relieve from their contract. And I know there are a couple of – two guys in there that were in a flight training program – all they wanted to be was pilots, and it devastated those two kids, and they opted out of the program. That was a big bump, overall.

Earlier you asked about the good things, too. I still think, just as I did then, that the military, to me – or let’s put it this way – Government service should be an obligation to every US citizen. Government service. One of those Government services is the military, and if you go that route, I think it’s good. Not necessarily better or worse that Civil Service or something like that, but I think every US citizen – every US citizen has an obligation to their country, and I’m in the minority on that.

KB: Now the mid-Seventies were a time of financial stress for this campus. Were you protected from that, or did you notice any of the cutbacks that the State of Washington was imposing on Universities?

RG: It did not affect us in any way.

KB: Did you have any business with the President of the University? Any of the leaders connected with the campus?
RG: Very limited. I recall I worked with several people in several different fields. I don’t recall their names right now, but especially if we had somebody that was a History major, for example, and there was some type of a problems with the – him, or he’s not progressing very good as far as getting his degree, we would certainly go and contact people and see if there was anything we could do to help out the individual. Because once that person came into the program, he was due to graduate in June a certain year, and that was part of pipeline for the Air Force. So if he’s not taking his full load, that causes problems. So if he’s not going to graduate on time, that causes potential problems.

KB: Did you have any connection with Zoltan Kramar? He taught military history in this department until the Nineties. Hungarian man.

RG: Don’t even know him, no. Was he there in the Seventies?

KB: Now you said a few women came on board – as students, not as staff, right?

RG: That’s correct. Students.

KB: And they must have had some impact – did they? Was it a smooth sailing, or was it a bumpy transition?

RG: Uh, a non-factor is all I can say. One of them was the wife of another cadet, and there was another that her name was – I never heard – Liz Lane – a Black student, too, which is a little bit of transition there, too, you know. She was a very outgoing individual – very personable individual. She was still in the program when I left. I don’t even know if she finished the program or not, but she was a very good individual.

KB: Did the students room together, or did they make all kinds of separate arrangements?

RG: They were just like anybody else on campus – they did their own thing.

KB: And what kind of support staff did you have? Central provided the secretarial?

RG: Yes, they did. Actually, Kathy was our secretary for two years – I think about two years, anyway. There was another secretary before her – Sharon Maris. And Sharon’s husband Lee, who was a janitor at both Junior Highs here in town – while they were going to school, he was going to school. He’s now the Principal down at Davis High School, and Sharon is in the process of getting her Doctor degree to become a Principal herself. Some of those “Yay, yay” stories there. We were pretty good friends with them. We did some things with them.

KB: And how did you like Ellensburg? What kind of a community was it to be in?

RG: Well I’m back here, so obviously there’s something good about Ellensburg.

KB: When did you come back?

RG: We came back two years ago. We were here for four years. At that time we had three kids living with us. I think when we left here the oldest one was probably had finished the tenth grade. The other one had finished the eighth grade, and the other one was a little tadpole about fourth or fifth grade there. And even now those kids say that was the best years of their life. But we lived outside town out here on three acres, and we had all the animals that go with something like that. They really enjoyed it. And after I retired from the Air Force in ’87 – I was in New Jersey at that time – we moved to Southern California because one of our sons – and our first grandchild had been born. They moved two years later to Georgia, so the reason we went back there disappeared real quick. We stayed there from ’87 till ’90 – left in January
'94, and every time we left, we said – we came back specially for summertime – “Why are we living in Southern California? Just a mass of humanity, and the smog.” So finally I was up for the long hike in 19– or 2003 – the wife met me up here, and we were driving back and we said, “Why are we going back to California?” And we made a very rash decision to move. We said, “Well, we’re going to move.” Well, we started thinking about Ellensburg, and we came back. We knew the wind would blow, and we knew it was cold sometimes.

KB: You still out in the country?

RG: Yeah, further out now. We came back and we bought – changed our plans on the kind of land there – we were on a place with two acres, we bought a seven acre place up there, and we’re just in the process of buying a seventeen acre place here in town, so I guess we’re permanent.

KB: I guess so. Now when you left your position here, was it your choice, or is that the routine with the Air Force?

RG: When I came here it was a three-year tour. They ended up extending me for one year for Air Forces Whistle [?], but I was happy about it. So four-year tour is probably the max. At that time the normal tour was three years.

KB: What’s the philosophy behind that?

RG: Well the whole philosophy I like in the Air Force, just “Rotation is good.” There’s not any stagnation. And I guess it’s probably a good idea.

KB: So who succeeded you?

RG: When I left here the guy that became the head guy was Colonel Dave Hubbard. He’s retired and lives in town now. The individual who actually replaced me, I never met him. I don’t know, because I left before he got here.

KB: Now who was your superior while you were working here?

RG: Okay. The first year was Lieutenant Colonel Charles Greenwood, the for three years it was Lieutenant Colonel Lars Barbey, and he and I left at the same time.

KB: Did you folks – did the two pairs divide up the responsibilities in the same way, or did you have different working relationships?

RG: A combination of both, once again. You know, both of us had particular jobs we had to do, and both of you did part of the teaching. Like I was the main recruiter all that time, but he had more of the oversight, of course, of the whole year.

KB: And what do you think of the campus here? Is it adequate to the classroom needs and the other needs of the students in the Seventies?

RG: You talking about for all students?

KB: Well – no. Well, sure, but I’m mostly concerned with your students.

RG: Yeah, I’d say Peterson Hall definitely met our needs at that time. We had the bottom floor, and maybe four or five office spaces, then you had a big classroom area, and you had a place down there for
textbooks and uniforms – a supply place. At that time it was adequate. I don’t know – I haven’t gone there since I’ve come back.

KB: Oh, maybe you should take a peek for old times’ sake.

RG: No, I sort of – I left the Air Force, I walked out – I really did, obviously, with the pony-tail, you know. People say, “What do you mean? You can’t even be an Air Force officer!” Well, I’m not anymore.

KB: Aha. Well what about the physical demands on the students? What was the routine, and what were the facilities that you used for that?

RG: Okay. We – because of the fact we were such a small unit – we did not have physical training. Just, you know, that – well, I’m going to take that back. That’s probably incorrect. Every so often they did have to do a – there was a mile and a half run you had to do in a particular amount of time. I don’t recall what the minimum time was, but I know I didn’t think it was very difficult, because – but I’ve always stayed in physical shape, and I could easily do it as – what was I? In my late thirties, early forties at that time. So it really wasn’t real stringent, you know. It wasn’t Marine style physical training.

KB: But there was marching and rituals, weren’t there, for ceremonies?

RG: A limited amount. A limited amount on that.

(Transcription of Tape 1, Side 2)

RG: . . . but that was really a medical physical. It’s not PT, not push-ups, chin-ups, or something like that. The Air Force is just going to check them over to make sure that when we commission you, we’ve got a solid product. We don’t want you to be sick, or anything else like that. So they go through a pretty good, just medical physical. We call it a commission physical, so maybe about a month before they graduate, they have to go through that. So they could actually go through all their studies here, and graduate with a 4.0 or something like that, but if they couldn’t pass that physical, we didn’t want them. And that’s just – well, that’s just like the military, you know. They want a top physical person when you go in.

KB: Were there many that ended up rejected?

RG: I can’t recall anybody being rejected at this particular school, but I do know it did happen at other Universities.

KB: Did you do this job at other Universities?

RG: No. No, when I left here I went down to Norton Air Force Base, which is in Southern California, and that’s an administrative head for all the ROTC units in the Western part of the United States – all the way from, say, Arizona, New Mexico, to Montana and Washington, and back down in California. So at that time we would go to visit several different Universities and their ROTC programs – just looking over their shoulder, but nothing else, you know. Seeing how everything was going.

KB: So what are you proudest of about your contributions to Central?

RG: I can’t think of anything to start off with, other than the fact that I didn’t cause any problems while I was here. We didn’t have any riots, or anything like that.

KB: Well what do you think Central should be proudest of?
RG: I think going back to the idea that I had earlier, that every US citizen should have an obligation towards their government in some way. Central is providing the opportunity for cadets to go into the Air Force and be commissioned with the Air Force. Because there’s a difference between going on active duty as a commissioned officer or going on active duty as enlisted. The responsibility is still the same responsibility towards the government, but obviously the officer has a lot more day-to-day responsibility on active duty, and that’s the type of person we were looking for. You know, some people like to be in the military, but they don’t want to have anything to do with providing leadership to people, because people cause problems. And some people are willing to take that on, and obviously that’s why you’re a commissioned officer. You are expected to be a leader of people.

KB: Well are there any last things that you want to share that I forgot to ask about?

RG: No. I would just say I enjoyed Central Washington University. I enjoyed all the professors and the administrative people that were actually working here when I was here, because my wife, also – she was a secretary for the Econ Department for two or three years, so I knew a couple of those people over there. They were good, and then the cadets were good. I liked to go down in the Student Union building, put up my recruiting table, and a lot of them would just come by and talk, you know? They had no interest at all in the ROTC program, but they would like to talk, and I was proud of the Air Force uniform, too, while I was wearing it.

KB: Okay, well thank you very much. I appreciate your time.

RG: Okay.