VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT

Preserving Stories of Service for Future Generations

Interview with

Walter Toldness

Conducted by Deb Barrett

June 14, 2005

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in partnership with the Library of Congress

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

Part 1: Introduction:

This interview is being conducted on June 14, 2005, at the Indian Prairie Public Library in Darien, IL. My name is Deb Barrett. I am speaking with Walter Toldness. Mr. Toldness was born on February 10, 1943 in Chicago, Illinois, and now lives in Willowbrook, IL. He is a retired factory worker from Electro-Motive Division of General Motors. He learned of the Veterans History Project through conversations he and I have had over the past year. Mr. Toldness has kindly consented to be interviewed for this project. Here is his story.

Part 2: Entering the Military:

By the way, how would you like to be referred to in the interview?

Wally is fine.

Let's start with when you entered the service. When did you go in?

Well, I was drafted on the 14th of April, 1965. A month earlier I had come home from work. My Dad had a grin on his face and said, "There's mail on the table for you." It was from the draft board, Wheaton, Illinois. So, it was expected that eventually military service was coming. There was the letter. I had thirty days to get my personal life in order and report to Wheaton.

And the branch that you were in was in the Army?

United States Army.

You just went along with that because you were drafted? Did you consider any other branches?

Oh, no. No, no. The Army was fine with me.

At the time you were living here in Darien?

Well, back then in 1965 it wasn't Darien, it was Marion Hills. Since then that neighborhood has been incorporated in Darien. But, yeah, I was living at Ma and Pa's house.

And you were working you said?

Um, hum. Thirteen months. I got hired at Electro-Motive on the 4th of February, 1964. So I was there 13 months when I got drafted.

You were inducted in Wheaton?

Pardon me?

Where were you inducted – in Wheaton?

Local draft board 121, Wheaton, Illinois.

What were your first days like after you were inducted?

What were my first days like in the Army? I went along with the program. There's always someone in the service that's going to tell you what to do and how to do, so you – just like cattle – you follow instructions, for better or for worse. I wasn't intimidated by the process by no stretch of the imagination. I just went along with the program.

Where did you get your training? Where did you go to boot camp?

Fort Knox, Kentucky.

How did you get there?

Well, after the paperwork in Wheaton, we were put on a train and went to downtown Chicago to spend the day with a final physical examination and other paperwork process – it was an all day process. And from there in the evening we went down to the Union Station, boarded a train for Louisville, Kentucky. And then in the morning – it was Good Friday, 1965 – a military bus came to the train station in Louisville, picked us up and took us to Fort Knox.

When you came down to Chicago, that was just on a regular passenger train, right?

Yeah, but there were many of us [with local commuters].

And you said you had physicals and things. Where was that in Chicago?

I believe, if memory serves me, it was on Jackson Blvd. There was a military building in downtown Chicago for the different branches of service. So it was strictly a military building that did all the processing. And then that evening we took our oath that we would be faithful and patriotic to the United States Army and the country. And I might add – I have this propensity for adding or connecting dates that

happened in my life to possible historical events. When I was drafted, it was exactly 100 years to the day of the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. So, unbeknownst to me, in 1865 on the 14th of April, Lincoln got us out of a civil war, and unknown to me I was just getting involved in another civil war on the other side of the world. So, that's just my habit of trying to connect dates.

That's a very keen observation.

And just by chance, this day, the 14th of June, 2005, is the day I graduated from basic training 40 years ago. This wasn't planned, but nonetheless, the 14th of June, 1965, I graduated basic training.

Part 3: Training

All right. So what was your basic training like? What did you do?

Well, again, you did what you were told. It was a variety of things. You had the first couple of weeks was classes on military courtesy, the memorization of the different ranks, who you salute, who you don't salute, what you do, what you don't do. Then, of course, there's the rifle training**.** You walk out to the rifle range with the M14 at that time. And a lot of – I hate to use the word 'harassment,' but – to get you adapted to the military style of life. I never took anything on a personal level. If you take the… mentality of the military on a personal level it would cause you to climb a wall. So, at least my approach was to keep my mouth shut, [and] go along with the program. Personal attacks I never considered. And on ___????_____ rifle training, you had practice with the use of the gas mask in the event of a chemical war. We were marched through a chamber, and there was some gas released. You had to inhale it a couple of times and find out what that experience was like. And then how to put on the gas mask… And then a lot of marching. A lot of drill. The purpose of which was to get the individual to operate as a unit rather than an individual. Teamwork was always stressed, not individualism.

So thinking like a team, not thinking as an individual.

That's right.

And acting as a team.

That's right. As one unit. As my platoon sergeant would say, "You're not a mob, you're a platoon." That was his description. Sergeant Billy D. Humphreys. A good old boy from Alabama. He was a good drill sergeant. … . [He amused me.]

What did you enjoy? What made him a good drill sergeant? Maybe they're not the same thing.

No, there were some obnoxious ones – ones I wouldn't want to know personally. But, no, my attitude of him – he was doing his job. He was a Korean War veteran. So he went through the mill. And he was just doing his job as a drill sergeant. I never saw him take anything out personally on anyone. It was his job to get you, the civilian, to adapt to military life, to military thinking. And he did his job. And I thank him for it.

He had to make sure he did his job so you'd come back.

Well, of course. Of course. [Anyone in a leadership role should be concerned for the well being of those under him.]

Any other people you remember from your basic training? Anyone else that stands out? Or any other incidents that stand out?

Yeah. There was First Sergeant Mayberry. He wasn't a bad guy. It was about my 5th or 6th week of basic training. We were going through the chow line in the morning for breakfast. And the military fashion, you had a metal tray, and you're going through this long line for breakfast. And that particular morning there were two strips of bacon along with scrambled eggs and toast routine. I remember the fellow on my right … got two strips of bacon. I got a piece of bacon about the size of a postage stamp. And I didn't say anything. Then the fellow following me, he gets two strips of bacon. So I asked the cook, "What am I going to do with this?" He said, "You're going to eat it." I said, "Like hell, I am. You're going to eat it first." And I threw it back at him. Well, that set off a chain of events. I was quickly ushered into the First Sergeant's office, and the cook explained the circumstances. And that set off First Sergeant Mayberry. He told me that my heart pumped piss, that I was responsible for all the turmoil that was happening in America during the mid-1960's. I didn't know that I was that influential. But nonetheless, he assumed responsibility to me. And then said all he gets was two strips of bacon. Well, that was my cue. I leaned over his desk. I looked him straight in the eye and said, "I bet they're not as big as a postage stamp. And then that really set him off. But beyond that, nothing ever came of it – surprisingly enough. I expected that I really was going to be put through the harassment mill. But I wasn't. Just a lot of hollering that he was doing. And my position was that [while] he was hollering. I thought to myself, "I can stand here longer than you can holler, so you do your thing and I'll do mine." And that was it. Until the end of the day. And then at the end of the day – 4:30 was the final roll call after all the training – my platoon sergeant, Humphreys, he calls me out individually and asks, "What happened between you and the First Sergeant?" And I explained it to him. He was very understanding. He said, "You've got a couple of weeks to go. Just keep your mouth shut and get the hell out of here." And that is the extent of that story.

And that was your goal, too.

Yeah. Other than that, basic training was a good experience. No regrets.

Were you in contact with your family while you were in basic?

Oh sure. Sure. All kinds of mail coming in every day. Yeah, Ma would send letters and other family members would send letters.

Did you get any kind of leave when you finished your basic training?

… After basic training, on the 14th of June, 1965, I came back home to Chicago – everybody was sent back home for a week, week and a half. And then I had to report back – it was the early part of July – for the next eight weeks of training.

Okay. And where was that?

Fort Knox, Kentucky.

Back to Fort Knox?

Yeah. After basic that was my first airplane ride, was to O'Hare field. I picked up a flight, I don't remember where from down in Kentucky. But I picked up a plane that went to O'Hare. Ma and Dad picked me up at the airport. It was a nice, bright sunny Saturday afternoon. In fact, one of the guys I grew up with in the neighborhood, his brother was getting married that day that I got out of basic training. Earlier in the year he had asked me to stand up for his wedding, which I agreed to, but then the military intervention, so I had to back out of the wedding. But, anyway, I got home on the 14th of June, the day of his wedding, and the day of my graduation from basic. [and a week later, back to Ft. Knox for AIT training.]

So you got to go to the wedding?

No, no. The wedding was over. There was the reception. But, no, I didn't go to the reception.

So you were home for a week, week and a half.

Week and a half. …

And then you flew back down to Kentucky, Fort Knox?

Fort Knox.

And what was the second part of your training?

The second part of the training. During the processing of basic training you were given all kinds of aptitude tests to see where you fit into the scheme of things. And I guess my mechanical abilities stood out, so I was sent to Fort Knox, Kentucky to be a mechanic on military equipment. My MOS was 63B2P – whatever all of that means – but that was wheel, or light vehicle mechanic.

So, what kind of vehicles did you work on?

Jeeps and half-ton, no three-quarter ton trucks. And then the Army deuce-and-a-half – the 2 ½ ton trucks. We were taught the components of those vehicles for maintenance purposes.

So, how long was that training?

Eight weeks.

And then, what did you do after that?

Well, going back to basic training again. I remember on the third week of basic training we had an airborne recruiter come to one of the classes looking for volunteers for Army paratroop training school. And so I had signed up – I had made up my mind before I went into the Army that that was the route I was going to go: since I was going to be in the Army, I was going to make the best of it that I could. I didn't want to be just the average soldier. I wanted to be a little bit better. So on the third week of basic I sign up for airborne school. And then, in the course of what we called AIT – the second eight weeks of training – during the mechanic school, orders came down to go to Ft. Benning, Georgia for paratroop school.

When you were thinking about this ahead of time and you said you wanted to do something more than just being in the infantry – you wanted to do something special, a little different – did you select paratroop then, or did you just say I want to do something different.

No, before I even went into the Army I thought about it. I had this 30 days to think about what I was going to do. My mind was made up I was going to go airborne.

Okay. So you went down to Ft. Benning for paratroops.

Yes. That was a four week program.

Tell me about paratroop school. What was it like? What did you do?

Oh, much like basic training. A lot of yelling. A lot of harassment – if you want to call it that. A lot of physical activity – a lot of strenuous physical activity. They… but they tried to make … [the experience] as miserable as possible to push you and see who was going to break first – you or them. And I knew it wasn't going to be me. And so I stuck it out for four weeks. It was a miserable place. Especially in July – no that was August and into September. And hot and humid – a miserable place. I wouldn't want to go back.

You had a lot of gear for paratroopers.

Yeah. You were required to run around the better part of the day with a full parachute pack on your back, and, oh, if memory serves me correctly, that was about 60 pounds. So that was all part of the airborne routines.

Conditioning?

Regimen, yeah.

So, how did they train you to be a paratrooper?

Well, you were – let's see now, let me think about that one. There's a proper way in which you are to exit the airplane. So they have mock airplanes set up, and you were taught how to stand in the door properly for exit out of the airplane when you made your jumps. So that was part of it. And then part of the training consisted of a proper fall – what they call a PLF: parachute landing fall. So you were taught how to hit the ground properly without breaking a leg. And, then, in the event you were jumping in high winds, once you hit the ground there was the possibility your parachute would be pulled with the high winds on the ground, so you were taught how to compensate for that problem. And how to get out of the parachute, should you be dragged on the ground. And, again, a lot of running, a lot of harassment. In the middle of the night you would be forced out of bed and made to do all kinds of athletics and running around, put up with all the shouting that was going on at 3:00 in the morning.

So they had these mock up of planes to teach you how to land properly, how to jump out properly. When you first jumped from a height – when you first jumped with your parachute – was it out of a plane, was it off a tower?

… The first exit, if you will, was from a 40' tower. You had your parachute on. You climbed this 40' tower. You attached your static line to a long steel cable. And then you made the proper exit from this 40' tower, and then your static line attached to this steel cable would take you down about 100 yards down to a hill. And then you would do your practice parachute landing fall. Some of the guys were afraid of jumping from a 40' tower. It was all secure – there wasn't anything unsafe about it – but some guys couldn't deal with it, so they were weeded out of the program. So, after the 40'

tower, we went to a 300' rig that would take you up 300' into the air – the same thing like at Riverview [Amusement Park] in Chicago … – … . It would take you up and once you at the top you were released, and then you were allowed to free-fall. And then after a few of those practices, then in your third week you were required to do your five qualifying jumps from a plane.

How many men started in this program with you?

If I remember, I think there were about 700 – somewhere in that range. My number, I remember, was 439. Each of us was given a number. Mine was 439. They didn't call you by name – you were referred to as a number. … . If memory serves me there were somewhere in the neighborhood of 700 guys that were in the jump school class that I was in.

Do you know how many finished?

No, I have no idea.

Were there any accidents while you were at this school?

None that I can remember.

That's good. So you were in this jump school for four weeks, you made your five qualifying jumps, then what?

Well, then we were asked what airborne unit we would like to go to. We were reminded that if our fathers, whether in the Second World War or the Korean War, were airborne, as a matter of tradition we would be assigned to the same unit our father may have been in. My Dad wasn't in the military, and so I opted for the 101st Airborne Division, and I was assigned to Ft. Campbell, Kentucky…

Ft. Campbell. You were in Kentucky a lot, weren't you? (laughs)

Yeah. Ft. Knox was on the north end of the state, Ft. Campbell was on the Kentucky/Tennessee border.

So, Ft. Campbell. And how did you get there?

Went by bus. All of us going to Campbell… Georgia, went through Alabama, through Tennessee and up to Ft. Campbell. It was, I don't know, a twelve to fourteen hour ride if I remember. What really struck me – that was my first experience in the south – to actually see blacks in cotton fields still picking cotton by hand. I never expected that, but nonetheless, there they were. I'm sitting on the bus taking all the sights in, and you'd see these field hands out there literally picking cotton by hand.

Kind of a surprise.

Yeah. Well, it was to me. I certainly didn't expect to see people out in cotton fields. Nonetheless, there they were. … .

Okay. Anything from your jump school that you particularly remember? Any incidents, or …?

Yeah. Two incidents. No, three incidents.

On Labor Day weekend they were looking for volunteers. No, let me rephrase that. You were expected to buy a ticket for some picnic or something. I don't remember what that was all about – some Labor Day event in September. And I wasn't in any mood for the social life, and I refused to buy a ticket. And so, at about 3:00 in the morning the doors in the barracks literally bust open, and the drill sergeants come in, lining everybody up outside. "Let's see your ticket for the picnic." And those that could show a ticket were allowed to go back in the barracks. The rest of us – there were a handful of us that didn't want to go – we were marched to – [the mess hall and] put on KP… It wasn't going to be a holiday event. We were put on KP since we didn't cooperate with the picnic program. And that was fine with me. Again, I went along with the program. That was the first memorable experience.

The second one was in jump school. There was a fellow and I, we had gone sightseeing on the Fort – there was some time off – and we reported late for lunch. And like a couple of naïve kids, we went to the mess hall to see if we could drum up a sandwich or two, and the cook says, "Yeah, I could take care of you. Here, try this." And he handed us two sheet of emery cloth. We were required to polish the stoves. So that afternoon was spent polishing stoves in the mess hall kitchen. That's the second incident. (laughs) It was … [an amusing experience].

Not quite the sandwich you were hoping for! (laughs)

It was fun. It was fun. Again, I didn't take it personally.

The third incident was my first parachute jump from the plane. You were taught to look out and not down as you were descending with your parachute. You were told not to anticipate hitting the ground. Well, as I was nearing the ground I looked down and I could see the ground coming up at a particular rate of speed. And the risers, which is the harness you are attached to, I started climbing those risers. It was a natural reaction, I guess. I wasn't in the mood to hit the ground as hard as it was coming up. But nonetheless, reality set in and I didn't do the proper parachute landing fall, the PLF. It was a pretty rough landing. And it rattled my cage for a day or two. …

Just a little shaken up.

Yeah. Reality set in. … [I never made a bad landing again – I learned my lesson.]

Well, since you had such a rough jump on your first one, how was your second one?

The second one – well, you were required to make five to qualify – the other four were fine.

It was kind of like after you passed that first one you were all right.

Yeah, yeah. I remember the first jump there were ten or twelve commands that you were given prior to exiting the plane. The first command, I remember, was "stand up." You're sitting in a C130 plane, and at the end of the plane where you're going to jump you have the 'jump master,' who is Jesus Christ on earth. Whatever commands he gives you have to follow. And that's for your own individual safety, and it's for the safety of everyone exiting the plane after you. So, his first command was, "stand up." Which means we're minutes away from jumping. I was the fourth from the door. So I could see that hot Georgia horizon out that door. This was on the first jump. And I asked myself in my mind, "What in the hell did I get into now?" It was an intimidating experience. But, nonetheless, except for the landing everything went well after that.

Okay. You said that was a four week program?

Jump school, yeah.

Jump school was. Okay. So what happened after Ft. Campbell?

Well, you can see from the diploma here, I graduated the 10th of September, 1965. I left Ft. Benning, Georgia, for Ft. Campbell, Kentucky. Then I was assigned to a unit there – C Company, the 187th Infantry of the 101st. So, after jump school I was assigned to an infantry unit. So you were issued the M16 rifle along with other infantry gear. And, in typical military fashion, one of the first duties you're assigned to is KP. The most miserable duty I think you can get in the Army is KP. I hated KP. But, anyway, after that you were assigned to a particular barracks. And, so again, just like anything else, you get up in the morning and somebody's going to tell you what to do and where to go and you just follow the instructions. In October of that year we had gone on an eleven day field problem in North Carolina. It was war games, is what it amounted to. So, in October of '65, the battalion that I was assigned to went on bus to North Carolina and we played war games against the graduating class of special forces. So it was a military exercise. It was nice. I enjoyed North Carolina. The weather was nice, the scenery was nice. I was lugging a radio around – one of those big, bulky radios – so that was my job, humping a radio through the woods. And I remember one morning we were on patrol on this exercise, and our platoon

leader came upon a gas station that was stuck in the middle of nowhere in North Carolina – just a little one-pump gas station, kind of a Mayberry type experience. And the platoon leader went up to the gas station attendant and asked if the attendant had seen any guerillas in the area. This attendant, I guess he had a sense of humor, he says, "No, but these woods are full of bear." … [a moment of amusement.].

(laughs) How long did the war games last?

Eleven days. Then, after eleven days we went back to Ft. Campbell, Kentucky, by bus.

Okay. So, when you got back to Ft. Campbell, what did you do?

So, that was October. What did I do? Okay, during that time we were required to make, what we called "night" jumps. Put on the parachute, get on a C130, and then make a jump into the black of night. Those were intimidating because you couldn't see the ground, you couldn't see the horizon – it's all black out there. So, there was no sensation at all that you were falling. And this parachute is just a sensation of just hanging there in limbo. And then out of the sky blue the ground would come up. So those were always intimidating jumps… I hated those. But, we got through that in fine order. And then, I guess, again, a lot of marching, a lot of guard duty. I remember at Campbell I had to go to the military base hospital and guard something or another. I don't remember what it was. But it was just busy work is what it amounted to. Rather than let you sit around and be idle, they'd give you these nonsense jobs just to keep you busy. I remember when I went to Vietnam I was put on guard duty the same day I got there. There was this huge steel beam – this thing must have been 20' long, God only knows it might have weighed 5 tons, I don't know – but I was put on guard duty to guard this thing; who the hell would steal that. But then, that was typical military.

Okay. So you were in Ft. Campbell, you did the night jumps. How long were you there this time?

I got there, it was mid-September. And around the 10th of December, let's say three months later after I got there, orders came down. And the company I was assigned to, C Company of the 187th Infantry, six of us received orders to go to Vietnam.

Just six of you, huh?

At that time, yeah.

So, how soon after getting that were you sent overseas?

Well, we had to clear Post. And once we cleared Post …

Explain what you mean – had to clear Post.

Well, you had to wrap up all the military paperwork for transfer from one Post to the other. So there was paperwork that had to be wrapped up and processed before you were given your orders to go someplace else. So after all the paperwork routine was cleared up, then I received orders to go home for ten days. So, it was mid-December – no, not mid-December – it was early December when I got back home for another week and a half leave before I went overseas.

So that was your first Christmas you were overseas then?

Yeah. Yeah.

So how did your family react when you came home and told them where you were going – that you were going to Vietnam?

I don't remember any particular reaction. I don't think Ma and Pa realized exactly what was going on. Vietnam was just starting up. It wasn't the hell-hole it was just a couple of years later. I had military life insurance. It was a $10,000 policy. So I explained to Ma, I said there was this $10,000 policy, and if I don't get back you get the money. That was it. So, anyway, while I was home, Ma made arrangements for, well not for, but with a photographer, and we went to LaGrange. I went in uniform, and she had photographs made of me in uniform.

We have that color photo of Wally in his uniform that was taken. And that's the picture I remember on your Mom's TV. Seven years later she still had that up there.

Yeah. That's it. So, we had gone to LaGrange and went through the photograph routine. So, anyway, it was, I can't remember the exact date, but somewhere around the 10th of December. So we all went to O'Hare Field, and from there I went to Oakland, California for three days, to the Army processing center in Oakland, California, for transfer to overseas.

Okay. So you were there for just three days. Paperwork and …

Yeah. Paperwork. There was no harassment there. There was a lot of leisure time in those three days.

So what did you do with that time?

Well, we had to go through the usual paperwork routine. You were given medications to take for malaria – that sort of thing. Those were given to you at

Oakland, California, prior to going overseas. And it was a lot of leisure time there. We were told not to leave base, because there was a lot of social unrest in the country at that time…protesting outside the gates of the Oakland depot. So we were told to avoid those areas so there's no confrontations. Anyway, nonetheless, a fellow and I from Ft. Campbell, his name was Dan Fox, he and I decided we were going into San Francisco and get a pizza and have a few beers. We were given privileges to go off Post. And we were warned to stay out of trouble. So, anyway, this fellow, Dan Fox and I – we hitch-hiked, actually. And some guy picked us up and we paid the toll to go across the big bridge from Oakland to San Francisco – we paid the toll, which didn't amount to anything. And so we went around and had pizza and beer. And that was the extent of it. No problems. No problems. And then after the three days we were all put on bus – there were hundreds of guys there – and we were taken to an Air Force base north of 'Frisco. I don't remember the name of the base. But from there we boarded a commercial jet. And it was about 6:00 in the evening when our flight took off. From there we went to Hawaii and stopped in Hawaii for refueling. And we were not allowed to get off the plane. I guess they had expected people to desert from this journey, so we were not allowed to get off the plane. From there we landed in Guam. That was the first time we got off the plane. There we were out in the middle of the Pacific there on Guam, which is strictly military, so there was no place to run there on Guam.

And this was a commercial plane yet?

Yeah, yeah. This was all commercial. Yeah. The government had contracted these commercial airlines to transport back and forth. And from Guam, we landed there about – oh, that must have been about 3:00 in the morning; it was dark, hot and humid, warm and humid. And from there we landed in Saigon. It was evening – late morning, early morning or something – it was still dark nonetheless. The plane circled Saigon and we landed at, I think Tan Sanot Air Force Base in Saigon.

Part 3: Vietnam

What was your first impression when you got off the plane?

The first impression when I got off the plane? Well, the first thing that I can recall was the humidity – the heat and the humidity of the Mekong Delta. Here it's December – back home in the United States it's wintertime, it's cold. Now I get off this plane and it's like sticking your head into an oven – it's hot, it's humid. So that's the first recollection that I can recall at this point. The temperature differential… I didn't expect warm weather in December.

Worse than Georgia had been?

Comparable. Comparable. Georgia, I'm sure, is more winter like in December than Saigon was in December.

You were talking about the trip over. That's a long flight.

Fourteen hours.

So what did you do while you were on the flight? How did you pass the time?

Sit there twiddling your thumbs. There were guys in the back of the plane getting involved in card games and craps games. I was never into that baloney. So, I was literally – for 14 hours… in that seat.

You didn't read or write, or …

Yeah, I wrote a letter home. I asked the stewardess if she had any paper. She brought a couple sheets of paper. I penned the letter. And it was my intention to send it home at some point in time. So, that's basically all I did – just sit there and look out the window. And stay away from the crap games.

(Side one ends.)

You were talking about stepping off the plane in Saigon and the heat and humidity just hitting you. And from there where did you report?

From there we went to the processing facility at Saigon. It was called… "Camp Alpha." And, again, that's where more paperwork is involved. You just basically sat around for those three or four days that I was there – waiting for orders for wherever they were going to send you. And it was a secure camp, but you were not allowed to leave the camp for obvious reasons. And I remember one morning I was looking out over the area – the neighborhood, if you will – and there was some smoke rising in the background. There was an explosion of some kind. I don't know what happened. But, nonetheless, that was my first experience of what was going on over there. I saw this dark plume of smoke and this explosion – I don't know, again, what the circumstances were. But it certainly my first eye-opener of what was to come. And I remember I was sitting on the ground at this Camp Alpha, and I was throwing little pebbles at flies. And a fellow walked up to me. And, by God, it was somebody I had known in high school – Ken Kolicky. We happened to be there at the same time. He didn't expect to see me. I certainly didn't expect to see him. But this high school chum and I were together in Saigon…

Was he doing the same work you were doing – paratroop?

No, no. He was with a different Army unit. I have no idea – I don't recall what unit he was with. But, no, he was not with the 101st. He was just with another Army unit.

It must have been nice to see a friendly face.

Oh, there were a lot of friendly faces, yeah.

Okay. So you said you were at Camp Alpha for a few days.

Three or four days.

And then where did you go?

Okay. During that three or four day period they were looking for volunteers to be door gunners in the helicopter. So I volunteered for that. That sounded pretty good…When they found out I was airborne, they wouldn't take me.

Hm. Okay.

I don't know the explanation. But I was turned down.

Because they needed…

I don't know what the reasoning was. But when they found out I was with the 101st, I was turned down. That's all I can tell you. And I think it worked out for the best. But, anyway. Finally, you received instructions that you were going to be assigned to a unit, so, you grabbed your duffle bag. And those of us that were assigned to the 101st boarded a C130 Hercules plane, and we flew north to the base camp of the 101st, which was Phan Rang, Vietnam. About 200 miles north of Saigon, right on the coast, right on the South China Sea…

What was the camp like there? Were you in tents, was there housing?

No, it was all tents.

How many of you to a tent?

Oh, eight or ten – something like that, I guess. But when we landed at, when the C130 landed at Phan Rang, there was this makeshift airfield. And the runway was not concrete or asphalt. It was made of what they called PSP, which was heavy steel planking that Army engineers set down. It's a mobile airfield, is what it is. And it's these interlocking lengths of steel sheet. And when that C130 hit that airway, that PSP, all this loose steel starting rattling and making all kinds of noise under the weight of this plane – scared the living hell out of me. I thought we got shot out of

the sky. But, nonetheless, it was a safe landing. But certainly an unexpected one for me. But then we got off the plane, and I remember at the airfield all these bunkers set up for security purposes. And, of course, all these guys on guard duty. So, it was around twilight, in the early evening. It was really pretty to see this countryside for the first time in this twilight atmosphere. It was really an attractive sight. And then, again, all these military bunkers and everybody – and all these guys on guard duty guarding this air field. So, from there I was assigned … to guard that steel beam that night – this 20' long, 5 ton steel beam. That was my first duty and responsibility. And, no doubt, it's still sitting there. And, then, the following morning someone came in a jeep and picked me up and took me to the company in which I was assigned to. So, I had expected, being in an infantry unit at Ft. Campbell, Kentucky, I had anticipated being assigned to an infantry unit in Vietnam. But it wasn't the case. By the grace of God, I guess they needed mechanics more than they needed infantry at that time. So I was assigned to a support battalion, and my duties were to keep the vehicles running.

So you weren't acting as a paratrooper, you were acting as a mechanic.

Yeah, yeah. Still assigned to the 101st, though.

Once you're assigned, you're there.

You're there – still airborne status. So, that was twelve months of that routine. Twelve months and 27 days, to be exact.

So, not quite 13 months.

UmHm.

Okay. Anything interesting happen while you were…

Oh, all kinds of things – interesting, my goodness. Let's see. That was just before Christmas when I got to Vietnam. I think that was probably, let's see, the 20th of December, when I got to Vietnam. I remember the first Christmas there – I was there just a few days. And it was uneventful. There was some beer drinking – that sort of thing. Nothing eventful. I had gone to Midnight Mass.

Where was Midnight Mass held?

Oh, there was a tent. The Army chaplains had a tent set up somewhere on base there at Phan Rang, for services. So, I had gone to Midnight Mass in this tent. And things were pretty routine until after the New Year. And sometime in early January we were given orders that we were going to go north from Phan Rang. So, in early January, all the vehicles and equipment and ammunition and artillery pieces – everything that the

Army had – was packed up. And we spent all night loading this equipment on a Navy LST, which is nothing but a big barge, the front end of which comes up on shore. And we spent all night loading equipment on this big barge. And the following morning we headed north to Tuy Hoa, which is another 200 miles north of Phangrang. So, at this point now, I'm 400 miles north of Saigon. And I remember that morning this barge was supposed to back off from shore, and then head north. There was so much weight on this Naval vessel that this thing couldn't budge. It couldn't move. It was stuck on the bottom of the South China Sea there at the coast. So, we waited until about 1:00 in the afternoon when high tide came in, where enough water would lift this boat up off this shore. And it was at that point that we finally got off and headed north to Tuy Hoa. And that was a nice overnight trip. I remember standing on the bow of this boat, and we may have been five miles or so off shore, and just watching the coastline go by. It was interesting. The evenings were always enjoyable over there. It was so scenic and so serene.

It is a beautiful countryside there.

Oh, it's a good tourist trap. It's a beautiful country. The Saigon area is desolate. It's hot and arid and flat. But once you get north into the mountain regions, it's really a beautiful country. So I enjoyed standing on the bow of that boat and watching the scenery go by. And I remember, finally, I went into the back of this deuce-and-a-half to go to sleep – this large truck. And the sea started getting pretty rough, and the boxes that were in there started shifting and falling, so I moved on before a box hit me in the head or something. But I do remember that.

And it was an overnight trip?

Yeah. It was an overnight trip. We got up to Tuy Hoa on the South China Sea coast the following morning. And then it was at that point the boat beached itself and all this equipment was unloaded. And from there we went to our base camp up in Tuy Hoa.

Back in tents again.

Back in tents. That was the first priority – to pitch a tent, dig foxholes, fill sandbags. And that was the routine. And then I remember – it was about Midnight or so at this point in January – the sergeant of the guard, … came through the camp running and carrying on; … our base was being hit by North Vietnamese. So, naturally, you jump up, you grab your rifle, you head for a foxhole. And you could see these tracers going across the sky. A tracer is a bullet that glows in the dark. It's really a beautiful sight. You could see these tracers going across the night sky. And then it finally dawns on me – there's no bullets flying around, you know. I can't hear bullets hitting anything. And we found out later it was the South Vietnamese Army was celebrating their New Years. That's all that amounted to. But it was really a beautiful sight,

watching those tracers go across the night sky. So, that was another memorable experience.

While you were there, you stayed in touch with your family back here?

Oh sure. By letter. There were no cell phones – no e-mail stuff. Strictly mail.

How long did it take letters to get back and forth?

I told Ma and Pa, … [to] send it air mail – it took about 8 days. If you sent it conventional mail it might take 8 weeks. So, it was about 8 days to get a letter back and forth.

Did you get packages…?

Yeah. Pa sent me a 6-pack of beer. Ma sent me a couple of boxes of Chef Boy-Ar-Dee pizza mix. So there was another fellow I got acquainted with. We slapped together this pizza mix, made some pizza, drank the 6-pack of beer that Pa sent.

That beer must have been pretty shaken up by the time you got it.

Yeah, it was shaken up. I remember the package – it was pretty beat up, too. But, nonetheless, it was American beer.

What was your normal food while you were there?

… – powdered eggs in the morning, bacon – you know, that routine. The basic breakfast. Lunches and dinners were chicken and beef, turkey on holidays. Unless you were out in the field. Then you got C-rations – those packaged goods, those canned rations. Ham and lima beans – what else did they have? Spaghetti and meatballs, turkey – all this canned stuff. You had your basic dinner in a can. One can held a roll – a hunk of bread. Another can held cookies, gum, and there were cigarettes in there if you smoked – in these C-rations, these packets. But that was strictly in the field when cooking facilities were not available.

So you had a mess tent set up?

Yeah, there was a mess tent set up in camp over there. And the cook did his job. And, yeah. You go to the tent in the morning, afternoon and evening for dinner, lunch, breakfast.

While you were over there, were there any – you talked about the countryside, but was there anything interesting or funny?

What I found interesting was like going back into a time zone. We, in the United States, take things for granted. But once you leave the continental United States, it's a different world out there. I was 22 years old. Again, it was like going back into a time zone to see how primitive the rest of the world lives. What we take for granted here – electricity – is not available in many parts of the world. Wash machines we take for granted – washers and dryers – and here you see people at river banks doing their laundry. So, again, there was that culture shock sort of thing.

You had also told me about a mongoose?

… I don't know how this mongoose got into the camp, but, nonetheless, it showed up one day. And it hung around for a week or two. It was a friendly animal. The thing would crawl over your shoulders, and up and down, and just kind of run around. Yeah, it was a friendly sort of an animal. I know little about mongoose, but nonetheless I was told they were good for killing rats and snakes. It was nice to have it around.

So the mongoose just kind of adopted your group.

For a week or two, and then, for whatever reason the thing disappeared. And, if I recall – yeah, there was this one fellow from Detroit. I forget his first name. His last name was Arndt. And he says he's got a pet. So, naturally, I asked him what his pet was, and he pulled out an aluminum case. For those that smoked, there were these aluminum cases that you kept your cigarettes in to keep them dry. Anyway, he had a scorpion in this damn aluminum case.

Interesting pet!

Yeah. And I proceeded to throw him and his pet out of the tent...literally. When you were on guard duty there was the possibility – and I know of guys that got zapped by these scorpions. It was a pretty painful experience for them. And, so, I wasn't about to have one in the tent. And I threw this guy from Detroit out of the tent along with his pet.

While you were there, what did you do as far as entertainment? Were there USO shows there? Was there something else that you did in camp?

Oh, there were a lot of card games. We weren't allowed to play cards or the dice games with real money. So, some of these guys were pretty creative. They would go to the PX, buy a Monopoly set, and they would play their card games and their dice games with Monopoly money, and then go off in the corner and divvy it up into real money from that point. So, there was that sort of thing. And, sadly enough, not my cup of tea, but nonetheless in these towns you have your houses of prostitution. So, for some of the guys that was their form of entertainment. But I, I could never

appreciate that. And then, three days later, you can count on these guys going to the medics for their penicillin shots. And, so, there was that nonsense. There was one show I had gone to – Danny Kaye and Vicky Carr had come, and they put on their performance. I remember once the Bob Hope Show. But I never attended that – I wanted to stay away from the crowds. So I never saw Bob Hope. But he was there, nonetheless.

Was it because you didn't want to be with the crowd?

Yeah, I didn't want to be with the crowd. On that particular day I just wanted to be left alone.

But you saw Danny Kaye and Vicky Carr.

Yeah, one day Danny Kaye and Vicky Carr came, and I did attend that. And it was nice to see. But that was the extent of it. As far as entertainment – a lot of reading. But, then, you were always kept busy. You know, you either had KP or guard duty every few days. So, you had your leisure moments, but then you had your other things to keep you busy with.

What did you read – did you get books from home, or were there books around?

Oh, no. James Bond novels, stories, were popular. There was a lot of James Bond books – paperbacks, that sort of thing. And I remember reading the Flight of the Phoenix – reading that one along with all the James Bond stories. And, that was basically it. Oh, entertainment – yeah – which I really enjoyed. In the evening you could go to a movie. They set up a couple of sheets of plywood as a movie screen. We would see the Gunsmoke series with James Arness. I always enjoyed doing that – I'm a Gunsmoke fan. And I guess back in the States, which was popular, which I didn't know at the time, that silly Batman series. So everyone went on with that – those two clowns. So I got my first introduction on the screen to Batman over in Vietnam. But I prefer the Gunsmoke over Batman. And we sat out there rain or shine. Oh, there was more than once I'd sit out in the rain watching – not alone, but going to these movies you put on your poncho and sit in the rain and watch Gunsmoke. … I enjoyed it.

So, how long were you in Vietnam?

Twelve months, 27 days. I was supposed to leave Vietnam in mid-December. But I found out that once you – how am I going to say this – once you got back to the States, if you had less than 90 days in the Army, you would be discharged. If you had over 90 days you would be assigned to another unit in the States. So I did some simple math, and I figured out that if I stay another 30 days, that will bring me down to 87 days, in which case I could get out of the Army in January as opposed to April.

So I did a little homework and I found out that all of this was true. So I extended in Vietnam one month extra. It brought me down to 87 days, and I was discharged from the Army on the 17th of January, 1967, as opposed to mid-April '67. I had enough of military life.

And you were a mechanic the whole time?

Um-hm.

No combat duty?

A lot of guard duty. No, we went on – we did some patrols, yeah. We did some patrols, but I have no heroic war stories to tell.

What was it like when you went on patrol? What did you do?

Well, you stayed alert. You didn't know what to expect. We'd have to go into these villages up in Tuy Hoa, and sometimes, sadly enough, we'd have to evacuate the residents. You'd find out that there were caches of food that these people had stored for the North Vietnamese – they were sympathizers with the North – so you would have to evict these people from their homes and houses, and destroy all that food cache to keep it out of the hands of the North Vietnamese. And that was always an unpleasant experience. But, such is war. You have your winners and you have your losers.

Did you encounter any booby traps while you were out?

No, not me personally… I have nothing in that regard to tell. I, for reasons I don't understand, I got the better end of the stick – more so than many others.

When you would find these caches of food and things like that, what was the general reaction of the people when you found them? Did they try to run, did they try hide them?

No, they were very passive. They were very passive. I didn't experience any resistance of any kind. They were very passive. You told them you'd bring in these vehicles – these deuce-and-a-half's – and you'd tell these people to get on. And they would load up their personal belongings and their families and get on these trucks and they'd be carted off to another village somewhere. They were very passive. I was surprised.

So, even when you were destroying all this stuff, they didn't say anything, they didn't protest?

No, no. Naturally, there'd be some jabbering going on. But I didn't know what they were talking about, no more than they knew what I was saying. So, it wasn't – at least from my perspective – it was a good experience. It turned out well.

Was there anything special that you did? Some people have gone into combat and they have their little rituals or something to keep for good luck. Did you do anything? Did you have anything?

Oh, I always had my rosary. Other than that, I was 22 years old. It was an adventure. I didn't look at it as a harrowing experience. You're a 22 year old kid. I looked on the whole experience as an adventure. And it was a good experience. I have no regrets. I know there are those who want to continue arguing the right and wrong of the whole Vietnam experience. But I don't get into that. I was given a job – a duty, a service, a responsibility – and I did it, for better or for worse.

What was your rank while you were there?

I went over as a private. Then I got PFC. Then I got Spec4, which is Specialist 4th class – E4. Equivalent to Corporal. I remember up in Tuy Hoa we were going out on a patrol and we were along this road, and this road was above a river. And looking down there, I'm looking, I'm looking. And there was a body floating in the river. I don't' know who it was – we never went down to investigate. Nonetheless I remember this bloated, human body floating in this river. The poor soul – he must have been twice his normal size, whomever he was.

Now, even though you did not encounter any casualties yourselves, you didn't get wounded or go into some of the fighting, did you see friends of yours who were wounded?

Well, I saw many of the wounded. There was one fellow that I knew, that I worked with. He was in a vehicle, and he hit a land mine. And he got some shrapnel in his backside and got a Purple Heart for it. But he come out best for it. Other than those kind of incidents, no. I remember one time I had to fly into the central highlands – up around Pleiku, Dak To, up in the central highlands. And on this flight there were six body bags. I don't know who they were, of course. But, nonetheless I was on this flight with six body bags, so, the reality of the whole incident was there, more or less on a daily basis.

But you just kind of put it out of your mind when you were there if you could.

No, I accepted it as reality. I'm not into putting anything out of my mind. It's just part of the experience – you deal with it. You live with it for better or for worse. You make the best of it and you get on with your life. I'm not one to waste time

feeling sorry for myself. I can't afford the luxury of self-pity. So you just deal with it. [and avoid the psycho babble]

Part 4: Returning Home and Discharge

So you said you came back to the States. You said you were discharged in January – January 17 you said? Where were you discharged?

… After I left Vietnam, I flew to Ft. Lewis, Washington.

Washington state?

Washington state. From there we were greeted by the Army at Ft. Lewis with open arms. We were given all we could eat. We were given our discharge papers. And that evening I picked up a cab on Post, and I told the cabdriver, "Take me to the best hotel you've got here in Tacoma" – Ft. Lewis was in Tacoma, just outside of Seattle. So I spent the evening. I went to the show and I saw that movie – science fiction movie ["FantasticVoyage"]

2001?

No. They miniaturized these people in a submarine and the injected them into this guy's body …

…

…

…

… And I fell asleep in the show. And when I woke up I went back to the hotel and I missed my flight back to Chicago the next morning – I overslept. But, anyway…

Your body was getting caught up with some rest.

Something like that, I guess.

How did it feel to spend that first day back here? Did you have any adjustment?

No. … I adapted well to military life [but]. I always was a civilian by heart. I had this military uniform, but it wasn't the lifestyle I wanted to pursue. So I was basically, I think, a civilian at heart. And, so, I ... [re]adjusted well to civilian life back home.

So you missed your first plane back to Chicago. You got one later that day. You flew into O'Hare?

O'Hare Field on a United Airline flight.

And who met you there?

Ma, Pa and my Aunt Sophie, which is my Ma's sister. So the three – and my brother, Bill. He was just a kid – he might have been in 7th or 8th grade. So the four of them were at O'Hare Field when I got home. And so, all of that was behind me.

And they must have been glad to see you get back home.

Oh yeah. Oh yeah. There was no tearful reunion. You know, the usual hugs and a handshake. And that was the extent of that. We don't get too emotionally involved.

So, when you got back home and you settled in a little bit, what did you do after?

Well, when I got home that evening, after all the commotion, I stayed up that night and I had all these 35mm slides, and I set them up and I was looking at them. I would take them, and I would send them home. So that evening, when I was home, I went through all these 35mm slides, and, for whatever reason. And that was it – it was all over with.

So, what did you do? Did you go back to work? Do you go to school? What?

Well, yeah. I hung around the house. And after about 30 days I remember my Dad telling me, "It's about time you get back to that job you left." When I was at Electro-Motive, I took a military leave of absence. And then Pa reminded me that it was time to go back to work. And so, I went to the employment office and told them I want my job back. I got my job back, and the rest is history.

So, did you go back to the same job you had left?

Basically, yeah. They asked me if I wanted to get into maintenance. And I said, no. Just give me the job I had when I left. And that was it.

Have you had any contact with any of your buddies – anybody you met when you were in the Army?

Yeah. A couple of years after I got home, I got in the car and went to Chapmanville, West Virginia. There was this fellow – he was a nice guy; he was a lot of fun – Lawrence Horne. He was from West, by God, Virginia. And, on a shoestring, I went to Chapmanville, West Virginia, and I was riding through this little one-horse town,

and I hear some guy yell out my name, and it happened to be him. And, so, we spent the next day or two together. I remember we were sitting in a bar that afternoon in Chapmanville, and drinking a couple of beers. And some good-old-boy was going up to Horne and pestering the hell out of him to play a game of pool. And Horne said, "Well, I'm visiting with an Army buddy right now." This guy just couldn't take "no" for an answer. He was just focused on a pool game. So, Horne finally excused himself for a few minutes – "Let me play a game of pool with this guy." And Horne beat him, and that was the extent of that. It was a kind of a bizarre experience, but this good-old-boy wanted to play pool, and there was nothing that was going to change his mind. I didn't want any problems. I told Horne, "Go play him a game of pool so he's happy." So, that was Saturday afternoon. And on Sunday morning I went back home to Chicago. And then, about 15 – 20 years ago, Claudia and I went to Montreal, Canada. We went on vacation. And we went into Maine. I was going to look up a fellow I was in the Army with over in Vietnam. He was from – I can't remember his town in Maine. But he wasn't living there in the town anymore. … – by chance I grabbed a phone book, I looked up his name in the phone book – he was living in Belfast, Maine, at that time. So, anyway, he answered the phone. So, we got together that afternoon, and went out to dinner – all of us went out to dinner. He was a State cop on the Maine police force back then. I'm sure he's retired now. But those were the only two I've seen since then.

Okay. Have you joined any veterans' organizations or anything?

No. No, no, no. Many years ago there was this Viet-Now organization here in DuPage County. I went to a few of their meetings…but some of these guys sitting around and some of them feeling sorry for themselves. I'm not into that routine, so that was the extent of that. I had enough of that baloney. I left that organization. I'm not into fraternal organizations anyway, so.

So, pretty much, you had a couple of meetings with people you knew back in the Army. But nothing recently.

Nothing recently, no.

You still keep in touch with anybody at all?

Oh, the fellow from Maine – there are Christmas cards that come back and forth every year. That's the extent of it – nothing on a social basis. The fellow in West Virginia – that was 1968 or so when I saw him – I haven't seen him since. I don't even know if he's alive.

How did your military experience influence your thinking about the war, or about the military in general?

Oh, I think personally going into the Army was one of the best things that happened to me. I have no regrets of doing it. It's my personal belief that people in this country have a duty and responsibility to serve their country in one way or another. And, so, I fulfilled my obligation. As far as Vietnam, I don't pass judgment on the right or wrong of it. It's an event in the history of this country that's far too complicated for me to untangle. So, I just simply did my job as a soldier in the United States Army. Did it to the best of my ability. And I have no regrets. I make no apologies to anybody for it. I'm a little disenchanted with the current generation of today. I think, in large measure, we have a couple of generations of Americans that are nothing more than spoiled brats. I think many parents are too complacent. We take all of the things this country has – we take them for granted. And there's this entitlement mentality that's evolved in the last thirty years or so. And it seems to me that people don't have a duty and obligation – a sense of patriotism that they have a sense of responsibility to serve their country. The attitude is, "Let someone else do it." That's my perception of American society in large measure.

So, how do you feel your experiences really affected your life?

It forced me to grow up and take responsibility. And to do things that you may not necessarily want to do. But there are things that have to be done whether you want to do them or not. And so you bite the bullet, so to speak, and you do them and set your personal feelings aside. There are things in life that are sometimes more important than ourselves as individuals. So we have to set aside our selfish attitudes and do that which may be uncomfortable or unpleasant, and then get on with life.

We're just about ready to wrap this up. Is there anything we haven't talked about that you'd like to express or any final thoughts you'd like to share?

Just one that comes to mind. I remember in Tuy Hoa – it was February of '66 – we had gone out into the field and everybody loaded up on these deuce-and-a-half's and went back to our base camp. And I remember an M16 rifle going off – about three or four rounds – all these deuce-and-a-half's were in a long line, one parked in back of another. And somebody had their M16 on the roof of one of these trucks and grabbed the rifle – the safety wasn't on. These three or four rounds went off and hit someone – I don't know who – but hit someone on the truck in the front and killed him. I had witnessed that. I had heard the rounds going off. That was my first bad experience that I can recall – to see one of your own bleed to death there in the sand. I don't know who he was, but that was in February of '66. That has always stuck with me for whatever reason.

Because of an accident.

Yeah, just a simple, stupid accident. The rifle wasn't secured, it wasn't on safety, and off it went on automatic and hit some unfortunate soul. And, so, whomever he is, his name is on that wall in Washington, D.C.

Have you ever seen that wall?

No, I will never go.

Why?

No.

Why won't you go? Is it too hard to go?

I couldn't handle it emotionally. 58,000. No, I will never go see that. That's more than I want to deal with.

All right. Is there anything else?

…

ADDENDUM:
After veteran's review, he added the following:

Yes, just a couple of final thoughts, which I believe can be tied together and relate to an earlier question about how Vietnam affected me. The first is about former President, bill Clinton. For me he is – representative of a generation of people who chose an easier path in life. For me, he is nothing other than an adult child who used extraordinary means to avoid duty and responsibility to his country. And as a consequence he and many others who are and were in leadership positions have caused me to be skeptical of any who have authority over others. Both politicians and military lied to the American public about the Vietnam War – what our goals were and how we were doing. All at the expense of 58,000 lives. May God have mercy on their souls.