

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
MARK C. PATRONSKY
Artillery, Army, Vietnam War, and Cold War era.

2003

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Patronsky, Mark C. (b. 1948). Oral History Interview, 2003.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 60 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 60 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Abstract:

Mark Patronsky, a Columbus, Ohio native, discusses his experiences as a Cold War and Vietnam War-era veteran stationed in Germany. His family moved to Waukesha, Wisconsin, then to Indianapolis, Indiana. After graduating high school, he attended Indiana University and the University of Chicago, each for two years. He states that all male students were required to attend ROTC and he chose the Air Force. After graduation, he was drafted after an unsuccessful attempt to get deferments first as a conscientious objector and then for psychiatric reasons. He remembers that he was inducted into the Army in January 1971 and sent to Fort Knox, Kentucky for basic training where he was appointed squad leader. Patronsky illustrates how loose his basic training was by relating that he got his expert marksmanship badge by buttering up a score taker. He states that after basic training all the college graduates were sent to artillery school at Fort Hood (Texas) where they were trained in the Fire Direction Center instead of receiving training in Advanced Individual Training (AIT). He recalls that there was racial diversity at Fort Hood and there were never any problems. Patronsky mentions participating in an anti-war rally in Killeen (Texas). He explains that he was sent to Germany in January 1972 and landed in Frankfurt where he spent several days exploring and sight-seeing. Patronsky was assigned to a fire direction artillery unit with an eight-inch gun at a base with about 1,500 soldiers. This unit had nuclear capabilities. Patronsky expresses his dislike for being called a Vietnam veteran because he believes he was more of a Cold War veteran. He trained at Grafenwöhr for thirty-day periods twice a year. Patronsky discusses the living quarters and food. He reveals that he liked to have friends that were good story tellers because it helped to pass the time and explains that there was no social contact between enlisted men and officers. Patronsky states that he was able to enjoy time off because the base had several opportunities for recreation such as gyms, bowling, a photography dark room, and a movie theater. He used the dark room often and regrets not taking more pictures of military personnel and the facilities. Patronsky explains there were a lot of illicit drugs available and that it was part of the culture at the time. His mother made a trip to Germany and they took a tour down the Rhine River and to Cologne and Munich. He did not have much contact with German citizens. Patronsky explains that soldiers were afraid of the Germans and called them RADS, a short version of comrade. He states that most of his days consisted of garrison duty and there was not much to do in the mornings, but in the afternoon he performed various minor detail work such as unpacking boxes, kitchen duty and guarding the atomic weapons stockpile. The stockpile had to be guarded carefully because the Bader Meinhof Gang was active at the time. The gang engaged in minor terrorist activity. Patronsky tells a story of being bored and finding a bullet filled with sand rather than gun powder. He left Germany in January 1973 and spent four years on inactive duty. He states that he had a good time despite dreading being drafted.

Biographical Sketch:

Mark Patronsky is Senior Staff Attorney for the Legislative Council of the Wisconsin State Legislature and lives in Madison, Wisconsin.

Interviewed by Jim Kurtz, 2003

Transcribed Becky Berhow, Wisconsin Court Reporter, 2007

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Interview Transcript:

- Kurtz: Today is March 1st, 2003. The interviewer is Jim Kurtz interviewing Mark Patrosky. Mark, could you tell us where and when you were born?
- Patrosky: I was born in Columbus, Ohio in 1948, August 15th.
- Kurtz: Okay. And was that where you were raised?
- Patrosky: I was raised at a couple different places in Ohio until I was 8 years old. My family moved to Waukesha, Wisconsin, where I lived until I was 15. We moved to Indianapolis where I lived until I graduated from high school in 1966. And then I spent two years at Indiana University, two years at the University of Chicago where I graduated and then I was drafted and I guess that's where this story begins.
- Kurtz: Right. And were you offered an opportunity when you were in college to go to ROTC?
- Patrosky: Not only that, it was mandatory when I was in college. 1966 at Indiana University all the guys were required to take two years of ROTC and mostly that meant taking, I think, a one hour class a week and then marching on the parade grounds on Thursdays and I opted for Air Force ROTC because I thought the uniform was a little cooler and I might get dates.
- Kurtz: Didn't work?
- Patrosky: But I did the two years and then at that point you take a test and if you did well on the test, they pleaded with you to stay on, but I chose not to.
- Kurtz: Okay. Did you do well on the test?
- Patrosky: I did very well on the test.
- Kurtz: And then you say you graduated from the University of Chicago in 1970?
- Patrosky: That's correct.
- Kurtz: And where were you when you got drafted?
- Patrosky: I was in Chicago at the time, although my draft board was in Indianapolis,

because as I understand it, you kept the draft board where you were first registered. And so all of the paperwork and processing went through Indianapolis draft board rather than through the Chicago facilities for me. I think I could have switched over to Chicago, but I felt a little nervous about possibly being inducted into the Army with the miscellaneous characters that lived in Chicago and I thought I'd do a little better if I was in Indianapolis.

Kurtz: When and where did you report for active duty?

Patronsky: That was at Indianapolis. I -- what I did was I was really, really freaking out about the prospect of getting drafted. It had been hanging over my head since I was in high school, of course, and all through college I had the student deferment. And when it finally came time that I was graduating, it was clear that I had a low draft number, that there was no student deferment available after I graduated from college. I kind of started having a melt down and the first thing I did was my final semester at Chicago I failed to take my exams. I just told the Profs I wasn't ready for it and took incompletes in everything. I realized that wasn't going to get me anywhere, so I spent the summer making up the incompletes and graduated in August of 1970 instead of the end of the spring semester. And then I tried to get a conscientious objector deferment. I really wasn't a conscientious objector, I never believed it for a minute at the time, but I thought at least if I tried and got it that would be a great thing. I failed to get that. The Indianapolis draft board, as far as I know, had never met a conscientious objector and so there was -- it was just an exercise. And then I spent some time trying to -- well, I got referred to a psychiatrist in Chicago who was willing, for a small fee, to write a letter to say you were too crazy to be in the Army, and he did that, which I took the piece of paper with me to Indianapolis and they just laughed at it (laughs) and when I was getting my physical said that didn't really mean anything to them, nice try. And so when I reported for the physical at Indianapolis, I really had thought that somehow I was going to get out. I still hadn't accepted that this was it, and I was going to go in the Army and so I showed up without personal affects or really having gotten things straightened out back in Chicago. So I asked them if I could have a couple of weeks and they said, yeah, sure, go back to Chicago, get things straightened out and then come back, which I did, and then I was inducted from Indianapolis.

Kurtz: Okay. What month?

Patronsky: That would have been January of 1971, January 25th.

Kurtz: Those dates somehow you remember?

- Patronsky: We remember the days exactly.
- Kurtz: So where did you get sent for basic training?
- Patronsky: That was to Fort Knox, Kentucky.
- Kurtz: And was it cold then?
- Patronsky: Actually it wasn't too bad. There were a couple of days when it was cold like and we had snow, but otherwise it was pretty tolerable.
- Kurtz: When you were in basic training were you with other college people or was it just a potpourri of --
- Patronsky: It was a complete mix. There weren't that many college graduates and for some reason because -- I don't think it was because I was a college graduate, I think it was just because I was older, being 22 years old instead of the average age of the draftee then was about 19 years and one month or something like that I believe we were told. So I was picked to be a squad leader in basic training, and there really weren't very many guys who were college graduates. Most of them were guys off the farm, guys from small towns in the Midwest.
- Kurtz: Did you make any friendships in basic training that carried over?
- Patronsky: Not that carried over, but I definitely had a number of guys that were friends. One guy that was really close and we just hung around together, and --
- Kurtz: Okay.
- Patronsky: So, yes.
- Kurtz: Any memorable experiences or anything particularly funny that happened in basic training that --
- Patronsky: (Laughs) Well, the funny thing about basic training for me was the whole thing, because as near as I could figure, what was being done when I was in basic training, at least with us basic training unit, was some kind of experiment to see just how easy they could treat us and still end up with something that vaguely resembled soldiers, because my story was so different than anybody else's and I think this is something important to keep in mind in the military is that everybody has his own experience. No two people, even people in the same unit, had the same experience. But overall, my experience was that the drill

instructors didn't show up until after first formation in the morning. We were free to get up in the morning, they'd come wake us up, but then we'd get dressed and clean up the barracks and go to breakfast and wouldn't really have a work day that began until 8 in the morning; and then at 5 o'clock the drill instructors disappeared, and we were on our own and could go to the enlisted men's club and have a beer. On the weekends we were able to leave the post. I hitchhiked up to Indianapolis, I still had friends at Indiana University and had dates and wouldn't get back until 2 or 3 in the morning on Monday morning. The weekends that I didn't go to Indiana we would have big beer parties in the barracks, and have to clean that up at the last minute. It was a very relaxed time. I don't think I did but twenty five push-ups the whole time I was in basic training.

- Kurtz: Was there the specter of Vietnam hanging over this experience?
- Patronsky: The specter of Vietnam had been hanging over my life since 1965, about the time I was a junior in high school, and I lived with that every day. Specter's a good word. You never stop thinking about that. I thought about it through high school. I thought about it all through college, every day. I thought about it when I was getting drafted and in basic training, there was the very real thought that when basic training was over, I was going to go to advanced individual training, AIT, and then get sent to Vietnam. In fact, there were guys who were sent to Vietnam directly from basic training without any advanced training at all in my unit. But --
- Kurtz: Do you know what the reason for that was?
- Patronsky: I don't, no, but --
- Kurtz: Are there any characteristics of them that they were good marksmen or screw-ups or --
- Patronsky: It didn't seem to have anything to do with anything.
- Kurtz: So they just needed people?
- Patronsky: Right. But at the time I believe that by the end of March, 1971, as I understood it, the forces in Vietnam had peaked and if anything were starting to decline some and so the chances of getting sent to Vietnam were diminishing at that point.
- Kurtz: Okay. Is there anything more you'd like to talk about basic or should we go to AIT next?

Patronsky: Well, I could tell you another story about basic --

Kurtz: Please do.

Patronsky: -- if you like. This is -- there always seemed to be a way to get away with something and one of the stand-out things that I got away with was getting an expert marksmanship badge. There were three levels of marksmanship. I don't remember what the other two, but expert was the good one and I was terrible with the M16. I was just awful and couldn't really shoot very well. And besides one of my main interests seemed to be to shoot at the piece of lathe that hold up the man-shaped targets. Somehow I could make the target fall over. So I was just mainly goofing around and not taking it seriously. But it came time to take the final test and they were always threatening us if we didn't do well on these tests, that we were going to get held over and that sounded like an awful prospect because basic training, even though as I said it was easy for me, it really wasn't that much fun, I wanted to get away from that; and when we got to the test, I was really scared that I was going to fail this and somehow have to be held over. It was on kind of a drizzly day and there was a really young, really forlorn looking kid in a poncho who was taking scores and I felt empathy for him. He really looked so pitiful and I asked him who he was and what his name was, where he was from, what he was doing. Turned out he was waiting for his AIT in the armor school to begin and he'd been put on special duty to take score. And so I told him my story about how bad I was with the M 16 and how I was really afraid I was going to get held over, and because I'd shown this guy some human warmth and treated him with dignity and kind of made friends with him on short notice, he looked at me and he smiled and he said, "Oh, don't worry, you'll do very well" and I got my expert then.

Kurtz: Outstanding. You finished basic training in March of '71, then what happened to you in your military career?

Patronsky: Well, this was another odd thing. Rather than get sent to AIT, I get sent directly to Fort Hood, Texas to an artillery unit. Normally if you were going to get a military or an artillery MOS, a military occupation specialty, which meant that you would work in an artillery unit, you would go to AIT, which was an eight week course, advanced individual training, for artillery it was at Fort Sill, Oklahoma and that would have been the standard thing that they did with a guy who was just drafted. But that didn't happen. What they were doing was again I got experimented on again as far as I could tell. And what they did was they sent a group of us, all college graduates, directly to an artillery unit in Texas, and they turned over the training responsibilities to the officers and upper ranking enlisted men in that

unit and the idea I think was to see if they could manage to train us well enough that we could perform the skills in an artillery unit. What I'm talking about here is the fire direction center, which is the part of an artillery unit that takes the target locations from the field, translates those into the numbers for aiming the artillery pieces, elevation and deflection, and gives that to the guns and directs the fire of the guns. It's not super hard to do, but there's a certain amount of technical knowledge you have to have and so this was an on-the-job training version of advanced individual training and I think it went reasonably well. I think I probably didn't get as much as I would have if I'd gone to an advanced individual training.

Kurtz: How experienced were the officers and NCOs that trained you? Were they Vietnam veterans or returnees?

Patronsky: I don't know if they were Vietnam veterans. Certainly they were all young guys, and if to the extent they had experience, it wasn't a real deep experience, and they weren't necessarily trained as teachers either. They didn't necessarily have a good curriculum. They were -- I think they were doing the best they could. I really felt that.

Kurtz: Okay.

Patronsky: But I think it's just -- it wasn't a normal classroom-type training where I think I would have gotten a lot more out of it.

Kurtz: Did this situation alleviate your concerns about Vietnam at all? I mean, going into a unit like this, being trained like this and --

Patronsky: I did think about that. I felt at that point that I was probably going to stay at Fort Hood because it was just a two year draftee service, but the possibility of being sent to Vietnam worried me because I felt I wouldn't be competent to perform under pressure, that I just -- it wasn't really ingrained into me what I was supposed to be doing and I figured I could pick it up if need be, I'd learn how to do it. But at least as far as performing at Fort Hood I felt there were a lot of things I didn't know how to do all that well.

Kurtz: How long were you at Fort Hood?

Patronsky: It turned out I stayed at Fort Hood until December of 1971. So that I'd been there for roughly nine months I guess, and I got orders to go to Germany. Most of the guys that I went to Fort Hood with initially and had gone through this experience of on-the-job training for the fire direction center stayed at Fort Hood their whole two years.

- Kurtz: Did you maintain contact with any of those people?
- Patronsky: We exchanged a little correspondence, but it was hard to do and the thing about being in the Army is you live so much in the present. What's happening today is what's important. And keeping in touch with people, there really was very little chance I was ever going to see these guys again. So there wasn't a lot of incentive to try and stay in touch.
- Kurtz: Did you go on leave or back to the Midwest before you went to Germany?
- Patronsky: I had a very nice time. What you could do is after you were leaving one post and going to another you could take vacation. And I think I took about a three week vacation and I went with my family to Brownsville, Texas and we stayed about a week down there. My folks met me from Lincoln, Nebraska and so it was good to get together with the family after being a year in the Army, and then I drove from there up to Chicago and I connected up with some friends of mine, enjoyed about a week there. I still had some belongings from college that were stored in a locker and I picked those up in a rental van, drove back to Nebraska at Lincoln where my folks lived, dropped all the possessions off and spent some time with them and then flew from there to Fort Dix in New Jersey, where I was processed to go over to Germany.
- Kurtz: Was there a sense of relief having orders to Germany?
- Patronsky: I knew at that point that this was it. There was no Vietnam in the picture and there certainly was. I absolutely no interest in serving in Vietnam and I'm not one of these want-to-be guys who felt that I've missed something, and that I wished that I'd gone to Vietnam. I never wanted to go to Vietnam. I was glad I didn't go, and I don't feel bad about that because I served too, I gave two years of my life.
- Kurtz: In the states before we get you to Germany, was there any -- any anti-war type activities in the military that you were aware of?
- Patronsky: There was a certain amount of, you know, modest amount of anti-war activity at Fort Hood, but it was off-post. In Killeen, Texas which was a small town outside of the gates of Fort Hood, I did one time participate in an anti-war rally, which I went in fatigue uniform for some reason. It was not the brightest thing in the world. But it was a terrific rally and Pete Seeger sang. I think that was probably the main reason I went, but I marched in a rally and carried an anti-war banner,

and probably got my name on somebody's lists, because I'm sure that there were authorities watching that.

Kurtz: Okay. You're at Fort Dix, New Jersey and what's the date roughly, was it January of --

Patronsky: It would have been early, real early January of, 72. 72, yes.

Kurtz: Okay. How did you get to Germany?

Patronsky: We just flew on a chartered military jet -- a chartered civilian jet that was entirely military.

Kurtz: Okay. And where did you land in Germany?

Patronsky: Landed in Frankfurt.

Kurtz: Okay. And then what happened from there?

Patronsky: Well, this is also very interesting because by this time I'd been in the Army for a year, and I had a pretty good idea how the system worked. And I knew, for instance, that when you got sent to a new unit that you would be put in a transition barracks, and when I landed in Frankfurt, I wasn't assigned to a specific unit yet. They had just requested so many bodies from various units in Germany and there was going to be at least a few day period when I was put into a transition barracks. It was called the paperwork to be processed and they would match us up with the requests for bodies from the various units. So the first thing that they did when we got to the transition barracks was tell us in no uncertain terms were we supposed to leave the premises, and I figured 'well, okay, forget that' and I instantly left the premises and spent most of the next two or three days really enjoying myself in Frankfurt. I found a couple of guys who were adventurous as well. In fact, I stumbled across one guy in the transition barracks who spoke fluent German. So we had a translator and we had a terrific time and at the end of three or four days, I did get my assignment and I was transferred to my unit that I was going to be in.

Kurtz: Did anybody notice that you were gone those three or four days?

Patronsky: No. Nobody paid any attention.

Kurtz: Okay. So what was the assignment that you received?

Patronsky: The assignment was the same thing I had at Fort Hood, Texas, which was fire direction center artillery unit. This time it was a different gun.

Instead of a 155 millimeter at Fort Hood, it was an 8-inch gun, heavy artillery, the unit I was in this Germany. It was a different set up in Germany because Fort Hood was huge. It was roughly 40,000 GIs, and the bases in Germany were smaller and scattered around. So the base I was on in Germany had about 1500 guys in two artillery units and one rocket unit.

Kurtz: And were all -- both artillery units 8-inch guns or --

Patronsky: The base in Germany had an 8-inch unit, a 175-unit which was the extremely long range gun, and then an Honest John Rocket battalion.

Kurtz: Were atomic weapons -- were you using atomic weapons at that time?

Patronsky: That's a good question and I think a really, really important question for my experience, because the answer is yes. We were a nuclear capable unit, as they called us in Fort Hood and we were a nuclear capable unit in Germany. What that meant was that we had artillery shells that we trained with and artillery shells immediately accessible to us. There was a stock pile of those available that we could use. And if -- the understanding was that we were fighting the Cold War and I like to say this to people, because there's so much emphasis on people being described as Vietnam-era veterans and I've never much felt comfortable with that because for one thing, when people say Vietnam 'era', era is kind of a little tag word at the end that you almost swallow. You don't quite hear that. I don't like being called a Vietnam veteran because I think that takes away from the guys that went to Vietnam. But as I thought about it, what I really was doing was not just being in the Army at the same time that Vietnam was going on, but I was actually part of a very major effort that the Army had going at the time, the military in general, in the Cold War. And we were the line of defense over in Germany against the 10,000 tanks where the Warsaw Pact come pouring across the border in West Germany and caused a great deal of trouble. We felt that that, I mean, the guys that I was serving with, felt that our equipment was in such poor condition and our training level was so poor, that the only choice we were going to have was to use nuclear weapons. Now, I'd grown up in a whole era of 'duck and cover'. I'd lived under the threat of nuclear annihilation my whole life and seeing the movie *Dr. Strangelove* and so I was pretty freaked out about the whole idea of nuclear weapons. I'd read *Hiroshima* when I was in high school, and so this was something that had permeated my whole life and here I am in a tent at Fort Hood or in a tent over in Germany, with a mock up of a nuclear shell learning how to set the timer on the thing so we can blow up the bad guys. And we periodically, my buddies and I, would stop and we'd look up at each other and we'd get this look in our eyes,

like our eyes would get bigger and we'd say "Oh, my God, I can't believe we're doing this."

Kurtz: Did you -- obviously you didn't do any live fire of nuclear weapons but did you do live fire of the 8-inch guns that you were --?

Patronsky: We did and actually for us in the fire direction center live firing was that big of deal because all we were doing in any case was practicing how to listen to the forward observer on the radio, get the target coordinates, do the calculations and relay that down to the guns. If the guns actually fired at that point it really didn't matter to us, other than it was a way to check your work, but if it wasn't very close to where it should have been, then something probably went drastically wrong. So it was really the guys on the guns who benefited more from the actual live firing and that was always a problem because live firing is expensive. And the military didn't have an unlimited budget for practice rounds. So, for instance, when my battalion would go to the major training area in Germany, which was called Grafenwöhr, we'd go for a thirty day period twice a year and we'd have 600 rounds to fire at a thirty day period. And whatever that works out, like twenty rounds a day for twelve guns. So there really wasn't a lot of actual firing.

Kurtz: Okay. So when you went to the field there did you live in tents in -- what were the living conditions like when you went there?

Patronsky: It was an interesting contrast with Fort Hood and with Germany because at Fort Hood the barracks were right there at the edge of the impact area. The impact area was huge and so all we had to do was drive off the back of the motor pool, drive out into the field around the edge of the impact area and the most we would do would be to stay for a day or two perhaps, set up our pup tents, or sit, string hammock from the trees. When we got over in Germany, because we had to go some distance, we'd have to put all the equipment on rail cars and have it shipped to the major training area and we'd have to drive all the trucks there. We would live in a tent city there for a thirty day period. These were the tents that were up on the wooden bases and they were the wall tents that stayed up permanently. And we went once in relatively cold weather. As soon as I got to Germany, in the month of February we went there, and then the second month I went to the major training area was in August.

Kurtz: What was the food like out in the field?

Patronsky: It was kind of a mixture. Again, at Fort Hood, because we'd only be out for a day or two, it never really got that bad. The cooks would take

their field kitchens out and set up and do cooking in the field because that was part of their practice as well. And I always thought the cooks did a good job. I never really had a complaint about Army food. We were offered one meal a day of C rations, and I think again it was probably because they had a whole bunch of them and they needed to get rid of them but also it was just part of the experience. Learning what that stuff tastes like and getting used to the idea of eating it. Most guys couldn't stand it and I thought the C rations were okay, too, but in Germany we could -- because we'd go out during the day to the field, and then come back and stay in the tents at night, there was always a chance to get back and go to the snack bar. So a lot of guys, rather than eat the C rations, in fact a lot of the guys rather than eat the Army food would go to the snack bar and just get a hamburger there.

Kurtz: Okay. What -- did you make any lasting friendships in your experience in Germany?

Patronsky: Again not friendships that went beyond my Army experience. But there was always people to hang around with and because we were tossed in together and living in close proximity you'd spend so much time with guys that you would find people that were good to hang around with. My main criteria for a friend was a guy that was a good story teller, because there was so much time on our hands. There was just hours and hours in every day when not much was going to happen, except we'd be sitting in the motor pool cleaning off some equipment. And a guy's ability just to talk about jobs that he had or girlfriends that he had or cars that he had was something that really helped to pass the time. I always liked to have friends too because I'm not exactly what you call a fighter, never was. And there were some times when you run across some characters in the Army who were just trouble, and you couldn't help bumping into them. And I always liked to have a couple of friends who were pretty good at defending themselves and who liked me and therefore, would be pretty good defending me, too.

Kurtz: What was your relationship with NCOs and officers?

Patronsky: As lower ranking enlisted men, as the draftees, I think it's important to understand that we really lived in a completely different world than the upper-ranking enlisted men, the Sergeants and the officers. There was virtually no -- there was no social contact whatever. After hours the enlisted men all would -- low-ranking enlisted men just hung around together and we'd never go anywhere or do anything with any of them. So there really wasn't much contact. It was kind of interesting because the officers, the young officers, lieutenants were my peers. They were college graduates, recent college graduates, we were the same age. I just happened to be enlisted men and they were an officer and I always

felt that I was never hesitant to try to talk to them and find out what was up with them, what they were thinking about, what was going on. But they always were very reluctant to talk to me or be seen talking to me.

Kurtz: At this point we're going to turn the tape.

[Tape 1 Side B]

Kurtz: So, when we turned the tape over we were talking about relationship with NCOs and officers, is there anything more to add to that?

Patronsky: I would like to say one thing. In thinking back on my experience, in the more recent times I've read a few articles about life in the military. It seems from what I've read in the articles that quite a bit of effort in the military is going into really looking out seriously for the welfare of the troops. When I was in the Army, I feel that we were really on our own, that nobody was particularly looking out for our welfare in an active sense. It fascinates me, though, that there was a tremendous number of opportunities to entertain yourself on off-time. The Army was really good about having facilities available, like woodworking shop, gyms, weight lifting facilities, handball courts, bowling alleys, photographic dark rooms, which I happened to use a great deal. I was very pleased about that. Trips were organized through the base, and there were a lot of things available, enlisted men's clubs over in Germany, we had a small enlisted men's club that would have rock bands and occasionally strippers would come. There was a, even on our small base in Germany with 1500 guys, there was a movie theater. So there was a tremendous number of opportunities to entertain yourself. But everybody was still left on their own and none of the officers or Sergeants really made any inquiries about whether a guy was miserable or enjoying himself, and there were people that really didn't do very well. I did fine. I was really out for entertaining myself, but it's interesting thinking back on just how little attention really was paid to the welfare of the troops, other than just saying "Here, here's the stuff, go enjoy yourself if you feel like it."

Kurtz: Before we get into your off-duty interests and travel, couple specific questions. Were there any racial difficulties in your unit that you observed or in the Army in Germany at that point in time?

Patronsky: To my knowledge, during the year I was in both Texas and Germany that there was never a racial incident in the sense of tension that erupted into some sort of violence or that sort of thing. There was always a kind of a segregation of races for the most part, although I certainly talked to people, you know, that were the African Americans,

the Puerto Ricans. There was a lot of foreigners, non-citizens that were in the like Polish, Indian, not American Indian but from the Indian continent. A lot of people that were very different, but somehow there never seemed to be racial incident. It's interesting thinking back on that.

Kurtz: Was there any anti-war activity in the Army there?

Patronsky: In Germany, no. There really wasn't any particular anti-war activity.

Kurtz: Did -- were there any people that you served with over there that were Vietnam veterans?

Patronsky: Most of the Vietnam veterans that I served with were in Texas, and what was happening then was that there was a huge number of guys that were coming back from Vietnam. They completed their 13 month tour, and often they would have been, for instance, like a helicopter mechanic, and they were sent back to the States and these were guys who had volunteered, who had asked for school as a helicopter mechanic, gotten it, and had done very well in that in Vietnam, had enjoyed it. It was intense work, they worked hard at it, and they were really let down when they got sent back and they got stuck in an artillery unit at Fort Hood because it was the only place that was available. There weren't enough positions as a helicopter mechanic. So their attitude tended to decline very, very quickly and their morale was low. They didn't feel like doing the work that they were being asked to do. And so there was an early out program. What was done was guys who had enlisted for a three year term, if they'd completed their Vietnam tour, and had more than 18 months in the service, they were released. And I've had arguments with guys about when that occurred. My recollection was that occurred in 1971 when I was at Fort Hood. But other guys have said "No, that occurred later." So I don't really know exactly when it happened. But the effect of that was to clear out a lot of guys who would come back from Vietnam and there were fewer guys at my unit in Germany who had been in Vietnam. They were still some, but the early out had gotten a lot of them out and had left still though a mix of draftees and people that volunteered and that in itself caused tension because the guy who had gotten drafted for two years would look at the guy that enlisted for three years. We're in the same unit. We're working side by side. I'd say, "You fool, I got two years of this and you volunteered and you got three years of same thing." (Laughs)

Kurtz: Were there any drug problems in Germany or Fort Hood? I mean, it was reputed that Vietnam caused a lot of drug problems in the Army?

- Patronsky: It depends on what you call a drug problem. If you mean "Was there enough drugs?" there was no problem. Drugs were everywhere. It was part of the culture at the time and I think it's definitely not just military; it was the culture as a whole. College, rural areas, big cities, and the military drugs were commonplace.
- Kurtz: Okay. You mentioned that there were very good off-duty facilities and I know that you're interested in photography. Could you describe your interest in photography in the Army?
- Patronsky: What I did was developed the interest in photography when I was in high school. I used a high school dark room, was in the photography club, carried that over into college. I never really did a huge amount of it, but it was just something I would dabble in and enjoy. And when I was in the Army, as soon as I got to Fort Hood, I found out that there was a dark room available and it was a wonderful facility. They had full-time staff, non-military staff, civilian staff, who would come in and set the dark room up and it was available weekends and after hours during the week. All the chemicals were mixed and set out, all the equipment was available and so all you had to do was to purchase the materials, the film and the paper, take the pictures and go in and use the dark room. It was a fantastic opportunity.
- Kurtz: Now, did you take a lot of pictures in Germany?
- Patronsky: I've got -- all together, with Fort Hood and in Germany I took something like 3,000 pictures. And I'm in the process now of going through those and trying to get them organized, and to prepare some written commentary to go along with them explaining what they're about.
- Kurtz: What was the focus of these pictures, military life or --?
- Patronsky: Well, I did a little bit of everything. I did a lot of military life. I also took pictures when I would go off post and of some of the experiences that I had, places I went and so on. Looking back on it, the photographs that I took of travels are very uninteresting today. And I wish I had done a lot more photographing military life and particularly the people and I wish that I would have written down a few details about the people because I can't remember really who they were, what their names were, but the photographs are still very compelling in terms of showing the faces of young guys, guys from age 19 to maybe 22, 23, 24 years old, all of them wearing the uniform and all of them doing what had to be done.
- Kurtz: Did the military make any use of your photography interests?

- Patronsky: No. But there really wasn't an opportunity to do that.
- Kurtz: Did they care? I mean, when – like when you went out to these field activities, did you take your camera with you?
- Patronsky: Well, that's an interesting question. I did and thinking back on it I find it astounding that nobody ever said anything to me because I would wander around for hours with a camera around my neck, doing nothing in particular, except taking pictures and nobody ever said anything about it.
- Kurtz: Which just shows if you're doing something maybe you're supposed to be doing it.
- Patronsky: (Laughs) Could be, I don't know.
- Kurtz: So did you actually take any pictures of maneuvers and stuff out there?
- Patronsky: Yes. Yeah. I took the camera out in the field. I have pictures of the guns actually firing. I would walk, leave the fire direction center and walk down to the gun line and when they were firing, I'd stand behind one of the guns and get a picture of the smoke from the burning powder coming off the guns or people driving Jeeps, people out marching in the field and so on.
- Kurtz: Okay. You mentioned that you did some traveling when you were in Germany, would you like to tell us a little bit about those experiences?
- Patronsky: I did. It was kind of interesting because it was hard to get away, actually, in Germany. This was at the same time Vietnam was at its peak and starting to decline and so much of the military effort was devoted to Vietnam that the unit I was in Fort Hood and in Germany were very under strength of the assigned personnel with the amount that the units were supposed to have by the book. We would have about 60 percent of that. And the equipment was the cheap stuff or the old stuff that tended to break down a lot. And so there, you know, it was hard to find time to get away. People that would ask for vacation and get denied, because just having enough people available to do the guard duty, to do the routine things that had to be done was kind of difficult. But what I was able to do was when I was in Germany to take short weekend trips and just like go to a different town where maybe they were having an art exhibit and look at that. I'd find out where the nearby castles were and I'd go there. Usually the castles would have a restaurant and a bar and so I'd get together with a couple guys and we'd go take a train trip somewhere. Frankfurt was only about 40

miles away, so for kind of a big city experience we could go down there. The really fun thing I did was when I was over in Germany my mom, after trying to talk my dad into going on a European trip and not having any luck with him, he wasn't interested, she decided to go on her own and so I met her at the airport at Frankfurt, took a week off, and we went over to the Rhine River and took a boat trip down to Cologne. We stayed there a couple of days, rented a car and then drove down to Munich, and saw a lot of sights along the way and I had a terrific time. It was a wonderful time, good time to spend with my mom and also it was like a real vacation. It was very enjoyable.

Kurtz: Okay. Is there anything that we haven't covered about your Germany experience?

Patronsky: There's thousands and thousands of things. I can't think of any big thing that stands out.

Kurtz: Well, then I've got just a couple questions. What contact did you have with the German people?

Patronsky: There wasn't a lot of contact with German people, and that was a little disappointing. I think I did know one guy over there who sang, and was trained as a musician and he had a lot of contact with Germans because he became involved in a German singing group. There was a German guy who ran the library at the unit in Germany. And libraries were another thing I didn't mention earlier, but were very common. The military was very good about providing libraries. So there was an older German guy and I spent a lot of time in the library because it was a good place to hide and goof-off and I was able to spend a lot of time talking to him, he spoke very good English and we talked about the old days in Germany and about how he thought modern times were terrible and how much more fun they had in the old days. (Laughs)

Kurtz: Did you ever get to the German border with East Germany or --

Patronsky: No. I was pretty spooked about that. One thing I should mention about the Germans is that, this is something that was really disappointing to me and I was disappointed in the other soldiers, because a lot of the guys had kind of a xenophobia, a sort of cultural fear about the German people and I could never understand that. They referred to them contemptuously as Rads, R-A-D-S. It was a shorten version of 'comrade' which was the common greeting that Germans would have for one another. And when the GIs said this, they said it in a demeaning way, as if the Germans were, I don't know, stupid or irritating people, and of course, they weren't. They were just regular German people. I think if anything, being in contact with GIs and

having them show up at the bars downtown and if ever you went to a public place in Germany, near a military base, and there was an outbreak, loud voices or scuffling or something, it was always GIs. It was never German people. The German people were very civilized in public. And it was always disappointing that the GIs thought so poorly of the German people.

Kurtz: Okay. Is there anything else before we get you out of the Army that we haven't covered? Let's talk about a duty day. What was a typical duty day?

Patronsky: Duty day? Well, it was very standardized because I was in peace time Army, although Vietnam was going on and the Cold War were going on, I wasn't in a shooting war. And so if you're in the peace time Army they call it Garrison Duty. Garrison is just staying around the barracks area and motor pool and the work day is the same every day. It's 50 percent maintenance of equipment and 50 percent training. So the typical duty day would be to get up at -- we're supposed to get up at 6 in the morning, usually we'd roll out of bed by about 6:30, clean up the immediate area, go to breakfast and be at first formation by quarter to 8. We'd get our instructions at first formation and then by 8 o'clock usually head down to the motor pool. Now, the fact is that there wasn't enough to do in the motor pool to keep us busy for four hours and so you'd try to take long breaks, go to the snack bar, get the Stars and Stripes and read at work, the cross word puzzle, drink a pitcher of Cokes and maybe after an hour and a half or so go back down to the motor pool and a lot of days we would just sit there, frankly. There was -- and because you didn't want to be caught totally doing nothing, we'd sit there with a wrench in one hand and a piece of steel wool in the other hand and if anybody came along and said, "What are you doing, soldier?" we'd say, "Oh, I'm just cleaning the rust off this wrench." (Laughter) And then we'd go to lunch and in the afternoon it was some sort of training and again, there wasn't enough training to occupy our whole afternoon. So there would be some picking cigarette butts up or mowing the lawn somewhere or doing some sort of minor detail. That was the normal day and then there was a lot of variety because of special details. I did, for instance, a day of unpacking boxes at the food store, at the PX. I did two days worth of kitchen police at the bachelor officers' quarters. I did special guard duty where there would be something where each unit in the post was required to contribute a guard detail at a certain location for a day, like the atomic weapons stock pile or something like that. So there was a lot of special duties that would be different from the regular work.

Kurtz: Did you ever actually see the atomic weapons?

- Patronsky: No. Although they were in the midst of a fenced in area, double fenced in area that was guarded with live ammunition every day. There was a great deal of concern about those things getting stolen.
- JIM Were they guarded by people different than you or were they guarded by MPs or --?
- Patronsky: No. In fact, let me tell you a story about that. In Germany when I was there, there was a particular trouble being caused by a group called the Baader-Meinhof Gang. And they had engaged in some terrorist activity and so there was a very high level of security and we were really given instructions about how to be most attentive when we were doing the 24 hour guard of the atomic ammunition because there was some fear that that would be stolen. And so this was a tough detail. It was 24 hour guard duty. Two on, four off, for a 24 hour period and so you'd be kind of blurry eyed from lack of sleep and at three o'clock in the morning in January in Germany the wind would be howling, the wind was called 'the hawk' because it was so sharp. And I would -- you'd be bored and so I'd be sitting out there, I'd pull a clip out of my M-16 and they were supposed to give us five rounds of ammunition and I'd take the ammunition out of the clip. Again, I'm just doing this to have something to do. One time I looked at one of the bullets. It looked kind of funny, it didn't look right. I pulled on the bullet and it came right out of the case, just fell out and I turned the casing upside down and I poured it out in my hand and it was full sand.
- Kurtz: Oh my.
- Patronsky: (Laughs) So some guy must have poured the powder out and set it on fire just to have something to do. And I didn't feel real secure about that. (Both laugh)
- Kurtz: Okay. When did you leave Germany and how did you leave Germany?
- Patronsky: I left Germany, it would have been on the 19th of January and --
- Kurtz: That was '73 ?
- Patronsky: Yes. And my last day in the Army was the 20th of January. Getting us out of Germany went pretty quickly. We didn't have to go to a transition -- well, actually I think there was one night we spent at a transition barracks. But they were pretty efficient about getting us down to Frankfurt the day before our plane was going to go. We'd stayed overnight and then stuck us on an airplane the next day and I think the reason for that was just there was no paperwork processing

that had to be done in Germany. The paperwork was all going to be processed at Fort Dix, New Jersey.

Kurtz: So then you flew from Frankfurt to Fort Dix?

Patronsky: Yeah. Once again it was kind of funny because it was a similar situation. It was a leased aircraft. It was a stretch DC-10, which I don't know how many guys it held, but it was enormous and almost everybody smoked. And so I was sitting near the front of aircraft and I turned around and I looked to the back and you couldn't see the back of the airplane, there was so much smoking in there.

Kurtz: So you flew into McGuire Air Force Base, Fort Dix, you processed out of the army at Fort Dix, is that right?

Patronsky: Right. And again I was very grateful for the way they handled that. We got there in the middle of the night, about midnight and there were people there to greet us, to get us stuck in a temporary barracks. Again, there was this overnight stay and I was so excited about getting out, having anticipated this day for two years that I couldn't sleep. I just laid on the bunk with my possessions nearby, and the next day they hurried up and they processed us as fast as they could and I think they got me out of there by about 2 o'clock in the afternoon.

Kurtz: Did you have a physical exam before you left?

Patronsky: No.

Kurtz: Okay. Did they give you a voucher or something? How did you get to wherever your home was?

Patronsky: As I recall, there was just some sort of a voucher because you could go anywhere you wanted, you didn't necessarily have to just go back to your home of record as they call it, which is where you supposedly gotten into the military. What I chose to do was to go from Fort Dix to Montclair, New Jersey, which is where my grandparents lived, my mother's parents were there, and I hadn't seen them for some time. So I stopped there and visited with them and I think I was there about a week or so and then from there I went back to Lincoln, Nebraska where my folks were.

Kurtz: Did you have any reserve obligation after you left the Army?

Patronsky: As I understand it everybody did because although I was only drafted for a two year term, the real obligation was six years, and so my actual military service wasn't to be finished until four years later and

potentially, as I understood it then, I could have been asked to do two years of active reserves and two years of inactive reserves, which the active would mean weekly or monthly meetings, whatever, and then inactive would mean just being paperwork status, but not actually having to do anything. And I was really unhappy about the thought of having to do two years of active reserve, I didn't want that and it turned out I didn't have to do that. I had four years of inactive reserves and that was it.

Kurtz: Did you have any experiences to note as a veteran? Anybody know that you were a veteran care or --?

Patronsky: I think this is interesting, you know, I heard stories back then about veterans being spit at, sworn at, called baby killers, and a lot of extremely negative things. I never personally saw any evidence of that, and I never had anything like that happen to me. In fact, what surprised me in a way was how -- I don't know if it was the people didn't show any interest in my military experience or whether they just didn't want to hear it -- but there was just resounding silence. I came back to nothing. And so, because I had a fairly okay time of it in the military, I wasn't carrying any demons around with me or anything like that, I felt okay about my military service. I decided that I was going to mention it as often as I could to everybody who was within earshot and just see what they would say. And I still would -- I rarely get a response. Nobody would ever say "Oh, man, you were in the military, you know, tell me about that." There was never any open-ended question to me where a person who hadn't served was actually interested in finding out what my story was. So I wasn't able to interest anybody in ever engaging in a conversation -- a few people, but most people weren't even interested in talking about it.

Kurtz: Did you join any Veteran's organizations?

Patronsky: No, I didn't although recently I've joined one of the Vietnam Veteran's organizations just as a supporter. But no, I haven't been involved in a Veteran's organization.

Kurtz: Is there anything else that we should cover, Mark, that we haven't covered in this conversation?

Patronsky: Well, I guess maybe just to sum it up, the whole military experience for me, I'm glad to say, was not anywhere remotely as bad as I anticipated it was going to be. Having worried about it for something like six years or seven years before I was finally drafted, the experience turned out to be fairly tolerable. I had a lot of good times. I learned some interesting things. I met interesting people. And it still

wasn't something I wanted to do. And if I had it to do over again, I still wouldn't want to do it. (Laughs)

Kurtz: But you're glad you did it?

Patronsky: But I did it and it's certainly part of my life.

Kurtz: Okay. Well, thank you very much.

[End of Interview]