

VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT
Preserving Stories of Service for Future Generations

Interview with

Nick Darien

Conducted by Deb Barrett

January 24, 2018

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Corrections to transcript are noted by square bracket [] for additions and an ellipsis ... for text that has been removed, either due to inaccuracy or at the request of the veteran.

This interview is being conducted on Wednesday, January 24, 2018, with Mr. Nick Darien at the Indian Prairie Public Library in Darien, Illinois. My name is Deb Barrett. Mr. Darien was born on September 29, 1943, in Muskegon, Michigan. He is a retired mechanical engineer and learned of the Veterans History Project through a visit made by the library to the local VFW, Darien Post 2838. Mr. Darien has kindly consented to be interviewed for this project. Here is his story.

Life Before Entering Military Service

Nick, where were you living when you entered the service? What was your life like at the time?

Well, I had started college. Actually, I had gone from junior college in Muskegon to the [University of Michigan at their Dearborn, Michigan campus] and began a co-op program, which was something new they were trying. The program consisted of a sequence of iterations of working four months on a job in the Detroit area and going to school for four months. So, after I completed my first trimester, I went on to my job assignment as a draftsman in the heating and ventilating department of an architectural [firm] called Albert Kahn and Associates. I was working there when my call to the draft came along.

So you were studying to be an engineer at the time.

I was studying to continue my engineering education. However, I had decided to not go back. I was from a small town and was enjoying a big town – the Detroit area – opportunities for a young man. So after my four months of co-op I decided simply not to go back and just stay at my job for a while and think about college a little later, when the draft came along.

When you were drafted, were you living at home or in an apartment?

I was living in an apartment in what [was] called the “New Center” area of Detroit.

How old were you when you were drafted?

I was 23.

So you were the old guy.

I was pretty much the older guy.

What was the reaction of your family when you were drafted?

Well, like any family, there was apprehension. Certainly there was an awareness that there were substantial casualties and injuries that were happening in Vietnam. It was probably the first time that the conflicts of the U.S. military were being documented as they were happening and brought to the public with rapidity than any other previous conflict.

It was the first televised war.

It was the first televised war. Right.

This was 1966?

This was 1966. Actually, I was inducted in Detroit on 12 April 1966.

Induction and Basic Training

What do you remember about your induction?

I was very apprehensive, number one. But I had committed to that. I had had an opportunity to apply for a waiver, but decided against that. So it was simply a matter of going through totally unfamiliar steps.

What was the opportunity for the waiver?

Well, the architect engineer that I was working for had some government contract building that they were doing. The head of engineering had asked if I wanted to pursue that. I had an uncle who had been in World War II. I had talked to him. He was active in the American Legion. I just felt it was my turn and my obligation.

You've got to remember, at that time the conflict in Vietnam was quite new. The commitment there was to stop the advance of communism. And I felt very strongly about that. Everything that happened subsequently became so political that most veterans will tell you they're very disgusted with the way the politics worked out. Politics cost a lot of U.S. soldiers' lives.

That was also a very difficult time in our country's history – very polarizing.

Right. And the way the media portrayed it, for instance with the Tet Offensive. It was a decisive victory by the American troops. However, the way that it was portrayed in the press made it sound like it was a communist victory. The terrible thing about war is that the objective is to kill more people than your side has killed. That's essentially it. War is terrible. War is a terrible thing. Young people were seeing they could avoid it and not make a commitment to their country. You can't really blame them for that because the way it was being portrayed on television, it [appeared to be] a ticket to slaughter.

Were your friends drafted, or did any enlist?

Actually, I had a very close college buddy who did not enlist. Actually, I had two. One avoided it [by staying in] college. The other one avoided it [by continuing in] college, but he eventually became very [helpful] to the military... He worked for a company that provided [armored] military... [vehicles]. He became essentially their... [expert]. So probably his efforts

in supplying some of the equipment that eventually came to Vietnam probably saved a lot of lives. It was probably the better thing that he went on the way he did. The other guy I just totally lost contact with. I felt that he was not making a commitment that he should. I have met him since and it was cordial. And to me it wouldn't be any major factor today. But that's the way it was then.

So you were inducted in Detroit. Describe what the process was.

The process was simply checking in at the facility where the induction was done. You were totally unaware. You just followed the steps. I learned that I was going to be in the Army. The guy in front of me was being sent to the Marines. So if I had been one person in front I probably would have been a Marine!

That's how it was decided.

Yes. "You're a Marine – they need some people." And somebody would drag you out of line.

Then you had to go through the process of getting your clothing, getting inoculations and so forth.

All in an assembly line.

All in an assembly line. Yes. And when you got your inoculations, it was left arm, right arm in sequence [or at the same time].

How many men were inducted when you were?

It was a sizeable number. I really don't know.

A couple hundred, a couple thousand?

Because everything was pretty localized into which particular sequence in the induction process you were – say you might be in a large room. It wouldn't necessarily be gym-sized. It would be something smaller. People were just going in one door and out the other. So you really didn't have a good concept of how long the line was or how many people were being inducted.

You were just in and out of rooms.

Right. And it was a pretty continuous process, so I'm sure there were quite a number of people who were being inducted. And it was at the time when the military was being heavily built up.

So you were inducted into the Army. After your induction where did you go?

Well, we were transported – I don't really recall if it was by bus, but I suppose it was by bus, to Fort Knox, Kentucky to begin our basic training. As it turned out, Fort Knox was at full capacity. So we were then flown to Fort Bliss, Texas for our basic training.

Basic training is, of course, eight weeks. So you begin the whole indoctrination process into the military. That eight weeks was at Fort Bliss, near El Paso.

Did you know anybody?

There was nobody who was in my group – none of my friends were in the same group.

What did you know of military life before you started?

Very little – only what I had seen on TV. Of course, things like the song about the Green Berets were popular at the time. As a child growing up, I had heard stories from my Uncle John who had been in the Second World War in the Aleutian Islands. So I knew very little other than the fact we used to play Army when I was a kid and I had fun doing that. You didn't have any concept of what it was really all about.

So when you got down to Fort Bliss, what were your living arrangements like?

We were in a wooden barracks. Typically, during training the troops are assigned to 48-man companies. So you had squads within a company, so typically there are four 12-man squads in a two-story wooden barracks. And you had one or more drill sergeants who were responsible for you.

Were there bunk beds?

Bunk beds. Indeed, bunk beds. And everything, of course, had to be inspection proficient, clean and tidy. There were always just made-up ways to criticize what had been done. For instance, you might have worked to pass inspection in the morning and there might be a fly in the drain in the bathroom. And you'd be told you had to clean the whole place again. So it was a matter of simply bringing people away from their individualism and jelling them as a team who were dependent on one another.

First thing in the morning, how did they wake you up and what time?

You know, I think it had to be probably 6:00 in the morning – that's a guess, a possible recollection. And it was typically the drill sergeant walking into the building and shouting, "Fall out," or whatever military language he might use.

And it wasn't a gentle tap on the shoulder.

Never a gentle tap on the shoulder! He didn't say, "Wake up, please."

How much time did you have to get ready?

Everything was on a really tight schedule. You shortly had to fall out, dressed and ready to go to the mess hall for breakfast. Then you had to go to the day's training activity. Somewhere along the line you got lunch, and end up with dinner. Typically, we had a little free time in the evening – maybe an hour or hour-and-a-half. Then it was lights out at 10:00 or 11:00.

Let's talk a little bit about your daily routine. The sergeant would come in and wake everybody up.

And you had to go through the various aspects of combat – learning how to use a rifle.

Let's go before that and talk about just the routine. You'd have 15 or 20 minutes to get yourself together?

Maybe a half an hour. I really don't recall all the details.

So you would fall out.

You would fall out dressed and ready to go. Typically, dressed and ready to go meant fatigues, boots, a baseball style cap. By that time you had your nametape on your shirt. Now this was Fort Bliss It was April, May.

So it wasn't too hot yet.

It wasn't too hot and it wasn't cold. So you weren't wearing any heavy coats or anything like that.

Would he inspect you first and then go to breakfast, or do calisthenics?

There would be an inspection. And then you would do calisthenics. You're bringing back the memories! We would do calisthenics and then go to breakfast. Maybe a half an hour of calisthenics. Then breakfast, and on to whatever particular training regimen there was for that day.

Did you go to breakfast as a unit?

Yes. Everything was done as a unit.

What kind of stuff did you have for breakfast? Was the food good?

I think it was very passable. I don't remember it not being okay. It was edible.

Could you get what you wanted?

You had a tray. Whatever the mess sergeant put on your tray is what you had. It was typically eggs and some kind of meat, cereal – either hot or cold cereal. The nourishment was

there, and it was important because of the high level of physical activity. I can never really – other than running across things I didn't particularly have a taste for – being underfed during my whole military experience. Even out in the field once we got to Vietnam.

Were there any rules around meals?

Yes. There was a limited talk time. Once you sat down you had to do it in a very statuesque fashion while you were eating. You had to make sure you were done by the time the period was over. So there wasn't a lot of time for chitchat. I don't really recall how that structure worked, but I know there was a formality to the process. So there was a time when you had to sit down and be at attention, essentially be pretty bodily controlled as far as sitting down and getting your meal eaten. There must have been some talk. I'm sure there was chatter. I don't really recall much detail about it.

Do you recall about how much time you had to eat?

Probably a half an hour.

And everybody left together.

Everybody left together. Everything was done as a unit under the direction of the drill sergeant.

Do you still remember who your drill sergeant was?

I don't. I remember he was tough. Actually, he was very good. He was very capable of getting a response from the men just because of his stature and his way of directing his orders. He wasn't cruel in any way. However, he was demanding.

Were you one of the oldest guys?

I was. I was one of the oldest guys. I would say that most of the inductees were 18 to 21. I was a couple of years older than that.

What was your relationship with the other guys? Did they look up to you? Did they just think you were kind of old?

Actually, it was more a matter of just being one of the individuals going through the same thing. You know what happens; there are some of the individuals with certain types of physical or psychological problems that become apparent. That's part of the process, actually. We did have one individual who would run away from formation in the morning. He was getting a lot of bullying and there were times I had to step in and stop that. Because it was cruel. I think he was eventually washed out.

He was getting bullied from the other recruits?

Yes. Getting harassed. Things like wire-brushing him in the shower. I walked in the shower room one time and they were doing that.

Wire-brushing?

Wire-brushing, yes. And this is the other recruits.

On the skin?

Yes, in the shower room. So it was time to put an end to that.

Were there any repercussions for the people who did this?

I didn't let there be.

So you kind of protected the group.

I kind of protected this guy. And I communicated it to the drill sergeant. He wasn't with us very long – I'm sure he washed out.

So he washed out. But were there any repercussions for the guys who attacked him?

No, because I was the only one who observed it. It wasn't observed by the drill sergeant or anything. I don't recall what happened after I reported it. But there were little things like that that would happen, but that was probably the one I most recall in particular. These were people who were going through changes. There was a lot of resentment and anger until people simply worked their way through that.

So you had breakfast. After breakfast ...

You'd get on to your training regimen, whatever it was. There was everything from hand-to-hand combat, using rifles, targets, crawling under barbed-wire, poisonous gases – all those things that we had to learn for a combat situation.

Was it mostly experience related? Did you have classroom work, too?

There was some classroom stuff, too.

What sort of classroom stuff?

Particularly for poisonous gases, before we would actually go into a chamber with chlorine gas with the equipment on. We learned how to use the equipment.

There was also classroom instruction on the rifles that we were using. My particular time in the service was when the M14 rifle was being used, before the M16. When we're talking about Vietnam I'll tell you a story about that, because I didn't want to let go of that M14. I was used to it and I didn't want an M16 for the short time I had left in Vietnam.

Had you handled guns before?

Oh, yes. I had gone hunting. I grew up in Muskegon, which had a lot of rural and hunting area around, so I had been hunting for years.

So it wasn't something new to you – a new sensation.

No, not at all. I had a 22, a shot-gun, and B-B gun and the whole thing.

How long was your basic?

Basic was eight weeks. I did pretty well. Everybody goes in as an E1. I was actually promoted to E3 – private first class – on completing basic training.

From there my next assignment – because of my engineering training, I would think – they had me routed to combat engineering training at Fort Leonard-Wood. I think maybe because I was older and had done well in basic, they sent me to two weeks of leadership school at Fort Leonard-Wood before I was to start my advance training. They called it AIT – advanced individual training – which was your second eight weeks.

So I went to two weeks of leadership school and then I was assigned a platoon of 48 trainees. As a platoon guide, I had to appoint four squad leaders – a squad being 12 men. I would communicate to the squad leaders what they were supposed to do, or I would simply do certain things myself, to make sure all 48 guys got up in the morning when they were supposed to, got to the places they were supposed to go and make sure they got to bed at night.

But it was a lot different than the first eight weeks.

It was a lot different. Not only because I was in a leadership role. There were arguments and invitations to go out in the woods. That did happen with one of my squad leaders. We were going full tilt and I stopped because I had gotten on top of him and brought a rock up. It struck me to stop right then because I could end up killing the guy. I would probably not be in a leadership role. I'd probably be in Leavenworth.

But things like that would happen, so you walked away from it. And I'd simply appoint a different guy as squad leader. This guy simply had to fall in place and we just got along with one another after that.

So the men who were in the squad, was this their second half of their basic as well?

It was for all of them. They were not in basic. The first eight weeks were the basic. Then, depending on your MOS – military occupational status – whatever that was going to be, so at Fort Leonard-Wood they trained the [troops for] engineering [work]. It was the advanced training, and it was for some category of engineering – construction engineering in this case.

What was the training like there? Was it more classroom based?

There was a combination of class and actual worksite – things that you would be doing and how you'd go about it; everything from the need for sandbags to the need for familiarity with the types of equipment that we were going to be using. Some people were routed to be actual operators of heavy equipment – be it bulldozers, road graders, dump trucks – some of the guys would be assigned to that. [We were also trained in placing and removing explosives]. My unit was simply pioneer, which was grunt. You were assigned as a company member and you did everything from operating a shovel to driving a dump truck or whatever type of assignment a worksite sergeant might assign you to. That was the advanced individual training.

And that was eight more weeks. So you had two weeks of leadership and then ...

Two weeks of leadership training and eight weeks of basic and advanced, so [total of] 18 weeks [training].

During this time, did you have some free time – during this 18 weeks?

Not much. I don't recall ever going anywhere other than being on base.

Were you able to communicate with people back home?

By letters. I don't recall whether there was a phone facility. Typically, it was by letters – by snail mail.

Were there any restrictions when you got to your first basic about one phone call home and that was it for so many days?

If there were, I don't really recall that. It was like going into another world. So you were kind of like just going along with the program.

Did you get any leave after the basic or after the AIT?

We must have, because I remember a group of us renting a car and driving from Fort Bliss and ending up in Detroit. There were four of us. And along the way I think one or two people got dropped off to wherever they were going. So there must have been a couple of weeks between. But I don't think it was 30 days.

If I recall properly, after advanced individual training we found out where we were going – whether we were going to Germany or Vietnam. So everybody ran to the pin-up board where that was displayed and was anxious to find out what their assignment after training was going to be. And so we knew after advanced individual training where we were going – where we would be assigned.

Was it a surprise to you?

It was a disappointment. Certainly Germany would have been a better choice, but you just accepted the fact. You were in the Army, and that's what you were trained to do. And I still felt strongly about what our purpose was at that time.

So you were able to go home briefly.

So after advanced individual training, if I recall properly – this would have been June some time. However it turned out I actually didn't get to Vietnam until September of 1966.

Deployment to Vietnam

Well, you said it was 18 weeks, so that was four-and-a-half months.

Yes, so that was about right. I recall arriving in Vietnam in late September. This was after a leave. So after my leave we were sent to Fort Dix, New Jersey and left from there on chartered commercial aircraft.

It was all military folks on the plane.

All military folks.

What was the mood like on that plane?

Well, nobody was panicked, but it seemed quite somber now that you bring that up. And there was always somebody who is the gregarious person – the joke teller – so there was some of that.....

We went from Fort Dix, New Jersey to San Francisco. That was one leg of the flight. And then from San Francisco to Honolulu. And these planes at that time weren't like they are now – they had to make [more] fuel stops. So we stopped in Honolulu, and from Honolulu we went right to Cam Ranh Bay, which was the major in-country location.

Before you left the States, when you said good-bye to your family, that must have been hard. Did they go with you to the airport?

You know, I think I only visited Muskegon to see my family during that time. But I probably spent most of my time in Detroit with the people I knew there. I guess I did have my apartment, and I guess I did spend time in my home town. Now that you're mentioning some of this recollections are coming back, because when I was working before I was drafted I had actually bought a car. So I know my parents used that car while I was in Vietnam and then I got the car again [upon returning home]. It was a 1965 red Corvair convertible – one of those rear-engine jobs that was so condemned subsequently. I remember that it was driven by my parents while I was gone. I know I spent time in Detroit because I had the car, but I also spent time in Muskegon. If I recall properly, I did leave from Muskegon. But that meant I would have had to come to Chicago or Detroit because there would have been no direct flights.

I think I went into Philadelphia. I'd have to look at a map to see how close that is to Fort Dix, but that's what I recall flying into – Philadelphia.

So you don't think your family went with you to the airport.

No.

Did they have any words for you before you left?

Well, you know. I think there was just a recognition that that's the way it was at the time. There weren't any major tears shed or anything. It was just be safe, come back – that kind of thing.

You flew to San Francisco.

Yes, and then from San Francisco to Honolulu.

How long a flight was it? I know it's about four hours from Chicago to San Francisco.

It was probably not much more than that back then in 1966. [We flew in] jets.

And from San Francisco to Honolulu and then to Vietnam. How long was it from San Francisco to Honolulu and then to Vietnam?

The whole thing probably took us the better part of a day, if not a day and a little bit more. You just slept on the plane. There wasn't any stop for a night at a hotel or something like that.

How did people pass the time on the plane?

Talking, sleeping.

Card games?

I don't recall card games. Everybody was packed into the seats. They reclined so you could sleep and talk. That was about it.

And we were fed along the way.

When you got to Cam Rahn Bay, what was the first thing you saw when you looked out of the plane?

The big base. Cam Ranh Bay was pretty well developed by that time and... [adequate for] landing jets there – commercial size jets. The Air Force had a pretty substantial base developed. That was it. Everything was walk-down steps out of the plane.

Then we ... [went to] a replacement company..... So we were simply assigned to a squad tent until our next orders came in to where we were supposed to go. Then, because there was a unit – and it must have been an engineering unit because we had all kinds of equipment to load onto an LST, the type of ship that has the drop-down front where you can drive in and drive off – I was just grabbed as one of the individuals to help load that up. I was told I would get my final

unit assignment from wherever that ship was going. As I recall it was Vung Tau, farther down the South China Sea coast – a little farther south towards Saigon.

Once we got the ship loaded it was an overnight trip, and by morning we were coming into the harbor. There was a tremendous storm that night and there were a lot of sea-sick people. But the next morning it was beautiful, and I remember coming into that harbor thinking, “Wow, this would be a great place to vacation.” It was beautiful.

So we got there, got the ship unloaded and went to the [replacement] unit.... [at nearby Long Binh]. I got my orders to my destination company. At the airfield I got onto a short-landing cargo plane called the Caribou. I was on my way to a special forces camp where there was a hasty airfield being built by the combat engineering unit [that] I was assigned to, the 20th Combat Engineer Battalion.

What was amazing to me is I looked down from the airplane and there was hardly anything the size of a pencil where we were going to be landing. And, as far as I knew, that was where I was going to be, and that is where I was from probably in early of October until shortly after Christmas. We simply pitched in with whatever –..... you had to dig your own fox hole and help with the day-to-day operations, driving a dump truck, [filling sand bags]....whatever the sergeant in charge ordered you to do.

And you would actually pull guard duty at one of the bunkers. The engineering unit would be set up on the perimeter of the special forces camp and we would have to pull a round of security at night. So you simply had a four-hour shift you had to do. But if you were on guard duty that night you were essentially sleeping in or near the bunker. You just rotated with whoever else was on guard. Typically I think it was only two guys, because darkness to daylight was pretty well covered by an eight-hour time increment at that time. I only recall two guys being on duty at each bunker. There was a perimeter of bunkers.

Tell us what the bunkers looked like.

The bunkers were essentially four walls of sandbags with an entry door on the compound side, and firing holes on three other sides. They were big enough to stoop down to walk in. And there was a nightly compliment of cat-size rats that would find their way around the bunker at night.

The apprehensive times were when you'd be outside the bunker because it was raining and it was dark, and it was pounding on your helmet. You were trying to listen and see, and there was very little you could listen or see. But you had to use whatever senses you could to detect whether or not there was any enemy trying to sneak in or set any type of explosive device nearby. The Green Berets were really good at securing their areas with their Montagnard Mercenaries. So it just never happened.

Tell us about the Montagnard Mercenaries.

Our typical assignment was once a special forces camp would get established and the decision was made to stay there for a while – because at that time they could only be supplied by helicopter or air drop by parachutes from airplanes. If they decided they wanted someplace for airplanes to land on a hasty air strip, then they would call in the combat engineers. And we would have to make our way to the camp.

Typically a special forces A-team was 12 Green Berets. They would initially go into an area. Montagnard is French for mountain people from when the French were there. This was in the central highlands, so it was more like an Appalachian mountain type of environment. So they would typically set up at a high point near a Montagnard camp. The reason they chose the Montagnards is they were very structured, very loyal, very dedicated tribal people. The special forces formed a strong relationship with the Montagnards. Because of the political divisiveness there was in the South Vietnamese government, there were some South Vietnamese units that were very highly trained and capable, from what I was told. We didn't encounter them very often in my experience other than sometimes along the routes of movement from A to B to get from our base camp to get to a special forces camp when we were convoying with all this heavy equipment. But the Montagnards would be recruited by the special forces and they would be provided with the training and would essentially go out on patrol in the area with the Green Berets.

All during this time we were getting set up and working, and finding the right types of compactable material and whatever timber we needed to do the job that we needed to do. And clearing an area. We had real heavy-duty bulldozers called Rome Plows which could knock down trees and shove them off to the side. So there would be a line of construction with a location and orientation decided for the runways so there would be landing and take-off clearances for the airplanes. So that would have to be cleared. Then the surface would have to be leveled and the undersurface prepared – anything from a dirt runway to a rubber membrane runway. In the units I was with we never did any aluminum panel runways. We didn't use perforated steel paneling like they did during World War II, for any of my experience.

Typically our runway would be... long [enough to land a C130, though supply planes were usually C123's or Caribous]. After it was cleared and leveled and dressed for drainage, there would be a rubber membrane that would be placed over the compacted subsoil. There would be V-shaped ditches on either side with big thumbtacks that would go through the rubber membrane to hold it in place. Then the rubber membrane on the rolling surface of the runway would be painted with an abrasive in the paint so that it would have some abrasion. It was intended to handle the lighter type of aircraft called the CB7 Caribou, typically the airplane that was the most in. But it really wasn't intended to be heavy-duty for a C130 aircraft. However, occasionally there would be a C130 aircraft when there was a need for a particular large supply of material.

Until the runway could accommodate an airplane, not only the Special Forces but [also] the combat engineering unit would be supplied by airdrop. Because there was no refrigeration we would actually get livestock by parachute.

So you'd have a cow coming down from the sky on a parachute!

We'd have a cow, a pen of chickens coming down by a parachute. We also got large rubber bladders of diesel fuel ... [for] our [construction] equipment.

It was a big deal when planes were finally able to land. Typically a hasty airfield, if you starting from scratch – in the case of Phu Tuc they had already started that there [would take a couple of months]. But when we went down to Duc Lap we had to do pretty much all of the work. As I recall we had to move and re-set up a village, and we ran into some underground water problems. So that took three months. But typically a line company would be at a site two or three months – something of that order – to build a functioning air strip from scratch.

In my own case, I came into Phu Tuc and was doing whatever I was told to do. Shortly after the New Year in 1967 – early January – somehow the word came down that the battalion was short on surveyors. Apparently I was just tapped on the shoulder and told I was going back to Pleiku to on-the-job train as a construction site surveyor. It was probably because I'd had two-and-a-half years of [college] engineering training by that time. It was a couple of weeks of training. It wasn't a major endeavor because typically what construction surveyors did was to set the [direction, the] level and set the crown (so there would be drainage), for the road graders that would ... shape the runway. The rest of the equipment would compact it. So the job of the surveyor was to set the orientation and the grade. After my training [as a surveyor] I was assigned to Headquarters Company, from which surveyors would be sent to [a line company] ... wherever ... [the company was] assigned and needed a surveyor. ... One of our major jobs was at a place called Duc Lap.... We were actually there for quite a period of time, [there were three of us in the surveyor crew] so we took the canvas cover from the rear-end of what would essentially be a pick-up truck today, but it was called a three-quarter ton. We used that and our pup tents to build a living structure with the canvas from the truck in the center and the pup tents angled out from the sides with sandbags as walls, and then our cots behind the sandbags in case we would get mortared at night – we'd be protected by the sandbags. But that essentially was our living quarters while we were at Duc Lap. We improvised because for some reason we did not have squad tents there. Other places we would have a 12-man squad tent.

So most places it was 12 men to a tent.

Right.

Sleeping on cots?

Sleeping on cots, but with mosquito nets.
Typically our meals were from a mess tent.

Hot meals?

Initially when we got set up it was all C-rations. There were times we couldn't get supplies and would have C-rations instead of a prepared meal. But there would be a mess tent. As engineers we had a little more capability than, say, an infantry company which was only going to be passing through an area [for awhile]. We would be at a location. We had a water purification unit. We would build a wood structure to hold a 55 gallon drum on top of the structure and put a diesel [fuel] heating unit underneath it, run down some hoses and you actually had a hot shower. Instead of just digging a hole somewhere to do our duty we actually made out-houses. And the receptacle in the out-house was a cut-off 55 gallon drum. Then the waste was simply dragged out daily and burned in diesel fuel, rather than going down into a hole so we wouldn't have to be moving the thing. So we had some comforts that on-the-move units did not have.

Simply because you were in place for a while.

We were in place for a while and we were an engineering unit. We had the wherewithal to do this stuff.

While you [were] in place during these things, did you communicate with folks back home?

It was only by letters. There was the classical mail call. The mail would come in on an airplane [or helicopter]. I took a lot of slide film, but you couldn't run down to the local store to get it developed. So it might be a number of weeks before you could actually get something developed, or send it out on an airplane and get it back – if it didn't get lost. My whole thought was that I would probably use a slide projector. We'll get to what happened to those later on in the conversation.

What about any downtime you might have had? What did you do for entertainment?

Actually, somewhere in here I have a photograph. In Phu Tuc there were times when I wished we were not at war, I could have a convertible and just drive through [the surrounding area]. It was beautiful. There was a river nearby. I would go down to the river and go swimming. The kids from the area would be down there swimming with me.

I had my rifle with me with a full clip. The way the M14 worked you had a 20-clip magazine, but you taped two together so if you needed it you could just flip to the next one. So ... [the river] was maybe [equivalent to] two blocks from our encampment. If anything happened while I was down there I figured I could just get my way back to the unit. But it never happened.

Where was your rifle while you were in the water?

Sitting by my stuff. I never got that far away from it. But it was nice to get into the cool water like that. It was ...[scenic]. The central highlands, compared to what some of the guys experienced in the swamps and everything, were quite an attractive area.

Did you see any of the USO shows that came through?

We talked earlier about whether or not you recognized Martha Ray's name. Of course, while we were at Phu Tuc, Martha Ray was a little more courageous with her contact with the troops. She wouldn't just tour with the USO and go to the large bases. She would actually go to the Special Forces camps. So she was an honorary Green Beret. I think she retired from the Reserves as a Colonel. I think she was a Major when we [traveled] from Phu Tuc to Cheo Reo – one Special Forces camp to another – to see her show. There are stories about her where she, as a nurse, was at [places] when wounded were coming in and she actually treated wounded. She did quite a job of not only entertaining the troops, but pitching in medically when she was needed. It was pretty impressive. That's something a lot of people never knew about her.

What about interacting with the Vietnamese people – the locals?

Any interaction I had with the Vietnamese was when we were in the base camp at Pleiku. Typically when we were at Special Forces camp it was more the Montagnards. And the kids who would come around watching the heavy equipment operate.

When I was in Pleiku I used to go into town and get a haircut – that’s when I had hair. So I did that. Otherwise, there were opportunities to mix socially – go to a movie at a base camp, or they had drinking establishments around. So you had those opportunities.

But most of the time we were in the field, and any interaction we had was with the Montagnards. The Montagnards had some kind of ceremony. I don’t know what the occasion was, but they had a water buffalo tied up to a post. It was rather cruel, but part of the ceremony was a ceremonial person dancing around this water buffalo and then severing the joints on the legs and eventually [killing the buffalo with a spear then] cutting the throat of the water buffalo and draining the blood into a cup. That cup was passed around for everybody to take a sip from it.

Did you?

Yes. It was expected. We were their ... [guests], and it was a rather solemn ceremony of some sort. I still have a picture of that water buffalo somewhere in my photographs.

You mentioned a little while ago about needing to relocate a village.

Yes. There’s not a lot I remember about that. For some reason, I think it was because of an underground spring, that the orientation [of the runway] had to be changed. That was the only other option [through where the village was], so the village had to be moved....

How did the villagers react to being told they had to move?

I didn’t have much interaction with that. We were busy ... [with rearranging the runway orientation while others were] moving them.

We’ve heard stories of the Viet Cong being mixed into the village.

Yes. The one frightening experience I had was when we were going to do a construction that had to do with bringing compactable material to the runway. One of our squads was out looking for the right timber. I was at our encampment and I happened to be – this was before I was a surveyor – I happened to be going by the motor pool tent and the sergeant said, “Take this dump truck and go get those guys at the end of the runway.” So I jumped in the truck and didn’t have my combat gear at all. I just had a baseball cap and my regular fatigues, figuring they were at the end of the runway.

When I got down there they weren’t. I had just grabbed whatever truck was available. I saw there was a two-rut path that ran off the side of the runway and thought maybe they were down there. I started down there and got maybe three blocks length in and the engine stopped. I realized the vehicle was out of ... [fuel]. I didn’t see them yet. I thought, what do I do now. If I tried to [continue] to crank the engine,... if there was any VC around they’d hear that. So I decided since it was only three or four blocks I could walk back to the end of the runway where somebody who would see me.

There were some Vietnamese working off to the side of that path in the woods. I was just thinking that if any of them were VC or they were armed, it was a great opportunity for them. I was a sitting duck. Just as I got maybe a block away from the truck a squad sergeant hollered out. He said, "Hey, Darien. We're here." He radioed in and got some fuel out there for the truck with another truck. So that solved that situation.

Apparently the people who working off in the woods were not VC.

What feelings did you experience when you did have interactions with the Vietnamese? Were they positive? Were there people who were suspicious?

Sure, they were positive. When we were in base camp and I'd go into town to get a haircut, we were essentially income for them, so they were very hospitable. I never had any adverse interactions with them.

The other things we would do in base camp when we were there, our unit was close to the lumber stockpile. So somebody would have to do a guard tour at night at the lumber pile to keep anybody from pilfering the lumber. You were armed with a .45. But, again, you'd walk around and crawl around the lumber. In my experience, there was never any situation of interaction with anybody. And that was only a couple of times because typically we were not in base camp that long. If it was two weeks that was a lot.

Was theft a big problem?

Since we were posted I'm sure it was. Did I see any theft? I didn't see any theft. No. But it was a concern, apparently, if we were sent out there to pull guard duty.

You went to a variety of camps during your time in Vietnam.

Yes. Essentially the progression was from mid-October until early January I was at the Phu Tuc Special Forces camp.

That was October 1966 to January 1967.

Right. Then I went ...[back to the Pleiku] base camp ... [for] on-the-job training as a construction surveyor. And that was probably two weeks.

From there there was a major construction effort about 150 miles from base camp called Duc Lap. We were there for quite a period of time. I think I mentioned that previously. But the entire effort of moving all that equipment from Pleiku to Duc Lap, and typically our surveying unit was in what would amount to a pick-up truck. It's called a three-quarter ton. That was the configuration you would visualize as a pick-up truck now. It had a canvas top on the back and we had all our surveying equipment in there. We were typically up toward the front end of a convoy, if not right behind the commanding officer – a few vehicles behind.

In that particular case there was one river to be crossed, and the one bridge that was available wasn't able to handle the heavier equipment. Typically we would have a number of bulldozers and road graders, and these would have to be a tractor-trailer configuration with the trailer being a flatbed, and the bulldozer being on the flatbed. Same thing with the road graders, Then a number of dump trucks and other types of road construction/airfield construction

equipment – rollers and that sort of thing – that would be pulled by the bulldozer. All that heavy stuff could not cross the bridge, so we had to wait for a unit to actually build a float bridge. It ...[consisted of] pontoons with a flat surface, with one vehicle on the top at a time would go onto the flat surface and be ferried across the river. In this particular case there was a large fuel truck, a number of bulldozers, road graders and this heavier other ancillary equipment. In the meantime we were stalled along the road. Fortunately we did not have any combat interaction on that trip.

Typically, what was done is that because of the high value assets that were in our convoy we would have a bird-dog airplane flying over us all the time surveying the area for any ambushes that might have been set up along the way. So that was the route down to Duc Lap.

On the way back we were going through a heavily wooded area and a mine was exploded underneath one of the flatbeds that carried a bulldozer, this meant that the convoy was stopped and susceptible to ambush. So we had to get moving again as quickly as possible. The bulldozer was not damaged – the flatbed was destroyed, but the bulldozer pushed the wreckage off to the side and the road grader was taken off another flatbed because it could go fast enough to keep up with the convoy, and the convoy got underway again.

... [A] good friend of mine – just an outstanding [road grader] operator [-volunteered to drive the road grader]. [As I mentioned before, as] surveyors...we would set grade and it took a real talent for some of these construction equipment operators to do what they did. This guy was just such a good road grader operator. So as ... [the convoy was] going down a rather steep downgrade, his brakes failed on the road grader. Rather than pile into the convoy in front of him [causing injury or death,] he took it over ... [a steep drop-off at the side of the road] and he was killed. He essentially sacrificed himself.

When I got back to the United States – he was from a little town called Lake Arthur in New Mexico, near the town of Roswell. I went to see his mother to let her know what ... [a courageous] man he was.

So he took this piece of equipment over the edge and sacrificed himself to save everybody.

Yes. The whole need was to get that convoy moving again. And it did. The rest of the trip back to base camp was uneventful.

Now, you found yourself in an unexpectedly dangerous situation, you were telling us before we started the interview, where you found yourself in a mine field.

There were really two incidents.

One occurred when we were going to see Martha Ray. We took a few vehicles with the guys who wanted to go. It was maybe ten miles. Everything out there was based on clicks; what we call kilometers. So it was maybe ten miles away. The route took us through an area where there was a cut in the road and there was a high side and a low side. There were maybe five guys on [each] side of [the bed of] a deuce-and-a-half truck – a larger truck with an open back bed. We were all positioned in our combat gear, ready for any ambush that would come along the way.

As we were passing this area I heard something hit the bed of the truck. I looked down and it was a grenade. Your mind just immediately goes through, should I jump on it or should I throw it. I decided [that if I jumped on it, it would still kill more than just me, so what I decided

to do] was reach down and throw it. I threw it down to the low side of this cut. But as I threw it, and it was already gone from my hand, I realized that it did not have a firing pin on it. So rather than having been thrown in by an enemy, it had simply unscrewed from somebody's ammo belt... So the firing pin was still on their belt and the grenade was now gone.

That was one incident.

The other time, and I don't remember whether it was Duc Lap or Duc Co. I think it was Duc Co which happened after Duc Lap, that we were there to improve the landing area for the planes at this particular Special Forces camp. This was near the Cambodian border, as was Duc Lap. Anyway, we knew that we were supposed to survey this tarmac area which was a parking area for any cargo planes that came in – an unloading area I should say because they didn't stay parked very long. So ... [upon arriving at the tarmac] I grabbed the surveying rod and we were going to start shooting some levels to see what we had and what we had to do. And, while the other surveyor was getting out the instruments, I grabbed the rod and was going to get set up to take some shots around the area. I had walked onto the tarmac area. In military language, somebody behind me said, "Freeze." So I stopped and was told I had walked into a mine field. So I was able to spin around on the balls of my feet and saw my footprints from walking in there. I hadn't set anything off, so I just stepped back out by following my footprints.

Very nervously, I'm assuming.

It wasn't until afterwards that I got nervous! You just realize this is what you have to do. So afterwards we rigged up what we called a sheep's foot roller, which is kind of a spiny roller behind a bulldozer and built up sand bags around the operator. Then [the bulldozer pulling the sheep's foot roller] went back and forth in that area to set off all the mines. [They were antipersonnel mines;] there were quite a few of them

How far had you actually wandered into that field?

... It was maybe ten or fifteen steps. Just where the actual boundary was was a good question. But I just count my lucky stars that somebody told me to stop!

Now, when you went from camp to camp were you with the same squad?

I was with the same surveying crew. But surveyors were assigned to Headquarters Company, which would feed surveying assistance to any line company that called in for it. Typically when we would go somewhere we would stay with the unit until the job was done because everything was construction-wise incremental. You had to clear an area, level it, bring material in or take material out, and eventually get things to a common grade and shape the runway. All of that needed assistance from the surveyors.

How long were you in Vietnam altogether?

It was a year. I got there in the middle of October [1966] and I was back [in the U.S.] late September or early October of 1967.

During the time you were in Vietnam did you get any leave or any R&R?

I did! As a matter of fact I did two things. One was R&R and the other was some leave time. I really can't tell you how that came about. I was trying to think about it after you asked me to do this.

Anyway, R&R as I recall was either one or two weeks. I simply caught a helicopter into Cam Ranh Bay and then caught an R&R flight. It was a DC4 piston engine airplane. We went from Cam Ranh Bay to Kuala Lumpur. You could pick where you wanted to go from certain choices. You could go to Bangkok or to whatever other places there were.

I thought Panang, Malaysia sounded interesting. It was pretty cool. We flew there and landed at Kuala Lumpur and had to take a ferry out to Panang. I stayed in a hotel. The exchange rate was phenomenal. One American dollar would be like twenty Malaysian dollars. So I stayed where Somerset Maugham, the author, had stayed.

We met some young ladies and took them out to dinner. I think we had our own waiter and an excellent dinner. I had met some other guys on the airplane there, so there were three of us – a total of six who went to dinner. And I think my share was only \$20. It was just amazing – the exchange rate.

Then one day I did have to stay in the hotel because it was a Muslim area and there were some Muslim uprisings. So we were requested to stay in the hotel.

It was a matter of knowing what your timeline was and getting back to the airport for your assigned flight. Get back to Cam Ranh Bay and get back to your unit. Typically you caught a helicopter to your unit, wherever it was at.

Another time, for some reason I had some accrued leave – something better than a week. So I just took military flights out of Cam Ranh Bay to Okinawa. And I went to either Yokohama or Tokyo, I don't remember, but I had to go south for a bit. I heard about a Japanese resort community in Atami, Japan. So I just jumped in a cab and said, "I want to go to Atami." I did that and it was maybe an hour-and-a-half drive. I just walked into this hotel called the New Fujiya Hotel.

Unfortunately there was a rather rainy weather front going through the area, so some of the time we were limited to the hotel. But there were University of Tokyo students who were there who were bilingual. I did get a chance to go out with them one night to go out to different restaurants. It was away from the Americanized areas, so people always looked suspiciously at me.

You kind of stand out.

You really stand out. Yes. I just am not a fan of those types of food. The one thing I did like was shark fin soup. What's interesting there is [that it is proper] manners...to slurp soup.

Yes. To show appreciation.

It was just contrary to what our manners are, so that was kind of a surprise to me.

So I was there and came back through Da Nang and somehow took an extra day. I don't think I ever got penalized for it, though. Da Nang was on the beach and I thought I would spend the day on the beach. So I did that before I jumped on a helicopter to [return to] where my unit was.

.... And that was the extent of my out-of-Vietnam experiences.

What sort of things did your squad do to maybe relieve some tensions? Did people play practical jokes on each other? Did you have celebrations of some sort?

We would play cards. But there wasn't any real trend toward practical jokes or anything. Well, one of the sergeants had a mongoose and we would get a snake and put it in with the mongoose. It was amazing how [quickly] the mongoose would move around [and kill the snake]. We used to eliminate some of the mice, some of the rats, in a different way. But most of it was really kind of drudgery from day-to-day.

Because you weren't in direct combat.

Right. You know you had to go out to whatever your assignment was. Or if we got a survey for a particular thing.

The one thing we did that was very quick was taking measurements when you had the [level measuring] rod, because it was a great target! And you had to put it right in front of your body. So we'd take pretty quick measurements in case there were any snipers around.

But again we were very lucky.

Now you were working in what you called the more drudgery. But you were doing work with Special Forces, which is sort of the other end of the spectrum.

I kind of wondered about this. Because the times [that] there was heavy action at Duc Co and Duc Lap, either preceded or occurred after the times we were there. And there was some pretty heavy action at these places. Because both of them were near the Cambodian border, it depended on what the objectives of the enemy were. If they would pass by. There was only one day at Duc Lap where we were in our fox holes with gathered ammunition ready to have interaction. But they decided to pass by – they had a different objective.

Later on that day the word went out that they had passed. So in the places where the special forces were – and this was early on in the conflict, Ia Drang Valley had happened, and it was just south of where we were at. So I wondered why this whole year went by and ... [we were] that fortunate. From what I could tell it was because it was quite early in our involvement there and this probably had a lot to do with it because a lot of the establishment of their efforts was still in process. So they probably didn't want to sacrifice what they had gotten over there.

At nighttime we would see activity happening off in different areas. There were essentially parachute flares that would light up an area. Or you might have heard of "puff the magic dragon", which in early stages was a C47 [cargo variation of the] twin-engine DC3 with a mini-gun.... A mini-gun was a very rapid fire weapon that would concentrate ... fire into an area. We would see puff operating off in the distance. Or during the day we'd see a flight of phantom jets attacking an area that we could actually bring into closer ... [view] with our survey instruments. But it never was directly with us – knock on wood!

[During the day the kids from nearby a nearby Montagnard village were frequently around to watch the bulldozers, road graders and dump trucks. There were three buddies, maybe 10 years old, who were frequently there to watch; I taught them to sing Old McDonald Had a Farm and they would come by often and repeatedly sing it. One of my greatest fears was that on nights when we worked around the clock, and we would be positioned in the bush around the

work area to protect the equipment operators, that some kid from the village would sneak into the area to watch the equipment and rattle the bushes and I would accidentally shoot the kid thinking he was VC.]

So you were there for a year. How was it determined when you would leave? Was it a point system?

No. It was just time. Essentially you rotated out and were replaced by somebody else. These poor guys today do multiple tours of duty. We had to deal with it once. And we all had our own experiences depending on where you were and what you did. It was just a matter of fate.

How were you notified when it was your time to go home?

The word came to the commanding officer. And you kept track of it! And they ... [notified] you.

That was a funny thing. We were starting to get M16's for our weapons. Of course I had a M14 and I was just so comfortable with it I refused an M16. It wasn't any big deal. I wasn't ordered to change. I was down to a month when that change was being done and we were out in the field at the time. Maybe it was that there weren't enough of them to go around at that time, anyway. And [word was] ...guys [were] having problems with them.

Redeployment Home

When you knew you were going home, you must have been in a mood to celebrate.

Yes. The real celebration came when you got back to the U.S. You ended up back at Cam Ranh Bay. Then it was a chartered commercial flight [home]. I came back into Tacoma, Washington. I think it was late September or early October of 1967.

What I wanted to do was drive a convertible down the expressway. So after I checked out of Tacoma.

Let me go back just a little bit. When you got back to Tacoma – this was 1967 – what sort of response did you get from people?

Well, first of all, before you left – somehow we went back through a replacement unit, ... because you had to check in your rifle, all of your ammunition, your grenades, your combat gear, before you left there. That's kind of interesting because you wondered who got it from there and what they did.

Were you able to bring any souvenirs back?

Just things like – and I didn't try to smuggle anything – I did bring back some of the money and some arm patches from different units that had pulled security for us along the way. When you convoyed with ... [high-value] equipment ... there were efforts made to protect that.

So there were a couple of airborne units – the 101st and the 82nd – also, the 25th Infantry. Also, at Pleiku and Dragon Mountain that was also the base of the 4th Infantry. And somewhere along the way we got the Big Red One, too. And I'd collected the arm patches along the way. But I didn't bring back any [weapons or] live rounds or anything.

When you got back, you flew. I'm guessing the mood on the plane was a lot different than it was on the way over.

It was. It was highly spirited.

A lot of talking and a lot more laughing.

Yes. That's for sure.

Did you have to stop in Honolulu?

I don't recall. I probably didn't even notice! All I knew was that we were on our way back to the States.

When you ended up back in Tacoma, how long were you there before you headed back east?

Not very long. And I didn't head back east. I stayed out west for a bit. And that was the first I was hearing about any of the rallying and stuff that other youngsters were doing.

Did you encounter any of that?

Actually, I came into Tacoma and I went through the process of checking in and getting my next assignment, which was back to Fort Leonard-Wood. But I had 30 days of leave.

Of course, what I wanted to do was drive a convertible down the expressway. So I got a [plane] ticket to San Francisco and rented a Dodge Charger convertible and drove all around town. Then, it was on a Sunday, I remember putting on my uniform and going to Haight-Ashbury and walking down the street. But nobody was around. I was like, "Let's see what happens." But I guess everybody was up too late the night before and it was early enough that I was going to church. And I actually met a flight attendant at church and we went to Sausalito and had a nice day.

From there I went ... to Albuquerque, and rented a car and drove out [to the small town of Lake Arthur] to see the mother of my friend who had been killed. [I wanted her to know that I was a friend of his, shared her grief, and tell her that her son had been a very brave soldier by likely saving a number of others from injury or death by driving his road grader into that ravine rather than into the convoy vehicles in front of him coming down that hill when the road grader brakes failed.]

Then I went back to Albuquerque and then to Muskegon for a while because I wanted to [see my parents and] pick up my car.

So you flew from San Francisco back home.

I flew from Albuquerque.

Your family must have been very happy to see you and that you were okay.

Yes. It was fun seeing everybody. I [also] visited the cousins and the uncles and aunts.

Did you talk to that uncle who had shared his stories?

He was in Chicago, and I didn't get to Chicago.

What was the first thing you remembered doing when you got back to the States. You talked about driving. Was there any food you ate or something you did that just said, "I'm home."

Probably I had a hamburger. And I had gotten a number of letters from this one young lady from Muskegon. So I just made it a point to take her out to dinner one night. And that wasn't something I was interested in continuing.

Then I drove back to Detroit. I had a girlfriend there. I visited there.

It's interesting to try to recall just what happened. Because probably I spent most of my time in Muskegon.

Were you still in the Army at this point?

Oh, yes. I still had six months to do until April of 1968 when I would get out.

I had been assigned to Fort Leonard-Wood. Again, it was early November when I checked in at Fort Leonard-Wood. I had my car so I drove there and was able to keep my car there.

As it turned out, the same first sergeant who had gotten drunk [in Viet Nam] that night was my first sergeant there. He was a good guy. He was an excellent soldier. It's just that he had that particular moment. And it was kind of frightening for me because I didn't know whether I was going to have to shoot him or not.

So I checked in. And I was a surveyor, but we weren't building anything. So all we had to do – and we were short-timers – so we would check in in the morning at the unit office and go have coffee.

What was your rank at this point?

I was an E4, [like] a corporal, ... [but] a technical ranking. So I was a Specialist 4.

But I heard about this unit called 'unit police' where these guys would go pick up prisoners and take them for their judicial action – their punitive action. I checked into it and it sounded like it was pretty cool, because you could meet a pilot [and fly out of Fort Leonard Wood airport] in a small 7 passenger airplane. The [air charter] company had a contract with the government. You would take off with the pilot and you'd go to Fort Carson, Colorado, to Chicago Midway, Indianapolis, [or Detroit] and pick up prisoners that were apprehended by the

military police and take them for punitive action [to Fort Carson in Colorado, Fort Riley in Kansas or back to Fort Leonard Wood.]

So I went to the first sergeant and said, “Sergeant, I’d like to do this. I’m not doing anything.” It sounded pretty cool to mark off the rest of my time. And this is December, and it’s down near Rolla, Missouri, and it’s wintertime. It didn’t even faze me [that flying in a small plane in the winter might be a bit iffy]. He finally agreed. So I got assigned to this police unit.

... [We were equipped with] a .45, a night stick, [five sets of hand-cuffs], and [we had] a [starched] uniform regimen. It was just fatigues and you had a camouflage ascot and a [baseball-style] cap. Everything had to be pressed and pleated. What you do, is you check in the morning, meet your pilot at the airport. These were either single-engine Pipers that would carry seven people – the pilot, you and five prisoners. Or, in some cases it was a twin-engine Beechcraft Queen Air which would handle 12 people – the pilot, you and ten passengers. Typically you were allocated five prisoners. If there was going to be more than that you’d have two guards.

What we’d have to do is ...go to the airport’s general military aviation terminal and the military police would be there with the prisoners. And there’s always paperwork [to transfer the prisoners from the MPs]. Then we’d put handcuffs on... [the prisoners] and march them off to the airplane. Then you’d take their handcuffs off [as they were seated on the plane.]. Then pilot got into his seat and I got into the co-pilot’s seat, and [the prisoners] were behind us. But their handcuffs couldn’t be on in case there was an emergency. So ... [it was necessary] to convince them that there would be no good ...trying to attempt anything, [not letting them know that ’s highly unlikely that I was going to shoot a .45 in a plane while in the air.

But these guys were scared to death. Number one, they had been apprehended. And number two they’d probably never been on a small airplane before. So I never had any problems.

Anyway, we’d leave from Fort Leonard-Wood empty. Then, let’s say ... [there was to be] a pickup at Midway. We’d come into Chicago Midway, get our prisoners and go out to the plane. Then we might be going to Colorado Springs. So now we’re flying cross-country ... [and there] might have to be a fuel and meal stop. Now we land at some little town in Iowa. As these guys are getting out of the plane I put their handcuffs back on them. But now they’re going to have to eat. ... [So] two guys [get] hooked together, so one guy is going to have to eat with his left hand and another with his right. [Then as we] walk into a restaurant [with handcuffed prisoners and a guard with a .45 and a night stick, and people are wondering just how dangerous these prisoners were; though they were being routed for discipline for only more minor offenses like AWOL or fighting with a fellow soldier.] It was really kind of interesting. [Next it was back] on the plane and be off again.

What kind of restaurants would you go into?

Restaurants by the airport. We might come into Dodge City, Iowa. It wasn’t really a podunk location because there was a need for a fueling stop and it was probably [a place the air charter company] had a contract with for fuel pricing.

But you’re flying across Kansas. And the plane is relatively droning on. Well, I had some [prior] engineering [classes in junior college] and I understood about aerodynamics. So the pilot would take a nap and I’d fly the airplane!

This one time one of the prisoners asked if I was a pilot. I said, not really. [There were no further questions.]

But it was fun doing that. And we'd run into some weather situations sometimes, but it never occurred to me to be concerned about that.

We were in a twin-engine airplane one time. I thought I was picking up five prisoners at Midway. The plane had iced up to the point where we were probably ten feet above the runway on a landing approach when it just fell out of the sky because of icing. So we had to get the airplane checked out. And we went to pick up the prisoners and there's ten of them there. So now I have handcuffs for five. But I could hook them together. So I agreed to take them and I didn't have any problem. But we had some bad weather.

We were going to Colorado Springs. One of the owners of the charter company was the pilot. And he let me fly as we were approaching Colorado. But the weather got so bad he had to take over. And then we were coming into Colorado Springs. And it was the first time I had ever seen snow coming at me – blinding snow – sitting behind a windshield [in the co-pilot's seat.]. Of course, he's making an instrument approach. It turned out fine. But I was thinking, "There's mountains around here!" But it turned out uneventful.

But there were some really neat experiences doing that.

So I did that until my ETS – my termination of service, until I was released from active duty. And that happened at Fort Leonard-Wood.

Then I went back to my job in Detroit.

Discharge and Returning to Civilian Life

I took a little time off. Another guy and I – I had the car – decided we were going to go to Daytona Beach. It was April. Some of the colleges were having spring break. So we decided to go. But the darn thing was, the guy was from Iowa. And whenever it was his turn [to drive] and I was sleeping, as long as we were heading south he just took whatever road. And I had to figure out where we were at before I could get back on the highway. But he didn't care!

We got down there. We stayed in a motel the first couple of nights before we realized how fast our money was running out. So we went and rented camping equipment and went to a campground and we were able to spend a little more time there before coming back.

But I remember coming back, and I had a sister who lived in Chicago at the time. I remember having a dollar in my pocket. I got to her house and borrowed some money from them so I could get back. Maybe I stopped in Muskegon before I went to Detroit, but I went back to my job then – the job that I had previously.

So they held it for you.

They held it for me, yes. I worked there for a while. But when I met the gal who is now my wife, she was working temporarily – she had graduated from Western Michigan as a teacher. So she was doing temporary work as a secretary until her job started at a nearby high school that fall.

I met her at the Xerox machine, [which copy machines were called back then]. Everything that happens in life happens at the Xerox machine! [I was on the company softball team and she would attend the games; we would all go for pizza afterwards.] So I met her and started thinking it was going to get serious and I'd better get myself back in college and finish up

my engineering degree. Anyway, we got married. I went back to college and finished my degree.

I had some great jobs. My first job was as a test engineer with Chrysler. I had fun doing all kinds of crazy things with cars. They had a downturn and I decided to look elsewhere. I came to Chicago and switched to the railroad industry doing various types of testing for the rail industry. [Riding the locomotives and trains was a thrill.] Then various jobs during that time, still ...within that industry, but not working directly for railroads, with either suppliers or research and development organizations.

And you retired.

I retired in 2009, at the end of March in 2009.

Did you make any close friendships with anybody? Are you still in touch with anybody that you knew while you were in the service?

Not really. I was curious about some people and tried to look them up one time. But you never know where that leads. You were good buddies, but because people were coming and going I just never did. And there's never been any unit reunions or that sort of stuff.

But you did join the VFW.

It probably wasn't until ... I've been in the VFW probably about seven years. I don't even recall what it was, but I guess I became curious about it and went over there. Now I'm very active in the VFW.

And now you're the new service officer for the Darien Post.

The way that works is there's the commander, and the number two who is the senior vice commander. Then there's the junior vice commander and the other officers. I'd been the senior vice commander for a number of years. I'm not interested in being the commander because I want the younger guys to be the face of the Post – so the guys who've been in Iraq [and Afghanistan]. And we've got some really good guys.

...My intention is to give them support. They're still working so I'm there to do stuff they're not available to do.

Lasting Impressions

How did your military experiences affect the way you think about the war or the way you think about the military in general?

Well, I think that you can't help but walk away with a much better sense of determination, of loyalty, of self-confidence, and of appreciation of life that we have an opportunity for here in the United States. I say opportunity because if we don't take advantage of that it's our own fault. The opportunity is there.

When I see now that voting can be done without providing identification, when I see people sit down during the national anthem, or kneel down . . . [it makes me wonder what has become of appreciation in the U.S. and having respect for the flag.] There's been no experience in their life to tell them what to appreciate what they have available to them. It's up to them to do something with it.

How did your military experience affect your life?

Tremendously. When I got back, number one, I was intact. Number two, I had a better commitment of doing something with my life. Before I went in, and when I left college, I was getting by because it was a good time to be young and have fun. But there was a different sense that there was a future I had to take care of, especially after I met the person who is now my wife. I realized there would be responsibilities there. I just had a better sense of what life was all about.

Final Thoughts

Is there anything we haven't talked about that you'd like to add before we finish?

I think we did a pretty good job with nearly two hours of conversation!

The only other thing is it saddens me sometimes to see how the media presents the negative side of the world and people, particularly the way they report some of the military interactions. One of the things that came out of Vietnam and interactions we had before is that if we're going to do this we have to just be committed, like it was in the Second World War. We can't have the media all the time showing the mistakes, or just the one side of what the enemy is doing without the commitment that individual soldiers have made. Maybe one guy or two guys I encountered were druggies or anything like that. But most of these guys were there to do a job and got it done very responsibly, very honorable young men. And I think that's mostly the case in the military today.

There certainly is a lot of recognition of people – thanking you for your service and that sort of thing. But the way the media handles things today is really upsetting to me. All they're interested in is controversy and getting something to the public first. And opinions. They're not necessarily objectively committed to the truth. They're interested in what gives them ratings. It's a sad state.

As far as anything else I think we pretty well covered the experience.

Thank you for sharing your story.