

BOBBY DEAN PAYTON
ON
ARMY ACTIVITIES IN ALASKA (1962 -1971)
AND
1964 GOOD FRIDAY EARTHQUAKE
ALCAN

BY
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This is Lorie Phillips. I'm here interviewing Mr. Bobby Dean Payton on April 24, 1995 in Kodiak, Alaska. Mr. Payton is here to visit his daughter, me, um all the way from Fairland, Oklahoma. He used to live in..in Alaska for..um.. a period of about six years, but they were not consecutive years. He did two tours of duty here and I'm going to let him tell you about his experiences.

BP: Well, I'm Bobby D. Payton. I came to Alaska for the first time in 1962, we drove up the Alaskan.. or the .. ALCAN Highway in..uh..uh '61 Plymouth. I had three young daughters and my wife Shirley. And as we arrived into Alaska I was assigned to uh.. Fort Richardson, Alaska to the 23rd Infantry. And my job was a Supply Sgt. Which it primarily what it does is supply the company with everything it needs. To see that they get them on time and where they need to be. And then I was here about a year in 1963 and we had our fourth daughter, who was borned in Anchorage, Alaska and her name was Teri and we loved her very much and about that time we moved on to post at Fort Richardson. And then on come 1964 on Good Friday when the worst thing that had ever happen to me.. or disaster I had ever seen..was when we had the earthquake. I was upstairs...or I was downstairs and I had two daughters upstairs and when it started I thought.. I didn't really know what was happening. And then it dawned on me that hey this was a earthquake. So I went up the stairs and got one daughter under each arm and started down the stairs and I was bouncing from one side of the wall to the rail and as I looked out the window when I came down... the ground looked wavy, just like it does on the sea, it was just rippling, tearing, screnching, and consequently all the telephones were out, the electricity was off, all gas lines had to be turned off. And I had just was getting ready to go that morning to go on a caribou hunt. So I had a three quarter ton that was loaded down with provisions of sleeping bags, tents, stoves... uh some mess equipment cause I was going to be gone for several days. Well I knew immediately that I had to get to my company... that I was probably needed there. And when I arrived at my company I was the first non-commissioned officer to arrive in the company. And so we immediately started clearing the buildings getting everybody out because we didn't know what state we was in the buildings... the buildings were cracked, uh Ft. Richardson wasn't hit quite as hard as the town of Anchorage, but it was hit hard. uh I put up a tent and I put it up originally for just to get the people out of the cold because some of them was running around in shorts, they didn't have proper clothing on and we put tent up and put a generator going and got Herman-Nelson heaters going. But then instead of using it for that then they started using for a hospital. So I'm glad it come to some good use.

I stayed up into Alaska till 1965 at which time I left.. and went to Virginia and then I spent a tour in Vietnam and then

came back and then I had... I spent another tour in Ft. Greeley, Alaska. And I was assigned to the Arctic Test Center. And our mission there I was in Logistics and my job was to support to see that we had the right supplies, at the right time, at the right place. Uh It was just a small unit. We tested everything from beans to parachutes. I think Alaska is a great country, I loved every moment of it. I was wanting to retire in the state of Alaska but, it didn't work out that way. But I'm back here right now I was at Ft. Greeley from '68 to '71. And .. this is my first time to be back to Alaska since that time. Uh.. it's a great country.

LP: Well, Mr. Payton..Dad, why don't you tell me a little bit more about..what you saw in Anchorage when you went in there and..um.. some of the experiences that you encountered or.. you, you had.

BP: What kind or what time?

LP: In 1964, during the earthquake.

BP: Well, the buildings uh the three story building would you look out across and they'd be only one story - they'd drop completely into the ground. The roads - there was no roads in or out. We were isolated.

LP: How were the people reacting in Anchorage I mean were there...or was there alot of confusion um was there looting going on?

BP: No, I can't really say there was a lot of looting because you know one thing-uh, there was guards posted on every block uh trying to keep everything as it was. When I first come to this state uh, you didn't have to lock your doors. If you had trouble somebody was going to stop and assist you - that was just the way the people were. People didn't drive by you and leave you unassisted and that's the way we were doing with Anchorage - I don't think ... I think the people were very calm under the circumstances of what they went through. I know several times after, we had alot of tremors afterwards and, boy, when that thing go to trembling - tremors would come, I mean we would skeedaddle out of that building in a hurry. We got out of that thing pretty mighty fast. But no I can't say..that the people... the people were very calm. And everybody pulled together. But later in my last tour of duty of Alaska, it had changed alot. We started be getting.. getting a lot of hippies up here. They moved in they had no regards for anyone's property or anything else they just used it and didn't replenish it. If we would be out on a trail or hunting trip and an emergency arose we went into a cabin, dried out, got warm, but when we left we either left a note or replenished anything that we took Uh you didn't have to lock doors back in the early

days, but after the late 60's and early 70's you had...if it wadn't nailed down it'd got stolen.

LP: Well, Back to the earthquake how quickly...do you... did you see that uh repairs were being made...was it back to the same old business in a short period of time or you left in 1965..so you had a little bit of time there I think ta maybe to see some of the repairs that was going on and was the Army involved in any of the repairs?

BP: Oh, I don't think the Army was involved in directly into repairs, but I think immediately after the earthquake rebuilding started it's just the way of life if a tragedy happens the quicker you can get to work and you get it done the better off you are you can't dwell on a something that happens in your life bad the quicker that you can get back to work and I think that's the way it was then I think the minute that the last tremor shuddled the people of Alaska started rebuilding.

LP: Backing a little bit in time you mentioned that you came up the ALCAN with..with all of us what were the roads like and did anything interesting happen along the way?

BP: Oh, we had lots of interesting things uh there wasn't much paved roads although we came up in uh the period of time February which really is the better time because the roads are still frozen enough that it's ...it's smooth. But I've went down the Highway at other times and periods like in oh, say June? And when the thaw comes and oh there's chug holes, dust,...when I came up the ALCAN the first time we didn't pass a filling station if it was only 50 miles or a 100 miles when we came to a filling station we stopped and filled up. We had been told what to bring with us, we were prepared for the road. um We didn't have anything drastically happen coming up in 1962, but one time when we were leaving here in 1971, uh, we were going down and we got to Destruction Bay and uh before we got there we ran off the highway, my wife did, and I accused her of going to asleep. I was a dosing over ta the other side, so I got under the wheel and I thought, "Well I'll drive" well I didn't go a half a mile and I run off the road too. But the one time we run off the road we covered our vehicle completely up with snow, it was emersed. We were underneath the snow. I had to crawl out the window and a state truck passed us but didn't see us. And there was a oil truck that came by and I got up on the road and he stopped and he put his cable on and I didn't think he could pull us out, but he did. And it took us about an hour to get all the snow unpacked from underneath the motor and we got back in the car and the first place I come to we spent the night. And where did that happen to be? It happened to be at Destruction Bay. And we had another disaster that night I got up the next morning, we were going to get on our way. I went out to

start my vehicle and it just grunted, the plug in the hitching post didn't work and the temperature had dropped to probably about fifty below zero. So we were almost a day inside a garage with a heater trying to thaw our car out. But once we got it thawed out we really didn't have much more else to happen...you know drastically. But that could have...when we went off the highway that day and covered up...There was a lot of things going through my mind 'Will anybody see us' Thank God there was.

LP: Now your second tour was at Ft. Greeley, Alaska, and you came up in 1968 I want to say um what was your.. what was your job descriptions or what was it you were assigned to do while at Ft. Greeley?

BP: I was a Logistic NCO which S4 which and again is supplying our unit with clothing, materials that it needs to function..... That, that covers a latitude of things...Logistics does.

LP: I, I recall that you had some experience in doing some Arctic training. Can you, can you tell about that?

BP: Oh, everybody ...as a...as a...We were little teams of people. We would be ..um.. normally uh officer and one Senior NCO and then there'd be a group of soldiers that'd be sent TDY (temporary duty assignment) from the lower 48 up here to assist us in these tests and like I said we tested everything from beans to parachutes and ... uh certain amount of it had to be done at a certain percentage, you could test it at any time day or night. Other parts of it...it had to be tested at a certain degree. We'll say five percent of the tests it had to be....forty below zero or maybe one or two percent of the tests it had to be fifty or sixty below. oh, ...uh...When those times come, we were called upon to go it didn't make any difference what time day or night..uh we was called out ta ranges to..to continue this test. And it was all classified. We'd be given our instructions what to do when it was time to do it and then we carried it out. I also had another disaster to follow up on me one time. I was up on the Denali Highway and ...uh I was with two colonels and myself and we were just really out snowmobiling. We didn't...we...uh.. didn't even have a rifle with us. We just up there just havin a good timeand ... the weather changed on us and it...it went from probably when we was up there ..it was probably... ten below (clears throat) and the weather warmed up to probably thirty-five degrees. Well when that happens water goes to running on top the ice and we were going ...and we was planning going down this river and when the water started running on the river we couldn't run on the river because it was too soft. So we had to find another trail...and ...uh...the trail was so bad that we finally ran out of fuel. I had an extra gallon of gasoline and one other

snowmobile had an extra gallon of gasoline But the one colonel that was just new up there he just had what fuel was in his tank. Well, he was the first one to run out of fuel. So I gave him my snowmobile and we left his and we rode double till my snowmobile run out it was a larger one. And we fin....we rode...we rode and walked and when the last snowmobile went out we left them... tried leaving them on top of a hill andlast we was in there about three days and I finally had to walk out to get help. Cause I seen we wasn't going to get out. So I walked out and got another vehicle and went back in to rescue the other two people. uh.. it was Colonel Rhodes, who is later in life went up to the University of Alaska and was a professor up there. I used to talk to him on Christmas, but I've lost contact with him...so what I think has happened is...he's probably retired...I hope not..I hope the later not is he's passed on. But he was a great person a great commander and I respected him very highly.

LP: Where were the two colonels when you walked out?
I mean...how did you ..I mean..what did you have to do for survival in that kind of weather conditions?

BP: While in my snowmobile I had emergency rations and naturally we had matches I left them pretty well dug in and I..I had emergency ..uh..I had a sleeping bag in my snowmobile though we didn't leave them in the snowmobile we carried with them They stayed in in sleeping bags and we got up enough wood and built a fire and I walked out.

LP: Sounds cold....um...I..I recall back when I was very young that you..you did a lot of camping up on like Mt. McKinley? or something like that. And I recall some-thing happened on one of your expeditions up there..um I don't recall all the details about it so maybe would you talk about something pretty drastic I think happened..um The weather changed or something and you all got stranded up there. Couldj'a tell about that?

BP: Well, it's just a thing you don't panic. When we run into a blizzard, so the only thing to do was to dig in and dig into the snow. And if possible two people get into one sleeping bag to create as much heat as possible. And then try to wait the storm out...uh, this is when you're..like...the..I was assigned to a infantry company and this was our..uh..yearly..uh.. training. We'd go up on the glaciers, climb the glaciers. I really never thought I was in any danger, you know, I look back now and see- hey, I could have frozen easily. But when you have your confidence in yourself - don't panic. You can survive.

LP: Did you get frost bite?

BP: No I was dressed properly. Um...You want to keep moving and have the right clothing - Don't never go unprepared, even though you think you're just going to be gone five minutes - you don't get separated from your rut sack. And what's in that rut sack? Is your survival gear - and when I say survival gear that depends on the training you're going into. uh.. If you're well equipped you can survive harsh weather.

LP: Well, I must be thinking of another trip that you went on - you went on another trip - maybe this was during your first tour that you were going across a glacier or something - You had to do some glacier training. Would you tell us about that experience and what occurred?

BP: Every year every infantry company that was our sole mission up here in the 23rd Infantry Battle Group - Was we were to detain the enemy in case Russia decided to cross. So for us to be prepared each year we had to train to climb the glaciers. And that generally where the battle would be fought. And....this...one week it was our..it was our time to go for the glacier claining.. and our..uh.. civilian advisor advised the CO that the weather was changing and he didn't recommend us making the crossing. Well this crossing wasn't probably over a quarter a mile at the most half a mile. But as it turned out we had over a hundred mile hour winds..and..and temperatures of forty below zero.. and with hundred mile hour wind that makes it almost unbelievable to cross - it'll suck the body heat right out of your body. Any little ole crack. And...He wanted ta ..our commander says..We're gonna try...if...if he could get across this opening to the next one the winds might not even be there, you know, so forty below zero ain't to bad. But with hundred mile hour wind - you can't survive. We pushed on and consequently... we had two casualties - which didn't have to happen. But finally the word was given to dig in and when we dug in and got out of the winds and got into sleeping bags the rest of the company survived. But there was a lot of frost bit and I myself did not receive very many fro..I was close ta been frost bit but it wasn't serious enough. But many of the men in the company did get frost bits and we had two casualties that had died.

LP: Well thank you for sharing with me and with any other people that are interested in history. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

BP: Oh,..I would have liked to have come back to retire but it didn't happen. I love the state of Alaska..and ...again I'm gettin up in years of ages now...it'd...What I, what I like about the state, I loved to hunt, I loved ta fish and I loved the people. And when all that environments together - I could have lived on a mountain or a valley for the rest of my life. And if I was younger then I would say for all

young people -- it's a beautiful state. But to preserve it we have to respect it..we cannot use our resources if we don't replenish 'em. Don't ravish it. It'll be there for the next generation and the generations after if we will take it and preserve it ..it will be here for others to enjoy.

LP: Thanks Dad, Well that concludes this interview about Mister Bobby Payton's experiences in Alaska from in the 60's and...early 60's and later 60's and - early 70's. Thank you.

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