

# **VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT**

**Preserving Stories of Service for Future Generations**

**Interview with**

**Stanley J. Gradowski, Jr.**

Conducted by Deb Barrett

March 31, 2007

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**This Interview is being conducted on March 31, 2007 with Stanley J. Gradowski at Indian Prairie Public Library. My name is Deb Barrett.**

**Mr. Gradowski was born on November 21, 1938 in Chicago, Illinois. He retired as vice president and corporate secretary of the Tribune Company. He is also my cousin and has kindly consented to be interviewed for this project. Here is his story.**

### **Life Before Military Service**

**Just before you entered the military you were living in Western Springs?**

Yes

**And, what was your life like at the time?**

Well, at the time I was just finishing college. I had graduated from Northwestern with an undergraduate degree in 1960. I went immediately to business school and I just finished my last class for my MBA degree in the fall of 1961 when I was drafted.

**And how old were you?**

I would have been 23 at the time.

**When you were drafted you just went into the Army?**

The Army. That's right.

**Did you have any choice in where you would go? Could you go into another branch?**

I don't recall. I suppose if I'd wanted to I could've enlisted in another branch before reporting to the Army, but that probably would have entailed a longer period of service.

### **Induction and Basic Training**

**Where were you inducted?**

In Chicago. I reported to a draft center in Berwyn, Illinois. They took us into the heart of the city. There was an Army induction center on the kind of the southwest end of the downtown area near Union Station, and they did some processing there and inducted us. I think we were shipped by bus to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, although I'm not certain whether it was bus or train now.

**What was your family's reaction?**

Well, they weren't very happy about it.

**What was going on at the time that caused your parents to be concerned?**

Well, the draft was an ongoing regular thing at time. In 1961, I guess it was, there was a big military build-up over the building of the Berlin Wall. The president increased the draft calls and all that. There was a sudden surge in the number of people getting called up, and I got caught up in that.

**Your family wasn't happy but what about your friends? Did you have a lot of friends getting drafted?**

Not really because, again, most of them had probably gotten passed over because they had gotten married right at that time.

**So there was an exemption?**

I don't recall if there was a specific exemption but, apparently that might have been the case.

**And so you were single at the time?**

I was single.

**So you went to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri?**

Right.

**What was boot camp like? What was your basic training like?**

A little hard to remember. This all happened in early December of 1961. We went down there for a couple weeks issuing uniforms, doing basic indoctrination and all, and then they gave us a Christmas leave. So I got to come home for about a week, a week and a half, I don't recall what it was. Then we went down there actually for the basic training, which, as I recall, two months; maybe a bit more. Into like the first of March, or early March. A lot of marching (laughter) – long, long marching! The rest of it, I expect, was probably pretty routine. I personally had some problems in that I kept developing blisters on the bottom of my feet.

**From all the marching (giggles)!**

From all the marching, I guess. And that made it all the more difficult.

**Now, you're an only child. So you had your own room at home and...?**

Yep.

**That must have been a little bit different (giggles), going into a barracks situation.**

Yeah, it was, although, I guess I can't say it bothered me much.

**What was your barracks living conditions like?**

Well, these were old wooden structures – I think World War II vintage. Basically long rooms with a bunch of double cots lining both walls with an aisle down the middle. I don't know – I can't say they were particularly crowded but maybe these beds were three or four feet apart. I don't recall how many people overall fit in to the barracks, but quite a few

**What did you have as far as storage space for your clothing and any personal effects?**

Well, through boot camp we didn't really have personal effects. Everybody had a foot lock where we kept our military clothes, basically. Everything we had personally got shipped home when we got to Fort Leonard Wood. So we had really nothing that you didn't need. There was no such thing at the time as having civilian clothing during boot camp or basic training.

**Everything was just Army issue?**

Yes, Army issue, pretty much. There was a shaving kit and maybe a couple of paperback books and things like that, but that pretty much were the personal effects you would have.

**What did they issue you when you went down there?**

Basically, everything. I don't recall how many uniforms we had, but we had a dress uniform, several sets of Army fatigues, olive-drab color. You had two sets of boots, one of which you typically wore all the time. A jacket and an overcoat – again, military olive-green I guess we must also have had several uniforms. Of course we weren't wearing them then because you were in the middle of Missouri and it was very cold and snowy part of the time.

**You said you did a lot of marching but you also had some training. What was your training like?**

There were some classes. The training – well, everyday you had some physical training; we did a variety of exercises and things. There was a fair amount of rifle training – we'd march out to a rifle range and do some target shooting, and learned how to use a rifle.

**Was that your first time using fire arms?**

That's the only time in my life I've used a firearm!

**And how did it feel to use that?**

I was kind of different. I mean I had no idea what it was like. It was kind of an interesting experience to do it, to find out you could take a gun apart pretty quickly and put it back together when you had to. (Both chuckle) You spent a lot of time cleaning it in between. Although, the Army was pretty careful about how they let you handle the gun. When you went out for the training you picked up the rifle when you went, and you turned in into a locked storage area – you had it when they wanted you to have it. They were extremely conscious of safety when you were using rifles on the range.

**So nobody got hurt while using the rifles?**

No, no. They were pretty careful that that would not happen.

**So were you a good marksman?**

Actually, no. And one of the things I found out when I went into the Army was that I had lousy eyesight, which I didn't know. So they issued me my first pair of glasses. Even then I had trouble shooting because basically I'm right-handed but had to shoot left-handed

**Why did you have to shoot left-handed?**

Because I cannot close my left eye and keep my right open. I couldn't reverse. So that was kind of awkward.

**Yeah, doing something with other hand would be kind of awkward. The classes that you took – what sorts of things did they teach you in the classes?**

It's kind of hard to remember now. We went to classes, we saw movies, we heard people lecturing.

**Was it military history? Did they talk about how to deal with combat situations or was it more routine types of topics?**

You know, I really don't remember a whole lot. A lot of it was combat related, in that they gave you a lot of indoctrination about what you should or shouldn't do, should you ever be captured by an enemy. That was pounded into your head a lot.

**And do you remember any of what they told you?**

You only gave you your rank – name, rank and serial number. That was the bottom line. That's the message that really sunk in.

**Do you remember any of your instructors?**

Not really. Before I came here I looked at this book I had, and I recognized a few of the names from our training company. I don't remember much about any of the people, though. It's all been lost in the fog, in the haze.

**What was a typical day like for you in boot camp? Do you remember?**

Well, they wake you up at like five in the morning. You have a little time to wash up and dress. Then you go out and you do exercises for an hour or so. Then you'd have breakfast. Then I think you had a little bit of time to clean up the barracks – that sort of thing. Then you'd be off doing whatever that day's activity was, whether it was going out to the rifle range or an obstacle course, or whatever.

**What were the meals like?**

I have a good recollection of the meals. I guess they probably were pretty good. I certainly don't have any bad thoughts about them.

**Well, that's good! (chuckles)**

I guess given all the activity and all, we were all constantly hungry so, we you were very anxious to eat each time you went to a meal.

**Other than the Christmas leave that you got to come home, did you have any other contact with you family in your basic training?**

No. Well, I think that we were able to make phone calls on weekends – when we had some free time on the weekends. So I suppose I called home probably fairly regularly, but I don't specifically recall doing so.

**Your parents were glad to hear you every time you called, I'm sure.**

Yeah, I'm sure they were.

**You got the leave at Christmas to come home. And then it was like a week and a half and you went back.**

Yeah, I don't remember exactly how long it was but it was, but it actually was kind of a pleasant surprise.

**I bet! I bet your parents were very happy. I remember seeing a picture of you along with the Christmas tree with your uniform on.**

Yeah, that could be. In fact I think because I did come home we had the whole family over for a party while I was home.

**I was very little but I remember that picture! (Laughter)**

In fact, I think I have some old home movies of that day.

**So you got through your boot camp, and you had a graduation of some sort?**

Yes. They did have the live band there, and the Army put on a big show with all the soldiers dressed up and parading around – playing military music and all. It was all quite impressive. They really do that up quite nicely.

**Anything that happened that you can remember during your time in boot camp? Any friends you made? Or anything unusual or interesting that happened?**

Not really. I can't say I made any friends because, again, once we left boot camp we were all split up and scattered. There was this one fellow who was also assigned down to Fort Benning, Georgia, as I was. I'm sure there were others, but one that I knew. But then we were in separate units and kind of got apart and lost touch. We really didn't have much contact with each other.

**So you finished your basic training in February?**

Roughly March first. I don't recall, again, the exact timing.

**In 1962?**

1962.

### **Duty Assignment**

**So when you finish your basic, then you go on to you MOS – your specialty training?**

No.

**Where did you go after that?**

I was assigned down to Fort Benning, Georgia. I was assigned to a unit down there where I spent the rest of my military time.

**And what was your job down there?**

I was a clerk in the brigade headquarters. In the supply unit.

**And what did you have to do? What were your responsibilities down there?**

Filling out forms, typing the letters, that sort of thing. Shuffling paper.

**(Laughter) They didn't want you to have a gun!**

Yes! Maybe there was more of that!

**When you went down to Fort Benning, how did they transfer you down there?**

You know I was thinking about that the other day and I don't remember. I thought that after basic training I might have come home for a short while, in which case I probably took a train down to Columbus, Georgia which is where Benning is located, and got down there that way. But I didn't specifically recall that.

**Ok and what were your living conditions like down there?**

Well they were much better. They had far more modern barracks for us. These were basically stone buildings. They would house a whole company of soldiers which might be a couple hundred. The barracks were I think two floors, maybe three. They had large barrack rooms at each end of the long rectangular building, where, again, the facility was a little more spacious than the boot camp one, in that you had these big rooms with double-decker beds in them, except that you had dividers between the beds and then there'd be, everybody in addition to their foot locker would have a regular locker where you could hang up things.

**So they gave you semi-privacy?**

Semi-privacy. And then the center section of these buildings had basically small private double rooms for soldiers, and when you got up rank-wise – seniority enough – you got to live in one of those which was much nicer.

**And what rank did people normally have to get to, to get to one of those?**

I don't know if it was absolute rank or if it was kind of a seniority kind of thing where everybody, they kind of went down the list by rank and by time in the unit, and when you got up if there was room in one of these. I spent at least half my time there, maybe longer, in one of the semi-private rooms as opposed to barracks area.

**Ok and what was the semi-private room? I mean, how was it set up? Besides the privacy, what else?**

It was a room. It had two single-level bunk-beds in it, one for each person, a kind of divider in the middle so each person had a side of the room. You had two stand-up lockers – the typical military foot locker. And I think you also had a small chest where you could keep things, also, because once we got back to Benning, of course, in addition to the military uniforms and things, we were allowed to have civilian clothes which we wore off duty hours and on weekends. So there was certainly much more storage. And of course you could have a radio or photographs; that stuff.

**You could have your personal things.**

Right. Back in those days, of course, we didn't have personal televisions because there just was no such thing.

**They were too big.**

Yeah, yeah.

**What did you do for recreation?**

There was a group of us who did a lot of card playing. Probably saw most of the movies that were made in those years. That was a regular thing. There were several movie theaters on the base and they would change once a week or twice a week. So typically we saw most of the movies that came through on the base. We could have gone to town, too, of course. There wasn't all that much extra in the town to do – maybe some bars, that sort of thing.

**What was your work day like? Were you up at five again?**

We were still up pretty early. I don't remember if it was five, but it was still very early. Most of the time they had an assembly of the troops early in the morning. Occasionally we'd do some exercises – not a whole lot. It was basically making the beds, cleaning up the barracks, having breakfast, and then spend most of the day in an office in the adjacent building doing whatever your thing was. But basically you were kind of working – I don't remember the exact hours – probably about a nine-to-five with a break for lunch; that sort of thing.

**And when you had your break for lunch, you working in an office type of environment – did you go to lunch with the other people; did you just go when you were available?**

Everybody went to lunch at the same time. We basically were in two buildings. The work building and the living building were adjacent to each other. They were maybe 100 feet apart or a bit more. So you'd go over to the barracks building and at one end there was the mess hall and everybody would eat lunch there.

**The other men who were with you, what types of jobs did they do? Were they all doing administrative types of jobs or like a variety of jobs?**

Well, in the building it was pretty much administrative. There were other people in our unit who worked in motor pools maintaining trucks or driving vehicles. This was the headquarters company, so it basically was a bunch of office workers.

**So, for recreation you did things on base. You might go off base ...**

You could go into town. But not a great deal.

**When your work day ended were you free, or did you have to get permission to go into town?**

We were pretty much free to do what we liked during the off hours.

**If you went into town, how did you get there?**

There was a bus service from the main part of the base into town, which was just outside the base. You'd go from your unit, typically walk to the main part of the base headquarters and there was a bus place where you could jump on a bus and go right into town. It would take you right into downtown Columbus.

**Did you go in your civilian clothes?**

Yes, almost always. Typically you would not wear your military uniform off base.

**The people in the town knew you were from the base (chuckles).**

Oh, yeah. Looking at us it was pretty obvious.

**What was their reaction to you – did they treat you any differently; positive, negative?**

I think basically they kind of treated you pretty well. I certainly don't remember any problems of any type with the treatment. And, of course, the base was the big thing in the area of the town. So, in large part, the base and the people on it pretty much supported the economy of Columbus. There were a lot of other businesses there, but I'm sure, by far, this was the biggie.

**Did you get any leave to go home during this time?**

Yeah, we did. There was a set amount of leave each year. I don't recall how many days it was. But, as I remember, while I was in the service I possibly came home from Columbus maybe three or four times. And each time would have been for two weeks.

**You flew home? Bus home?**

Train home. That was the most convenient. Flying home, you somehow had to get to Atlanta, then fly into Chicago. The train passed right through Columbus and you could jump right on it. That was the easy way to do it, although it was a long, boring train ride.

**How long was the ride, do you remember?**

No. It was possibly 24 hours – maybe not that long – but it was an overnight train ride, with part of the day each side of it. So maybe not 24 hours, but it was long.

**And then 24 hours back, so you basically lost two days in travel.**

Yes, pretty much.

**Is there anything you remember from your time at Fort Benning as far as any incidents? Whether with friends, in the office?**

Nothing really.

**Anything from holidays?**

Nothing stands out. I don't remember anything particularly unusual happening. It was a good group of guys who basically got along pretty well. I think we all ...

**Did anybody pull any jokes on anyone?**

Not that I recall.

**Everybody came in, did their work, got along?**

We socialized a lot. Nothing unusual stands out in my memory anymore.

**How did you stay in touch with your family while you were there?**

Again, there were some phone calls, but it was a lot of letter writing back in those days. It was still the normal way of communicating long distances. I tended to get a lot of letters from family members and I tried to write back to anybody who sent one to me. I wrote to my parents on a regular basis.

**Every day, every couple of days?**

It wasn't every day. I don't recall the timing. I'm sure it wasn't more than once a week, and maybe not quite that frequently.

### **Discharge and Return to Civilian Life**

**So you finished your time at Fort Benning. And you were drafted, so it was two years?**

Yes, two years – I was released in December, 1963.

**Where were you discharged – at Fort Benning?**

At Fort Benning, right.

**What was your rank at that time?**

I was a specialist fourth class, which would be the equivalent of a corporal, except since we were kind of an administrative unit we had specialist ranking rather than the corporal, which would be comparable if it was a fighting unit. The brigade was made up of several different types of units. People in the infantry battalion or armored battalion would promote people to corporal at that level.

**How did you feel when you were discharged, when December 1963 came?**

It was a tremendous relief to get out. Again, a lot of the people in the unit were draftees, like myself, were in pretty much the same situation. So everybody kind of lived for the day and had it marked off on the calendar, and were counting days to be released.

**You didn't have any concern at the time that you would have been sent overseas?**

As I recall, the whole while we were there once a month the Army would issue orders. It was not unusual for people to get a transfer somewhere else to another unit – often overseas. At the time the big overseas thing that most people didn't look forward to was being sent to a unit in Korea. Basically, if you wanted to be sent overseas it would most likely be Korea or Germany. People obviously preferred Germany to Korea. This was a monthly thing. Everybody had to wait and see whose name was on there and where they'd be going.

**But you never got that.**

I never got that.

**And you were very glad (chuckles)!**

I was very glad.

**Some of your friends went.**

Yes. Every so often somebody would get shipped out to one of those.

**Did you ever have any kind of get-together or send-off for anybody who went – any of your friends?**

I don't recall that happening. A bunch of us might go out for an evening and have a couple of drinks, but it was not a big deal kind of thing. And, of course, some of the people looked forward to it. Some of the people wanted to go. They very much looked forward to it and hoped that they would be on the list. I don't recall specifically, but I

expect if you wanted to be you could probably put your name in the pot hoping you might be selected.

**There was both Germany and Korea, but Vietnam was heating up.**

Vietnam was a very small thing at the time. In fact, I think it was toward the end of my service that one of the fellows I knew pretty well there was actually hoping to be sent to Vietnam. This was, again, when the fighting was on a very small scale and most of the people going over there were not in direct combat. At the time I don't think any of the Americans were in direct combat.

**So it was an advisory type role?**

Yes. I don't recall what the contingent of troops might have been there, but it might have been in the 20,000 to 30,000 range as opposed to the half a million or more who ultimately ended up there.

**So, with your discharge, was there any possibility that you'd be called back at any time?**

Yes.

**For how long?**

I think that went on for six years, as I recall, or might have been four years. It was a lengthy period of time where, in theory, I was in the Reserves and could have been called back into service. And to some degree that did happen during the Vietnam build-up. For whatever reasons I was lucky and was not called.

**Timing is everything!**

Timing is everything! Again, why I wasn't – maybe it was my background in the military. Maybe it was an age thing. When I got off active duty I was 25, which in military terms is very old.

**Yes. I think when they were drafting it was 19 to 26 that was the prime age group?**

Eighteen to 26. Basically that was the group that they were drafting, and they would go at the low end of that age range.

**When you got discharged you were very relieved, and I know your family was relieved. How did you get back home?**

At the time when I was getting discharged my parents came down to Georgia. They picked me up and we went down to Florida for a couple of weeks for vacation.

**It was kind of nice to be on vacation after that!**

Yes. I think we were down at Fort Lauderdale for a while, then went to Disney World, which was brand new. Maybe it wasn't there yet – maybe it was later I went to Disney World. I think it was Cape Canaveral. Although, again, there wasn't that much there. It was later it got developed.

**When you got home, what was the first thing you did?**

You know, I don't remember. Basically I got home and it was Christmastime. I got out on December 6, spent a couple of weeks in Florida, and got home about a week before Christmas. I enjoyed the holidays and went back to work. Before going into the service, as I was finishing up my MBA degree I had started working for Price Waterhouse. I worked there while I took my last course in the evening. So I worked there basically three months before going into the Army and I had a job waiting for me coming out.

**They held it for you.**

Well, that was the kind of place where they were constantly hiring people all the time, every year. As it turns out, I got out of the military just as they were entering their busiest time of the season – after the first of the year. So they were delighted to see me.

**Again, timing is everything (chuckles)!**

Right. And right after the first of the year I started going to work every day.

**So you finished your schooling before you went, and you stepped back into work. So you didn't use the GI Bill or anything like that for education.**

No.

**And you went to Price Waterhouse and Company as an accountant.**

Yes, as an accountant.

**Did you make any friendships that lasted beyond your time in the military?**

Well, a couple of them which died out quickly, although there is still one of my friends from the military who I am in touch with. We haven't seen each other since shortly after we got out of the military, but we communicate back and forth often by notes and Christmas cards and those sorts of things. Now it's a little bit on the internet, and it turns out that he happened to call me this past winter so we actually spoke on the phone for the first time in many years.

**Where did you meet him – at Fort Leonard Wood or at Fort Benning?**

At Fort Benning. We were in the same unit there. We got to know each other pretty well. We've stayed in touch all these years.

**Have you joined any veterans' organizations?**

No.

**Have you gone to any reunions or anything like that?**

No. Reunions, there wasn't anything. Even the veterans' organizations, I think there were a couple of them where basically at least at one time I wasn't eligible just because I did not serve during wartime. I think it was something like the American Legion I would have been eligible for initially, although later on they did open it up but I never did join any of them.

**Lasting Impressions**

**How did your time in the military affect your thinking about life, about war? How did it affect your thinking later on?**

It's a little hard to say, although I suspect if anything it may be more anti-war or opposed to the idea of wars. So I personally do not like what this country has done in a lot of cases afterwards – getting involved in military situations.

**Now, you did not serve in combat. So it's interesting because I have heard that comment from men who have been in combat themselves. So how did it make you feel that way since you weren't in combat? Was it just what you observed?**

I guess it's just the thought of being there where you could end up in combat with somebody shooting at you. Being in the service made it appear more real ...

**More real, more imminent.**

You could imagine how this could happen. I think while in my case it never was a great thing, it became at least a little bit of a possibility while I was in service because of what had occurred while I was in service other than being called up because the Berlin Wall thing. I don't know what that had to do with anything. In the middle of my service the Cuban missile crisis was a big thing for several weeks. There was an actual situation where we could have actually gone into combat.

**And right off our shore. When that happened, were you put on alert?**

Yes. I expect everybody was. But we were definitely put on alert. In fact, the unit had a lot of equipment all packed up and ready to head south. I think given the unit I was in we probably would have been a follow-up unit to any invasion of Cuba if it had come to that.

But the idea was that we were ready to go on very short notice, and be shipped down to Homestead Air Force Base south of Miami which I suppose would have been the jumping off point to somehow be transported into Cuba.

**During the Cuban missile crisis, when you were ready to go, were your communications back home affected at all?**

I suspect they might have been but I really don't remember.

**So basically your time there made you more aware of what it could mean.**

It made it a little more real, even though I wasn't in any really dangerous situation.

**I would think the possibility of going down, even as a follow up, into a hostile situation would be enough to make it very, very real.**

I guess.

**Is there anything we haven't covered that you would like to talk about?**

The other thing that occurs while I was in the service, which was kind of a momentous event, was the assassination of President Kennedy. That happened roughly about three or four weeks before I got discharged from the service. But that was certainly a momentous occasion. And at least the first couple of days kind of had everyone on edge not knowing what was really going on before it finally sunk in that this was one nut who grabbed a gun and shot the president, as opposed being the prelude to some event internationally.

**An international conspiracy of some sort.**

Right. So we had a couple, three days of uncertainty and everything quieted down.

**Again, did they kind of clamp down on stuff waiting in anticipation of anything?**

No, I think it was kind of unexpected and too short. A lot of the activities at the military base kind of slowed down and stopped, and everybody, like everyone else in the country, was watching television or listening to radios as to what was going on. But beyond that I don't recall there was anything much that specifically happened.

**So you were in the military when there were several major world events taking place.**

Yes.

**But you didn't have to go into combat.**

I didn't have to do anything, maybe as a result of that.

**That's pretty lucky.**

It certainly was!

**Is there anything else?**

Maybe not, I guess.

**In that case, thank you very much, and we're going off record.**