

Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center

Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with  
RONALD LEWIS  
Truck Driver, Army, Vietnam War.

2003

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**Lewis, Ronald**, (1947- ). Oral History Interview, 2003.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 53 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 53 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

**Abstract:**

Ronald Lewis, a Middleton, Wisconsin native, discusses his Vietnam War service as a truck driver in the Army. Lewis describes talking to an Army recruiter, who made some promises that were not fulfilled, and enlisting. He speaks of basic training at Fort Leonard Wood (Missouri), advanced individual training learning to drive trucks, and being flown to Vietnam. Assigned to the 120<sup>th</sup> Transportation Company and based in Long Binh, he talks about duty on convoys to locations such as Saigon, Bearcat, and Loc Ninh. Lewis tells of being pinned down by mortar fire for three days and describes the weapons he was issued. In Saigon, he describes loading a cache of stolen supplies that had been recovered from Vietnamese civilians. He touches on his officers, the food, R&R in Manila (Philippines), monthly perimeter guard duty, latrine duty, and waterskiing on the Saigon River. Lewis recalls one of the transportation companies stealing a pallet of beer and getting his whole battalion in trouble. He describes Temporary Duty (TDY) with the Redcatcher Express unit of the 199<sup>th</sup> Light Infantry Brigade, which specialized in scouting. Lewis characterizes the scout dog that rode in his truck and tells of seeing it in action during an ambush. He tells of getting into a firefight while transporting troops during the '68 Tet Offensive. Lewis describes his homecoming and receiving terrible treatment when he wore his uniform while on leave in Madison (Wisconsin). Assigned to Nuremberg (Germany), he tells of disliking duty in an artillery unit and being treated like he was a new recruit rather than a Vietnam veteran. He tells of requesting reassignment back to Vietnam, getting promoted, getting back late from leave at home, and being busted down to corporal E-4. Lewis describes being busted in Germany for rolling a truck while giving a ride to some German girls and being processed out of the Army at the rank of private first class. He discusses receiving poor treatment at VFW Post 1318 in Madison, his activities with the Wisconsin Vietnam Vets, Chapter 3 and the VFW in New Glarus (Wisconsin), participating in Winterfest, and raising money to buy a wreath for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall (Washington, D.C.) during the Americal reunion.

**Biographical Sketch:**

Lewis (b.1947) served in the Army from 1966 to 1969. He served with the 120<sup>th</sup> Transportation Company and the 199<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division in Vietnam and with an artillery unit in Germany. He eventually settled in New Glarus (Wisconsin).

Interview by James Kurtz, March 5, 2003

Transcribed by Michael Chusid, December 30, 2005

Transcript edited and abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2011

**Interview Transcript:**

Jim: It is March 5, 2003. This is Jim Kurtz, doing an interview, and Ron Lewis is our narrator. Ron, could you tell us where and when you were born?

Ron: I was born in Vincent Center, Rich County, August 31, 1947. I went to – My dad was a farmer up there, and my dad had a light heart attack so, he had to get off the farm, and we moved down to Middleton.

Jim: Okay.

Ron: And that was in 1961 or '62.

Jim: Okay. And did you go to Middleton High School?

Ron: I finished Middleton Grade School eighth grade in Middleton, and then I went on and graduated from Middleton High School.

Jim: When you went to high school, did you have any awareness of the Vietnam War?

Ron: Oh, yeah. We had a – matter of fact, in our social studies we talked about Vietnam.

Jim: Okay.

Ron: Matter of fact, I fell asleep there in class, and this teacher pounded hard on my desk and woke me. I jumped up, he said, “Lewis, you’re going to be in Vietnam, and you ain’t gonna know what I’m talking about.” So, low and behold, doing my time in Vietnam – I was doing guard duty: bullets were flying around, and I remembered that teacher slamming his hand down on the desk. [Kurtz laughs.]

Jim: So you graduated from high school in June of '66. Then what did you do?

Ron: Well, I – During that time I was trying to – in '65 I was trying get in the Army Reserves. But all the other Reserves were filled up, and there was no way I could get in. It was – They weren’t taking anybody. Well, then, in that following summer, I worked in my dad’s service station that we had: Shell station. And then in August or September it was, I was talking to an Army recruiter, and then I decided to join the Army. ‘Cause they – The Army had promised me a bunch of stuff, which they never fulfilled.

Jim: So you joined the Army in September of '65?

Ron: Right.

Jim: And did they promise you special training?

- Ron: Well, they promised me to be a mechanic on staff duty cars, which – I was a mechanic working at the shop. And – But all that changed.
- Jim: Okay. So when did you go on active duty?
- Ron: Well, I got in, processed – it was October 1 when I processed in.
- Jim: Okay, and where did you go for basic training?
- Ron: Ah, went down to Fort Littlewood [Leonard Wood], Missouri.
- Jim: Okay, and do you have any specific – How long were you at Fort Leonard?
- Ron: Well, I took basic training there, and then during that time, that's when my MOS changed, and they said mechanics school was full, they couldn't get me in. I had two choices: be in infantry or be a truck driver.
- Jim: So what should you pick?
- Ron: I took truck driving.
- Jim: And do you remember what the MOS was for that?
- Ron: Ah, 64-B, I think. I'm not sure.
- Jim: Okay, but that we can check. Truck driver. Okay, did you make any friendships in basic training or any people that you saw subsequently in your military career?
- Ron: Well, yeah, I did. But in basic training and AIT training, which was also in Fort Littlewood, I actually got a little leave here, it was Christmas time, and then we went back to Fort Littlewood. On AIT training. And then after that – that was eight more weeks of AIT training – that consisted of driving the trucks and going on maneuvers.
- Jim: What kind of trucks did you drive?
- Ron: Deuce-and-a-halves, 7, 5 tons.
- Jim: Okay. No semis or cattle cars or anything like that?
- Ron: They didn't have that heavy of a trucks down there at that point in time.
- Jim: Did you have any remembrances that time either in basic training or your AIT of NCOs or officers that made an impression on you one way or another?

Ron: Oh, yeah. I remember this one colored dude, he – I don't know how he did it or said it – you know, I'm not a ten-year man, I'm not a twenty-year man: I'm a turdy [thirty] year man!

Jim: Alright!

Ron: You know, he was getting old.

Jim: Was he good? Did you learn anything from him?

Ron: Well, just enough to keep our nose clean.

Jim: Okay. So after you completed AIT, where did you go?

Ron: Well, I got a thirty-day leave. My orders were to go to Vietnam.

Jim: So you got direct orders to Vietnam after a thirty-day leave, and when was that, about?

Ron: Let's see. I landed in March, March 15<sup>th</sup> in Vietnam.

Jim: So about February 15<sup>th</sup> you got orders. And how did you get to Vietnam?

Ron: Commercial airline. We processed, had to fly to Oakland, California. We processed and they gave us shots, you know, and then took us to Oakland Air Base and put us on a plane – it was a commercial airline.

Jim: Okay. Do you remember what –

Ron: United Airline.

Jim: United Airline. And was it a 707?

Ron: 707.

Jim: And what route did you take across the ocean?

Ron: I don't even know, I can't remember. Wasn't really paying attention.

Jim: Wasn't really paying much attention. What were your thoughts on this trip over?

Ron: Aw. Hard to say -- basically, about being blown up.

Jim: For everybody concerned, yeah.

Ron: Especially with trucks.

Jim: And so where did you land in Vietnam?

Ron: We flew right in Tansoon [?] Air Base. And then from there they trucked us up to Benwah, which is twenty miles from there. And that was 90<sup>th</sup> replacement personnel.

Jim: Okay.

Ron: And that's when – Then you get divided up and put in units.

Jim: So how long were you at the 90<sup>th</sup> replacement company?

Ron: Oh, probably about three days.

Jim: And did anything happen there when you were –

Ron: No, nothing happened there, just made us do a bunch of KP and stuff.

Jim: So then you got assigned to what unit?

Ron: The 120<sup>th</sup> Transportation.

Jim: And where were they at?

Ron: Located at Long Binh there.

Jim: So assigned to 120<sup>th</sup> Trans in Long Binh. So were your quarters in Long Binh and everything like that?

Ron: Yeah, yeah. We had regular – When I got shipped up there, we had regular buildings. They didn't sleep in tents. They had tents down in the – replacement personnel, but we had regular buildings.

Jim: And did the tents have wooden floors or concrete?

Ron: Yeah, well the tents had just dirt floors. The one I was in. But then, like I said, I was only there three days.

Jim: Okay. But as far as – The buildings had concrete floors?

Ron: Yeah, they had concrete floors, and then we had the bunkers outside, underneath. That was all sandbagged and done already.

Jim: Okay, that was for rockets and mortars.

Ron: Yeah.

Jim: And how long were you at this facility?

Ron: Well, I would say a good six months. Well, a little more than that, because the last three months I was there, I doing – I got transferred TDY [“temporary duty yonder”] to 199<sup>th</sup>. Oh, maybe it was six months, ‘cause I remember I was TDY with the 199<sup>th</sup> six months, and they awarded me their patch.

Jim: Okay, so let’s take the first six months then that you’re with the 120<sup>th</sup>. What were your duties there?

Ron: Well, my duties was on convoys, driving. And when I first started out I was on days. Well, then, after that, then I got – they put us on night shift [unintelligible]. We’d go into Saigon and load up from the docks. And then rendezvous back out where the convoy was going to start, and then at that point in time we would have to check the truck over, make sure there were no flat tires, and then we could from there go on to bed. ‘Cause we always had guards guarding it. So it depends – Sometimes I might not get there until four in the morning, or I might be there at two in the morning. Back. Just depending on how long it took me to get loaded and –

Jim: So where did you go – The trucks, they parked that in the docks area, and then you left during daylight from Saigon? Is that right?

Ron: No, it was at night. Do it at night.

Jim: So you drove out of Saigon back to Long Binh at night, is that right? And did you change often – Were you responsible for unloading the trucks?

Ron: Yup. Yeah. Just when I drove in the convoy, yeah, but most of us all fork-lifted – most of us.

Jim: And did you drive any other routes other than between the Saigon harbor and Long Binh?

Ron: Well, on the convoys we’d go from Long Binh to Thai Nin. And then one time we had a convoy down to Wan Tau [Vung Tau?]. I think that one to Wan Tau was about the longest convoy we was on. And then we went to Bearcat, and another one was Loc Minh [aka Loc Ninh], Lak Key.

Jim: Loc Minh would be up Highway 13, and that’s on the Cambodian border.

Ron: So we were close to there.

Jim: And did you have any events happen on any of these convoys that you'd like to tell us about?

Ron: Yeah, well, when we went to Tien Yen one day -- I was running the convoy itself that day. Matter of fact, we were just above Cu Chi.

Jim: Cu Chi, did you say?

Ron: Yeah, we had to drive through there Cu Chi to go on up to Tien Yen. And the road had gotten blown up and I've seen a truck blown right up. And we was --

Jim: In your convoy?

Ron: Yeah. Only that truck was towards the front, and I was way in the back.

Jim: Did it hit a mine or was it an ammo?

Ron: Yeah, it was a mine.

Jim: Okay.

Ron: And that took about three hours to get it so we could go again. And then when we came in, we got pinned down for three days -- we couldn't move.

Jim: How was that now?

Ron: They were mortaring us.

Jim: Mortar.

Ron: [Unintelligible] and they wouldn't let us move out. So at that point in time, I -- we just laid underneath our trucks, 'cause we figured -- it would have to be a direct hit, because the trucks had great big steel beds on them. So we figured it would have to be a --

Jim: Were these five-tons or deuce-and-a-halves?

Ron: Well, the ones I was driving at that time was deuce-and-a-halves. In winter [?] we had trailers behind us.

Jim: What kind of security did they have on these convoys?

Ron: Ah, they had mine-sweepers on front, but that particular day, they didn't -- they swept it, but then it was -- maybe we didn't get there right, the way we were supposed to. And what I think happened is when they went through and swept it, they came back and planted another one.



Jim: Was this road asphalt or laterate [gravel] or –

Ron: Well, that was dirt.

Jim: So they didn't laterate it, they did that red clay sort of –

Ron: Yeah, yeah.

Jim: And what sort of interval did you have between the trucks in the convoy?

Ron: We's always about 50 feet between.

Jim: Okay. And did you have any 50 caliber machine guns or anything like that in the middle part of the convoy?

Ron: Yeah, yeah. All the Jeeps had M-60s.

Jim: M-60s, okay.

Ron: On the convoy, we always had to have an assistant driver. So that's when we'd have the windshields fooled [?] down with sandbags on top of them. And his job would be – like if he had a machine gun, you know, it would be the same thing, but he just had the M-16.

Jim: M-16. And what kind of a weapon did you as a driver have?

Ron: Well, I had – When I first got there, they issued us M14s, and I got issued a .45 Colt, and the last four months I was there I got an AM-60.

Jim: Okay. And did you ever have occasion to use the M-16 when you were driving in the convoy?

Ron: Yes. Yes, as a matter of fact during Tet of '68.

Jim: Could you tell us a little bit about that, please?

Ron: Tet of '68, that was when I was TDY with the 199<sup>th</sup> Infantry. My job at that time was to pick up the troops in the rice paddies early in the morning and take them to a rendezvous and get them hot breakfast. And they would meet at this rendezvous most of the day, and at night I had to go back out, pick them up and drop them off another ten miles out somewhere in the rice paddies. And –

Jim: You were doing this off a main road, I assume?

Ron: Yeah, yeah. I mean, you had rice paddies on each side of you – it was not a two-way street. It was just a one-way street. So – Matter of fact, we were coming out of Saigon that day and taking them back up to the rendezvous point. And we got pinned down right on the Saigon bridge – this is Tet of '68. And down on the river banks there was a bunch of them down there, and they were firing on us. And –

Jim: What were they firing on you with? AK-47s?

Ron: Yeah, AK-47s.

Jim: They have rocket-propelled grenades?

Ron: Yeah, but they didn't – The infantry got down on them and kind of, you know, got them under control. I ran out of ammo, and then one of the infantry guys threw me a bunch of ammo up, so -- Other than that, we was there for about six hours that day.

Jim: Was there any air support or --?

Ron: Not at that time. The choppers were flying over, you know –

Jim: But they were going somewhere else.

Ron: Yeah, they were – you know. 'Cause at that point in time Saigon was getting hit pretty bad.

Jim: And so your job was to take troops to various positions to handle the Tet emergency. Do you have any other impressions about the Vietnamese people during Tet?

Ron: Not so much during Tet.

Jim: Well, tell us about other times.

Ron: Well, the Vietnamese people are – I remember when we were loading up at the Saigon docks, for instance. You know, and all the – They had a lot of civilians driving civilian trucks too. And they were picking up supplies to go to other military bases. Well, we got called up to go out in the middle of the night. And they needed trucks. Well, we got in this village and they had a great big church. And they let us out and they said, "Whatever's got 'U.S. Government' on it, you guys take it." And we got down in the basement of this church, and you wouldn't believe the stuff that was in there. That they stole –

Jim: Off the docks.

Ron: Yup. 'Cause what they were doing, they were loading up, and on their sheet they wouldn't write it down it was loaded on that truck. So then they'd drive through this village, dump it off and get going. We pulled battery acid out of that place – a semi load of it. We couldn't get battery acid for our own trucks, for our own batteries.

Jim: That's something.

Ron: Yeah. And it took us all night. I mean, there's Mama San lying in there on her bed. I mean, we had filled up and loaded, and I pulled her bed up and there was nothing but all American cigarettes underneath her bed that they had stolen.

Jim: And so this was all for black market purposes and stuff like that.

Ron: Yeah, yeah. And a great big potato skinner, one of them big voltage.

Jim: Sure.

Ron: And none of them places had that kind of electricity over there – they couldn't use it anyhow.

Jim: Do you know how this was discovered, that this stuff was –

Ron: Well, I imagine that somebody got wind of it, you know, or through the government. They probably had CIA agents running around or – I imagine they got drift of it, or somebody.

Jim: So you think this was Viet Cong or just black market?

Ron: Well, I think it was both. I think it was both. 'Cause basically, like, there's a lot of times that – My first experience, you know, you seen these little kids, these Vietnamese people. And they look like they're starving to death. And I threw a can of C-rations over the bridge. And they all dive in on it – about five of them, six of them, you know. The guy says – I had just got in the country, first day or so – and the guy says, "Don't be throwing food at them people." He says, "They don't eat that." I says, "Why?" He says, "Well, they save it, and then the Viet Cong come in there, and they give it to them." I said, holy cripes, here we're feeding our own enemy.

Jim: That's not good. Do you have any impressions about the temperature, smell –

Ron: Oh, the smell was stinky, rotten. And the climate was drummy [crummy?]. I mean, I didn't think that country was pretty.

Jim: You didn't think it was pretty at all?

Ron: No.

Jim: Now you got there just towards the tail end of dry season. And what was your impression of the difference between the rainy season and dry season?

Ron: Well, it was kind of neat. You could set your watch by it. Every day though. At a certain time.

Jim: Right, right.

Ron: And then, it just keeps moving. Well, it rained real hard for maybe a half hour.

Jim: Did you have difficulty driving the trucks during the rainy season?

Ron: Not really. We'd get stuck, though. One time I got stuck. Fell off into a rice paddy, and it took three other trucks to pull me out. I got out.

Jim: Well, that's good.

Ron: But other than that, driving down through Saigon there – oh, gee, the smell. Those people was like animals. I mean, the garbage is just lying out there in the street, and then you got that dead fish. 'Cause they wanna make that raw fish.

Jim: Yup.

Ron: And, oh man, the stench – it was just awful.

Jim: Was it different out in the countryside, like you said you ran some convoys up to Cu Chi, Tay Ninh –

Ron: Well, up there it wasn't so bad.

Jim: Right.

Ron: The air itself was a little better up in Tay Ninh. As far as you were closer to the mountains.

Jim: Right. Do you remember the mountains Nui Ba Den? Right?

Ron: Yeah.

Jim: Black Virgin Mountains. Did you ever get very close to that?

Ron: Just seeing distance.

Jim: Okay. Did you see the Cao Dai Temple in Tay Ninh?

Ron: Yeah.

Jim: What was your impression of that?

Ron: Oh, kind of different. You know, I – I was more interested in: another day, another dollar in Vietnam – get out.

Jim: Right. So you kept a short-timer's calendar?

Ron: Oh, yeah. Definitely everybody had one of those, hanging on the back of our – we had a regular wall locker. Every day – cross a number off.

Jim: What was your impression of the NCOs and officers that you dealt with in Vietnam?

Ron: Well, I had a real good captain and lieutenant when I first got to – He was a prince of a guy. And then, when we got the new guy, he wanted to run it like a state-side duty. You know, spit shine this, spit shine that. And then we were having money [?] – you know, they'd clean your hooches, and they'd shine your boots up for you. And that was okay. So much a month came out of our pay check to pay them.

Jim: What was your impression of the food you had at –

Ron: The food?

Jim: Yeah.

Ron: I hated it.

Jim: Okay.

Ron: The Army has lousy chow, I thought, because we had rice every day, and I can't stand rice.

Jim: Does that carry over to today?

Ron: Yes.

Jim: I can agree with you on that, too.

Ron: I don't know, I just – that food at that point in time – the best food I ever ate was when we got down to Tan Son Nhut and I ate in the air force mess hall.

Jim: What did you do off duty? Did you have any off-duty –

Ron: Well, we did. We got joined to the city of Bien Hoa.

Jim: What'd you do there?

Ron: Oh, what do you think every GI did? [Laugh.] Went to the bars. Played tic-tac-toe with the girls.

Jim: Did you drink the local beer or did you drink American beer?

Ron: American beer.

Jim: Okay.

Ron: 33 beer we'd have once in a while.

Jim: It's now got a third "3" in it now. It's 333.

Ron: Oh yeah?

Jim: Yeah. It's the same company and it's got a modern brewery just like in the United States. Did you have an in-country R & R?

Ron: Yeah, we took a – A buddy and I from New York – we said we was going to go. And it was right – we were scheduled to go the tail end of Tet.

Jim: Okay.

Ron: So after we got back from being pinned down – You see, we were supposed to – went to – So then they called us in and said, well, you guys can go.

Jim: So this would be right at – This would be February '68?

Ron: Yeah. February.

Jim: Pretty close before you left –

Ron: Yeah, it was right after the Tet was pretty well over with. So then we got down there, and they still had a lot of delays and flights and crap, because of all the things changing around. Well, then they held us up for a day, and then they announced – 'cause we were scheduled to go to a city in Australia – well, then they said anybody of us wanted to go to Manilla in the Phillipines, you know, get on board, so -- We only had seven days we was already gone down one. So my buddy said, let's go to Manilla, the heck with it. So that's what we did.

Jim: And so that's what you did, and do you have any impressions of Manilla?

Ron: Oh, it was a great place fair enough.

Jim: Okay.

Ron: It was aye-aye.

Jim: Yeah.

Ron: But that was a great place.

Jim: So you had a good time?

Ron: Yeah.

Jim: Probably not anything you want to tell about on the tape?

Ron: Well, not on tape.

Jim: I understand. What was your typical duty day in Vietnam?

Ron: Well, it was guard duty.

Jim: How often did you have guard duty?

Ron: We had to pull it once a month.

Jim: Okay. Was that perimeter?

Ron: Perimeter guarding. If I was driving truck during the day, I would have pulled a couple hours a night, you know, during that month. And then the following month I'd go into another company, so it went by companies.

Jim: And what kind of guard posts did they have? Were they bunkers?

Ron: They were bunkers, set up with M-60 machine guns.

Jim: And how many people were in the –

Ron: Two.

Jim: Did you ever have an opportunity to shoot your weapon when you were on guard duty?

Ron: Yeah. My buddy and I, we was – We wound up in the same bunker one night. And that was before we went TDY. And, anyway, we saw something out there.

We shot a flare. We shot a flare. And we seen shadows of people out there on the hill. 'Cause there was a hill, looking right at us. And so, after we seen the silhouettes of a – we opened up fire. Oh boy, did we get in trouble! The guard chief came down and escorted us out of there, put two more men in there, and, boy – he more or less threw us in the brig for the night, 'cause we had no permission to fire. And our captain came out and got us out the next morning. And he was kind of grumping around there, but when we got back to his office, he told us we got a couple of confirmed kills.

Jim: And they were still mad about it?

Ron: And he said, "I didn't. I got you guys out of it – that's all. Just leave it at that."

Jim: Okay.

Ron: So then the other detail we had was shit-burning.

Jim: Okay, tell us about that.

Ron: Oh, this was – First time I ever got on it, I had this colored boy. We pulled these little barrels out of the bottom.

Jim: These were latrines?

Ron: Yeah, he lost his cookies right here, right now. And he'd take 'em and dump 'em together. He'd put all of them on a truck and haul them down to this burn place and he'd mix five gallons of diesel and five gallons of gas and light it.

Jim: That smell good?

Ron: Oh, a nice big black smoke rolls out.

Jim: So you didn't have the Vietnamese doing that, did you?

Ron: No, no. GIs had to.

Jim: -- had to do that. Did they have recreational facilities at Long Binh that you could use?

Ron: Well, we didn't have any recreational – But see, basically our duty was twelve on, twelve off. And the only recreational thing I ever got to do, was – it was kind of fun that day – when I was TDY, like we carried the 199<sup>th</sup> troops down. They had a little R&R day, they had a little park right off the Saigon River there, and they had boats out there waterskiing. You know, and a lot of the guys were hollering at us truck drivers to go waterskiing. And I said, "I don't know how to waterski, but I did.



Jim: Were you impressed with the water quality in the Saigon River?

Ron: Well, it was kind of dirty, but I got there and I skied.

Jim: We're going to stop the tape and turn it over now.

[Long Pause on SIDE A, TAPE 1]

Jim: We're now on side two of the March 5 [2003] interview with Ron Lewis, and Ron would you tell us – You said you went on TDY: what does that entail?

Ron: Well, TDY is a temporary duty, okay? What it was was the 199<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division [199<sup>th</sup> Light Infantry Brigade]– they had another unit call Red-Catcher Express, and that's what I was involved with – the Red-Catcher Express.

Jim: Was that a truck unit?

Ron: Naw, that was the infantry guys themselves, and they were equipped – The reason they call them the Red-Catcher Express was – It was a division of the 199<sup>th</sup>, but they specialized in scouting and canine dogs, and I was assigned like 22 guys to my truck. A sergeant, corporal and a dog, and the other guys infantry. And this dog – I got to know this dog real well. Matter of fact, when it first started, the dog didn't take to me much at all, but then the dog knew, hey, this is my ride, you know. So then, when the dog got to know me, he wouldn't let his sergeant sit up in front. That dog would jump right up there and lick my hand, and set right up there and perked. One night, I was going, I was taking them out. Anyway, the dog heard something, jumped out and was the first one out, and then all of a sudden: Bang, bang! The infantry went: bang, bang. They went -- And then, 23 minutes later, the dog comes out, everybody jumps on the truck and we go: Where are we supposed to go?

Jim: What happened there? Just an ambush or somebody sniping at you?

Ron: I think so. Whatever it was, they got 'em, and then –

Jim: So what you were doing there was this Red-Catcher Express was taking out essentially a couple squads and scouts to take them to a position. Was this around Long Binh or around Saigon?

Ron: Around Long Binh and Saigon. I mean, it varied.

Jim: And where was the 199<sup>th</sup> stationed?

Ron: They had a big base camp right there on Long Bench. It was up there closer to Bien Hoa. 'Cause Long Binh was, what, a ten-mile stretch or an eleven-mile

stretch. So that particular night, I – The hardest thing in my night the next morning when I dropped them off – Like I said, when you come in the morning, that dog's the first one out.

Jim: Yup.

Ron: And, jee, everybody was climbing on the other trucks back there. What's going on here? Well, the corporal walked out, three other guys, told me let's go. Gotta go back to base camp. So then I had to call back up to headquarters and everything and get okayed if I could run. So they give me a Jeep escort. And what they do, they regroup their platoon and then start over again. But we lost the dog, we lost twenty some men.

Jim: Oh, so they got in a fire fight or something?

Ron: Yeah, that night.

Jim: -- and the dog got killed.

Ron: Yeah, the dog got killed.

Jim: So when you went out, how many trucks went out on these missions? You carried twenty-two on your truck.

Ron: Yeah, there was twenty-two, twenty-eight. You know, just depending what they –

Jim: So how many trucks went out on these missions?

Ron: There was five trucks.

Jim: So it's about a company then.

Ron: Yeah, five trucks.

Jim: So you never really heard anything more about what happened in this thing?

Ron: The thing of it is I didn't know any of the guys' names. I knew the sergeant, you know, but as far as names, no. I mean, they never talked to you, you never talked to them.

Jim: Did you make any friendships in Vietnam that carried over after the war?

Ron: Yes I did. This buddy I was talking to you about I went on R&R with – he was from Otavia [Batavia?], New York, up around the Buffalo area. As a matter of fact, when he got home, he called me up and said for me to stay up at his way. He wanted me to stay out at his way. And I said, "Frank," I says, "I don't think your

marriage is going to last, and I'm honest, because she played around on you when you were here over in Vietnam, and she wrote you 'Dear John' letters, you know, I just don't think it's a good idea." Well, after that, I went to Germany. And he kept correspondence with him – wrote me a letter to Germany, and about six months after that, he wrote me a letter he was getting divorced.

Jim: Okay.

Ron: So after I got out of the service completely, I stayed with him up there two weeks.

Jim: Great.

Ron: We had a ball.

Jim: Let's get you out of Vietnam, then we'll find out a little about that. So essentially have you described what your tour in Vietnam was like? Different convoys, hauling troops --

Ron: Yeah, doing what my job was.

Jim: Did we miss anything? We got you in the one unit you were in – you were in TDY, and another unit –

Ron: I had, you know, one other thing that we – We had a gravy run. We got to go to the beer depot to pick up beer to go on this convoy. Well, this other company C – because I was in company A at the time, well, these guys decide to steal a palette of beer. And they stored it all on that wall out there. 'Cause before, if there was busted pallets or banged up cans, you know, busted cases open, well then they would let us take it. You know, a case here and a case there – big deal. You know, it was cool. Well these guys stole a whole pallet, well then – boom! Our whole battalion got done away with beer.

Jim: No more beer.

Ron: Well, then to punish us, they – What we had to do? We had to drive coffins to the airport hangar [?]. And I didn't like that at all.

Jim: Bad duty.

Ron: I did that one week and then I got – that's when they sent me TDY.

Jim: Okay. Do you remember what kind of beer they had?

Ron: A lot of Balentine, Falstaff, Budweiser.

Jim: You still like Budweiser today, don't you?

Ron: Yeah.

Jim: Any Australian beer, anything like that?

Ron: Yeah, there was some. [Telephone in background.]

Jim: Okay. So we've covered Vietnam now, it seems.

Ron: Yeah, pretty much.

Jim: So where did you leave Vietnam from?

Ron: Tan Son Nhut Air Base.

Jim: Okay. You flew back to where from?

Ron: I left Tan Son Nhut and flew into California. During that time, when we got up in the air, everybody stood up, clapped, cheered. And then we had an engine problem. And we had to pull in to Tokyo, Japan. Then they couldn't fix it, so they shipped us into a nice big hotel there down in Tokyo. So we got to stay in Tokyo, Japan for one night. And we went out to the bars there to see what Tokyo was all about. It was kind of neat. At least the engine didn't break down –

Jim: In the middle of the ocean.

Ron: Yeah. So then [?] got there and I flew into Oakland, California and processed. And they gave me dress greens to come home in. But see: when I left Vietnam, the only thing I had was my khakis – all my fatigues, they took my fatigues. I never had any fatigues come back with me. And I never brought anything back – all I had was my khakis.

Jim: Didn't have any civilian clothes or anything like that?

Ron: Oh, I had a bag of civilian clothes.

Jim: And you came back in February of –

Ron: March of '68.

Jim: March of '68. So you needed the greens, 'cause it was cold. So did you have a thirty-day leave back in Middleton then?

Ron: Yeah, a thirty-day leave. And I spent leave thirty days, and then I had orders to go to Germany.

Jim: Before we leave your leave, did you have any impression of what was going on in Madison in March and April of 1968?

Ron: No. I had no idea until I got home.

Jim: What was your thought about that?

Ron: I hated it. The only bad thing I hated was wearing that uniform.

Jim: How were you treated?

Ron: Like shit. After the war [?], I got arrested in Chicago. When I got into Chicago, I didn't get arrested really, but I got handcuffed. That was because I was flying military standby, and I had my family here in Madison waiting for me. And I got bumped off the airplane with some college kids. And that really ticked me off, because here I had been gone, fighting for our country, and then they do that. And I started raising hell and I was angry, and the MPs said, "Come over," and handcuffed me.

Jim: So these were MPs, not Chicago police?

Ron: And they did escort me on the next plane, and escorted me right on.

Jim: You were calm then?

Ron: Yeah.

Jim: But you weren't treated well in Madison, so –

Ron: No. Definitely.

Jim: After that, did people say bad things to you, just ignore you?

Ron: Well, they'd throw things at you. I mean, if you're walking with your uniform around -- Soon as I got home, that uniform came off.

Jim: Okay.

Ron: I mean, I even going [?] my local bars, I wouldn't wear that uniform.

Jim: Then when you left Madison after the leave, did you have the same experience?

Ron: Basically. Even in the airports. The airports were terrible. I mean –

Jim: Did you then go to Germany? How did you get to Germany?

Ron: Oh, we flew. Well, first of all, I went to Fort Dix, New Jersey, and that's where they processed you. And then after that, they flew me right into Frankfurt, Germany.

Jim: Flew into Frankfurt, Germany. And what was your assignment over there?

Ron: Well, that's another thing. The military likes to mess your mind up. Because they didn't care about my MOS and how many miles I drove in Vietnam without an accident. They didn't care about that crap. They wanted bodies.

Jim: Sure.

Ron: And they threw me in an idiot howitzer artillery.

Jim: Had you had any training in any -- ?

Ron: None whatsoever in artillery.

Jim: So what was your job in this –

Ron: Well, at first I didn't like it and I was pulling KP. It was terrible. They were treating me like I had been in the military only a few months, you know, and they didn't even recognize you as a Vietnam vet – you know, they didn't care. So anyway, I got assigned to driving a Jeep. Ho, then one night I rolled the Jeep, so they put me back on the guns. Well, then after that, there were about twenty-five of us guys who came from Vietnam, and we were all truck drivers. And we always kept throwing in this artillery. Well, there was a big truck drive-in right across Nuremberg, where I was stationed. And we went right in and talked to the CO, and he said, "I'd love to trade you guys, 'cause I got some men here who are artillery men: they don't know how to drive a truck." So we called up my CO – "No way I'm going to trade, I'm gonna train them guys." He was just one bully, and that was it. So that went on for a couple of months, and then all these guys, they 10-49'ed back to Vietnam. So I did too.

Jim: You 10-49'ed back to Vietnam?

Ron: You betcha.

Jim: So when was this now?

Ron: This was in '68.

Jim: So was it in the fall of '68?

- Ron: The fall of '68, yup. And then, as a matter of fact, I was in the motor pool one day, and then they called me up. I walked in. And here was a two-star general. Couldn't believe it.
- Jim: Was this in Vietnam or Germany?
- Ron: This was in Germany. When they asked specifically why I would want to transfer and go back to Vietnam – And I told them, I said, “Well, here I'm a Spec-4, you know, and I get treated around here like, for crying out loud, like I'm a newbie,” and I says, “I want to go back to Vietnam – this ain't even my profession anyway.”
- Jim: What did he say?
- Ron: And then they had a little recess. Then my captain and my top sergeant called, said, “If you send that papers, you'll be going up for E-5 board. We guarantee you'll make it.”
- Jim: So what'd you do?
- Ron: I'd already sent my MOS and my papers, so -- the reason why is: I knew darn well there is no way I could get back to Vietnam in my old unit. Or any truck driving unit, 'cause my MOS was artillery at that point. So that's why – and then I made sergeant E-5. Well then, after that I put in for a thirty-day leave to come back to the states. 'Cause I had thirty days coming to me. Well, they only gave me fifteen days. This corporal, who was underneath me, he had only been in the Army a year, and they let him go on a thirty-day leave: they couldn't let the two of us go. So then I got – I called my dad, told him that they wouldn't let me come, so -- Dad says, “Come anyway –I'll send you the money.” Okay. So then I got home – I got a twelve-day extension, because of his health condition, through the Red Cross. Well, then I was supposed to fly out Christmas Eve. No way I'm flying home. I'll go after January 1<sup>st</sup>. So I got in. Caught a 15 bus right away [?]. Fights.
- Jim: So what did you get busted to?
- Ron: I got busted to corporal E-4.
- Jim: Okay.
- Ron: And – which was the best rank the military ever had.
- Jim: Why was that?
- Ron: Well, it just because you're still an NCO and the only thing you had to do was CQ [common quarters inspection] duty.

Jim: Okay.

Ron: You didn't have KP.

Jim: That's not hard to understand.

Ron: But I had fourteen days restriction to the post, and couple hundred dollar fine plus the bust, but that was okay.

Jim: So what else happened when you were in Germany?

Ron: Well, that was coming down toward the end, I was getting short. Buddy and I took some Fraeuleins to stroll the trucks out at the motor pool. Took some foul lines out, and he rolled the damn truck when I was in back with the Fraeuleins. And so we went back to the motor pool and the lights came back on, 'cause we were being tow-trucked, we just laid it on its side – didn't hurt it. Well, the next morning we were looking at bust and fine and everything – got busted to PFC. So I came home as PFC basically, but funniest thing was I had my order to process on home. Well, then that day, I get orders for PFC – my final orders, and I'm PFC. So I'm had – I've got my dress greens hanging there ready to go, I'm trying to catch a train at six o'clock at night. My cop comes in and says, "Lewis, you're going to get busted in dicks – 'cause Europeans see it, you're wearing corporal straps." So what are they going to do? Send me to Vietnam? Fine. I processed all the way out with corporal stripes on my arms.

Jim: [Laughs.]

Ron: The only thing that caught me was pay line. And they said, "PFC Lewis, here you got thirteen dollars."

Jim: Alright, alright. So how would you compare the NCOs and officers in Vietnam and Germany?

Ron: Lifers, lifers. I mean, terrible.

Jim: So the ones in Germany were much more difficult to deal with?

Ron: Oh, yeah. Definitely.

Jim: Were there any drinking or drug problems in Germany that you noticed?

Ron: Yeah, yeah.

Jim: How was the morale?



Ron: Well, morale wasn't too bad, you know. I mean, basically the morale at the time -- these guys are Germany. Well, at least they weren't sent to Vietnam, so -- And the drugs were a lot with the colored. Matter of fact, one guy killed himself, flying high on hashish. Looked like a Hershey bar, chopped off. Well, he was climbing, literally, four stories up. He flew alright -- splat!

Jim: Not good. **[Beginning of SIDE B, TAPE 1]**

Ron: My room was straight next door to his, so I just went back in my room.

Jim: So how did the food compare in Germany to the food in Vietnam?

Ron: Ah, it was better. 'Cause I think the refrigeration trucks and all that we had were -- you know, the food was better.

Jim: Did you have much contact with the German people other than these Fraeuleins that you took driving?

Ron: Well, yeah, we had a -- it was kind of neat -- we go downtown to the bars and had this one German guy, on the fifteenth of the month you could charge beer, and he'd just mark it down on a round card that the beer set on. And payday -- when everybody got off on payday -- you better go back to the bar and pay him. Otherwise you don't get no more credit. And that was kind of neat.

Jim: So when you came back, did you come back to Middleton, Wisconsin after you completed your --

Ron: Yeah, yeah.

Jim: You said you just -- Did you stop to see this friend from Vietnam on the way back?

Ron: Yeah, I stopped and seen my buddy Frank. And we spent two weeks together, and then I come home, and we said we'd keep a correspondence to each other. And we did, and I got married. And he flew out here and stood at my wedding. And he found a nice gal and he got married. And my wife and I then drove out there and was in his wedding.

Jim: Well, neat.

Ron: And then we always kind of said we was going to meet every year in the middle between New York and here, and all just party for the weekend. Well, he was a meat-cutter, a butcher by trade. And he came down with cancer, and at the age of 28 he died.

Jim: Oh, my God! Could that have had anything to do with agent orange?

Ron: Well, now they – I don't think so, because when he was a kid he played baseball. He got hit real hard by a baseball bat in his chest. And what happened, it bruised badly inside, and then the bruise, as the years went by, developed cancer, and at the end shut his air off.

Jim: I know you're involved in veterans organizations. When did you start that involvement?

Ron: Well, first of all, 1969 or '70 a guy just came into the station and he begged me to 1318 Lakeside [Street, South Madison], VFW. Well, VFWs didn't really consider Vietnam veterans part of them or anything, so – They had a big club, and I thought they probably have a lot of people at this meeting. And as a Vietnam veteran I, you know, I was more or less told to sit down and shut up. And I never went back to another meeting, and I said to hell with VFW then. And I never joined another VFW until 1989. There were a couple of guys from New Glarus that started this Wisconsin Vietnam Vets, Chapter 3.

Jim: But you joined the VFW at the same time? Or –

Ron: Well, just shortly thereafter. And the VFW club in New Glarus was made up with all Vietnam vets – sixty people, sixty-eight people. There was fifty of them who were Vietnam vets.

Jim: Okay.

Ron: It's a small club. It's not -- There's not as much community involvement.

Jim: And you joined the Vietnam Veterans –

Ron: That was 1986.

Jim: In 1986. And it's Chapter 3, right? And how many people are in that chapter?

Ron: Right now we have on our roster between 90-100.

Jim: How active is that organization?

Ron: Our organization is real active. We have seven chapters in the state. And we're probably the most involved chapter out of all of them.

Jim: When you say involved, what kind of –

Ron: You know, like one thing -- For fund-raisers we do a calendar raffle, and we make pretty good sizeable money. Well then, we do a lot of donations. And then we have Winterfest every year.

Jim: Tell us a little bit about Winterfest.

Ron: Well, Winterfest was started for an R&R in the middle of the winter, and the idea was we would march in a parade in the middle of the night in winter. And New Glarus has an old saying, like January 15 is the burning of the winter, where they burn all the Christmas trees. And it's kind of like an R&R thing to get away, and it was trying to get as many veterans involved as we could.

Jim: And how many were involved in the most recent one?

Ron: Well, in the most recent one we had over two hundred some people, probably three hundred people there in the small town of New Glarus. And it's not like a big reunion like Cocamo [?] or –

Jim: What's the one in Cocamo?

Ron: Cocamo has been going on about twenty years.

Jim: How long has Winterfest been going on?

Ron: Seventeen. Cocamo draws a lot of people, I mean, they draw from all over. For crying out loud, there's 25-35,000 of them.

Jim: And that's all Vietnam veterans?

Ron: Mostly. And family. 90%.

Jim: Winterfest is mostly Wisconsin, Northern Illinois Vietnam veterans?

Ron: Well, let's put it – The year before last year we had out of fifty states – we had twenty-one states represented. So – The word's out.

Jim: That's great. So is this by word of mouth mainly that people are –

Ron: Yeah, and I'm – put fliers, and we send out and stuff to other organizations throughout the states.

Jim: This year – not this year: the year 2002 on Veterans Day, I saw you at the Vietnam wall. Could you tell me about that please?

Ron: Yeah, we – we had a whole group of different organizations, and we planned a dance out in D.C. and the Americal reunion was out there, because one of the guys in the chapter was in charge of the Americal reunion. And what we did is we made raffle tickets up, and each organization sent in five hundred dollars to get involved with it, and each organization sold so many tickets, and you'd get

your money back out of it. And plus, that included us to put on the dance, pay for the music whole night. Then out of the whole deal each chapter made about a thousand dollars out of it. Or each organization that did it. And then when we went out to the wall, each chapter – we had got a wreath and we got to lay a wreath down at the wall. And that's a big ceremony. And it was the twentieth anniversary.

Jim: And you were representing the Wisconsin veterans in that?

Ron: Right. And, like I said, we had a total of seven chapters in the state, but not all the chapters were out there with us.

Jim: Okay. Did you see anybody out there that you met when you were in the military?

Ron: Matter of fact, I did. I ran into a guy that had a 199<sup>th</sup> patch on. And I also got talking to him, and he was there – he got in-country and was in the Red-Catcher Express as a truck driver. And so after I rotated out, he came in – he was like my replacement! And I didn't know the guy – I had seen him: I didn't see him in Vietnam, but we were reminiscing and talking, and he was telling me he was a truck driver. And that's when I – And I said, well that's what I did. And as a matter of fact it was kind of remarkable, because my truck was number 47. And he said that's what his truck number was.

Jim: Oh, that's amazing.

Ron: So, he was definitely my replacement.

[PAUSE]

Jim: So do you have any final impressions of Vietnam? We're sitting here in 2003.

Ron: Not really, no.

Jim: Well, thank you very much, and --

**[End of Interview]**