

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

MICHAEL P. ESSER

Machine Gunner and Mortarman, Army, Vietnam War;
Maintenance, Army Reserves, Persian Gulf War.

2004

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Esser, Michael P., (1947-). Oral History Interview, 2004.

User Copy: 2 sound cassettes (ca. 61 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 2 sound cassettes (ca. 61 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Michael P. Esser, a Middleton, Wisconsin native, discusses his experiences during the Vietnam War with the 2nd Battalion, 14th Infantry Regiment, 25th Infantry Division and during the Persian Gulf War with the A-26 Ordnance Company of the Army Reserves. Esser talks about being drafted after graduating high school, basic training at Fort Leonard Wood (Missouri), and advanced infantry training at Fort Polk (Louisiana). After a twenty-one day leave, he tells of reporting to Fort Ord (California) and being flown to Bien Hoa (Vietnam). He speaks of two weeks of training with the 90th Replacement Company and states that, after training with M-14 rifles, he was issued an M-16, which he had never fired before. Esser describes carrying an M60 mortar, high explosive rounds, and white phosphorus rounds. Assigned to the 25th Infantry Division in Cu Chi, he states they sent him into the field right away, carrying radio and machine gun ammunition. He tells of being pinned down by sniper fire his first time out, helping pull a shot medic under cover, and turning down an offer for a bronze star commendation. Esser recalls the smells in Vietnam, riding a helicopter into the field, setting up perimeters, and walking patrols. He speaks of respecting most of his officers and eventually becoming a non-commissioned officer himself. Esser explains he spent six months as machine gunner, machine gun assistant, and ammo bearer before being rotated into a mortar patrol. He describes life in Cu Chi base camp, rotation policies, and the parties after big operations were finished. He tells of doing patrols in rice paddies around the Saigon River and, later, around Tay Ninh. Esser mentions having limited contact with Vietnamese civilians and the regular North Vietnamese Army. He talks about normally having good air support and details being wounded by a friendly fire airstrike while taking cover in a bunker. Esser speaks of R&R in the Philippines, volunteering to ride shotgun in supply runs to Saigon, and being in an old French fortress on the Cambodian border during the Tet Offensive. During a cease fire, he states the Viet Cong threw rocks instead of firing weapons. He recalls coming under sniper fire, being told he couldn't get air support because he was over the Cambodian border, and being the last person to run during the retreat. Esser addresses red ants, high casualty rates, and especially difficult combat areas such as "the Purple Crater," "the Fishhook," and the base of the mountain Nui Bai Dinh. He comments on drinking Vietnamese beer while on patrol, his experiences with marijuana, and occasionally having problems with soldiers on guard duty falling asleep under the influence of marijuana. He reflects on problems with his training and the training of officers. Esser talks about his uneventful homecoming, spending five and a half months at Fort Benning (Georgia), being urged by his brother to join the Reserves, and joining the A-26 Ordnance Company. He expresses bitterness at being exploited by the Army and states he joined the Reserves partly to get

all he could back from them. Esser touches on being called to active duty in September of 1990 and spending eight months in Saudi Arabia during Operation Desert Storm. He touches on learning to control the memories of his experiences in Vietnam. Esser speaks of joining the VFW in Middleton and the American Legion in Waunakee, but dropping out because he felt looked down on by World War II veterans for losing the war; now that Vietnam era veterans are more numerous in the VFW, he states he has rejoined and is having fun.

Biographical Sketch:

Esser (b.1947) had a twenty-three year career in the Army and Army Reserves. During active duty, he served in Vietnam (from April of 1967 to April of 1968) and in Saudi Arabia (from September of 1990 to July of 1991). He settled in his hometown of Middleton (Wisconsin).

Interviewed by Jim Kurtz, 2004
Transcribed by Telise Johnsen, 2011
Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2011

Transcribed Interview:

- Kurtz: It's May 19 [2004]. This is Jim Kurtz interviewing Mike Esser in Middleton, Wisconsin, about his Vietnam experiences with the 25th Infantry Division and later staying in a Reserve Unit and going on to Desert Storm.
- Kurtz: Mike, where and when were you born?
- Mike: I was born just right outside of Middleton here on October 6, 1947.
- Kurtz: 1947. By "outside Middleton," were you born at home, or--?
- Mike: Oh, no. No.
- Kurtz: No. Okay, so you--. Oh, right. Got you.
- Mike: But they took us--. We had hospitals then.
- Kurtz: Okay, got you. Did you then grow up in Middleton and go to high school in Middleton?
- Mike: Yeah, stayed right here in Middleton until--. I turned nineteen October 6, and I was drafted November 7.
- Kurtz: Okay, so what year did you graduate from high school?
- Mike: October 6, I mean, uh--.
- Kurtz: [Laughs]
- Mike: I graduated June 1st of '66.
- Kurtz: June 1, '66, and then you were drafted on November 6 [7? *see above*], '66. Is that accurate?
- Mike: '66, yeah.
- Kurtz: '66. So you didn't really have any time to do anything between high school and the military.
- Mike: No. Right after high school I went to the service. After I come back from the service, everybody I knew was gone. All my friends were either married--. It was kind of like starting all over on your own.

- Kurtz: Okay. So, when you got drafted, did you enter the service with anybody you knew?
- Mike: No. I just went down to Milwaukee for your—what do you call —your basic?
- Kurtz: The physical.
- Mike: Your physical. And come back, and once there was a letter in the mail: “Report.” We reported to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri.
- Kurtz: Fort Leonard Wood, that beautiful place, Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, okay. And when did you go to Fort Leonard Wood? That was obviously in November of '66.
- Mike: I actually reported—we, uh, what was it? Did we, seemed like we had to go to Milwaukee. Didn't you have to go to Milwaukee on that first bus?
- Kurtz: They could have. I wasn't drafted, so I don't know.
- Mike: Anyway, I had to report November 7 in Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. It was Induction Center, Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, that's right, and we had a bus down there.
- Kurtz: Okay, and so the Basic Training was eight weeks. So that takes you just past Christmas, I think.
- Mike: We went to the Induction Center, you know, and got your hair cut. And you got your uniform, all your clothes that didn't fit.
- Kurtz: Yup.
- Mike: And then we started Basic in November. And I think it was around the 15th of December they closed the whole place down. And they had buses there, and they bused you to St. Louis. And then from there you'd catch a bus home. And so we had a Christmas leave from about the 15th until around the 1st of November we had to report back.
- Kurtz: First of January.
- Mike: First of January of '67. And then finish our Basic in Leonard Wood. And then they took us out the back door, out the back gate, and loaded us on trains, regular [unintelligible]-type trains that time. And they shipped us down to--I went to Fort Polk, Louisiana, Advanced Infantry Training. So when I left home the 1st of January and reported, I finished my Advanced Infantry Training out in Fort Polk, Louisiana. And I was home--.

Kurtz: How long was your--, what month was--?

Mike: First of April.

Kurtz: First of April.

Mike: I come home. I reported the first of January back to Leonard Wood, finished my Basic, caught a train, finished my Advanced Infantry Training. And I was back home on the 1st of April, and I had twenty-one-day leave. I had to report to California—Fort, what was that, uh--?

Kurtz: Oh, it was in California. So you probably had to go out to Travis Air Force Base, Fort Ord.

Mike: Across the bridge.

Kurtz: Yeah.

Mike: California, across the bridge. It was just a holding area. I reported April 21st.

Kurtz: Okay, so twenty-one-day leave. And then how did you get to California--plane?

Mike: Yeah. I guess so. Flew into California and then bused over to, uh--.

Kurtz: Well, we can figure that out. I know what you're talking about.

Mike: Big warehouses. And we must have stayed there for about ten days. You just slept in open, big old warehouses on cots.

Kurtz: Yeah.

Mike: Until they got your number, and they'd load you on planes, and landed over in--.

Kurtz: What kind of a plane? Did you go on a military plane?

Mike: No. It was a Braniff, I think, that time. They had about six different colors. Sometimes they had orange wings and blue bellies, and I don't know how many people they could hold.

Kurtz: Well, those were 707s. That's the way I went to Vietnam, you know, on DC-8s. And so they held a couple hundred people.

Mike: And landed in Alaska.

Kurtz: So you left and flew Braniff to Vietnam via Alaska.

Mike: And from Alaska straight to Vietnam.

Kurtz: And where did you land in Vietnam?

Mike: I think it was [unintelligible].

Kurtz: Bien Hoa?

Mike: Bien Hoa.

Kurtz: Yeah, landed in Bien Hoa [*Air Base*]. And I assume that would be around May 1st.

Mike: Uh, no. Uh, yeah, it could be. I was, uh--.

Kurtz: Yeah. What was your DEROS [Date Eligible to Return from Overseas]? That would tell us. What was your DEROS out of Vietnam?

Mike: Well—it was the 6th.

Kurtz: Sixth of May?

Mike: April.

Kurtz: Sixth of April, okay.

Mike: April 7th.

Kurtz: Okay. So you had some of that time--. Okay, I understand. Then you went to the 90th Replacement Company, and how long were you there?

Mike: Oh, I'd say about, well, close to two weeks. You had training, you know, like if you walked point, you don't walk [unintelligible]. And, uh--

Kurtz: So you had two weeks of training.

Mike: Roughly. It could be, you know. We sat on bleachers. They talked about this, and they talked about that. And they had some small, hands-on, feet-on training down the mountain grade.

Kurtz: Was it outside the wire?

- Mike: No, it was just a little training area.
- Kurtz: Okay, so--. And there, did you know any of the people that--?
- Mike: No. No, these were all--.
- Kurtz: What was your impression of the people that did the training?
- Mike: I, uh, my whole feeling about Vietnam--. Well, went to Basic, come home on leave on Christmas, finish my AIT in five and a half months. All right, and I took a 21-day leave when I was in Vietnam. Well, figure five and a half months.
- I could tear an M-14 down blindfolded, and they handed us an M-16. Never even fired it. So my whole opinion of Vietnam was: "We'll fly you over there, and you're standing here, and [unintelligible] from now we'll fly you home."
- Kurtz: So, when you were at the 90th Replacement Company, did they give you any training on the M-16?
- Mike: Uh-uh; no. First of all, my MOS [military occupational specialty] was really Charlie [?], which was mortars, eighty-one mortars. And so when [unintelligible] replaced with the 25th Division, you were basically just pulling all the--actually one guy had an M-14 yet—but they just pulled all the M-14s out of the company and issued M-16s.
- Kurtz: Were the companies carrying mortars in the 25th Division at that time?
- Mike: They carried the little M60 mortar, which they said was left over from the Korean War. So you had the little M60 to carry on your shoulders. And then you had about, I think there were like five of us in the squad, and you carried mortar rounds. We carried five high-explosive, I think it was, and four white phosphorus.
- They called them Willy Peter--code for "white phosphorus"--for marking rounds, because they were against the Geneva Convention, I understand, to use white phosphorus, which burns until you smother [unintelligible]. But, you know, we did use it for marking. [Laughs]
- So I think the white phosphorus was six pounds, the high explosives were five pounds, and I think you carried five and four. Plus, you carried your ammo. Plus, you carried your water. Plus, you carried your--.
- Kurtz: When you carried water, how many canteens did you carry?

- Mike: As many as you could, usually three.
- Kurtz: Were you briefed on that when you got to your unit, you know, what you should carry in the field?
- Mike: Not really. They just said, "If you want it, you carry it. If you don't want it, don't carry it."
- Kurtz: But they told you you had to carry that basic load of mortar ammunition you were talking about. Did you have to carry any anti-machine-gun ammunition?
- Mike: No, usually your regular infantry would carry that. But you knew you had to carry your ammo. You had to carry your own C-rations. You had to carry your water. You had to carry your rifle, and you had to carry enough ammo for yourself.
- Kurtz: And were you told--? What was your basic ammo load?
- Mike: Oh, I don't know, usually two bandoliers across your chest, which would hold about five, five, seems to me about ten plus one—about eleven, whatever you wanted. Maybe you might pack a couple extra in your--.
- Kurtz: Magazines, you're talking about.
- Mike: Magazines--might pack a couple extra in your backpack. But they were pretty good for, you know, [unintelligible] supplies/surprised[?].
- Kurtz: Yeah. So when you got to the 25th Division, did you go to Truai?
- Mike: No, they were at Kim Binh[?].
- Kurtz: Oh, Cu Chi, rather, excuse me.
- Mike: No. They were out in the field at that time.
- Kurtz: Okay. So you got taken to your unit.
- Mike: Yeah, they, uh--.
- Kurtz: So there was no indoctrination in the 25th Division?
- Mike: No. They just took us right out in the field. And they were set up for base camp at that time. I don't even remember, because I was just too--. I didn't even know where I was at, other than Vietnam. They just convoyed you

out there, and you were [unintelligible] replacement. And you were going to the 25th Division, and they said--.

Well, I think the first couple days they had me, uh, carry radio for the First Sergeant. I didn't know a darn thing about that. And then, of course, they started out on a LP listening post, and ambush patrols. Did a little bit of point man work, but that was kind of stupid. New guy, didn't know nothing, they put him out on point, you know. [Laughs]

And then afterwards--. Actually, I was with the [unintelligible/11th?] Charlie mortars, but they were full. The unit was full. So they put me as an ammo bearer on an M60, a machine-gun assistant, machine-gun and ammo bearer. And this is on the first trip out. We went out on the Saigon River, and this is my first--other than meeting the unit out in the field and then coming back, and then Cu Chi and then going back out.

We went down to Saigon, caught some river boats run by the South Vietnamese. And they took us down the river, and we walked up some rice paddies, and we got sniper fire from the front. And so everybody went up front. And we were sitting on their left, and they shot everybody down through the heads who, uh--. A medic got shot in the head. So, uh, there was three of us: two guys their last time out--they were going home--and me. So we went out there under fire, and of course we pulled him back. And, uh, he was dead.

And our sergeant was from England. He said, "I'm going to put you guys in for a Bronze Star with V [valor] Device for bravery under fire." The two guys who were there said, "Well, we're out of the Army. We're leaving, and they'll never catch up to us." So they turned it down. I said, "Well, I guess they turned it down," so I turned it down. But, I guess [unintelligible]. It never went through.

Kurtz: Yeah. I forgot to ask you this. Did you have any impression about the heat and the smell?

Mike: Yeah. What was that movie, that first one that come out, the first Vietnam movie? But the first thing you smelled—the dust with the helicopters, the humidity, and the smell. The smell—well, Louisiana's about the same way—a mucky, watery, marshy smell. You'd smell that right away, and the heat.

Kurtz: So what was your typical day like, Mike, when you were out in the field?

Mike: Uh, I wasn't in Cu Chi much. They would take us out, and they would put us on choppers. And they'd help our assault out into the boonies where we figured there was activity. And we'd jump off the choppers, and we'd set

up the perimeter. And we'd spread out, maybe that day. And then they'd bring in the 105. They'd bring in the [*sounds like 'quilts'?*]. They'd bring in this, and they'd bring in that. And they would put up the concertina wire.

And then the next day, then we'd get on choppers, and they'd chopper us out about six or seven miles maybe to the right. And we'd walk back in. And then they'd chopper us out six or seven miles off to the left, and then we'd walk back in.

Kurtz: So you'd stay in that first position where they set up the artillery, and then you'd do patrols or sweeps.

Mike: Sweeps over, with the choppers helping out there. And we'd do that all the way around that area until we figured it was clean. And then they would throw us on choppers, and wherever they thought there was a hot area they'd chopper us out.

I was in the field one time for three months. So I never seen Cu Chi much.

Kurtz: What time of the day did you get up, like sunrise?

Mike: Oh, we got up around, I don't know, five o'clock. You'd have to clean up; you'd have to shave. Our 25th Division, compared to what I've heard other people, was pretty good. If you weren't in a fire fight ahead, and you had a forward base camp, they would fly in a hot meal. And, of course, all the people would chip together for one beer and one pop. So they had enough pop for everybody.

But you'd have a hot meal. And then a lot of times the cooks would stay over, and you had your fried eggs and your eggs and bacon and stuff. You had kind of a hot meal. And then they'd fly out in the morning. And so unless you were pinned down in a fire fight, they were pretty good that way.

Kurtz: Were you required to shave?

Mike: Yeah. [Unintelligible]

Kurtz: Did you see much of officers when you were there in the field?

Mike: Yeah, we always had, you know, our First Sergeant usually went with us. You had your, uh, lieutenants on each—well, we had five squads. You had [unintelligible], and then at that time Mortars Section would go with the Headquarters, which would be the Captain, First Sergeant, and your Radio Operator. And we would operate in the middle. And they usually operated

in a wedge. You'd go First Division, first section, second section, and then you had your third section behind you. Then the next time it rotates. You know, and then finally one would be in the back, and then you always kind of knew the [unintelligible] was narrow.

Kurtz: Yeah. What was your impression of the officers you served with?

Mike: I had no problems. We only had a problem with one captain. He didn't turn out very good. He was only there about three or four weeks. We didn't have respect for him. He could get lost in a paper bag, and they pulled him out.

Kurtz: What kind of NCOs did you have? Were they pretty well trained, or were they--?

Mike: Uh, most of the NCOs started like I did. I ended up, I left as an E5. You started out there as a nothing, and as time went on you got smarter or you got dead. And that's how I got to be NCO.

Kurtz: So were you basically in the same unit for the twelve months you were there?

Mike: Yes. I stayed there. Right after we got there, they were pulling some of the—what division or unit?—oh, part of the 25th Division, the Wolf Hounds, had got hit pretty bad. And they had to reorganize. Everybody got hit pretty bad. So they had to pull troops from all over the Division to pull the unit back together, because [unintelligible?] everybody was wiped out. That's the rumor I heard. I don't know where. But that's right when I got there, so that's the only time that they pulled anybody out, or whatever.

I never--. I did feel like I should transfer. I did try to transfer to a machine-gunner on a helicopter gun ship. They said it was dangerous. But what I was doing was dangerous too, but at least it was dry when it would rain and you had a good meal at night. But that never developed, so I finished my--.

Kurtz: You said you started as a machine-gun ammunition bearer, assistant gunner. Then did you go back to the mortars?

Mike: Well, uh, we got ambushed on the Saigon River May 26th, and I moved up to a gunner, machine-gunner. But I never trained as a machine-gunner either. But I did know enough to load it and pull the trigger, so I did carry, and I did go on ambush patrols, [enlisted?] patrols for a couple--, a little bit. And then they pulled another, they pulled some people from other units with experience, and they put them on the machine-gun. And then I was assistant machine-gunner for awhile, a couple of months.

Actually I was in the field or I was in, basically, machine-gunner, assistant machine-gunner, ammo bearer, for six months in the straight infantry division. And then they had rotation in the mortars. And then they pulled me out, and then they put me with the mortal patrol.

Kurtz: And when you went out in the field, you said they carried these 60-millimeter mortars?

Mike: They carried, it was just tubular like—

Kurtz: A little, small—

Mike: Yeah, five feet with a tripod. They carried that on their shoulder. The gunner carried that. And then your, uh, your [unintelligible/crew?].

Kurtz: So, the company commander then controlled those mortars, or did the mortar platoon leader--?

Mike: Uh, well they would call in, actually you did feel like you were eighty-one. You didn't have to put out—uh, PC80 stakes.

Kurtz: Yeah.

Mike: You just put her down, and you checked your white phosphorus for marking, and then you fired in that direction. So it was just, “Sssshhhh,” you know, better than nothing, little over there, little trip cord[?].

Kurtz: You said you weren't trained on the M16. What was your experience with the M16? Did it work, did it jam?

Mike: No, we were with that first group that, when they first come out with the M16. And if you fired them, with dirt and stuff, they said that they expanded in the chamber, then they wouldn't extract the shell. And we had trouble with that.

But the only time I had trouble with it—when you put it on automatic and pulled the trigger, and she just opened up, which we weren't supposed to do because you lost control of your firing and you had trouble. Otherwise I didn't really have any trouble.

But they did, right after that, they pulled them out. They give us the new M16A one, I guess it was, and I didn't have any trouble with those. But you had to learn your stuff. You had to ask them how to clean them, how to train, because you didn't know how to.

- Kurtz: Did you have adequate supplies for cleaning them?
- Mike: Oh, yeah. When we'd come in, when we did come in, we'd all go out to the back of the company area, or out in the corner where nobody was, and we'd fire, target practice, fire and see how your weapon works. You'd basically use up your old ammo. And then you'd clean your weapon. They issued new ammo. And then you were ready for your next.
- Kurtz: When you went back to base camp areas, what was it like there? Did you have to pull perimeter security and KP and stuff like that?
- Mike: When we went, like, we were on different—I can't remember—we were on, like, one Kit Carson was a big, uh, push that was a whole division. When the whole division went out, we might be out in the field for two and a half, three, maybe four weeks, whatever. And, like I said, one time we were out there for three months.
- But what they would do, then, every day four or five people would come in. And you'd shower, you'd shave, you'd get new equipment. You'd go down to the PX, you'd go down and have a beer. You'd probably get in on a Saturday afternoon, and on Sunday afternoon you'd go out. So that's how we rotated the company for three months.
- But when the whole division was in, and your, like your Kit Carson, or your big operation is over, then they would pull you in, and then you had to pull detail. You might be in for four to six, maybe eight, days. You'd have a big beer party. You'd have a big steak fry. You'd have services for all the people that were lost. And then we did the sand bags, and you'd cook for another guy who went out on ambush patrols out behind the back end of Cu Chi. And, uh, all things like that.
- Kurtz: Did you have any experience with the tunnels of Cu Chi?
- Mike: No. Didn't even know they were there. But I did hear one time that they had a small fire fight, and the person that got killed was the same guy that you got a haircut from all the time. Nobody knew how he got there. But I guess we know now. No, nobody told me about it, or that I knew about it, or that anybody every told me that we were on top of a cave.
- Kurtz: Now, when you were out on operations, were you in the rubber plantations areas mainly or jungle or rice paddies?
- Mike: When we were in Cu Chi, it was mostly the rice paddies around the Saigon River. We were only there in Cu Chi for six months, and then I think about September then they moved us up to Tay Ninh. And they said

it was the same area that Lieutenant Calley had, uh, his unit had lived in those tents. That's what they told us. I don't know.

Kurtz: Well, he was in [unintelligible]. They were supposed to be north in [L?] Division.

Mike: Well, one time they said, "That's the company that..."

Kurtz: Okay. Did you remember Nui Va Dinh?

Mike: Yes. Black Coogee Mountain.

Kurtz: Yep.

Mike: We operated around—[unintelligible] Black Coogee Mountain. Rubber plantation, we went through a rubber plantation.

Kurtz: What was the attitude of the people in that area?

Mike: Well, we never had much contact with them. You know, you'd go through a village, and sometimes it was considered a safe village. So you couldn't go in there with a bullet in your chamber. If you got shot at you could put a bullet in your chamber, and, uh, but other than that--.

Of course, you know, what was Vietnam? They had old women and young kids, young boys and young girls. You didn't see anybody else--you know, old men, old women, and young kids. There was no, I never seen anybody older than nine or ten and younger than about forty-five or something, or fifty, whatever.

Kurtz: Yeah. Now, the people you fought against, were they North Vietnamese regulars or VC or both?

Mike: Around Cu Chi they said it was your, uh, VC. But when we were up around Tay Ninh, I think it was both. But they said we were pushed against the regular NVA.

Kurtz: Yeah. Did you get air support frequently in your operations?

Mike: Yeah, we did pretty good. Yeah, we were real good. We had good chopper service, and we had, uh--. I only got hit twice by my own Air Force. But we were pinned down, and they said they'd come in and they'd drop these ten-pounders, what they called [unintelligible], or little bombs, because we were pinned down and they cut in so close. And when they come overhead you could read the writing on the airplane. And you had to put your hands on your ears. And they were coming in, "Boom, boom, boom." And that's

why I got hit in the eye, and I got shrapnel above my knee and sprained my ankle. So I was pretty lucky, although they were close ones.

Kurtz: So, you get two good [unintelligible]?

Mike: No, I didn't ever do enough [unintelligible]--. Got a bunker blown up and all that other stuff.

Kurtz: What about a bunker being blown up? What happened there?

Mike: We were, uh, in forward base camp, and it was at night, later in the evening, and we had our eighty-ones set up. And all at once, you know, you could hear the "boom, boom" from incoming. So we got in our bunker with about two layers of sandbags on it. And we had a little hole, and I could see it, I could see them coming.

And, "Bang! Boom, boom!" I said, "You know, in about two or three more of those, if he keeps going, it's going to land right on our bunker." And I thought, "I'm getting out of here." They said, "Well, you never run." So I got in the corner, and it hit right in the middle. Blew her right up.

And I did have a shirt on that time, and I was on a, we had our purple--, and your, your regular what do you call them, smoke bombs. And, of course, they, they got holes in them, there, from shrapnel. So that was coming down through the holes and out the other end. And the sandbags were made out of, well, dirt that time.

And when the mortar come down, it missed my ankle by about two inches. What happens when a mortar explodes upwards, a projectile went down and missed my ankle by about two inches. It was imbedded in the dirt.

Kurtz: Oh, my.

Mike: But all the dirt come down and hit me in the side and the back and in the front. I could see a burn. I was looking for blood. Until, anyway, we got out of the—there was three of us in there—we got out of the bunker and checked each other over. And the medics were coming with the, with the stretchers. They looked at us. And when they walked back [unintelligible]. So, uh, that was a good experience.

Kurtz: When did you go on R&R and where?

Mike: I, uh, I, actually I didn't want to go right away, which is kind of stupid, I guess. A guy usually goes, like, three months. I was there eight months. And I went in—that was April—May, June, July, August, September,

October, November--yeah, eight months. I went to the Philippines, because I remember we were there for five days and, uh--.[**End of Side A, Tape 1**]

Kurtz: I forgot to turn the tape over. You were just talking about the Filipino people. So, you know, you're on R&R in the Philippines.

Mike: Uh, the Filipino people were--. Well, first of all, they're like a second-, third-rate country. So, you know, it was cheap over there, and they didn't have much money. So, I mean, we rented a--, a guy had a car, a fifty-six Ford that time. And for about, uh, he'd pick you up, take you anywhere you wanted to go, he'd bring you home, pick you up. You had his car for fourteen dollars a day.

And, uh, all these people, a lot of the guys, a lot of the women, there was no way for them to make a living. And a lot of these people lived out on these islands and stuff. So they all come to the main island, which was Manila, to do anything to make a living. They clean house, or they'd do that. One thing, they were friendly, and they could speak English. And, it was reasonable over there. So it was a fun time.

Kurtz: Okay. When you got back, then, you went back to your unit. And is that about the time that a Cambodian incursion into--?

Mike: Uh, no. We were up in, uh--. When I come back from the Philippines, or my R&R, they needed a volunteer to run shotgun around trucks. So, being as I didn't want to go back to the infantry, I said, "Well, I'll volunteer," which wasn't really that good either. Because, you know, you're driving down the road when you get sniper fire, and it kinda zips through the truck. It isn't the best job either.

Kurtz: So these were supply runs back down to Saigon?

Mike: It was from Saigon up to, uh--. We were stationed up along the Cambodian border, and they were running supplies for us when I was in Saigon. And I tell you a thing, there was no French Fortress. That had been overrun back in '54 when--. There was even graves back there. The cement was there where the buildings were, but the buildings were all down.

Anyway, the whole division went up there. And they had an airport. They had an old runway and everything. So that was right around the Tet Offensive. Actually, there was supposed to be a cease-fire. And one of the guys was on the radio. It was around midnight. And he said, "I just got hit over the helmet with a rock." And the lieutenant didn't believe it. So he

went down there, and *he* got hit over the head with a rock. So they're throwing, the VC were throwing, rocks at us. [Laughs]

Kurtz: So that was part of the cease-fire. Instead of firing, they were throwing rocks. So you spent the Tet Offensive up there as opposed to back in Saigon like some of the--.

Mike: Yeah, we were out in a, we were just in a cease-fire. And we had a forward base camp in this old French Fortress along the Cambodian border.

Kurtz: So you weren't in any of the cities during the Tet Offensive?

Mike: No, we didn't, uh--. Not like the Marines had to. No, we would just hold our position. I don't know how long it lasted.

But I'll just tell you. When we were running maneuvers up there around the Cambodian border, they flew us in the area. They said, "Well, check out this area." So as you walk in this one area, there was a big ant hill, oh, about eight, ten feet high. So you walk straight toward it. When you went around that ant hill, on the other side of that, we got sniper fire. So we all took cover, and so we called in for gun ships. And the gun ships come in and said, "We can't come get you because you're in Cambodia. You'll have to get out on your own." So, as you ran back, you had to run around that ant hill. On the other side of the ant hill, they couldn't hit you. You weren't going to get sniper fire.

So, I was in the mortars. I was carrying about a hundred pounds, you know, six HE and five white phosphorus. I had my rifle. I had my ammo. I had my canteen. I had my C-ration. I had my can of beer—warm, of course. So they said, "Well, we got to pull back."

So, uh, the guy next to you would fire his magazine; [then] he gets up and he runs. So, that happened; this guy fired, and he got up and run. This guy fired--. All of a sudden, "Look, there's only two of us left!" I've got a hundred pounds on my back. And this long-legged Southern boy from Kentucky, he's got a small bag and his rifle. And he's six feet.

So he gets up and he fires his rifle, and he takes off running. I'm the last one. [Laughs] They said, "You're supposed to fire your rifle, count to ten, and run." Well, he fired his rifle and his magazine out. He got up and run. When I fired my magazine, I didn't count to ten. I just fired my magazine and I run. I was the last one. Well, I got a hundred pounds on me. He's got long legs. When we run straight in towards that ant hill, I *passed* him on the right hand side. [Laughs] He wasn't going to leave me back there.

- Kurtz: [Laughs] You bet. You bet. So was that the only time that you went to Cambodia?
- Mike: Yeah. That's the only time I know of.
- Kurtz: When you were up in that area, did you ever have any contact with the Cao Dai religion, the Cao Dai temple, which is in Tay Ninh?
- Mike: No, not that I know of. I mean, we were on some night ambush patrols where we stayed in a temple, you know, around the main area. But we never run into anybody I know of that--.
- Kurtz: Well, of course. Are the temples kind of like the headquarters for your company?
- Mike: No, no. For night ambush patrol we'd use it for cover.
- Kurtz: Oh, okay.
- Mike: But we never--. No, we were usually out in the field. We had our tents, or whatever. And we'd use any buildings--.
- Kurtz: So, what did you like better, the rain or the heat of the dry season?
- Mike: [Laughs] Give me another choice.
- Kurtz: [Laughs] Neither one of them's very good, huh? Did you have any contact with snakes or red ants or--.
- Mike: Well, no snakes. Somebody said there was a boa constrictor that fell down an open well. I couldn't see him. But usually they would run away. I never see any snakes. I never see any monkeys, or I never seen any elephants.
- But, boy those red ants, were they ever--. You're walking through the woods, and they'd have nests up there. And they'd crawl on you, and, boy, would they bite! Boy, it didn't take you long to get out of your equipment and your shirt and stuff. They were just, they would charge you.
- Kurtz: Yeah.
- Mike: And, boy, they could take a wallop out of you. You'd be sweaty and then them darn things would be jumping on you.
- Kurtz: Was it more difficult the anticipation of contact or when you were actually in contact with the enemy?

Mike: I don't know, you know, it was scary. Uh, this is what a guy told me. When I first went over there, uh, if you had thirty days left in the field, they would pull you out. When they pulled me out I had twelve days left.

And about that time, a guy told me, he says, when he had just transferred over to another unit, and he was looking at the guys that replaced him. Actually, he was in Basic Advanced Infantry Training with me, and [unintelligible] that replacement. He said, out of the thirty-two or thirty-three people that come over here, there was only at that time that he could count, six is left that weren't dead or wounded. So that wouldn't be very--.

Kurtz: So it was the group of people that you--?

Mike: --that I trained in, out of Fort Polk, Louisiana. And he said there was, like, thirty-five or thirty-six of us. There was only six of us left walking. The rest were all dead or wounded that come over as that replacement.

Kurtz: Okay, so when you came back--. Is there anything that we should talk about in the field that we haven't talked about?

Mike: Um, no. You talked about anticipation of, uh--. I think that the first two things I really hated was the [unintelligible], because they always seemed to, uh, I mean—

Kurtz: They were hot?

Mike: Hot most of the time. My luck, I was either on the first or second one, chopper in. So, it always seemed like you were running and rolling and ducking. And the sniper fire the other thing. But, uh, we seen so much contact that for a while we were losing three and four people a day.

Kurtz: Booby traps or snipers?

Mike: Mostly fire fights. We were in the, uh, I can't even tell you where-all we were at--some location like the Purple Crater and the Fishhook and, uh, all these. The Purple Crater was named for, it was bombed so much. And you just gone in there, and purple was for Medevacs that dragged dead and wounded out. And that's why all the water was covered over with purple. That's why they called it the Purple Crater area.

And the Fishhook was down along the water. And, uh, they had all these areas, you know, like, you go where you're going. They don't show you a map. So I, yeah I know the names, the big names, but--.

Kurtz: You were never told, in other words, what your missions were and stuff like this.

Mike: We're just going on this-here mission, and, you know, that was it. Usually they'd have long-range patrols. And they would say, "Well, this area seems to be overwhelming with, uh, activity." And then they would throw us in there.

Like, they'd put us up to forward base camp. We'd run our different directions for about a week, and hopefully, they hoped, we'd run into enemy. I always hoped we didn't. And then we'd clean that area. They'd just throw you on a chopper, and out you go again.

Kurtz: Did you have any experience in the rubber plantations?

Mike: We had gone through that. I guess everybody's gone through it. I can't even tell you where it's at. I guess there's only one big one, wasn't it Michelin?

Kurtz: Michelin was one. There was a lot of big ones, but that was the biggest one in your area of operation.

Mike: And I know they were every, every tree straight in a row. And we got a lot of sniper fire in there. But I don't recall any big, uh, fire fights.

Kurtz: Any big fire fights or anything like that there. You said you had little contact with the Vietnamese nationals. Did you have much contact with the Vietnamese Army?

Mike: Again, I could only tell you what they told us. When we got, uh, hit on the Saigon River--. See, there was, near the Saigon River area for six months, was mostly VC. And six months after that, what came in was mostly the hard core. They told us the hard core. And they were, you know, more aggressive. You know, not like hit and run; they would hit and stay awhile.

Kurtz: Yeah. When you were around Nui Bai Dinh, did you ever have an operation where you were trying to go up the hill?

Mike: No we didn't. I talked to a bunch of people that, uh, [unintelligible] come back from the hospital. A lot of us tried. Even the mechanized went up there. And nobody succeeded. We operated around the outside. Actually, I don't recall—I know they said one time they found a Vietnamese farmer that was in the area. They found him, and he had his throat cut. So they figured he must've got too close to the VC.

We did have a patrol going out one time. And Green Beret were up on top, and apparently they were getting hit. So they were firing fifty calibers.

And they were hit [unintelligible], but it was so far down that it kind of landed on you like snowflakes, so nobody got hurt. But we operated around the outside, but we never went—why, I don't know what the mission was—but we never tried to go up. But I've heard some units did, and they didn't get very far.

Kurtz: That's true. Did you have any experience with Vietnamese food or beer?

Mike: Oh, Ba Bee Ba [*second syllable is variously spelled: ba/moui/ma*], number thirty-three. Yeah, uh, never food much, but--. They said not to drink it. But I know a friend of mine, he had some Pepsi and got stomach-poisoned, or something. But I never had any trouble. Of course, I never drank too much.

But a lot of times when you're on convoys or something you were really thirsty or you'd get down. And you know how the Mama-sans would come around with a cooler full of beer. I liked the Ba Bee Ba Number thirty-three, it was a good beer.

Kurtz: Well, now they added a three. It's a little bit better now than it was then.

Mike: Oh. But if you were on a patrol, they would come and you'd sneak one. But I didn't go out of my way, or to eat it. I didn't like dog, you see, so--.

Kurtz: And cat and snake. Was there many drugs during the time that you were there?

Mike: When we had our, uh--. Actually, we'd go out on our missions, and when the division come back, we would have a big beer party. All the beer you wanted to eat[sic], all the steak you wanted to eat in one big [unintelligible]. And then the next day you would detail.

And I was there in, like I say, '67, and it wasn't—I never noticed much. The worst, the most we had was pot. And there was only, like, six or seven of us in the company that I knew. And that wasn't bad. I mean, they passed a little pot.

I was a little farm boy, you know, and I said, "Oh, I gotta try this here." So we had a party, and I was drinking beer, and puffing on the old pot. Of course, they had to show me how to smoke it, as you know. And I got really sick. And I thought, "Well, if I live long enough, I'm going to go back to Wisconsin. And I can drink beer or I can smoke pot. But I know I can get beer in Wisconsin. I don't know about—." So I never tried it again. Besides, I was the [unintelligible] sergeant, I was supposed to be a squad leader.

But I had some problems. When you're out in the forward base camp, they had the radio going and noise would travel. And they'd be out there literally smoking pot.

Kurtz: This was Armed Forces Radio that they had on.

Mike: Oh, yeah. I suppose, yeah. They always had country-western, they always had--. And, uh, you could hear it, two in the morning. And the next morning they'd be all sleeping. So you knew if somebody had infiltrated through that area, they'd have been dead and probably us too. But that's the only problem we had smoking pot that I knew of.

And you could pick it up. You'd go through convoys and, you know, a little boy would come along and say, he'd open up a book, he'd say, "I'll show you a picture of my baby-san[?]." And he'd open it up and the inside was cut out, and there'd be a bag of pot, good stuff, for, I don't know, three-four-five bucks. Like I said, they were smoking something that one time. But it was easy to get. And supposedly good stuff, they said.

Kurtz: Okay. I asked you this question before; I'm going to ask you again. Is there anything else that we haven't really touched on in your experience in the year in the Infantry in Vietnam that we should hear about?

Mike: No, I guess. I made it; that's the main thing. Like I say, I think it was poor training from Basic to AIT. Five and a half months in Vietnam, poorly trained. To me, it felt like they dropped me off. They said, "You're standing here and, one year from now, you can climb on this plane and we'll take you home." And I just felt it was a, a--.

Kurtz: Now, do you blame the fact that the trainers weren't very sharp and weren't very diligent, or just the lack of time to do the training?

Mike: I think it was a little of each. I noticed that a lot of these guys were people returning from Vietnam. And they probably said, "Well, you know, I gotta do this for so long, and I'm going to get out." So, you know, they pushed a little bit.

But the other thing is, I think it was a big buildup, and they didn't have the right equipment. And the equipment was turning over, new phases, different things. So they train you in this, and you were in that middle where, "Well, we trained you in this, but the new equipment's coming in." So I think it was time and the training, it was kind of fifty-fifty. But I think it was the big push, the big Vietnam buildup. And, you know, it was just an open meat market, and you were just a dumb farm boy or factory worker, or something like that.

- Kurtz: I understand. So, that leads me to another question. The unit that you were in, then, there weren't many educated people and stuff like that.
- Mike: Not too much. I remember everybody that was in Georgia--. Actually, the unit I was with was mostly Southern--Kentucky, Missouri, Carolina—and mostly farm boys—[unintelligible], Texas. We did have one person that was going to college, and we had one guy that was going to tech school. But nothing, uh, mostly just your middle class [unlucky?] person.
- Kurtz: Yeah. Did you have any West Point officers, or were they OCS and ROTC?
- Mike: I think they were all ROTC. Because I know one thing, we had an E-6 sergeant. We were out in the boonies, and the lieutenant got us lost. So the E-6 had to [unintelligible], then he had to get us back on course. So, I mean, they were coarsely[?] trained, pushed through too also, but most of them would become six-month wonders.
- Kurtz: Oh, those were OCS.
- Mike: OCS six-month wonders. It was a basic person that did well. So they'd run you through Officer Candidate School and, six months, you were over there, yeah.
- Kurtz: Okay, when it came time for you to leave, where did you leave from Vietnam?
- Mike: We went back through, uh, through, uh, [unintelligible]—.
- Kurtz: [Unintelligible] replacement. So you left from Bien Hoa.
- Mike: Bien Hoa. Threw all your clothes in one pile, and all your shirts in one pile, all your pants in one pile, all your shoes in one pile. They reissued you greens again and shipped us back to Oakland.
- Kurtz: Oakland.
- Mike: Oakland, California. That was right on the other side of the bridge. Big warehouses, I don't know how many they had. I come in at, like, 3:00 or 4:00 o'clock in the morning, and they issued you a cot. Well, you could get you a free steak, but I didn't want to eat steak at 4:00 o'clock in the morning. Then I think it took us a couple days to get an order to clear out of there, and--.
- Kurtz: Was there any protesters there in Oakland, or was that--? You landed probably at Travis Air Force Base, were they--?

- Mike: No. There was no problem.
- Kurtz: Okay. So, you were there a couple/three days, and then did get [leave?] back to Madison?
- Mike: Yes, flew, uh, I think we caught a bus down there for a flight.
- Kurtz: Did you go back in military or civilian clothes?
- Mike: I went back in military.
- Kurtz: And did anybody give you any difficulty in any of the airports?
- Mike: No, I don't remember any problem.
- Kurtz: Okay. So then when you came back to Middleton, you still had some time to go in the military. Is that right?
- Mike: Yeah, see, if you had five months or less, they would give you an early "out." But, okay, it was five and a half months, basically, from leaving Vietnam, so I had five and a half months left. So they put me in an ammunition outfit based in Fort Benning, Georgia. So I spent five and a half months there.
- Kurtz: Any experiences there that are notable?
- Mike: No, just, just count the days.
- Kurtz: How were you received back in Middleton when you came back from Vietnam?
- Mike: This is just a little factory farm community. No problem.
- Kurtz: Did anybody ask you about Vietnam or care that you'd been there, or--?
- Mike: Oh, a couple friends of my folks, older folks, asked about it. And I tried to explain to them, and that was it. Mostly, you'd go downtown, and they'd say, "Oh, you were in Vietnam. Whoa, I'm proud of you." And they'd buy you a beer. But, other than that, nothing that out of the ordinary; nothing--. I guess, with a lot of people coming and going at that time, it was just part of the--.
- Kurtz: Yeah. Then, when you left Fort Benning, you got out of the military then, and you just came back to Middleton to live, is that right?

- Mike: Yeah, I come back out of the military. ‘Course, you have a six-year obligation, and I put my two in. And they kept sending letters, and I kept ignoring them. And my brother had gone into the--. Part of the 32nd Division was stationed in, an arm of them, were stationed over here at Truax. And he had gone in with a bunch of people in 1965, a bunch of people from school. And they had gotten out.
- Well, after I come back from Vietnam, they had gotten out, and he wanted to stay in. And he said, “Why don’t you join a Reserve unit with me?” He’d kind of like to stay in.” And I said, “Well, I’m an E-5.” You know, and I was a little bitter, and I said, “Oh, you know, I could join the Army for a year or two.” You join it, and you could extend twice, be in two years. I thought, “Well, the Army hasn’t done me anything but make me a pincushion or target practice for somebody.” And I said, “You know, I’ll get all I can out of it.”
- Kurtz: So, in other words, what you took your bitterness is to try and exploit the Army they way they exploited you, as opposed to--.
- Mike: Yeah. I’m going to go in there, and you’re going to give me a check every month, and I’m going to take the check. And I’ll do as little as possible, and what were they going to do, fire me?
- Kurtz: Yeah. Did you stay in contact with any of the people that you learned to know in Vietnam?
- Mike: Just two of them. Mostly because I met them, I knew them in Vietnam. And one is from St. Louis, Missouri, and one is from Fayetteville, Georgia. And only because—I was in Vietnam with them, but, uh, we ended up back in Benning, Georgia, and we hung around a little bit before we got out of the Service. So those are the main two people that I’ve kept in contact with or I’ve gone down to see every other couple of years. And we’ll call on the phone or something.
- Kurtz: Do you talk about Vietnam at all, or is it just now, life has gone on?
- Mike: Oh, not much. But, oh you kinda like—this guy was from Texas, and I can remember they all had a nickname, you know, like “[Tweety?], what was his name?” And you know stuff like that. But, and you kind of remember, “Where were we at” you know. But not--, rethink a little bit.
- Kurtz: Okay, now, your situation is, you did go into the Reserves after Vietnam. We aren’t going to talk about Desert Storm other than just to flag that, you know, as something that a Desert Storm interviewer should do. But can you kind of just summarize what your Reserve experience was, and how long did you stay in the Reserves?

Mike: When I come back, I got back into the Reserves with my brother. We ended up in the A-26[?] Ordnance. And, like I say, I was kind of bitter and I was going to get out. But, by the time I wanted to get out, they promoted me to an E-6, and after that to an E-7.

Now, I was going to get out in March of '90. But they called us up in September—which would be, September, October—September of '90, and I was going to get out that coming March. And they sent us over to Saudi, and we spent eight months with the A-26 Ordnance Company. I was in maintenance.

Kurtz: What was your feelings about going to war again so long after, you know?

Mike: Uh, they always said--the whole deal of the training when we were with the A-26 was, "The Russians are faced off across, you know, from Germany. And it's our mission that the Army could hold for a couple weeks. And if anything happens, we're going to get called up."

Well, when Saudi happened, it was always the vacuum. I knew, if it happened, you *were* going to get called up. So what had happened, you know, that we were there.

I wanted to get my twenty years in and get out, but, uh--. So we spent eight months in Saudi, then I--. I ended up with twenty-three years of service. Not bad for a guy that, when he got drafted for Vietnam, figured two years would be quite a loss.

Kurtz: [Laughs] So, how would you--? I'm going to turn the tape over, because I got a few, uh, gotta put a new tape on. **[End of Tape A, Side 2]**

Mike: And, like one of the guys said, "No beer, no booze, no woman—women. And it's my war." Well, it was our war. You either do it or you run away. So, what was your choice? You know, it was like, you just did it, and you made the best of it.

Yes, I don't think there's much time that goes by that you don't think about a fire fight you went through, or somebody reminds you of this guy that was with you or is dead now, or how scared you were. Or it was just, uh, you *always* think about it. But it's something that you either control or is going to control you. So everybody's gone through it.

I come back, and I drank a lot. And, uh, but I always thought, well, I didn't, uh, you know, just--. And, I, uh, I enjoyed myself. I did get in fights. And I was a clown, I threw jokes. And I drank a lot. But, I, you know, you had to hide it. But I, uh, you know, I didn't go off the rocker

because I figured [that comes about if you let it?]. I went a whole year trying to [unintelligible], why should I kill myself over some, you know--? So you got to control it. See, you never forget about it.

Kurtz: When did you join any veterans' organizations?

Mike: When I come back, I wanted to join the VFW in Middleton. That would be in 19—oh, well, whatever—'69/'70. And I had a lot of veterans of World War II that kind of looked down on you: "Oh, you're a Vietnam veteran. Oh, you lost the war"--kind of thing. I got a bad--, maybe not from everybody, but from some people I talked to. So I got a bad feeling from them.

So I walked away, and I joined, uh, the American Legion in Waunakee for about five years. And then, it got to be the same way over there, that people [unintelligible] war, or service with six months [unintelligible] take over here. You know, I've got this experience; I'm a Vietnam veteran. And then they kind of [unintelligible] me there. So I kind of backed off.

At that time, we had more people from the Vietnam Era taking over the VFW. In fact, they had, you know, different ideas and different approaches. And they were one of our, one of, like, my kind of person. Where the old World War II veterans were falling back and retiring. So, uh, I then joined the VFW and, of course, it's my group now. We have a fun time.

It's, you know, maybe twenty years from now somebody else comes back, and we'll have the kind of attitude that the old World War II veterans had. I have no hard feelings against them, but I think that they had the idea that they won the war, and I lost a war, and it was my fault.

Kurtz: Uh huh. Is there anything that we haven't covered, Mike, that you'd like to cover in this?

Mike: Uh, no.

[End of Interview]