

**EXCERPT: Interview with Bruce E. Spivey, MD**

Interviewed by Jenny Benjamin, June 12, 2008

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Jenny Benjamin: For the record, this is Jenny Benjamin interviewing Dr. Bruce Spivey.

We're going to be discussing mainly your time in Vietnam, but we're going to go back first and talk about your feelings about the Korean conflict. During your high school years, America was involved in the Cold War and Vietnam has its roots there. Did you discuss the Cold War with your family or friends? Were communists much on your mind?

Dr. Bruce Spivey: Not really. The Cold War was something that came up in school, was discussed marginally. But in Cedar Rapids, Iowa it was not a hot topic.

MS. BENJAMIN: You weren't worried that the communists were coming.

DR. SPIVEY: No, I don't think so, and while there was really an issue about the Korean War, and I had a lot of somewhat older high school friends who went to... they were either enlisted or a couple got drafted, and a couple got killed. That was, again, a relatively distant, somewhat fleeting thing on the scene, because we didn't have what we have now, 24-hour news, all the video cameras in the world running in there, and so the Korea Conflict, as it was called, was distant, wasn't quite real, at least to me.

MS. BENJAMIN: And your parents, did they ever speak about the communist threat or a nuclear war?

DR. SPIVEY: They didn't lose any sleep.

MS. BENJAMIN: When did you first become aware of U.S. involvement in Vietnam? Were you in college when the U.S. first got involved?

DR. SPIVEY: Before the U.S. got involved I was through [college], I was in medical school and, or at the end of medical school in residency. That would have been... I started residency in 1960 and finished in the middle of '64, and went right into the army in June or July of 1964.

MS. BENJAMIN: Now you told Sally Hughes that you had joined the army reserves for the money.

DR. SPIVEY: Yes.

MS. BENJAMIN: When did you join?

DR. SPIVEY: I don't know. Somewhere in the early 60's.

MS. BENJAMIN: What was it going to pay for?

DR. SPIVEY: Medical school. Medical school and residency, and also, not without that thought, that it may take away the need for me to go in the army, but I had what was called a Berry Plan, a deferral, and the Berry Plan allowed you to finish your specialty training and then be inducted.

MS. BENJAMIN: And that was a required two-year service?

DR. SPIVEY: Right. And that's what I did, that's what got me.

MS. BENJAMIN: I understand the Berry Plan could have allowed you to stay either in the states or do some sort of other service?

DR. SPIVEY: No. The Berry Plan inducted you into the army, and then what happened to you was up to the army or the navy or the air force.

MS. BENJAMIN: Did the army reserve require anything of you while you were in medical school?

DR. SPIVEY: I went on the weekends and then went to summer camp.

MS. BENJAMIN: Did you get basic training?

DR. SPIVEY: No, I never had basic training. Never ever. And as a physician, and we were in a medical unit, we had... because it was in Iowa City and a lot of doctors... we were the medical backup for a variety of regular Army-type units. And so we would go one weekend a month, two days, Saturday and Sunday, and then two weeks in the summer to some... either Wisconsin, we went to Wyoming, we were all over.

MS. BENJAMIN: Did you talk a lot about your compulsory service in the army?

DR. SPIVEY: Well, everybody was wondering how you could avoid serving your country.

MS. BENJAMIN: Was that because the job seemed unpopular or just because it was an interruption?

DR. SPIVEY: No, I mean, that's just people not wanting to go into the army or navy, whatever. No, I mean, it was people who are constitutionally not very interested in the military structure.

MS. BENJAMIN: My impression is that you were not terribly interested in joining the army per se, that it was a means to an end.

DR. SPIVEY: Yeah, I mean, I had no deep seated animosity to the military, but I had no affinity toward it, either, and so when I did get in, I went right from Iowa City, Iowa, to Fort Polk, Louisiana. I drove myself there, and it was interesting because most people went to Fort Sam, Houston, which was the basic training for physicians. They had some orientation. I got none. And so I just went down to this God awful place in Louisiana that had been used as a basic training in World War II, and the barracks were... and the hospital and everything was World War II, I mean, it was all these low, long barracks and no equipment, no anything.

MS. BENJAMIN: Now at the time that you went to Fort Polk you were married, right?

DR. SPIVEY: I was. And left my family in Iowa City.

MS. BENJAMIN: Your kids were pretty young then.

DR. SPIVEY: Yeah, they were, they were... see, that would have been 1964, so six and four.

MS. BENJAMIN: Wow. So they must have been pretty sad to see you go, and it was understood at that point that they would not be seeing you for two years?

DR. SPIVEY: Oh no, no, no, I'd go back, I went back, I took a leave and went back, but no, that was... when I went to Vietnam that was different. But this was not a big deal. And what got me out of Fort Polk was a letter that I wrote to the person who assigned ophthalmologists, as it was, in the army, and I accused him of dereliction of duty, which I knew would provoke something, I didn't know if it was the brig or a change, but I said that...

MS. BENJAMIN: You were just hoping to get out of Fort Polk.

DR. SPIVEY: Yeah, I said dear, and we laughed that night, just... forget the guy's name right now, but we later laughed about it, but I said, 'dear Sir, you are in dereliction of your duty. I think I'm the best trained ophthalmologist in the United States Army, and I'd be happy to be judged on that basis, but you put me in a place where I can't use any of my skills and I don't think that's right.'

MS. BENJAMIN: Let's talk about Fort Polk. What was there, I mean, other than these long, low buildings?

DR. SPIVEY: No. The hospital was 1941, and it was all the charm of that, and all of the equipment of that. So there was really nothing I could do, and it was a basic training for army.

MS. BENJAMIN: And how many other physicians were there?

DR. SPIVEY: Oh, probably 20.

MS. BENJAMIN: And you were the only eye doctor.

DR. SPIVEY: Right.

MS. BENJAMIN: And I notice you had the rank of captain.

DR. SPIVEY: Right, that's what you got at that time.

MS. BENJAMIN: So all the physicians were captain.

DR. SPIVEY: All the physicians, unless you'd been in longer. Later they began to give people major and so forth, but everybody was captain.

MS. BENJAMIN: And were you older than the other fellows there, because you were about 30, right?

DR. SPIVEY: Yeah, the Berry Plan people were all older, because they'd all had medical school, and then their residency. So it was not unusual.

MS. BENJAMIN: What was your opinion about the soldiers? They must have been a good deal younger than you.

DR. SPIVEY: Oh they're... you know, they were kids, and... 18, 19, and like 18, 19-year-olds, they were just wonderful kids. Yeah, sure, but nice kids.

MS. BENJAMIN: Did you have a sense there at Fort Polk that they were, being trained up to go to war?

DR. SPIVEY: No.

MS. BENJAMIN: It was pretty early on.

DR. SPIVEY: It was very early, I didn't have any sense that they were going... later Fort Polk became much more active because it was, it replicated some of the aspects of Vietnam, and they had a lot more trainees than when I was there. But in February I got orders to go to Fort Dix in New Jersey, which was three steps up, it was a vertical hospital, it had actually nice operating rooms, it was just fine.

MS. BENJAMIN: So you felt that Fort Dix is where you wanted to be?

DR. SPIVEY: Well, it wasn't where I wanted to be, but it was certainly 100 clicks up, and we all moved to New Jersey.

MS. BENJAMIN: So your anticipation, once you got to Fort Dix, was that the remainder of your two-year stint was going to be in New Jersey.

DR. SPIVEY: Exactly, right between New York and Philadelphia in the Cranberry bogs. It was lovely, and... but that didn't last too long. I took my boards in June.

MS. BENJAMIN: I was going to ask you about that, your boards, how did you manage? Were there other ophthalmologists there taking the exam? Where did you go?

DR. SPIVEY: At that point they were having examinations in New York, and so in June a buddy and I went to the Waldorf Astoria and got a room and sweated our way through the exams. We did well, I mean, we were very well trained, and it was no problem, but you always are nervous, because you always wonder about that one question that you just, oops, didn't get, but I did fine.

And then I got the orders to report to Fort Bliss in Texas for deployment to unknown areas in Southeast Asia.

MS. BENJAMIN: And do you remember what year that was?

DR. SPIVEY: That was 1965.

MS. BENJAMIN: Let's stay with Fort Dix for a second. I understand that its Walson Army Hospital there?

DR. SPIVEY: Umm hmm.

MS. BENJAMIN: How many other physicians were around? That was a much bigger operation.

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