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Arkansas State Police Project

Interview with

G. B. Harp
Harrison, Arkansas
7 June 2004

Interviewer: Michael Lindsey

Michael Lindsey: Where were you born and raised?

G. B. Harp: I was born and raised in Harrison, Arkansas. I went to work for the Arkansas State Police as a radio operator in 1969 here at this headquarters. There was a break in service from 1972 to 1976 where I did a little of everything else. Then I came back as a radio operator in 1976 and got commissioned as a trooper in 1980. I was in the highway patrol in Marion County for nine years and I was in highway patrol in Madison County for six years. Then I got promoted to sergeant at Fort Smith. I made lieutenant in Fort Smith and stayed there until 1999 when I was promoted to captain up here [at Harrison, Troop I]. I have been here ever since.

ML: What was your motivation to join the state police as a radio operator?

GBH: I knew some of the troopers here. I just always admired them. I liked what they did [and] their professional attitude [and] the way they dressed.

ML: Is there anybody in particular that sticks out?

GBH: Hansel Bradford really sticks out. Ken McFerran was here then, too. I saw those guys and got stopped by them a few times. They were always professional, polite, and [they] took care of business. That got me interested, and the rest is history.

ML: When you were commissioned as a trooper in 1980, did they send you to a troop school immediately?

GBH: Yes. There were periods of time when the state police hired officers and waited until later to send them to troop schools. Mine was one that went directly to troop school. It was twelve weeks long.

ML: When you think back to your troop school, was there anything particularly memorable?

GBH: It is an experience, and it still is. The intensity level [is very high and] the drill instructors make you question if you really want to be there. The people who stick it out usually are long-term employees. I would equate it to a military basic training, and parts of it are a little tougher. They put a lot of mental pressure on you. It was an intense twelve weeks, and now it is an intense twenty-four weeks. I am sure glad I don't have to go through that [again].

ML: When did you finish troop school?

GBH: I finished on September 19, 1980—the day the missile silos blew up at Damascus. [Editor's note: At a Titan II silo in Damascus on September 19, 1980, a nuclear warhead blew out of its silo when leaking rocket fuel ignited.]

ML: Did you go up there to work on that?

GBH: Not on that. It was pretty well taken care of, and we were in the process of gra-

duating.

ML: Your first posting was in Marion County. As a young trooper, what would be your typical day?

GBH: It was just going out and working the highway. That was during a period when the Covenant, Sword and Arm of the Lord [CSA] was active. [Editor's note: The CSA was a radical organization formed in 1971 in the small community of Elijah in northern Arkansas.] You look back and think that it was a dangerous time, but you were so used to seeing those people that you didn't think anything about it. What we found out later made us nervous; we realized how dangerous they were. Day to day you would just go out and work the highway and work accidents. It wasn't a really exciting life [laughs].

ML: Talk about the CSA deal. That was one of the big events that the state police had to deal with. Also, leading up to that was when a Missouri Highway Patrol officer was killed. What are your memories about that whole chain of events and how it started? What was your role in that event?

GBH: Yes. It was Trooper Jimmie Linegar. I remember that we knew it was coming to a head for a long time. The Covenant, Sword and Arm of the Lord had hooked up with the Aryan Nations and there were some armed robberies on armored cars and illegal weapons manufactured. We knew it was coming to a head. Bill Carver and I were assigned to Marion County. That day we were sitting in Municipal Court—which is now called District Court—and we got a phone call from dispatch. They told both of us to head toward the Missouri state line because a trooper had been shot and killed near the line. We thought it was one of our guys.

You remember when things happen and where you were [when they happened]. We were sitting there in Municipal Court and the next minute we were flying up toward the state line. It seems like we spent two days up there before they finally located David Tate up around Forsythe. We were actually assigned to that area up there on that manhunt and when it broke up, they realized it was time and they laid siege on the CSA. Luckily, we got a day or so of rest before we headed up for that. I forgot how long we were up there, but it was long shifts. Since we were familiar with the area, we were assigned outer perimeter roadblocks and dealt with the local people since we knew them better. It seems like the siege lasted three or four days. At that time, the federal government told us that was the largest joint operation we had ever been on.

ML: Captain Carver talked about having to sleep on a picnic table because they couldn't go home. Do you have any memories that stick out about this event?

GBH: I remember a couple of things that happened. We were assigned to cover a road. We had heard that the Aryan Nations were going to try to slip some weapons in to the CSA. There were about ten cars parked on that road. About 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning, a headlight swept in there and came down to where we were. We all turned our headlights on. It was pouring down rain and it was muddy. [This is an example of] the miscommunications that you have when there are that many agencies working together. We had these people get down in the mud—which wasn't a real good thing to do—and they turned out to be FBI agents. There were things that we wore that told us who was who, and they didn't have those on, so it was partly their fault. Bill was talking about the sleeping. We were worn to a

frazzle. We had our [bullet proof] vests on and we never wore them until we got up there. It had a big metal plate that slid in the front of our vests. We put those in because we heard they [CSA] had some pretty high-powered rifles. I remember we were sitting up there on this dirt road. I forgot how long we had been there. It felt like days, but I am sure it was less than a day. I was sitting there and the next thing I remember was another trooper asking me if I could hear the radio. It dawned on me that I had fallen asleep sitting up. The metal plate in my vest was so stiff that you could not fall over. You have trouble remembering everything that happened because so much was going on.

ML: Was that the first time you were issued bulletproof vests?

GBH: No. We had the vests shortly after Louis Bryant was killed. He was killed in 1984, and that took place in 1985. We got the vests because of Louis Bryant's killing. [Editor's note: Trooper Louis P. Bryant was shot and killed by CSA member Richard W. Snell during a traffic stop in 1984. Snell was sentenced to life in prison, but was executed in 1995 for another murder he committed.]

ML: You didn't wear them all of the time?

GBH: No. The troopers today wear them all of the time, which they should do. Our generation grew up without them. Our biggest obstacle on a Friday or Saturday was fighting a drunk. Fighting a drunk with one of those vets on—as heavy as they were back then. They aren't that way now, [but back then] you felt like a turtle. You would fall on your back and [you] couldn't get up. We didn't wear them a lot. Luckily, they have improved the vests to where they are a lot more comfortable and they can wear them.

ML: Marion County and Madison County seem like the same kind of county with the same type of people. Did you notice a difference?

GBH: I was a little busier in Madison County because of the “Pig Trail” [reference to the scenic byway that passes through the Ozark National Forest]. We worked a lot of crashes on kids were running back and forth to the University [of Arkansas]. I was there when they opened up the new I-540 and it looked like a desert there [on the Pig Trail]. There used to be constant traffic. The people were similar. We were there [in Madison County] during the Ralph Baker era, and that was always an experience. It was a shock to my system when I went to Fort Smith. I had never been in that large of a town. That took some adjustment. Just getting used to the traffic and the [Arkansas] River Bridge. I never knew bridges moved up and down when you are standing on them. The first time I was working a crash up on the River Bridge, a semi came by and I thought the whole bridge was coming down and we were going into the water [laughs].

ML: Who was the captain at that time?

GBH: When I first went down, it was Tom Henson. Dale Best was after that.

ML: A lot of people talk about troopers taking on a different role in the community in rural areas than in Little Rock or Fort Smith. Can you talk about your perception of the trooper’s role in Madison and Marion Counties?

GBH: In the small counties, you are probably one of the better-known and respected people in the county. In a larger county you lose touch with the people. They don’t know you and you don’t know them. In Marion and Madison Counties, everybody knows you. People would call my house when it snowed wanting to

know road conditions. In the larger areas you can go out and work traffic and write tickets all day long and you will never see those people again. In a rural county you will see those people again and again. You have to be able to work with those people more. You get a better feel for the respect people have for the state police. You are there [for the long term]. Sheriffs may change from election to election, but unless the department—or he [the trooper]—decides to move, you can stay there forever. You were more involved in the community, and I actually enjoyed them [rural counties] and thought they were easier to work.

ML: In the 1950s and 1960s, troopers who worked in rural areas typically had someone they knew who would come to town and cause trouble on the weekends. Did you see that stuff continue in the 1980s, or has the state progressed?

GBH: I think the state has progressed. There will always be certain individuals in every county—in fact, I was over at the Marion County jail and looked at the jail board and the names have not changed. It just goes from generation to generation. There were always people that you knew you would have trouble with, but in Brad's era [retired Lieutenant Hansel Bradford] there were more people who came to town on the weekends. By the time I came along, people weren't really doing that so much. Even in dry counties, you still had your Elks Lodge or VFW [veterans of foreign wars post] and people would do that rather than go down on the square. I think that part of it changed.

ML: You mentioned Ralph Baker. What was your relationship with the sheriffs?

GBH: I have always had a good relationship with the sheriffs. The thing that you get into is realizing that they are running for office. There are simply things that can

cause them problems in a county that won't cause us problems because we aren't running for office. We are pretty well there, and [we] don't have to worry about our jobs. I never had any serious problems with sheriffs.

ML: One of the things Captain Carver talked about was how closely the state police in this area worked with the Missouri Highway Patrol. He thought maybe that closeness has changed. Do you still work that closely together?

GBH: I don't think the troopers work as closely together. In Marion and in Baxter County, we knew the troopers over the line and we would meet them. I don't think that young guys do that so much anymore. On the other hand, I am really good friends with the Missouri Highway Patrol commander. We meet and have lunch. We still have that ability to communicate. Communications have gotten so high-tech. When I first started working on radios, they were the old tube type. Every time a thunderstorm came up, they went down or you wanted to get as far away as possible. You could turn the lights off at night and watch the sparks fly. We had to rely more on each other. We had to talk to each other more. Communications are a lot clearer than they used to be, but they have cut out a lot of the interpersonal relationships. I don't think they young troopers get together anymore. On the admin [administrative] side, I think it is better.

ML: Do you think that also means that troopers within this troop aren't' as close as they used to be?

GBH: I don't think they are. We have gotten so diversified. It used to be that all a trooper did was work the county he was in. Now we have SWAT [Special Weapons and Tactics] teams, honor guards, and all of these other assignments. I remember

thinking, “This is my county,” and I got offended if someone messed in my area. You would be aggravated if another trooper had to come over and work something in your area. The younger troopers aren’t that way. They are saying they want to do all of these things. Back in mine and Carver’s day, we were just happy to be in a county. Because of that, you were almost like brothers. If you weren’t working, he was. You managed your days off [and] you managed your vacation not only around *your* family, but also around *his* family. If he came to you and said that his son was graduating, then immediately you would tell him to take those days off and you would work the assignment. I think we have lost some of that. Of course, we are a lot bigger department.

ML: Are there any other memorable events that come to mind when you think back over your career? Maybe a traffic stop or an accident?

GBH: I made a memorable traffic stop one time at Huntsville. It was a speeding car [and] no big deal. It had Missouri plates, and he was only running about twelve or fifteen [miles] over the speed limit. He didn’t have a driver’s license. He was sitting in the front seat with me and we were talking for a few minutes. He turned and looked at me and said, “You aren’t going to let me go until you know who I am, are you?” I told him I wasn’t going to let him go until I found a driver’s license or who he was. He said, “I am an escapee out of California and am wanted for murder.” He had just stolen a car in Springfield. You walk into those things, and by the grace of God you walk out of them. There have been traffic stops like that and you think that you are just lucky. The CSA was probably one of the biggest things in my time period. I was just going through troop school when they

had the Cuban uprising. I have enjoyed all of the years that I have done this. I have had a great career and enjoyed all the people that I have been around, like Hansel Bradford, Bill Carver, [and] Les Brauns, [who] was my mate in Madison County. I remember one traffic stop—and I don't know how risqué you want to get on this, but I stopped a young lady for speeding on the Pig Trail. When I walked up to the door, she had on a blouse and underwear and nothing else. She kind of pulled a pillow over herself when I got up there. Without missing a beat, I told her what I had stopped her for and asked her for her driver's license. I was thinking the whole time, "What has she done wrong? She is not really violating the law." I went back to the car and was writing out the speeding citation and thought, "She is not really in public. If I hadn't stopped her, I wouldn't have seen her that way." I went back to the car and had her sign the citation and said, "Ma'am, it's not really any of my business, but I am curious why you don't have any clothes on." There was a bag hanging behind her. She said, "I have got a job interview in Fayetteville, and I didn't want to wrinkle my dress." I thought that in a weird way that made sense, and she did have a garment bag behind her, so I let her go on down the highway. The lowest points I have ever had were death notifications. I have always hated them and never got used to them. I thought the chaplain program was one of the best things we ever did. Not only are you prepared to make them, but you simply don't have the time that you need to devote to them. I had an accident on the other side of Huntsville that killed three fine young men. I knew them. They all played football for Huntsville and were good kids. I had to make three death notifications that night. I remember the first one I

went to was out in the country. I always tried to get a hold of someone that knew them, but these were private people and didn't really have a lot of friends. So I went to there house and they were so emotionally overcome I was concerned about leaving them, but I still had two more to go. I think that if you ask any trooper, the thing they hated most was the death notifications. With the chaplain program, we can at least take someone with us and leave him there. Overall though, I have enjoyed every minute of [being in the state police].

ML: You have talked a little about some people that have stuck out over your career. Is there anyone else that is memorable? Do you have a story that highlights why they were memorable?

GBH: Brad [Hansel Bradford], just because of his presence. Around here, the term you hear about him is that "a straighter arrow was never shot." Bill Carver and I grew up here on the same city block. We are great friends. While Brad was always the straight and narrow guy, Bill was the one that was on the borderline. You were thinking, "We will get in trouble for this one." Other people? Les Brauns is a good friend. We worked Madison County together. He is what I picture Hansel Bradford looking like when he was young. He is really a straightforward guy and as honest as the day is long. I will leave someone out that I hate to forget. Ron Lemons, the captain at Fort Smith, was my mentor when I first went to Fort Smith. He saw a guy that came in there without much [big city] traffic and gave me some good advice. When you first join the department, you look at the older guys and think, "Holy cow." They may have not [found] the Holy Grail, but they got close. You asked me earlier why I joined the department, and it is [because

of] people like that. So many people we get in [the department] now are looking for something to put on their résumé. To be honest, even ten or fifteen years ago, you didn't see that. When they went to work for our department, it was for life. When I was a senior in high school, somebody asked me in my annual [yearbook] what I was going to do for the rest of my life, and I told them I was going to work for the state police. There were times early on in my career when I asked myself if I really wanted to do this for the rest of my life. I look back now after thirty-one years, and I have loved every minute of it. I hope—and you lose touch being behind a desk, which [is where] I have been for seven years now, that the young troopers get a sense of the tradition. That tradition is what keeps our department going. We have fallen on some hard times. With our benefit reductions—in fact, I am on the retirement board and we are going to have to reduce benefits at our next meeting. It all takes a toll after a while. Thirty-one years ago, I made a commitment to the state of Arkansas. I promised I would do the best I could and go where I was needed and now they aren't following through with their end of the deal. I am a big pusher of the history of the state police. As you probably know, the first trooper that was killed—Sidney Pavatt—was killed up here. There is a building down in Little Rock that houses inmates. There is a cornerstone that identifies it as the Sidney Pavatt building. I have gotten them to agree that the building needs to be bulldozed. I am going to get that cornerstone and bring it up here and put it in front of the building. This should be the Sidney Pavatt Building. What you will find from the people stationed in the urban counties is that the people in the rural areas are the legends because they went through so much. In

most cases, they were *the* police. I would guess that more officers in rural counties were injured in the line of duty. I know at one time that this part of Arkansas was where most of our troopers got shot. These guys knew they were an hour or more from backup.

ML: Do you think that it is a different job today than it was in 1980?

GBH: Our responsibility hasn't changed. Our responsibility is that twenty-five feet of roadway. We have gotten more diversified and therefore more is expected out of the troopers. They have to be on the SWAT teams and honor guards. When I went to work, you didn't go on special assignments, except for maybe the horse races. Unless there was a tornado or a disaster, you were in that county every day unless you were on vacation. That portion of it has changed.

ML: Some of the changes that seem clear are ones in technology and equipment, cars, and weapons. Is there anything that sticks out as important?

GBH: I know we all badmouth this radio system we have when it isn't working, but I remember the old radios. We are getting ready to put computers in the cars so they can run license checks and write their accident reports right there in the car. It is light years ahead of what we had. The weapons? I am one of those guys who think the old wheel gun, the revolver, was the best gun we ever had. But sometimes we have to have a lot more firepower because we go up against some people that are well-equipped. The cars are basically the same. The uniform is like it was. So I don't think we have changed that much. On the electronic side, there have been a lot of upgrades, but it is still the same job.

ML: How would you describe your interaction with the CID [Criminal Investigations

Division]? A lot of people talk about how CID is one group and they do their own thing.

GBH: The image of the Arkansas State Police is the uniformed trooper driving a white car with blue stripes. It is not the criminal investigator. There are two separate agencies. As much as we like to think we are one entity, we are not. The highway patrol is one and criminal investigation is another. The mindset for each group is different.

ML: One question that comes to mind is that before, the state police had a highway patrol commander and a CID commander. Now they have a single person heading up enforcement. Do you remember when and why they did that?

GBH: Well, it happened under [former Director Don] Melton's administration, and [the reason was] just budget cutbacks. He had worked in departments where that worked. It doesn't work for us. I told him at the time it wouldn't. We are just two separate entities and need to be dealt with differently. It was done for budget cuts, but it was a bad idea. It destroyed our chain of command. The highway patrol is organized on a paramilitary basis, and that is the only way it works well. Information has to go up the chain of command. We got a break in our chain when they did that.

ML: Do you think that past directors without state police experience don't understand these issues?

GBH: Yes. Half of the image and half of the respect that our troopers get is created by a knowledge of the history of this department. To effectively run this department and understand how it works, you have to know that history. We are not that

large of a department, but we do a big job. There are a lot of miles of highway.

[The director] needs to be somebody with a sense of the history.

ML: Is there a director who sticks out in your mind as being particularly effective?

GBH: Tommy Goodwin. He was one of those directors who was never fully-appreciated. People thought we were sitting still, but we got what we needed to get the job done and there weren't any layoffs. Of course, there aren't any layoffs now. He really stands out in my mind as the director who did the most for the department.

ML: What do you perceive the role of the state police commission is in running the state police?

GBH: The commission should bring a business sense to the department. They are all highly educated businessmen and women. My opinion is that they should provide guidance and have input on our retirement and health care. I am on the retirement board and I haven't had any financial training. They just need to be counselors and advisors to the director to let him bounce ideas off of.

ML: You talked about how benefits are under pressure now. Is that the key problem facing the state police now?

GBH: Any type of budget problem is key. We are 100 troopers down around the state. We wanted to hire fifty, but couldn't even find enough qualified applicants and hired thirty-four. I am not saying the legislature doesn't understand, but a newspaper article from 1962 when the state police just started their retirement system, and they said it [the retirement system] was one of the greatest recruiting tools. If they knew that then, they should know that now. Benefits are a big part of our

package. There are departments that pay more money than we do and we have to have the ability to offer something extra. We have lost those abilities and it will hurt us in the future.

ML: When you look back over your career, are there any sort of special enforcement tactics that come to mind? I have heard about a team that would just focus on DWI [driving while intoxicated] enforcement.

GBH: We used to have DWI enforcement teams that just traveled in a group. We still do saturations in areas. If we are having a problem in a county and the fatal count is way up, we may put three or four extra troopers in there and bear down on them. Those have always been effective. I don't know if the people getting tickets enjoy it, but I think the local people like to see that many troopers go in there. I always liked the old round robins. Everybody was assigned a particular area during a holiday. Nobody took a holiday off. Everybody went into uniform and worked, even the Criminal Investigation Division. Everybody had a twenty- or thirty-mile stretch of road [to patrol]. The reason it was called a round robin was you would drive from point A to point B and back and forth all day. That really increased visibility. We also used to do a thing called rolling patrol. I used this down in Fort Smith. I would get five or six cars in a row and spaced five minutes apart. When the lead car made a traffic stop, the others would pull over and run traffic. When he finished with his stop, he would fall to the back of the line and they would pull out again. It was all about visibility.

ML: As a captain and lieutenant, what is your idea of what the troopers need to be doing? When you look at their activity reports, how would you judge if they were

doing their job?

GBH: It isn't just the citations. To me, when you take a drunk off the highway, you don't know how much good you have done. You might have saved somebody. DWI enforcement is important to me. We made thirty-three DWI arrests over Memorial Day and I look at that as thirty-three potential fatal accidents we took off the road. I am also big on safety education. I have an officer assigned to that full-time. If you can get a rapport going with kids I school, you are a whole lot better off.

ML: Everybody I have talked to points to a trooper they saw growing up that influenced them to join the state police. It might not be that way now for the young troopers.

GBH: I know that it still is important for my guys.

ML: One thing that Bill Carver talked about was a wreck you worked that killed [George] Mann, who was a city marshal.

GBH: George was a Flippin city marshal and a good friend of Bill's and mine. He had been riding with me that evening. I got a call of drag racing on Highway 14 south of Yellville. I let him out of his car. I got over to Highway 14, but the drag racers were gone. When I stated back in, I heard this voice on the radio say, "George has been hit and we need help." I finally got to where they were. What had happened was George saw a guy that he knew the county had a warrant for standing beside a bridge. George was eighty years old and didn't need to be out there working the road. He told the kid there was a warrant for his arrest and to get in the car so he could take him to the sheriff's office. The kid told him he didn't

want to go, so George got out of his car. He was right at the end of a one-lane bridge. There was a car coming in the other direction and it hit him and pinned him between the two vehicles. The doctor told me that it wouldn't have mattered if we had a garden hose pumping blood into him. He was still talking and moving around when I got there. They moved the cars and he passed out. We did CPR [cardiopulmonary resuscitation] on him for a long time and got a heartbeat back, but he didn't make it. He was a really good fellow. It was one of those things that is surreal. One minute you are riding with the guy, and then he is gone.

ML: That says a lot about how close the state and local officers were, which may not be something you see in larger communities.

GBH: I really don't think you do. Especially in the rural counties, the troopers and city marshals and city police are fairly close because that is who was backing you up on a call. George was a unique guy. I guess you would call him a character. He had lived there all of his life. You would have him in the car with you and go to stop one of the kids and he would tell you to let him go because they were going home. He was just fun to be around and a good guy. Did Bill tell you about the little girl they found?

ML: No.

GBH: I probably won't get all of the facts right, but to show you how they all worked together, there was Bill and a trooper named Bill King and Larry Patterson. There were four or five of them altogether. A little girl was kidnapped. Those guys banded together and went for hours without sleep until they found her. I don't think you could have made those guys go home that night until they found her,

which they did. I think she had been assaulted, but she was alive. I saw a picture of them after this, and their ties were pulled down and their shirtsleeves were rolled up. I thought that the director wouldn't be too happy if he saw them like that, but they had been going for probably thirty-six hours straight. That was another thing people don't realize: we didn't wear short sleeves. That was the old wool shirt and it was summertime.

[End of Interview]

[Edited by Rebecca Willhite]