

VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT
Preserving Stories of Service for Future Generations

Interview with

Larry Grabowski

Conducted by Deb Barrett

January 21, 2016

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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 Thursday, January 21, 2016 with Mr. Larry Grabowski at the Indian Prairie Public Library in Darien, Illinois. My name is Deb Barrett. Mr. Grabowski was born on June 28, 1945 in Chicago, Illinois. He is a retired accountant for Peoples Gas in Chicago. He learned of the Veterans History Project through the family of Joe Popowitch, the librarian here who is responsible for this project. Mr. Grabowski has kindly consented to be interviewed for this project. Here is his story.

Life Before Entering Military Service

Larry, where were you living when you entered the service? What was your life like just before you went in?

I grew up near Douglas Park, which was kind of a bad neighborhood. It was a poor area. In fact, one of the friends I grew up with was a big-time football coach. They had an article about him in the Chicago Sun Times, and in that article he mentioned that he grew up in the slums. So I guess I can say I grew up in the slums. It was a bad neighborhood.

When you went into the service were you living at home? Were you in high school or out of school?

Yes. I had graduated from college and was living at home, anticipating getting drafted. In those days it was almost certain that you would get drafted and go to Vietnam. And that's exactly the way it happened.

Were you working while you were waiting?

I was. When I worked for Peoples Gas I had a really nice deal where in my last year of high school I worked as messenger. I would pick up mail from outlying locations and then all during college I was a messenger. During the summers I worked full time and during school I worked after school. So it was a terrific job for me. So I did have that job when I got drafted.

You said you knew you were going to get drafted; it was pretty sure.

Yes.

Had you had any family members who had been in the service?

No.

So you were the first one.

Yes.

What was your family's reaction to your draft notice coming in?

Well, my father was kind of a strange person. I had no reaction from him. My mother was concerned, of course. She just had to get used to it, just like I did.

How much time did you have after you received your notice before you had to report?

I'm going to say a month, but I'm just guessing. It was something like that.

Do you remember what you did during that time?

I put on a lot of weight! I went out drinking with my friends – kind of like going-away parties from various groups of people. It was just the way it was.

Induction, Basic and Advanced Training

Where were you inducted?

I remember going downtown somewhere. I think that's where it was – it was Van Buren and something. That was like a meat-processing plant, so to speak: People just came through there and they shipped you out to wherever they were going to ship you.

What did you see when you got downtown and got to that location? When you walked in what was there?

There were just guys like me all over the place, not looking forward to the experience. They gave you a physical and you were filling out paperwork and all that kind of stuff. It took most of the day. But by the end of that day they had figured out where they were going to send you.

Did they give you your uniform and things there?

No. That didn't happen until you got to your basic training place. Which in my case was Fort Polk, Louisiana. Having been to Vietnam, Fort Polk, Louisiana, where the conditions there were about close to Vietnam as could be – I mean, just hot and humid and awful.

So you were sworn in in Chicago.

Yes.

How did you get down to Louisiana?

I think I had to fly.

Just a commercial flight?

Yes. One of my friends – I can't remember how I got to know him – his family drove me to the airport because my family didn't have a car. That's kind of the way it happened.

So you flew down. When you got to Louisiana, how did you get to the base?

They had a bus that bussed us to the actual military base. I still remember this. We got in late at night and they took us to the military base. Of course, we hadn't eaten very much so they put us in the mess hall. I still remember this: They had some food for us and already they were preparing us for the meanness of the people who run the Army. I remember they kept saying, "You better eat everything that's on your plate." I had put something on my plate that I thought was Jell-O and it turned out to be jelly! And I'm hearing these words: "You better eat everything on your plate." So that was my first encounter with military people.

So you were drafted into the Army. And you were 22?

It was 1968, so I was probably about 23.

So you had something to eat and got your quarters?

Yes. We got our bunk beds and all that stuff. We just got ready for basic training.

You said you had bunk beds. What were your barracks like?

They were pretty sparse. It was just beds and a little footlocker where you kept any personal things you might have had. It was no big deal. They had to give us some place to sleep and it was not much more than that.

Did you have the top or bottom bunk?

To be honest, I don't remember. I remember having to make your bed all the time. They were very strict. If you made your bed and it wasn't satisfactory they'd just come and tip everything over and you'd have to do it again. That was their way of disciplining us.

The things you had in your footlocker – did you have a standing locker as well?

It was just a footlocker. It wasn't tall. But, really, there wasn't much to put in there. Maybe the clothes that came in – my civilian clothes – I might have had in there.

Was there anything you were not allowed to bring?

That really wasn't an issue. There wasn't much that was going to do you much good in the service. Again, I'm probably thinking ahead to when I went to Vietnam. I brought a transistor radio and things like that. But for basic training I don't think there was hardly anything I had down there of civilian-type stuff.

So how did they wake you up that first morning?

They came in at the crack of dawn blowing whistles. “Get your feet on the ground!” Again, kind of a gruff attitude until you woke up. Then you had to make your bed. And then you could go to the mess hall and grab breakfast.

How much time did you have to get ready?

It wasn't a huge amount of time. They always wanted to keep you moving and rushing – that kind of thing. You just had to deal with it.

Did you go to the mess hall as a unit or just separately?

We went as a unit, as I recall.

Did you have to march there?

You know, I think so. I think we had to. And once you got there you ate and got ready for the day.

How was breakfast? Was it a good breakfast?

It was okay. Some meals were okay. Some were not okay.

Just whatever you take, you eat.

Yes. They'd have eggs and bacon. They would have what we called “shit on a shingle,” which was creamed beef on toast. So they did have a variety, as best they could do.

Gave you lots of calories!

Yes.

And after breakfast what was normal?

Then training. You'd start the day off with a long run and have to run quite a ways. Then you'd do calisthenics and all that kind of stuff. After that you'd go to training. There would be classes or going to the rifle range – skills you would need in the service.

What sort of classes were there? Were they classroom classes?

Yes.

Like what, for example?

It's hard to remember. Again, it was all geared toward the military – like the Geneva Convention and things like that. That's about the only thing that comes to mind. But it was always related to being in the Army; being in the military.

Did you know at that point that you were going to Vietnam, or was it just assumed?

It was assumed. Fort Polk was a Vietnam shipping point. In my mind I was pretty sure I was going to go there. And towards the end of basic training is when you got your orders. Then you had to go to advanced training. My advanced training was also at Fort Polk.

So you just stayed there.

I stayed there. And at that point in time they didn't tell you quite yet that you were going to Vietnam. But it was known that if you were going to AIT – advanced infantry training – you were going to Vietnam. And that's the way it turned out.

How long was your basic training?

Eight weeks, as was the advanced infantry training.

So, basically, four months' worth of training.

Yes.

Were you able to communicate with your family back home during that time?

Not like if you're in the service now, with e-mail and different devices. It was all snail-mail. The mail would take a long time to get in either direction.

But there were no restrictions on communication?

No really, as far as mail goes. Calling was another matter. If you got to call home that would be a real treat.

What time of the year did you go in?

I was in training from May for four months. By the time I got my orders to Vietnam it was October. I had the pleasure of being at Fort Polk, Louisiana for the heat of summer months.

And it gets hot down there.

It's awful.

Well that was preparation.

It was. Yes.

Had you held a gun before you went to basic?

Never.

So this was a whole new experience for you.

Yes. In fact, today, friends I have who were in the military – they were clerks or whatever – kind of joking, one of them is a gun fanatic. Not fanatic, but he collects guns. And the fact that I have no interest in ever getting a gun or any of that stuff, he finds it ironic that I used a gun in the military and I don't care to now.

When you first were given our rifle, what did they tell you?

First of all, at the advanced infantry training they used a rifle called an M14, which was obsolete – they didn't use that in Vietnam. So here they are training you to go to war on a weapon that you were not going to use. So that was stupid to begin with. Then, when you got to Vietnam you got an M16. Again, there all these odd situations happening about that.

When the trained you, you had target practice. What other type of practice?

In the advanced infantry, marching through the woods at night because that's what you'd be doing over in Vietnam.

This is another event I remember. They had something like a telescope that you could see at night everything that was happening. I remember they kept telling me I better not drop that because it cost I don't know how many thousands of dollars. And if it broke it was coming out of my paycheck! So I remember shaking, carrying this thing. But that's one thing that kind of sticks out in my mind.

Again, it was trying to get you ready for being in Vietnam.

Did you do live-fire exercises?

Not live. But target practice and that kind of thing. I don't remember firing against somebody else. Maybe it did happen, but I don't remember that.

Did they do anything like some people talk about crawling under barbed wire?

Oh, yes.

While being shot over above?

Yes.

Getting you accustomed to the sounds and feel.

Yes. And when it would rain, just getting accustomed to being out in the rain in the field and having to live that way.

Did you do any exercises that involved your staying overnight in tents or anything?

Yes. There were activities like that.

What were they like? How long were they and what were you expected to do?

Oh, they might be a day or two out in the field – just to get used to not having a roof over your head. That was that.

So you had your eight weeks of advanced training.

It was four and four: four weeks of basic and four weeks of advanced.

So it was two months that you were in training?

I think so. Does that make sense? Or maybe it was eight and eight. I don't remember to be honest with you. If I went in in May and didn't go to Vietnam until October ...

That sounds like four months.

So maybe it was eight weeks each.

Deployment and Duty in Vietnam

So when you finished your advanced training and got your orders to go to Vietnam, you said you were not surprised.

Yes.

Did you have any time between advanced training and the time you left for Vietnam?

Yes. I think we got about three weeks or so.

So you were able to go home?

Yes. And then, again, it was going-away parties from various friends and so forth.

From there, when your three weeks were over, where did you meet?

I think they just told you to report to Oakland, California, and you had to get there on your own. Once you got there is when the fun really started.

So where did you meet in Oakland?

They had some facility there. It was like a factory for processing guys going over to Vietnam.

You said you had your uniform and stuff?

To be honest, we didn't get our real uniform until we got to Vietnam. So we must have had some other temporary type of uniform to get us over there.

But you also mentioned some personal things you took.

I did.

What sort of personal things did you take?

Just paper and envelopes so I could write letters, that transistor radio something to shave with. Again, pretty sparse stuff. And, of course, whatever you brought you had to carry on your back. As we talk further I'll get into a situation – I had too much.

So you had to take that into account when you were figuring out what to bring.

Yes.

So you met in Oakland. Did you know any of the other men who were going overseas?

I knew a couple. In fact, that incident where I talked about getting driven to the airport, it was one of my friends from basic training whose family drove to the airport. I knew him. And there were a handful of other guys I had trained with. And while there one of the things that you are assigned every now and then is KP. I'm sure you've heard of that. Which is a demeaning job. And even in Oakland, you think they'd let you have a couple of days to have fun. But I got stuck on KP. And everybody was going to town to party, and here I was cutting potatoes and that kind of stuff.

Just part of the rotation; the luck of the draw.

Yes.

Did you have any free time while you were in Oakland?

No. We were there a couple of days. We filled out paperwork and they assigned us to where we were going to end up in Vietnam.

When we got there, there were a couple of cities where everybody went, pretty much. And from there it would be all over again – they would divide you up into whatever unit you were going to be in.

They did that in Vietnam or Oakland?

In Vietnam.

In Oakland you knew what city you were going to in Vietnam but that was it?

Yes. Again, knowing that really didn't tell you anything. You didn't really know where you were going to end up in the country.

And you knew what you would be doing? You were infantry?

Oh, yes. I was infantry. Some people were trained in one thing and when they got over there ended up in something else. But I trained in infantry and became infantry. Which is ironic, too. When you graduated from advanced infantry training they called your name off and told you where you were going to go. There were guys who could barely read who were sent to finance school. And I had a degree in finance. Now, does that make any sense? But, again, that's the way it worked, and so be it.

So you had a degree in finance from the University of Illinois?

In Chicago. Yes.

But you ended up in infantry. And you ended up in Oakland for a couple of days. Where did they house you?

They had a unit there. There were buildings. It was like a factory the way they were running through there. Again there were half-a-million guys in Vietnam at the peak. It was a lot of people.

Was it a regular military installation – a regular military base that they had?

I believe so. Yes.

So when it was time to go to Vietnam you flew?

Yes.

Was it a plane of just soldiers?

Yes.

A commercial flight?

Yes.

And where were you headed?

I think it was Bien Hoa, which is one of the big cities where you landed. I don't think I was ever in Saigon. So I think Bien Hoa was the city where I landed.

It was another processing situation where they figured out where you were needed.

On the trip over there – you're on this flight with all these other men going the same place – what was the mood like on the plane.

It was pretty quiet. Everybody knew what life was going to be like when we landed. It was a really long flight. I think we may have landed in Hawaii to refuel. But it was a pretty quiet ride.

So you went from Oakland to Hawaii. Did you make another stop before you got to Vietnam?

We may have.

But you stayed on the plane while they refueled?

Yes. We didn't get to walk around much or anything.

What did you do during that time? You said it was quiet.

I'm a reader so I read a lot. I'm sure I was reading. Small talk with other people on the plane.

Was your commanding officer on the plane?

No. You didn't know who it was until you got there. First you landed in Vietnam and then you went to the actual unit that you were going to.

So when you landed in Vietnam was it daytime or nighttime?

I think it was daytime. And you saw all these Vietnamese people working at the airport.

Did you notice anything when you were coming in to land?

Yes. Looking at the terrain, it was a very green country – a lot of jungle. There were not many big cities where we were.

So you said you landed in Bien Hoa. Do you remember what part of South Vietnam that was?

It was in the southern part, but not that far south; maybe north of the southern part.

You landed. The heat probably reminded you of Louisiana.

Oh, yes. It was pretty obvious what it was going to be like when you got off the plane – pretty steamy. And in Bien Hoa it was like processing all over again. We were probably there two or three days and they finally decided where you were going to end up. And I was going to end up in the Americal Division, which was pretty far north. While we were waiting we had a little chance to party for a couple of days. You also had a chance to listen to the field radios of the people who were out in the field as to what that would be like.

And I still remember this. There were a lot of leaches. Leaches were a huge problem. They crawled on you and sucked the blood out of you. They were hard to get rid of. Not only did you have to worry about snakes and big spiders, but these leaches were a nuisance. And the unit we were going to was loaded with leaches. So I didn't look forward to that at all!

How long were you doing that – listening in?

Just a couple of days at the most – two or three days, tops.

Once they figured out where you were going, and they told you that you were going to the Americal Division, how did you get there?

I believe we went in a helicopter.

How many of the guys you flew in with went to the Americal?

Maybe a half-a-dozen went together. And, again, when you landed at the Americal Division they sorted out which unit you were going to go to within the Division.

Were you still with any of the guys you knew?

At that point it was like everybody was going in their own direction, so it was new people all over the place. I remember now the guy I went to the airport with, we were pretty good friends. We were joking about we ran into somebody who was in training with us who was an obnoxious guy who would always brag about this or that, "I'm not going to Vietnam." And there he was walking around in Vietnam. So we both had a laugh about that.

You flew in a helicopter. Was this your first opportunity to fly in a helicopter?

Yes.

Again, you were 23?

Yes. I was older. A lot of them were 19, but there were a few of us old-timers.

So you got in the helicopter and taken to your division. How long did the flight take there?

It was probably less than an hour. Again, I'm sure you've seen helicopters that are open on the sides. It makes you a little nervous when you're sitting there, that they'd take a little turn and you'd flop out of there.

Did they have chairs or were you sitting on the floor of the helicopter?

We were on the floor.

So you had your pack with everything in it.

I'm not sure we had our pack yet. Until you got to your final unit it made no sense to be carrying a bunch of stuff. But I did have my personal stuff with me.

So you got to the Americal Division. As you were landing, what did you see?

You were getting to the smaller places and this was where the war was actually happening. Again they had a base camp where they had clerical people working there and stuff like that. We were there again another day or two before we actually got out into the field where we were going to end up. It depended on the need. We were losing a lot of people there.

So you were basically taking the place of someone who had been lost.

Yes.

So you were out in the field. What was your living situation like? Were you in tents? Were you living in a building of some sort?

No. They had these so-called base camps which you would get to rarely, where you would sleep with a roof over your head in a bunker. You might even get a warm meal.

But the first day out in the field there was an operation. We got there and your job was to walk through the jungle looking for the enemy, so to speak. Or, as I've seen referred to many times, to try to draw fire from the enemy so you knew where the enemy was, which is a pretty stupid way to run a war. It was their home and here we are making noise through the jungle.

I remember the first operation we had to walk through the jungle. And it was mountainous, so you had to go up and down. And it was hot. So I remember that first day, whatever I had in my pack was so much I couldn't take it anymore. After a while I was breathing so hard, the squad leader – Terry Hardig, who was in charge of our squad – he took off his very light backpack and gave it to me and took my heavy one. That was pretty classy.

A pretty compassionate thing to do.

Yes. And at the end of that day I ended up throwing out all the junk I had in my bag because I didn't need it. And I'd have to carry it.

So that was a typical day. You'd get to where you were going. You'd dig in – dig trenches – and during the night you've have to watch; go on guard duty. And a couple times during the night you'd have to watch that nobody penetrated your area.

It was a kind of amusing situation. I always like to get a head start on the day, so I'd try to time it so I'd be the last person watching. It would start getting light. It took me about two or three times to realize that you would pass off the watch to the next guy and everybody was

moving their time up! And there I am – it's supposed to be getting light out and it's still pitch black.

So it was a literal watch!

Anyway, it only took me two or three times to realize I was getting swindled. But again, it was rough. You wouldn't get a good night's sleep. And even when you were allowed to sleep, you were always worried that the guy whose on guard was going to fall asleep, which happened more than once. So, again, that was typical. That was our job.

Where were you sleeping? Were you sleeping in tents?

On the ground.

Did you have anything to sleep on?

Not really, no.

Just wherever you were, that's where you slept.

Yes.

What was your food?

The food was C-rations in cans. And it was pretty generic.

What was it?

One of the ones that everybody hated was ham and eggs in a can. And for some reason I liked that one. If you were going to trade with somebody it was pretty easy to get that. And they had hot dogs and beans in a can; macaroni.

Did you heat it up?

Yes and no. If the supplies were there you could heat it up. But often times it was not available, so you had to just eat it as it was.

The other downside of cans was we would get resupplied every-other day or something. And they would give you enough food until the next time you were getting supplied. But you had to carry it on your back. And those cans were heavy! So, again, you just had to deal with it.

We would do this – we'd be out in the field for two to three weeks at a shot where you would be living like that. And every now and then they'd take you to a fire base, which was where you could take a shower.

That was another thing. There was no water to take a shower and you were just filthy – sweaty and filthy.

And if you went in the river you might get leaches.

Yes, or water moccasins.

The other issue was you'd have to sometimes walk through rice paddies. Your feet would get wet and never dry out. My feet were wet the whole time I was there, and my feet still suffer today with fungus from that.

Did you ever have to deal with the water moccasins or leaches yourself?

You know, I was pretty lucky. I don't think I ever saw a water moccasin. But I was chased by a snake one time. It scared the hell out of me! We were searching a village and there was a pile of rubbish. One of the guys had one of the locals move stuff around on it. He started taking whatever was on the pile and there was a snake in there. I don't know how long it was.

Like six feet?

Probably ten feet. And snakes are fast. And it started crawling and going after people.

Whoever was close!

Yes. I remember running to fast and so far. And thank God I got near a tree, and it went up in the tree. Thank God I never had to confront it.

It's a mental game when you're out there. You have to worry about things like that. And poisonous spiders and things like that.

But you managed to avoid all of those.

I was lucky in that respect. The leaches – thank God I didn't have to deal with those very much at all.

So you said you'd be out two or three weeks at a time, then come into a fire base. It sounds like that was sort of your break.

If you want to call it that, yes.

What did you do to try to decompress a little bit?

You'd catch up on writing letters and that kind of thing. And they did have a mess hall where you could get warm food. You could take a shower. It was almost human.

A little civilization.

Yes. Exactly. And the safety – a little bit of safety being on the fire base, which was surrounded by barbed wire and that kind of thing. But it still didn't make you immune from being attacked.

You wrote to your family. Did you have any restrictions on what you could or couldn't tell them?

Not that I know of. I'm not sure if they ever opened your mail. I'm going to say 'no' because any information that was in there couldn't do anybody any good if they intercepted it.

Did you get letters from home?

I did. It was always one of the highlights – getting letters.

It didn't matter what they said, just that you always got mail?

Oh, yes. You just wanted to touch base with what was going on back home.

Did you hear any of the news about what was happening back home?

Not really. While I was there a few people got assassinated, but I really didn't know much about it. Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King.

Those were in April of that year.

I was in the service then. That is kind of a cloud in my life – when that stuff happened.

I know you said your family didn't have much. Did you ever get any packages from family or friends?

I did – not so much from my mother, but one of my wife's cousins. He's maybe about your age or a little younger. They used to send me stuff every now and then.

What did they send you?

Sweets. I remember one time somebody sent me a bottle of booze. One of the things that you would get – not all the time but maybe every other day – everybody would get two cans of pop or beer. Or maybe two or each. I don't know. But I would always try to trade the pop for a beer. So I'd have a couple of beers. And one time when I got the bottle of booze I kept my pop and the squad leader got a little suspicious. I forgot how that turned out. Anyway, that kind of stuff.

Did the guys share when you got something?

Oh, yes. Definitely. There was a lot of camaraderie as far as that goes.

But these were all new guys to you as far as nobody you knew from back home.

Yes.

I'm imagining you got pretty close to some of these guys under stress.

Yes. It was very stressful conditions.

I might as well throw out a lot of these situations while we're talking about being in the field.

We were on ambush one night, which meant going out one night – stupidly being out at night. It turns out that they had an ambush for us. We were kind of all gathered around, and all of a sudden a rocket came into the middle of us and two of my best friends got killed immediately. At that point we were starting to lose guys pretty quick. But it's a war. Stuff like that happens.

Another situation was a couple of days after that. Our group was a squad that was supposed to have ten guys and we were down to four. Two of those happened the very first day we were in the field. So even at that we had to go out on a patrol. I think we combined with the other squad. Even with that you still had to do KP. My squad leader asked me if I wanted to do KP. He and I got along pretty well. People squawk and moan when they'd get assignments like that. I pointed out to him that there was another guy who only had a month left in the field. And I said, "You know what, you may want to ask him if he wants to do KP. It would be safer."

You wouldn't have to go in the field.

Right. It turns out that's the day I got shot. And I feel I would do the same thing again today. If somebody had that short a time, why risk it.

Tell me what happened when you got shot. What was going on?

Well, it was fairly quiet and we were walking around. I still remember seeing a statue of Buddha and there was a sniper there. He just started shooting and I got shot in the leg.

This was during the day?

This was during the day. You start calling for the medic. And, of course, the medic doesn't come right away because the guy could still be out there. And he identified the medic that's worth double points if he gets him.

Right. Because he can't save anybody.

Yes. It took a while, but he finally got to me. They put some kind of plastic thing over my whole leg because they didn't have any idea what injury or damage was done to my leg.

Was it in your calf?

Yes, it was in my calf.

In retrospect I was very lucky. It didn't hit any arteries or the bone. So I was very lucky as far as that goes.

Did it lodge or go through?

It went through. So, anyway, they put this plastic thing on my whole leg and inflated it with air so I couldn't mobilize it. I got helicoptered out to the nearest hospital.

Was this in 1968 or 1969?

It was 1969.

So you were 26?

It was in the end of February and it wasn't my birthday yet, so I was probably the same age.

From there I was in hospitals in Vietnam. Then they flew me to Japan in the hospital and then to the States. So I was in the hospital. They sent me home after that wound.

So you had been in Vietnam for a year?

No, about five months, maybe six months including hospital time.

Was it common to send men home if they'd gotten shot?

It depended on how serious it was. Mine was serious.

Because it tore muscle?

Yes. I got 50-some stitches. It was pretty significant.

When you got shot you called the medic – that's how they knew something was wrong?

Yes.

And the medic was with your squad, or there were several squads?

It was just one squad. It was a very small group.

You said he put a plastic thing on that was inflated. Was it inflated by mouth?

Yes.

So it was inflated by mouth and put pressure on the wound. And it also kept your leg from moving.

I think it was more to stabilize my leg, because they didn't know if there was a broken bone or anything. I know when I was in the hospital in Vietnam; the administrative sergeant came to visit me with somebody else. I was just lying there. It was a good thing he did because I was sweating like a pig. I had an infection. If he didn't show up that day ... I didn't know how

I was supposed to feel. I figured it was all part of the process. But he called attention to the doctor. I don't remember what they did. They probably gave me morphine or something.

Some sort of antibiotic, probably.

Yes, probably.

The hospital they took you to the first time in Vietnam was a field hospital.

Yes.

Was it an actual building or was it tents?

It was an actual building.

Did they do any surgery or just clean it?

I don't know what they did, to be honest with you.

(Veteran asked to add the following incident)

[We had reached our destination for the day, and were getting ready to eat. There was a helicopter coming in with supplies, and Terry, the squad leader asked me to help bring supplies back. He already had one soldier to help. One of the other soldiers was expecting supplies for his machine gun, and wanted to go instead, so he replaced me. Terry stepped on a booby trap and was killed instantly. Of the other 2 guys, one lost a leg, the other lost an arm. Fate.]

Returning to the States

And from there they sent you to Japan?

For a while. And then I ended up at Chanute Air Force Base near Champaign, Illinois. I was there for quite a while. In fact, from there they gave me a medical leave for 30 days, so I was able to come home. But I was actually hospitalized for 7 or 8 months before they sent me back to duty.

I finally ended up at Fort Leonard-Wood, Missouri. Then they finally put me into finance. And that's where I spent the rest of my military days.

They had a deal where they would let you out early if you were going to go back to school. As it turns out I had applied to graduate school and the semester started out perfectly. So I was able to get out a couple of months early. That was kind of sweet.

Did they Army pay for your graduate school?

Yes. They had a GI Bill that I took advantage of.

So you got your master's degree then.

Yes. Actually, I got two of them!

Finance and what?

One was in management systems, and the other was in accounting.

So you went to Vietnam in 1968 and came home in 1969.

It was 1970 by the time I got out.

You came back to the States in 1969, but by the time you got out of the Army it was 1970.

Yes.

And you were discharged at Fort Leonard-Wood?

Yes.

So you served two years?

A couple months short of two years, yes.

When you got home after you got shot, your parents had been notified; your family had been notified?

Yes.

You heard from them?

Somewhere along the line I was able to make a phone call from Vietnam and talk to my mother. I kind of reassured her that I was okay. At the time I was planning on getting married the following June after I got out of the service. I was only able to get one phone call and I figured I'd call home knowing my mother would be home and not knowing if my future wife would be. So that turned out okay.

Your family was probably really reassured to know you were okay.

Yes. Getting back to my father, who was an odd person. Here I am coming away from fighting in the war, I walk in the door and he's sitting there reading a newspaper. I walked in the door and he didn't even look up. That was so hurtful.

Your mom wasn't like that.

No.

She probably ran to hold you.

Yes.

Anyway, I was back home and started life as a civilian.

Returning to Civilian Life

You said you had a fiancée. She was somebody you knew from school or somebody you met in the neighborhood?

We met when we were in high school. I think we got engaged before I went over to Vietnam. We got married in June of the year after I got home. We're still married today!

Congratulations!

Thank you.

So you went back to school and got your masters. You went back to Peoples Gas.

I did.

It sounds like their investment in you had been a good one – very advantageous for them. When you did get back home and were discharged, what was the first thing you did?

I probably went out for a pizza somewhere. I'm trying to remember. I think I went and hooked up with some of my friends from the gas company and some of my neighbors – just catching up on stuff. I don't remember doing anything special of any kind, especially since we were getting married. There was a lot to do related to that. Of course nothing which, in my opinion mattered!

Just the fact that you were getting married was enough.

Yes.

You got married, settled down and had your job. Did you keep in touch with anyone who was still in Vietnam?

Not really. There were a couple of people – one of the guys who was still alive and left – I used to write letters to him. We used to write and then I got it back and it said he was dead.

Ironically, I played softball – I've played softball my whole life. I was on a 50 and over team. In fact, I ran the team. One of the guys who I recruited to play on my team – I don't even know how I got to know him – it turns out he was in the exact same unit as me in Vietnam: the same company, the same squad, everything. He was there earlier and had left by the time I got there. What are the odds of that! It just blows me away. His situation was that he trained as a group of guys and shipped over to Vietnam as a group. He had a group of people who trained

together, went over together, served together in Vietnam. So he had a big group of people that he knew, as opposed to me going over there by myself.

As it turns out the same unit has reunions. I went to one a few years ago to see if anybody I had served with would show up to the reunion. That wasn't the case. There was one guy whom we overlapped a little bit. So I did that. I don't know if I did it once or twice. But it was not the same. That bunch all knew each other. So there was not much – a lot in common, but not really because we didn't know each other. So I did that and stopped going to that.

Do you belong to any veterans' organizations?

I do. I belong to the Disabled American Veterans, the American Legion. I'm a lifetime member of the DAV.

And this Americal Division has a group that I also belong to, and I'm a lifetime member of that, also. It's a pretty good organization. They have a newsletter they print three times a year or so, with information about people. Sometimes they write in there and ask if anybody served with this person or that, to contact just to know what it was like before they died. Ironically, that just triggered in my mind when my two friends got killed. One of my friends who got killed, it was one of their relatives who wanted to know. So I contacted him. It was pretty powerful just to have that conversation. I still remember. I was reading that in bed and saw that name there. My heart started pounding so fast that this was even happening.

It's kind of good to keep in touch. People write stories in there about their time in Vietnam. It's good to keep tabs.

Many Vietnam vets have had nightmares and things like that. Does keeping in touch with these people help with any memories that you have from there?

I guess I feel lucky that I don't feel as scarred as I could have been. If I would have been in Vietnam a whole year I think my life would be totally different. Even though I got wounded, my brain was still okay when I left. If I would have been there the whole year I'm not so sure that would have been the case.

The memento you have from the war is your wound – your leg. That's something that continues to bother you.

It doesn't bother me on a day-to-day basis for the most part. The scar is still there so it's a memory.

Lasting Impressions

When you look back on your experiences in the military, how did your service affect your life?

Well, I'd say it makes me anti-war. I get so offended with us being in the Middle East. These young kids fighting a war against people who are having a civil war. It really bothers me. Another thing I should say, I guess, is on Veterans Day every year one of the local high

schools – Riverside-Brookfield High School – they have a special event on Veterans Day where they gather the whole school in the gym. They give us breakfast and have a couple of speeches and stuff. After that is over each person goes to a class and talks to the kids. I've done that. Last year I went to my grandkids school, but I've gone every year. It's really a good experience. And when I talk to those kids I tell them my position on war. It sucks. We shouldn't be doing this stuff. I feel in my little way. I know some of these people are all flag this and flag that, defend your country – totally the opposite of me. I feel I'm helping in that way.

Maybe encouraging a different approach for the future.

Right.

When you returned, I don't know what sort of reception you got. It was a difficult time for our country.

It was.

When you look back on what you went through, you said you look at war differently now. What about everything else you see happening in the world now? Do you see history repeating itself? Do you think we're taking steps in the right or wrong direction?

Have we learned from Vietnam? No. We went to Iraq and now we're continuing. Some of these people want to go to Syria and these other countries. It's ridiculous. It's totally ridiculous. It's shameful that our politicians don't get it.

It may be a case of those who were there don't want to go back – those who have been in war.

Yes. If these politicians who were there, I think they might have a different take on it. It's unreal.

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

I think we pretty much covered most of the experience. You know when I walk out of here I'm going to think of that one thing!

If you have nothing more I'd like to thank you for sharing your story with us.

[I was one of 50 veterans to contribute to a book called *I Remember: Chicago Veterans of War*. It was published on 11/11/2015 (Veteran's Day), and was celebrated with a reading and reception.]