

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center**

Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with  
**WILLIAM RETTENMUND**  
Helicopter Crew Chief, U.S. Army, Vietnam  
2006

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**Rettenmund, William.,** (b.1944). Oral History Interview, 2006.

Approximate length: 1 hour 15 minutes

*Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.*

**Abstract:**

William Rettenmund, a Black Earth, Wisconsin native, discusses his service during the Vietnam War with the 1<sup>st</sup> Aviation 162<sup>nd</sup> Assault Helicopter Company as a crew chief. He comments on being drafted into the Army in May of 1965. Rettenmund details his training at Fort Knox [Kentucky] and Fort Rucker [Alabama] and explains how he was chosen as a crew chief. He describes being transported to Vietnam and landing at Cam Rahn Bay and Vung Tau before being stationed at Phuoc Vinh. Rettenmund outlines the role of his company, as it supported the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry and discussed his own role as a helicopter crew chief. He also comments on the reactions of those around him when he returned home, and reflected on how his service affected his life.

**Biographical Sketch:**

William Rettenmund (b.1944) was drafted into the Army in 1965, trained at Fort Knox [Kentucky] and Fort Rucker [Alabama] and was stationed at Fort Benning [Georgia] before deploying overseas during the Vietnam War. Rettenmund served for one year in Phuoc Vinh, Vietnam with the 1<sup>st</sup> Aviation 162 Assault Helicopter Company.

Interviewed by Jim Kurtz, 2006.

Transcribed by Kelly Hourihan, Audio Transcription Center, 2015.

Reviewed by Claire Steffen, 2015.

Abstract written by Claire Steffen, 2015.

## Interview Transcript:

[Tape 1]

Kurtz: --ay is March 10, 2006. I'm in the home of William Rettenmund. And my name is Jim Kurtz and we're interviewing him about his experiences in the military service and in, more particularly, Vietnam in the 1st Aviation, 162<sup>nd</sup> Assault Helicopter Company. Bill, where and when were you born?

Rettenmund: April 15, 1944.

Kurtz: OK, and where was that?

Rettenmund: In Black Earth.

Kurtz: Black Earth, Wisc--

Rettenmund: Well, I was born in Madison, I think, but I --

Kurtz: Yeah.

Rettenmund: -- on a farm in Black Earth.

Kurtz: Did you grow up in Black Earth?

Rettenmund: Yes. Mm-hmm.

Kurtz: Did you have any relatives or family or neighbors that were veterans that had any influence on you while you were growing up?

Rettenmund: Oh, Uncle Art was World War II, in Italy, most of the time, where he was. And so I'd hear -- well, once in a while I'd hear a story; usually he hardly ever said anything, so most of the time I didn't run into -- veterans from the World War II era didn't talk that much; they were just uncles and stuff, anyway. But when I got drafted, there was one -- my cousin was ahead of me.

Kurtz: Cousin drafted ahead of you.

Rettenmund: Mm-hmm. Ahead of me, anyway, so.

Kurtz: OK. Did you graduate from high school at Wisconsin Heights?

Rettenmund: No. No, it was still Black Earth High School, in -- right in Black Earth, there. Heights didn't come for, oh, a couple more years [inaudible].

Kurtz: So what year did you graduate from high school?

Rettenmund: Nineteen sixty-two.

Kurtz: Nineteen sixty-two? And what did you do after you graduated from high school?

Rettenmund: I went to MATC, and the first commercial art program that they had there, and spent two years with a -- got a degree in art, and...

Kurtz: So that would be, like, 1964?

Rettenmund: 'Sixty-four, yeah.

Kurtz: That you got graduated --

Rettenmund: 'Sixty-two to '64 --

Kurtz: Yeah.

Rettenmund: And then I worked a year in an art job and got drafted out of their work. So.

Kurtz: OK. What was your reaction when you got drafted?

Rettenmund: Expecting it. All the family and friends that I knew of, and relatives, had been drafted since World War II. And I just expected it -- it was just part of life, you know, you do a couple years and that's it. It just happened to be this was Vietnam.

Kurtz: Yeah. Did you have any impression of Vietnam or anything like --?

Rettenmund: Not really. Not much of -- I guess I realized there was a Vietnam. I was drafted in May of '65, and in May of '65, I don't think the First Infantry or the First Cav were just about ready to go and land over there, and as -- you know, the big push was on, so. And --

Kurtz: And where did you have your basic training?

Rettenmund: At Fort Knox, Kentucky.

Kurtz: And does anything stand out about the basic training you had, as far as people that you met or anything like that?

Rettenmund: Oh, the -- there were about 125, including myself and three classmates. One of them was my first cousin. And of course, we only had 40-some people in Black Earth High School, and here's four of us that --.

Kurtz: So there were four classmates from high school --.

Rettenmund: Yeah, that got drafted the same time. We all went to, oh, maybe four, six, seven guys -- three of them didn't pass the physical in March. And one later on was drafted the year afterwards, and he went to 'Nam too. But those three guys, fortunately, went to Germany. And...

Kurtz: So you were the only one that went to Vietnam.

Rettenmund: Vietnam. That's enough.

Kurtz: Yes.

Rettenmund: (laughter) And...

Kurtz: And so after basic training, where did you go?

Rettenmund: I was one of the... I think it was two or four of us out of the whole company went to Fort Rucker, Alabama, for maintenance training on -- in aviation.

Kurtz: Was that something you volunteered for, or--?

Rettenmund: No, I was a commercial artist, so I figured that's -- you know, being in aircraft chromatic [??] is what the equivalent was over there. It was always kind of a joke, but (laughter) probably they needed --

Kurtz: Did they give you any tests? Tests or anything?

Rettenmund: Yeah, we had tests in the regular -- the regular ones that everyone else had in basic, and I'm not sure how I fared on that or anything, but there must have been some mechanical aptitude that was there. In Fort Rucker, we learned how an airplane flies, and, you know, like, five weeks of school for that, and another three weeks of school on the old Scout reciprocating engine, like the Bell helicopter, like, it was from Korea? That MASH --.

Kurtz: Yeah.

Rettenmund: And then we -- some of our class went to the fixed wing, because he had both schools there, and then we did go -- and after that they kept us for the Huey training schools.

Kurtz: So how long was a Huey training school?

Rettenmund: It was about three weeks. Most of our training already, on the basics of everything, was set in stone with us, so to speak. So we was pretty steady all the time in class, so...

Kurtz: Did they talk about Vietnam at all in these training--?

Rettenmund: Not a lot about -- they -- there were guys there that were wearing Vietnam, and the old yellow and red patch that they guys coming back -- lots of helicopter pilots and crewmen were in Vietnam for years already. There were aviation companies there in, I think, '62, '63, even -- way before us, supporting the -- they weren't supposed to be in combat, but you were in combat when you're hauling troops in the...

Kurtz: Yes.

Rettenmund: Anyway, but -- so most of the people that were training us were mechanics returned already, that early. And one of the guys I went to basic with went -- graduated and went on to teach, and he taught at Fort Rucker the whole time. When I went back there after 'Nam, he was still there. And so they just had picked him up, sent him right straight through training.

Kurtz: OK, so did you -- any of your classmates, any of you guys talk about Vietnam or anything like that? Were you just --.

Rettenmund: Boy, I probably should have done this interview 30, 40 years ago, I could remember a little bit better. When you're in an outfit like, you know, training to be a mechanic on helicopters, it certainly does come up, because even then, everybody kind of knew that the helicopter was moving people around, and was an important part of the soldier in the war type effort. And so we did talk about it somewhat, I know. There was a lot of time, you know, studying and the like, and -- so I don't remember too much about how much we talked about it. I didn't think anybody was excited, mad, or whatever; you just let the marbles fall where they fall, so to speak, and that's kind of what I did too, so --.

Kurtz: When you completed your training, where did you get assigned?

Rettenmund: Well, I got bused and assigned to the 162<sup>nd</sup> Assault Helicopter Company at Fort Benning. They were forming up this brand-new helicopter unit after the 11<sup>th</sup> Air Assault, which was later changed to -- made the First Air Cav. And they left Fort Benning just -- oh, probably three -- about the time I was in basic, or AIT, they left for, you know, for Vietnam. So they were making new companies up to support -- we already knew that we would be supporting the First Infantry Division in training. And I got -- so

our whole class was bused to -- as mechanics, so we didn't -- nobody knew anything about -- as far as had past experience with it. When we got there, there was only just a handful of people that had aviation experience or Vietnam experience to do the training part, so. For some reason they picked 23 -- let's see, we had 16 -- 24. We had 24 helicopters, and they picked 23 guys to be crew chiefs. That's people that would be trained to fly. Well, my name showed up in the list of all of us. So there probably was -- oh, must have been 100 of us that went up there -- well, maybe not quite that many, but.

Kurtz: What -- who was the crew chief on that 24<sup>th</sup> helicopter?

Rettenmund: On the 24<sup>th</sup> helicopter was a maintenance helicopter, and so I don't even know if they had a crew chief, but everybody -- oh, changed off being crew chiefs, I think, because that was their bird, and we flew -- and they flew following us sometimes, and sometimes it was a toolbox, or there were other names that we called it. The 116<sup>th</sup> Hornets, they had their own -- "witch doctor" was another one, from the tomahawks that would follow, and if we were working with them, then we had maintenance.

Kurtz: Did you have any reaction to getting an opportunity to be a crew chief as opposed to being just a mechanic on the ground?

Rettenmund: Oh, yeah. I was not a big lover of flying. My first time I ever flew was going in the service, and I got an orientation right on the helicopter at Rucker during the school time. I remember on the ship, looking out on the water as we were going over there, and I said to myself, "They had a crew chief, and I will stick with it no matter what." And usually I didn't go into racing cars, football, all this stuff; I was a fairly passive-type person most of the time. We were so busy on the farm; we didn't have time for much of that anyway. And I wasn't a big thriller going 80 miles an hour on the drag strip that we had down the road from us on the farm, so. So having -- flying was -- it took a lot of extra effort on my part to continue with it, and --.

Kurtz: What was your training at Fort Benning like, then?

Rettenmund: Fort Benning, I learned -- from the pilots that came back, you know, how to pull up the preliminary maintenance P.E. post-inspection, and then when we inspected it on -- when we returned to fuel aircraft, when it started was to watch inside. We had a little door we'd watch all the time as the engine was being start. They told us some of the tricks that the VC would do would be put a grenade inside the gas tank, wrap the tape, and it would blow up. And so they recommended, if you were worried about it, gave us some tricks like how you'd position the cap, so every time you put

the cap on it's the same way, and if it shows up differently, somebody else has been opening it up. And early in the morning, it might be worth --.

Kurtz: Checking.

Rettenmund: -- taking another look at it. And --.

Kurtz: Did you train with any troops at Fort Benning?

Rettenmund: No, we did not. We practiced more of the flying type of the thing -- not flying troops around or anything; it was mostly using the helicopter for our benefit. One of the things that we did is they taught us how to break down the M60 machine gun, which is what we would be using. At Fort Rucker, Alabama, we did not learn, and sometime after probably we went in the next year, they put a gunnery school at Fort Rucker. So every helicopter mechanic got gunnery training. But I didn't have any. I had OJT in the combat zone, is how I learned --.

Kurtz: But you didn't train with the M60s at Benning, is that correct?

Rettenmund: I don't remember -- I didn't fire the M's -- I tore it all apart, showed how it worked and everything, but not actually firing it at --.

Kurtz: At that time, were the Hueys equipped with M60s?

Rettenmund: Generally they were. And the standard equipment was the M60. And we -- our unit, like I said before, we didn't have enough M60s when we went over, and our Huey -- or crew chiefs and door gunners that we got from the infantry, door gunners came from -- we used out M14s out the row [??], or maybe on fully automatic or maybe not, you know. But that didn't last very long, maybe just a couple of weeks or so, and then we got 60, and then we wired them with bungee cords coming down on the handle and we shot our 60s -- "free 60s," they were called. And probably maybe about three months down the road we got the XM23, which was the mount. And it also kept you from shooting the rotor blades up, the skids, pilots, and (laughter) you know --.

Kurtz: Yeah, if they're on a bungee cord it's pretty hard to control the machine--.

Rettenmund: Yeah, and lots of times, I know, my gunner shot up the floor. He was following a target and then we turned left right into it. And that was an easy thing to happen. Even pilots sometimes would -- so busy on what was going on, they forgot to fly and they'd hog her in that way.

Kurtz: So how long were you at Fort Benning?



Rettenmund: Well, let's see. Probably somewhere around October when we arrived, and we were there, lowered up all the guns -- the CONEXes. And I left just before Christmas for a two-week leave, and then returned back to Benning around early January, and so I went -- probably the week before Christmas, the week after I was in home--.

Kurtz: What was your reaction to --.

Rettenmund: And actually it was a 30-day leave, so --.

Kurtz: OK. What was your reaction -- I mean, what was your family's reaction to the fact that you were going to Vietnam?

Rettenmund: I think they were nervous about it. They didn't really say anything. (laughter) You know, lots of the things in our family you didn't talk about that much. I still have trouble with feelings and, you know, and so it was one of those things that you just kind of looked at each other and --.

Kurtz: Was that -- the feeling that you didn't have, is that a result of your military service, do you think, or was it just something that came before that?

Rettenmund: Oh, I think that was before that. That's kind of the way the Rettenmund family were or -- and still are, as far as -- I wouldn't say keeping within yourself, but like my dad used to say, "If you can't say anything good about -- you know, don't say anything at all," you know? Or "the boss is always right," or -- and so --.

Kurtz: What about your contemporaries at Black Earth and the ones that you want to school with at MATC? Did they have any reaction?

Rettenmund: Well, MATC, of course, was already a year before. It was a -- I never saw any of those people after that. I did when I got back after that, because I went back to school when I got back. But the Black Earth kids that were there -- and of course, we had party and stuff like that, and you know, I even got pictures of the four of us. When I came home, that -- I had -- I got three letters, because I was out of town as I was working in Belvedere, Illinois. And when I came through town, they already said that "you got a letter home, at home," and they were telling my cousin, and it was already drafted, and so they figured I was too, so. So I got home, I had three letters. One was my state driver's license, because I'd just turned 20, or 21, I guess it was, and then the other one was my federal tax return, and then the last one was Johnson sent me a letter, "Welcome [inaudible] open arms of the government--"

Kurtz: (laughter) Welcoming you to federal employment.

Rettenmund: --you know, and they show up, and that was -- my birthday's April 15 and I had to be at the bus down in Milwaukee on the third -- I think the third of May. So I didn't have much time to do anything, you know, and you just sort of abandoned whatever you had in a couple of weeks and had your party, said goodbye and maybe that was it for you.

Kurtz: OK. So when you went back to Fort Benning, did you travel by commercial air for --?

Rettenmund: Mm-hmm.

Kurtz: Was there any reaction to you as -- traveling in uniform by anybody?

Rettenmund: Nope, mmm-mm. Not before. And I never seen much -- too much of anything after I came back either. Like I say, this is pretty early, and everybody -- a lot of esprit d'corps, and, you know, everybody's kind of doing the right thing, and --.

Kurtz: Did your helicopters go over on Pope?

Rettenmund: No, our helicopters went over on the -- I thought it was -- I don't think it was a Iwo Jima, it was like that helicopter carrier. Yeah, I always thought it was a Iwo Jima, but I was looking on the Internet and they said it was a different -- but we went over on a troop ship that was one of the first times it was brought out of dry dock since World War II, the *USS John Pope*. And so our --.

Kurtz: So where did you leave from?

Rettenmund: We left from the Golden Gate Bridge, down in California. So from Benning, we flew -- I think we stopped in Texas and then hopped the rest of the way into California. And our -- you know, by commercial airlines, we also went. Our helicopters, we did not have in Fort Benning; they were still at Bell in Texas, the -- being manufactured by Mrs. Johnson. (laughter) So -- and they were shipped over, picked up on the aircraft carrier, and we had an advanced party in our company of, you know, like a First Sergeant, the head maintenance guy, and the company commander, XO -- they went in December, ahead of us, and so they kind of got there and helped coordinate getting a [inaudible] --.

Kurtz: So these helicopters were brand-new when --.

Rettenmund: Brand-new. They had less than 25 flying hours. They were all test hours. And whatever it was -- we -- and whatever it was, flying it, took to get to -- we actually lost one. Because all of our numbers were in a row, 860 was mine. We had 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 -- actually, we had one that was -- I think

it was 868, and then we didn't have that one, and we found out that they had some problems, so it was left behind, and they sent another one to take its place, so.

Kurtz: OK. What happened on your ship cruise across the Pacific?

Rettenmund: Other than getting sick? Not too much training or anything. We just sat around and tried to enjoy the ride. Most of the time I stayed in the rack because it seemed a good way to keep my stomach. I never had to throw up or anything, like some of the guys did, seasick, but it is about -- we stopped twice, and so without that much duty, I could lay down and kind of relax, and didn't really feel like eating too much of anything. And then we stopped in Hawaii and they let us off for nine hours, and everybody got back on, too. And then we headed -- we had one of the Marines on board, because there was a lot of different other soldiers on board who had appendicitis, so we stopped in Guam, and they came out from Guam and picked them up. And -- anyway. And at the same time, in January, you know how chilly it is around Wisconsin? Well, Fort Benning's pretty chilly too. Even California in January. So the guys enjoyed getting out on the deck, but without that much to do with no shirt on. Well, that damn sun out there in Guam just cooked them. Oh, man, they were fried in a couple hours. And some guys should have gotten Article 15s from it and stuff. And we had to carry some of the guys' backpack -- they couldn't even put them on, they were -- you know, anyway. But that -- so then we arrived at, oh --.

Kurtz: Cam Ranh Bay?

Rettenmund: Cam Ranh Bay, yeah. Cam Ranh Bay is where most of the ships come in. We stayed there that night and then headed for Vung Tau, I think the next day.

Kurtz: How did you get to Vung Tau?

Rettenmund: Ship, still ship.

Kurtz: The same --?

Rettenmund: Yeah. They let a lot of people off at Cam Ranh Bay, and the ones that were going -- the Marines that probably were going up to Da Nang and the like. And I remember, we didn't get off the ship, although at night they were throwing grenades off the ship, and you could hear them, *whump!* You know, like, bang, they would go off, and then we'd watch the green tracers and the red tracers and holy shit on the -- [inaudible]

Kurtz: So at [inaudible] --.

Rettenmund: There was a firefight on the land, and we were still way out in the -- quite a ways out, [inaudible] --.

Kurtz: Well, you -- at Cam Ranh Bay, you didn't get on land.

Rettenmund: No, I didn't. Mmm-mm.

Kurtz: OK.

Rettenmund: And we had -- I don't know whether they're called LSTs or that type of thing. And they weren't ducks, but they would load -- and so at Tau they went on board -- went to Cam Ranh, those guys did. And then they came back in the Lincoln, and I don't know if they loaded them up or what they did, but in Vung Tau, when we got there the next day, they came and got us, or we loaded up in those, and they came to show our, you know, like World War II guys, you know, "hey," you know. (laughter) And [inaudible] --.

Kurtz: So was there anybody there to greet you? The Vietnamese, the, you know --.

Rettenmund: There was, let's see. Our company commander, there was Vietnamese officers there, kind of welcoming us, anyway. And they kind of moved us pretty well right over to the runway, and we took off in C130s or C123s for Phuoc Vinh, which was about 45 miles north of Saigon, and -- which was going to be our company area. The helicopters were either there already or just getting there, so for the first two or three weeks I was there after the February 3<sup>rd</sup> through -- or February 2<sup>nd</sup>, I think, through -- I didn't go pick the helicopters up until the end of the month, and then most of us crew chiefs went on -- went down, and we stayed overnight with them in tents and cleaned them up as best we could, because they had a lot of cosmoline, and wrapped stuff up on them. [inaudible]

Kurtz: So what did you do --.

Rettenmund: So -- and then we all flew back. Flew the whole damn works back --.

Kurtz: What did you do for the three weeks you were at Phuoc Vinh?

Rettenmund: Unloaded all those CONEXes that I loaded up at Fort Benning. You know, the equipment, tents, machine guns, I suppose, all kinds of different equipment. Wall lockers, foot lockers, you know, they'd come in and off of our ship from Chinooks, and they would drop them off and then -- right off between the village [inaudible] --.

Kurtz: Well, did you have to build the base then, or --?

Rettenmund: Our -- Phuoc Vinh was an old Vietnamese, maybe even a French, fort that was built there. And they had wooden-type structures -- you could see right through them, reminded me of our corn cribs at home. But each had floors --.

Kurtz: Let me -- let me stop --.

[break in recording] [00:28:20]

Kurtz: -- over the tape. I forgot what we were talking about, because the machine -- we were talking about picking up the helicopters.

Rettenmund: Yeah. Mm-hmm.

Kurtz: Why don't we go back through that.

Rettenmund: Yeah. We picked the helicopters up about two -- about two weeks after, and brought them all to Phuoc Vinh. Before that, we were unloading our equipment from the States, and then we got training by sister companies that were -- but we also had -- orientation ride was the first things we did, showing where our AO, or area of operation, was, and the different towns that were around and the like, and --.

Kurtz: How big of an area was that, roughly?

Rettenmund: Oh, boy. I don't know how many miles that would be, because we were -- we covered north of Saigon all the way on up to An Loc, all the way over to Tay Ninh. And we even -- wherever the First Infantry was, we were. And then if they didn't -- if the First Infantry didn't use us that day, whether it was one helicopter or ten of us, or heavy gun team, light gun team, whatever, we -- lots of times the First Infantry, or the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry, we pulled assaults with them. And Vietnamese fits in then too.

Kurtz: What was the difference between the heavy gun team and the light gun team?

Rettenmund: Usually an extra helicopter. Light gun team could be two, heavy gun could be three. And those guns could be, oh, most of them had rockets on -- some of them had all rockets, some of them had 40-millimeter grenade launchers in the front. They all had door gunners and crew chiefs. Some of them had -- most of ours all had flex guns, and we didn't have any mini guns. The Robin Hoods, when they arrived the next month, brought mini guns with them. And we never, that I can remember, during our year, had mini guns put on. They kept the flex guns. And a lot of my mechanic

friends out of school were picked to go into the gun ships, just like I was picked to -- there wasn't really too much rhyme or reason. After that people volunteered for that stuff, but before that, everybody just was assigned. And you got to start someplace. And --.

Kurtz: Sure, sure. Well, we were also talking about a combat assault, and you said you started about five in the morning. Did you --.

Rettenmund: Yeah, we'd usually generally -- because you're up at the crack of dawn or before to eat, go out and do a pre-flight, so we might be kicking off --.

Kurtz: What was it about --.

Rettenmund: -- about 6:30 --.

Kurtz: What was involved in pre-flight?

Rettenmund: Pre-flight, we -- I got there first, the crew chief, and we'd go around the aircraft checking fuel, crawling underneath it, checking the relief valves on the bladders to make sure we always lifted up and let a little drain out. Usually if there was water in it it would come out then, and then that was the only [inaudible] usually did that. He'd check all your oil ports, your tail rotor gear boxes to transmission, the oil levers, all that up to take in your engine, go up and -- upstairs and check the rotor blades, pull on your linkage and -- lots of it was just tugging and pushing and pulling and feeling and --.

Kurtz: OK. What did you do if you found a problem?

Rettenmund: Well, generally we didn't. We'd find them at night, because we'd work a lot harder at night to find those problems. In the morning it was flyable, and it was rare -- I did have one time a guy came and took my master control panel, and I didn't notice it. And so we had to stand down and everybody else took off until I could get another one. So we were about 45 minutes, and I was totally embarrassed on that one.

Kurtz: Sure.

Rettenmund: But -- because we were in charge -- lots of times the mechanic wasn't the mechanic, or the crew chief wasn't the mechanic, it was a -- like a carpent-  
- or like a guy building a house who was the manager. And he would get Avionics to come out. He would get all the things that would happen during the day of the flight that they would -- we would talk over or add to the flight records and stuff, things that we should be looking at. You know, and then I'd go get an expert, and, you know, and [inaudible] --.

Kurtz: Did the pilot and --.

Rettenmund: The pilots, they were both -- usually -- especially the pilot would [inaudible] their own inspection, post flight.

Kurtz: What's the difference between a pilot and a ship commander?

Rettenmund: Time. If you had a lot of time, you could be put in for aircraft commander. Usually they were in country quite a while, and they flew as a pilot for quite a while, doing combat assaults and doing support-type missions -- takeoffs, landings -- and be comfortable with surroundings, map reading, and the like. Because you were in charge. And the first part of our -- we didn't have anybody in charge, everybody just sat in a seat until we wound up getting people that everybody recognized as a little better than next, so they made them the aircraft commanders and --

Kurtz: Which seat did they sit in?

Rettenmund: They sat on the left side. The pilot always sat on the right because it had more instruments on the right. You can start and fly and everything from the left seat, but generally the pilot was on the right seat.

Kurtz: OK, so when you went then on a mission, you were all set to go about 6:30 in the morning, then what would happen?

Rettenmund: Yeah, something like that.

Kurtz: Then what would happen?

Rettenmund: We would -- gunner would show up with the guns and everything, and we would -- generally we had a flight of ten, with lots of times a heavy fire team with three gunships. And we'd move out to the runway, everybody would take off at the same time, and a lot of dust and stuff like that. And we would go, either sitting on that runway where the First was, or we'd fly someplace like, oh, Lai Khe, and pick up the First down there. And we would come in and land wherever they told us to. Some cases we would shut down and wait. Other -- most of the time everything was coordinated: at 7:15 we were going to be there, and we had sticks of ten, maybe three deep, of seven Americans. And those first seven would load, and we'd take off for the LZ, and --.

Kurtz: Was there any typical distance between your pickup points at a base camp and an LZ?

Rettenmund: Not -- well, typical, probably even wasn't more than, oh, 15 minutes, something like that? Of course, at 90 knots, you cover quite a bit at -- you

know, sometimes it was five minutes. You know, sometimes it was -- well, things like -- when you were moving quite a ways, maybe up to, like, a half hour up to, say, Phuoc Vinh -- or not Phuoc Vinh but Tay Ninh or something like that. But generally, I would say 20 minutes, you know, and you pretty well are in there. We'd go up to 1,500 feet generally. It was rare that we would go low-level.

Kurtz: What would dictate going low-level?

Rettenmund: Artillery in their same azimuth, or coming through -- you don't want to get shot out of the air by your own artillery. So we would either skirt around it, go underneath it and the like, and -- but generally we would be -- go up 1,500 feet, and when we get so far out you could sometimes see the LZ from where you were [inaudible] --.

Kurtz: Did they typically --.

Rettenmund: Typically they would bring in artillery strikes into the LZ, and they would be -- and then they'd fire a white phosphorus one, and then our gunships, our gunships would go in and assault, looking for anything that they could, and then they'd drop smoke where they wanted the lead helicopter to go in when they figured it was safe to come in. And then all of that time, we're inbound. So from 1,500 feet, we would -- I wouldn't say we auto-rotated, but we went, you know, we went into a trail position, and you'd -- the first guy was going down, everybody stacked almost on top of each other, you're overlapping or at least over the top of the tail rotor. As you're going down you want to try to drop as fast as you can to get from 1,500 down to low-level, and when we would come out on low-level we were either pretty close to the LZ or only had a few hundred yards or something like that to go, and then we'd put in. Or maybe if it was big enough, like, where we were, there were -- some of the LZs were awful big, rice paddies and stuff like that, and you'd put them right in, in that landing.

Kurtz: Did you come in with the guns firing from the [inaudible] --.

Rettenmund: Guns were firing up in front of us, and then [inaudible] --.

Kurtz: What about your [inaudible] the door gunners?

Rettenmund: When we would get maybe either fired on or they would call for suppressive fire, and I would shoot out one side of the door at anything that I could -- that looked like it would maybe hide somebody, bushes or tree lines, and you'd just keep the steady fire going, and we would start maybe, you know, a minute or two out, which, probably we were at 100 feet or something like that, and maybe less than an eighth of a mile out, you'd be getting down there, where it's serious business, and then you'd



start shooting. And we shot right up until the infantry jumped out. And usually we never fired after that. We didn't want to take any chances of hitting the infantry. But on the first lift, we would fire after we left the LZ sometimes. And -- as long as we didn't shoot back towards the LZ. But sometimes you were at the mercy of Old Charlie, if you wanted to drive and you couldn't shoot back, you know. And lots of times it was that way.

Kurtz: What kind of fire did you take from Charlie when they chose to shoot at you?

Rettenmund: Oh, it was almost always M2 carbines or 30-caliber carbines that they left over from Korea, and the Vietnamese liked them because they're little short things. And M1 grands were taken from the troops, bolt action French guns, little burp guns. BARs. I don't know how much AK-47s we had in there in 1966 in the earlier part. It's funny; as we went along, things changed, month by month. It was quite a bit different in May and June than it was in November, a lot different. Lots of fire in November.

Kurtz: By -- more automatic weapons?

Rettenmund: More of the automatic weapons and, you know, even -- I shot at by 50 -- you know, that's an experience. And it's like somebody hitting the side of the aircraft with a hammer, and that's the misses. If it ever got hit by one, I don't know what that would sound like.

Kurtz: Did you ever have an airplane go down by gunfire?

Rettenmund: No. I've been forced down a few times, but with, you know, holes in the rotor blades, and then in the belly -- I got shot right underneath my seat once and [inaudible] --.

Kurtz: What is the SOP when you get forced down?

Rettenmund: Well, if you would get -- well, forced down is someplace you can make it to the friendly area. If you're shot down, I mean, you have to go. I mean, there isn't -- fortunately I never had to get shot down, and -- I crashed twice, but it was pilot error. (laughter) And that type of thing, and [inaudible] --.

Kurtz: By pilot error? Is that, like, when they hit something, or --?

Rettenmund: Yeah. Both -- the first one I hit a telephone pole, and I had 144 hours on 860, and we were coming in and hit a steel pole, just put the tip of the blade on it, right on the road. And I remember as we were crashing to the ground the infantry were ducking. They had the -- we were picking them up to take them out, and so when we crashed everybody else diverted to a

different spot, and the infantry had to move and they took them out, but that was --.

Kurtz: Were they able to fix that ship?

Rettenmund: Yeah, I think they -- I never was able to find a record of it. The best I could say, they dumped it in the South China Sea. Stripped it and dumped it. The other two helicopters I had, the one that went down was repaired in the States and then shipped back to Vietnam, and it burnt up in a -- when it crashed over there again. And there was a fire from a firefight and started the grass on fire and burnt the helicopter up. It should have been able to be hooked out, but it didn't take it, so. Anyway.

Kurtz: Well, we were talking about going into LZs. What percentage of the LZs did you go in that were hot?

Rettenmund: Oh, a really small percentage. During my year -- I wouldn't think any more than 10%.

Kurtz: OK. Were any of the -- did you ever have any expression with LZs that were booby-trapped with, you know, dead artillery shells and stuff like that?

Rettenmund: Not on my tour. I lost my pilot -- the last guy who flew my helicopter, he was our platoon commander, he's a major. That's another story, but we went over with 23 majors. And we were supposed to have 23 warrant officers but we had 23 majors. Had no warrant officers. So we had heavy-duty -- anyway, but he was -- they had a mine -- a bomb detonated and blew the whole front end off the helicopter. And both pilots were killed, and the door gunner was at -- was our doctor. He was flying as gunner. And the crew chief I knew; he was on his second tour and he broke his back. And Carrus [??] was kind of left hanging upside-down for -- I don't know, it was hours before they were able to get in there. But that was -- they said -- he was the lead helicopter, and I almost always flew lead helicopter, just because I always had a new ship all the time. And [inaudible] --.

Kurtz: Why was that that you had a new ship?

Rettenmund: Well, the first one crashed with 144 hours. The second one, I had -- oh, I had 400-and-something on that one, and we tore the tail rotor off coming in to pick the First Infantry up in a pickup zone. Fortunately, both of these accidents were in pickup zones, which are more secure than they are LZs. And then within -- most of the time within two weeks I got a brand-new one from the States. Because we were a combat outfit, and we had priorities. And even the general didn't get a helicopter. We would go

TDY and fly the general around, and, well, after a while he got one too, but -- and so generally people like to fly, and I did, too, in one that was always new. You didn't hardly have any maintenance to do on it, and you'd -- when you'd start getting three, four hundred hours on the engines in that kind of conditions of dirt and dust and [inaudible] --.

Kurtz: How many hours could you get on an engine before it had to be replaced?

Rettenmund: I think they usually did, if I remember right, about 500 to 600 hours, if I remember right. I never got that far. (laughter) My third one had six -- what did I have, six? Well, we didn't change the engine at six, then, that I know of. But maybe it was -- maybe they were shooting for 1,000 hours. I don't --.

Kurtz: Yeah. What --.

Rettenmund: I thought it was like 600, but --.

Kurtz: Were there any problems with the air frame or anything like that that stood out, or rotors, or --?

Rettenmund: Not really. Pretty well everything was taken care of. Our gunships had a real bad problem with nylon bushings in the push-pull tubes, and everything that went around, they would wear out so fast. Sometimes they would wear out in a mechanical flight, where the maintenance officer would take them up, and they were already starting to wear already. And it was a different -- a brand-new rotor system that we took over and called up -- door hinge or 540 rotor systems to -- you know, which is the same thing that's on Cobra gunships. And --.

Kurtz: Because the gun ships you had were not Cobras.

Rettenmund: They were not. Cobras didn't get here until about nine months after I left in the fall of '67, just a couple-three months before Tet. And then they were still new then, you know, but.

Kurtz: So how many lifts would you do on a typical day?

Rettenmund: In a fairly large assault, most of the time we did two lifts or three lifts. You're talking ten times seven times three, you're -- as an infantry guy, would probably understand how many people that would be --.

Kurtz: [inaudible] battalion.

Rettenmund: Yeah. A battalion force if you're taking three lifts. If you're taking a company, we can usually get 70 guys in, which in Vietnam --.

Kurtz: Is a company.

Rettenmund: -- maybe was just the company, where it should probably have been 120 or something. And there may not -- may be that many people in the company, but not out in the jungle there.

Kurtz: Did you work seven-day weeks, or --?

Rettenmund: Seven-day weeks, yeah. I only knew when Sunday was when I -- lots of times I would haul a chaplain around on Sunday. And so, well, it's got to be Sunday.

Kurtz: Yeah. Did you have an NCO club at Phuoc Vinh?

Rettenmund: Yeah, we had NCO, EM club, which I could go to -- and I never made E5, so I didn't go into the NCO. And we had an officers' club, too, I usually -- you know, I never got in there either. But I'd go to EM club. I was never much of a drinker; I'd usually get sick. And I tried to drink and see how it was flying with a hangover, and it doesn't work. It doesn't work at all. And -- at least I couldn't handle it. And I just felt that I was not -- if you weren't 100%, you weren't doing your right job up there. Maybe that sounds a little -- [inaudible]

Kurtz: Did you have an R&R while you were in Vietnam?

Rettenmund: Well, I only got 50 bucks a month. I sent the rest home because I wanted to buy a new car when I got home. I had a chance to go to Borneo, and I kind of wished I would have been able to figure out -- get some money to do that. But I wanted to go to Australia, but because Australia was part of our force, and over there, they didn't open up R&R until late '66. And I guess that was a little bit different story, where they didn't want troops coming, and they had a whole thing with the locals, when they had their own convent. But that did change, too, people had to go someplace, and --.

Kurtz: Did you ever get to Saigon?

Rettenmund: I got to Saigon quite a few times. Picked up stuff. Once in a while we got down to the PX. I didn't go to Saigon as -- on anything personal. It was always part of the job. I sat on the -- on the soccer field, near the PX. As a matter of fact, most of the time I'd get stuck behind because they wanted somebody left behind, and so I didn't get a chance to go in, or I'd have to tell them or send some money with them, and the pilots and the door gunner would go in. And one time when I went into the soccer field out there, I had two MPs show up, and I thought I was really in for trouble.

Anyway, and all it was was two Australian MPs who wanted to see what the guns were like and what it was like, and show us around the helicopter, and we had a pretty good time, and they never said anything. Didn't care whether you parked there or not.

Kurtz: Were you stationed at Phuoc Vinh the whole time?

Rettenmund: The whole time.

Kurtz: The whole time. Did you have any connection with the local government in Phuoc Vinh or anything like that, or the local culture?

Rettenmund: No, not really. The village of Phuoc Vinh was on the other side of the wire, on the other side of the -- on the end of the runway, there was a Vietnamese outfit there, too, across from us, in between, or alongside, the runway. And away on the other side the First Infantry used to be. I guess they moved to Lai Khe relatively soon after we were there. I did -- you know, I did go into town a couple of times. I needed a foot locker once, a pillow you know, stuff like that. But I was a good Catholic so I didn't need to go into town for that other stuff, if you know what I mean.

Kurtz: Yup. They have a pretty big Catholic church in Phuoc Vinh, too, if I remember --.

Rettenmund: Yeah, there are -- from the air, it looked like -- I didn't know it was Catholic, but they probably -- if they weren't Buddhist, they probably were Catholic.

Kurtz: Yeah, it was Catholic.

Rettenmund: And the --.

Kurtz: Did you get to the Cao Dai temple in Tay Ninh?

Rettenmund: Nope, never did. Saw it from the air, but --.

Kurtz: Kind of an impressive-looking place.

Rettenmund: Oh, yeah. Yeah, it was -- it really looked kind of -- you know, from the air everything is -- some of those landmarks are -- you get tired of looking at just trees, and [inaudible] --.

Kurtz: What about night flying? Did you do much night flying?

Rettenmund: Not a lot of night flights. We had standbys, and lots of times I made it through standbys at night without having to go out. And then, like, if we

did, it was usually -- I remember one time the First got nailed pretty good, and they actually brought them wounded in by Chinooks. And then we -- into Phuoc Vinh, and we picked them up and took them into the hospital after that. But why they didn't, I'm not sure. But, you know, that was an awful big bird for getting people out. There was a lot of people hurt there. But generally I wasn't too much night flights. We overlapped into the night, and our night flights on -- generally our night flights came from direct combats more, where Birmingham, some of the ones in November, but [inaudible] --.

Kurtz: Caesar Falls [??].

Rettenmund: Caesar Falls, yeah, something like that was -- Junction city had started--.

Kurtz: Attleborough [??] --.

Rettenmund: --Attleborough was the one before that. Junction City, I think, started the day after I left. The next day. It was one of the reasons why I didn't [inaudible] --.

Kurtz: That was a good idea to leave. It was a good idea that you left. What about bad-weather flying?

Rettenmund: Did it -- I'd just close the door sometimes. You know, we always had the -- I always had doors, but -- on, but we'd fly in the bad weather anyway. In the daytime. Bad weather at night was really pretty tough. And generally our guns was doing the night flying. And we had night flight equipment on the Huey, and fortunately, I suppose, for me, I didn't do a lot of that. It seems like when we did it was an awful lot, you know, like, we'd get back at two o'clock in the morning after leaving at five in the morning, you know.

Kurtz: Yeah. So --.

Rettenmund: And you slept pretty good for about three hours, you know, but --.

Kurtz: Well, you said when you got back, you checked over to helicopters, and that was heavy.

Rettenmund: Oh, yeah.

Kurtz: What would that constitute?

Rettenmund: Well, I generally took a half hour, 45 minutes, sometimes an hour -- all depends on, you know, how -- what I was looking for. Same thing as the pre-flight, you're going over -- all around, of course. And at night, you're

looking for battle damage, like strike damage or anything like that. But usually, strike damage we would have caught before, because of when it's -- strike damage and you are somewhat forced down, so you'd take a look at it, and see how -- if it's flyable or anything, and --.

[Tape 2]

Kurtz: Okay. You were talking about night flight checks.

Rettenmund: Yes, our post-flight -- that's -- generally, you know, a pilot would do a little post-flight dual and we'd already had the book written up, some problems that we would be having. We had conditions in the book, from caution, remarks of, you know, zerk fittings or something like that are loose that need to be repaired, a fire extinguisher was empty, you know, and then you get things that are caution, which was things that you could fly with, but you want to try to get it as fixed as fairly soon as you can. And then red X was you can't fly it. You know, sometimes I would have to red X it -- that was fairly -- didn't happen very often. If my aircraft was red Xed, it was usually between the pilot and I and we already knew it, either on the way in or for that type of thing.

Kurtz: Did you have a pretty good relationship with the pilots?

Rettenmund: That was real easy. We were --.

Kurtz: Even with the majors?

Rettenmund: The majors was easier than -- they were the easiest. I was surprised, on those 23 majors, how many of them finished the tour with me that did not leave for other outfits. I think they all expected to be Italian officers, and they all were right out of school, just like the warrant officers are right out of school. You know, back in those days they would take any kind of body who wanted to transfer over for pilots, where before that it was a lot harder to do anything like that. And -- so they flew combats and they were family men and everything, and [inaudible].

Kurtz: What was your reaction towards the officers you worked with? Was it pretty positive or negative?

Rettenmund: Pretty positive. We had some that were, you know, didn't like quite as well as the next one. All in all, they were real good, real good people. They were very professional. I know that the -- you know, we didn't get real personal -- one case in point, one guy was named Chappie -- Chappie James is -- and one of my crew chief friends called him Chappie once, and he was told that that was not -- you know, he was a major, you know, and

it was either "sir" or whatever. But it wasn't a real chew-out or anything; he just wanted it kept that way, you know, and --.

Kurtz: Sure, I understand.

Rettenmund: I guess --.

Kurtz: What about NCOs?

Rettenmund: NCOs were -- they were always busy. Whether it was the first -- first sergeant or the crew, crew chief maintenance sergeants and gunner sergeants and the like, they were -- they had lots of paperwork and book work in keeping track of their crew and everything. And I never felt that there were any person that I would be in fear of, or nervous of -- you know, I -- to be honest with you, I think crew chiefs had a little bit of a halo around 'em --.

Kurtz: Sure.

Rettenmund: -- or something, that they were -- we were a little different than the other guy walking around, and even though we didn't -- it wasn't sure, but, you know, it didn't seem -- but I think it was that way, you know, where they didn't bother you as much as the next guy, you know, if your hat was [inaudible] --.

Kurtz: What did you tell your family about your experiences, by letter or whatever?

Rettenmund: Oh, I had -- I wrote -- I tried to write at least once a week. But they learned all about the weather, and -- about, you know, how I was feeling, you know, how green the grass was, what the hooches looked like, and --

Kurtz: In other words, you --.

Rettenmund: -- the helicopters, and the -- I did tell them that I crashed. And I'm not sure that was a good idea. It got out, and I sent some pictures home that showed the common area, and the crash ones were on it, and so they stuck it in the paper that she's -- and excerpts from the letters, a couple letters I sent home, anyway. But I tried to keep it --.

Kurtz: So basically you didn't tell them what you did.

Rettenmund: Right, and -- right. And so I have all the letters from home that my mother kept for me, but I went through them once and there was nothing in there -- I tried to find, you know, like, a June 28<sup>th</sup>, you know, what I was doing, and there was a little somewhat of what I was doing, I knew what the



weather was like. And sometimes it was just, hi, hello, doing fine, you know, and you'd send it home on a C-ration box or something, you know, they could ship it almost any way. And --.

Kurtz: I've got a whole body of letters exactly like that.

Rettenmund: Yeah, yeah. I wish I had some of the ones that were sent to me, but of course that was --.

Kurtz: They were pretty hard to keep. What was the morale of the unit that you were in?

Rettenmund: I can't think of any time there wasn't high morale. I felt, you know, real proud of what you were doing. My basic thing for me, and I think it might have been a little different for the other door gunners and the pilots, was for me, I had my cousin Junior in the First, and he was an infantry guy, and most of us crew, we served the infantry, wherever the hell they said. "Come on down here," bullets are flying -- yeah, come on down, we'll, you know. We'd get hot chow to them or hospital or whatever it happens to be. Haul them beer --.

Kurtz: The beer was good.

Rettenmund: It was good, yeah. Sometimes I'd sample it, anyway, and I remember even telling the guys that I was picking up, I says, "I sampled one of them." "Oh, that's fine, we're just glad to get it." Because we were the people that moved stuff around and [inaudible].

Kurtz: What did you think your mission was over there?

Rettenmund: Well, my mission was to serve the First Infantry division. And we were a combat assault outfit, and that was our main job, to take troops from an LZ or from a pickup zone to an LZ or a landing zone, and then support them during that day, during that week, during that month. If it's just a mission or if it was a full-blown Birmingham, you know, where you got battalions and everybody involved, then we'd actually even go sit on the runway and put up tents at Dau Tieng, and so you're on call all the time. As long as you're waking up at five in the morning, you don't have to fly way the hell up there to do it -- you're there. Of course, we'd wind up bringing cots and things like that along with us in, too, and sometimes they had tents for us and they brought up too. But our crews -- and the gun ships were used to that. Lots of times they were TDY all the time, and --.

Kurtz: Did you have any idea why the United States was in Vietnam, or any impression?

Rettenmund: Well, we were stopping the communists from coming down, or the -- what I always said was the domino theory. That's what they told us all the time. If they were -- if they were talking positive about it, this was the domino theory. And --.

Kurtz: Forty years later, what is your view?

Rettenmund: Well, 40 years later, it seemed like a heck of a, you know, a thing that we were doing. If I had to do it all over again, I wish somebody would have said "let's not do it." Because any time you escalate, you make things worse. I found that out from -- it just gets worse. You know, and you're better off taking a bag of apples over, or even better, a bag of seeds, and doing your thing that way than the last resort as a combat type of thing. I would do it over again, I was just -- the experience was -- it's a little hard to explain sometimes, but you --

Kurtz: How do you --.

Rettenmund: Probably if -- today kids don't get drafted; I probably wouldn't be in the service, I would still be in art school. It was just part of the thing of getting drafted, you know, it was part of life. It was an automatic thing, like kids nowadays go on to college, you know, or go on to high school, you know, [inaudible] --.

Kurtz: What do you think about those people that say that going to Vietnam was a waste of time? You know, they didn't choose to do it because they didn't support it? Do you have any thoughts about those people?

Rettenmund: Draft-dodgers in particular?

Kurtz: Yeah, yeah.

Rettenmund: Oh, I -- to me it was a last resort, and if I really wanted to do it myself, I would have probably joined the Navy or something else that would have made it more beneficial to me. Maybe a guy could have got in the Peace Corps somehow and got out of it or something, but -- I mean, it just seems like you're sticking your country in the back by not supporting what your President and Congress have said, you know, same way as right now, you know, the guys are over there, and they're supporting whatever good reason, bad reason -- we'll see what history has to say about that one. History for us, it was a war for us, and it was a terrible thing. And personally, being in aviation, there were so many rewards that I got back from supporting the infantry. You know, everything from pat on the backs, and the smiles and everything on the way out, you know, maybe even on the way in, where the guys said, "Well, if I'm going to get hit, maybe I'd better do it right now, because all the helicopters are right

here.” And for us crew, we -- if the thing would stay flyable, we could get our wounded butt to the hospital in minutes. You know, and that was elevated. We also -- the guy behind us would follow us in if we were going in. And that’s kind of the -- you protected yourself that way. And most of us fought hard to do a job for -- because they don’t want to be out in the boondocks like our soldiers were. And so whatever we could do to help, I think it was pretty well -- you could probably ask everybody in aviation that way. And aviation itself, in helicopter countries, tended to be a higher esprit d’corps anyway. And maybe because of the small crew type thing -- guns always were the same crew. I mean, you know, you had a gun guy, the officers would use the same gun ship all the time. We were -- [inaudible] were all the -- you know, they were all the same, didn’t make any difference which one you were on, but the ordnance delivery on the guns was different. And, of course, then you worked together with your crew because you have to be pulling the trigger a lot more. I am doing suppressive fire, they’re doing it for aggressive or positive or [inaudible] --.

Kurtz: Sure. How do you feel this experience affected the rest of your life?

Rettenmund: Well, here I am sitting telling the story that many years later, is one way. I don't know, chaplain in the legion wouldn't have been -- I'm a black belt in nan kido [??] karate, it's run by Vietnam vets for stress-related -- and they set it up, and I've been in that for 12, 13 years now.

Kurtz: And where is that at?

Rettenmund: It's a little church over by West High over there. Bethany, the United Methodist. They let us use the hall every Tuesday night, so. Yeah, we've been doing that a long time. Oh, you know, like, vets' rides, I like to bicycle ride from Madison to the high ground for 10 years. You know, I suppose, you know, maybe some parades or something like that. I would have always thought I would have been a patriotic type of guy. I think it probably makes me more patriotic -- it doesn't necessarily make me more Republican (laughter) than -- and it doesn't always make me more Democrat either. It all depends on which way -- if it has something to do with shooting up there, I'd probably be a lot more Democrat. That's maybe a poor way to do it, but if you have to, then go. But if you can yell, scream, or holler before, then it would probably be a -- before you get into trouble, or somebody else does --.

Kurtz: So on the whole you've got -- listening to you it sounds to me like it was a positive experience.

Rettenmund: Yeah. Yeah, it was a positive experience for me. I was terrifically glad when my cousin left in one piece. My other cousin, his brother, the three

of us overlapped, and so I left, and then the other cousins left after that, a short time. And so you had people that were connected. There was, like, 14 of us from Black Earth in Vietnam. Two of them I saw over there. One I didn't even know.

Kurtz: How'd you know he was from Black Earth? Because of the way he talked?

Rettenmund: No. Got time for a quick little story?

Kurtz: Sure.

Rettenmund: There was a grocery store in Black Earth when I was growing up called Simley's [??]. Simley's daughter was a few years older than me; she was married to an Army captain. And he was older than me, and I really didn't know him -- I'm not sure if he, you know, would walk in the door if I wouldn't -- you know, I would now, I mean, but not then. And right before I left for Vietnam I was in the store and she said, you know, "If you see my husband Gordy over there, say hi." You know, and I didn't have the heart to tell her if he walked in here right now, unless he was in uniform, I wouldn't know him. Anyway, we picked up a captain from the artillery outfit and we were taking him to another artillery -- he was an XO, apparently, over there -- and I looked down at his duffel bag, where he was being transferred -- Captain Gordon DeWitt, right across the top of the bag. And I said, "Oh, shit, I wonder if --" So I said, "You wouldn't happen to be from Black Earth?" "Well, yeah." You know, and we started talking back, and I was telling him about, you know, "Your wife said to say hi and everything when I run into you," you know. "How did she know?" But anyway, my pilot turns around and he says, "Well, who are you talking to? He looks familiar," and so I told him, "I went to OCS with him." He says, "Give him your helmet." So for the rest of the trip he wore my helmet talking to him.

Kurtz: (laughter) And talked to him. (laughter)

Rettenmund: Anyway, and then I never seen him again. He was killed in -- when he got back. He was the CO of a guard unit up north, and he got ran down by a hit-and-run car when he was coming back from town and he was walking back to the base, so. He only had just a couple months left, and then he was going to retire. So that sucked. And then the other guy I ran into was -- remember me telling you that my classmates, three of them --?

Kurtz: Yeah.

Rettenmund: Well, one of them was a good friend of mine, and the other guy, his brother, was my brother's best friend, who was two years younger than

me. And he went to 'Nam. And I'm walking out of the -- or he's walking out of the AM club as I'm walking in, and it's Tom, you know. And so we turned around and went back and had a beer or two. He was in a mortar outfit outside the fence, and they let us come -- let them come in and use our AM club and the like. So that was kind of a -- but seeing somebody's duffel bag, it was hard to forget the coincidence of something like that, but --.

Kurtz: Is there anything we haven't covered that we should have covered, Bill?

Rettenmund: Well, came back to Black Earth, I never noticed any spitting or all that stuff. I had the American Legion, like, junior or jinx. He was already in it and he was going around to different things in the state, being the first veteran coming back. He got me into the Legion. Of course, my uncles are all American Legions. Sometimes we go to a meeting -- three-quarters of the people there are all relatives, and it was easy to come back in, you know, because I actually went to a meeting when I came home in January, before I -- when I come back from Vietnam, and then I got 15-day leave, and so went to, actually, one of the meetings -- they invited me. So it was really easy to come back. I didn't run into too many things. I had some people that, you know, it was one of those things, you put your uniform away and don't talk about it. It was just too much to give information to somebody who didn't want it, or was looking for the right -- or for the wrong kind or the right kind, whichever way you're looking at it. I had a -- you know, I had an aunt who was not happy with the Vietnam, and of course, her son was in Germany, my classmate. And that's fine too. My uncle was wondering what I was doing back -- "the war isn't over." And he's, of course, a duration guy from World War II, and it was kind of -- it was one of those that kind of stuck in your craw a little bit. But when we were given a year, 12 months, 13 months, whatever it happened to be, that would -- when the Army and the United States felt it was fine, good enough, you know, you could go home and feel satisfied with it anyway. And I had -- my cousin come up and shook my hand, thanked me, he says, "I wanted to thank you for serving." You know, and he never was in the service or anything, but oh, it's -- that's all he ever said. And I thought it was really kind of nice. But that -- it was -- there isn't too many things like that happen.

Kurtz: So that's a good note probably to end it on, don't you think?

Rettenmund: Yeah, mm-hmm.

Kurtz: OK, good.

[End of interview]