

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
ROBERT DRUMMOND

Transportation and Maintenance, Army, Vietnam War.

2006

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Drummond, Robert, (1947-). Oral History Interview, 2006.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 47 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 47 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

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

Abstract:

Robert Drummond, a Chicago, Illinois native, discusses his Vietnam War service with the 264th Transportation Company. Drummond discusses dropping out of high school, his motivations for enlisting in the Army, and the reactions of his family and friends. Sent to basic training at Fort Polk (Louisiana), he mentions disliking the snakes and states bulls and cows were allowed to wander camp. He speaks of being sent to pole climbing school for a week before being reassigned as a stevedore in the newly-formed 264th Transportation Company at Fort Eustis (Virginia). Drummond describes flying overseas on a C-130 and arriving in Cam Ranh Bay (Vietnam). At Cam Ranh, he discusses the routine of loading and unloading ships out on the water, military life, an unloading mishap, and the types of cargo he handled. Drummond states, "It wasn't like a part of Vietnam, you know. It was just like being here in the stateside." He describes participating in Operation Oregon: setting up an ammunition dump on the beach at Duc Pho, standing watches in his camp, and hearing battleship artillery rounds pass overhead. Drummond touches on seeing his wife while on R&R in Hawaii and trading with a Republic of Korea Marine for a carbine. Drummond details the ammo dump catching fire, running for safety, and losing all his possessions in the fire. He states, "Some of the guys didn't even have clothes with them because they had been down there swimming in the ocean." After starting to set up a new base, Drummond recalls someone scrounging for ammo in the old base site causing another explosion by accidentally triggering some dead rounds. He tells of another, similar loss of possessions after an airplane accidentally dropped a bomb near the loading area. Drummond explains that the only object to survive in the whole company area was a prayer book from his footlocker, which he later donated to the Wisconsin Veterans Museum. He touches on his homecoming, having a furlough, and assignment to a maintenance battalion at Fort Riley (Kansas), where he was in charge of the pallbearers and did military funerals all over the state of Kansas. Drummond states the hardest duty he had while in service was presenting flags to the next-of-kin of deceased soldiers. Sent next to a maintenance company in Karlsruhe (Germany), he describes duty operating a rough-terrain forklift. He comments on the tendency not to talk about experiences in Vietnam. After being discharged, Drummond states he was no longer satisfied to work in a factory, so he got a job with United Airlines at O'Hare Field loading and unloading planes while using the GI Bill to go to engineering school at night. He discusses his activities with VFW Post 1318, including being on the Madison Area Firing Squad for military funerals.

Biographical Sketch:

Drummond (b.1947) served in the Army from 1966 to 1969. He eventually went into business for himself repairing x-ray machines and settled in Madison (Wisconsin).

Interviewed by Jim Kurtz, 2006

Transcribed by Alis Fox, Wisconsin Court Reporter, Jan. 2007

Checked and corrected by Joan Bruggink, 2011

Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2011

Interview Transcript:

Jim: It is January 31st, 2006. My name is Jim Kurtz, and I'm interviewing Robert Drummond. Bob, where and when were you born?

Bob: I was born in Chicago, Illinois—

Jim: Okay.

Bob: —on December 23rd, 1947.

Jim: December 23rd, 1947. And is that where you grew up?

Bob: Yes, most of my life until, oh, in the '70s, about 1975 or '76. I worked for a company up there manufacturing x-ray machines.

Jim: Okay. Did you go to high school in the Chicago area then?

Bob: Yes.

Jim: And did you graduate from high school?

Bob: No. I quit.

Jim: Okay. And what did you do when you quit high school?

Bob: I went to work for a company called Teletype.

Jim: And how long did you work there?

Bob: I worked there probably about three or four months maybe, roughly, kind of hard to say, and then I decided to go in the service.

Jim: And were you drafted?

Bob: No, sir. I enlisted.

Jim: Okay. And so do you remember the date about that you enlisted?

Bob: March 13th, 1966.

Jim: And how long did you enlist for?

- Bob: If you enlisted, it was three years at the time.
- Jim: For three years. And what motivated you to join the military?
- Bob: Well, I felt it was my obligation, number one. I did it for kind of get out on my own. I felt that if I enlisted I may have a better choice than if I was drafted. The company I worked for said if I did decide to go in and I got a particular school it would benefit me when I got out.
- Jim: Did any of your immediate family, like father or uncles—were they veterans?
- Bob: My father was World War II.
- Jim: And did that have any influence?
- Bob: No, not really.
- Jim: Okay. And what influence, if any, did the fact that we were in a shooting war in Vietnam have on you when you enlisted?
- Bob: I—Well, it was kind of mixed emotions at the time. In no way was I against the war or anything. Whether we were right or wrong, it didn't matter. It was something that we were involved in. And I guess I am kind of like the big brother type with all the younger siblings at home, protective, and I felt, you know—another thought that I had, too, was that if I went then I knew my brothers wouldn't have to go in.
- Jim: Um hmm. Did any of your people that you grew up with, had they been either drafted or gone to Vietnam yet?
- Bob: No.
- Jim: Okay. Where did you report then for basic training?
- Bob: I reported for basic training at Fort Polk, Louisiana.
- Jim: Okay. And when did you go down to Fort Polk? Do you remember? You know, what month was it, in April?
- Bob: It was in March.
- Jim: Okay, in March, right after you—

- Bob: Right. I think it was a week or two after I, you know, we enlisted, and then we went down there and you took your oath, they took you out to the airport, and you flew out there. So my actual date that I was put in the service was March 13th.
- Jim: Okay. And what was the reaction of your family that you joined the Army?
- Bob: Well, Mom wasn't too happy about it. Dad was kind of proud about it.
- Jim: Okay. What about your friends? Did they say anything about it one way or another?
- Bob: As long as you know what you're doing type thing. I mean nobody tried talking me out of it, nobody, you know, pushed anything on me. And, again, at that time the only real friends you had was, you know, people that you worked with, and those were mostly older people.
- Jim: Okay. When you got down to Fort Polk, is there anything that stands out about that experience?
- Bob: [Laughing] Snake pit of the world, and for somebody that hates snakes that wasn't a good experience.
- Jim: So you did actually see some snakes down there?
- Bob: Oh, yes. And they have a no-fencing law down there, so it is not uncommon to go out there and have to go to the secure[?], we called it at the time, and see bulls out there or, you know, Brahmans, cows, whatever.
- Jim: Okay. Did you ever have any incidents with any of these bovine running around?
- Bob: No, just, you know, when you walk out at 2:00 in the morning because when you had fire watch you had to go report in so they knew you were up and you'd walk out there. And being a city boy and seeing wild animals out there, that was an experience.
- Jim: Did you make any friends in basic training that you served with later?
- Bob: No.
- Jim: Okay. Was there any discussion about Vietnam in basic training that you—
- Bob: Not that I can recall.

- Jim: Okay. Did it make a difference that you weren't a draftee in basic training?
- Bob: You know, between the drafters and everything else, and you got to realize back then a lot of people were in the service because of court orders, things like that, so there was a little bit of an attitude. You know, you get the why-for type thing, you know, "Why did you join this?" you know, "Why not just wait?" you know.
- Jim: Did any of these court-ordered people stand out in your mind as—
- Bob: No. Again, the military back then was totally different than what it is now, you know, as far as strictness and that. I know my son is in the service now and the way they're treated now versus the way we were, it's a day and night experience.
- Jim: Could you amplify on that just a little bit?
- Bob: Well, from what I understand now—my son is in the Navy, he has been in for seventeen years—you know, now they got these little stress cards and everything, you know, and you can't raise your voice to 'em. You know, they hold up this stress card, and you know, it's not like what it used to be.
- Jim: After you completed your basic training, what was your next assignment?
- Bob: I was to go back to Fort Polk, Louisiana, for what they called a pole climbing school. So I went back down there for that. After about a week or two, there was too many people in that class so they came around rattling off names. My name was on that list. We were being shipped out. We were put on a train and ended up in Fort Eustis, Virginia. And that's where they started to form the 264th Trans. Company. It never existed before. It was a brand-new company. And that's how I got started in that.
- Jim: What was your reaction when you got reassigned out of the pole climbing school?
- Bob: Well, at first all our thoughts was that we were going infantry, of course, and that's what our thoughts were. We didn't know where we were going, what we were gonna be doing, so we were concerned about that. I was happy to get out of pole climbing school because that's not what I went in for. I went in for Teletype repair school, communications. And I'm not very fond of heights, so climbing ninety-foot telephone poles wasn't one of my things. And our barracks kind of looked like a hospital ward because a lot of people were getting injured on these poles.

- Jim: So when you got to Fort Eustis what were you told about what was going to happen to you?
- Bob: Just that it was a new company forming and we were going to be stevedores.
- Jim: What was your reaction when you found out you were going to be a stevedore instead of a—
- Bob: Not knowing what a stevedore was [Jim laughs], you know, it was an experience. Then when I saw what we were gonna do, you know, I think a lot better about it. I was hoping I had gotten into being a crane operator there, winch operator, but I didn't.
- Jim: Were you told that your company was being organized for a specific purpose?
- Bob: For Vietnam.
- Jim: Yeah. What was your reaction when you found out that you were going to get whatever training you got and you were going to go right to Vietnam?
- Bob: No real reaction.
- Jim: Okay.
- Bob: We knew we were going to go sometime anyway; at least we knew what we were going to be doing over there.
- Jim: Okay. So how long was your training?
- Bob: We finished—I think we went home on a two-week leave before we shipped out. We shipped out in September of '66.
- Jim: And how did you ship out to Vietnam?
- Bob: We boarded four C-130 aircraft.
- Jim: Did you have equipment with you? What kind of equipment did you have?
- Bob: Pretty much what we had in our duffel bags, things of that, and they all went on the plane. We flew out on four C-130s.
- Jim: And how long did it take you to get to Vietnam on C-130s?

- Bob: If I'm not mistaken, I think I counted it change day and night about four times because you're stopping constantly. We stopped in California, Wake, Manila, Philippines, Guam, Hawaii.
- Jim: Because you had to stop to refuel and stuff like that?
- Bob: Yeah, and they give you a box lunch when you landed and, you know.
- Jim: How comfortable was it flying in that C-130 that far?
- Bob: Well, there are strap seats on the side walls or you lay on top of the crates or whatever you had in the middle.
- Jim: What were you told to bring with you in your duffel bag? Were you given any specific—
- Bob: No. We just took our military items, nothing really personal that I can remember.
- Jim: What was the training that you got at Fort Eustis?
- Bob: Mostly what it was was they found out who was the best at operating the winches, which is to use to pull the cargo out of the hold, forklift operators, I want to say stackers, but there is really no training for that, you know, how to stack and things like that.
- Jim: So what were you trained to do?
- Bob: I was mainly—like I say, I tried out on winches. I wasn't that good at it and that. So basically, you know, netting, unnetting, that type of thing, forklift.
- Jim: What kind of NCOs and officers did you have?
- Bob: We had a captain that was in charge. We had—I don't remember the number, but we had lieutenants.
- Jim: And NCOs. Were they pretty competent?
- Bob: Oh, yeah.
- Jim: So where did you arrive in Vietnam?
- Bob: We arrived at Cam Ranh Bay.

- Jim: And what was your first reaction when you got to Cam Ranh Bay?
- Bob: It was kind of like peaceful. You know, I couldn't believe it was Vietnam.
- Jim: And did they have an area prepared for you?
- Bob: We pretty much had to set it up ourselves, CP [command post] tents, thirty-man tents I think they were, the sandbags, the wooden walkways.
- Jim: Okay. What were the sandbags there for?
- Bob: Around the tent area. We used them around the tent plus the communication bunker.
- Jim: Were you down by the beach there, or were you out on the perimeter?
- Bob: No. We were not on the beach but not far from it because we unloaded the ships out in the harbor, we didn't do 'em on a dock, so DUKWs [pronounced "ducks"] would come in and pick us up.
- Jim: What is a DUKW?
- Bob: That's kind of like what they have out here at the Dells. It's a wheeled, motorized that goes into the water or on land. They would come into the company area, pick us up, take us out to the ship.
- Jim: And so what would the routine of unloading a ship—
- Bob: Well, first of all, when you got on a ship, it was the first time on there, you would pull the hatch covers. You know, back then we didn't have a lot of containers. They started with the Conex containers like what you use nowadays. So a lot of ours was loose in the holds of the ship. So they would pull off the covers then they would start winching the stuff out. We would unload it off the side of the ship onto DUKWs, Larks, barges.
- Jim: What are Larks?
- Bob: It's a larger version of the DUKW, more for cargo.
- Jim: Okay.
- Bob: Barges, LSTs [landing ship tanks].

- Jim: How did they move the barges? Did they have a tugboat?
- Bob: Yes. Okay. And they'd put it up and they'd secure it to the side of the ship.
- Jim: How long would it typically take to unload a ship?
- Bob: Oh, I really don't—you know, I couldn't say. You know, we never really said, you know, we got X amount of hours on it, you know, because we worked around the clock. You know, we had different shifts: day shift, night shift.
- Jim: And how long was a shift?
- Bob: Twelve hours.
- Jim: Twelve hours.
- Bob: Right.
- Jim: And so when you completed your shift you would go back to your area, and did you have any duties there or could you rest?
- Bob: Well, pretty much rest. I mean, you know, if you had what we call honey bucket detail or if you had KP [kitchen police] or something, of course you didn't go out to the ship that day, you stayed behind and you took care of your details. So once you were done you were pretty much done.
- Jim: Was there any harassment or anything like that?
- Bob: No.
- Jim: Did you ever have any responsibilities to go on ambush patrols or any security on the perimeter?
- Bob: No. No, not while we were at Cam Ranh and not at that time.
- Jim: Were you assigned a weapon?
- Bob: In Cam Ranh?
- Jim: Yeah.
- Bob: No. We really didn't have weapons in Cam Ranh, and we were pretty secure.

- Jim: Yeah. So how long were you at Cam Ranh?
- Bob: [pause] I think I remember spending the holidays at Cam Ranh Bay on a ship. Sometime in January or February we shipped out on Operation Oregon.
- Jim: Okay. We'll stay at Cam Ranh for just a bit yet.
- Bob: Okay.
- Jim: Were you there when President Johnson came to Cam Ranh?
- Bob: No.
- Jim: What did they have for off duty? Did they have an enlisted men's club or—
- Bob: Not that I can remember, nothing that we would, you know, that we had really gone to. Not that I can remember. I can't remember really doing much there.
- Jim: Well, you were there for the holidays. Did you have any USO show like Bob Hope or anything like that?
- Bob: Not to my knowledge, no. The reason I remember is because we had our Christmas dinner and that on a ship. The ships were operated by Merchant Marines, and I think that probably had to be one of the best Christmas dinners we ever had, you know, as far as the quality and the quantity of the food.
- Jim: Were these ships crewed by American personnel or were they—
- Bob: No.
- Jim: —all over the world types?
- Bob: Pretty much all over the world. As a matter of fact, I think the Norwegian ship even had women on their ships that mainly did the cooking and the cleaning and things like that.
- Jim: Was there quite a backlog of ships at Cam Ranh Bay where they were anchored out until they could get—
- Bob: Not to my knowledge. You know, we were assigned a particular ship. That's where you went. You know, how many would be sitting out there waiting or not, you know, I don't know. I know there would be a lot of ships in the harbor, different companies working on them.

- Jim: So do you know how many transportation companies were there doing—
- Bob: No, I don't because there were some that did them—you know, they would actually bring them in to a dock and they unloaded right onto a dock.
- Jim: Okay. So they did have some docks there for—So what you did was—
- Bob: Out on the water.
- Jim: —out on the water. Was there a reason why they didn't bring them into a dock, or is it just because you could unload more ships?
- Bob: I think it was because we could unload more ships because, you know, you can only put so much dock space out there, and it was easier, too time consuming—you know, they'd just go out there and they'd drop their anchor, you go out to them. I don't know what it takes to put a ship in to a pier, dock, or whatever you want to call them.
- Jim: So did you have any responsibility when you moved the stuff onto shore, or did somebody else pick it up then?
- Bob: Somebody else picked it up. That was some trucking company or whoever, you know, dealt with it at that point. We didn't really have trucking. Ours wasn't into that. Ours was the actual stevedoring, loading and unloading of the ship.
- Jim: Okay. Did you see any contractors at Cam Ranh Bay, you know, or civilian types that were doing construction work and—
- Bob: Not that I could pay attention to.
- Jim: Okay.
- Bob: You know, we pretty much had our company area. We pretty much, you know, stayed there.
- Jim: Okay. In the time you were there was Cam Ranh ever mortared?
- Bob: No.
- Jim: Is there anything that stands out about your experience at Cam Ranh?
- Bob: Outside of some mishaps on our ships that we were unloading, no.

- Jim: What kind of mishaps?
- Bob: Once we got the center of the hold of the ship opened up, sometimes we were able to drop a forklift down in there and be able to pull the pallets out from underneath the flooring, and at one time a gentleman put the fork through a napalm bomb.
- Jim: That wouldn't be very good.
- Bob: No, not when you got a full ship of napalm.
- Jim: [Laughing]
- Bob: And that was kind of a scary situation, you know, having to get off and, you know—
- Jim: Did they have some other people in to handle that problem?
- Bob: Yeah, yeah. They came out and, you know—
- Jim: What were the type of things that you unloaded from these ships?
- Bob: Most of what we unloaded was ammo. We did do some PX [post exchange] ships, and that was another experience. We had a container from PX stuff in rough water come off of the DUKW or Lark, whatever it was we were putting it on, and it went overboard. So I mean that was—not a security reason but, of course, you know because of being PX goods, things like that, there was quite an investigation on that. And usually when we did PX ships there was usually an MP [Military Police] in the hull of the ship when we were working.
- Jim: Were there any Vietnamese nationals that were involved in any of this?
- Bob: No.
- Jim: So did you have any contact with Vietnamese nationals on the Cam Ranh base?
- Bob: You know, there was—I don't know if you'd call it a village off post or someplace, but I knew there was a place that we used to go and get like, you know, mirrors made out of our old beer can type thing, you know, like a little village-type thing, and I think there were some beer joints there, you know, not far from where our company was.

- Jim: Did you get to go off base very often?
- Bob: I'd say we were able to. You know, I just don't remember, you know, having to want to, and I guess maybe it was kind of security of, you know, staying right there in the area, you know, getting out and about.
- Jim: Did you get to do any like sunbathing in the ocean? I mean, was there a beach there or anything like that?
- Bob: Not so much there as when we went out on our operation.
- Jim: Okay. Is there anything that we haven't covered at Cam Ranh that we should before we get on this operation?
- Bob: No. The only thing they did a lot at Cam Ranh every day is—I don't know who it was with the Navy, I don't think they were Seals or anything, but they would go down and check anchors on ships every day for mines, especially if the ship was pulling out. They'd go by in one of them rubber raft, motorized-type thing, the guy would drop off, go down, check the anchor, come back up. It used to be nice to watch that going on every day.
- Jim: Did you see any Vietnamese fishermen or anything like that—
- Bob: Oh, yeah.
- Jim: —fishing the area?
- Bob: Yeah.
- Jim: Did the Navy do anything to keep them away from the boats or anything like that?
- Bob: No.
- Jim: Was there any suspicion that there might be some VC involved with that?
- Bob: I don't think there ever was. I think Cam Ranh Bay was—my impression of it and everybody's impression was, no, it wasn't like a part of Vietnam, you know. It was just like being here in the stateside. I think it was very lax back then, you know, in '66. I think it was very lax back there. Everybody, you know, never really paid no attention because we used to watch these guys sitting out there in their fishing boats and they'd be cooking their fish on the back and their rice, you know, and never thought anything of it.

Jim: Were there any warships ever in Cam Ranh?

Bob: Not that I can recall.

Jim: Okay. Let's talk about Operation Oregon.

Bob: Yes.

Jim: What was that?

Bob: We went up to a place called Duc Pho, which is near Chu Lai.

Jim: Duc Pho, that's D-u-c P-h-o?

Bob: Yes.

Jim: Okay. And that's up north?

Bob: Yes. It's by Chu Lai.

Jim: Okay.

Bob: The purpose for us to go up there was that I guess the 1st CAV had gone in there and been fighting the VC. VC had moved up into the mountains. 1st CAV had quite a loss. They were bringing the 101st in to replace them, and that's when it was called Operation Oregon.

Jim: Okay.

Bob: We showed up up there, and they had like a small landing strip there in Chu Lai, and our purpose was to set up an ammo dump on the beach, get it fully supplied to where once they got an airstrip completely built in Chu Lai they would be able to fly in what they needed, so basically we were stockpiling there.

Jim: So were you offloading ships initially?

Bob: We were offloading LSTs and LSDs that would come in and hit the beach, and then we would go in there with rough terrain forklifts and offload it.

Jim: So were these LSTs coming from Da Nang or—

- Bob: I think they were coming down from Cam Ranh, I'm not sure. I don't know where they were coming in from, but they were coming in and—because they were coming up the same way as what Cam Ranh was.
- Jim: Well, Cam Ranh was south of this though; right?
- Bob: Right, because we flew there up on C-29s or 129s.
- Jim: You said C-123s in the note.
- Bob: Yeah, C-123s.
- Jim: It was a two-engine—
- Bob: Two-engine. Miniature C-130s is what I call them.
- Jim: Yeah, yeah.
- Bob: They would come up there and we would offload, and we would also offload—they had a barge that come up there every so often and offload. We had a reefer barge up in the area there and we would stock it with steaks, ice cream, artificial milk, whatever you call that stuff they gave us over there. So we would offload the reefer barge, but most of what we did was the ammo.
- Jim: And how long did you do that?
- Bob: I think we got up there maybe about January-February up until—we got out of there in September, because we went as a unit, got there in September, we got out September as a unit.
- Jim: Okay. So you stayed there the remaining time?
- Bob: Yes.
- Jim: Now did you get any leave or R and R while you were—
- Bob: Yes. I had an R and R when I was up there. I went to Hawaii.
- Jim: Okay. And you went to Hawaii because—to see your wife?
- Bob: Yeah.
- Jim: How did that feel going to Hawaii?

Bob: It was nice. It was nice to get out of there. Hated to come back, of course.

Jim: Yes. What was the security situation like at Duc Pho?

Bob: When we got there the only thing that was there at the time was an artillery company. So when we first got there we had to kind of do our own security, stand watches.

Jim: So you were issued a weapon when you got—

Bob: Yes.

Jim: Before you left Cam Ranh were you issued weapons?

Bob: Yes.

Jim: And what—

Bob: Basically we had weapons in Cam Ranh, but we didn't have them with us. They were in the—

Jim: Arms room?

Bob: —arms room. They were given to us when we went up there to Duc Pho, and then at that time they were kept in our tents.

Jim: Okay. And what kind of weapons did you have?

Bob: M-16s.

Jim: M-16s. And were you trained on an M-16?

Bob: Yes.

Jim: And did you have to go out on any ambush patrols or—

Bob: No. We didn't really go out on patrols. We just secured our own area.

Jim: Were there any problems?

Bob: Oh, battleships firing offshore had some short rounds a couple times, you know, artillery keeping us up a lot; but other than that, no.

Jim: So you were never probed or anything like that?

Bob: No.

Jim: Were you ever mortared?

Bob: No.

Jim: What was it like to have a battleship shell go over you?

Bob: Listening to them, at first it was scary. Then you got used to it, you know, and kind of thought, you know, I'd hate to be on the other end of that.

Jim: I was just checking the tape here. I was in a panic. Okay. We're still okay. Did any of the short rounds land in your compound or—

Bob: No. Not from the battleship.

Jim: Right.

Bob: No.

Jim: Did you have any reaction to the fact that you had to provide security? I mean what is your feeling about that?

Bob: Coming from Cam Ranh and everything, and then I'd say this would be our really first Vietnam experience there, it was scary, yes.

Jim: Did you have any contact with Vietnamese nationals there?

Bob: No.

Jim: Any ARVN or—

Bob: The ROK [Republic of Korea] Marines, yes. They were in the area.

Jim: That would be Koreans though.

Bob: Yeah, Korean.

Jim: Did you have any reaction to them?

- Bob: Umm, the opinion of them is that they were some mean son of a bitches. I mean, they—[pause]
- Jim: And did they have a compound near you or—
- Bob: Yeah, because they were in our area quite a bit. And, matter of fact, I got a .30 caliber M-1 carbine from one of them when I was there that I had as a personal weapon there that I preferred over the M-16.
- Jim: Okay. And so that's something that you had to leave there; you couldn't bring it back with you?
- Bob: Well, it got destroyed in the ammo dump fire anyway, so—I would have had to leave it there, yes.—[End of Tape 1, Side 1]
- Jim: You had an M-1 carbine that you had obtained from a Korean. Did you trade anything with him for it or—
- Bob: I don't remember what it was that we had traded for it. I don't know if maybe it was my portable radio or something. You know, it wasn't much.
- Jim: You said there was an ammo dump fire. What was that all about?
- Bob: In June of '67 while they were—we would back load 105 canisters, empty canisters, back onto some of the LSTs to take back for reload or whatever it is that they did with them. A spark from the forklift set off some powder that came out of one of these canisters and started the ammo dump on fire. It started blowing up, and when you got an ammo dump fire the first thing you think about is running like hell, and we were just laying around in our tents because there wasn't nothin' to do, and some guys were down on the beach swimmin' because we were right on the beach. So when we left our tents to get away from the ammo dump, our weapons and everything that we owned was left behind.
- Jim: Okay. So the ammo dump took your tents out and stuff like that?
- Bob: Took everything we had.
- Jim: Was anybody hurt as a result of this?
- Bob: No. No. We got out of the area. We were down at the end of the beach at the base of the mountains. They called in some aircraft to give us protection. LST come up and took us out into the water where it was a little bit safer out of range.

- Jim: But when you said aircraft come to give you protection, in case the VC were around yet?
- Bob: Yes, because they were supposedly up in those mountain areas.
- Jim: Okay.
- Bob: Some of the guys didn't even have clothes with them because they had been down there swimming in the ocean.
- Jim: So then what happened after that? How did you get resupplied or reset up?
- Bob: Well, after that they brought us in. They took us to the 101st base camp, and we spent a couple of days there, got some sort of clothing and stuff to clean up with, went back to our area. We weren't allowed to go into our area because of dead rounds and things like that, and some of the stuff was still going off, so down at the other end of the beach where it was cleared we started—
- Jim: You had to set up a new base?
- Bob: —to set up a new base there, and we started offloading there. Okay. And problems that arose from that is that the artillery company were running low on ammo. Some of the guys went out into the old ammo dump area, tried to find some—
- Jim: Stuff that wasn't—
- Bob: —stuff that wasn't blown up, and in doing that they set off what they call dead rounds, and it was like almost a week later we ended up with another explosion, going through the whole thing again. So we had to stop bringing ammo up for a while again until this settled down. Then finally we were able to start getting ships in there. And then at one time at that point, too, I don't remember what the timeframe was after that, but they were doing a bombing on the mountain there and when the plane come over to do his turnaround and come back in, his bomb didn't drop on the mountain but it shook loose over and come down just short of the LSTs that we were unloading. So, you know, we had a couple close calls like that. Again, everything we had in the company area was totally lost, so they had to get us clothing up there and they had to get us, you know, soap, toothpaste, toothbrushes, everything like that. And that was the purpose of me giving that prayer book and that rosary to the—the prayer book to the museum there.
- Jim: Could you explain what that's about, please?

- Bob: That was in my footlocker. We had our footlockers with us and everything, and when the company area burnt down, if you look at your footlocker, how it's square, when you went back into the tent area all you saw was a square of ashes on the ground. Everybody's was like that. Our rifles were, you know, just a ball of metal with the wood stocks burnt completely down. And out of the whole company area that prayer book is the only thing that was left intact except for the burns around the edges, and that's—
- Jim: Was the rosary intact, too?
- Bob: The rosary we got afterwards because when that blew up we also took some kids from a local—
- Jim: Orphanage?
- Bob: —orphanage there into safety.
- Jim: Okay. And so they gave that to you?
- Bob: Yes. They gave us those.
- Jim: Okay. So how did you preserve that prayer book? Did you wrap it in plastic then or something like that?
- Bob: Just like it was when I gave it to the museum. I put it in one of them plastic seal bags, and that's the way it's been kept. Because it meant a lot to me. I mean, everybody in the company area tried everything to get that off me and I said, "No." [laughs] That meant something to me, and that's the prayer book they give you when you take your oath and join in the service, that little "New Testament" book. That's why it was dated with the date that I went in.
- Jim: Okay. Is there anything that stands out other than these dump fires, which is pretty dramatic, at Duc Pho?
- Bob: No.
- Jim: So with everybody having a short time or calendar and all of that, did some company come in behind you to replace you there, or do you know what happened when your time was up?

Bob: I believe there was another company coming in. They were kind of filtering in when we were coming out. I think we left kind of like in two groups. I was in one of the first groups that left.

Jim: How did you leave there?

Bob: Went back to Cam Ranh Bay and flew out on United Airlines DC-8 I think it was.

Jim: And what was your reaction when your tour was up?

Bob: I was happy. I was glad it was over.

Jim: And when you got home did you get any leave?

Bob: Yes.

Jim: And what was the reaction, your people, your wife and family and all that, about your experiences?

Bob: They were glad it was over with, really didn't talk about it a lot.

Jim: And so did that bother you at all, that nobody wanted to talk about what your experience was?

Bob: I was the one that really didn't want to talk about it that much. You know, I'm not into bragging about what happened over there. I went, did my thing, and come home. You know, I'm just happy that I made it.

Jim: Did any people in your company—did any of them get hurt or killed while you were there?

Bob: No.

Jim: Then you had some more time yet in the service?

Bob: Yes.

Jim: And where was that?

Bob: They sent me to Fort Riley, Kansas, and I was assigned to a maintenance battalion and told me I had an MOS [military occupational specialty] of a graves

registration, which at that time was Memorial Specialist; and I was in charge of the pallbearers and we did military funerals all over the State of Kansas.

Jim: Was that a hard duty?

Bob: I would say that's the worst thing I had to do since I've been in the service, especially after coming back from Vietnam.

Jim: Does anything stand out? I mean, obviously it's got to be very difficult to be bringing remains back to a town and deal with the families. Is there anything that stands out about that other than it was very difficult?

Bob: Being as how I was in charge of the pallbearer, it was my job to also present the flag to the next of kin and, you know, on behalf of the United States Army for Private so-and-so, who so proudly gave his life. That I'd say has to be the hardest.

Jim: And so do you roughly know how many funerals you might have been involved with?

Bob: I really don't.

Jim: So how long did you do that?

Bob: I think I was there for almost six months, if I'm not mistaken.

Bob: Is that where you separated from the service then?

Bob: No, sir.

Jim: Okay. Then what happened?

Bob: From there I got orders to go to Germany, and at that time they were bringing a battalion back from Germany and bringing them in to Fort Riley, Kansas. So when I got my orders to go to Germany I thought I was going over there to load the ship up with their supplies because of my stevedoring background, but when I ended up in Frankfurt I was in a replacement center, nobody knew where I was supposed to go.

Jim: So where did you go?

Bob: I ended up in Karlsruhe, Germany, and it was a place where they turned in—the battalion that was coming back here was turning in their tanks, their radar, their

Jeeps. We were kind of like a maintenance battalion that warehoused their stuff. Okay, what they were doing at that time is it was kind of like a Minuteman operation. They were bringing them back to the States, they would be in the States, and then once or twice a year they'd fly them over there for maneuvers. They'd come in, check their stuff out, go out, do their two-week maneuvers, and then fly them back to the States versus leaving them over there in Europe all the time. So that's what the purpose of that was. So what I was doing was I was taking in their—I was mainly doing their radio and radar equipment, warehousing and checking it, warehousing it, and because of my forklift background they ended up getting—because of wintertime they got a rough-terrain forklift over there, and the gentleman in charge of the motor pool didn't even know what it was. Nobody knew anything about it, with my experience with it. So I ended up taking care of and operating the rough-terrain forklift, which was a six-ton Pettibone.

Jim: So was that pretty good duty?

Bob: Yeah, it was good. I was an NCO at the time, so I really didn't have much detail. You know, I had guard duty once in a while.

Jim: Did people ask you about your Vietnam experience?

Bob: No, because most of them were Vietnam vets already.

Jim: So did you guys ever talk about Vietnam?

Bob: Not really.

Jim: Was that good or bad?

Bob: It was good. You find that there's a lot of people that don't like to talk about their experience over there, so, you know, you don't like to get into those conversations.

Jim: Sure. So is that where you separated from service then?

Bob: Yes. I got discharged out of Fort Dix.

Jim: Okay. And when were you discharged at Fort Dix?

Bob: It would have been February of '69 because we got back thirty days early.

Jim: And when you completed your service, then did you have any reaction about your service? Did you feel good about it, bad about it?

Bob: I felt good about it.

Jim: Yeah. And—

Bob: I almost thought about reenlisting, especially when I was in Germany I would have reenlisted. My only concern was I didn't want to take a chance on having to go back to Vietnam again. That was the only thing that kept me from reenlisting.

Jim: Um hmm. Then how did you end up here in Wisconsin?

Bob: Okay. When I got out of the service I went back to work for Teletype. After being outside for three years in the service, I could not take being inside a plant all day. I took a job, I got a job at United Airlines at O'Hare Field in Chicago loading and unloading airplanes, but my main job was I drove the food truck for them, put the food on and off the planes. Worked for them 1969 to 1974. I was with them for five years. I was going to school with my GI bill for engineering at night, and I had to make a decision, you know, am I going to unload planes the rest of my life and look like that guy over there at forty years old, bent in half, you know, all messed up. I always believe in working smarter and not harder, so I was going to school. So, going to school for engineering and drafting and unloading the planes, I couldn't relate with the two. I had to kind of get a hands-on experience back in the factory situation. Got a job at a place called Litton Medical Systems where I was building x-ray machines. I quit the airlines, went to work there. After about a year or so I had worked myself—well, in less than a year I had worked myself into a main assembler, actually building the whole x-ray table instead of just subassemblies. They were having a new product line come out. I spent most of my time working with engineers up front, getting tips, finding out what it was, and again going to school, trying to relate the two. So when it came out, I knew how to build it. And after a while they were having a layoff. The company didn't want to lose me. I was in a union. So they asked me to go into management, and the opening that they had is what they called a national service. I would travel all over the United States repairing x-ray machines. I got sent to California to do a repair on a machine in San Diego, California, and at Terminal Island Federal Prison. Local people there, manager, asked me if I'd move to California. They transferred me out there. They paid my moving expenses, my car, my wife and kid, they flew everybody out there. So I ended up in California and stayed with the company for about five years, went into business on my own repairing x-ray machines. Things got bad out there. Things got slow. Wife's company was closing up, so she took an offer to come back here to Madison.

- Jim: Okay. So that's how you got here?
- Bob: Yeah.
- Jim: So you've lived in Madison since the mid-'80s, is that roughly—
- Bob: Roughly, yes. And I think we've been here about fifteen to seventeen years, something like that.
- Jim: You belong to a veterans' organization?
- Bob: Yes. I belong to Post 1318 VFW.
- Jim: Okay. And why did it take you so long—when did you join the VFW?
- Bob: I'd say it had to be maybe about fifteen years ago, roughly.
- Jim: Okay. Is there any reason why you didn't join the VFW or some organization like that before that?
- Bob: Really never knew that much about it, and to me I thought it was like mostly older-type guys, you know, that's something, you know, World War I, World War II; never researched it, never thought that much about it. And they come knocking on my door one day, explained it to me, and I said yes, you know, I'd be interested.
- Jim: Have you been active in the VFW since then?
- Bob: Oh, yes. I do their birthday list, their obituary list. Right now I'm Acting Junior Vice. I'm also on the Madison Area Firing Squad.
- Jim: Could you explain what that's about, the Madison Area Firing Squad, please?
- Bob: Okay. We do military rites for vets in the Dane County area. My job within that organization is I'm what they call a "tucker." When we fold the flag I do the tucking at the end.
- Jim: Is that because you had that experience when you were—
- Bob: I volunteered for it because of my experience before in doing military funerals.

- Jim: How would you compare the experience now of doing funerals, for the most part people that die just because they are old as compared to the ones where they were killed in Vietnam?
- Bob: Totally different. It's not as—I don't know what kind of word to use. I don't want to say it's tragic. That's what it is when you've got a gentleman that's killed in action. You know, the trauma is different, depending on the circumstances, you know. You got a gentleman that's, you know, served his whole life, you know, and he has lived his whole life and everything, you know, and died of natural causes versus somebody that was killed in action.
- Jim: And so is this a satisfying thing for you to do?
- Bob: I feel like I'm paying my respects and I'm helping fellow vets.
- Jim: And how many—
- Bob: I feel it's the least I can do.
- Jim: Yeah. And how many a year roughly does your group handle?
- Bob: If I'm not mistaken, the count we had—and I would have to check my notes—for last year was two hundred-six.
- Jim: And how many people are involved in this?
- Bob: I'd say roughly we have ten to twelve.
- Jim: And how many people typically show up for these things? I mean do you have the ten or twelve every time?
- Bob: Sometimes we do, sometimes we don't, for what reasons I don't really know. A couple times we're a little shorthanded, you know, to where we can just—instead of four people on the flag we may only have two or three. Our chaplain usually chips in and, you know, helps support the flag. We usually have three or four rifles.
- Jim: What kind of rifles do you use?
- Bob: I believe they are M-16s.
- Jim: Okay. How would you assess how your military experience has affected your life?

Bob: Well, it is kind of like I told my son when I told him, you know, he had to do something with his life besides flip burgers at McDonald's. You've gotta do something, you know; and I think it was a very learning experience. It taught me how to be on my own. It taught me respect.

Jim: Do you feel that Vietnam had any negative effects on you?

Bob: No.

Jim: Were there any positive effects, or is it the same as just the military experience?

Bob: Not that I can say. You know, it was a job; and again, you know, when you get back, you made it. You're just happy for that and happy that your experience wasn't as bad as some of the other guys that were over there.

Jim: Is there anything we haven't covered now that we should cover?

Bob: Not that I can think of off the top of my head.

Jim: Okay. Then I think we will just wind her up. Thank you.

[End of Interview]