

# **VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT**

**Preserving Stories of Service for Future Generations**

**Interview with**

**Lawrence D. Smith**

Conducted by Mr. Kevin Haney

January 23, 2006

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(Note: Corrections made to original transcript by interviewee are noted in parentheses.)

## **Part 1: Introduction:**

**This interview is being conducted on January 23, 2006, at the Indian Prairie Public Library in Darien, IL. My name is Kevin Haney. I'm speaking with Lawrence DeWitt Smith. Mr. Smith was born on October 6, 1968, in Oak Lawn, Illinois, and now lives in Downers Grove, Illinois. He is currently employed as a commercial truck driver and has kindly consented to be interviewed for the project. He heard about the project through the Indian Prairie Library. And now, this is Mr. Smith's story.**

## **Part 2: Entering the Military:**

**Pertaining to entering the military, where were you living at the time when you entered the service and what were you doing there at that time?**

I lived in Palm Springs, California, which is in southern California, and I was a high school student. And I enlisted in the latter part of the summer of 1986, in September.

**Why did you pick the service branch you joined?**

To be honest, I wanted to serve my country, and I thought the Army was my best choice.

**Okay. And what were the first few days like?**

The first few days they kind of walked us through the enlistment process, training and that sort of thing.

**You mean before you went in?**

No, right at the time you enlisted. In January of 1986 – it happened to be the day the space shuttle blew up – I took my Armed Services vocational aptitude battery test, the ASVAB. It was in California. I was about 17 when I enlisted. I just took the test – I wasn't sure what I wanted to do yet – and then I made a decision after I graduated high school. I believe I signed up in August, and I left in September.

I went through the military enlisting processing station in Los Angeles, and when I was there I took two trips. I had to do my physical interviews. I believe we had to do drug tests. And my recruiters were straight forward with me. And my MOS was 63 Hotel (63H) -- track vehicle repairman.

**What does "MOS" mean?**

Military occupational specialty.

And since I was a minor I couldn't sign up on my own. And after I went up there to the MEPS station in Los Angeles, I came back home and talked it over with my Mom again. And then a few days later all the paperwork was done and the recruiter came to my house and my Mom had to give consent. And then we took it from there, and I had my date was, I believe, towards the latter part of September I left for Ft. Jackson, South Carolina.

But one thing that was kind of funny is that I could have left earlier, but my parents divorced in 1971, and they needed to have evidence that my parents were divorced, for some reason – the government needed that. So, my Mom didn't have divorce papers, so we had to send back to Illinois – to Cook County – and my Dad had to get all that. It was kind of a process that we could find him. And it kind of delayed me from going a little bit. And my Dad had to do some kind of paperwork, and when he was doing that he accidentally used blue ink instead of the black ink that was required, so we had to do the whole process again.

And then the day I left – we left out of Los Angeles International Airport – I stayed in a hotel in LA with other new soldiers, and we left and we got to Ft. Jackson, South Carolina. It was around midnight, because we stopped, I think in Atlanta, Georgia, and continued.

### **Part 3: Training**

#### **How long was basic training?**

Well, basic training – the entire time I was there was a little bit over nine weeks. The night we got there for the first week was all in-processing. We did detail work, and then we went through eight weeks of training. They tried to push it a little bit because we graduated the day before Thanksgiving, I think it was. Actually, it was a Tuesday, and then Wednesday we left to go to my Advanced Individual Training – AIT – at Aberdeen Proving Ground, Maryland.

#### **So what sort of things was the initial stage of basic training? Now, that would be like a general basic training that everybody goes through regardless of their specialty.**

Yeah. For the Army that would be basic soldier infantry skills. Everything from first aid, to becoming a marksman, setting up a Claymore mine, uniforms, inspections, a lot of marching, discipline – being screamed and yelled at – all the things a soldier needs.

#### **And what was the sort of the kind conversation, the morale amongst the guys in basic training?**

I'd say morale was pretty good, because when I went in it was at peacetime – everybody there was a volunteer, there was no draft. You had some people that had – I was 17 and I didn't know anything about the world. Some people had been out in the world. We had every form of life. Some people had bad attitudes. I grew up in a resort town – we were

upper middle-class – where a lot of guys were from the inner city, and this was their way out. Some were glad to be there and some weren't, but they all volunteered. So, it was mixed.

**And what do you remember about your instructors?**

Well, I remember the two drill sergeants I had in basic training was Drill Sergeant Matthews – he was our senior drill sergeant; and then we had Drill Sergeant \_\_\_\_\_, the assistant. And these guys were very hard on us, but they were fair, and they were very committed to their job. And I could see why, because to become a drill sergeant in the military they go through a school that is probably worse than basic training. And these guys gave it their all – they were clear and to the point; they didn't talk no bull or anything like that. And they put a lot of emphasis on the buddy-system – taking care of your fellow soldier – a lot of emphasis while I was in the military on that; all through my career.

**Were you in contact with your family during training?**

During basic training, besides letters – I probably wrote maybe six letters the whole time I was there – I made one phone call, and that was on graduation day. We got done at noon and had to be back at the barracks by 9:00 that night. And I called my Dad who was in Illinois, and my Mom in California, my brother, and that was about the only phone calls I made.

**Did you get any leave after basic training?**

No. After basic training we went directly to AIT at Aberdeen Proving Ground, Maryland. And they called it the “Christmas Exodus,” that was our, I think it was a two week leave during Christmas because the Post was pretty much closed down for training – it was a training Post. And that was the first leave I had.

**What was the advanced training like? How long did that last?**

Well, Advanced Individual Training – I got there on Thanksgiving Day, it was about 2:00 in the morning – and I left there, I think it was a Friday or Saturday. We flew out of Dulles Airport in Virginia, and we got to Rhein Main Air Base in Germany. It was on Easter Sunday, I remember that. So it was probably about four months, probably.

And as a track vehicle repairman, we were dealing with the basic fundamentals of the internal combustion engine all the way to the gas turbine engine, which is on the M1A1 tank – that was the main battle tank and most popular and advanced at that time. And we did a lot of training on that, and on Jeeps and Humvees. One particularly interesting vehicle was the Bradley fighting vehicle.

**So you were cross-trained.**

Yeah, in that MOS, yeah. We were basically what they call “Third Shop,” that’s what they called it. We were third echelon, and what we did, basically, was remove and replace major components on wheeled and tracked vehicles – differentials, transmissions, engines, injector pumps – things of that nature. We weren’t so much like first or second shop – that would be like a 63 Bravo (63B) where they did more maintenance like brakes, oil changes, things like that – we were more on the component side of the house.

**The engines.**

The engines, the transmissions – those things. The major components.

**And that would be everything from, say, a Jeep or a Humvee to a Bradley fighting vehicle, which would be a smaller tank?**

That’s not considered a tank, it’s a tracked vehicle – it has a turret. I don’t remember the size of the gun on it.

And then, in the training I did later – I went into Recovery School when I was in Germany – and I worked on the, I think it was the 3 or 488, it was an M88 Wrecker. And I went for four weeks up in Montief, Germany. So I was on a recovery team – that was my advanced MOS.

**Now, what do you mean by “recovery team?”**

Oh, that’s retrieving vehicles that are stuck in mud, towing vehicles, things of that nature.

**So, in the case of hostilities, you’d be doing similar type of work?**

Yeah. Well, in a combat environment – depending on what kind of combat environment you’re in – we did a lot of training, especially at night, with no noise and light discipline. For example, in Germany we’d be pulling an engine, say, on a deuce-and-a-half in a forest with no lights. We had colored lenses on our flashlights. If somebody wanted to smoke, smoke under a poncho. And when it was raining – we trained in some terrible weather, the mud – so you’d know in combat. We trained in our MOP suits – that’s our nuclear, biological, chemical suits -- and our gas masks for several hours. We had a lot of training in basic training on that, in case we were in a chemical, nuclear or biological environment.

**So there wasn’t too much doubt in your mind that this was training for war and peace time.**

Yeah. They put in all that. Yeah.

## **Part 4: Duty**

**Okay. Going overseas – Did you know where you were going; you were posted in Germany and where in Germany? What was kind of the mood amongst the troops overseas, the civilian population? You were sort of over there during the closing period of the Cold War, so kind of put us back there if you could.**

In early April of 1987, when I was still in Advanced Individual Training, before we graduated, our orders came down from Personnel. And I would say 7 out of 10 – 70% of us – were going to Germany. Maybe another 10% or 20% were Stateside, and one would go to an alternative place, say, Korea or Panama. The vast majority of us were going to Europe.

We left out of Dulles Airport. And the thing is I was 17 and turned 18 when I was in the military, and a lot of guys were 17 – 18, and they couldn't wait to get to Germany. They said, "We're going to drink Germany under the table." Heard all the stories, you know. And we arrived in Rhein Main, I think it was Easter Sunday – it was probably early or mid-morning – and it was raining and then it stopped raining. And we were at the air base for one night. It was kind of – I was brand new, just out of high school; I didn't know anything. It was kind of a neat adventure – you didn't know what to expect.

And we got on a bus the next day. Some of us went to different areas – they went to Ansbach, Germany – the headquarters of the First Armored Division – "Old Ironsides" – that was the Division I was in. And we spent a day and a half there. When we left there we had orders to our unit, and I was being sent to the third support battalion – it was the "Third Bulldog Brigade," we were the third support battalion, First Armored Division, in Bamberg, Germany.

And we got our first taste of actually traveling on a train by ourselves. We went to the bonnheufensten – that means train station in German – and they put us on a train, told us where to get off and came to meet us there. And my company – most of them were in the field when I got there. Somebody came and met us at the train station and took us there.

**Now what part of Germany was that – Germany was still divided into east and west at that time.**

We were in West Germany. We were in the northern part of Bavaria. We were actually, I think it was southern, kind of more south-central, we were, for example, more east/southeast, and we were north of Nuremberg, probably about 30 or 40 miles.

**So you would have been north of the Munich area.**

Yeah. Way north of Munich, yeah. Probably 2 ½ hours north of Munich.

**You weren't real close, then to the east/west cut-off point.**

Yeah.

**And what were your experiences like, in terms of housing, average day or week?**

In Germany?

**Yeah.**

Well, when we got to Germany, some of these barracks – they were like big A-frames; they were tall; some were like four or five stories. We were like on the third floor. And you could see that these barracks had been modified at some point, because we didn't have open bays – that's where everybody is in one big room – we were anywhere between a two and an eight-man room when I was in permanent duty.

**So it was almost more like a primitive college dorm.**

More primitive, yeah.

**More than like a World War II era barracks.**

We didn't have that. We had that in part of AIT. We were in A-frames, we had a community latrine in the middle. But over in Germany we weren't in primitive – there were some areas like that – but where we were at it was an old building, but you could see it was modified. It was really green, really rainy. Like I say, I was young, there was everybody from every walk of life. Some people moaned and groaned about everything all the time. Like anything, I guess.

And I was in a support unit – our unit became the 125<sup>th</sup> Support Battalion; they changed the name for whatever reason right after I got there. And we were on, what they call, I was in the second or third platoon, we were on a contact team – there were five contact teams. We supported units within the Third Bulldog Brigade of the First Armored Division, and we supported the 3-3 Armor. So, basically, when they went to the field, we went to the field. If they go to war, we're going to go with them – we're not going to stay with our unit.

**Okay. So you'd be assigned to an actual combat unit.**

Yeah. When they went on field exercise, we went with them. Our unit was divided – we had three companies, it was a very small unit. We didn't even have 100 people in our company – in Bravo Company; that's what I was assigned to. And we had Alpha and Bravo, and Headquarters was with Alpha was real small – they had many 60 people in that whole unit. And then Charlie Company, was in a city called Montief, which was near Nuremberg, and that was a medical unit. And we did a little training with them, but we never really saw them.

**Okay, so you're in Germany from '87 to about ...**

April of '87 until August of 1990 – I got out three days after the invasion of Kuwait.

**Now, what was going on in Germany – I mean, obviously, a lot of these things were going on at the time, and what was kind of your feeling, and then the talk of the place and that sort of thing?**

Well, in '87, when I got there and everything was new, we did a two-week in-processing. It was called "ICIS" – in-country, I don't remember what it was – in-processing. And then, my unit, my contact team, they were getting back into the field and everybody started learning their job and everything. We would go to the field maybe four and a half months out of the year, which wasn't very long.

And the Berlin Wall hadn't been broken until October of '89, but there was still, I guess, a lot of hostility, per se. We would go out into the field, and some of these sites would be near the east/west border, and we had an armor company. We stayed in the rear, but they were out there patrolling it, still, and \_\_\_\_\_. And I really didn't feel there was a threat. It was winding down. I mean, at that age. The reason is, if they were going to let soldiers bring their families and kids over there at the government's expense. I mean not it wasn't a threat, but it wasn't that big a threat. But in Korea, that's a hardship tour no matter what. I think maybe only high ranking officers or NCO's can bring their wives and that's it.

But, I mean, pretty much where I was at people moaned and groaned. Some people didn't. A lot of guys just wanted to out and party – do what they wanted to do, and couldn't wait to go out every night. But, overall, it was just a neat experience being there, being in a country that was pulverized in two wars and see how it rebuilt itself – how American helped that out, England and the French over there and the Dutch and the Canadians – all as one team.

I would say the German people, overall, were very nice. There were some Germans who didn't like Americans, and your haircut and uniform gave it away right there.

But there was an experience: I was in Bamberg and on a bus taking us from the Post into the downtown area. And, because I love history, there was a church – I can't remember, I think it was called St. Michael's. And there was a desk in there – this famous desk – where Napoleon signed the War with Prussia, which was Russia at that time. I don't know if he signed it that cathedral, but the desk was there that he did. Anyway, I was on this bus, and I was reading all this stuff about that. And when an old person gets on a bus, you give your seat to the older person – they're real strict on that there – and I gave my seat up to this guy, and he put his arm on the rail. And he has a short sleeve shirt on, and he had a tattoo. And he had been in a concentration camp – a Jewish man, I believe that's what he was, I didn't ask him. And he spoke English. And after I got up he says,

“Sir,” I think that’s what he said – Sir or Young Man – “Mr. Reagan is a great President.” Reagan was still President then. And that really felt good.

Overall, a lot of drinking going on. A lot of GI’s were there getting DUI’s. When a GI would get killed in a car wreck, they would take the car and put it in front of his unit or battalion headquarters after they removed the bodies out of the wreck. There was constant problems with drinking over there. And in the military, a lot of \_\_\_\_\_, could find everybody on the Post, that was probably the biggest problem outside of a soldier fight or something.

And just the experience of traveling and everything.

**So generally speaking people would die in service over there from DUI’s or whatever.**

Yeah. DUI’s. There were some other things if you want me to tell you about them.

There was a guy named Madeus. I didn’t know him, I’d seen him, I’d met him. He was American Indian. He was at the bonnhoff one night. He was drunk, and he was walking around on a Saturday night by the railroad tracks, and he started climbing one of the electrical towers, and he got shocked and he died. And this is a few months after I got there.

And then, at the end of the summer, September of ’87, there was a guy named Falsepool. This guy, he was a nice guy, he was a Cajun. And it was kind of hard to understand him because of his language from down there in Louisiana. Anyway, there was guys in the barracks, when they run out of money or something, they would try to do what was called a “poor man’s drunk.” They would drink Robitussin, do whatever they could to get a buzz. Well, this guy and some other guys were in the barracks, and they took some butane canisters. They were similar to a propane canister – and the thing with a butane canister and a propane canister is they were similar – they have a compression lip on there – and propane is 44° below 0 inside a canister, where butane is 32°. Anyway, they would take a nail and depress it and suck it and get high. Anyway, one day, during the middle of the day, they had everybody come out in a formation at 3:00, and they announced that this soldier had died – his lungs froze and his heart stopped. And they came through the barracks, went through everybody’s room, brought the dogs through trying to find any kind of contraband.

They did that a lot. We had constant drug testing in the middle of the night. So we had a lot of alerts over there all the time – whether they were real or not. That was another common thing. So people griped about that. People would go out drinking – they’d be out partying and stuff, and you’d get an alert at 2:00 in the morning, people are half-drunk. It was a constant headache.

**So there was a lot of readiness.**

Yeah. A lot of readiness. Yeah. They put a lot of emphasis on that.

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

When I was discharged?

**Yeah. I mean throughout.**

I made it to E4 – Specialist 4. That’s an E4, which would mean if you were in pretty much non-combat, or if you’d be in combat you’d be a Corporal. But I was a Specialist – same pay, but just less responsibility.

**And in terms of casualties – I mean you did see some people die in service over there. Did that surprise you at all – that you were in the Army, it was peacetime and you were still having some people ...**

Yeah. It was kind of shocking. I was just 18 years old, and I didn’t know anything, and it was like, “What the heck is going on here.” And then a few months later, after that one guy got it at the train station and the other guy died. And then you start thinking – is that like the norm around here? I didn’t know these guys, so it wasn’t personal. And you’d see guys from other units.

All I know is that during the Gulf War, after I had gotten out – and my unit ended up going over there after I was discharged – there was one person in our unit, I don’t remember his name – was killed. He was hit by a track vehicle. That’s all I know. That was in my unit. I don’t remember who it was or anything.

**You were in Germany when the Wall came down. What was the feeling of Germans toward Americans at that time?**

Well, it was in October. I remember we had a formation that morning. And it happened pretty early. It happened in Berlin in the west, and I was watching something – it was on Armed Forces Network in the Day Room – right before formation; it was after PT, right before we went to chow. We had our formation. And nothing was said about it then, but I heard something on there. Then they talked about eastern Europe had just fallen. And they had walls then went along East and West Germany, Czechoslovakia, the “Iron Curtain,” then you had where Berlin was separated. Right after that – that day, I think, within a couple of days – they started taking out links of the fence and all the borders were opened and East Germans started coming over. And they had these little cars called “Trabant,” and they’re little two-cylinders.

They really didn’t know what living was – I mean even like what we had in the west, even in West Germany. They were lucky to get a car. It could take five or six years then on a list. They were driving over here, and they went across the border and their passport would be stamped, and they gave everybody I think like 200 Deutschmarks to spend – any East German. And we saw some in Bamberg.

We were 20 or 30 miles from the border, and what I saw was that people were just happy, they were honking horns. Some West Germans were kind of against it. Because when East Germany fell, when they were under Communism everybody was pretty much cared for. And now they're pretty much going to be a capitalistic country. And there's going to be a big burden put on West Germany. And a lot of West Germans, not all, but some that I talked to didn't like that.

They told us, maybe in November, they were probably going to be doing early out's, the whole formation in Europe was going to change. They were just talking "hot air." They didn't know what was going on.

I took an early out. They were letting people get out early. Just being part of that history and defending it.

**So you were kind of there almost for the final stage.**

Yeah. I was there from '87 to '90 – almost a year and nine months after the walls came down.

**And this was after 40 some years after occupation by US Forces. This was the end.**

Yeah. This was it!

## **Part 5: Discharge and Recall**

**Okay. Take us from the period when all of a sudden you go from Cold War and the Gulf War starts.**

Well, it was in August – actually it was in July of '87, and they were talking about early out's. And my discharge was in latter September. That's when I went to basic training – 20 something of September '86 I went in. They said, if you'd like to put in for early out if you have less than six months, to put it in to get it approved. So I put it in, and it was approved in latter July, and they said your ETS date would be sometime in the first half of August of '90.

**Okay. I think you said '87, initially. So we're talking about 1990 here.**

Yes. I mean, when I'm leaving Germany. And when I got out it was three days after invasion of Kuwait – when Saddam Hussein went into Kuwait. We weren't on any alerts or anything then – they didn't know what was going on.

So I left Germany, flew to Philadelphia, took a bus – no, Newark, it was. I went to Fort Dix, New Jersey. I was honorably discharged from there. Got my last pay. Got on a plane and went back to California.

And I was going to start school – college on the GI Bill college fund – and said I would just wait until summer or something. Anyway, in December – or, actually, January – it was after January, I remember it was after New Year’s. I got a letter in the mail – a Western Union telegram – stating I’m in the Inactive Ready Reserve. That means when you’re in the military for four years, you’re four years inactive. I’d been recalled back for a minimum of one year duty of active service. And I believe I had one week to report to Aberdeen Proving Grounds – where my AIT was. It said I had a plane voucher to go to the nearest airport, bring my dog tags and any uniforms I may have. And I left, I think it was within five days.

**Well, was this pretty stunning for you? I mean, what was going on in your mind?**

Well, yeah! I mean it was kind of shocking. I just got out after four years, and five months later I’m back in.

And, anyway, I fly to Baltimore, get in a cab. We get to Aberdeen, and it was the biggest mess I’ve ever seen. It was the biggest call-up of military troops in the history of the military. It wasn’t just inactive soldiers, either. There were officers who were on indefinite status, and they were retired. There were even high-ranking NCO’s that did 25 years who were called back. Some of these guys were in the Korean war who were called back for this thing.

**So they were calling in everybody.**

They were calling in everybody. And lot of guys – some guys had been out almost four years that were regular enlistees; they had been civilianites – some guys had already finished college and they had lives, and they’re taking a big pay cut. And a lot of people were over-weight, they had long hair.

What it was, when they got everything organized, we’re in these old A-frame barracks, and the AIT people, they were in these new barracks – they were like three or four stories; they were apartments almost – more dorm-like, two and three-man rooms. And people were mad about that. We sat around for a week and a half in civilian clothing. They didn’t know what to do with us.

We had drill sergeants they brought over from the AIT units to us. And they were trying to treat us like raw recruits. But it didn’t work. They go, “You guys raise your hand, you’re back in, deal with it. If you want to be treated like a ‘newbie,’” that’s what they called new soldiers.

We did some MOS training at night. We went into the classroom for whatever our MOS was, to get back on that. There wasn’t even a bunk. They had to bring cots out. There were people, they’re civilians now. They brought the dogs through the barracks all the time. There was guys giving the MP’s – it was just a big clutter.

I could'nt understand what was going on. We went out – like I said, some guys had been out for four years, some guys hadn't touched a rifle in four years. We went to the rifle range out there at Aberdeen, and when we went out there, they gave us an M16, they gave us 40 rounds. We didn't zero our weapons – when you fire an old M16, you go to a range where you zero your weapons to your sight – they didn't do that. They just gave us a rifle, shoot it, and that was it. Only training we had.

**Okay. So, “zero the weapon,” for those of us who are civilians mean what?**

On your sight, whether you're left-handed or right-handed, you have \_\_\_\_\_ . And you had a long time, you had like a paper target. And I don't remember the exact now, but you zero your weapon – you get your adjustment so it's just right for you – it's fit for you – so it's set when you're firing. And we didn't even do that. Because everybody wasn't going to be issued a rifle. They gave us 40 rounds to go out there and shoot targets, and that was it.

**So this is like fire a weapon 40 times.**

Shoot 40 times and that was it. We didn't clean our weapons or anything. And when we were over there – I mean we went maybe a week and a half of training. The rest of the time we were on detail – you know, doing policing, taking out garbage, whatever. They had some of us cleaning barracks.

And then orders started coming down.

Oh, by the way, there were a lot of Generals walking around. We were like a science experiment. They had never seen this. And it was also like a big reunion. I hadn't seen some guys since basic training – guys I went with to Germany. And one of our commanders – Captain \_\_\_\_\_, he was a Captain, a Company Commander. He was at Aberdeen – he was a hard-core soldier. He was an enlisted man that went to college and then became an officer. And he was kind of old for a Captain – probably in his late 30's. And he had a nice family, and there was about ten of us from our old unit. We all got rounded up and had a barbeque on Saturdays.

And towards the end orders were coming down. And you were going to go, you were either going to Germany. If you're going to Germany, you're going to Germany. If not, you were replacing troops in the States. If you're going to Ft. Jackson, Ft. Benning, you were going over to the Gulf. And everything had already winded down. Pretty much they were putting out the oil wells.

I had a set of orders every other day, and they would get canceled – bing, bing, bing, bing. Anyway, they sent us to Ft. Dix, which was a three or four hour bus ride away to get our issue – some of our issue – they didn't have it all at Aberdeen. So we got our fatigues. And some people got at Aberdeen what they had left. So we just got regular fatigues – no desert or anything – got a million shots, did all that processing. And then

we had to go get our haircuts, because people were walking around in their BDU's with ponytails. (he laughs) The Army didn't want to talk about that, you didn't see them in the news. One guy brought his dog with him, a little chiwahwah.

**So a big difference between the active duty and out a little while! Now, were the guys kind of watching the war on CNN?**

Oh yeah. When this happened I was working at a Marriott resort, and my Mom called me on the phone. And it was right before my shift started – it was like at 3:30/4:00 in the afternoon. She says, “You got a letter in the mail: ‘Go to war or go to jail.’” We need to talk about that. And she explained what it was. And I talked to my boss and said I'd finish out the next few days. I was watching – I think it had just broken out the day before, or two days before, when the SCUD's started going off.

**The ground war, you're talking about.**

Yeah, the ground war. When the first thing started with America, not the Desert Shield. I'm talking about when the actual fighting started.

**Desert Storm.**

Desert Storm, yeah. The first things we saw on TV was SCUD's, missiles – they were hitting Baghdad. And I saw that a couple of nights before on TV.

Anyway, when we got to Aberdeen, we waited – there was still some fighting going on or whatever it was – we're, like, “What's going on here.” So some of us watched it. Some guys were just so mad.

There was an actual soldier – I don't remember his name – he was over there during Desert Shield. He shocked by an electrical wire somehow. He was missing three of his toes. He got recalled to active duty, and he had to wait for a medical discharge. So he was there with us until March. This guy was on crutches. He had already been in the Army. The Army didn't even know about this. There were guys who got out in Germany, that got discharged there, who married a German girl or whatever, and they had to fly back to the States. And another thing was, when we were there – it was towards the end – people were just like, “What's going on with this. Are we going, are we staying.” Nobody knew anything. The Cadre – those are the people in charge of the training, in charge of the troops, like drill sergeants, first sergeants – we probably had one leader, person in a leadership position like a drill sergeant, in charge of every 200 to 300 people. The Post was pretty much empty except for us.

**So what was the standard ratio for a drill instructor?**

Well, for example, for a platoon you'd have maybe two drill sergeants with maybe 50 people. Maybe 50 – 60 people in a platoon. But, I mean, they became what they called, “Tech Sergeants” or a “Platoon Sergeant.” They took off the “Smokey-the-Bear” hat. It

was a constant – how do I say it without swearing – ‘hurry up and wait.’ Organized confusion, worse than it ever was, because there were so many people. I remember we didn’t run out of food or anything like that, but we wondered what was going on – there’d be calls, and everybody would go to one place, and nobody would know anything.

**Did you ever get a sense of how many people actually got called up?**

Well, I don’t know. I mean, there were people from all over the country at different posts. But for Aberdeen, I mean, we were beyond capacity. Because we were in these H-frame barracks, and we were sharing wall lockers. They brought cots in there because they didn’t have enough bunks.

**Any idea how many people were even in Aberdeen?**

Oh God, I don’t know – tens of thousands. No, no. I mean I’d say probably at least maybe 2,000 – 2,500. It just depended where you were on the Post. For example, in the ordnance court – in the ordnance court where we were at – we also had Marines, they had Air Force detachments, Navy – those were real small because they were learning things, too. But it was just more people than normal. They would have the AIT students. They had a permanent party on the post, but most of the permanent party were instructors, things like that, because it was a training post, per se.

**So all of a sudden a huge call-up.**

Yeah. All of a sudden there’s all these people coming in – there’s cabs, there’s buses rolling in; it’s just like, “What’s going on?” Everybody is checking in. Just like a convention (laughs).

**Part 6: Second Discharge and Closing Comments**

**So it’s almost a logistics for World War III, just about. Okay. We talked about things after service, and obviously you were kind of activated for the first Gulf War, and now there’s another Gulf War. So, kind of any added views on that at all?**

I’ll kind of pick up from when I left Aberdeen Proving Grounds in 1991 when I was discharged the second time.

**Okay.**

Well, we had to out-process like we had to in-process, just like everything. When we were there – I think I was there, it was sometime in March; it was less than two months. And they gave us a casual pay, which was like maybe \$150. Well, anyway, we never got a paycheck. They were going to send that into the mail because they didn’t know where – when you go into a permanent unit, per se, they give you ‘sure pay,’ which is like direct deposit. So I remember after the first month there, they gave us another casual pay with

some traveler's checks – it was maybe like another \$150, and that was it. And it was like, some people needed more money, and they were mad about that.

For example, say that you entered the military from Los Angeles. Anyway, the Department of the Army or whoever it was sent your mailgram to be called back up to there, or they had forwarded mail to where you were at. Well, anyway, when plane tickets were coming down for us to get out of there, we didn't have any dress greens. They wanted us to be in dress greens, so they sent us all the way back to Ft. Dix again to get dress greens – we're in line with basic training troops just to get dress greens to wear them for one day. And there was a guy that lived in, let's say Vermont for example. And he came from the Army in Georgia. Well, anyway, he had to fly back to Atlanta. They told him they wouldn't cut him a ticket to go there. He goes, "Well, I came from there. They forwarded it." They said, "That's where you came into the Army, so that's where you have to fly back." He said, "Well, I don't live there; I'm not a resident there anymore. I moved to Vermont three years ago." So he had to pay for his own way home because the Army wouldn't do it.

### **He got discharged ...?**

He got discharged at Aberdeen, but if he wanted to go home he had to go home back to Georgia because that's where he came into the Army at.

### **Okay, okay.**

But he didn't live there anymore. Actually the letter went to his mother's house, and she sent it to him, and he actually got a ride -- Vermont – it isn't that far from Maryland – he rode down with a buddy or his wife brought him down or something. But when the plane ticket came back, they had him going to Atlanta. But he didn't need to go to Atlanta, he needed to go to Vermont.

Anyway, that happened to a lot of people. They were so mad. There were some guys who wanted to re-enlist. They wouldn't let them re-enlist. They said, "You have to be honorably discharged, then you could go to your recruiter and re-enlist." They said, "You might not meet re-enlistment requirements." The guys said, "Well, if I might not meet re-enlistment requirements, why did you call me back?" I remember they said that specific to us – they had a thing.

Anyway, when I got out I asked if we were going to be called up again, and they said they didn't know what was going to happen down the road. And I just pretty much said I want my life, and, up to this point – when this thing started in 2001 – I knew my four years inactive status was up, but Congress could always change something and call me back. So I'm like, if it happens, it happens. I'm about about 20 pounds, I'm a little older now (chuckles), you know.

But I look at it that everything happens for a reason. And it was a good experience because of the fact that people like me, we did volunteer and, we were willing to come

back. And I think that was important. But hopefully the military learned from this to get more organized in the future. If this has happened – I'm sure this has happened in this Gulf War that some people have been called back, but I don't think it's been in mass numbers like what we went through at Aberdeen Proving Ground.

But it was a neat experience. I don't regret it or anything. I mean I was still young. Still, I'm single. I don't have any kids. It don't even bother me, there was no pressure. Basically it was like I was on vacation. Because when I got out of the military, I was still living with my folks for five months. It was like, "I'll be back whenever." But I was a little scared because I didn't know what was going on. You'd hear stories of what was going on over there.

**Okay. Anything else you'd like to put on record before we go off the interview?**

I guess just that I appreciate this – to be able to do this. Maybe we can learn something from it. It's nice to be heard.

[Interview concludes]