

Sam Gray Oral History

[00:00:00] Dean Wetzel: And I'll start the video. Alright, Sam. I want to start by just saying real quick, thank you for sitting down with me today for your oral history. I really do appreciate that. we're going to just start off with some very basic biographical information. Um, just talk a little bit about your parents, who they were, any brothers and sisters you may have, and then obviously where were you born. Alright. So, not any further to do.

Sam Gray: So, my name is Samuel Gray, um, born and raised to Georgie, uh, Gray and Charles Gray father is deceased now, but, um, they divorced when I was about nine years old. So, anyway, um, so, somewhat of a relationship with my father. Um, And, uh, I have six other brothers and sisters, uh, one older sister than I'm next and everybody else is under me. Um, I have one brother that followed my career, my youngest brother, actually second to the youngest brother that followed my career in the Navy. And, uh, so, it was cool to be able to, you know, support him through his, uh, training, uh, as he went to San Diego. Uh, So, I was in San Diego at the time, so, to be able to follow his career, uh, in boot camp, go to his graduation and we ended up on the same base. So, that was pretty cool to be able to experience that together with my second to the youngest brother. And then from there, um, that's it.

Dean Wetzel: Did your dad serve at all?

Sam Gray: No, he did not serve out of all of my family. My dad was the only one that didn't serve. Um, so, uncles, all of my uncles on both sides of my family have all, uh, I've served in all branches of the service.

Dean Wetzel: Okay.

Sam Gray: Uh, matter of fact, the one I was closest to was in the one that influenced my decision to go into the Navy. So,

Dean Wetzel: and uh, when did you, uh, join the Navy?

Sam Gray: I joined in the summer after my 11th grade and went into what they called the late entry program in 77, and actually went active duty in 78, June of 78.

Dean Wetzel: Um, how was it growing up during Vietnam?

Sam Gray: To be quite honest. I wasn't even focused on war and all that kind of stuff. I heard about it, heard about people being drafted and that kind of thing. And since 74, when that war actually came to an end, at least that's what I believe, then, you know, we weren't required to go register and all that kind of stuff. So, it was all at that point volunteering.

Dean Wetzel: then would you say it was the family tradition of being in the service that had you join at 17? Or what was the reason you think you enlisted at 17?

Sam Gray: I believe that it was because of the uncle that I was close to. Um, he was, and like I said, I've seen all of their military pictures and knew that all

of them, you know, served. I've seen them in their uniforms and all that kind of stuff. So, basically, it's just it's a family, you know, history of being in the service. And so, at the time, I didn't even think that, you know, that this would be a career and that kind of stuff. But, um, quickly, it became a career decision, um, to stay in to make a career out of it.

Dean Wetzel: What made you select the navy versus any of the other ones?

Sam Gray: It's, uh, so, my dad's brother, uh, his name is George Bray because we spent a lot of time with him because again, my family divorced my mom and dad divorced and he was the one that was closest to me. And so, because of him, he didn't say join the service or anything like that, but because seeing all the photographs and all that kind of stuff, and I knew from high school, even that I didn't want to go to college at the time, I didn't think I was ready. I didn't, you know, you hear about all the financial things about college and that kind of stuff. And so, I just felt like at that point that the service is a, a real viable choice, you know, for me to go in and that I could get a career and talking to my recruiter. I felt like my recruiter was real with me too. And it wasn't just about quotas and that kind of stuff that he actually really explained everything. So, I went in designated as, uh, you know, with a designated school technical school. And so, he wasn't just, you know, pulling my leg and just it wasn't about quotas for him.

Dean Wetzel: Well, what was your MOS or your initial MOS?

Sam Gray: Yeah, so, my MOS was Aviation Mechanic Structures, which they call the Aviation Structural Mechanic. And so, I got a chance to learn about aircraft maintenance and all about hydraulic systems, structures of the aircraft, emergency seats, and that kind of thing. In that career field. Was that an MOS you wanted? I knew that I was, I was a woodworker. We still had that kind of stuff in high school where we could do wood shop and I was really good at it. So, uh, so, what I qualified for, um, and, and what we talked about as far as fields to go into when I looked up descriptions and that kind of stuff, that one fit me. Um, best and so, and I was interested in it too. So, you had to got a chance to work on airplanes. I mean, that was, you know, small tomboy from Battle Creek working on airplanes. I just thought that was pretty cool.

Dean Wetzel: How did your family feel about your early enlistment and your enlistment in general for that matter?

Sam Gray: Well, my mom had to sign off, you know, on my paperwork to go in because of the late entry program. So, she was She was okay with it. And, um, I'm sure my uncle had something to do with it, too, maybe reassuring her, you know, that things would be cool, or things would be okay.

Again, you know, Vietnam War was over because I enlisted four years after. So, I wasn't going into a war, say, you know, right off the bat. Not like some of the kids that are going in now, you know, they're going right into battle, you know.

Dean Wetzel: Um So, where is Navy boot camp? And then how exactly did you get to that place? Because I'm guessing it's not here by the way.

Sam Gray: No. Uh, actually in the, in the Navy there was three boot camps. Uh, one was in Great Lakes, one was in San Diego, and one of them was in Orlando, Florida. But when they decided to single site boot camp, The one where I was at. Decommissioned in San Diego because I was the drill instructor or company commander or what they call a, uh, a, a divisional commander is what they changed the name to. So, uh, that one decommissioned. So, I had a year and a half of pushing boots in San Diego before they closed it. And then a one in, uh, Orlando closed as well. So, they wanted everybody to go to, uh, to, uh, Great Lakes, Illinois to the one in Chicago, so, or Great Lakes. And so, um, at the time I, um, I was married and children and so, my wife at the time, I said she didn't want to move to, uh, to the East Coast. So, I then that's when I wound up North, Northern Cal area called Point Mugu. It's a naval air weapons station. So, I transferred from, from San Diego to Point Mugu.

Dean Wetzel: Okay. Uh, but when you entered the Navy, you had to go to boot camp, correct?

Samuel Gray: Yeah. So, I went to Great Lakes.

Dean Wetzel: Great Lakes?

Samuel Gray: Yeah.

Dean Wetzel: How did you get to Great Lakes?

Sam Gray: I actually can't tell you why. Um, it's just one of the ones that was available at the time and that's where I went to.

Dean Wetzel: Okay.

[00:10:00] Sam Gray: Uh, my brother ended up in San Diego boot camp and I can't tell you why, you know, so, from the east coast he went, uh, to west coast to boot camp and so, I just, uh, luck of the draw, I guess, I don't know what the mentality was or whoever at the time, why I wound up in Great Lakes and he wound up in San Diego or neither one of us went to Orlando.

Dean Wetzel: Now. Obviously going to boot camp, I'm sure you had your own thought as to what you were going to experience. Is that what boot camp was like or what was boot camp for you?

Sam Gray: Actually, I played football in high school, and we had some really hardcore coaches. So, to me, boot camp was a piece of cake. Um, because again, I was fit, athletic and that kind of stuff. So, you know, the things that Camp. Uh, the rigors of boot camp didn't really bother me, you know, and I was accustomed to following orders. I called my mom, my first drill instructor, because she had some strict rules, six of us, and she's the only one raising us. So, you know, she was like, you know, be in the house when the streetlights come on. She expected certain things out of us. Uh, we had chores, you had to get those chores done, so, you know, so, following orders was really not an

issue, you know, for me. We were taught to respect, you know, adults and, and that kind of thing. So, boot camp, again, physically, mentally was not that tough for me.

Dean Wetzel: How long did boot camp last?

Samuel Gray: Eight and a half weeks.

Dean Wetzel: What was maybe the toughest part then would you say? Was there a tough part? I mean, I know you've just talked about

Sam Gray: I think that, you know, again, having a recruiter that was, you know, really prepared you for what you were going to experience. So, so, maybe watching films that he had, you know, a bootcamp, um, talking about his A school that he went to and what that was, what was that, what that was about, um, So, I think having a really great recruiter, you know, somebody that you really believed in and that kind of stuff. Now, being a being a company commander or a Drill instructor, they, uh, I've had recruits come in that were well, my recruiter told me, you know, I could, a seal, you know, I could be this. And it's like, uh, recruit, you gotta graduate bootcamp first. You know, uh, you gotta get through this first, you know. And they were thinking that as soon as they came in, that they were gonna, you know, be assigned this or that. So, then at that point, you knew that they were just trying to pump their numbers up, their quotas up, because they didn't tell them. What was the real deal, you know?

Dean Wetzel: So, having that light shine down, that whole experience kind of made it so, it wasn't difficult. You kind of knew what was kind of coming at you and what you had to do and what was comfort. Yeah.

Sam Gray: And like I said, having coaches, football coaches and that, that, you know, uh, they were more tough on me than my, than my, than my company commanders were. And I didn't have a problem following orders. As a matter of fact. Because I followed orders so, well, I got positions in companies that other people did not, you know, so, I was like the master at arms in our company. I was a squad leader in our company, you know, so, I graduated, um, second, uh, the second highest level as far as grades and, and that kind of stuff out of my company. And so, um, Boot Camp is, Boot Camp is a piece of cake for me, I thought.

Dean Wetzel: Uh, you mentioned a school. What is an A school?

Sam Gray: Yeah, so, they have different school levels, technical levels. So, A school is like the basics. Then you have a C school or B school. So, it's a different level of like aircraft maintenance. You have different levels of aircraft maintenance. You have organizational level maintenance where you're doing. Some basic park removals and stuff like that. And then the second level would be you are taking those parts that we pull out of aircraft; you're taking those parts apart and fixing those and putting those back together. And then where the C level training is, is where they take the part that the B level can't

fix and maybe go a little deeper in, uh, preparing that part. Yeah. So, that's the same thing with the A school. A school is like your basic, and then your C schools are more technical, where they get deeper into the technical aspects of whatever rating you're in.

Dean Wetzel: Okay. Uh, so, for you, where did you go then? Cause obviously, I'm guessing you went to B School next after, after basic,

Sam Gray: so, after basic I went to my A school.

Dean Wetzel: Okay.

Sam Gray: And that A school was in, uh, Memphis, Tennessee, or actually it was Millington, Tennessee at the time. Millington. And, uh, and from there, um, you go to school, not just your focus, you know, so, go to school. And I did extremely well in school too. And graduated second out of my class of, uh, uh, air framers is what we call them. And, um, and that actually helped out because I got promoted, like, accelerated, advanced from my A school because of how well I did. So, yeah, so, I didn't have to stay. Uh, so, basically, I went from boot camp, got accelerated, advanced, and from A school got accelerated, advanced. So, all I had to do was wait, like, six months and I was, uh, E4. Um, very quickly.

Dean Wetzel: That probably makes it a little bit easier too, getting into the fleet, getting that higher rank a little bit quicker than that for sure.

Sam Gray: It, it gives you more responsibility, obviously. Yeah. You know,

Dean Wetzel: Better pay,

Sam Gray: better pay, but better pay, more responsibility.

Dean Wetzel: So, uh, how long was you're A-school?

Samuel Gray: My, a school was, uh, two months long.

Dean Wetzel: And then from A school, were you sent to your, what do they call it, permanent duty station or your actual?

Sam Gray: Yep. And so, another one of those fortunate things I was talking about earlier was from A school, um, because of where I was at in my training, the level that I was able to attain, or the grade, I was able to attain. I was able to pick my orders. So, I picked San Diego. And, uh, and it was San Diego shore duty. So, I was able to pick it and I actually got it. I couldn't believe it because there were other people that got, you know, other assignments and that kind of stuff. And one of my very best friends from a school He got, um, uh, San Diego as well and so, we became roommates in San Diego.

Dean Wetzel: Do you have any, um, memories or vivid memories of your time in training? Either basic training or your A school that stand out.

Sam Gray: The only one that I can think about is I really got close to God. Um, and my religion, um, really was calming for me. You know, but just really getting closer to God and my decision to serve God. So, that was my, my memory of that. But, you know, again, going through boot camp, I felt like was just, you know, a really piece of cake because of my athletic and my

coaching being the ones that worked really hard on us. You know, uh, you better not lose a game, and if you lost a game, when I say lose a game, if you lost a game because the team was, like, way better than you, but if you lost a game because of mistakes and things like that, then it was really hard on you. So, you know, you don't have that anymore in sports.

Dean Wetzel: Uh, you mentioned, um, shore duty. Uh, could you maybe explain what it was? And then just maybe while you're doing that, take us through, like, your first four years. What a daily job, what your daily workload looked like, or what you could expect.

[00:20:00] Sam Gray: Yeah. So, when I get to San Diego, um, I, was assigned to what they call the line division. The line division is where you prepare the aircraft for flight. So, we would look at the flight schedule and whatever the flight schedule warranted for that day. These are the airplanes we're going to use. So, you basically went out, checked, tire pressures you checked. Hydraulic, you know, fluid levels. You basically doing a checkup on the airplane and make sure that everything functioned in the aircraft prior to the pilot, you know, taking a flying airplane. So, basically you did all the check over the structure of the aircraft, make sure all the screws and all that were in place. And, you know, there weren't any obvious cracks or anything like that. And, uh, Like I said, tire pressures, pneumatic pressures, uh, hydraulic fluid levels and that kind of stuff was where they should be for, you

know, the aircraft. So, that was the line division. From the line division, I got moved to the airframe shop, where now I'm working in my, my designated rate and working on the structures of the aircraft. Which we would do, basically our maintenance program would be, you know, just routine maintenance on the aircraft. If the aircraft came back and something didn't work or they discovered some problems with, uh, with the aircraft, we would work on those parts of the aircraft and, uh, that kind of stuff again to get the aircraft ready, you know, for a flight. And, uh, that, that's where I really got my, uh, first shot at, um, leading a work center. Um, with the, the, uh, airframe shop. I was able to run, like, uh, we had three different shifts. Day shift, night shift, and mid shift. So, I ran the mid shift, um, and again, it was all getting aircraft ready for flight.

Dean Wetzel: Now as your first four years in the Navy is coming to a close it's now what 82 I think right roughly. Were you was part of maybe put you to reenlist was the status quo of where the economy was because I know at that time that was right in the middle of Reagan economics, or Reagonomics, and the economy wasn't at its most you Stable point. So, you were like, hey, I have got a job here in the Navy and then I'm going to stay for another four or where you already committed at that point at that four years because of what you've already done. You're like, I want to be here for life.

Sam Gray: Like I said, my decision to make the Navy a career, um, came relatively quick. Um, because like I said, my first four years of the service was shore duty. And so, um, so, my decision to stay or make a career that had nothing to do with the economy, you know, it just had to do with my love for working on aircraft and doing what I was doing. I really enjoyed working on the aircraft that I worked on, and it was uh, F 14s, uh, Tomcats is what I worked on, and I really enjoyed what I did, and I was really good at it. So, that, that was the thing that motivated me to stay, you know, in the service and make it a career because I really enjoyed what I, what I did. And really what it was about and what we, you know, what we did was really important.

Dean Wetzel: For sure. Um, enlistment two, where does that start?

Sam Gray: So, enlistment two starts, like you just said in 82. I went to a squadron called VF-two. which is called the VF-Bounty Hunters is what their nickname is. But it's a another F14 squadron in NAS Miramar's naval air station. And at this naval air station, they had sea going squadrons and they had, uh, shore duty, uh, billets or jobs. All right. And so, basically when I transport from my, my shore duty squadron, which is the frame squadron, as I said, that fleet readiness squadron and then transfer just up the street to a sea going squadron, which is VF-two, which is my first aircraft, our first sea duty. So, basically, we all knew what we were, you know, doing. And at that point, I was in charge of our airframe shop and went in there was the leading petty

officer in that shop. And so, I ran that shop for that space of time that I was there. And that, that's when, um, I even, uh, let's just call it luck or whatever. But, uh, for the space of time, my first sea duty, uh, assignment was VF-2 and the ports that we pulled in, we probably max spent about 55 days, the whole cruise at sea. And that's counting the whole time. When we were in a port, it just seemed like, you know, we're always in port. And so, uh, that was very fortunate to experience something like that. Because again, I was, that didn't happen, uh, later on, you know, in the cruises that I went on, where you would spend 55 days at sea, you know, in one time. And that's when they would throw in what they call Steel Beaches where you would shut down flight ops and

Dean Wetzel: you get one beer

Samuel Gray: and you get the one beer. Actually, you got two tickets. So, you had the two beers, and you know, and so, they would shut down. It was a day where people could really decompress. And that kind of stuff. And so, but um, but yeah, those, those, those at sea periods for those long-extended periods of time, you know, you had to have those kinds, you know, of days you know, where people can just relax.

Dean Wetzel: What was the name of that ship that you on?

Sam Gray: So, my very first ship was the USS Enterprise. We called it the Big E. So, it's a nuclear-powered carrier, and uh, it's got quite the history

behind it being the first nuclear powered carrier. And so, um, so, it was pretty impressive, you know, to be on that ship.

Dean Wetzel: Was it, did it just leave you in awe? I'm sure it probably did when you first saw it

Sam Gray: It did. Um, cause we had a flight up to Alameda, California where it was docked. And then once we I mean, I mean, just how massive this ship is, it really does kind of like, you know, take your breath away because when you get lost, uh, you know, you just, it was just so, real, you know, how massive this ship is. And as you know, I've never saw anything like that in my life.

Dean Wetzel: For, for me, my comparison was we had, when we deploy on a MEU, you have a flat top, which is just for vertical launch or whatever capable planes. And I remember that pulling alongside, I don't know which one of the nuclear carriers, and it just made it look like a baby carrier. Yeah. It looked like a little tiny baby carrier out there, and I was like, wow. Yeah. I can only imagine if you're an enemy of the United States and that shows up on your horizon, you're, wow.

Sam Gray: And so, at that time, we had, we flew our airplanes up to Alameda and then we cranked them all aboard the aircraft. Subsequently, in other deployments, they would fly aboard. And then we would park them down the hangar, just to make space, you know, for the others that was flying aboard.

Dean Wetzel: Not sure if you can disclose this, but how, roughly how many planes were on board?

Sam Gray: Yeah, so, each squadron, um, well I'll say, of 14 squadrons, we had 12 aircraft that we would deploy with. So, you had, you had your squadron, you had your sister squadron, so, that was, uh, 24 F-14 that was on the aircraft. Then you had EA, EA um, EA6B, which were intruders. You had s threes, which were the sea prowlers that were, uh, sonar detection where you could find submarines. Then you had, uh, and then you had two squadrons of each one of those. So, you had Squadron and a sister squadron, EA6B, you had a squadron and a sister squadron. And, um, then you had, uh, E2C Hawkeye type aircraft where they have four, about four of those on the, uh, aircraft. And you had your squadron and your sister squadron. Then you had, of course, uh, uh, helicopters as well, which were your search and rescue, you know, aircraft. And, um, that would also, hunt for subs and serve that purpose.

Dean Wetzel: Uh, well, I mean, you're still did the Cold War at this time. Um, did you ever have any close encounters do you know of with the Russians?

[00:30:00] Sam Gray: Oh, yeah. So, we would have those encounters. What they would do was their aircraft, which is called a Soviet Bear, which is really huge, like bomber type aircraft. So, when they would, the radar would pick them up, we would launch, you know, uh, aircraft and there would be escorts, you know, for them. So, they, they would do these, uh, escort missions or, in

some cases, I've never heard of one so, far, but the whole time I was in the service, where they would do these suicide missions. Where if you saw a door open, a bomb bay door open. That they were designed to fly the aircraft, you know, up inside that aircraft to destroy it, you know, so,, uh, those are things that we heard about that could happen if they got close enough and if they, if you saw the, you know, there's no problem for them to fly by, but they would always have an escort flying with them. And looking up, it makes sure a door didn't open or whatever, and then, you know, like I said, they did, you know, their mission was to just so,

Dean Wetzel: Um, so, 86, you're rapidly approaching your next enlistment, your third enlistment at this point. Um, where did that one take you?

Sam Gray: So, that one took me to what's called, uh. Uh, a training group. It's a naval air maintenance training group. Uh, it's now traded as what is called a training detachment. And so, now I'm training, um, students on flight controls, how to rig flight controls. And we have all these trainers in this, uh, uh, detachment where we would show, you know, um, students how to work on that aircraft.

Dean Wetzel: Uh, did you ever go out to sea during that, um, third?

Sam Gray: So, during, so, we go sea duty or whichever, whatever you get assigned. So, we'll go sea duty, shore duty, sea duty, shore duty. So, now I'm coming off of sea duty and I went back to shore duty. So, during that shore

duty detachment, I actually went right back to the base that I was at NAS Miramar. And they have this training group there. The Naval Air Training, Naval Air, Naval Air Maintenance Training Group. And so, that's where we would train on all of the aspects of aircraft where these folks would send. Like I said, it was a training squadron. I went to that FRAM squadron initially, but now this one taught you, you know, how to work on that aircraft and talk intricate little details of maintenance on the aircraft. So, we could talk about all the hydraulic systems and have static displays or displays on, you know, actually, uh, with F 14 because it swept wings and had a sweep ring. The wing swept out and swept back. So, we had a trainer that would show recruits on how to work with several students, how to rig that, um, that flight control. So, from the spoilers to the ailerons and elevators and rudders and all that kind of stuff on how to work on that, including how to troubleshoot it and blah, blah, blah.

Dean Wetzel: And how long were you at that station?

Samuel Gray: So, from there, that was another three years of the training squadron, or the training group, their detachment, and three years there, they went back to the fleet, where I went to what they call VF 213, which is another F-14 squadron.

Dean Wetzel: And that's, that's putting us right around Desert Storm then, right?

Samuel Gray: Yes.

Dean Wetzel: Okay. Uh, and then, so, before we get into Desert, before we get into Desert Storm, you'd have been on How many other ships? Just, just the one. Just Eisenhower? Or had you been on?

Sam Gray: So, the enterprise. Or the enterprise. And then, uh, from the Enterprise to that training group, and then now on the USS Ranger.

Dean Wetzel: So, you have turn over

Sam Gray: which was a conventional carrier. It wasn't, uh, nuclear power, but it was conventional.

Dean Wetzel: The little baby carrier.

Sam Gray: I would not say a baby because it's still massive. It wasn't big as an enterprise.

Dean Wetzel: No. Uh. No, I bring that up just because like there's turnover, right? Like you're getting moved around. You're going to different places, but it's not. Not that you don't get to get your feet adjusted underneath you and you get to land on your feet. You're there for three years. You get to establish a routine. If you had family, you had kids or something like that, they could go to school, make friends. Like it's not like every six months you're moving to another place. You're going all over the country. You're deploying, coming back, going back. Like, you know, some, some stories out there.

Sam Gray: Which was a great part about this one because, you know, D Terrors wasn't about trying to transfer you here. Transfer your PCSU across

the country and that kind of stuff when the Navy could save money and just move you from one base to the other base, you know, which was San Diego, or when I got, when I got detailed up to Point Mugu, which was Northern part of California. All right. So, you know, So, you mark PCS across country. Now, you have to move your family and all that kind of stuff and blah, blah, blah. There's more to it than PCS or family across country. So, the Navy can save money that way, you know. So, I do my things that way. As much as I wanted a PCS across country, you know, it would never happen.

Dean Wetzel: Yeah. Um, so, before you went to Desert Storm and all of that, what was your favorite Libo or your point that you got to be free outside of the United States? What was your favorite place to visit?

Sam Gray: So, like I said, my very first cruise, we were always in a port. So, so, so, leaving, uh, San Diego, stopping in Hawaii from Hawaii to uh, the Philippines from the Philippines and just go around Singapore, uh, uh, Korea, um, Pusan, Korea to Mombasa, Africa, even to the little dinky little island, which we call, we were on station in the Indian Ocean. Once we hit the Indian Ocean, um, coming out of Singapore, and the Strait of Malacca. So, coming out of there into on station, the Indian Ocean, that was our operating area. So, that's normally where we were operate. So, that little island called Diego Garcia, we were able to get off the boat and we couldn't. We all we all of us couldn't get off the ship and go into Diego Garcia because it's a very small

little island. So, they couldn't get everybody off the ship. So, we would come off in duty station. So, if you were in duty station, it was for duty for duty station. So, so, duty station one would be able to depart and go ashore and then come back and then it would just shift us like that. So, so, from Diego Garcia to Mombasa, Africa from Africa. Once we were done with our on-station time, which again, you know, that whole, that on-station of about 55 days just being out on the water from the time we left port, because we were always in a port. So, from, so, from Mombasa, Africa went down to Australia, uh, from Perth to Sydney to, uh, Tasmania. And then from Tasmania, from Tasmania back up to, um, I think we hit, uh, the Philippines one more time and then came back across to, uh, uh, Hawaii where we would do what they call tiger cruises, where part of the squadron would fly home to prepare our squadron spaces and everything like that for us to come back, which would create space for civilian dads and uncles and that to ride the ship from Hawaii back to home port, which was pretty cool because, um, then those dads and sons and uncles, you know, would be able to experience, you know, what being on a ship was like. And, uh, and it's a really nice PR piece to, you know. So, they would do air shows, um, and all that kind of stuff while you were at sea. And so.

Dean Wetzel: Did you get shellback while you were out there?

Samuel Gray: Oh yeah, I did that. Can you go into that a little bit?

[00:40:00] Sam Gray: Yeah, so, basically, so, you would cross the, uh, equator. So, from there, it was, uh, so, you were a Ploywog. All right, is what they call it. It's a Navy long Navy tradition, you know, that when you cross the equator, that you would go through this initiation. So, everybody that was not a Shellback, uh, Wogs, Polywogs. So, you will go through this initiation where you would do some things that, you know, you wouldn't normally do. And they'd have these fire hoses that they would wak, wak, wak, you know, pat you in the butt, you know, kind of like the keys the whole time. And then you had to crawl through this, uh, this, uh, engine container that would hold an engine. The engine obviously wasn't in it, but they would fill this thing up with all this nasty stuff. Maybe their food from the galley and just, it would just look awful. And so, you would have to jump into a swim across the other side, and then they would look at you and say, what are you? And if you said you were a Wog, you know, then it'd make you go back through again. Because the proper response would be, I'm a Shellback. You know, you've been saying this Wog-Wog-Wog-Wog-Wog-Wog, you know, all through this initiation. And if you didn't get it right when you came out the other end, 'cause some people didn't know that that was the end. So, it would be from here to that end of the table, you know, you'd have to, you know, go through this, uh, crap. All right. And so, it's just a fun day again to decompress. And I guess if you felt like you

were when you were going through, you didn't felt like depressing. But, but yeah, so, it's just a time-honored tradition.

Dean Wetzel: Did, was there any other cer uh, ceremonies you may have participated with the Navy in?

Sam Gray: Yep. So, you had the Shellback, then you had a Golden Shellback. Golden Shellback is crossing the international dateline. So, that's another one. Golden Shellback. And that's just another level, not people. You got shell back, then you got a golden shell back. So, um, as a Chief Petty officer. When you change uniforms, that was another initiation that you went to again, their time-honored initiation where you were, we call it tested, initiated and accepted, you know, into that rank because now again, you changed, you totally got out of the type of uniform you were wearing, into a khaki uniform. And again, a whole bunch of other duties and responsibilities as an E seven. You know, coming out of the surface. And that's what I got out as a E-7.

Dean Wetzel: Alright, let's, uh, let's get into Desert Storm a little bit. Just, um, where were you when it started and then go, walk us through what is it that you were kind of doing over there?

Sam Gray: So, still in, uh, VF- 213 at the time. So, we came back off of the deployment. And that's when that war ramped up. So, our turnaround period, typically a turnaround period for when you come back off of deployment is like a year and a half before you deploy again. But this one was so,

accelerated. It was less than a year to turn the squadron around, which means we had to train the pilots again on landing aboard the aircraft. So, we had the task is that we had to go out on Um, like to Fallon, Nevada, or El Centro, or wherever that detachment was. Again, to spool those pilots back up, um, to be able to land on the aircraft, and also, get everybody ready to, uh, deploy again. So, people would go on their vacations and, you know, reacclimate themselves to their families and that kind of stuff, and then get prepared to go back out to sea again. So, that turnaround period was like super-fast. Um, so, it was, like I said, less than a year, um, to turn that squadron around to be able to go back out again to, uh, to deploy, to go to this war. So, in February, actually no, it was, let's see, Desert Shield started first. And so, I think that was like, you know, a couple months before storm happened. And so, we were that part of the squadron or part of the air wing or, uh, carrier air group that got on station in that area in the Persian Gulf. And it's like I said, it went pretty quick. So, um, so, we deployed from San Diego. We get our normal little stop, but those stops were like real short. Instead of being in port for a week, you were in port for maybe two days. So, the same thing happened from, we would leave San Diego, go to Hawaii, do whatever we do in Hawaii, and then hit the Philippines, do what we were going to do in the Philippines, and then be out on station in Diego Garcia. Once we got across the Indian Ocean and got up into the Persian Gulf, then it was at that point it was it was on and popping. I'll

put it like that. You know, it was on and popping at that point because the tempo here, regular at sea periods, the tempo is not as crazy as it is doing the war. So, the operation tempo, they explained to us that. So, we had a couple of aircraft that were, uh, um, so, that Operation Tempo, they explained to us that we, we want to have every single aircraft that we have. So, all 12 aircraft, they wanted up and operational. So, if something happened to another aircraft, once it lost in it, and if it came back down, meaning something was wrong, they would swap it out real quick. And if it was down for a certain reason, like for instance, say like a spoiler actuator went bad. We would have the part like, you know, now you need to remove, remove and replace that part.

Dean Wetzel: I can pause this real fast if you need to take it.

Sam Gray: No, these, these are Juneteenth stuff. So, and I'll, I'll call it back. Um, so, that op tempo was like, like crazy to turn an aircraft around if it came back out. Here's the one for instance, like a. I will use this one. A spoiler actuator went down. A spoiler actuator is not the easiest thing to change. So, I said what I did was I was really good at, you know, so, being able to remove and replace that thing as fast as I could and still do it safely and get the aircraft back up and back on the flight schedule, like within the next, you know, flight. Was crazy. You know, normally you would take your time and you know, you had time to do it. But, you know, the tempo was so, hot we were even trained or certified to hang bombs on aircraft. We didn't arm them because the

ordnance men armed, armed that they were dropping bombs so, much in Kuwait at that time. The ordnance men needed help loading bombs on aircraft. So, just doing that part was crazy. Not only maintaining your own aircraft, but also, going to help these ordnance men hang ordnance. And then once it was hung safely, then we would go off and they would arm you with all the stuff that they needed to do to ready, you know. Get the aircraft ready. So, those pictures that people saw where people were writing a message on the side of a bomb. You know, I don't know if you saw those pictures, but we would do the same thing. We would chalk something on the side of a bomb, like, okay, take this or hello from Sam Gray, you know, or, you know, just crazy stuff like that, you know, and but they were, I mean, we would see aircraft leaving the ship on the normal operation with bombs on them and coming back with them on it. In this particular theater, in this type of operation, we would launch aircraft and the aircraft would come back with no bombs on it. So, uh, at that particular time, they were dropping bombs like crazy, you know. And our mission, as far as F 14 squadrons, our commanding officer was able to shoot down one of Sudam Hussein's aircraft that at that time they had a no-fly zone. And so, um, so, their mission was to watch, you know, see if any aircraft got off the ground. And if it did, they were, they were, uh, assigned to go and shoot it out the sky. So, that was there, their mission for F-14 squad. Because at the time

we didn't have bombs on our aircraft, at the time there was the 86 Bs and other attack aircraft that had bombs and drop bombs all over the place.

[00:50:00] Dean Wetzel: Um, seeing how you were still in the service. How did you, how did you feel when the, the Cold War ended? You know, 89, the Wall falls, the USSR breaks apart. I mean, that was your biggest threat, your entire enlistment. I mean, I'm sure everybody was talking about the Cold War Russia. That's where the war's gonna be. 89 happens and it kind of almost in a surprising way Gorbachev tears down the wall and the Soviet Union is no more.

Sam Gray: I was to be quite honest; I didn't focus on that too much. You know, um, I was happy to see it happen. All right. When I say that I'm glad that, you know, I didn't think that we had threats out there anymore. And Russia was that threat. Again, they would fly Bear aircraft loaded with bombs on them. So, they would come out and, you know, monitor, you know, whatever they were looking at. Don't know what they were looking at. But they always had an escort. And for the entire time that I was out to sea, any bombs, any aircraft that would want to fly in our airspace or, or didn't identify, because they have these certain terms, identify friendly or foe, IFF, are right. Are you friendly or are you a foe? And if you didn't identify yourself as friendly, you know. Then that was one thing, but if you identified yourself as a

Interviewee: Samuel Gray
Interviewer: Dean Wetzel
Date of interview: June 5th, 2024
Library of Congress Veteran History Project

foe or didn't identify, then you were, you had an escort. You know, so, that's, that's the way that worked, you know. So, um, so,

Dean Wetzel: Did you ever have a moment then when you were out at sea that the hair on the back of your neck stood up like the alarm bells are going off and you're like you, this could be them coming in to do a run?

Sam Gray: Yeah. Um, like I said, the uh, you would see them off in the distance. You would also, see them with an escort. And so, you're like, wow, you know. And, um, we have what they call, um, tactical air reconnaissance pods attached to our aircraft. Which were these really high-end camera systems. that would shoot footage of whatever it was. And at times we were able to go into what they call the ready room where the pilots are, and they would show that film. And so, you would be able to see, you know, you know, that aircraft and that mission and blah, blah, blah. See them with the bear or whatever, you know, aircraft were flying that escort. With that, uh, Russian bear. So, that was pretty intense to see, you know, but you know, like I said, they never open the bomb bay door and no one, you know, had to actually, you know, shoot it down or fly that suicide mission, um, into that bear. So, you can see pictures to this day online. Uh, those escorts of Russian bear and F-14 or whatever. F-18 or whatever I escort, you know, with a bear aircraft. So,

Dean Wetzel: when did, uh, you get the orders to become a DI (Drill Instructor)?

Sam Gray: So, from, so, once I finished up with 213, I then got the orders to be a Drill instructor, or company commander from 213. And so, from there is when I got those orders to go to, uh, San Diego, uh, Recruit Training Center, San Diego.

Dean Wetzel: Was that a, uh, night and day difference as far as your daily workload? Going from aviation mechanic to training this new incoming Navy Seaman, Cadet? I don't know what you guys call those guys. Recruits?

Sam Gray: Recruits. So, the thing about that, in any of the billets, well, I'll put these two from instructor duty to being a company commander. They only wanted, you know, the top 10 percent of the people that were, um, in your squadron or if you're, uh, well since I was in a squadron. You know, they only wanted the cream of the crop to go to these places. If you were, you know, a mediocre sailor or anything like that, you couldn't, you couldn't get those billets. So, I was always top. I got, like, sailor of the year twice. Um, I was sailor of the year in my VF2 squadron, sailor of the year in, uh, in 213 as well. So, twice I was recognized as sailor of the year. That's like top in your, in your squadron. As far as enlisted was concerned and got that recognition like that, that's pretty cool, you know, to be recognized like that. So, I got the orders to, um, RTC San Diego. Um, so, was it different? It absolutely was. All right. One, because we had to go through boot camp ourselves. All right. So, we had to. Experience what the recruit experience. So, we had to go through both our

clothes a certain way. We had to go through some of the same schools that they went to, you know, just to get us acclimated to what that recruit was going to experience. And so, So, basically, you know, that's what we had to experience. Well, how long was that school? I think that school was like I think probably about a month-long D. I. school or a commander school. And so, we had to do the workouts, the runs, and all that kind of stuff. So, this is what they were going to experience. So, but, you know, I was, like I said, one of those top-of-the-line sailors. PRT wasn't an issue or anything like that for me. So, uh, PRT is a physical readiness test. So, you can keep up, you know, with, uh. You push yourself, you know, as hard as you're going to push yourself. And there's only certain things you can do to recruit anyway. You know, and so, um, as much as you wanted to push them hard and that kind of stuff, you, there was certain parameters that, you could do to a recruit.

Dean Wetzel: I know we could probably, uh, spend a whole hour talking about being a D. I. But looking back at it, what's the one, one of the things that a recruit did that was just absolutely funny. They all had to test your bearing where you couldn't laugh, but you really wanted to. I'm sure there was a few times.

Sam Gray: There was a few times. We wouldn't allow recruits to cuss, alright, to say swear words. And me and my co company commander heard. Out in the compartment somebody say a cuss word and he and I just, ah, you know, just

Interviewee: Samuel Gray
Interviewer: Dean Wetzel
Date of interview: June 5th, 2024
Library of Congress Veteran History Project

came on and, you know, we have a certain way and just get as crazy as we wanted to be. All right. Who cursed out here? Who cursed in here? Blah, blah, blah. No, right now, we're not. We're gonna smash this whole company. We're gonna, you know, do physical training and then they would. They would end up ratting out who it was that said the swear word. And we asked this recruit to get in the office, stand by. He had a knock. And you know, and he stood outside the door, and it was like, enter. And then he would enter, and he would stand there. And then he and I just like, he's in one ear and I in the other. And this recruit got so, nervous. So, nervous. He peed on the floor. And so, we had to maintain military bearing right through that whole experience. And then we told the recruit, you better clean this up right now. Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. And he went, cleaned it up. And he and I disappeared out the back door from the office. And we just busted up laughing. We could not believe it. That this recruit got so, worked up. That peed on the floor. All right, he pissed on himself. Let's put it that way. So, that was, that was pretty funny. Um, but then, you know, you, you quickly learned, you know, that you are that example, you know, to that recruit. At the end of everything, you know, you're kind of like, you know, Hey son, you know, I'm proud of you, you know, and you know, you're going to do good out in the fleet, you know, and sometimes you will share, you know, with them because it's all about, you know, taking them from a civilian setting and making them sailors, you know, and this is

what you're going to experience, um, from, from going to the workouts to, uh, to wanting your recruits to score high in training because you're, they're moved by the flags that they got on their guide-on their, their guide-on flag, you know, from **[01:00:00]** physical training, physical readiness flag, uh, academics to, um, how they marched, you know. So, they were really moved by that to have all those streamers, you know, on their flag by the time they got out of boot camp. And, uh, when you what they call pass and review, meaning they, uh, are at graduation, they have dignitaries on the podium and those dignitaries would pick out who was the best company that passed and review and twice during the time I was a Company commander my company, you know, got designated what they call best foot forward. They would get, they got that destination. I was really happy about that. Really train hard and they were really precise, and you know, they're marching a lot of times I would go because M. C. R. D. Uh, Marine Corps Recruit Depo was right next door to RTC San Diego. And so, a lot of times I sit You know, outside, on base, on base, go on base and then sit outside and watch those D. I.'s how they were training those recruits, how they marched and how precise they were in their turning and there, you know, movements were nice and crisp and, you know, and that and I've emulated that for my companies that, uh, and so, that's what we did. Now, we, I did have an experience with a recruit. It's a pretty bad experience where a recruit, we have recruits that were either got injured

Interviewee: Samuel Gray
Interviewer: Dean Wetzel
Date of interview: June 5th, 2024
Library of Congress Veteran History Project

somehow or we call them a no march, no PT. They went to medical and medical would send them back with, you know, they needed to take, you know, some time off because they were injured. Either their foot hurt or something, they had some ailment. And so, we couldn't march them, so, we call it no march, no PT. So, we couldn't do anything to them. So, they had to march separately from the class. They could not be at the training that we were at. So, when we were in the classroom, we would tell them to go ahead. You know, if we're going to go eat chow, we would tell them to get dressed and meet us, you know, at the chow hall or at the training. Or if we were drilling, we would have to meet us on the parade ground so, they could actually still see it, but they couldn't participate. In that particular aspect, because they were no march no PT, but this particular time, this recruit, I guess he got a bunch of them together that were no march no pt. I asked him to fall out and meet us at whatever training at evolution we were at this particular day we were practicing for graduation. And this recruit came up and he said, I asked him, I said, why did you guys fall out with your company? And well, you told us and then, you know, just the way he said it was, well, you told us, you know, how it just came unglued, right? And when I say unglued, you couldn't put hands on a recruit or anything like that. And I'm like, nah, nah, nah, nah, nah. And this recruit, not the same one that peed on himself, but this recruit, you know, got flustered and started backing up. And I'm just coming at him. It's like, you

get those guys out there, you get dressed, you get dressed. And you meet us at the parade ground. You do this ASAP, right? So, they got for us, they met us on the parade grounds and then he wouldn't sit down and I'm like recruit sit down, you know, like, you know, you no march no pt and he just defied, you know, he stood there and then he passed out. And when he went to medical, he said, I pushed him, I'm like, you and I both know that was a lie. And at that point I ended up having to go to what they call invest, be investigated. And then I just told the recruit, this is the first time that I made, uh, chief petty officer. I changed uniforms because I made chief at, um, E7 at boot camp, RTC. And so, anyway, this, uh. So, I said, if I lose these, it'll be worth it, you know, because I'm about to, you and I both know that that's a lie. I never put my hands on you. And, so, I said, if I lose these, it's going to be complicated. You know, because you worked so, hard in your career to make E seven. And all that I've been through to lose it because a recruit lied. You know, so, anyway, uh, he recanted, he ended up recanting his story, telling the investigator that he lied, you know, and then I just made sure, you know, that this kid would not make it through boot camp. Because if you can sit here and lie like that, how am I going to trust you being out in the fleet when I need you to respond? Like, for instance, if there's a fire on deck, where are you going to run? I need you to respond, you know, to command because there's going to be somebody that's going to be on scene that's going to direct you to do

something and you cannot run, you cannot walk away. This is everybody's, you know, responsibility to put this fire out or whatever we're doing, you know, mishaps happen at sea and there's a bunch of them to talk about, you know, mishaps happen at sea where you have to respond. So, if you can sit here and tell lies like that, then, you know, I'm not, I personally don't want to serve with you. And so, I ended up pushing him back and then later on found out that he, uh, I didn't make it through that, that second company.

Dean Wetzel: I know we're a little close on time here. So, do you recall the day your service ended? And where were you when your service ended?

Sam Gray: I was at, uh, a naval air weapons station in Pointe Mugu. So, at this time, they moved all the F-14s to the East coast. And they moved all the E 2C Hawkeye aircraft up to the Point Mugu area. So, I went from Miramar back up to Pointe Mugu. Which I was familiar with Point Mugu anyway. So, because I was there in the Antarctic Developmental Squadron, uh, at that time. And then, so, went from there back down to San Diego to the E2 Squadron. That was there and then they went to the Point Mugu. So, Pointe Mugu was my last, where I retired from the NAS, Pointe Mugu. Um, at the time. Um, I'll put it this way. We had a squadron, uh, model that says if you're not having fun, you're not doing it right. Right? So, what, I was not having fun in the service at the time. You know, you're 20 plus years in and you're like, this is not happening right now. You just, at that point when you just know you need

a change, you know. And so, uh, at that point, I, uh, put in my papers to, uh, retire. I had enough time, so,

Dean Wetzel: I know we talked a little bit before and, uh, I'll keep it short for time's sake, but you mentioned going to Antarctica. Could you just talk a little bit about that deployment, what you did down there and that? I thought that was really cool.

Sam Gray: Yeah, so, that, that was one of the highlights of my career. It is one because not very many people get to experience Antarctica. And, uh, and just to get down there was interesting and films that we had to look at for extreme weather and, you know, uh, extreme, the extreme temperatures that were being down in, and how we had to prepare our, our squadron to, uh, experience that. Um, so, my first tour was, and we had, when I say tours, I mean like two times that I've been to Antarctica. So, half of the squadron would go, what we call on ice, would be to Antarctica. The other half of the squadron would be in New Zealand, Christ-church, New Zealand. Because there was like major maintenance that you could do on an aircraft, but you couldn't do it in extreme temperatures. So, there was only so, much time you could stay out in extreme temperatures. So, what we would do is get the aircraft ready to fly back to Antarctica and perform that, that major maintenance on the aircraft. And then once we perform that maintenance, we fly it back down to Antarctica. So, why was that important? Well, because,

um, one, it is the most beautiful place you ever did want to see. Just think about snow, [01:10:00] ice as far as you can see icebergs. You can see just witnessing that, you know, an aircraft could land on this ice that the aircraft that we were flying at the time was C-130s. They were LC-130s that were equipped skis on the on the landing gear. And so, that whole mission was to resupply the South Pole and because they were people that will winter over. So, we were down there during the daytime six months of daylight and the people that will winter over was down there during the six months of darkness. And so, being able to land on ice, being able to do the things that we did to the aircraft you know, being, being outside, being seen, penguin, seeing other sites where aircraft have landed before and have crashed. So, we had been to crash sites and that kind of thing. So, seeing that kind of stuff, um, was just really just awesome to see. Um, and so, the second time being in Antarctica, when I say Antarctica, I mean this part I was able to be in Christchurch, so. This time I was in Christchurch doing a major maintenance on an aircraft and sending it off back down to the flights the first time I was heading to Antarctica. And being able to go to Geographical South Pole, being able to go to, um, the Ceremonial South Pole was an experience. The, uh, what they call it, the, uh, the Science Globe, we call it, there's a globe. At the time, but this sphere that was down there where the scientists would be down and do all their, you know, studies, that's really all this was about, is all these studies about climate

change or, you know, different fish or different, everything was in, it was about science. So, we were able to be in, down in Antarctica, we were able to interact with New Zealanders. that they have a base. We were able to interact with other countries that was down there. And again, our whole mission was to resupply all of those folks that were down there. And so, that was really interesting. It was interesting to see the Coast Guard cutter come in and cut up McMurdo Station or the ice going into McMurdo Station and seeing all that ice float out to sea. And the very place where we landed. Our aircraft, we had to move them from there to a permanent ice shelf, which is Ross Island. We had to move it over there because that ice, it does melt, but it's like 2,000-year-old ice, you know, that's just built up over time. But this ice, once that cutter came through and cut up that ice, then you see all these blocks of ice float out to sea. And then all these ships will come in. and offload all of, uh, the trash or offload supplies or on load. We would unload trash, um, offload supplies and that kind of stuff, the McMurdo station. And so, seeing that whole operation was this really interesting. I have pictures from that experience that just, just really blocks of ice that are like as big as, as tall. This room is right here from the floor to the ceiling. See that block of ice, you know, float out to sea. Is this crazy?

Dean Wetzel: So, well, thank you for sharing that. Um, real quick before we end here. I would like you to talk if you could just a little bit about what you

get after service and then doing those activities helping out veterans. Do you feel that your time in service helped you in that regard?

Sam Gray: So, because of my love for service. And that I, I became involved with several different, um, components of, veteran, or service organizations. I was on the advisory committee for the, uh, Fort Custer. So, basically, that advisory committee basically, you know, was the advisory for the, uh, the director for the Fort Custer. You take care of the grounds. Visibly didn't, but we were able to raise monies to take care of the grounds to replace flags and to have a national cemetery just down the road from here is pretty incredible. So, I was on that advisory committee. I was, uh, on, uh, Calhoun County Veterans Affairs, uh, part of our Veteran Service Organization, the American Legion. I was also, part of the West, West Bloomfield, part of the, uh, to ski airmen because they were, you know, aviation. And my goal in mind was to, uh, also, we have a school of aviation down the street here. That's right here. Western Michigan School of Aviation. So, this to try to get students, African American students involved in aviation because that was the love of my life, you know, for 20 years of service was in aviation. So, it's to try to get African American students involved with aviation and no better way to do it than see these, you know, Tuskegee Airmen, you know, the ones that were still living at the time, to come to Battle Creek and allow students to, all students, because we, we had them come here, the Tuskegee Airmen, to have them go to all of the schools,

Interviewee: Samuel Gray
Interviewer: Dean Wetzel
Date of interview: June 5th, 2024
Library of Congress Veteran History Project

the four different school districts in our community. And how students, black, white, whatever, you know, experience to hear their stories. You know, the times that they were, uh, in, uh, in flight missions and things like that. Uh, and then, you know, of course, the movie came out, Tuskegee Airmen. To have them tell all of this thing where he flew over and he saw this woman and then she's waving oh that's a lie that's movies you know and that kind of stuff you know I mean it was just funny to hear them say it you know and because they're stuff you know made for tv matter of fact the movie top gun was filmed on uh NAS Miramar and a lot of our planes were a part of that movie corrosive control shop sand off our decal on the side of the hair path and put Tom Cruise's, uh, decal on the side of the, uh, aircraft. So, that was pretty cool to meet Tim, Tom Cruise. He would be walking through the hanger and, uh, Kelly McGill us to watch that whole thing, just develop and then see the, and it was just really, you know, incredible. But my career here. That's the thing that moves me a lot is to be able to serve veterans. You really feel like you're still part of the service that just because you took off the uniform, you still have a responsibility to help serve, you know, that community. So, being part of the advisory committee, being part of the American Legion from the one post, the Staff Sergeant Michael Dickinson post, um, I was there from the very start of that, of that Legion post, um, being part of, uh, Calhoun County Veterans Affairs. And I've been a part of that now for over 11 years now. And so, it's

just, that's what you do, you know, you feel like you're still a part of, and you still relate to your comrades, you know, your brothers, and sisters. You know, I was able to pass a millage here. Um, to lead a Calhoun County Millage, um, here to really do that. It's part of the Calhoun County red, white and blue Vietnam traveling wall year to be a part of that was incredible. So, whatever we can do to help veterans is what I'm willing to do. So, just because you know, you still you took off the uniform, you still have that responsibility to serve.

Dean Wetzel: Well and thank you for all that, you know, I feel the same thing, it's kind of what led me to doing this project is giving back to my, to all of the veteran community in that. Well as we get ready to down wine, I know we covered a lot over this last hour and 20 minutes now, um, but is there anything you personally would like to add to this oral history that we haven't covered? or any story that stands out, any. Mission, anything like that you want to put out there.

[01:20:00] Sam Gray: I'm just really proud of the 21 years that I served, um, in the service. When Desert Storm jumped off and just watching film, I'm not saying film, the news of this war, I early on kind of felt like, you know, I'm Is this going to be another Vietnam, you know, is this gonna be another war that we can't win? And that kind of stuff, but very rapidly. Um, I said being able to see film in the ready room and to see and hear pilots talk about what they saw

and things like that, made me, um, believe that this is a war we can win. And, and 21 days later, you know, it was over. And so, I was really happy about that, that it wasn't one of those wars that just went on and on. And even though, you know, we still have Iraqi Free, Operation Iraqi Freedom, OE, I was at OEA, uh,

Dean Wetzel: Operation Inheritance, Operation

Sam Gray: got all this, all this, all these other operations, and it's still an open, you know, war. I still haven't ended it. Because people are still getting a national defense medal when they get out of boot camp, you know? And so, I'm like, that particular war, I was really proud of how America came together the end of the day. You know, how strategic it was, the bombing, the, and being out to see at that time and seeing some, even some of the footage that they showed on. You can say, man, we were part of that, you know? And so, uh, so, but anyway, so, my 21 years of active duty, um, would I do it again? I absolutely would, you know? And, uh, we said earlier, when, uh, something else jumped off, and, and I was part of the fleet reserve, if I got recalled, would I go back? Yes, I absolutely would.

Dean Wetzel: I think we were talking about 9/11. Because you ended your serve in 1999. So, roughly two years later we have 9/11.

Sam Gray: I was actually, uh, doing my mom's remodeling her bathroom. I was like, Sam, you know, come see this. And so, when I saw that first tower

go down, and I'm like glued to the TV at that point. Then that second plane hit the second tower. I was like, you know, sign me up, you know what I'm saying? So, yeah.

Dean Wetzel: I do because I was in fourth grade, and I said the same thing in fourth grade. I said, I want to join. I'm going to serve in the United States military. And eventually I did get to that point where I could serve. I think it definitely had an impact on a lot of us. Um, last question and then I'll let you go for the day. But I want to ask this just because I know you work with veterans and you're so, moved with the veteran community. What do you wish people knew more about veterans?

Sam Gray: I actually think that people get it, you know? Um, because every time I wear something either a shirt like this that, you know, speaks to a veteran or I wear a veteran hat, someone will stop you and say, thank you for your service, you know? And so, seeing that and hearing that, I always, I won't say get choked out by it. You know, it's just like, thank you so, much, you know, did your husband serve, or if it's a guy, did you serve, and they would say either yes or no, or if they said no, they would always strike up this conversation, why they didn't, you know, blah, blah, blah. And so, it's always hearing, hearing that, you know, means a lot, you know, thank you for your service. I probably served for those 21 years and, um, you know, like I said, I would do it again.

Interviewee: Samuel Gray
Interviewer: Dean Wetzel
Date of interview: June 5th, 2024
Library of Congress Veteran History Project

Dean Wetzel: Well, Sam, I want to thank you for your time today. I know you're a very busy individual, so, I appreciate you sitting down with me and just having a conversation about what you did over there. I know people in the future will be very appreciative of this oral history. Like I said, you passed a lot of information. You were serving during a time where there wasn't a lot going on, but there also, was a lot going on. Between the Cold War, Desert Storm, getting ready for the Global War on Terror, all these different moving parts, you know, and stuff. And being in the service right after Vietnam, it was a different world altogether in that. So, thank you for inviting us and letting us see it through your eyes. I really appreciate that.