

Interview with LTC Frank Fiala

March 14, 1995?

Northern Michigan University?

Interviewer (INT): Well, I'm doing a study, a history of the Military Science Department, which is part of a bunch of projects from Dr. Magnaghi's history department, everybody's doing, all the different departments and everything for the hundred year, you know, celebration coming up here in a few years, and of course this is our term paper, too.

Frank Fiala (FF): Sure. Are you a history major?

INT: Yes.

FF: So am I.

INT: Oh, really?

FF: Both my bachelor's and master's are in history.

INT: Oh, great. Ok, so, I guess you know what I'm faced with here, I met the secretary there and she showed me some scrapbooks, I said wow that's just what I'm looking for, because I've been over to the archives and, you know, I can find all the school bulletins starting back '69 '71 and, you know, right on up to the present, so, you know, I can get the structure of what the classes were and that sort of stuff, you know, out of the school bulletins, but I'm looking for, you know, some interesting things that, you know, you might be able to tell me or places to turn me on within the department such as those scrapbooks.

FF: Ok. Well, first of all, the program, it was an interesting time that the program came about when it did because it started in 1969, middle of the Vietnam War, which was a time that most campuses were looking at kicking ROTC off, this campus was for an ROTC on, which I think was interesting in itself. Commissioned our first lieutenants, first lieutenants ever to be commissioned here were on June 6th, 1971. And since that time we've commissioned 278 lieutenants. They have served in all of the army's major operations and deployments since Vietnam, so they've been through Panama during Operation Just Cause, to Grenada, to Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, to Somalia and to Haiti. So, you know, they've already, you know, performed a great deal of service to their, to the country with the commissionings that we have had. There are several people who, I've only been here for three years, this is my third year, but there are several people around campus –

INT: How long is the tour?

FF: It's three years.

INT: Three years, ok.

FF: We have a list of the former professors of military science and we can give those to you so you know who they were if you want that information –

INT: Ok, great.

FF: And four of them live in the immediate area here, so if you really wanted to go back and find particular information about what it was like in the '74 through, you know, through 80- something or other –

INT: Oh, great.

FF: They live here, and we can give you their names and they're in the phone book, you can look them up and they might be very willing to discuss it with you. Another person you might look at talking to is Dr. Robert Glenn in the English Department, who's just right upstairs. In fact, he is our guest speaker this Saturday, this Saturday is our 25th Annual Military Ball. And Dr. Robert Glenn is our guest speaker because he was the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences from 1971 to 1974, and after that he was a provost here at the university and Vice President for Academic Affairs, I believe, until 1984. So he was in a real key position here on campus and knows more about the early years than probably most people around –

INT: Sure, because you guys fell under Arts and Sciences.

FF: Right, right, we're in the College of Arts and Sciences. We have, this particular department has been rather flexible in its location, they started out at the armory down here at the, where the P_____ Maintenance Company is right here on the corner of Wright Street and whatever –

INT: Lincoln.

FF: Lincoln, right. And they went from there to the University Center and there were at least two locations in the University Center, one on the bottom floor and then ultimately the top floor. And that's where they were when I got here, and so I've only been here three years but this is my third location.

INT: I know, you guys have moved just recently –

FF: We just came from the Learning Resources Center here in the summer. As far as the, if you want to discuss the purpose of ROTC and what it does or any of that, or you want to get more into what have we done here at Northern –

INT: Yeah, I think, yeah, yeah.

FF: There's been some, we have a relatively small program as programs go –

INT: You mentioned numbers, uh, 271 –

FF: 78, 278 that we've commissioned so far.

INT: 278, how does that compare in numbers with other colleges our size?

FF: Well, first of all, there aren't that many other colleges out there – well, there aren't in Michigan, there aren't any other colleges our size that have ROTC, they all have at least three times our undergraduate population, or two and a half, three times, and those programs have also been around longer than we have, so we're small, and so we have commissioned fewer officers than they have, but on the other hand, one of the things that's impressed me the most about this place is the quality of the people we're commissioning. Traditionally our students, our cadets, are non-scholarship cadets who are working their way through college, maybe a little older than the average age of a student here on campus, and many of them, most of them have asked for active duty versus serving in the reserve or whatever, so just the caliber of folks that we have, I think, more mature, working, self-supporting, self-starters, it's pretty impressive. The, as far as the members are concerned I can't really tell you how that compares with like Michigan Tech, Michigan Tech's had ROTC on campus since like 1934 or something, so, you know, they've obviously had a long and storied tradition, but in recent years we have certainly commissioned more than has Michigan Tech. The program itself has, it is, because we have non-scholarship students our approach is a little different for our freshman and sophomore classes. We're more the fun and adventurer type, outdoor, wilderness survival, winter survival-type classes, so we do, for freshman classes we do a lot of rappelling and river crossings and shelter building, map reading, land navigation, marksmanship training, these kind of things. And for a small program as I was mentioning before, we have received several real interesting awards. Two years ago we received award for the best small battalion in region, now, the way ROTC is set up we all fall under an organization called Cadet Command, which is in Fort Monroe, Virginia, that's the overall headquarters, and then there are three different regions, geographical regions in the United States, we happen to fall in second region, which is a 12 state area that basically goes from Lake Superior to the Gulf of Mexico, and of these colleges we were the best small college in this 12 state area two years ago, and that's based on the performance of our cadets, it's on the performance of our c_____, meeting s_____ and deadlines with virtually no, virtually error-free paperwork _____, that's pretty impressive. One of our extracurricular activities is ranger challenge, and initially the rangers were a group of young cadets who wanted to learn more about small unit tactics, and so to challenge themselves, it was like our varsity sport, to challenge themselves they would compete against other universities, teams from other universities, in what was, back then, called the Rogers Cup, named after Robert Rogers, who founded the American Rangers during the French-Indian War, and so NMU's team won it like three out of the last five years they had this cup, and it was so impressive that Cadet Command decided to use that as a basis and do this nationwide. So now every region has champions and most recently for us, our most recent success, really, was in 1991, we won our brigade competition and then we won best small school, or best small university, at region level. Which is pretty impressive because we're going up against the – and we're third place overall – we were going up against the Notre Dames, universities in Kentucky, Tennessee, you know, we're talking SEC schools and Big Ten schools, I mean, we beat Michigan State, U of M –

INT: Wow, that's impressive!

FF: You know, Marquette beat all of those, and that's, that's pretty impressive. So, you know, the competition is where the caliber of our cadets has always been high, but those were a couple

of awards that have been won recently that are pretty, that I think are pretty phenomenal. We, as far as the history is concerned, I believe we've probably only had maybe eight professors of military science in the 25 years we've been here, and like I said, we can give you the names of them and the chronologies, so that'll save us from me repeating it to you, I'll give you the names of the _____, I don't know what else to really tell you, what kind of stories you're after.

INT: Well, I've got access to those scrapbooks, and that has a, you know, world of information, I got to look at the first couple of pages, it's like wow, you know, everything's right here, so that's the sort of thing I was looking for.

FF: We've had, I suppose, you'll find it anyway when you look at the scrapbook, there was one period of time here when, a low point for ROTC on campus was the time during a leadership lab, I believe it was leadership lab, we have the articles there, where a sergeant major that was assigned here bit the head off of a live chicken in front of class.

INT: Oh, geez.

FF: Not a very practical thing to do, not very smart at all, and so there was a lot of negative publicity on that, and there are articles in the scrapbooks about that because a human cry was raised as to, you know, "is this what we want on campus?" And of course the answer would be no, this is an exception to the rule and the sergeant major was asked to leave campus and he did, but, you know, that was sort of our low point as far as an incident that occurred on campus, basically, though, with that one exception, from what I can tell, it's been a very, very successful program, done a lot for the university, trying to do more and more for the community is one of my pet peeves is to try to branch out and do more for support, so a lot of the kinds of things that we do here, this weekend, this past weekend for example, we taught about 40 middle school students who are from, uh, whose parents work at Tilden Mine, we talked on winter survival techniques and skills, building snow caves and shelters and cross-country snowshoeing and _____, we just did that for them at, you know, no charge to them. We do a lot of similar kinds of things for non-profit making organizations, you know, if they need some volunteers for security or they need some volunteer help, when they had the luge races this winter in Negaunee we had cadets there assisting crowd control and we just do a lot of those kind of activities. One of the things instituted since coming here was home football games, we now rappel in in the dome, rappel down with the football, with the game ball –

INT: I think I saw you during Dome Mania somebody was coming down, yeah, my kids like that.

FF: So, I mean, we do some of those kind of activities just to support the community, the university, and whatever, the color guards for the home football games, whatever is necessary is what we're also trying to do here.

INT: How is the success rate for people that come in new to ROTC program, how many of them actually complete, you know, or just roughly, you know –

FF: Well, it's hard to say because our freshman class, like I said, is geared toward just the fun stuff, there's very little military about it, it's learn basic survival skills and build your self-confidence, so it's open to everybody, and a lot of the people don't have any real desires to go on and we understand that.

INT: So they're not obligated at that point?

FF: No, no.

INT: Ok.

FF: So the people that are obligated, of those people we're probably at 95% of those people will receive a commission, so it's very high. I think ROTC's got a lot to offer for campus because since you can't get a major in ROTC, you know, we don't care what your major is and we want people with a broad background anyway in the, uh, for a background of majors and all, um, that, you know, we're sort of keeping the person in school, so we're sort of, I think that sometimes we're honest brokers when it comes to advising students on what's best for them as far switching a major or trying another slant at something to stay in school, we obviously offer financial incentives, because those students that are contracted with us, are obligated to us, we give them money and a promise of a commission if they finish their coursework. We do demand quite a bit of our students that are in the program, but the emphasis for them is on leadership training, and we do, I think, a very commendable job of taking young men and women and teaching them basic leadership skills and then evaluating them at the same time, and we have, not we here at the university, but Cadet Command has developed some very, very good evaluation procedures so that we can describe to them where their weaknesses are, where their strengths are, and make them better young men and women, which even if they decide not to get a commission in the army, still makes them better, more fruitful citizens, which I think is certainly worthwhile.

INT: In these drawdown times, you know, since the crumbling of the Soviet Union and shrinking of the military and the whole governmental complex, it seems like, how's ROTC, you know, are your numbers up?

FF: Our numbers are going up, last couple years have gone up, and I think it's because, yeah, we're talking about a drawdown of the military, but right now this is a more dangerous place to live in than ever.

INT: True.

FF: I was in the army, been in the army 23 years by the time I retired, but never had to go to war, because the enemy that I was always facing was the Soviet Union, but, you know, student, uh, the people that have been in the army the last 10 years have deployed to Panama and Grenada, Desert Storm, Somalia, and Haiti, already, I mean, five different places at least where even if the enemy that they're facing is not a formidable forward self (??) like the Soviet Union was, you're not facing armored columns and divisions or guards motorized rifle divisions or whatnot, but you're just as likely to get killed, because there's fewer of us to defend one another, and the likelihood of our deployments have grown immensely as we now become the major peacekeeper

of the world, there's even more of a need to have good, qualified men and women in charge of these people, because quite honestly, I think it's a more dangerous place now.

INT: I do too.

FF: At least the Soviet Union and us, we were at a standoff, and it looked like, you know, neither one was going to pull the trigger, um, couldn't be sure, certain of that, but that's pretty much what we felt was going to happen. Well nowadays anybody, you know, any terrorist organization, anyone that's got the dollars, can buy _____ weapons, can buy missiles, service to service missiles, can purchase the technology, and can cause a great deal of problems, so anyone that still wants to come in the army can still make it a career, I believe, despite the fact we're drawing down.

INT: But are your numbers of enrollment up _____?

[Both talking at once, inaudible]

FF: Yes, yes, ours are.

INT: Is it due to outside economics, I mean, you know, is it the type of program or -?

FF: It's hard to pin that down. We went through a period the last couple of years of very, very low enrollment because I didn't have enough officers assigned here to actually work with the number of students _____, so we were down anyway, now we're coming back up to where we were about three years ago, and we won't know till next year if that was a fluke or we're on a, definitely on an upward trend, but the reason my numbers were down here had nothing to do with economics, had everything to do with manpower, I was not manned to, you know, in order to have the normal numbers that we were used to. But we don't know what's going happen, in today's job market I'm the only one here on campus who can guarantee somebody a job.

INT: Yeah. That's a fact.

FF: And whether or not they decide to go on active duty or reserves or whatever is up to them, but it's a job. And, you know, that's sad but it's true, you know, if I were a history major coming through today I don't know where I would be looking, uh, because there's a lot of us history majors out there, and I thoroughly enjoy history and everything else but their job market is certainly a difficult one. What else can I...?

INT: I don't know, I, I think we've got it covered, so other sources within the department, you say hit the scrapbooks.

FF: I can show you the scrapbooks, uh, I'll give you a list of prior professors of military science.

INT: Ok.

FF: And the years they were here, in fact there's a three-ring binder back there with that information in it, now all of this is going to be loaded up on Friday, taken to our military ball,

and then it'll be brought back, so we'll be, so it's, I can't really let you take anything out of here for a few days.

INT: Yeah

FF: But you, after that you're certainly welcome to borrow things, I don't have a problem with that at all.

INT: Ok.

FF: In fact it's, I've got three history majors that are responsible for setting this up at the military ball, so, it's part of this 25th anniversary, wanted to give a chance to have some old photos and newspaper clippings and folders and whatnot but other people have been instrumental in...

INT: Ok. Things sound great.

FF: Good.

INT: Thanks a lot, colonel, appreciate it.

FF: My pleasure. Let me escort you back here –

INT: I'm retired Navy myself.

FF: Uh-huh. Well-

[END OF TAPE]