

Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

KENNETH L. BENDER

Infantry, Army, Korean War  
Officer, Infantry, Army, Cold War  
Officer, Infantry, Army, Vietnam War.

2000

OH  
129

**Bender, Kenneth L.**, (1931-2008). Oral History Interview, 2000.

User Copy: 2 sound cassettes (ca. 72 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 72 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Video Recording: 1 videorecording (ca. 72 min.); ½ inch, color.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Military Papers: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

**Abstract:**

Kenneth L. Bender, a Polo, Illinois native, discusses his service with the Army during the Korean and Vietnam Wars and his Cold War service in Germany. Bender talks about enlisting in 1951, basic training at Schofield Barracks (Hawaii), and being flown as a replacement to Korea via Japan. Assigned to Company F of the 2nd Battalion, 9th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Infantry Division, he states he was sent into combat the day after his arrival. Bender talks about the Battle of Heartbreak Ridge where he fired a Browning automatic rifle (BAR). He comments on transferring to a mortar crew and using old rounds from World War II. He discusses the high casualty rate, effectiveness of Chinese mortar fire, and the Army's use of Koreans to deliver food and water to the front line soldiers. Bender emphasizes the importance of airstrikes and recalls being impressed by the Marine pilots at Hill 1005. He describes the changes setting up a static line had and shifting to combat patrol tactics. He touches on use of artificial moonlight and having R&R in Kokura (Japan). After being shipped back to the States and a thirty-day leave at home, Bender touches on joining the 155<sup>th</sup> Regiment, 31st Division at Camp Atterbury (Indiana) and training troops as an acting first sergeant. He touches on duty with the 12<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division training troops in Gelnhausen (Germany) and transferring to F Company of the 14<sup>th</sup> Armored Cavalry at Bad Kissingen. Bender discusses patrol duty on the East/West German border and working with the Grenzpolizei (German police). After returning to the States in 1957, he mentions assignment to the 18<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division at Fort Riley (Kansas). Transferred to the 8<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment (which changed to the 17<sup>th</sup> Regiment, 7<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division), Bender tells of being shipped to Camp Kaiser (Korea). He comments, "all the guys had to do was sex and liquor." He talks about duty as a training NCO (non-commissioned officer) and his role in the color guard. Returned to the States again in 1961, he talks about assignment to the 10<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, 5<sup>th</sup> Division at Fort Carson (Colorado). Bender comments on his work in military education as an instructor and rifle coach for ROTC Junior at St. John's Military Academy (Wisconsin). Transferred in 1967 to Company D, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 12th Infantry Regiment, 4th Division, he talks about duty as an E-8 first sergeant in Vietnam. Based at Camp Enari, Bender talks about search and destroy missions in the Central Highlands and evaluates the North Vietnamese Army. He describes his participation in a combat patrol skirmish with an NVA battalion, the Battle of Dak To (Hill 875), and the '68 Tet Offensive. He talks about his men only having problems with marijuana off the front lines. Transferred to the 15th Regiment, 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division at Wildflecken (Germany), Bender compares his tours in Germany,

stating that the German people seemed more independent in 1968. He recalls being diagnosed with malaria and applying for a compassionate transfer leave to return to the United States. He tells of serving at the National Guard Advisory in Logansport (Indiana) with the 38th Division until his retirement in 1971. Bender touches on having a lifelong membership in the Veterans of Foreign Wars, using the GI Bill to buy a house and for school, and keeping in touch with other veterans.

**Biographical Sketch:**

Bender (1931-2008) served in the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry Divisions during his Army career, which spanned twenty years. He served in the Korean and Vietnam wars, as well as during the Cold War in Germany. Upon retirement, his rank was master sergeant, and he settled in Monroe (Wisconsin).

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 2000  
Transcribed by Elizabeth Hackett, 2009  
Corrected by Channing Welch, 2010  
Corrections typed by Erin Dix, 2010  
Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2010

**Interview Transcript:**

James: Okay. Talking to Ken Bender, and it's the 25th day of August, the year 2000. We need to have your approval, Ken, for anything that you say to us so we can print. I'm gonna write a book, okay?

Bender: Sure.

James: And I have your address and all that. But if you could sign right in that space there, that would be fine. Thank you. Now, when were you born, Ken?

Bender: April 27, 1931.

James: And that was where?

Bender: Polo, Ogle County, Illinois.

James: And you entered military service, when was that?

Bender: March 23, 1951.

James: You were a volunteer, or did you get drafted?

Bender: Volunteer, volunteer.

James: And your first duty was where?

Bender: I first went to Fort Sheridan, Illinois, for processing. We spent about a week there, and then we got on the train. There were about probably 1,500 of us, and we took the train to Oakland, California. From there we got on board ship, the *USS Pickaway*, a single-stack ship, so you know it was rousy, rousy, rousy. And we took that on to Hawaii, and were assigned to Schofield Barracks.

James: You had your basic training there?

Bender: We took basic there. We took, I think, eight weeks and six weeks of advanced training.

James: What were they teaching you in advanced training?

Bender: We knew we were destined to go to the Korean War. We knew that.

James: Right. You always develop a specialty, you know, and you get your MOS number. So—

Bender: It was all infantry.

James: Just infantry?

Bender: Infantry tactics, yeah.

James: So after the advanced training course, then you're back onboard ship on your way to Pusan?

Bender: Some of the people got leave, but most of us couldn't afford to go back to the States. And that was the time when Hawaii still wasn't a state yet; it was still a territory. So we spent a few days in Honolulu, and then we got boarded back on ship, and we went to Yokohama which took over 25 days, I think. We docked at Yokohama, and then we transported over to Camp Drake, Japan. Processed for three or four days, and then flew from Camp Drake to, I think, Osan Air Force Base in Korea. And we flew in the old, oh, you know, the—

James: C-47s.

Bender: C-47s.

James: Were you in a group by this time? Were you attached to any particular group at this time, or were you just in the replacements?

Bender: We were in the replacement stream, but we were destined for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division.

James: Okay. That's what I'm gettin' at. That was where you landed, was with the 2<sup>nd</sup>?

Bender: Yeah, yeah.

James: And you picked them up from Osan?

Bender: Osan, we went to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division replacement center which was—I can't quite remember where that was. But we processed in there and were assigned our units. And I could remember, they were asking for volunteers to be medics. They'd tell you, "If you'd like to be a medic, raise your hand." And some of the guys did. But I'll bet 30 days after they volunteered they weren't glad that they did. The rest of us, we just kept our hands down and went to the infantry units. They spread us out between the 9<sup>th</sup> Regiment, the 23rd, and the 38th Regiment. They spread us out between those three. There was one particular friend of mine who

went with me, and he and I are still in contact today. Ronnie Chevremont, from Cable, Wisconsin. We're still in touch—

James: Oh, how nice.

Bender: Today, yeah.

James: He lives in Cable?

Bender: And then another friend of mine, Ruben Teet(??), who I joined up with later, in the division, in the company, in the platoon. We're still in contact, too. He's from Beaver Dam.

James: What's his name?

Bender: Ruben Teet(??). We're really close friends. We get together every once in a while.

James: How nice. So you were in the—what's your smaller unit called?

Bender: Company F, Fox Company, of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment.

James: Okay, 9<sup>th</sup> Regiment. That's—

Bender: 9<sup>th</sup> Regiment, the "Manchus." Yeah.

James: 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry, 2<sup>nd</sup> Division.

Bender: Okay. So did they get you all ready for combat right off the bat?

Bender: Right off the bat. We went into the unit, we were issued our weapons, and we got, I think, three rounds of ammunition to zero in. Almost the same as I did in Vietnam. [laughs] We got three rounds of ammunition to triangulize, you know. We went to the rear area for the regiment. We stayed overnight, and this is the 28th of August, 1951. I'll never forget the date. We went there and stayed overnight, and we could hear the guns in the distance. The next day we moved out, and we were on Heartbreak Ridge, the Battle of Heartbreak Ridge the next four or five days. When I entered the unit we were into the Bloody Ridge campaign then, and we went from there to Heartbreak Ridge.

James: What was the objective, your regimental objective?

Bender: See, I know now, but I didn't then because a private—you don't know what's going on except what they tell you to do. But we started out, and you could tell if you looked at the map today in that area, you started out

like Hill 720, and then we had to take Hill 830. Then we had to go to 923, and then we had to go to 1064. And all these hills and masses were a little bit higher—

James: Those numbers represent heights, don't they?

Bender: That's right. They represent meters.

James: Each hill was tougher than the last.

Bender: Yeah. The normal G.I. would—you'd say, "Well, why do we take this hill today, and then maybe we're going to be giving it up tomorrow?" Which we did get kicked off of a couple of them. And it's hard to keep the G.I., you know, to understand what's going on.

James: Right. So how did that go, your first experience in combat?

Bender: Really scared. The thing that bothers me the most is that—

James: You had the—excuse me—you had the BAR [Browning Automatic Rifle] at this time? You were a BAR man?

Bender: Yeah, I started out with the BAR. You were really scared because it's your first introduction into combat, and the things that we know is that the last thing we want to do is to take anybody's life. But we know that when somebody's trying to take ours that we have to do it. A lot of it I can't remember because I think I've probably blocked it out. I think it is, a lot of it is. I carried the BAR for probably two weeks, three weeks, something like that. Then I transferred over, and they put me on the 60 mm mortar crew. I was a gunner. I was that for a while, and then I was carrying ammunition—50 calibre ammo.

James: Who sights the 60 mm?

Bender: The what?

James: Who sights the 60 mm mortar?

Bender: The gunner.

James: Okay. How did you sight that—so you decide where, the tilt, the angle you wanted?

Bender: Well, we put in bait stakes, I remember. You had a center stake, and then you put in perimeter stakes on each side. And then you sight it, and then

wherever the rounds hits the F.O. [field officer] would call in a correction. And then you would make the necessary correction on the sight.

James: You could tip that thing up.

Bender: Yeah, but we didn't do it like they show in the movies. We didn't take it and stick it in a helmet and fire it at will. We usually tried to know what we were shooting at.

James: Center it a little better, right.

Bender: And we did at one time fire it, and we saw three enemy troops disintegrate on the other hill. We got a direct hit. How we did, the first or second round, I'll never know. And another note: the 60 mm mortar rounds at that time, a lot of them were still painted yellow or orange which indicated they were World War II ammunition. They weren't even ammunition that was—it was developed in 1945. And this was '51 so some of it was bad. We did get quite a few duds.

James: What about white phosphorus? [flammable waxy substance used in smoke, tracer, illumination, and incendiary munitions]

Bender: Well, we didn't have it for the 60s. We didn't have WP [White Phosphorus]. They did for the 4.2 and the 81.

James: Was it a continual advance there at the beginning?

Bender: Well, pretty much so. It was a lot of heavy combat then.

James: Moving up slowly and—

Bender: Yeah, and it was always ridgeline to ridgeline. But in the mass of the battle I can remember that my company commander, Captain Larkin, was killed. I've just found this—I just justified—I mean I found this out in the records not too long ago on a computer. I found his name, and I found out where he was from in Pennsylvania. I never knew where he was from. But Captain Larkin was killed in this battle, and the three companies—Easy, Fox, and George—had lost so many men that they consolidated the three into one. And a Lieutenant Wilson took charge of the one company that was left. And this was common in the Korean War, at least in our unit. We'd get replacements in, and then in ten days we'd need more because we'd have casualties. Not all killed, but a *lot* of wounded.

James: Most of the wounds were from rifle fire, or mortars?

Bender: Mortars.



James: Or grenades? What would you say?

Bender: Mortars. The Chinese were so good, and what a lot of people don't realize is that when we would occupy the hill we would a lot of times, take their positions. And then, well, they're going to know where they were before.

James: So it was easier to drop the stuff in on you.

Bender: And they were very good, the Chinese were *excellent* with the mortar. Not—I wouldn't say they were better than we were, but they were good.

James: Certainly as good.

Bender: Very good. Most people know that that had been there.

James: Did you suffer any banzai charges from them?

Bender: Yeah, there were some.

James: With the horns and the whistles and the bells?

Bender: With the horns and the whistles.

James: What was that like?

Bender: But I couldn't believe—

James: Was that a surprise to you?

Bender: No, but we—

James: Or had you been warned?

Bender: We were expecting it. But I couldn't believe how many of them died trying to take our position. They were so many piled up that they could almost run across the bodies to go over the wire. We had triple canopy wire to the front and all the way across our position.

James: So they saw that bomb and just put a platoon in, and then the other guys just jumped over the—

Bender: That's about right.

James: Yeah, 'cause I spoke to some guy who had been there, and he said that the Chinese, they didn't use any mine detectors. They used to just run a platoon in—

Bender: Yeah, yeah.

James: Destroy anything that's in the way, and then the rest would follow. They just wasted body after body.

Bender: That's what they did.

James: Had no feeling at all.

Bender: That's what I keep telling people, that this country is a country of feeling.

James: Right.

Bender: And a lot of countries aren't. The thing I can remember, too, is the smell. The North Koreans and the Chinese had a smell. And I think I know now that what it was was dope, opium or whatever they used to smoke, because it was such a stink in their bunkers that we couldn't believe it.

James: Well, of course, the Koreans ate that cabbage—

Bender: Kimchi.

James: The kimchi. That was an odor that was overwhelming for me.

Bender: I know it. I know it.

James: I could always spot when we'd get some of these guys—we had people from all walks of—and nations, you know, on our hospital ship, and occasionally we'd get a Korean in, and you could always tell where he was he walked in the ward. You could say, "He's over there." Because the odor was just terrific.

Bender: You can't mistake it.

James: Not a bit.

Bender: No, you'll never forget kimchi once you've been around it.

James: It's awful. [laughs] Its garlicky smell magnified really, what it is, the smell. Well, anyways.

- Bender: I want to mention, too, we got a couple airstrikes, and I think they were Marine pilots. The other day I read a story in the VFW magazine where this guy was talking, or writing. He said that the airstrike that he had at that time were so close that the shell casings were falling down on the helmets. This is what I meant to say about this attack we got on Hill 1005. The Marine Air pilots came in so close that the disintegrating belts from their belts were falling down on us, and they were hitting our helmets.
- James: Oh, for goodness sakes.
- Bender: And I'll never forget it. They were so good, I mean they were outstanding.
- James: Yeah, they could drop it in, couldn't they?
- Bender: And we had the full support of the P-51 Mustang, the F-86 sweepback wing, and some F-80s, we had those. And there was another prop plane, too, besides the Mustang.
- James: They had some 47s over there, too.
- Bender: But they were *so good*, those guys. They were so good.
- James: So after the—how did you battle up the first ridge, how did that come to a halt? Did they take—they ran back, and then you had the hill all by yourself?
- Bender: We had it for a while, and then they would kick us back, and then we'd take it back again.
- James: Would they come back at night?
- Bender: They'd probe at night. I remember this, too—I remember my first night on line. Whenever I heard a noise I'd toss a grenade out to the front, you know, down the hill. There was a platoon sergeant named Halverson, and Halverson—when I was off guard and I'd get the chance to sleep, I had this habit of snoring. I guess I was snoring away, and Halverson came up and threw something over my head. And I thought sure I was dying.
- James: So you thought it was the enemy.
- Bender: He said, "If I hear you snore again, I'm going to kill you!" I don't know if I snored, but I was real careful not to. [laughs]
- James: All you can do is stay off your back, that's the only way.
- Bender: Yeah. That was scary—I'll never forget that.

James: I'm sure.

Bender: Some things I can't remember, but a lot of things I'll never forget.

James: I'm sure that was—I'm sure you decided that was the enemy.

Bender: Yeah, that's what I thought. But it was terrifying the first night on line, and I relied on the expertise of the guys that had been there and were older.

James: You had lines out, you said several lines—

Bender: Yeah.

James: Did you have any bells or anything on them?

Bender: Yeah, we'd put rocks in ration cans and hang them on the wire.

James: Right, so you could hear—

Bender: Yeah, and I can remember one time when—

James: But you had it mined out there, too, didn't you?

Bender: Well, some of it was, and some of it wasn't. We didn't have time. This was real quick, static. But I remember throwing C-rations away, throwing them out, corned beef hash. Any G.I. will tell you that we never liked that. But I can remember throwing that away, and that night going out and getting it, bringing it back, because we didn't get rations that day. The rations were carried up on what they called "choggie boys," who were Koreans, workers that the Army employed. They'd carry *massive* loads on their backs.

James: Those A-frames.

Bender: Oh, my gosh. They'd carry this stuff up to us, and then we'd have rations or water, whichever was the case.

James: Was water a problem—keeping water supplied?

Bender: Not as much—not any more there than it was in Vietnam.

James: Ammunition was plentiful?

Bender: Pretty much so, yeah. They used to pass out bandoliers for M-1 ammo.

James: And the 60 mm mortar ammo?

Bender: Yeah. Yeah.

James: That was in good supply, then.

Bender: And at that time we had a 50-calibre machine gun we carried, too, up on line.

James: That's pretty heavy.

Bender: Which was different—unusual. The 50-calibre gunner was a kid named West. West lived in Winslow, Illinois. And he was killed—he was killed in action. He got a direct hit from a mortar, probably—I think a 122, right on his bunker. When I got back to the States in '52 I went and visited with his mother. I took a picture back of him that I had taken.

James: So how long were you on the line that first half of—?

Bender: Well, we were on from 28 October to—or 28th of August to about the 10th of October. The 10th of October we went back to Kap'yong for reserve.

James: You were replaced by another unit?

Bender: Yeah, 7<sup>th</sup> Division replaced us, 17<sup>th</sup> Infantry.

James: So you got some free time?

Bender: Well, yeah, we went back for training and re-equipping. We did this by—we exchanged places with a night relief which is really—it worked marvelously. A platoon would come up, relieve a platoon on line, and that platoon would go back. And we did that all night.

James: By platoon.

Bender: Yeah. And it worked so *good*. I couldn't believe it, how good it worked.

James: Now when you go back to a little rest there, what are you talking about? Five miles, ten miles, or further?

Bender: Well, we went to Kap'yong, which was about 15 miles back, and we went by truck. They took us back by truck.

James: And you lived in tents there?

- Bender: We lived in pup—we lived in G.P. tents, general purpose, the big ones. They had stoves in them. This was October. It was starting to get chilly.
- James: You get some hot food then.
- Bender: Oil stoves, and we got hot food.
- James: That was an improvement, wasn't it?
- Bender: Yeah, we didn't get much hot food on the line.
- James: No.
- Bender: Not until later. Now, the war kind of changed after October. It became static when the peace talks were going on. And at that time we set up a—
- James: That was in '52.
- Bender: '52. Well, October '51 on in to '52. We set up a pretty static line, and all we did was run patrols. That's all. I didn't go on—I went on one patrol that I remember, that's all, just one.
- James: So it sort of came to a partial halt then.
- Bender: Yeah, it came pretty much—and in October we had an operation called Operation Opossum where we tried to—
- James: October of '51?
- Bender: We tried to show as little of ourselves as possible. And we were on a stable line—set up on a stable line. But there were patrols that went out once in a while, but I only made one.
- James: So then what happened after that? What was your next adventure in Korea?
- Bender: Well, it wasn't really—just watching out for incoming rounds. We set up—there was one amusing thing that happened: we used artificial moonlight, they call it. It's reflectors—giant lights that they shine up to the clouds, and it comes down and lights up the area. They called it artificial moonlight. That one time we saw the Chinese across from us, we could see them with binoculars, reading papers, newspapers or something by that light. [laughs] It was so comical. We'd call mortar in on them, and then they'd call mortar back in on us. It was crazy, really. But the casualties—about the only casualties we got then in early '52 was from—

James: Patrols?

Bender: Patrols and from people being out of their bunkers, maybe getting sniped at or getting mortar rounds in. We got quite a few mortars.

James: That happened at odd times of the day?

Bender: Any time it would—they'd throw some in. Just about every day they'd throw a few in. Just nonchalant, all across the area.

James: Just to keep you off your guard.

Bender: Keep you on your toes. Yeah.

James: So then this duty slowed down. When did you leave Korea?

Bender: I left Korea—I was on the train to leave on my birthday, April 27, 1952. We went to Pusan. We got on the *USS Martinez* which is a small boat.

James: Ship.

Bender: Ship. Boat. [laughs]

James: A boat is anything you can carry on a ship.

Bender: There you go. I knew I shouldn't have said that. [laughs] We went—we sailed on the *Martinez*, and we sailed to Sasebo, docked in Sasebo, and spent, oh, a number of days there, three or four days. I didn't mention my R&R, either. My R&R from Korea was in Kokura. I went there for seven days, and then flew back to Korea.

James: How did you enjoy that?

Bender: Pretty good. We all got an R&R. Then, it was just Japan. But it felt good to get out of there, and get some milk to drink because we didn't get milk when in Korea. We got all kinds of milk when we got to Japan.

James: You enjoy the Japanese food?

Bender: Oh, yeah.

James: It was *very* nice.

Bender: Pretty good. You know, it was pretty good in Japan in 1952 versus 1968. It was different.

- James: I was there—I went to Korea in '50. And I left Korea in '51. I was there for a year.
- Bender: Yeah. 1950 was a hot time over there.
- James: [laughs] It was at Inchon.
- Bender: Real hot. Yeah. But I went to Sasebo, and then I sailed out of Sasebo after processing, I forget on what ship. I think the *Walker*, the *APA Walker*. All Filipino crewmen, and American key personnel. And we sailed back to Oakland, California. Or no, let's see—yeah, it was Oakland.
- James: Probably.
- Bender: We sailed in to Oakland under the Golden Gate Bridge. Processed out of there, and went on leave. I think I got 30 days leave from there.
- James: What was your rank at this time?
- Bender: E-4. Corporal. That's what I made.
- James: So after your leave was over, then where?
- Bender: Then I went to Camp Atterbury, Indiana and joined the 31st Division, Dixie Division. I was in the 155th Regiment of the 31st Division.
- James: Which regiment?
- Bender: 155th. The commanding general then was Harry J. Collins. And I just saw, the other day where Harry J. Collins was involved in some kind of a thing from World War II. [laughs] They called—we called him "Hollywood Harry." And he always wore his shirt collar out—had a blue scarf, no tie. We were the—
- James: The infantry scarf, but no tie.
- Bender: We were about the sharpest unit. And they were National Guard, but they were *sharp*. They had the Dixie Band—Dixie Division Band. Just everything about it was sharp. We trained trainees to go to Korea. I was a platoon sergeant—I made E-5 in 1953, and E-6 in 1954. I went up fast. I was an acting first sergeant then in that company, too.
- James: You were in training mode then, you're teaching them about the mortars—
- Bender: Training, yeah.



James: And the BAR and so forth.

Bender: I was like a drill sergeant.

James: Got it.

Bender: Most of the company was from Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York. They were quite a group. When they got done basic they threw me in the shower. [laughs]

James: That means they like you.

Bender: [laughs] Yeah.

James: Yes, it is. That's an honor.

Bender: And some of them got sent to Korea, and probably became casualties because the war didn't end, you know, until '53. But I really enjoyed that tour at Camp Atterbury.

James: When you signed up for the Army then you didn't sign up for any length of time. You just signed up as a regular, and that was it.

Bender: No, I signed up for three years the first time, and then I re-enlisted there for six more.

James: You were about time to re-up now.

Bender: Yeah. I wasn't—I didn't figure on making the Army my career when I went in. I didn't figure on that at all.

James: But?

Bender: But I got so I pretty well liked it. It was—

James: Well, you got some responsibility and—

Bender: Yeah. Good security, and I was able to exercise some leadership. And the Army helped to develop me, too, into somebody with some character. Not that I didn't have it before, but you know what I mean.

James: We've talked about this.

Bender: It develops it. Anyway, I went from Camp Atterbury to Fort Carson, Colorado and still with the 155<sup>th</sup>. The unit moved out there. I stayed there

for—up until May of '54. Then I put in—I think I put in a request to be transferred overseas, and I went to Germany. I joined up in Germany with the 1<sup>st</sup> of the 12<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. The one on my hat.

James: Do that now—it's the 4<sup>th</sup> Division?

Bender: 12<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment.

James: 12<sup>th</sup> Regiment. 4<sup>th</sup> Division?

Bender: 4<sup>th</sup> Division. And little did I know that I was going to be in this outfit again in the Vietnam War.

James: Okay.

Bender: Okay, I joined up—

James: What was your experience in Germany?

Bender: I liked it.

James: Training, primarily, of course.

Bender: Training, and we were always on alert status. We had to be out of the kaserne, and they—you know they call them “kaserne” instead of barracks. We were out of the—I was at Coleman Kaserne, in Gelnhausen. That's where I was stationed. And we had a back gate that we could go out of, and the unit was—we were really good. I mean, we were really functional as a combat unit ready to go in case of warfare. And you know how it was in the East-West border at that time.

James: Very touchy.

Bender: Very touchy. So I stayed there with the 12<sup>th</sup> Regiment until—from '54 in to '56. At that time, the 4<sup>th</sup> Division was going to rotate, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division—3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Division—was going to take over. Now, this is about when Elvis Presley went to Germany, because Elvis went to Büdingen, instead of—and I was in Gelnhausen. So I've transferred, and I went to the 14<sup>th</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment in Bad Kissingen.

James: You went to the 14<sup>th</sup>?

Bender: Fox Company.

James: 14<sup>th</sup> Regiment.

Bender: 14<sup>th</sup> Armored Cav. And it—the responsibility was for—

James: 1956.

Bender: '56. The responsibility was for border patrol, East-West border. We had about 200 miles of border to patrol from a town called Wüstensachsen [Bender pronounces as Wustersachen] to Maroldsweisach [pronounces as Marwiesach]. That was our responsibility.

James: Now, I need to know about the—you're the first one I've talked to on border patrol so I'm going to pester you with questions.

Bender: That's all right.

James: How did you patrol? By jeep?

Bender: We patrolled by jeep. We patrolled by one machine-gun jeep, and one radio jeep.

James: Four guys?

Bender: Four guys, and there were two sets: one would be patrolling north, and the other would be patrolling south.

James: You mean two sets of four?

Bender: There was four vehicles.

James: Right. Two went this way—

Bender: Two radio and two machine gun, and they both—

James: In either direction.

Bender: Right.

James: Then you cover the twenty miles.

Bender: Right. I was the scout section leader. I was still an E-6. I was a scout section leader. We were responsible for—you know how you get in the military—hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of equipment and vehicles. It was a very, **[End of Tape One, Side A]**

--very interesting assignment. We were like—we had power. We were the ones in charge in the “5K Zone.” There was five kilometers where nobody could go.

James: That separated you from the Russians.

Bender: That separated us from the border.

James: Oh, from the border.

Bender: Five k’s.

James: Was there another 5 km on the other side of the border?

Bender: No.

James: They went right up to the [unintelligible].

Bender: No, there was 1 k, one kilometer.

James: So they were only 1 km away from the border—

Bender: That’s right.

James: And you were 5.

Bender: So—

James: Now, how did you observe them, use field glasses, that sort of thing?

Bender: We used field glasses. We’d pull up sometimes to a place to observe, and there they’d be looking at us.

James: Of course.

Bender: So, maybe we might wave. [laughs]

James: That was my first experience. When I went to Germany I was a tourist. At Charlie, you know—

Bender: Checkpoint Charlie, yeah.

James: Climbed the Berlin Wall, you know, and I’m looking over with some glasses to see, and I looked over, [laughs] and there was a German soldier looking right at me. It was incredible.

Bender: That's right. Right. That's what they did. But we didn't see too many Russians. We saw mostly—

James: East Germans.

Bender: Volkspolizei, they call them. People's police.

James: Right. They wave at you?

Bender: A lot of times, yeah. They usually patrolled the border on foot. We knew where everything was, and I mean there wasn't anything we didn't know about. We always patrolled the border with—we didn't have a round in the machine gun chamber, but we had one under the belt feed pawl so you'd only have to pull it once and fire. But you'd never fire unless [laughs] there was something really—

James: I was going to say—were you authorized to fire if somebody's trying to cross over? You don't know whether he's a soldier or a civilian.

Bender: Well, you'd have to apprehend first without firing.

James: You were not authorized to fire.

Bender: Not really until you got permission on the radio.

James: Right, and now—how often did you check back to headquarters on your patrol?

Bender: We'd check in—we'd get what we called a "Sit-Rep," Situation Report. We'd call in about every half-hour.

James: Every 30 minutes.

Bender: 30 minutes. But you'd have to get—there were certain areas where the radio wouldn't work, you know, like dead areas. And we even knew where they were so that we wouldn't be in that area if we had to transmit. Communication was excellent, though. We had a radio relay station also, but we usually broadcast it all the way back to Bad Kissingen which was about 30 miles.

James: Any airplane surveillance—

Bender: Yeah, yeah.

James: In association with you?

Bender: Yeah. Their call sign was 1-4, I remember.

James: The Piper Cubs, were they?

Bender: Yeah. Yeah. There was one Russian—we did get a Russian one day in a staff car in the “5K zone.” He didn’t want to follow us, but we made him go anyway.

James: I’m sorry—how could he follow you?

Bender: Well, we had to escort him to a certain place so he could be identified.

James: How did he get there in the first place?

Bender: I don’t know. We don’t know either, for sure.

James: He crossed over.

Bender: He crossed over somewhere, and it was—

James: But he wanted to defect.

Bender: It was a major—no, he wasn’t defecting.

James: He made a mistake. [laughs]

Bender: Yeah. [laughs] So we got the radio—

James: He was a driver!

Bender: We had the radio jeep in front, and the machine gun jeep in the back. And we escorted him over. He was really mad. But he got over it. He got over it soon enough.

James: What was he angry about, his stupidity?

Bender: Probably, because we [laughs] caught him.

James: He’s just goddamn lucky somebody didn’t shoot him!

Bender: But the whole thing is, it gets—after you’re there for a while it gets to be kind of a joke. I’m glad the borders are down and everybody’s living together because it’s so *stupid!* *Boy*. But that was an interesting assignment. I really enjoyed that. I was there until July ’57.

James: Tell me about getting along with the Germans now before we leave this.

Bender: We got along real good with them.

James: I mean, you know, your free time.

Bender: Oh. Well, I lived on the economy.

James: The civilians treated you well?

Bender: Yeah.

James: They were nice and friendly?

Bender: Yeah. Yeah. I should mention, though, on the border, we also worked with the German police on our—and they were called Grenzpolizei, border police, and they worked with dogs.

James: They were covering the border, too?

Bender: Oh, yeah.

James: So you had a lot of people there.

Bender: Yeah. And we were on good terms with those guys. Their dogs were something else. They were *terrific* dogs.

James: You mean their ability to find things—

Bender: Oh, yes. They were good. They were really good.

James: They all German Shepherds?

Bender: Mostly. Mostly German Shepherds. And I got along good on the economy. I never learned to speak German very well, but—

James: They mostly spoke English anyway.

Bender: Oh, yeah. I learned to speak a little bit, and that's all it took, really.

James: The soldiers generally were well received for being in a foreign country? You know, they tolerated the brash American—?

Bender: Well, see, now, we're talking about 1954 and '55, and that's only just eight years after the war ended.

James: Things were pretty tough in Germany—

Bender: Yes, they were.

James: For civilians, right?

Bender: Oh, yeah. Yes. And they craved coffee. They'd do anything if you could get them a pound of coffee.

James: Cigarettes, too?

Bender: Anything like that, yeah. And soap—that was another prize item.

James: That's what I understood about the soap and the cigarettes. I didn't know about coffee.

Bender: Oh, yeah, coffee too.

James: What would you get in trade for that?

Bender: I don't remember anymore. What we get? But it was—gave you a feeling like you were helping them out anyway because a lot of people were in pretty bad straits right then. A lot of Germans were. But they've sure come back, haven't they?

James: [laughs] Yes, I'd say so.

Bender: They're really, really back.

James: Did that stop? Hmm. I just heard—nope, everything's fine. Okay.

Bender: But then I left in '57. And, let's see—where'd I put down? I went to—

James: Bad Kissingen.

Bender: Yeah, and then I went to Fort Riley, Kansas.

James: Fort Riley. Oh, came back in—when was that, in '58?

Bender: '57. July '57, I went to Fort Riley, Kansas. And I joined the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division, The Big Red One.

James: 1<sup>st</sup> Division.

Bender: 18<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment.

James: And what was your duty?



- Bender: Let's see—I was still an E-6. I was a platoon sergeant, training NCO, and I was stationed on Custer Hill in Fort Riley. They had just built it, or they were building it. We were strictly training unit—no mission to go anywhere or anything, just regular training and—
- James: Were you married by then?
- Bender: Yeah, I was married. Yeah.
- James: Didn't have a family or did—?
- Bender: Yeah, I had three children. One child was born at Fort Riley.
- James: Did you have your family in Germany?
- Bender: I got married in Germany. Yeah. I was married before. Let's see, then—
- James: How long did you stay in Fort Riley?
- Bender: I stayed in Fort Riley—I transferred from Custer Hill down to Camp Forsyth which is another branch of the post, and joined the 8<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment for duty in Korea.
- James: Oh! Now when was that, '58? Next year?
- Bender: No, I'd say '59.
- James: '59.
- Bender: Yeah.
- James: 8<sup>th</sup>. 8<sup>th</sup> Infantry.
- Bender: 8<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment.
- James: Regiment of what?
- Bender: Of 1<sup>st</sup> Division. It was still part of the 1<sup>st</sup>. They were—we were destined to go to Korea in a transfer called “Over Rep” which is overseas unit replacement. At that time it was the big thing. And we shipped out in 1960 for Korea, and we were still the 8<sup>th</sup> Infantry when we left. Completely full, all “T” only positions filled. We went by ship—let's see, we shipped out of California again, probably from Camp Stoneman because that was about ready to close. We shipped out, and—let's see, where did we come out at? We shipped to—I guess we shipped to Pusan and trucked from

Pusan almost to the DMZ to Camp Kaiser, Korea, is what it was. And we changed places with the 7<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. We became the 7<sup>th</sup>.

James: Oh, they changed your designation?

Bender: Changed designations. We became the 7<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, 17<sup>th</sup> Infantry.

James: 17<sup>th</sup>.

Bender: The Buffalo outfit. We went to Camp Kaiser for duty, you know, to support in case of an invasion by the North.

James: How far back from the DMZ did you—?

Bender: I think probably six or eight miles. But now, Camp Kaiser's been given back to the Koreans. There's no American troops there. They are at Camp Howze and Uijeongbu and Camp Stanley and some other places where Americans are, 2<sup>nd</sup> Division.

James: How different was Korea, second time around?

Bender: Well, I used to tell people it didn't look much different than when I was here during the war. There still wasn't any trees. There was three trees where I—

James: Or dogs.

Bender: That's all.

James: Or dogs.

Bender: Yeah.

James: They ate all the dogs.

Bender: Right. There were three trees, and the country still looked just about like it was.

James: Terrible.

Bender: It was not too much—

James: It's terrible place.

Bender: I know it. And all the guys had to do was sex and liquor. Drinking, that's all there was.

James: Yeah, I'm sure. It's a problem.

Bender: It was terrible.

James: Inactive troops are always a problem.

Bender: I know it.

James: Got too much energy, and nothing—

Bender: See, that's the secret to basic training, too, that you got to keep basic trainees working hard, or they'll go AWOL.

James: They got to run them out, run them.

Bender: Or they'll get in trouble. And that's what I used to do.

James: They're just like dogs. If you raise dogs you've got to run them if you want them to keep meat in your socks, you've got to run 'til he's tired [laughs].

Bender: Yeah. But we went through a normal training mission there. We were completely enclosed with a fence. The keyword was "chunji soonda"(?), the keyword on the fence was "chunji soonda"(?)—"Stop or I'll shoot." [laughs] That was the word, and before we went to Korea I learned a little bit of the language. Not enough to be really fluent in Korean, but I learned enough to greet someone, you know, and say who I was, and things like that. Then I went—after I learned that from a Korean teacher then I taught the unit. I went back and taught the unit a little bit of Korean.

James: Oh, good.

Bender: So we tried to integrate with the community, you know, like we should. We, again, were a good unit. I was a squad leader. I was a training NCO. I coordinated training, you know, got books and manuals for the guys, made training aids. I was pretty good at drawing, and that's how I got that job.

James: And also, you were just finishing your third three-year hitch.

Bender: Yeah.

James: So you're ready to re-up again.

- Bender: Re-enlist again. I also was a member of the color guard, and wore “Mickey Mouse boots” [nickname for black U.S. Army extreme cold weather boots]. That’s what we wore. With white laces.
- James: Pretty fancy.
- Bender: I carried the 17<sup>th</sup> colors, and George Fenicle(??) carried the national colors, and then we had two other guards with the rifles. And we were *sharp*. The whole outfit was—we were a good outfit. We trained, and we had an alert procedure like we did in Germany in case of an attack. And then I came home—let’s see, I came home in 1961. I came back and went to Fort Carson, Colorado.
- James: Again.
- Bender: Yeah. At that time, I joined the 10<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, 5<sup>th</sup> Division. That patch you got down there, the red diamond.
- James: Geez. Boy, you’ve been to a lot of places.
- Bender: A lot of outfits. A lot of good outfits, too. The 10<sup>th</sup> Infantry was another training unit. We got basic trainees in and ran them through the cycle. I even trained a Second Lieutenant named Patterson. Wonderful guy, platoon leader. He says, “I’ll run the platoon, and you help me.” I said, “Okay.” So I was—oh, boy, he came out so good. Milledgeville, Georgia. He came out to be such a good lieutenant. *Boy*, real good.
- We did a lot of maneuvers around Fort Carson, went out in the desert, and stayed out a while. From Fort Carson, I put in a request to transfer to St. John’s Military Academy at Delafield [Wisconsin].
- James: That was different.
- Bender: In a teaching job. ROTC Junior.
- James: When was that?
- Bender: That was 1963. I was there ‘til ’67. Delafield, St. John’s. I coached the rifle team, I taught military subjects, ROTC, and I coached a rifle club. I had 150-some members in my club, and they shot during free periods. We won so many trophies then that they had to build a new trophy case. Smallbore, 22-calibre, indoor range, 12 firing points. And a terrific bunch of kids.
- James: You enjoyed that?

- Bender: Oh, did I ever. I really enjoyed that tour. They paid me a little bit extra, you know, \$25 a month for coaching.
- James: But you were still in the Regular Army.
- Bender: Yeah, I'm still in the Regular Army. Just on ROTC. And I'm approaching a pretty good number of years now. I'm still an E-6, I make E-7 there, and I make E-8 there.
- James: In Delafield.
- Bender: I made two promotions, went up to E-8 there. I had extracurricular things going on. Like I had a "Shoot-a-rama" and everybody got to shoot, say, five rounds of ammo, and then the money that we got from it we donated to the local charity. The people loved it, they really did. We got like 250,000 rounds of ammo a year free of charge from DCM—Director of Civilian Marksmanship—in Washington, for the promotion of rifle practice for *young* people.
- James: Excellent.
- Bender: It was, *really*. I was a certified marksmanship instructor, NRA-qualified, and I just loved it.
- James: Did they shoot with scopes? I was going to ask you that.
- Bender: No, they shot open-sight. They shot some of the most fabulous rifles you ever saw.
- James: Oh, really?
- Bender: Anschutz—
- James: What kind of rifles?
- Bender: German, with adjustable stock.
- James: Oh, yeah? Beautiful things?
- Bender: Beautiful. And the kids were pretty well-to-do. It was—
- James: Who bought those?
- Bender: Their parents, and some of the kids.
- James: Yeah, those are expensive, I'll bet.

Bender: Yeah, and the kids were real good. They were—it's a boarding school. They lived there, and we were their fathers. And that's about how it was.

James: Sure. I understand that.

Bender: But—I stayed there until '67. [Approx. 15 sec. break in recording]

James: All right. In '67 you went to Korea.

Bender: Went to Vietnam.

James: Yes, I meant Vietnam. I misspoke.

Bender: Well, I went to Fort Lewis, Washington. We formed up the unit.

James: What unit?

Bender: We formed up D Company, 1<sup>st</sup> of the 12<sup>th</sup> Infantry.

James: 1<sup>st</sup> through the 12<sup>th</sup>?

Bender: 1<sup>st</sup>—"one slash twelve."

James: One/Twelve Infantry.

Bender: Infantry. 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division.

James: 4<sup>th</sup> Division.

Bender: Now, the 4<sup>th</sup> Division was already in the Vietnam War. But they didn't have a D, and they didn't have an E Company. So what we're going to do is form up two companies and give the Infantry Rifle Battalion five rifle companies, A-B-C-D-E. We were D Company, and there was an E Company also formed up.

James: Company was roughly how many men? 130?

Bender: No, it was more than that, about 150.

James: 150.

Bender: Something like that. So I went there as the first sergeant. I had never served under the capacity as an E-8 first sergeant before, but I knew what to do. And I had been trained by a man named Estanze(?) Torres, who was the best first sergeant I ever had in my entire life. He was so good,

and I learned a lot from him. So I knew what to do. And we formed up at Fort Lewis. We got all our legal affairs in order. I found a place for my ex-wife and my children to live in Tacoma. We all shipped out by C-141 Starlifters by way of Newfoundland, Gander. We flew over the top of the world, over—and landed at Tan Son Nhut in South Vietnam.

James: That's west of Saigon.

Bender: Yeah, I think so. I've never—I'm not too familiar now. I was mostly in the Central Highlands. So we went from there—

James: The whole regiment?

Bender: Eventually, yeah—well, no, just these companies. See, we were only bringing in a couple of companies is all. We went from there to the holding area, and again were issued our ammunition. We got six or eight rounds to fire [laughs] to make sure we could fire our weapons, got our M-16s, or whatever the case was, and then joined the regiment. Now, the interesting fact is, I'm still in touch with my company commander, who was then Captain Wilkins, and now he's colonel, retired, and Colonel Birch, who was my battalion commander, is now retired. I'm still in touch with both of those guys. Oh, boy.

I was to be—Colonel Birch required that I be in the company with the unit at all times, not in the rear. So I was in the bushes with the company. Prior to this time in July of 1967 one of our companies, B Company, the 1<sup>st</sup> of the 12<sup>th</sup>, was almost completely annihilated. About 50 of the guys were shot with their hands tied behind their backs. They were shot in the back of the head. One man, Gary Rasser, Lieutenant Gary Rasser, for the actions—in that action he won Distinguished Service Cross, probably should have got the Medal of Honor. But he was the only survivor, I think, that was left. And he played dead and got out of it and walked back and got back to the rear. But Colonel Birch, after that incident, Colonel Birch said that from then on he'd have as many experienced people in the field as he could. And nobody would be back in the rear except the clerk.

James: Those guys shouldn't have been overrun?

Bender: Not really. They shouldn't have been, no.

James: That's the inexperience.

Bender: A lot of it is, yeah, because Captain Wilkins and I only had about six killed in the time that I was out there. We didn't take any chances, and we didn't jeopardize anybody's life for nothing. And that's the secret to success in combat. Anyway, we did well, Captain Wilkins and I together.

James: Where did they send you in Vietnam?

Bender: Well, we were in Central Highlands, base camped at Pleiku, Camp Enari, is what—

James: And your duty?

Bender: Well, my duty was first sergeant.

James: And your mission, I guess, is what I meant—

Bender: Was to mostly search and destroy. Search out enemy positions and rice stockpiles, weapons, and all the rest.

James: You'd send out what size group in these—?

Bender: Well, we'd go out a whole company. Now, we'd go out as a company from base camp, and then out a ways there would be what they called the fire support base. The fire support base was a completely circular arrangement with barb wire, Claymore mines, everything, artillery, for fire support in any direction at any time of the day or night, 24/7. And then we would work out of the fire support base just like a leap-frog.

James: You had a place to stay there in the fire support base?

Bender: Yeah, hot meals, place to stay, bunkers. Everything. We would go out from there—say the first day we'd move two miles, the second day we might move a mile and a half.

James: As a company.

Bender: Right. And it was not uncommon to only make a mile in a day.

James: Because?

Bender: In that place, with the jungle. The only place where it was really the thickest was in the Ia Drang Valley which we didn't get to very much. We were there once, but not for very long. That's the place where the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Cav got caught up so bad. They got so many guys killed in the Ia Drang. Triple canopy [dense layered jungle thickets of bamboo and elephant grass], and very, very hard to maneuver in. We worked in the Central Highlands, between areas from Dak To in the North, Kon Tum Province, down to Ban Me Thuot, Pleiku, and places like that in the Central Highlands.



James: So you had no mission other than just to find the enemy and kill him.

Bender: Mostly find and kill.

James: But you weren't going anywhere—

Bender: No.

James: Because you'd come right back to the same and then go out again.

Bender: No, that's the object of the whole thing.

James: Would you make a judgment on the quality of the soldiers you were fighting? I mean—

Bender: If we were fighting—

James: North Vietnam, versus—

Bender: Viet Cong.

James: Viet Cong, yes. What was your judgment there?

Bender: The NVA were very, very good.

James: That's what most of the guys said.

Bender: Yeah. Because one that we—

James: They were very professional.

Bender: One that we killed was carrying an M-79 and was dressed in a G.I. uniform—

James: Oh, really!

Bender: Approaching our line. And he got blowed away. That was one guy. He was *not* a G.I., he was a North Vietnamese. We respected 'em, and we knew if we were fighting the 75<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment or the 37<sup>th</sup>, whatever it was, we knew the best outfits, too. So the order of the battle was important. We knew that if we were fighting a superior unit, a good unit, we had to be on our toes, too. Their sappers were very, very good.

James: What's a sapper do?

- Bender: To crawl in with a giant-size charge on his back and plant it, and then crawl back out.
- James: Where would he plant it?
- Bender: He'd plant it in some place like the command post or somewhere.
- James: And how would they set that up?
- Bender: Well, normally it would be—it could be by remote, or it could be by a fuse. But normally by remote, really.
- James: Did they have a landmines problem?
- Bender: Not that I ever noticed. Our Claymores were good. Our Claymores worked very good.
- James: But you didn't have those little shoe things that pop up and take your foot off?
- Bender: Well, they had a grenade on the end of a stick that was about three foot tall with a trip wire that would blow you to pieces. But I didn't—I don't remember losing any men that way. I lost a lot of guys from shrapnel and small arms fire.
- James: Shrapnel from mortars?
- Bender: Yeah, from mortars and grenades.
- James: Were you ambushed at any time?
- Bender: We ran into an NVA battalion we think. They were going perpendicular to our path, and we ran into almost the center of the unit. A Company ran into them—it was A-C-D—we were three companies in column. We immediately pulled back—the point element will pull back—they had five or six killed right off the bat. And we pulled back and consolidated, and we called in artillery first and then an air strike. That's when we killed the one with the American uniform.
- James: Air strikes with helicopters, or with jet—?
- Bender: No. Air. Aviation. Air. Jets.
- James: They would put what, 250-lb. bombs?

- Bender: They put napalm mostly, and they were close enough to feel the heat. So they were good.
- James: Had to be careful when they were doing that.
- Bender: And we had an artillery F.O. that would—it wasn't unlike him to climb up a tree so he could see better to call in the fire. And we—I don't know if a lot of people probably did this the same way, but we walked the artillery as we got moved in to the jungle. Our artillery support would be ahead of us all the time.
- James: What, 50 yards?
- Bender: 50 yards to 100. They'd be—if we wanted the artillery it would be right there when we wanted it from the fire support base. That's how—they walked it in front of us.
- James: How far back was that?
- Bender: That was only maybe a couple of miles, three miles, five miles.
- James: So they moved along with you?
- Bender: No, the fire support base stayed there. We moved around a pattern. Where we were was in—
- James: You didn't get it too far away, then.
- Bender: No, we were within their fire. But this—
- James: That means within five miles.
- Bender: Yeah. This particular time we were under heavy fire, *heavy* fire, for probably half an hour to 45 minutes. It's hard to remember when you're under fire. Time just doesn't exist. We got—I don't know, we had three or four killed in our company, but A Company lost five or six that were pretty well burned up from the napalm, too.
- James: I didn't ask you this—the artillery fire that you supported, was that 105s?
- Bender: Mostly 105, but we had 155 capability, too.
- James: They could shoot a great deal further
- Bender: Yeah. And we also for a while had the ships. We had—

James: Oh, you were close enough to shore?

Bender: We had a battleship that could fire—

James: As I showed you, they go in toward the—

Bender: Probably the *Missouri*, probably the *Missouri*, too.

James: Yeah, okay.

Bender: But we—after a while we got out of this NVA pullback. We re-supplied and figured out our casualties. But for a while, it got pretty hot and heavy, but they didn't overrun us.

James: Right. But you were in constant contact with them for how long?

Bender: For about a half-hour to 45 minutes.

James: How many days of this?

Bender: Just one day. Just one time, that's all. See, the worst thing the NVA could do was to pursue it. What they would rather do is to hit hard, kill as many as they can, and then disappear. From what I understand in the Ia Drang Valley when the 1<sup>st</sup> Cav got hit so bad they pursued, they stuck, and they killed a lot of G.I.s. A lot. But anyway, that was the one major battle. We also had a major battle at Dak To **[End of Tape 1, Side B]**

--on Hill 875. This was in November of 1967. We ended up finally securing the hill. The Airborne—the 101st Airborne—lost, I don't know, 200-300 people, killed in that battle. It was on the TV news, too. And then Tet, I was in Tet '68 which was a catastrophic defeat for the Communists, but the way the news media made it look back in the States, it looked like we were defeated. As a matter of fact, it turned the course of the war a lot. The war changed after that. And they got a false report out, is what they did. Americans killed, oh, I don't know how many. I got a picture at home with about 300 bodies in it, all stacked up, ready to be buried. I wasn't so discouraged because I always maintained myself as a career soldier. So all the talk in the world wouldn't have bothered me any.

James: So about how long were you in Vietnam?

Bender: Well, I was in Vietnam a full year. I was in the field from August to May, and then I guess I was promoted back, and I took over division headquarters and Headquarters Company.

James: That was in '68.

Bender: Yeah. And I had a big company. I had like 300 people in that including the “Donut Dollies” [Red Cross recreational workers] [laughs].

James: Was there a problem—people speak of the problem with marijuana, and hard drugs in Vietnam. What’s your experience with that?

Bender: Oh, I smelled it. I used to check the perimeter at night, and I could smell marijuana, but I never could find any. Marijuana was more prevalent back in the rear.

James: That was an experience other people I’ve talked to—

Bender: When I—

James: When we’re out in the field people didn’t—

Bender: You don’t have time for that stuff.

James: Well, it was too serious out there, yeah.

Bender: When I got back to the rear we caught one guy with it. He was putting the marijuana in Marlboro cigarette packs. We caught him, and I had him court-martialed. He swore to God he’d get even with me some time—

James: Frag you.

Bender: Frag. But I never got fragged. [laughs] I told them when I went back, I said, “Now you people have got it made; you’re living back here, and the guys are out front getting killed.” I said, “You got it made and you better act like you got it made, too.” And that’s the kind of company I ran. And whenever I could do it, I sent things back to my unit: Red Cross boxes, books, magazines.

James: Did you get any USO entertainers?

Bender: Yeah, yeah. We got Bob Hope, and some of the girls. I didn’t go, but I sent I think six or eight guys to it. We got it in Korea, too. Danny Kaye, Monica Lewis.

James: Oh, really? Jennifer Jones came aboard our hospital ship, the movie actress. So I toured her around. She was a beautiful girl.

Bender: Yeah. It really means something, don’t it?

James: Oh, yeah, it just made my day.

Bender: It means a lot.

James: Okay. So when did you leave Vietnam?

Bender: I left—let's see, I got there the 22nd of August, and I left the 21st of August. What's really amazing—I was in the same unit in Vietnam as I was in Germany.

James: You mentioned that, yeah. That's—

Bender: That was amazing. The 12th Regiment.

James: Pretty bizarre.

Bender: Yeah.

James: So then you went back to Germany, I see?

Bender: I went—I flew back to California on C-140—no, on commercial air, TWA. There was just one big, giant roar when we picked up off the air field into the air. A big, giant roar. I went back to California, and then transferred to Germany, and joined the 15th Regiment of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division.

James: That was in 1969? Or eight?

Bender: '68. I was stationed at one of the major—

James: What regiment?

Bender: 15th Infantry Regiment, 3<sup>rd</sup> Division. That was my first time in the 3<sup>rd</sup>. I joined them at a place called Wildflecken, or the German Wildflecken [pronounces the "W" as "V"], and it's a major training area, like there's Wildflecken, Grafenwöhr, Hoensfeld. They're big training areas. I was stationed there from '68 to '69. And I had to come home on—I came home on a special compassionate transfer leave, from family trouble. It was a good unit. We were a training unit like before, but the Iron Curtain was a little looser than it was. We still had that mission, though, a NATO mission.

James: The second tour was roughly the same as the first?

Bender: Well, yes, but it was a little—the Germans were a lot different on the second tour I thought. They were a lot different.

James: Tell me how.

Bender: A lot more independent. They didn't need us so bad.

James: Ah, not because you went to a different area.

Bender: No, they weren't belligerent or nothing. They just didn't need us anymore. They were looking for their own freedom, and their own economy. And I could feel that. Let's see—at that time I came down with falciparum malaria.

James: [laughs] At long last.

Bender: At long last.

James: Was that your first attack?

Bender: First attack. And I had been taking the daily pill and the Monday pill, all through my Army tour.

James: That's why it didn't show up earlier, you understand.

Bender: I kept it suppressed. A German nurse—a German doctor, a lady doctor found it, because every time I'd go on sick hall it would be in the morning, and I had no fever then. It wasn't acting—working. She says, "You come back in the afternoon." [James laughs] So I did, and she said, "I know what you got!"

James: Oh, that's cute.

Bender: I thought it was so neat.

James: Smart girl.

Bender: She found it! And they put me in the hospital in Würzburg, and my doctor was the outstanding physician from Walter Reed on that type of disease.

James: Oh, my gosh! What luck, what luck.

Bender: That *was* luck. And he treated me, and I have never had a recurrence. Although I'm after VA for something, you know, because—

James: You never get over—you have to cure that disease yourself, you know, there's no cure for malaria.

Bender: Your body has to cure it?

James: Yeah. To get rid of it. You can suppress it, but there's no pill that will make malaria go away.

Bender: Well, I hope VA considers that when they find my claim. [laughs]

James: Okay. So this had brought your career close to the end then.

Bender: Yeah, I went—I came from Germany—

James: Indiana, I see.

Bender: Got a compassionate transfer, and went to the National Guard Advisory in Logansport, Indiana. 38th Division.

James: You were there long?

Bender: I was there until retirement. '69, '70, and '71 I retired.

James: Retired '71?

Bender: Yeah, at Fort Benjamin Harrison, Indiana.

James: I see that.

Bender: I really enjoyed my tour with the Guard. It restored my faith in the National Guard because—

James: A lot of people have some bad feelings about the National Guard. A lot of Regular Army folks, you know, just sort of automatically look down at the National Guard without experience. It wasn't really fair, was it?

Bender: No, because a lot of people don't realize that most of the units in World War II were National Guard. All they did was augment Regular Army troops, that's all. Draftees. But I had a good time there. I really enjoyed it. And I could just about live again, start a new life all over again because I went to summer camp with them, and I treated them with respect, and I received it back. I was—well, I was a first sergeant, but I got retired as a master sergeant which I don't like. I like first sergeant. But I still put it down "Master Sergeant."

James: Right. You won a Bronze Star—

Bender: Mm-hmm.

James: In Vietnam.



Bender: Service. Bronze Star for service. Yeah. And I got an Army Commendation Medal, and two C.I.B.s [Combat Infantrymen Badges].

James: Yeah, that's very good.

Bender: Plus the normal—

James: Yeah, the areas.

Bender: I'm waiting now on my Korean War medal.

James: Yeah, they got a new medal out.

Bender: Yeah, I put in for it.

James: Did you? How could I do that?

Bender: Let's see—

James: You have to go through the county service officer, probably.

Bender: No, you just have to send it to the Air Force.

James: Air Force?

Bender: That's who's processing it. When I get back home, I'll send you—you give me your address, and I'll send you a copy.

James: Yeah, because anybody who was in Korea gets one of those medals.

Bender: Right.

James: Oh, I should add that to my collection.

Bender: You bet.

James: I don't have many, but I've got a couple.

Bender: This is a nice one. This is going to be a beauty.

James: Oh, I'd like to see it.

Bender: I'm going to give it to my son. I've giving a lot of my medals to my great-nephew.

James: You say you joined the VFW after the war?

Bender: Life member.

James: Did you ever use your G.I. Bill? You had one comin'.

Bender: I used the G.I. Bill for some schooling, and I used it to buy a house. That's—both times.

James: Five(??) percent, yeah.

Bender: Yeah.

James: I did, too.

Bender: Yeah, yeah.

James: Well, that's fine.

Bender: But I'm just now starting to go to VA to get a little bit of help up there. But—

James: And you kept contact with some of your Korea buddies you said.

Bender: Mm-hmm.

James: Right. Was their experience similar to yours?

Bender: Ah, pretty much so, yeah. Yeah. We were all three in the same platoon.

James: Anybody in Vietnam you still keep in contact with?

Bender: Yeah, my company commander.

James: He was the commander of the officers, yeah.

Bender: Yeah, and the battalion commander.

James: You go to any national conventions of either war?

Bender: No, not—I don't go to that, but we did have one down in Arkansas—no, Missouri. We had a get-together with my Vietnam outfit down there, and the company commander was there, and there were a lot of the guys. I couldn't believe it. They're all over the country, everywhere.

James: Quite a few of them survived, you said.

Bender: Yeah, we had a pretty good survival rate, then.

James: Well, I'm running out of soap here.

Bender: [laughs]

James: I can't think of what else to ask you. Anything that you didn't tell me that would be interesting about your experiences?

Bender: Boy, I really wanted to say that about the air support that we got.

James: Yeah, you mentioned that.

Bender: That was really good.

James: That was life saving for you.

Bender: They saved us. They saved us, and the "Huey" chopper was our very existence.

James: When you were out in the jungle—I'll ask you one last question. What did you do to try to pick up the enemy before they picked you up? Is there any way you could do that? Other than just patrols?

Bender: Well, it was very hard because they were very good.

James: They really had the advantage in the jungle(??).

Bender: I'll give you an example: we walked in to what must have been a base camp for either VC or NVA, and the rice was still hot. They had built the rice areas in the side of a hill, little side of a hill, and the pot was set in there, and we couldn't—we never found one person.

James: But it was still warm.

Bender: Still warm, they must have *just left*. So evidently they got us. They saw us first. They had a little model there laying on a table of a helicopter made out of sticks that they must have been training with. You know, how to lead it and how to shoot at it. Yeah. It was pretty good. But—

James: Did you capture any prisoners?

Bender: Yeah, we took—well, in the Korean War, we captured—

James: Quite a few.

Bender: A big Chinaman, a *big* one. He must have been 6'2." Dressed in the nicest-looking uniform you ever saw. Quilted hat, quilted gloves. A few North Koreans, not too many. And one or two NVA, not too many NVAs, either. Not too many.

James: Okay, we did it. Thank you.

Bender: About got her?

**[End of Interview]**