

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
DUANE W. MARXEN
Rifleman and Clerk, Army, Cold War and Stateside Vietnam War.

2005

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Marxen, Duane W., (1942-). Oral History Interview, 2005.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 24 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 24 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Marxen, a Porcupine Plain, Saskatchewan native, discusses his service in the U.S. Army in Germany and stateside during the Vietnam War. Marxen mentions his childhood, working for several years at Beloit Tool Corporation, and being drafted soon after getting divorced. He speaks of basic training at Fort Campbell (Kentucky), advanced infantry training at Fort Polk (Louisiana), and the restrictions on his service due to being a Canadian citizen. Marxen tells of being held at base while most of those he trained with were sent to Vietnam and describes his interactions with returning Vietnam veterans. Assigned to Germany for Exercise Reforger One, he discusses his combat gear and going on maneuvers near the Czechoslovakian border. Marxen states he spent nineteen months at Fort Riley (Kansas), first as a recoilless rifleman in a jeep and later as a clerk/typist for headquarters. He touches on driving officers and occasionally being given a hard time about having easy duty. Marxen details being a guard at ex-president Dwight D. Eisenhower's funeral: being selected and bussed to Abilene (Kansas), seeing many soldiers faint from standing at attention so long in the heat, and seeing Richard Nixon and Julie Nixon Eisenhower pass by. Marxen talks about returning to Wisconsin, using the GI Bill to attend college, and being unable to join the Peace Corps as a Canadian citizen. He states he recently became a United States citizen so that he can vote.

Biographical Sketch:

Marxen (b.1942) served in the Army from 1968 to 1970. He grew up on a farm near Porcupine Plain (Saskatchewan, Canada) and moved to Janesville (Wisconsin) when he was seventeen. He served with the Headquarters and Headquarters Company (HHC), 1st Battalion, 19th Infantry, 24th Division and the HHC, 2nd Battalion, 16th Infantry, 1st Division. After an honorable discharge, Marxen eventually became a city bus driver for the city of Madison and settled in Middleton (Wisconsin).

Interviewed by Jim Kurtz, 2005

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Interview Transcript:

Jim: April 7th, 2005. My name is Jim Kurtz and I'm interviewing Duane W. Marxen. Duane, where do you live now?

Marxen: I live in Middleton, Wisconsin.

Jim: Okay. And what are you doing right now?

Marxen: I'm retired.

Jim: And what did you retire from?

Marxen: Most recently from city bus driver for the City of Madison.

Jim: Okay. Where and when were you born, Duane?

Marxen: I was born August 6th, 1942 in Tisdale, Saskatchewan, Canada.

Jim: Is it Tis, T-I-S-D-A—

Marxen: L-E.

Jim: Okay. And Saskatchewan, what's the abbreviation?

Marxen: SK.

Jim: SK. Okay. And where did you grow up, Duane?

Marxen: I grew up about ten miles from a town called Porcupine Plain in Saskatchewan.

Jim: Okay.

Marxen: On a farm. It was my grandfather's homestead, then taken over by my dad, so I grew up as a farm kid, workin' on a farm.

Jim: Park—the town is Pork—

Marxen: Porcupine Plain, two words, P-L-A-I-N.

Jim: Okay. And so how long did you live on this farm?

Marxen: We left for the States, the last time in 1959, so I was just—I think just about seventeen when we left.

Jim: And where did you move to the States?

Marxen: We moved to the Janesville, Wisconsin area.

Jim: Okay.

Marxen: Clinton, Janesville, Beloit area.

Jim: Uh-hum. And did your dad—parents move here for economic opportunities or—

Marxen: Well, sort of. My mother was one of seven and was the eldest child and married my dad at the same time the rest of the family moved to the Janesville area, and so my dad and my mother ended up staying there. The rest of her family came down to the States in about 1941.

Jim: Oh, okay.

Marxen: So we always had that connection then over the years with the rest of her family down here.

Jim: Did you graduate from high school in Janesville—

Marxen: In Clinton.

Jim: —or Clinton?

Marxen: Uh-hum.

Jim: And what year was that?

Marxen: 1961.

Jim: And what did you do after high school?

Marxen: After high school I went to work for the Beloit Tool Corporation.

Jim: Okay.

Marxen: I was a milling machine and lathe operator.

Jim: And how long did you work there?

Marxen: I worked there until I was drafted into the service in 1968, so it would have been from about 1961 until 1968.

Jim: And do you remember what month you were drafted or thereabouts?

- Marxen: July of '68. July 24th, I believe. I was actually—I actually had moved into engineering and sales with them and then went on the road as a salesman for them in New York state and eastern Canada.
- Jim: Okay. Did—is there any circumstance why you got drafted so, you know, late after coming out of high school?
- Marxen: Yeah. I was married in 1964 and that gave me a deferment, and then we had a son, which kept the deferment going, and then in 1968, about March of 1968, my wife and I divorced and in July I was drafted.
- Jim: So in other words, they didn't let any grass grow under your feet?
- Marxen: No, they didn't. No, they didn't.
- Jim: And what draft board were you drafted by?
- Marxen: Janesville; I think it's either Janesville or Beloit.
- Jim: Okay. So Rock County?
- Marxen: Rock County, yeah. I think it is in Janesville.
- Jim: So where did you go for basic training?
- Marxen: Fort Campbell, Kentucky.
- Jim: And do you have any impressions on what happened down there in Fort Campbell?
- Marxen: Well, I remember it was awfully warm at the time, and of course, the war was on and the training was pretty intense. Some of the things that we did down there, I remember doing the low crawl under live fire and with live fire overhead and getting a bad case of impetigo on my arms.
- Jim: Yeah.
- Marxen: From crawling on the ground.
- Jim: And did anything else happen there that sticks in your mind?
- Marxen: No, not really. It was pretty routine. It was—like I say, it was a lot of work. They whip you into shape in a hurry with a lot of exercise and push ups.
- Jim: Okay. Then where did you go after basic?
- Marxen: After basic training, I went for advanced infantry training in Fort Polk, Louisiana.

Jim: Tiger Land?

Marxen: Tiger Land.

Jim: And what was that like?

Marxen: That was some more pretty rugged training.

Jim: So you were at Fort Polk then roughly like the fall of '68?

Marxen: Yes.

Jim: And how long was that training?

Marxen: Eight weeks I believe. Eight or nine weeks. Yeah. Eight weeks, I think, regular training, basic, and then eight weeks, I think, of advanced training.

Jim: What did they tell you about Vietnam there?

Marxen: Ah—well, we just knew that there were a lot of things happening over there and that most people who had been—who had gone through training at Fort Polk, Louisiana were either scheduled for going to Vietnam, most of them left for Vietnam, or they went to other paratrooper training or some other specialized training for combat. Most men—most men were heading out for something that would give them advanced, more training for Vietnam or they were going to Vietnam. Some were coming back at that time, too, to Fort Polk from Vietnam when I was there.

Jim: Okay. So they were cadre, some of the—

Marxen: No. I guess that would have been, no that was probably at Fort Riley they were coming back; they wouldn't have brought them back there.

Jim: So did you have Vietnam veterans training you at Fort Polk?

Marxen: Yes. Um-hmm.

Jim: And did they convey anything of interest to you about Vietnam?

Marxen: Well, nothing that made me really want to go over there. I didn't really care whether I went to Vietnam or not, and being a Canadian citizen I may have taken the Canadian route, I hate to say that but—

Jim: So what was your impression of the war? I take it that you had an opinion that it wasn't—it was not going well at the time and—

- Marxen: Yeah. There was—I had my doubts that it was a war that we should be involved with.
- Jim: And I mean, legally the U.S. could draft you, but what were your thoughts about being drafted, you know, as a Canadian citizen?
- Marxen: Well, I knew I was eligible for draft, and it's interesting, as a side track here, I was the driver for the colonel, the driver for the company commander, at both basic and advanced infantry training, and I was told at Fort—or was it at Fort Riley, now I can't recall, but I was told by the driver or by the company commander that—he asked me where I was from and I said, "Canada, sir" and he said, "Well then you won't have to go to Vietnam," he told me. They weren't sending aliens to combat zones is what I was told. But then a short time later they had the roll call where they handed out the olive drab underwear for combat zones and my name was called out and I had a package of about fourteen sets of the underwear like everybody else in the group. And so I wanted to get that straightened out, so I went up to division headquarters, Fort Riley I guess it was, and they told me that—no, it was Fort Polk. Fort Polk, because I was being held over at Fort Polk, Louisiana later on before I knew where I was gonna go. But I went up to the division headquarters and got a hold of a second lieutenant and he was not very nice to me and he said, "Who do you think you are? Your being a Canadian doesn't keep you from doing anything," he said. "You have just as much chance of you going to Vietnam as anybody else." So then I was confused, I didn't know if I had heard one thing from the commander—company commander—and then one thing from this lieutenant at division headquarters. So after I—at Fort Polk when I finished advanced infantry training, most everyone had orders to go somewhere. I was a holdover at Fort Polk, and I was held over for about two or three weeks and at that time got orders to go home for a break, Christmas—about Christmas time, to go home, take a break, and at that—after the break I would report to Fort Riley, Kansas and would be on a trip to Germany on what was called Reforger One.
- Jim: Okay. So that was when they were deploying the unit that was in Fort Riley?
- Marxen: Yeah. The one brigade there going over to play war games or—yeah, to play war games in Germany with another brigade of the 24th Division. It was right after the Russians invaded Prague, Czechoslovakia and that was the reason it was a NATO thing, where they were sending us over there to maneuver close to the Czech border.
- Jim: So most of the people that you were in AIT with went to Vietnam or went on to other places and you got held over?
- Marxen: Uh-hum.
- Jim: What was your reaction when they got orders to Fort Riley?

- Marxen: I was—I wiped my forehead and was glad I was headed somewhere other than—somewhere other than Vietnam.
- Jim: When you got to Fort Riley, were you in a unit with draftees like yourself or Vietnam returnees?
- Marxen: There was a lot of Vietnam returnees there. Many of them injured, many injured. Shrapnel wounds mainly; a lot of the fellows that were there had a lot of shrapnel wounds.
- Jim: Did you have any interaction with them, did they talk to you about—
- Marxen: Oh yeah. Oh yeah.
- Jim: What were your impressions of that?
- Marxen: Well, it was different. It all depended on the mindset of the person who came back. Some of them were pretty gung-ho kind of guys and even though they were injured, still thought that it was worth the effort, and there were others that came back that had just the opposite feelings, that it was a waste of time.
- Jim: Okay. Did they treat you any different by virtue of the fact that you hadn't been in Vietnam?
- Marxen: No, I don't think so. I don't think so. No.
- Jim: Okay.
- Marxen: I never felt that anyway.
- Jim: Okay. When you went to Germany, how long were you there?
- Marxen: It was about, if I recall, about six weeks.
- Jim: And how did you get to Germany?
- Marxen: Flew. We flew over in a C-131 transport plane, all the complete gear.
- Jim: So you were dressed up just like a soldier, not like a tourist?
- Marxen: Yes. We were dressed in combat gear with the rifles and everything.
- Jim: Okay. Did you—when you got to Germany do you land in a tactical sense, you know, at a military airfield or fly right away or—

- Marxen: Yeah. We went out, I recall we landed, I can't remember where we even landed there in Germany, but we went by train part of the way and then bus, and we were in the camp at—it was in—oh, was it—I can't think of the name of the town now; Gräftenberg, Gräftenberg, Germany. And we were there long enough to take the equipment, get all the equipment prepared to move into the woods, and then it was—we stayed right outside, we were outside most of the time. On maneuvers.
- Jim: Okay. And you were near the Czech border?
- Marxen: Fairly close. I think Gräftenberg was fairly close. That was the whole reason for us goin' over there was because Russians had just come in in '68 there.
- Jim: Okay. So you were playing like that, you know, doing maneuvers like the Germans—excuse me, like the Russians were attacking?
- Marxen: Absolutely. Yeah, um-hmm. And of course, us lower peons, we never knew much of what was going on—
- Jim: Right.
- Marxen: Except we just were told pack up and go and it was in February and snowing and raining and we didn't get much sleep and we—our sleeping bags and shelter halves were always wet and we only had short times in one place and then moved on to another and then it was over and we took all the equipment and had to wash it all back up. Everything had to be washed and put back in storage and then we'd go back again.
- Jim: Okay. So the equipment that you used was stored? I mean, like the Jeeps and stuff like that were stored there?
- Marxen: Well, I would imagine a lot of it was. Yes. A lot of it was. Whether they actually moved some stuff over—I think they probably moved some stuff over from Fort Riley too.
- Jim: Oh, okay.
- Marxen: I think they probably did from our brigade, but I remember a lot of it went back into buildings that were there.
- Jim: Was your brigade pretty close to full strength? Because this was kind of the height of the Vietnam War.
- Marxen: As far as I know it was full strength, yeah. As far as I know it was.
- Jim: So then when you came back to Fort Riley, what was your job there?

- Marxen: For a while I came back as a recoilless rifleman on a Recoilless 106 recoilless rifle on a Jeep, 11-B40 I think, and then my MOS was changed to 11-H40 when I interviewed for and got a job as a clerk/typist for headquarters company. And that's where I stayed for the rest of the tour. Nineteen months I was in Fort Riley, Kansas as a clerk/typist.
- Jim: Okay. At headquarters company as a clerk/typist you kind of were—knew what was going on, you know, basically because you were typing the documents?
- Marxen: Yeah, that's right.
- Jim: And did you have any—see any things about Vietnam veterans there about, you know, discipline problems, drug problems, stuff like that?
- Marxen: I can't recall. That was handled more by the—was it the courts and boards or something—
- Jim: Yeah.
- Marxen: —end of it, so—but we didn't get—we didn't get to handle a lot of that.
- Jim: And was there any non-judicial punishment, you know, that the company commander did? Did you get involved in that or that was courts and boards also?
- Marxen: Yeah, courts and boards usually handled that. We just handled pretty much the processing of commendations and colonel's orderly and things like that and formations. It was a pretty relaxed routine there at Fort Riley.
- Jim: Did anybody envy the fact that you had a pretty good job there, or anybody say anything to you about that?
- Marxen: Yeah. Yeah, they did. Again I was, I think, the driver there for the—for Major Faircloth, I think for the commander there, Jeep driver I think. I think that's where it was. I kind of forget. I was commander—I was a Jeep driver for two different times. I can't remember whether it was in basic and I think it was advanced infantry in Fort Riley I believe.
- Jim: Okay.
- Marxen: Yeah.
- Jim: And you were—
- Marxen: So yes, when you're driving the commander around, everybody else is marching, sometimes you take a little flack for it.

Jim: Yeah. Were you driving for the battalion commander or—

Marxen: The battalion commander, yeah.

Jim: So that's what you did. Now, you mentioned to me you had one real memorable experience during this period of time. That was the funeral?

Marxen: Yeah.

Jim: Describe what happened there.

Marxen: Well, the ex-president Dwight D. Eisenhower had passed away while I was serving in the Army and they were looking for people with good records and with good service and at the right height for security guards.

Jim: And how tall are you?

Marxen: I'm six foot, just about between six foot and six foot one.

Jim: So they were looking for people—

Marxen: Of that size, yeah. Yeah. And we had to get interviewed for those jobs and I was chosen and we were then bussed to Abilene, Kansas for the funeral of General Eisenhower, President Eisenhower.

Jim: What do you remember about that?

Marxen: Oh, I remember it was an extremely, extremely hot day, and we had to stand at attention for so long that many people collapsed, and in fact, I could not stay the entire time myself and the sergeant of the guard would come by once in a while and just kind of whisper to you and ask you if you were okay and at one point I was about ready to fall over, so they finally pulled me out towards the end. I just couldn't stand at attention any longer, and I heard rifles dropping all around me where people were fallin' over.

Jim: What kind of rifles did you have?

Marxen: M-14s.

Jim: M-14s?

Marxen: Um-hum.

Jim: And did you—

Marxen: I still have the white gloves downstairs there somewhere.

- Jim: And did you—did they fire a salute or anything?
- Marxen: Oh yeah. We didn't as security guards but there were guns fired. And I remember seeing Nixon and Julie Nixon Eisenhower going by in their limos and a long line of black limos, of course, for this event.
- Jim: And were there quite a few generals there too?
- Marxen: You know, there probably were. I'm sure there were, but I can't—I couldn't name any that were there.
- Jim: So was your role was to stand along one of the roads that the VIPs were coming up and down on?
- Marxen: Yeah.
- Jim: What happened when you had to fall out; did they put somebody else in there?
- Marxen: They had their guards that would come in and take your place. It was real common, because it was like in the nineties and standing that long without a break or relaxing.
- Jim: Sure. Sure. So after that did you have any other memorable experiences in your military experience?
- Marxen: No. I can't—nothing that stands out right at this moment.
- Jim: Okay. Then you separated from the service, let's see, July of—
- Marxen: 1970 from active duty. I received orders for, what was it, guard for the—
- Jim: Ready reserve?
- Marxen: Reserves and then they rescinded the orders.
- Jim: Because the service was getting quite a bit smaller?
- Marxen: Yeah.
- Jim: And you said you came back to Wisconsin at that time, is that right?
- Marxen: I came back to Wisconsin and I had worked for that same Beloit Tool Company and they gave me a job and I went out to Pennsylvania as a salesman for them—Ohio and Pennsylvania, and decided in a short time of staying in Akron, Ohio for a few

days that I just wanted to come back and go to college and you get to use the GI bill, so that's what I did.

Jim: So. What was your—did anybody react to the fact that you were a veteran when you came back?

Marxen: Well, not too much. Not really. No.

Jim: Okay. And have you joined any veterans organizations?

Marxen: No, I haven't.

Jim: What do you think about your military experience now that you're, you know, a sixty-two year old man?

Marxen: [laughs] Well, you know, I think I look back at—looked back it as kind of an interesting and I can't say enjoyable experience, but it's not—it's not an experience that I resent having. I sort of feel that it was good experience for me at the time. I'd just gone through a divorce and I wasn't sure what I wanted to do with my life and it was kind of a good place to go and let things shake down for a while.

Jim: Okay. Is there anything else that we should discuss here that, you know, about your military career or any thoughts about—do you think there should be a draft now?

Marxen: Well, no, I don't. I'm a Canadian. We've never had the draft in Canada, other than maybe at war time. And no, I guess I'm not in favor of a draft. I don't think I do. I guess, like I told you when I saw you first, I had just last year became a citizen and so that I can vote. I've never been able to vote in all these years, and actually I tried to get into the Peace Corps too, which was kind of strange, and as an alien I couldn't get into the Peace Corps, but I could be drafted into the war corps, which was kind of a strange thing to me, anyway, and I wrote to Kastenmeier when he was a Congressman at that time, and Kastenmeier said it was in the statutes that way and it wasn't something that could be easily changed, you know, but I could not join the Peace Corps as a Canadian citizen.

Jim: You were not offered citizenship after being drafted or anything?

Marxen: No, I wasn't. You still had to go through the same process even though you've had experience as a veteran, but no, nobody ever talked to me about it that I can recall.

Jim: But that was kind of the rule around there, you never talked about anything?

Marxen: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Jim: Well, I think we'll wind up the interview with that. That's very good.

Marxen: Okay.

[End of Interview]