

Robert Akins Oral History:

[00:00:00] Dean Wetzel: All right, Robert. I want to start by just saying thank you for sitting down with me today. It's a great pleasure to sit down with you and hear your story about your time in service. Really quick, we'll just start with some very basic background information. So, if you could please tell us where you were born, who your mom and dad were, did you have any brothers and sisters?

Robert Akins: Okay, I was born February 3rd, 1944. In Kalamazoo, Michigan. And my dad's name was Amanda Akins and my mother's name was Jane Akins. My mother was born in Kalamazoo. My dad was born in South Dakota. And mom for a few years worked at Kellogg's here at Battle Creek. And dad was a machinist. He worked for the F of L C I O UAW and he could measure. He would cut out of stock a valve and he could measure with his hand and say if it was correct or not. And he worked, he did not go to war because when he went to Jefferson and Levernoy is like we all did. He raised his hand to join the Navy and the next morning they came up to him and said, get out of here. You got to work in your factory. So, he worked 12/7 throughout the war and he had one day off a year which is Christmas. He was, he all, he remained a machinist all his life.

Dean Wetzel: Did you ever want to be a machinist like your dad?

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Robert Akins: No.

Dean Wetzel: No.

Robert Akins: No. I, and I, of course he's, they called him unskilled, and I said that's a misnomer. He could tell, he could touch a valve and say it's just three hundredths off and the boss would get out a micrometer and measure it and say they're off, they're bad, throw them out. He worked for the union, so most of the time he was done with his job by noon, and he played euchre the rest of the day.

Dean Wetzel: Only child then?

Robert Akins: And I have a brother, Gale, who I haven't seen in many years. He's an older brother and not much to say about him. He never went to the armed forces, he never graduated from college.

Dean Wetzel: Okay. No, no need to go into there. Now, did you join the service right out of high school?

Robert Akins: I joined the army, what do you call it, advance. I joined in June, but my reporting date was 1 August 1963. And I went down to Fort Knox, Kentucky for basic and AIT in 1963. And I went to Germany the 15th of December 1963. So, I spent four Christmases in Germany as a lad. That was a long time.

Dean Wetzel: Yeah. That's what you didn't want to go home for Christmas.

Robert Akins: You did, but you're in Germany. You can't go, only so many people could go home. We had to maintain two thirds of the unit in case we were fighting the Russians. And every month we had a practice alert, and we'd go out. To our assembly area and wait for orders when we're going to fight these Germans and Russians for turn around and go back to the post. And that was nerve wracking. You never knew for sure your tank was loaded up with ammo. You were all set to go. You went with a little shaving gear thinking you could go out, fight these Germans and the Russians, you had no clue.

Dean Wetzel: I'm, I can't wait to get into that a little bit more here. Cause that sounds both interesting as a historian, but also terrifying as someone who's been in the service. I don't like unknowns in that, and I would hate to be rushed into a situation where you thought you were going to war, but you have no idea. The smallest mistake at that point can be very big. So, you went there straight out of high school. Yep. So, the military really was your, your first taste of work, having an actual job then.

Robert Akins: A real job, yes.

Dean Wetzel: What was it like then for you to go into boot camp in 63, you said?

Robert Akins: 63. I'd already gone through boot camp. I was in the Navy Reserve for a year. In two weeks, in the Navy Reserve boot camp at Great Lakes, it took the Army eight weeks to do the same thing. So, I had quite a shock at Navy boot camp. Because they woke you up at four o'clock in the morning, and you were busy all day long. And we were and so that, and I had duty, and like that, and sleep deprivation was a big thing for the military. You had to function, you had to keep going.

Dean Wetzel: You were Navy first, then Army. Yeah. What changed, and why?

Robert Akins: My dad wanted me to go get a job, And I went to my commander, that was a rank commander in the Navy, not a position. He said, "I don't have any orders for you. My dad said, you gotta go to work somewhere. So, I joined the Army. And I found out much later on my parents had to turn in all my Navy uniforms and so on and so forth. And I had a year and two months of service as a Navy Reserve. I was a seaman apprentice. When I went to boot camp in the Navy and since I had two stripes on, I didn't do any work. I was in charge of people doing work. They couldn't do much to me. And I marched people back and forth already. Because I was a seaman apprentice, I had two stripes. Most of the time they play with you, you don't have any stripes and you don't know what's going on.

Dean Wetzel: At least you had at least a direction going there for you.

Robert Akins: Yeah, yeah.

Dean Wetzel: So, did you end up having to go to Army Basic, too, then?

Robert Akins: Yes. And I went to Army Basic for about ten weeks. The first week was just getting your uniforms together. I liked that. And I stayed at Fort Knox and marched from basic training to tanker training on post. So, the same afternoon we marched into another set of barracks and set up for tanker training.

Dean Wetzel: I'm sorry, I'm just trying to place all of this, because it's a crazy start to a career in the military you have here. In the Navy, in the Army, then you got ranked. Did they ever find out in boot camp that you had rank? Because I imagine they would have messed with you.

Robert Akins: I would think so, somewhere, but I wasn't in leadership then. They had no clue I was, that I had prior service. In fact, I remember going to the pay office and saying, hey, I'm prior service, I want my money. Oh, you are prior service, and they started shelling out the money that I didn't receive for being an E-2. But they were paying me for private, that wasn't I was I don't know Marine Corps, how you built up, but E-2, E-1 and E 2 have no stripes in the Army. When I was a lad. And so, you, you made PFC, then you finally got a

little stripe. Yeah. That changed later. Anyway, so I had one stripe for a long time.

Dean Wetzel: Going through boot camp, looking back at it, I don't want to bring it up how long ago that was, but does anything stand out at all? Do you remember ah, it feels like it just happened to you yesterday type thing?

Robert Akins: I think one of the things that got my attention in the Navy boot camp was the idea, since we were reservists if you didn't think you could pass a test, like firing the M1 rifle, you didn't try, because if you failed, they had to write you down as a failure. If you didn't try, they didn't know. What an attitude! One afternoon we fought a fire, and that was interesting. They put an oil tank on fire, and they had us march into the fire and put it out. And it took all of us to hang on to the fire hose, and we had another set of men who had a second fire hose, and they had a shower umbrella over us to cool us off as we marched in and put out the oil fire. Never did that in the Army. No way. So that got my attention. And because I had rank, I, my night duty was at a desk at the ship store they called it, and I was there for two hours, and I watched. Sailors come in and out. They had to double time it in Great Lakes if they're by themselves, and come in, call mom at home, and then get out of the phone booth and double time it back to their unit. And I didn't have to do that. I was E2. I

could round up six people and march them somewhere, and everybody loved it.

Because I didn't have to double time. I was a senior.

Dean Wetzel: Okay. Wow. So that was a great. I guess opening a couple of years then for you, and today, at least the military, you got to experience the Navy, you experience a little bit of the Army. What happens after boot camp then, in the Army side of things, for Tanker School, you said you marched over to?

Robert Akins: Yeah, Tanker, A I T, we call it Tanker School, at Fort Knox. And we immediately started Tanker School. And then, in the middle of November, as you know President Kennedy was assassinated and Fort Knox didn't know whether we're going to war against the Russians or not. The whole place stopped. They were in panic. They didn't know, they, they didn't know whether to cancel our orders to go to Germany or were we going to war? So, we had a whole day there where the post was just in shock. They started firing a cannon every hour for President Kennedy's death and deciding where we fighting the Russians or what were we doing and ended up, we took our orders and they, we went to I went home for two weeks and then we, I went to Fort Dixon and we got on a ship at Brooklyn Navy Yard and crossed the Atlantic. Nine days across the Atlantic. How about that? I spent Christmas Day on the North Atlantic.

[00:10:00] Dean Wetzel: Rewind real fast here and just talk a little bit more about the assassination of JFK. I don't Can you walk us through maybe your mindset for that period? Cause that's your commander in your chief, that's your president of the country. I'm sure if there was ever a point where you were like, war was here, that would have probably have been it.

Robert Akins: Yeah, and we were in a boring, very hot Assemble and disassemble of a 50-caliber machine gun class. And the sergeant in the back of the room said, somebody shot the president! He goes, oh come on, you can't shoot the president. He's in an armored car. He, wherever he goes, he, he doesn't, he's not out in the open. The secret service and everybody have control of the situation. And everything stopped. The sergeants, they panicked. They didn't know what to do. They left us in the classroom. And us kids? What do we do? Let's go to the chow. It was the last class of the day. So, we went to chow, and we realized all the adults, they were, they're just, they're stunned. They didn't know what to do. It took us until the next day before they even thought about telling us what to do. And we were really two days from graduation anyway. The whole country was in shock. Yeah.

Dean Wetzel: All right. And then you said your orders after Tanker AIT was to go to Germany?

Robert Akins: Yes. And we went hundreds of us went to Germany. We were in, we were at Fort Knox and they, and we assembled at Fort Dix. We took Army buses to Navy Yard, got on a ship, just like you see in the movies, climbed on a ship and the ship was run by the It was a private ship. It wasn't a Navy ship then. It was a private ship, but it looked the same. And we had hammocks about four or five high. You had one. And I had duty every other day. I had KP every other day. And the days I was off, I had a little tag on my pocket saying, I'm free. You can't touch me. And I found you got up on the deck of the ship and you watched the Atlantic Ocean. And the temperature is about 45 and cloudy. And once in a while you see a ship go by and that was just boring. I can't imagine the, your Marine Corps spending two months getting to an island in the South Pacific, out there on the ocean, trying to do PT or something to keep busy for two months. And then you transfer, and you hit the beach and you're in Guadalcanal. Hot. In war, I think that mindset's even worse than what I went through.

Dean Wetzel: Definitely was probably the worst part of my service was the seven months I was stuck on ship with the Navy.

Robert Akins: Yeah.

Dean Wetzel: You hit that right on your head. Alright so you get to Germany and that's 64, correct?

Robert Akins: Yeah, that'd be just, see I got to Germany December 28th, 1963. November. And we. Marched off the ship, loaded on a German train, and we spent that night going down to southern Germany. It was an all-night train ride, and the next morning we were in a gymnasium at the 3rd Infantry Division, and you waited and waited for somebody to tell you where you were going. I got to the 3rd Squad, 7th Cavalry about 8 o'clock at night, and at that point, the 1st Sergeant didn't know what to do with me. I slept in a sweetened bag in the orderly room for two nights because they didn't know what to do with me. And I was assigned to Headquarters Troop 7th Cav General George Armstrong Custer's 7th Cav. And then I went to Charlie Troop, but I wangled my way to go to Headquarters Troop and play in the bagpipe band that Custer loved to have. How about that? Played the, I played a drum.

Dean Wetzel: In a bagpipe band.

Robert Akins: Yeah, they have drummers in a bagpipe band, yeah.

Dean Wetzel: Awesome. Now obviously Vietnam hasn't started at this point.

We had, observers or whatnot going over there. When you get to Germany, did you think this is the front lines?

Robert Akins: No.

Dean Wetzel: It didn't feel that way to you.

Robert Akins: No, not at all because the first you and I was in the 7th Cav when we went to the field, my first field problem, yeah. I was in a truck, I couldn't drive yet, so I was a passenger in an army truck, and this idiot that I was with had whiskey underneath his driver's seat, bread hanging from the back of the window, a case of beer underneath the passenger's seat, and he had meat somewhere in the truck. It was a carnival, right? And at night they'd start a bonfire in the back of the trucks to keep warm. It's not a good unit, was it? No.

Dean Wetzel: You would say it's not combat ready.

Robert Akins: No, not even close. They were putting in their time.

Dean Wetzel: Did that at least not sit well with you then? Because, here you are, the Russians are probably almost an arm's reach away.

Robert Akins: They're only 15 miles away. From here to Galesburg away. That's all. They're only 15 miles away.

Dean Wetzel: And You're right around with a corner.

Robert Akins: It's surrealistic because, we signed a form saying we'd never go to the border and look at the Iron Curtain or anything. So, we never, it was just out there in Never Land, right? We really didn't catch on to it. It was just a bunch of teenagers in the army.

Dean Wetzel: So, what'd you guys do when you guys were over there in Germany then, those first few years? Oh, for R& R. Did you like, go out and explore? You're 64, 65, you're 20 years after World War II ended. Yeah. I'm sure it's still evident all over the place.

Robert Akins: Oh, yes. They're bombed out building jet around and but for, we didn't have R& R in those days. I did have two Christian retreats that I went to with help from the chaplain. But some guys came home at Christmas time on leave, and they could only be home, you could only be home for either Christmas or New Year's and you had to get back. For the first shift to leave, and you had no excuses. You were AWOL if you didn't make it back on time, which isn't, is the military right? But most of us were in Germany and most of us never really toured around. I don't know that I really turned around, toured around a lot. We went to the service club, which is part of the USO, and I enjoyed the service club. Every night get outta the barracks. Had to get outta the barracks. They'd pick you for duty if you're sitting around in the barracks. So, I went to the service club. But that's the USO, that's what Bob Hope had like that.

Dean Wetzel: Was that on base there?

Robert Akins: It was on post, yeah. You didn't, and they would have trips off post Sunday afternoon. You'd get on an army bus, and you'd go see places. I went to a Rotenberg. I went to a monastery. I went to Vinsheim, and just get on the Army bus and go. No pass, no nothing, and then you'd come back. But as far as taking a trip somewhere I did. I took two trips to see my pen pal, Max Bosmer in Switzerland. So, I did have some leave time coming, but not much.

Dean Wetzel: What was Switzerland like?

Robert Akins: It was great. We I took the train across the border from Aschaffhausen, Switzerland which is next to Germany. And I got in country, and I realized the civil, the it was a beautiful mountain land and most Swiss people speak English. If they don't speak American English, they speak British English. So, you got around, and they did, they don't hate the Americans like some of the Germans did. So, it was a good, it was a good trip. And I was really impressed. They they're awfully expensive in Switzerland. But beautiful country. And then I found out, years later, I had stumbled almost into the town where my ancestors came out of in Switzerland. So, I basically knew the territory. And my ancestors lived in the rolling hills around Zurich, not in the high mountains. How about that? I saw Max twice and Max became Max

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Vlasimir became a safety person. He was a skier, of course the Swiss Army skis, and he was the last man down the mountain to make sure no one was hurt. Whenever that was at dusk, he would go down the mountain, make sure he watched for somebody. If they ran into a tree or something, that he called for help and got them out of there. You don't want somebody overnight up in those mountains.

Dean Wetzel: No, it gets a little cold up there. All I know you weren't allowed to go to the Iron Curtain. But did you ever suspect that you were probably being watched? 15 miles. That sounds pretty close.

Robert Akins: It we were in a long distance because our radios didn't work. They were jammed by East German. We could listen to East German music was all. the German composers. We had Army, Armed Forces Radio, one kilowatt little station, just enough power to broadcast to us. We knew we couldn't go downtown on May Day. The communists were out parading, and they would want to get in fights with the Americans, so we were not allowed out on May Day. So that was still tough times, and we were up there. near the, like I said, the near East German border,

Dean Wetzel: did you get to experience a lot of German food?

Robert Akins: Yes, we could go downtown and have, I could kill for a Jaeger schnitzel. So anyway, yeah, and I was, yeah, I did that. We had our favorite little places we'd go to and a lot of GIs, they never got across. There's a bar called Lily Mar lanes. And most of them ended up at the bar at Lily Mar Lane's. They never did see the town at all. Didn't want to see the town. They were there for years and cared less. All they want to do is go home. And so, Lily Mar Lane's was the place. Yeah.

[00:20:00] Dean Wetzel: So, 1965 Vietnam becomes a war begins to happen. You're still in, obviously, Germany for another couple of years. While you're sitting there through 65, through 66, are you feeling like you're helping? Because everybody's focus was over there. You're over here in Germany.

Robert Akins: No, we're still busy worrying about the Russians. And we had a group of us who were called Spec 5s. It's not a rank in the Marine Corps. So, Spec four with an umbrella over it. And these guys came up to, wow, you're spec fives. How'd you like to be a helicopter pilot? Oh, so we go to Vietnam and get shot at. Oh, okay. How'd you like to be a West Point cadet? No, thanks. I'm a, I'm spec five. I don't want to be an officer. Oh, they were trying to recruit us to be helicopter pilots. I was already wearing glasses by then. So, you can't be a helicopter pilot and wear glasses. So, we just laughed at them, get outta here. When it was mandatory class, we had to go to blah, blah, blah.

Dean Wetzel: Sure.

Robert Akins: And before it really got hot to go to Viet, to go to Vietnam, you had to be a staff sergeant. You had to re-enlist for six years. You had to go to Fort Benning and learn how to jump as a and become a Ranger at Fort Bragg. Then you'd get orders for Vietnam. So, you're spending a year or so diddling around being qualified. Before you could go to Vietnam because you're supposed to be an advisor. And we're all private. We don't qualify.

Dean Wetzel: Not enough rank there.

Robert Akins: Not enough rank. Too bad. So sad. Ha

Dean Wetzel: Ha. I imagine driving a tank, and correct me if I'm wrong, because I'm assuming obviously, I was infantry. Driving a tank, firing a tank, firing while on the move. These things, these Moving tanks around on a battlefield. If you don't regularly practice those, I would imagine those skills are probably lost. While you guys were sitting in Germany, how often did you guys go to the field to, to hone your skills? And what was that kind of like?

Robert Akins: We went to the field every month to, to work on our skills. Everything was practice. And we tried we could fire a few small arms, but you're in Germany and the, and you gotta watch where you're firing them. We

fired blanks most of the time. Because real ammo goes out in the countryside, and if you go to play an army post, then you can fire live ammo and shoot up the works. And we'd go once a year to Grafenwoehr and fire the tank course, which took us 45 days. We day fired, night fired, day fired, night fired, and the first 20 days, the gunners and the tank commanders are firing small arms.

They're machine guns at target. And during those days, we're also firing our main gun with cement rounds, and we're trying to hit a target about the size of a pie plate. And you're just an average tanker, gunner, if you hit the target the size of a pie plate. You're just average. You need to be better than average to, to go up against the Russians. We knew we had five seconds against a Russian. That's it. You mess up. You're dead. So, we practiced, and then at the end of all that practicing, we went downrange, we called it, on a test course. And we had to fire the guns, we had to fire the main gun, I had to drive, and we had one run during the day, and one run at night to see if we qualified. And the tank I was on, we qualified, and Colonel, Said, if you qualify on the run, all of you get a rank. Spec 5 became a Staff Sergeant. And Frank and I became Spec 4s. And the mechanic became a Spec 5. We all got a rank, like the colonel said. I'll give you all a rank if you qualify. I think 3 or 4 tanks qualified out of a battalion of tanks. They just, they were not combat ready.

Dean Wetzel: How many tanks is a battalion?

Robert Akins: There's 17 tanks in the company and three companies to a battalion plus headquarters company has two tanks. Yeah, not many really.

Dean Wetzel:53.

Robert Akins: Yeah, and we had four battalions on the part of Germany we were in, which we could, they called the Folda Gap, and we knew the Russians were going to come through the Folda Gap charging right at Frankfurt if they could. So that's why we had so many tank battalions right there. Plus, support, all kinds of support. So

Dean Wetzel: How was it to fire a tank and be there when that's firing?

Because imagine a kid from lonely Kalamazoo, a tank's pretty new to you, and now you're sitting behind it.

Robert Akins: A 60-ton tank fires a 105-millimeter main gun round, and since I was the driver, most of the time when I, when they fired the gun, I had all my hatches covered up.

So, it's the concussion that I felt, not the bang of the gun. And as, and it was my job, we had an old fashioned tank. It was my job to stop the tank without the gun tube swinging up and down. I had to stop level so they could fire. And the

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command in, if I can give you real time, Gunner, Heat, Tank, Hup, On the way, Fire! That's how fast we had to be.

Dean Wetzel: Wow.

Robert Akins: Let me explain it to you. He says, Gunner, and the loader jams in a round into the breech. And the breech closes. And he says, Gunner, and so the gunner is on his sight. He says, Heat, and that's the round in the breech. He says, up! The loader says, up! It's in the breech. The gunner yells, The commander yells, Fire! The gunner yells, "On the way! And the tank fires.

Dean Wetzel: And then off you drive again.

Robert Akins: Yeah, and how about that? And we throw the hot round out of the tank. Now the loader has asbestos gloves in those days to throw that hot shell out. Don't burn the pieces out of you. If you touch it.

Dean Wetzel: How much does one of those rounds weigh roughly?

Robert Akins: 75 pounds. Oh. We had 52 rounds in the tank.

Dean Wetzel: And what kind of tank were you driving?

Robert Akins: M60, M60A1. And that's what the Russians are using now. The Russians are using T 55s against the Ukrainians. It's a World War II tank. It

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doesn't have a computer. It doesn't have anything. We had a rangefinder on our tank. We always practiced a second-round hit. Because we thought, because our rangefinder, there was a 50 foot gap. We'd fire the first round and see. And then we'd just reload and fire the second round and try and hit their tank. And the Russians has a tank, which they're using in the Ukraine, has only a 90-degree pivot, like a ballpark, first and third, okay? For them to see a tank over here, the driver has to turn the tank, but they already have an anti-tank round in the breach, and the commander eyeballs it, he thinks it's a kilometer away, fire. And if he's right, he blew away American tank. If he's wrong, he had to reload, and fire, and reload, and fire, to bracket, like artillery. And our chances of getting that Russian, at the first firing, the Russian has a better chance of blowing us away. But if he has to reload, we got him. That's, glad I didn't do it.

Dean Wetzel: Sounds like a very stressful time and I appreciate you explaining that to me because again I've always seen tanks as being the thing I want on the battlefield because everybody stops shooting when that thing arrives.

Robert Akins: Absolutely,

Dean Wetzel: but I have no idea how it works.

Robert Akins: The Vietnamese have scared us.

Dean Wetzel: I would be too.

Robert Akins: They we were up in the highlands of Vietnam and they, but their sharpshooters would fire at us Other than that, they left us alone. They didn't want anything to do with tankers.

Dean Wetzel: Let's just get right into it. When did you get to Vietnam? And did you go straight from Germany to Vietnam? Or did you go home?

Robert Akins: No, I was, I was at Fort Riley, Kansas. And in July 69, I went to Vietnam. And I went to Long Binh for a week. They didn't know what to do with me. I'm a tanker. And I had orders to go to Vietnamese Transportation Engineers. They canceled that. I ended up in 4th Infantry Division. And we had one tank battalion, 69th Armor. And you had a tank battalion on the DMZ. There was only two tank battalions in Vietnam. The Marines had the DMZ, and we had the Highlands up there. 60-ton tank. What are you going to do with it? It's got to be on hard ground. So, the 69th Armor was up, and we were, we never really interdicted the North Vietnamese Army. And what we did is guarded highways. And. You can imagine we were on a hill looking at each other optically and seeing if the Vietnamese tried to infiltrate the highway, if they tried to hit the convoys and so forth. And we had convoys going back and forth all day. At the end of the day, we'd pull our tanks into a landing zone and

be secure for a landing zone. Then the next morning we'd go back out on the highway. Did we ever fire our big guns? Nope, not at all. Don't know what to tell you.

Dean Wetzel: When exactly did you get to Vietnam?

Robert Akins: July 69 to July 70.

Dean Wetzel: You got there right after Tet?

Robert Akins: Yeah. Yeah, I didn't see Tet. And the 69th armor was decommissioned by President Nixon in March 70. So, my last three months I was in an infantry battalion. on main post, supply sergeant. So

Dean Wetzel: how'd you like that?

[00:30:00] Robert Akins: it was terrible. It was they tripped up stupid things for us to do all the time. Keep us, but by that time I was a staff sergeant. So, I wasn't doing too many details. It's just, and they'd have alerts and stuff. So, I'd have to issue out all the weapons. Then when the alert was over, I had to read, they had to bring all their weapons back in again.

Dean Wetzel: How did you feel about the protests then that were going on back home?

Robert Akins: I don't, we don't know too much about them. The Army, the Stars and Stripes didn't give us much information about that. I was in shock when I came home in 67 and saw all this stuff. It wasn't my country anymore. It changed. It changed from the country of John Wayne and Berns and Allen and to laughing in. And Petticoat Junction and what happened? I don't know. There was a big revolution that I wasn't a part of. I was in shock at that time.

Dean Wetzel: Yeah. Did you ever feel like your family might be in danger because you were serving in Vietnam or overseas?

Robert Akins: No. No, because all my uncles served in, in World War II. I was not in danger. I was doing what the Akins family had done. And Some of my uncles were in South Pacific, some of my uncles were in France, Germany. Yeah. Like I said, my dad was a grinder, and he couldn't join the armed forces. He was very important.

Dean Wetzel: Did you, by any chance, happen to go to Vietnam with some of the guys that you were originally with in Germany?

Robert Akins: No, it was just a mixture. I did see Sergeant Harrop, he made staff sergeant, like I told you. And a few years later at Fort Raleigh, he was the first sergeant. Good for him. He went from E6 to E7 to E8 in just a couple of

years. He was in the right place at the right time, I figure. And he had the right qualifications yeah.

Dean Wetzel: Did you I know you spoke with the one gentleman that you had as a friend there in Germany. Can you think of any comrades that developed a relationship with you that maybe stayed left after you were in the service?

Robert Akins: Raymond Jordan and I, he came to my wedding in 68. He was from Maryland. And we were good buddies. Other than that, we had a chaplain assistant named Helmstetter. He was a goon. But I, I never had a, the biggest lie in the armed forces is, I'll write, I'll keep in touch. And we didn't do that. We still didn't have cell phones and stuff, and most people don't write and don't keep in touch. It's very unusual to have anybody keep in touch with you. I don't know about your experience, but that's my experience.

Dean Wetzel: I would say, yeah, you're right.

Robert Akins: The branch that keeps together the Navy because they were on a ship in World War II throughout the war, until it was decommissioned. So, they were all the same crew and the same officers. Seems like they have more reunions than the Army because we go in and out of units. You're in a unit for a couple of years, then you go somewhere else for a couple of years. Were

homogenized, I'd say. I don't know about the Marines, whether you had any unit thing, like Charlie Company 3rd, 3rd Division or something like that.

Dean Wetzel: Nothing I can think of.

Robert Akins: No, that's the thing about the Navy, they were always together.

Yep.

Dean Wetzel: Question I have for you how was the mail both in Vietnam and in Germany?

Robert Akins: In Germany, when I first got there, I think, I don't know if I told you this, it took 60 days to get mail. And my birthday was in February and I just got in country in December. I didn't get my birthday cards until April. I was a lonely kid. No, here I had a birthday. Nobody cared about me. They did, but the mail took 60 days. President Johnson came along and said, why is the mail, the letters taking 60 days? You got to put it on ship. You don't do that here. We're going to put them on airplanes, the first-class mail. So, we started getting mail in five or six days from home. That was nice. But he made us pay air mail rate. And then President Nixon said, why are you paying air mail rate when it says here, Army Post Office, New York City? You're going to pay first class from now on. It didn't improve, but we no longer had to pay a premium for a letter,

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air mail. And then came Sam, Space Available Mail, and we got letters in three or four days from, and packages. Sam, that was on the packages. So, Christmas time came, we knew people could send us packages, and they'd be there for Christmas. And then, you know the rest, the cell phones and stuff, and you talk directly to people. Did we call home? I tried to call home. I remember one Mother's Day I went to the German post office. I sat there for a couple of hours. I paid him 400 Marks. He couldn't get through the telephone lines. He came up to his private Akins. I can't get through to America. The lines are all full. Thanks a lot. He gave me my 400 Marks. So

Dean Wetzel: Is 400 marks a lot.

Robert Akins: When I was a lad there, four marks to a dollar. If I had a hundred dollars, that was four hundred German marks.

Dean Wetzel: Yeah. That's an expensive phone call.

Robert Akins: You have no choice. That's it. You go to the German post office. And when people had their telephones in Germany, you paid whatever they ordered. Whatever, you have no choice but to argue about your phone call bill. You paid it. It's a federal post office. You paid whatever the bill was.

Dean Wetzel: Oh. Now, between both your time in Germany and your time in Vietnam, did you ever have a good luck memento, or a token that you were like, you carried around?

Robert Akins: No, I didn't until my wife, and I got to Fort Jackson, and we went to a graduation, and the colonel looked at us, and said which kids are yours? We don't have any kids, but we do have members of our church. And at that point, he shook my hand, and I got my first coin. I have a collection of coins. Most of the colonels, as they knew us for the two years we were on our mission. And that's what that picture is our mission. And she was a very happy woman. And we got, we had a colonel named Snodgrass. Treated us like a king and queen. Anytime we came to his battalion, what can I do for you? How can I find out? He had cell phones in pockets and legs and stuff. He'd call up somebody, hey, we've got to get somebody here. He'd These people wanted to see so and so, and we had a message to give them, so and so's in the hospital, or so and so's got an award or something, and they really accommodated us.

Dean Wetzel: I bet that felt awesome.

Robert Akins: Yeah, it did. And we volunteered at the chapel and chaplain school. That's where some of those certificates came from. We volunteered at the chaplain school, and I wore my baseball hat with my rank on it, Sergeant

First Class. I could, I got around post very well, and everybody treated us very well. Our replacement was a Lieutenant Colonel Air Force. And I said, you got to put on your Lieutenant Colonel emblem. He says, why? I'm from the Air Force. He says, you're in the Army now. He found out he has so much comradeship from the other officers. And they said you know, sir. You are the senior colonel on the post, Lieutenant Colonel, he's the senior lieutenant colonel on post, and they treated him like that. When he went to the O club and stuff like that it was yes sir. Would you like a table over here blah, blah, blah. He was retired just like I was, but he was lieutenant colonel and that, that got things done. I remember one time the Mormons did show up at a chapel and they said, where are they? They're making them do work today. He called up somebody and said, hello, this is Colonel so and so, I want the Mormons here in ten minutes. Out. Ten minutes later, comes an army truck full of Mormons. Lieutenant Colonels bark. Oh yeah? Yeah, they do. Now, I don't know about the Marine Corps, but man, you don't fool around with a lieutenant colonel. You just No.

Dean Wetzel: Yeah, we, you, I tried not to see those guys. I didn't want to be anywhere near those guys. After your time in Vietnam, and say, we get to 1974 now, Vietnam ends, how do you feel about the war in general what your service was there?

Robert Akins: I felt for myself, I did what I wanted to do. I've, I went for mom, popcorn, apple pie. That's why I went, and I'm glad I did. And there was a lot of fallback from people. They called us baby killers and professional. You can't be professional and a baby killer at the same time. Or untrained. You can't do that. You're trained. And, really, when Desert Shield started kids came up to me and thanked me. As you can tell, I'm still broken up about it. They think I was in uniform of the Michigan Guard, and, oh, soldier, thanks a lot for defending the country. It took that long to get that to us that, yeah. And now, my church does the same thing. I wear that uniform. Man, I'm like Superman. That's great.

Dean Wetzel: It warms your heart to be thanked.

Robert Akins: Yeah. Yeah.

Dean Wetzel: So, you When did you exactly, I don't know if I asked this question yet, but when exactly did you get out of the Army?

Robert Akins: 1976.

Dean Wetzel: 76. Yeah,

Robert Akins: November of 1976 I was out of the Army, and two years later I was in the Michigan National Guard, and in 92 I was released from the Michigan National Guard. So, I kept my hands in it, being in the Michigan

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Guard, California Guard, returned to the Michigan Guard, and then they said, Sergeant Akins. You're all done. They released me on my birthday, 92, February 3rd, 92, on my birthday. So, I forget how old I was then, but yeah.

[00:40:00] Dean Wetzel: I was negative one month. How Okay, so after Vietnam goes on, we're going to jump forward a little bit here. The wall came down in 1989.

Robert Akins: Yeah.

Dean Wetzel: I bet that was something for you.

Robert Akins: I never thought that would happen. I never thought when Reagan said, Tear down this wall. I never thought it would happen. And I never thought Eastern Europe would be free. Yeah. And so that's why I'm so much in saying Europe has got to defend Ukraine or the Russians are going to start moving in again. I don't know. Okay. But after all we went through, I don't want the Russians to recapture Romania, Poland, and yeah.

Dean Wetzel: you did. Was the wall coming down possibly a moment where you felt like your service was successful?

Robert Akins: No, I didn't have, I didn't have that. I was just glad to see it come down in Germany, being united. And I find even today there's the East

Germans are still separate from the West Germans. They really, the Russians really did a propaganda job on them.

Dean Wetzel: Have you gone back to Germany since the walking down?

Robert Akins: Wished I could, but I haven't. When we were in Fort Jackson at that time, we could go down to Charleston Navy Air Base and we could fly to Germany for 15 dollars, one five dollars not a plane going there, a courier or a troop ship, a troop plane. And Linda said, we had a passport. We could have gone, but I don't want to go. Okay. Now, forget it, it's a public airline and I, quite frankly, I don't have the money to do it anymore. It was Uncle Sam took me there and Uncle Sam brought me back, yeah, and I'm not sad. I'm not, I don't, it's not a bucket trip for me anymore. That's for sure.

Dean Wetzel: When you joined the Michigan National Guard, is that when you became the Chaplain Assistant?

Robert Akins: No, it was my, it was when I was out in the California Guard that I became a chaplain assistant. The first sergeant looked at me and said, we have a chaplain assistant E6 opening.” And I was a second supply sergeant in the unit, and you can't have two supply sergeants. So, the first sergeant came up and said, how'd you like to be in this E6 position as brigade chaplain assistant?”

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I, let me at it. And that's when I started going to school. It was to be a qualified chaplain assistant.

Dean Wetzel: Did you find that job more, more fulfilling than maybe your tanker job?

Robert Akins: Oh yeah. By far. That was my happiest time. Oh yeah. And that linked in with me being at the chaplain school at Fort Jackson, because then I realized, oh, you are a chaplain assistant, and yeah.

Dean Wetzel: Walk us through maybe a normal day then of a chaplain assistant. What was your. What did you guys do and deal with?

Robert Akins: I opened up the chapel, the post chapel, at Camp Roberts, California, about 6 o'clock in the morning. And the first thing I did was turn on that 40-cup coffee pot for the chaplains and get that going. Chaplains love coffee. Then we would check in with the officer of the day and see if there were any emergencies or anything going on. Or do we have any Red Cross messages? Do we need to go out to a unit and talk to a troop? What's going on? Find out when the general's staff meeting was held and one of the chaplains would stand in and that then we'd go to the officer's club for breakfast. They took me to O club for breakfast. Nobody cared. And then we would, I, then I would take. The chaplain said, I need to go to the Black Forest, Sergeant Hankins. Jumped in the

jeep, sir, let's go. And I take him out to the Black Forest, which is a training area. I say, sir, how long do you want to be here? Give me a couple hours. I'll be back in a couple hours. And I came back to the post chapel. And then I went to the PX and picked up some pop and stuff for the troops and some donuts and blah, blah, blah. Came back to the chapel. Now it's time to go pick up that chaplain. So, I went back out to the Black Forest, and picked him up. Then I went and got gas for my Jeep at the field point, cause it was open. Came back to the chapel and one of the chaplains, hey, you wanna take me to lunch? Yes, sir. Jump in the Jeep. We went up to lunch and then the Catholic Chapel looked at me, said, I need to have a mass out at unit. Could you stay with me? Oh, sure. So, I took him out to that unit, and he had mass out there. Came back, we had, then we found that one of the chaplains needed me to take him to a unit to talk about a troop and his wife had a baby or something. Did that. Came back, had chow. And at night we would sit in our office and play Uno until about 11 o'clock. At 11 o'clock the post chaplain said, we're done. We'll see you tomorrow morning, Sergeant Akins. We closed it down, turned out the lights, locked the door. Told the officer of the day. If you want something, here's the chaplain to call. So, there was always a chaplain on call but like we did at Camp Grayling, we'd lay down beside a telephone and ring a ding until we woke up, right? Oh, Camp Grayling Chapel. Then we'd get telephone calls from the Red Cross and say, oh, you have a, you had a, you have a troops. Now I'm switching

over to the guard. But anyway, that's. And we had to take troops home. Mom and the kids are in a traffic accident. They're okay, but the car's screwed up, so he had to go home. He had to go home and take care of business. We came a three-day pass and came back. If it was really something major, then the commander would get the message and he'd reschedule this soldier to go to another summer camp to fill his obligation of summer camp.

Dean Wetzel: That's awesome. Thank you for doing that.

Robert Akins: Yeah, just a day in the chapel. Plus, we had a worship service. I forgot about that. We had maybe a Bible study or something. I didn't like that, so we had a worship service. Sunday, we had a worship service with all that other. We still had a worship service and like that. Oh, yeah.

Dean Wetzel: I'm looking over your awards right here on your little biographical data form. Which one of these would you say is maybe You're Most Significant.

Robert Akins: The Army Achievement one.

Dean Wetzel: How Do You Award That?

Robert Akins: Cuz I, I've The Colonel the Post Chaplain gave that to me For Being Outstanding Chaplain Assistant Fighting Initiative Doing Things for

People Doing Things for The Chaplain Helping Chaplain's Make Sure I Said Sir, That's A Major You Gotta Salute this guy oh, ok, Sorry. And Be Courteous and Take Caretem Take Him to His Regiment to his quarters at night and pick him up in the morning if you need to get picked up because he didn't have a vehicle and like that. They said you went way out of your way to the, you're just not an average troop. We really appreciated you and that's why I got the Army Achievement Medal in a summer camp. Yes sir. And what we liked at summer camp was the last day of summer camp we all had a battalion formation and the colonel passed out rank and he passed out these. certificates and awards and then we all had a big picnic and the next morning we jumped in our vehicles and came home. So, of course there's little adult beverages mixed in there at the last night on post.

Dean Wetzel: Just a couple of those.

Robert Akins: Yeah,

Dean Wetzel: This was this actually could refer to a couple days for you because your service sounds like it ended twice or so. Do you recall the day your service ended and where you were?

Robert Akins: No, I don't. Cause that would be in the Army. I came home from, did I come home from Germany? Yeah. To Fort Dix and I left and in the

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National Guard, I was in an armor outfit here, E six chaplain assistant. And that's when I got the word, I was retired and there was no parade, no nothing. I for, I this is nuts. They, no thank you. No. What a deal, huh?

Dean Wetzel: That kind of, that probably stung a little bit after putting, what, 20 years in to not get anything.

Robert Akins: It was a tank battalion, and they were a busy playing tanker and I was a new guy to the unit. I was only there 90 days or so when I was retired out by Lansing. They didn't know me.

Dean Wetzel: And you didn't know you were about to retire? No. They just forced retired you?

Robert Akins: Yeah. Oh, yeah. Yeah. And the cha I didn't even see the chaplain in that place. He just wasn't there the two, three weekends I was there. And unreal.

Dean Wetzel: Looking back at your time in the service, twenty years I imagine this did definitely affect your life in some way. How do you think it affected your life?

Robert Akins: Like this family, I'm dealing with the hated soldiers. I just figured that out. All my military stuff that I left behind was trashed. I didn't

realize they hated military people. The only thing I got out of there was my uniform. I had a couple of coats with military stuff on them, and I had hats with, like a boondie hat with my emblems on. They're all gone. All gone by the time I got back. They were trashed. They're personal items. I couldn't believe a thing. We trashed the personal items; it's been a bitter thing with this family.

Dean Wetzel: Sorry you're having to go through that.

Robert Akins: Yeah, that's okay, I'm a big kid. I can do it. You want a light on?

Dean Wetzel: I see, it did get a little dark out there, didn't it?

Robert Akins: Yeah, there's a little round switch at the, there that round one there, turn that one, and there you go. There you go. Ta da!

Dean Wetzel: Perfect, we got light! That's 20 years also means that you have a lot of experience and a lot of stuff to share in that. So, for future generations who will come across your oral history in the Library of Congress, what would you want to say to them about war, about life, really anything really?

[00:50:00] Robert Akins: I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord. I was with some great chaplains. Both in the Guard and in the reserve units. Half the time when I was in the National Guards, I was the chaplain, but I'm not an officer. But I'd go visit troops in the hospital and like that. When they came back from

the hospital, they said, start anything. You visited me. Yep. And that's all I ask.

Be a servant. Be a servant to the chaplains. Be a servant to the soldiers. All they wanna be known as is a servant.

Dean Wetzel: you could reflect maybe on one life lesson, you attest to being taught to you through the military, what would that life lesson be? I know there's probably quite a few life lessons packed in 20 years.

Robert Akins: After it was all said and done, I'm glad I served for the 20 years, and that I was helpful to people, like I said, and it gave me great joy to It could be a part of a comradeship, a fellowship. Whenever I see a fellow soldier wearing a baseball hat, I say welcome home. They love it. There's so many of them, they've never heard a welcome home. I'm glad I'm in the VFW where I wander around and say welcome home. I usually don't wear military stuff, you don't realize I'm military, but see a lot of guys wearing ball hats, I say welcome home. Most of them are Vietnam, Korean veterans yeah.

Dean Wetzel: Yeah, my I would say my peers haven't warmed up completely yet to the veteran lifestyle. Yeah. I think GWOT veterans are still, much like how Vietnam veterans took a little bit to get used to that veteran status. So, I think that's where the GWOT veterans are right now.

Robert Akins: Yeah.

Dean Wetzel: I guess you said that you do. So, is the VFW the only veteran organization that you're a part of today?

Robert Akins: Yes. I put my time in that I've been an officer in the red Arrow, VFW in Kalamazoo for 10 years or so now. Yeah, so I, I'm still a trustee and I'm in my third year being a trustee and I plan to be a trustee. I don't want to be a commander or quartermaster or anything like that. I'm not up to that stuff. It's a lot of work. But I enjoy the comradeship at the post. I go to the post any night, and it's cheers. Hey, Sergeant Bob, how you doing? And they know I'm a chaplain assistant, and you want your Shirley Temple. Yep. They know I don't drink; I don't smoke. I'm a chaplain assistant. And the day when I was a chaplain assistant, in our regulation, if you got an article 15, you're in the infantry, pal. Not anymore. Not anymore. And I was proud of that. I never had any of those things.

Dean Wetzel: I saw on your biographical form you have a good cookie, or a we called it a good cookie.

Robert Akins: Three of them.

Dean Wetzel: Yeah.

Robert Akins: Yeah.

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Dean Wetzel: For every four years you serve, you can get one, or you can get a star added to it. Yep.

Robert Akins: Yep.

Dean Wetzel: Did you ever go to college? I know what that point is. Yes.

Robert Akins: After, afterwards, I went to Ohlone College. What, where do you live?

Dean Wetzel: Battle Creek.

Robert Akins: Oh, just like Kellogg Community College.

Dean Wetzel: Okay.

Robert Akins: And then I graduated from Davenport. And in my rec book, I can show you my, or it's in my safe, I can show you, I was on the dean's list of both colleges. So, I knew how to be academic.

Dean Wetzel: Awesome.

Robert Akins: Yep.

Dean Wetzel: You had a couple of brain cells. Probably a few more than me as a Marine.

Robert Akins: And we've missed it. I do have a daughter. Cool. I did. And she's, this year she'll be double nickel. She doesn't want anybody to know about it, but she's 55. She lives right here in Battle Creek.

Dean Wetzel: Okay. Was she born while you were still in the service?

Robert Akins: Yes.

Dean Wetzel: From doing the math?

Robert Akins: Yes. That was strange. I talked to the doctor here in Battle Creek. We said, the Red Cross will let me get a pass. Until the baby was born. Oh no, you can go on to Vietnam, and the baby was born while I was in induction in Vietnam, and the army didn't know where I was. My wife would say to the Red Cross, He's in Vietnam. No, he isn't. We don't have any record of him. Because they moved me from Bien Hoa to, to Pleiku, so I got lost in the record shuffle until The day our tanks moved out, the very first day I went into combat, and they said, you got to go to the Red Cross. Oh, great. So, I ran to the Red Cross, and got a letter which said, congratulations, Sergeant Akins, you have a girl. I have a girl, not a grill. I ran back to my tank and off we went into

combat. By the time Elizabeth was one year, Beth was one year old, I was home.

Dean Wetzel: Is that did that ever not sit well with you? Missing the first year of your daughter's life?

Robert Akins: Yeah, I wish I could. Just long enough for her to be born, right?

Dean Wetzel: Yeah.

Robert Akins: And the doctor wouldn't sign a release saying that the army didn't care. Hey, your child's going to be born. Hey, we can wait a couple weeks. No problem. Duh! Am I angry about it now? No. No, I'm happy to have a daughter.

Dean Wetzel: Yeah, you just wish you could have been there, especially when you're, like you said, that you were just in Vietnam it, all you're asking for is 48 or 72 hours. Give me back to the states, let me see my baby, say hi to my wife who's probably shaking up or what not, so what she's gone through. Yeah. And then send me right back on over here. Yeah. Just to help put nerves at ease, especially considering that she's tried to reach out to you, and they kept saying, no he's not, because I'm sure that played some games on her.

Robert Akins: Yeah, she said, while she was, while I was in Vietnam two or three times, she got letters from somebody saying I was dead. Yeah. And there you go. Boy, the Russians really, the Chinese really had us. I've heard about guys in Korea. I don't know if you've heard this one, but guys come to Korea, the DMZ, and it says, Welcome private so and so don't you miss being at home? They knew, man. They knew. Their intelligence knew exactly who was in Korea. The very day you hit the sand of Korea they welcomed you. Crazy, huh?

Dean Wetzel: Yeah.

Robert Akins: That's Intel, guys. Yep.

Dean Wetzel: And I guess, you were 15 miles from the Iron Curtain. Yeah. Sure, that played into your mind, because you're like, they could go to the DMZ and have that happen. I'm sure we've been photographed here in Germany or whatnot. Yeah, sure. 15 miles away. They And

Robert Akins: You knew that some of the people in town were communists. They didn't want us there in the first place, so Sure. It wasn't the Great Liberation. Oh boy, World War II is over, no.

Dean Wetzel: Yeah.

Robert Akins: Yeah.

Dean Wetzel: Bob, I know there's a lot that we've talked about here I want to open it up for you right now, if there's anything, as you look at your 20 years of service that you went through, your time in Vietnam, your time in Germany, that you would like to add to your oral history that I may not have included yet, you can go ahead and just say whatever you would like, if there's anything you want to talk about.

Robert Akins: No, not really. I am tired.

Dean Wetzel: Yeah, that's fair, I understand that. It gets a little long winded. I'm glad to

Robert Akins: do it with you. I'm very glad to have this verbal interview and I don't think the average GI does this. I'm just glad to add this in for the Vietnam guys and like that. And I served from Vietnam even to the Cold War and like that,

Dean Wetzel: yeah, you had a You, you served basically the Cold War. Yes. That's how I like to tell it. You missed out on Korea in the 1950s, in the late 1940s, but from basically 1960 onwards. Yeah. And if you count the years of you being a child and growing up, then you can say the late 40s, early 50s. Yeah. You lived that as a kid, and then you just went off to service, and by the

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time you got out in 92, the wall had ended. So technically, you served, or were a part of the Cold War your entire life.

Robert Akins: Yeah, and I'm surprised we don't have a federal ribbon Cold war. Soldiers, but we don't they just, never got around to it.

Dean Wetzel: No, not yet. The VA could always end up someday awarding something.

Robert Akins: There's not going to be enough of us to talk about at that point. I have seen a pictures of civil war soldiers marching down Michigan Avenue in Kalamazoo in 1900. Bunches of them, 1910, quite a few 1920. A few. By 1930, it was about a dozen.

Dean Wetzel: The last Civil War veteran, which Kalamazoo Valley is going to be mad at me if I don't get this name right because I wrote a paper a little bit on him when I was there as an intern, but he died in 38?

Robert Akins: Yeah.

Dean Wetzel: Yeah. Will Carlton. Yeah. Smith Carlton. Smith Carlton. Okay. That's his name and he died 38.

He was hit by a car when he was crossing the road.

Robert Akins: Yeah. Nice, huh? The last member we had of the 32nd Division, because our Red Arrow is the 32nd Division, died just a couple of years ago. And he was the last man standing in the 32nd Division. Strangely enough, my Uncle Arnie was in the 32nd Division in Charlie Company in New Guinea And he got injured in New Guinea and he was done. He had a major Japanese chopped his heel off.

Dean Wetzel: Oh

[01:00:00] Robert Akins: yeah. He was a cook and they said, “How’d you like to go on a patrol? Ah, sure. I’ll go on a patrol. And he got in an ambush instead. Everybody else was killed. Japanese buried him up to his neck, chopped his heel off before they buried him. He tried to play dead. And the next morning, the patrol found him, and he was in this hospital up here is the federal center. For a couple of years getting repaired from that heel being chopped off. Their medicine is not like ours where we have prothesis and stuff. Matter of fact, I’ll give you this yarn. We had a young captain, got his leg blown off in Iraq or Afghanistan. He said, “I don’t want to be a flying pilot. He said, Captain, you gotta get a prothesis. He says, “I want a prothesis. I want to go back to my troops. Okay, you gotta get the prothesis out, take you six months, then you gotta pass the PT test. He did. He had orders to return.

Dean Wetzel: Feels good, don't it?

Robert Akins: Yeah. That's my type of captain. I'm going back to my unit.

Yeah. And you guys, you Marines, you all have a totally different attitude about war than we in the Army do. You go out there and take on all kinds of stuff.

Wow.

Dean Wetzel: We're bred for one purpose and that's to take whatever the enemy has. I always make the chuckle; you have to be crazy to join a gun club where they don't even have medics. That's the Marine Corps that gives you the idea.

Robert Akins: Navy Corpsman.

Dean Wetzel: Yeah. Navy supplies. Those are, they're not a Marine. No.

Robert Akins: And it's

Dean Wetzel: Marines are, yeah.

Robert Akins: And I understand you have a certain psychology you'd have to pass now to be a Marine. Private. There's a psychological test. You've got to hit that test or you're not even qualified.

Dean Wetzel: I don't rem maybe I was a minister, I was a minister, so MEPS was a, we could probably spend a whole other hour explaining MEPS if you can remember your time there. All the stupid stuff that they have us do.

Robert Akins: Oh yeah.

Dean Wetzel: All the testing, jumping, running, standing, squatting, rerunning.

Robert Akins: See we didn't do that. We just had a bunch of tests and that's how I qualified to be a tanker. I was a little bit smarter than infantry. And I found that out after I really got into it. Even though we didn't think we were that good. Really because, Tankers have to know how to run a radio. They have to be smart enough to stop the tank if it needs maintenance. A lot of things. Infantry guy just has a rifle and he's in the field. Period. He doesn't have any of this stuff that, that goes on with tanking. Yep. Yep. We are And in the German Army we are the lead force. It's not airborne, it's the panzers. And the Germans would be, oh, Zie sein sit ein Panzer. Ja Ja. Ein Panzer. Oh, wow. Panzer. Yeah.

Dean Wetzel: So, was a tanker what you wanted as an MO? What did you want as an MOS?

Robert Akins: I didn't know what I wanted. I just, I got what I wanted. I told them, told the. I want to go to Germany. I think I can swing it. I had no clue how many guys were in Germany. He fulfilled his promise. I went to Germany.

Dean Wetzel: Bob Again, I just want to take a moment and just say thank you for all of this information. This is a lot. Your help with this explaining and talking about what tankers did over in Germany in the 1960s and Vietnam and stuff like that has been insightful. The guard, what it's like to be a chaplain assistant. My last question for you is with all your service to vet or active-duty individuals between the guard and being a chaplain's assistant. Looking outward at the civilian population, what do you wish they knew more about us veterans?

Robert Akins: Oh, I think more of the personal anguish that I couldn't come home. Letters took a week to get to us. We didn't know what was going on in America. And the Stars and Stripes newspaper really didn't tell us what was happening back here. It's a lot of Loneliness. That's why a lot of guys are on booze and drugs. It's a lot of loneliness. A lot of hours walking your post, being on guard, stuff like that.

Dean Wetzel: I'm gonna break my rule. Do you feel that the government failed you guys? At least in the terms of Vietnam in particular? On your return?

Robert Akins: No.

Interviewee: Robert Akins
Interviewer: Dean Wetzel
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Dean Wetzel: No?

Robert Akins: No. I have no regrets. I'm glad I went. I'm glad I walked my post and did everything. I really am. Yeah. Yeah.

Dean Wetzel: Thank you, sir. Yes, sir.

Robert Akins: Thank you.