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Narrator's name: Kurt Acktonate
Length of interview: 83:43
Date of interview: 4/12/2007
Place of interview: Orange City, IA
Interviewer's name: Bob Rohrs
For: Northwestern College, History 351: America and the Vietnam War

KA: Yeah, to start off with a little background: where you grew up, high school...

BR: I went to Alton Public High School, got out of high school, went to work for the Sioux County Highway Department for one year, got drafted in, well, let's see, what was that, Bev [directed toward wife Bev], about November?

Bev: What do you mean? What about?

BR: November of '65...

Bev: '65. Right

BR: And served for two years, got out in November of '67.

Bev: Right.

BR: Was in Vietnam for 12 months. Anyone else?

KA: Okay. What was some of the feelings...I see you got drafted. How much were you following the Vietnam War up until around '64-'65?

BR: When I got drafted and when I went, they were taking 18 guys a month in the draft.

KA: So did some of your other close friends get drafted too then?

BR: Yeah, There was a couple, three, four from the same town of Alton.

KA: Okay. So you said you got drafted in '65. What year did you graduate from high school?

BR: '63, I believe it was.

KA: '63. Okay. Being drafted from Alton, what was some of the local perception of the war? Of '65, it was slowly growing, I guess you could say.

BR: Yeah, I don't know. What do you want?

KA: Just you know, kind of some of the ways people think about the Iraq war now, what was the overall feeling in '65?

BR: They kind of felt then like they do now. That it was a lost cause, but they were over there for stopping communism at that time.

KA: What did some of your friends... you have any close friends that were also drafted?

BR: Yeah.

KA: They did? How was, kind of your feelings with that?

BR: Some of them went the same day I did. Some of them went to Korea and different places. Some of them didn't all go to Vietnam.

KA: Okay. Yeah, then you said you served the one year, what?

BR: Over there.

KA: Okay. The basic training, that lasted six months, right?

BR: Basic training was in Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri and that lasted eight weeks.

KA: Okay.

BR: And then we went from there to Fort Bliss, Texas, Air Defense, Missile Defense Base, and we took eight weeks of training there, advanced training in Fort Bliss, and then they shipped us to McGregor Range which was at Fort Bliss also, but it was in the desert. We served there for eight weeks training, more training. And then they brought us back to Fort Bliss and we were stationed on Biggs Air Force Base. The air force gave that to the army for training and we trained for eight more weeks before we went over.

KA: Okay. So that was three sessions of training then?

BR: That was 24 weeks total before we went over to 'Nam and eight weeks of basic on that yet.

KA: What was kind of your impression of the training, the way they got you prepared for that?

BR: Well, we thought yeah, we were going to Vietnam, that was a jungle and they had us in a desert for training. But it was for different stuff. It was for convoys and stuff like that, that we would be in over there for support for convoys. And we got into the quad 50 machine¹ guns. That's four 50 caliber machine guns on a turret. You sit in that and it's operated with a motor and a generator and you sit in there with a little stick, like an airplane, and you

¹ Refers to the M51 quad .50-caliber machine gun, a weapon often used in the Vietnam War. This machine gun was powerful against low-lying aircraft as well as ground targets.

could turn it, go up and down with the guns with that. And then we did a lot of artillery, support for artillery batteries out in the jungle and clearings. We'd give them support.

BR: Bev, give me another one [referring to food?]. You can tell your friends the one you interviewed was [inaudible].

Bev: You'd be eating more tonight than you did through your whole time in Vietnam.

KA: Anytime if you want, if you need to take a break or anything, just let me know.

BR: No, that's fine.

KA: I should have asked this earlier. You told me you were in the fifth army? What battalion, whatever, what regiment?

BR: We were in the 71st artillery and it was, let's see here [looking at papers] let me find this a minute... We were in the fifth battalion, 71st artillery, D battery. And then when we were over there, we got overrun twice and I got the Purple Heart² and Silver Star³. When we got there first, we went over in a ship, troop ship. That took three weeks and then when we landed and we went to Long Ben. That was a temporary base camp for us. It had six or eight men tents and then after we were there for about three, four, five days we had to go back to Saigon and unload the ship with all our equipment. After that all got done, we all separated and went different ways, gave different battalions support. We went up and down the coast of Vietnam. We were at Phu Cat and from north to south we were along the whole coast. We were out in the field most of the time over there. Once in a while we would be in the field for about eight, nine weeks at a time and then we'd come back in and they'd give us a week's duty, like supporting an air force base that the C130s⁴ would bring supplies in and stuff and give them support.

KA: Okay, so that was mostly your mission then, was to supply the...

BR: And then we did convoy duty. Give convoys support. That was hauling fuel and supplies.

KA: Were those convoys mostly during the day, or would you do those at night?

BR: Most during the day.

KA: How many guys did you have in a convoy usually?

BR: How many vehicles probably? Oh. Yeah, I really can't tell you. I stole twelve, fifteen vehicles and our quad 50s, we put them on the back of a deuce and a half⁵ truck and then

² The Purple Heart is an award given to soldiers in of the U.S. Armed Forces who are wounded or killed in action or die of wounds received in action. It is a combat decoration.

³ The Silver Star is an award given to soldier of the U.S. Armed Forces who displays "combat valor."

⁴ Refers to the Lockheed C-130 Hercules, a military transport aircraft used to bring supplies to troops.

⁵ "Deuce and a half" was a nickname for the series of M-35 cargo trucks.

we'd have them spread through every fourth or fifth vehicle. Sometimes there'd be twenty vehicles in a convoy.

KA: Along the coast, was that where...

BR: [Looking at map of Vietnam] Oh let's see here, where's Saigon at, down here someplace? Here's Saigon. And then we'd be all...we were at Phu Cat, Bien Hoa, Hai Cau is over here, I believe. Wherever. We were pretty much all over.

KA: All in South Vietnam?

BR: Yes. And we were in some north, up north too somewhat.

KA: What, I guess to go back to, when you're getting ready to go over there in '65, on that three week trip, what was, I guess, some of your feelings going over?

BR: [Laughs.] A lot of guys got seasick.

KA: Seasick?

BR: Yeah. I don't know what to say about the feelings. We didn't feel very hepped up about it.

Bev: How you doing, Bob?

BR: Give me another one.

Bev: Here, I got some right here.

BR: So anyway...

KA: What was an average day like then, when you were over there?

BR: If you were in the monsoon season⁶ it rained all the time. An average day you'd just pull guard duty and everything and once in a while, one of us would get picked that if we were pulling support for an artillery battery, well, sometimes they'd pick us to go out in the jungle at night for an outpost, just to be out in the jungle to see if anything was coming in.

KA: How many times did you encounter Vietnamese when you're out there patrolling?

BR: The enemy?

KA: Yes.

BR: How many times?

⁶ Vietnam has a tropical monsoon climate. From May to September the south monsoons control the area, and from October to April, the north monsoon affects the country.

KA: What do you say, on average?

BR: I don't know what to say about that. Probably weekly we'd make contact with them. Sometime within a week.

KA: Going off that, was there any Vietnamese that worked with you, South Vietnamese that would be...

BR: We had quite a few Vietnamese that were fighting with us, that'd volunteer to do that, that would change over and be on our side, just like they are now over in Iraq.

KA: Was there a lot of instances where you found out where there would be South Vietnamese working for the U.S. and then go back and work for the North?

BR: We had, one time, we were pulling guard support for an Air Force base and the barber that cut our hair, he was the enemy but they didn't know it. He'd step off...steps like from the main gate to the ammo dump, and the mess tent or the CQ⁷, and then one time just before morning, we got mortared and we found him dead. The barber, yeah, he was the enemy. In fact, I got pictures of him.

KA: Really?

BR: Yes.

KA: We could look at those later. That would be interesting to see.

BR: So, yeah. I got this write-up on that Silver Star and stuff if you want to read that or whatever.

KA: Yeah. How did you get that?

BR: Well, I'd probably let you read that. That'd be better yet. We got overrun one morning and we had to pull back and I just stayed in the foxhole and drug one of the guys, one of the guys got shot in the leg.

KA: So, was there quite a bit of, obviously quite a bit of fire going on around there and stuff?

BR: Yeah, there was a lot of, oh I suppose, God, I really don't remember anymore how many Viet Cong there was-probably a couple hundred.

KA: Where was this? Where did this take place?

BR: I think at Phu Cat.

⁷ Stands for charge of quarters. This was an officer in charge of a unit headquarters at night.

KA: What were some of the feelings you had after you did that?

BR: Yeah, I don't know what to say. I don't know how to describe that.

KA: Then you said you also won the Purple Heart?

BR: Yes. Got [inaudible – 17:50].

KA: Are those some of the pictures that you took over there?

BR: Yes. I'm going to try and find, quick a minute, that barber. See, some of these... They'd airlift us out with Chinook⁸ helicopters, that's the one with two propellers.

KA: Oh. Okay. That's the big ones then?

BR: Yes. I'm going to get a better picture of it in a minute for you. [Looking at a picture of a helicopter.] See, this is a helicopter. That's a hole where there's a wench and they hang those mounts from the bottom. That's kind of hard for you to... there's a Chinook one.

KA: Okay.

BR: See and those quad 50s, there's the mount you sat in, there's four 50-caliber machine guns on them. That whole pallet there was ammo for the 50s.

KA: How long would something like that last then, a big pallet like that?

BR: They could shoot thirteen hundred rounds a minute if you had all four of them going. See, this was when they were on a deuce and a half truck. [Looking at picture.] Just a second here. This was, one time we were pulling guard duty and we got mortared early in the morning and there was a Vietcong trying to climb up this here deal and shoot an RPG⁹ at us. Needless to say he didn't make it. We pretty much shot that all up. You can see all the places where the bullets hit.

KA: Was that just the entrance gate or something?

BR: Yeah. The entrance gate... and this was one of the air force bases we got overrun... That bunker, you can see how it got hit. The roof and see that one's caved in.

KA: Oh wow. Did you have a lot of – I see a rice paddy there – were those pretty much all over the place?

BR: They were what?

KA: Those were rice paddies.

⁸ The Chinook was a multi-mission, heavy-lift transport helicopter.

⁹ RPG refers to rocket propelled grenade.

BR: Yeah. A lot of them were rice paddies. And we had some little friends once in a while where we were on air force bases pulling guard duty and then these little guys. [Looking at various pictures in a photo album.] This was, oh come on, let's see here, this doesn't show it. [Flipping through photo album.] See that's those 50s all tore down.

This might have been a village where we're going through doing convoy support. [Looking at another picture]. That was a bunker that we had before, the guys before us had Playboy¹⁰ in there. [Flipping through album.] Let's see here, this guy right here who's standing by me, his name was Jim Singer.

KA: What did he do?

BR: He was on a twin forty duster¹¹. It's like a tank with two guns, with a turret that you sit in and his whole crew got wiped out. He was the only survivor for that one. [Looking at another picture.] This was back in base camp when I went back for R&R¹², for five days R&R. Then I was getting that Silver Star then.

KA: How long did the R&R last then?

BR: Five days.

KA: Five days? How often would you get that?

BR: Oh, once a year. Then once in a while you could go on a, like, a three day R&R and that was like to Thailand or something like that, someplace closer. We – me and another buddy – went to Tokyo on our five days R&R because we had a buddy that got hurt and he was over there in the hospital in Tokyo. [Looking at foreign currency.] That's some of the money that they got over there.

KA: How much money did you have over there and how...Did you get paid?

BR: Oh, I sent most of it home. We never got much money then.

KA: Just enough to...

BR: Well, they never paid much. I don't know what it was. One hundred fifty dollars a month maybe or something like that.

KA: What were some of the bigger towns like that you went through?

¹⁰ *Playboy* magazine, an American men's magazine that features pornography.

¹¹ A Twin-40 "Duster" is a self-propelled, anti-American tank engine that supported ground troops.

¹² Stands for rest and relaxation or rest and recuperation.

BR: Most of them are just villages. The bigger ones, like Saigon... [Looking at picture.] See now this was a homemade shower, had a barrel up there. We'd fill that in the morning and it got so beastly hot over there that by night when you wanted to shower, it was warn.

KA: That worked.

BR: Yeah.

KA: Would you take a shower then every day or every other day?

BR: Yeah, when we could. Some days we didn't get one for a whole week, when we were out in the field and once in a while... [Looking at picture] This one here, you can see this one got hit, this one here got all hanged up inside. There's the barber.

KA: Oh, that's him?

BR: Yeah. I want to find something else here, Bev.

KA: So he was a VC¹³ right?

BR: Yeah, he was a VC.

KA: How was the overall, kind of thinking, like that how much, you know, you probably couldn't trust a whole lot of people then.

BR: Not really. Just like Iraq. You don't know who the bad guy is. That is for sure. I want to show you some more pictures. There's bomb craters. Some of the smaller ones that a lot of these...see, those are the C130s¹⁴. That was on one of the air force bases where we gave them support, guarded it for relax, you know, from being out in the field so long. That's a bomb crater too, when the B52s¹⁵ dropped the five hundred pounders and the thousand pounders. When we were out in the field like that, a lot of times you could get in an old bomb crater and get cleaned up a little bit but you usually had to wear your shoes because those bomb craters had shrap metal in them. You didn't want to get cut, not over there anyway. You'd get an infection.

KA: How, like dry rot and stuff, did you ever have any of that?

BR: Yeah. That was bad. We usually didn't wear underwear because that'd just rub you raw so a lot of guys just wear their fatigues. [Looking at another picture.] That was the kind of bunker we had when we were out there with the quad 50, just a small foxhole. See, there's a picture of it on a deuce and a half truck, a quad 50.

¹³ Viet Cong, the colloquial name of the People's Liberation Armed Forces. The Viet Cong was the military arm of the National Liberation Front.

¹⁴ Refers to the Lockheed C-130 Hercules, a military transport aircraft used to bring supplies to troops.

¹⁵ The B-52 was a long-range heavy bomber used in the Vietnam War.

KA: Oh, that's the...

BR: Sitting on a deuce and a half truck.

KA: Okay, that's what you used to shoot then?

BR: Yes. And what we used for convoy duty. See here's some better pictures of it sitting on the truck.

KA: So, what was like, I know you kind of said it, what was an average day like with this? What exactly would you do with that then?

BR: Well, when we were just sitting, just pull guard duty. We'd have to sit in the mount or be by it.

KA: What were some of the things that you protected, like the air bases and camps?

BR: Air bases and the camps. We were even there, I forget what base it was, we even pulled guard duty when Bob Hope was over there. We were about four blocks away and couldn't see him. [Laughs.] We couldn't go see the show.

KA: When was, probably the times when you guys would get attacked or ambushed the most?

BR: Usually when they would attack it would be at sun up, real early morning. They'd mortar you first and then they'd come in running.

KA: You know why they did it in the morning?

BR: No, not really. Probably you'd be less alert, some of you'd be sleeping. [Looking at a picture.] See here you can see this one was just landing. It had reversed the engines, see how the dust flies?

[Talking to Bev] Bev, you got a wet rag or is it all pretty good?

Bev: It's really pretty darn good. Just don't touch it.

KA: You mentioned Bob Hope. How-was he over there? Did you ever get to see him then?

BR: No, just a couple times we could see him with our binoculars or something, but it just had to hit it wrong where we never got off to see a show. We were always pulling guard duty or somewhere else. To help your report or whatever, you want a couple pictures?

KA: Oh, I can maybe when the interview's over.

BR: I can give you a couple and you can take them along and you can keep them if you want to.

KA: Okay, Yeah I might, I don't know if...

BR: And then you go and have your teacher, your professor something, you say quad 50, he'll never have any idea what it's about.

KA: Yeah, that's true. It's just a recording.

How much access did you have to TV or communications with people back in the States?

BR: None.

KA: None?

BR: We could write letters and then the choppers would get in once a day or every other day unless they had too much ground fire, then they wouldn't come to bring supplies and stuff and then if you wanted to write a letter, you'd write it and then give it to them and they'd mail it. When I was in Tokyo, then I called home.

KA: You did?

BR: Yeah. And there was places in Vietnam too if you got the right places where there was telephones, you could call home.

KA: Was that through ham radio¹⁶ or was that direct..?

BR: It was like what?

KA: I guess I heard some people calling through a ham operator¹⁷, where you'd call, and then there'd be an operator and then they would convey to the person back.

BR: I know when you called, you got an operator and it was tough getting through to them because they were Japan or... they couldn't understand you very good. It took quite a while to get through what number you were calling, but in Tokyo, it went real good that way, calling home.

KA: Who did you get letters from then mostly?

BR: Mainly my parents and sister and friends. Then mom always sent me packages over there, care packages.

KA: Like cookies and stuff?

BR: Yeah, cookies and stuff like that.

¹⁶ "Ham radio" is a nickname for amateur radio.

¹⁷ "Ham operator" is a nickname for the operator on an amateur radio.

KA: How much of the media-I guess in '65 to '67, there wasn't much protests and stuff?

BR: Yeah, it was bad back home then.

KA: Yeah, I guess it really picked up in '67-'68.

BR: Yeah, it was bad because we had some colored guys that were in our outfit.

KA: Yes.

BR: They were really good guys and they didn't think too much of it then either about the protests, a lot of it was racial and stuff like that. No, it was pretty bad back home.

KA: How did that affect you and the guys?

BR: Well, when we got back, like in California, when we got issued out, our physical and stuff, then you'd get off the plane and they'd call you baby killers. They'd be standing by the fence, they had fenced off when the plane had landed.

KA: That was another thing I had to ask, was about...you came back in '67, so you came in, was it Oakland? Or where was it in California?

BR: I think so, yeah, Oakland.

Bev: I think it was Oakland, Bob.

BR: Yeah, it was Oakland because the way it worked, we went over on a ship, and if you went over on a ship you got to fly home. But some of the guys that were not so fortunate left from Seattle or whatever. They flew from Seattle over there and then some of them had to take the boat back. It took us 21 days. Two weeks from San Francisco, from San Francisco it took two weeks to get to Okinawa, and we docked there and then we got to get off the ship for about six hours, about that long, and then we got back on and it took the week to get the rest of the way to Vietnam.

KA: How was the difference in feelings from when you left, the week you left compared to the week that you were there.

BR: After you were there a week?

KA: Yeah, compared to when you left?

BR: I don't know how to really explain that. We just thought it was a lost cause. The military really don't tell you much when you're over there like that. I mean what good you're doing or whatever. The only thing...news media wasn't as much of it then as it is now. We had some guys over there that were not so much with us but they were out and about.

KA: Like newsmen and stuff?

BR: Yes.

KA: So I guess that was... Vietnam being Communist, what was your overall feelings, that it was a lost cause?

BR: Well, I guess not really totally. I guess we did do good, more good that a guy really realizes. The bad part about it is when they had the fall of Saigon, you know, when it was over and all those hundreds of mountain men-people that were with us, helped us and stuff, the Vietcong killed all of them because they helped the Americans over there.

KA: There was something a couple weeks ago about some improvements that, have you heard, I don't know, have you kept at all up to date about Vietnam, of their improvements or anything about the country at all, since leaving?

BR: Well, I've heard a while back that they were going to make a tourist thing out of it for the United States or anybody to go over there to tour and stuff. And I guess they even got problems with kids getting limbs blown off with land mines that never got dug up and stuff.

KA: They started getting hotels, motels, more tourist attractions.

BR: Yeah, and they are getting into that quite a bit, I guess. And even now we have... I got a couple Army buddies I still get together with every year, at least once, sometimes twice a year. One's from Ohio, one's from Michigan, and we have a reunion every year. Our battalion, we get together, different parts of the United States.

KA: Is that through the American Legion?

BR: No, it's just an organization. They started it with a few came, and more came and more came. It's mainly an organization. We can pay dues and stuff for... Well, let's see, it's going to be... Where is it this year, Bev?

Bev: It's going to be down in Indiana.

BR: It's going to be in Indiana this year.

Bev: It's the Quads, Searchlights and Dusters.

BR: It's called Dusters, Quads and Searchlights.

Bev: And Dusters.

BR: And Falcons. The Quads is these machine guns. The Dusters were the track outfit with the twin forty guns on it.

KA: Okay.

BR: Okay. And the Searchlights...they were a little outfit that went with us. They had a searchlight like this on a jeep, on the back. At night, if they wanted to light something up, they'd turn that on. That will light up the whole...but they never stayed on too long because that was a pretty good target. They'd want to shoot that out, but that's called Searchlights. We had them with us too.

KA: So they were with you on convoys and stuff?

BR: No, they wouldn't do too much convoying, no. They'd mainly maybe guard duty on air force base.

KA: What are some of the things that, you said you guys get together about every year then?

BR: Yes.

KA: What are the meetings, like that you guys talk about?

BR: One year I went to Branson.

Bev: About for days.

BR: And we had it in...went to a show. What was the name of it [talking to Bev]?

Bev: It was very patriotic, the patriotic show. It was very good.

BR: The patriotic show. And then we have a meal and they even have at the end of the week, then they have a meeting and stuff.

Bev: It's mainly for support, you know, stress afterwards. I think some of the guys need to speak about it, some of them have to talk about it.

BR: And then they go, wherever it is, they go to an army base or something. They get a tour and stuff like that.

Bev: It's very emotional. Some men can deal with it in a much different way than others can.

BR: One place we went, we had a service at the cemetery.

Bev. Oh, yes. Unbelievable. That was really emotional.

BR: Being as we were there, we had that and then presented the guy's wife with a flag and stuff like that.

Bev: His grandchildren... that was very...that was our first experience. That was good.

BR: She was about 60 years, you know, they were about 60 years old then. That's a long time ago but they had a program for that.

KA: Was there any way that you shared some of those thoughts through journaling or anything like that?

BR: Do what?

KA: Did you ever do any of that because I know people who wrote books...

Bev: I don't think he ever journaled daily through like a diary or anything.

BR: No.

KA: Not over there or since or anything?

BR: No.

KA: We talked about some of the tourism and stuff, kind of going over there, some of the views and the movies and stuff. I don't know if you've seen any of the movies about Vietnam or any war movies?

BR: Some of them are pretty true to life.

KA: Which?

BR: Did you ever see any of them?

KA: We watched some of them in class.

BR: That one with John Wayne, "The Green Berets."¹⁸ That's about how it happens.

KA: It was like that? What about some of the newer, like "Platoon" and some of those?

Bev: "Saving Private Ryan."¹⁹ I had strict orders when I went. He says you don't ask any questions. He says because it's exactly what I went through. I said, okay we won't talk about it. Yeah, "Saving Private Ryan." Boy, you're really thin on these, aren't you Bob? [Referring to pictures in album]

BR: No, but that "Private Ryan," that's in the Second World War though.

¹⁸ *The Green Berets* is a war film made in 1968 featuring John Wayne as the main character as a soldier in the Vietnam War.

¹⁹ *Saving Private Ryan* is another war film depicting the Vietnam War; it was made in 1998.

Bev: Yeah, I know. But did you see some of these? [Referring to pictures] It's so hot, they just lay underneath trucks, you know, just to cool off. There's one where he's in a crater, where he's taking a bath. He hadn't had a bath in weeks.

BR: He's seen that. Yeah, we got that one in this one.

Bev: Here you're getting a haircut.

BR: Yeah, That's a closer picture of that barber. I don't think you've seen him that close.

Bev: Yeah, oh, is this the one you said was not...

KA: Oh, okay. [Looking at picture]

BR: In fact, he's giving me a haircut.

Bev: Was he not the friendly one?

BR: I had more hair then.

Bev: You had a lot more hair then. Was he not friendly?

BR: No, he got killed.

Bev: Oh, he did? He was an enemy? You never told me that.

BR: Yeah, he'd step off how much, how many steps from the main gate to the ammo bunker, and then early morning we'd start getting mortared.

Bev: Oh.

KA: Yeah, because there was, I don't know if you remember the part in "The Green Berets," about when that older Vietnamese, he was doing that. He was marking off and they took him.

BR: Then there was that other Vietnamese that was on our side. Remember that? He took him out and dealt with him. See, there's all the shells laying on the ground there in the bed of the truck. [Looking at picture]

Bev: It was really a funny war, you know, because Bob says to you, you always were looking behind you because you never knew who your enemy was.

BR: Iraq is the same difference.

Bev: I know, the same thing. It's just crazy.

BR: It's just like China and Russia was supplying them with weapons, and I think Iran is doing the same thing over there.

Bev: I think so too.

BR: If I can find one of these pictures with the truck and the quad 50 on it that's real plain, I'll give it to you.

Bev: One of these, Bob? Is this it? Could this be one?

BR: No, that's not it. [Looking at a picture] See, this was backed down in a hole. This was the air force base. Then off to one of the side was a foxhole, big, where we slept in.

KA: So you just backed that truck then into the bunker then?

BR: Yeah, and then had a perimeter out here that you covered so much.

KA: How long would that take, do you think, getting set up then?

BR: Oh, not too long.

KA: Not too long?

BR: No.

Bev: Did you show him the money Bob?

BR: Yeah. Then we made kind of a Mickey Mouse cover over it for when it started raining or something and you're out there you can at least stay a little dry.

Bev: He said he hated the monsoons worse than he did the heat, you know, always being wet.

BR: Yeah. Well, the only good thing about the monsoons, you know, it rained all the time but it was so hot over there, when it'd quit for ten minutes, you dried right off.

Bev: That being wet all the time is horrible because everything gets moldy and humid and start getting bugs.

KA: You guys were always moving around and stuff, how close were some hospitals and stuff? Were there usually some at each base?

BR: Not really. There was some but I suppose...I don't really know if they took wounded to Saigon hospital or anything like that. I really don't know.

Bev: Kind of hard to tell because if you didn't have to go.

BR: Some of the bases had a hospital like M*A*S*H.²⁰ That kind of hospital. They could do surgery and stuff if they had to.

Bev: For the real emergencies.

Bev: So there was always doctors within?

BR: Oh yeah. They could do quite a bit of stuff.

KA: When you got the Purple Heart for the shrapnel, how long were you out of commission with that?

BR: Never was. When we got back to this certain base that day, I had some in my leg and one in my back a little bit, you know, they take it out and bandage it up and put a band-aid on it. It wasn't that bad.

KA: Hmm.

BR: Yeah, they still gave me a Purple Heart. But anyway, I had one in my finger here.

Bev: [Giving Kurt something] Just smell that once. We had those aired for months and months outside. That's how it always smelled.

KA: Oh.

Bev: Bob's mother made that comment over and over and over how she would lay this outside in the hot sun for days at a time, just to get the smell. You could never get rid of the smell.

KA: That was just the map?

Bev: Yeah. You know, just moldy and wet...horrible.

BR: [Referring to newspapers] Yeah, I don't know how that ever got into papers in town.

Bev: Yeah. He was in the papers.

BR: I don't know how they got that.

Bev: I think they send those. I think that becomes...Is it in that one too?

BR: I don't know. There's another paper here somewhere.

Bev: This is the "Sioux City Journal," oh boy.

²⁰ M*A*S*H* was a popular television comedy about the Vietnam War, and Hogan's Heroes was a sitcom about World War II.

KA: So how long would that machine gun...it said...

BR: Well, that one there too, that was an M-60 machine gun²¹. That was a small one.

KA: Okay, it was still on a tripod then?

BR: Yeah, not really a tripod. It did have legs that you could fold down. It shot the same round that the M-16²² shot, the same shell.

Bev: Did you tell him about that experience when you got that, when you went from machine gun to machine gun for like four hours?

KA: So how many machine guns then would you have going off in an incident like this, three or four?

BR: Well, every one of us had one of them on a truck and then we had that with a quad 50 machines.

Bev: Did you show him the citation that you got? This one? This is pretty much kind of the same thing.

BR: I am going to try and find...It was one. This isn't a very good picture of it. That's the M-60, that little one there.

KA: Oh, the M-60?

BR: Yeah, I'll see if I can find a little better picture of it for you.

Bev: You said you lost a lot of good friends in this battle, didn't you? A lot of them died. Very few men left.

BR: Give me that other, where's that other one?

Bev: This one?

BR: No, bottom.

Bev: This bottom one? Okay.

BR: [Looking at pictures] See, that was a CP²³ tent that the old man was in and the first sergeant. See how that's all tore up.

KA: That does look beat up.

²¹ The M-16 was a machine gun commonly used in combat in the Vietnam War.

²² Another machine gun used in Vietnam.

²³ CP stands for command post. A CP tent was used for shelter when troops were moving around.

BR: That's Frank Graham, he lives in Ohio. That's Gofta. He's originally from Omaha.

Bev: He didn't ever have much to do with it, did he?

BR: That's Jack West. He's originally from Fort Bliss, El Paso. El Paso is where Fort Bliss was in.

Bev: Some guys just don't want to even remember any of this. We meet some of these guys that just, they just have a terrible time.

BR: See, here you can see a better, closer picture of all the holes in it.

KA: Oh, yeah.

Bev: Some need that closure and some just don't want to think about it or even talk about it. It's just how everybody reacts differently.

KA: Yes.

Bev: Bob never really talked about it much until we got into these reunions which was about seven or eight years now. I think it's been really good for him because...

BR: Yeah, we've gone about seven, eight years...something like that.

Bev: Yeah, I think it's eight years now.

KA: Was there quite a few guys that didn't talk about it much?

BR: Well, a lot of them on the reunions, most of them are our replacements that come to the reunions. It's very hard to get the original guys to come.

KA: Oh, like the...oh, okay...with you?

BR: That went over initially on the boat.

KA: Oh, okay.

BR: See, and then when we were there a year, our replacements came to replace us. There's more of them guys that come.

Bev: Bob doesn't know many of the guys. You got a few more as the years went on but not very many.

KA: You said the second year. How was the second year different from the first year, say with the replacements and with you guys?

BR: You mean as far as the war?

KA: Yeah, just kind of your togetherness?

BR: [Referring to the war] It probably got worse.

KA: You know, your closeness compared to the new guys coming over.

Bev: Did you feel as close to those guys, I'm sure not, huh?

BR: No, we're not, wasn't as close to them replacements as we were to the guys that we went over with initially.

Bev: Now too, they're asking those guys, they're asking them to stay fifteen months instead of a year. It just came out yesterday, in Iraq. I don't know...It's going to be a second Vietnam I'm afraid. Because they don't even want us there. Most of the Iraqis are just furious that we're there and I think that's just one reason they keep fighting because I think they just don't care.

BR: See, here's a close picture of that machine gun.

KA: Oh, that's the bigger one.

BR: That's the M-60, the smaller one.

KA: On average, how much contact did you have with the Vietnamese on a daily basis?

BR: You mean the civilians?

KA: Yeah, just normal village people.

BR: Oh, when we weren't out in the field, when we were on those air force bases, some of them could get on the base and sell pop and this and that. We'd give them some of our C-rations²⁴ once and a while if they were, like cookies and stuff, little kids.

Bev: Bob was always sharing his goodies and his candy.

BR: Okay, see here's Tokyo. This guy here is the one we went to Tokyo to see. He got hurt, wounded.

KA: Now is this in Tokyo?

BR: Yeah. This was our motel room, or mine. [Referring to picture]

Bev: Did they pay you for that Bob, when you went on that? How did you get there?

²⁴ C-rations were pre-packaged meals supplied to soldiers during the Vietnam War.

BR: They paid for it.

Bev: They did?

BR: Yeah.

Bev: They did. Did you have a choice where you went?

BR: In Tokyo?

Bev: No. Could you go to other countries?

BR: You could go to other countries and stuff. In fact...

Bev: What made you go to Tokyo?

BR: Well, see our Army buddy. The one that got hurt, this kid. But we were kind of waiting for Australia, that opened up for R&R.

KA: Oh really?

BR: Yeah. Then when we got back from Tokyo, then it opened up for R&R. We was kind of wanting to go there, but we decided to go to Tokyo.

KA: Was that for the first year then for R&R? That you went to Tokyo?

BR: Yes.

KA: Where did you go for the second year?

BR: I was over there for just one year, in Vietnam.

Bev: Two years in the service but one year in Vietnam.

KA: Oh, okay.

BR: See the first year I was over here in the States.

KA: Okay, so you were actually in Vietnam in '66 to '67?

Bev: From November to November.

BR: Yeah, and then in fact the first year, you get about a month leave a year. Well, we only had two weeks the first year, then we got shipped out. And then at the end of the year, like in Oakland, they pay you for all the leave that you didn't get.

Bev: Oh did they? I didn't know that. I'm surprised.

BR: Oh yeah. No, if you can't get it, they paid us I think, yes.

KA: So what did you do in the States then for the first year?

BR: When I got out?

KA: From '65 to '66.

BR: We trained.

KA: Just training?

BR: In Fort Bliss, El Paso, Texas. Then I went to Sioux Falls to the induction center for my physical and then we went to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri for eight weeks, then we went to Texas.

Bev: How long before you went, Bob, did you know you were going to be going to Vietnam? Then they gave you special training, right?

BR: Well, when we got done with basic, you got your orders and then we knew we were going to Texas and then we kind of had an idea this quad 50 that we were trained in, that battalion got wiped out in the Korean War. Totally. And then they restarted it up again and we were training for that and then it was just, use your own judgment where we were going to go. Because we kind of figured that out.

Bev: But how long did you know before you were going?

BR: For sure?

Bev: Yeah. Six weeks?

BR: Probably three, four weeks maybe.

Bev: That's all?

BR: Yeah.

Bev: They just told you one day you'd be shipped out?

BR: Yeah.

Bev: And it took you three weeks to get there? He's telling you a lot more things than I've ever heard.

BR: By boat.

Bev: By boat. I bet you were glad, that it was taking you a long time.

BR: I didn't mind the boat ride. The longer it took the better it was because our time started when we left San Francisco.

KA: Okay.

Bev: Yeah, but didn't you have some guys that got so sick?

BR: Yeah. And there was two battalions on that ship. Our battalion and then another battalion and I don't know what they were, if they were infantry or what. We never...

KA: Okay.

Bev: So how many were on that ship? Eight, nine hundred?

BR: Troops? I don't know, about 2500. Yeah. Probably.

Bev: A lot of men.

BR: I should know how many is in a battalion too but I don't remember. I forgot.

KA: Yeah, I'm not sure right offhand either.

BR: There's two battalions on there, I believe.

KA: How many guys were on there, on the plane back then?

BR: It was a big passenger plane, a civilian plane. Probably a little over half full is all.

Bev: Really?

BR: To me, it looked like it was a waste to fly all the way back to the United States and only have it half full. It wasn't full, three-fourths maybe.

Bev: So 150?

BR: Yeah, I suppose.

Bev: They didn't get a very warm reception in San Francisco or wherever you came. [Inaudible]

KA: I was reading, some people came to Sioux Falls that were, there was a lot of support and stuff and then, which makes sense, and then the people coming in in California...

Bev: They were not. “Baby killers” and, you didn’t really have a choice.

BR: No, it wasn’t a reception like they get now.

Bev: Yeah, now you’re just a real hero but that was not the case then.

KA: You said there was people saying that, how many people were there?

BR: Well, I suppose a couple hundred. Maybe even more. Between two and three hundred people. They were just lined up.

Bev: They would just meet you then at the airport?

BR: Yes.

Bev: God, it’d be terrible after you went through all that and come home to that.

KA: I suppose that had a big impact.

Bev: It does.

BR: Yeah.

Bev: It’s like, “Man, why did I do this for a whole year,” you know?

BR: But it’s not like we don’t know what they are doing over there now either. They’re doing more good than you think.

Bev: You only hear the bad.

BR: The news media just wants the bad.

Bev: Did you have any news media with you? Did you see any news media like they do now, like they almost videotape the war?

BR: There was some over there.

Bev: Yeah, because a couple of those guys got really badly hurt. I just wondered if any of those guys were...

KA: I forgot which movie it was that we watched, but there was a newsman, he was just saying, you know, “Come on, act like I’m not here,” you know and stuff. I don’t know if that ever happened when you were over there?

BR: We never really had any news media with us or anything, that went with us.

[Phone rings and Bev answers]

BR: Once in a while you'd see one on an Air Force base walking around or something.

KA: Yeah, it's really interesting, how it's increased so much. The Iraq war and even the Vietnam War, "television war"²⁵, that's what they call it, I guess.

BR: Yeah, the guys too, they can go on the computer and talk to their family on the computer, you know, the screen.

KA: Yeah, one of my best friends is in the Army National Reserves and he's over in Baghdad right now and we occasionally get emails from him and stuff, probably once a month or so.

BR: Yeah.

KA: Yeah, it's changed a lot.

BR: Yeah, that's for sure, you bet. I think that's probably good too that you can, that some of those guys are in a place where they can get contact with their family more, talk to them.

KA: Did you have a girlfriend then?

BR: No. No, I didn't. That was the one good part. Yeah, because some of those guys really went through something, they had Dear John²⁶ letters.

KA: Hmm.

BR: Yeah. No, I didn't.

KA: What was some of the morale like when after the instances, the battles, when you won the Silver Star and stuff? If there was a big attack, how did that affect you and the other guys?

BR: They just didn't talk about it much, amongst them much either.

[Silence, then recording pauses]

BR: Ready?

KA: Yes.

BR: When I got the Purple Heart, that was 21st of March, '67.

²⁵ I.e., War that is over-dramatized on television shows and films.

²⁶ A Dear John Letter is a one written to a husband or boyfriend by his wife or girlfriend, telling him that their relationship is over. It was common that soldiers got these letters in the mail when they were in Vietnam.

KA: Okay. So that was about, you had about six months left or so, because you left in November, right?

BR: Yeah. Left in November.

KA: What was some of the, getting down to a month left or so, was there...did you get less dangerous jobs?

BR: No. It didn't really make any difference. It didn't really make any difference.

KA: People in some of those movies, I guess it's kind of a bad example to go off of...

BR: Well, I guess if you're in the infantry and you were getting short, sometimes instead of being the point man, they'd stick you somewhere else.

KA: Hmm.

BR: Sometimes that happened, I guess.

KA: You mind if I read this article and that paper into the recorder to have something to go off of?

BR: No, and if you want to read that Silver Star thing, whatever, or I think I might even have copies of it if you want to take it along.

KA: I'll go ahead and read this: "Soldier from Alton wins Silver Star. Special for Robert L. Rohrs, son of Mr. and Mrs. Rheiny Rohrs has been awarded the Silver Star for gallantry in action in Vietnam on March 21. Rohrs, then a private first class, was serving with Battery D, a machine gun group when it was attacked by an armed Vietcong regiment. He remained in his position as a fifty caliber machine gunner for two hours and when his weapon was rendered useless by the heat, he moved through fire to an alternate position where he continued firing on the enemy. His determination with disregard for his own safety was termed by his commander Captain [Edsel?] Counts as a significant factor in holding the perimeter and preventing further advance by hostile forces. The soldier enlisted the army at Bliss, Texas prior to his arrival in Vietnam in December 15, 1965." That's good.

BR: Huh?

KA: That's good. I got it.

BR: You got it?

KA: Yep.

BR: Okay. This has about the same in here, but it's got just about the M-60 machine gun firing more than three thousand rounds. You want to read that silently or whatever...

KA: Oh, okay. Yeah, this is the Silver Star here. It said, "Then a private first class." Did you move up at all after that? Because it said, "Then a private first class"?

BR: Yeah, I don't know that. Because I was, when that took place I was a private first class. Yeah, when I got out or before I was out, I went to a Corporal, E4, Specialist E4²⁷.

KA: What's an E4?

BR: That would be a corporal, but we were called, it was a spec 4, that means it was a patch, not stripes. You specialize in something, like a machine gunner, stuff like that.

KA: Okay.

BR: This is the Silver Star. I should have another one of these with that Purple Heart write up in there, although maybe there wasn't a write up. I'll go down to the basement and look a minute.

BR: At that time, this was the guys who got the Purple Heart at that time. No, it wasn't either. This is April, May, different dates for when guys in our outfit got Purple Hearts. I'm going to go in the basement a minute to see if I left one of them books down there.

This is Ford Leonard Wood, the book we got when we went to basic training. And all the guys I graduated.

KA: Thanks.

[Bev offering soda beverages]

BR: This is the same page you had there. It just gives where...

[Short conversation about beverages]

BR: I found some more pictures, maybe I can see once if I got any...

KA: How was the process that you got for this, after the fact that it happened, you know, being recommended for it, what did that include?

BR: I think I got that the same time I got that Silver Star. At base camp, they presented you with it. [Looking through pictures] Now, see here's that twin 40, that duster we were talking about, with 2 guns in the turn. Here's a closer one. I didn't know I had quite of few of these pictures of that.

²⁷ Corporal E4 and Specialist E4 are ranks in the U.S. Army. The difference in rank corresponds with pay grade.

When we got to Long Ben²⁸, we stayed in 8-man tents. They were setting them up there, then. [Referring to picture]

KA: Yeah, okay, setting them up there.

BR: This was at Fort Bliss, El Paso, by one of the barracks. [Referring to photograph] This was inside.

KA: Basic training, was that pretty intense?

BR: Yes, it was. They knew what you were going to have to do.

KA: Were there a lot of guys who had a hard time dealing with it, I assume?

BR: You mean the training?

KA: Yes.

BR: No, it wasn't too bad. A lot of harassment from the drill sergeants, but that went with it. One of the sergeants caught a scorpion or a tarantula, I don't know what it was.

KA: This picture right here shows you guys just sitting there. What were some of the things you guys did, when you weren't...

BR: At base camp?

KA: Yeah, to stay busy?

BR: Play cards.

KA: Play cards?

BR: Yes, because when we got there, we didn't really have to pull much guard duty. They had other guys there for that.

KA: How many guys would these hold? [Referring to photograph]

BR: I think there was about, let's see, the driver, the driver would...I thought maybe somebody would...I think about five guys, I believe. Five or six.

KA: These are pretty interesting. [Long pause.] Unless you have anything else to say right off-hand, I think we can....

BR: No, not really.

²⁸ Likely refers to Ben Tre, a South Vietnamese city that was later destroyed by U.S. forces.

KA: I think you answered most of my questions that I had prepared.

BR: Was that all right?

KA: Yes.

BR: I'm not very good at that stuff.

KA: On the missions, how many booby traps and stuff did you encounter, like land mines or bouncing Bettys²⁹ or stuff like that at all?

BR: Well, when we were pulling guard duty for artillery battery out in the jungle, you know, we really didn't go on very many patrols with the infantry. We stayed with our mount.

KA: So you were mainly in one spot?

BR: When we were on convoy duty, then you ran into land mines and stuff. Sometimes when we came into these clearings in the jungle to get set up, the Vietcong would put bombs in the trees about 20 feet high off the ground, bombs that our planes dropped that never went off. They'd stick them in the trees and then they'd set them off when you came in with choppers. You were probably, the chopper would be about 10 feet from landing from the ground, then these bombs in the trees, they'd set them off.

KA: Okay.

BR: Sometimes.

²⁹ A "bouncing Betty" refers to an explosive that propels upward about four feet into the air and then detonates.

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