

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
MICHAEL BORCHARDT
Truck Driver, Army, Vietnam War
2015

OH 2006

OH 2006

Borchardt, Michael (b. 1949). Oral History Interview, 2015.

Approximate length: 73 minutes

Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.

Abstract:

In this oral history interview, Michael Borchardt, a native of Evanston, Illinois and currently resident of Wittenburg, Wisconsin, discusses his service in the US Army from December 1967 until January 1971, a truck driver in the 86th and 597th Transportation companies during the Vietnam War. At an early age he and his parents moved to Wittenburg, Wisconsin. With an older brother in the service, a WWII Navy dad, and older classmates in arms, Borchardt, after graduating high school, enlisted in December 1967, with a three-year obligation. From the farm he left for induction in Milwaukee. He remembers chiefly of his Fort Campbell, Kentucky, basic training the infiltration course and the gas chamber, and states the experience does “straighten you up in a hurry.” April 1968 found Borchardt at Fort Polk, “Little Vietnam,” in Louisiana for Advanced Infantry Training; the base’s nickname a sure indication of a trip to Vietnam, although he witnessed at Polk a professional football player for whom “Little Vietnam” was a station on the path to citizenship. Assigned to a transportation company Borchardt learned truck driving. Following a leave home, he flew to California at the end of June, and from Fort Lewis, Washington, he set out on a journey to Vietnam that had an unexpected detour when a Soviet MiG forced Seaboard World flight 235A down in the Kuril Islands. He furnishes a sense of the three-day ordeal. Borchardt limns his service after release and resumption of the flight to Yokohama, Japan. While with the 86th Transportation Company at Long Binh base in Vietnam he glimpses his future wife, performing in a girl band at the officer’s club to which he drove the company sergeant. Borchardt notes the different truck types that he drove in country, and their purposes. A transportation company supplied a division with different commodities; the 86th TC supplying the 5th Division, and his second tour posting with the 597th TC making deliveries to the 25th Infantry Division. He touches upon the dangers encountered while driving the trucks—with the 597th gun trucks he also manned the weapons—convoying up Highway 19 and Route 1; operating in the Mang Yang Pass amidst burning wrecked vehicles. The experience that is seared into his memory—a GI body in a swollen rice paddy. Borchardt states that a leave home after his first tour, which ended June 30, 1969, familiarized him with the gathering anti-war protests and helped prompt him to reup for a second tour in Vietnam. Landing at Qui Nhon, he was stationed at Camp Vasquez in the Central Highlands. Promoted to buck sergeant, the knowledge that he was “short” kept him going, but news of the growing protests in the US tempered his anticipation of returning home. Borchardt reflects upon his life after leaving the service in January 1971—the readjustment to civilian life; the unexpected reunion with the musician he espied overseas; the wartime friendships maintained. While he would repeat his service, Borchardt expresses no desire to return to the “commercial city” that he feels Vietnam has become.

Biographical Sketch:

Borchardt (b. 1949) served in the US Army from December 1967 to January 1971, a truck driver in the 86th and 597th Transportation companies during the Vietnam War. After service he returned to Wisconsin and to Wittenburg; pursued a career, and got married. He has been a member of the local American Legion post for forty-five years and has attended gun truck reunions.

Interviewed by Rick Berry, 2015.
Transcribed by Audio Transcription Service, 2016.
Abstract by Jeff Javid, 2017.

Interview Transcript:

[Beginning of Borchardt.OH2006_file1]

Berry: Today is August 11, 2015. This is an interview with Michael Borchardt who served with the 86th and 597th Transportation Company, United States Army during the Vietnam War. This interview is being conducted at the Madison Public Library; 201 West Mifflin Street; Madison, Wisconsin 53703. The interviewer is Rick Berry, and this interview is being recorded for the Wisconsin Veterans' Museum Oral History Program.

[End of Borchardt.OH2006_file1][Beginning of Borchardt.OH2006_file2]

Berry: Mike, the museum thanks you for doing this oral history interview. Can you tell me where and when you were born?

Borchardt: I was born in Evanston, Illinois in 1949, May 23. Only lived there for a few months and then moved to my Wittenberg, Wisconsin residence where I lived until I got married, pretty much.

Berry: Okay. Tell us about your background and life circumstances just prior to entering military service.

Borchardt: Pretty much just a small world farm. Dad was a mechanic, Mother was just a housewife; had seven children, so we had a big family. Had all our own garden and had one cow that we milked for our own milk. We did all the chores and went to school every day. In fact, I was probably considered a geek back then; I never missed a day of high school, even though I didn't want to go to school, but sometimes Daddy's hand was worse than not going, so you went.

Berry: What high school did you attend?

Borchardt: I went to the Wittenberg High School.

Berry: And when did you graduate?

Borchardt: In May of 1967.

Berry: Okay. So you completed high school and you're kind of thinking of what your future entails. What happened then?

Borchardt: Well actually my future was decided for me probably when I was a junior already because every male classmate ahead of me was in the service. That was pretty much you had no choice; that's where you were going. I didn't want to wait until I was drafted, so I knew I was going to go in, one way or the other. So a buddy of mine, we enlisted already in December of '67, which then it was called the Delayed Enlistment Program.

Berry: Did you enlist for a particular job area?

Borchardt: Not a particular job, but we went in what was called then the Buddy System, told by our recruitment officer that we would be guaranteed to stay together. And then after you got in, they just gave you a written test and kind of told you. I think we could have signed up for a particular job, but at that point, I didn't know what was out there.

Berry: Do you remember what the induction interview and physical was like, that sort of thing?

Borchardt: I remember the physical [laughs]; kind of embarrassing. Other than that, I just remember hopping the train in Elan [??], Wisconsin, the town north of Wittenberg, riding that to Milwaukee. Milwaukee's where we did all the physical and the induction.

Berry: Now how did your family, and friends, and siblings feel about your entry?

Borchardt: My family was supportive because my older brother was already in. They know too that the first three boys were all one year apart, so they know all three of us were going in the service, which we did eventually. So they were all right. And the friends, yeah, they kind of knew—Well it's better that was with me, kind of. And they threw parties for you when you left—

Berry: Was your dad a veteran?

Borchardt: Yes, World War II, Navy.

Berry: Of course, this happened in '67. There probably wasn't all that much in the way of anti-war sentiment at that time.

Borchardt: No. The biggest one I think started '68, '69. And we heard about it overseas; about all these protests and riots, and then hearing about these soldiers who are coming from the states before we're leaving, telling us, "You might not want to go back there right now."

Berry: Okay. Tell me about your basic training experience.

Borchardt: My basic training, before it actually started, me and my buddy did leave together for Milwaukee, got to Fort Campbell, Kentucky. Got off, went through and got all out clothes, and haircuts, and that's the last time I saw him until I got out of the service three years later. So that staying together didn't last very long.

Berry: Did you complain about that at all?

Borchardt: Back then, it was pretty much, "Shut up!" You didn't talk to your— [laughs] You know, so I really guess I didn't know who to go to. You feared your drill sergeant and that's who you respected, and that was it.

[00:05:16]

Berry: Where did basic training take place?

Borchardt: At Fort Campbell, Kentucky.

Berry: Fort Campbell? Could describe the camp, and the living facilities, and so forth there?

Borchardt: I would say it wasn't the worst as far as living; it was the barracks with so many different personalities and GIs. So it wasn't that relaxing; there was always somebody moving around or screaming. You didn't get a lot of sleep. I remember after two years in the service, I said, "Can't wait until I can just get home and be by myself in the quiet for a while." The only really bad experience—I don't know if it was bad—but the infiltration course; crawling under the wire and the muddier they could get it, the more they were happy. That and the gas chamber.

Berry: Did you enjoy that basic training experience?

Borchardt: Oh yeah! Probably not at the time so much, but as I got older and stuff, I realized boy, that will straighten you up in a hurry.

Berry: How about the guys in your barracks? Did you make any memorable or long-term friendships there?

Borchardt: Not there. No, I can't remember a single soldier from basic training.

Berry: How about recreation opportunities? You didn't really probably have all that much time off.

Borchardt: I don't remember any. I never was off the base. Never had any relatives, you know because I was quite a ways from home, come and see you; even at graduation or anything.

Berry: How about the food?

Borchardt: There again too, I don't remember a whole lot. All I remember is the drill sergeant saying you put it in your mouth and if you know what it is, it's been in there too long. Put it in your mouth and chew it on your way out. [laughs] That I remember!

Berry: Okay. Basic took how long? Two months or so?

Borchardt: I think it was six weeks or eight weeks, one of those two. It went until April, sometime in April and then it was on to EIT.

Berry: Tell us about your advanced infantry training or advanced individual training.

Borchardt: Well actually you could probably say infantry because the fort I went to was a little Vietnam Fort Polk, Louisiana. But at that point, I was put into a transportation. So that's where my truck driving skills were taught.

Berry: Explain what a transportation company is for us.

Borchardt: In Vietnam, a transportation company were the ones that were at a base camp, a bigger base camp, and then supported infantry divisions beyond. For instance, in Long Bend, we supplied the fifth infantry division, the Red Diamond. So we went to Tianan [??], Cu Chi, that area, Saigon.

Berry: Okay, let's get back to your advanced individual training. You were essentially trained as a heavy vehicle operator then?

Borchardt: At that time, it was considered a light vehicle operator, and then when I got to Vietnam, I was put in the light vehicle company. But after like three weeks there, they were converted to a medium vehicle company; went from duce-and-a-half to five-ton cargos.

Berry: So light vehicle were duce-and-a-half and above that would be medium—

Borchardt: —would be five, five-ton medium and then it's the semis, five-ton with the trailers.

Berry: Okay. How long did advanced individual training take?

Borchardt: That must have been another six weeks, I think. It obviously went to the first part of June because then I got my thirty-day leave. I know I left on the 28 of June.

Berry: Do you remember a really wonderful town outside of Fort Polk called Leesville?

Borchardt: Diseaseville? [laughter]

Berry: Tell us about that. Did you have a chance to go there on weekend passes and so forth?

[00:09:58]

Borchardt: No, no. I never took a weekend pass. One of the most memorable moments at Fort Polk. There was a professional football player there from overseas, and in order to become a US Citizen or whatever, he had to complete six weeks of military training or whatever. Turns out it was Jan Stenerud. So every night out behind the PX, our barracks are just across from the PX, he was out there kicking footballs.

Berry: Okay. How—Let's ask this question. How well did the training that you received at basic and at Fort Polk prepare you for your first act of duty station?

Borchardt: Very well, you know. The weapons training and the truck driving skills; it's different than driving—A military vehicle's a lot different than driving a car because there's such a heavy, bulky, little harder steering.

Berry: Okay and then you apparently had to leave between your advanced individual training and your reporting to Vietnam. And then you came back home for that?

Borchardt: Came back home, yeah.

Berry: Tell us about that.

Borchardt: It went fast. It was mostly getting with some of my classmates, buddies that weren't already gone, and just partying. And went it got down to one-week or two-week, then I remember my parents throwing just a little going-away party at home there.

Berry: Okay. Then it came time for your first tour in Vietnam. Where did you leave from and how?

Borchardt: From what I recall, I left I believe Milwaukee on the 28 or 29 of June and flew to—

Berry: Would this be 1968?

Borchardt: Yeah. And flew to California, one of the bases there for induction or whatever. And then we flew to Fort Los Washington and that's where we departed from one June 30, 1968.

Berry: What sort of aircraft were you flying on?

Borchardt: It was a commercial airline called Seaboard World. Turned out this was its maiden flight; it was a brand new aircraft. So we took off; we were gone maybe two, two-and-a-half hours when I looked out my—I was a window seat—looked out my right window seat and I saw this real small aircraft coming. And he came up right underneath our wing. And I'm thinking this may be getting close to Japan; they're escorting us or something because we were supposed to go to Japan to fuel. And just like that, I saw another one off to the right. And all of the sudden, the pilot started making like maneuvers or something. So I looked out the window again and the pilot in this small craft—turns out it was a Russian make; it had a red star on it—and he's pointing like this.

Berry: Pointing down?

Borchardt: Down. And he was so close I could see his eyes right through his black goggles and his leather plastic shower cap he had on. So the pilot did go down like he was going to land, but there's nothing but water so what's he—Going to crash into the water? And just like that, he came back up. And the reason he came back up is he went down to scope out the landing strip. As he went back up and we leveled off again, they start shooting at us. We could see these tracers or red flares, so we don't know if they were actual rockets or if they were warning shots. So then he did go down. Just before we hit the water, a little metal corrugated airstrip shows up and that's what we landed on miraculously. I don't know, he landed it on a little make-strip made out of corrugated metal that I think they tinker-toyed or Legoad together back in those days. So I looked out the window and it was a like a dense, green valley, and all I could see was the local people running down off the hills in their garb that they—Scarves and stuff they wore back then. [00:15:10] Turns out we were on a deserted—not a deserted—a small island off the coast of Japan owned by the Russians; it was a chain of small island, Creole islands or something it was called. And we were boarded by some Russian military guy. I think he had to wait a while, I'm not sure, for a translator to tell us what was going on or tell the pilot. All I remember is one of the first things we were instructed to do was to pull all the window shades so we couldn't see outside.

Berry: So who was giving you these instructions? The crew on the commercial airplane?

Borchardt: Either the pilot or somebody did it. I mean, I was near the back so trying that filtered back, I wasn't extremely sure.

Berry: Did the pilot of the commercial aircraft let you know what was happening when you were making your approach to the island or anything?

Borchardt: No. No, nothing ever came over the intercom, so we knew nothing. I remember looking at my watch; it was 10:10 in the morning because I thought, "Well if that's when I'm going to do, I guess I'll know." But I thought later I guess I wouldn't have known. But we were held captive there for three days on the plane with no facilities, no heat, no air-conditioning. The only air that was allowed in the plane came in the front door and out the back door or vice versa. And then they brought in some food, some canned, must have been rations of beef. And gave us some Russian cigarettes; I still have my pack of Russian cigarettes that I never did smoke, so I didn't smoke them. But it was quite frightening at nineteen years old. We got to Vietnam and we've already spent probably four years of our life just not knowing what was going on.

Berry: Were there any NCOs or officers in the group there that kind of helped you guys hope?

Borchardt: There was one then, I guess, that took charge. I didn't know a lot of this until later reading an article that the pilot put out there; then pilot was Joseph Ducilini. The ranking officer I believe was a captain or something out of the whole group, and he was a dentist. So he took—You know, that's what you're supposed to do; the officer's supposed to take charge, so I guess that's where a lot of our—But living on that plane for three days. I never talked to anybody; I don't think anybody talked that I can remember. It was dead silence, the whole aisle because we all thought we were just on death row. I mean, I sat with a guy next to me like you for three days and I never knew his name, where he was from because we didn't go over as a unit. You went over as all individuals from the whole United States from forty different type backgrounds and companies. So then when I got home out of another two years of service, the only real memory I had of it was my mom kept the Western Union telegrams that they got. And I think my parents and my siblings were more afraid than probably I was.

Berry: Who sent the telegrams to your parents?

Borchardt: It was the military via Western Union Telegram. The officers came to the door and presented themselves and says, "We're here to tell you about your son." And my mother just lost it from what my sisters tell me. The first she could say is, "Which one?" because my brother was already in Vietnam which we were told was a no-no; supposedly two family members at one time shouldn't be there. So she called my dad at work and waited until he got home before they opened it, and that's when it said that I had been forced down on a Russian island and negotiations were taking place. And that's about all they could tell at that time. And then my sisters, they were probably about eleven and twelve at that time. [00:20:06] Well back then, the Russians were like the Martians and all, so they were all, "Oh my god, the Russians have Mike!" It was like

he's on some spaceship or something. So it was frightening for them too, I guess. So it was quite an ordeal. Then when we did have to go to the bathroom, they would take us off three at a time and march you out into the trees or whatever where they had make-shift outhouses. And each group of three had three armed AK-47 soldiers guarding us. And then when it did come time that we were released, the pilot did not know if he had enough fuel now to turn the plane around because he had wasted so much landing. So they unloaded us and we physically turned this big jet around by hand, pushing on the wheels and stuff. And then once he's turned around, then he didn't know if he had enough runway to get up enough speed to get off the island. Then some pictures surfaced years later from the Russian press showing all the fishing boats at the bay that the locals are ready to pick up the bodies when the plane crashed. So once we got off, we thought, "Oh maybe we're just going to fly to Japan, fuel, and then come back to America." Nowadays, that pretty much happens. Nope, made it to Japan and refueled, and on to Vietnam. Got there, then spent the day of interrogation. First thing they did was anybody that had a camera they confiscated; took the film out. Then I think that took almost a day, day-and-a-half. Then we flew to our prospective bases; mine was Long Bend so I flew into Tan Son Nhut and sat there for another half-day until somebody from my company picked me up. So I don't think I slept for about five days. Then my tour started.

Berry: This would have been the 86th Transportation Company?

Borchardt: Correct.

Berry: So tell us about your arrival at the company.

Borchardt: My arrival was, like I said, I was met by a gentleman; picked me up in a Jeep, brought me in. Then I met my platoon sergeant or company first sergeant. And the first thing I guess I said was, "I'm glad to be here. Where do I sleep?" [laughter] So I remember going to the hooch and sleeping. And then supposedly they wanted to maybe interrogate me more, so before they assigned me to a truck, I was assigned to just drive the company sergeant around. So I did that for, I think, two or three days max. And that's where another part of the story with my wife comes in. He wanted to go to the officer's club one night to see a band. So I drove him there, but I wasn't allowed in. But most of your clubs out there are open air; you can still see in. So I could see this all-girl band playing and that's about all I remember. Then after I got out of the service in '71, I went to work in '72 in Little Chute, Wisconsin working at a place. And there's a department with girls in it, workers on the line. I said to the maintenance guy, "This one girl looks so familiar. Where have I seen her before?" He said, "Well she was in an all-girl band that played in Vietnam." I said, "That's where I saw her." So after talking to her and dating for a few months, we got married, and forty-two years later, we're still married.

Berry: Okay. Let's get back to your military experience there. After you completed your three days or so as the company driver per se, you were assigned to a truck?

[00:25:09]

Borchardt: I was assigned to a truck and immediately, that was when we were turning from a light

vehicle to a medium vehicle. So the first few days then, we did more training from a deuce-and-a-half to a five-ton. And then once that, then I was assigned to a truck and that was your truck.

Berry: Tell us about the vehicle.

Borchardt: It's like a semi tractor-trailer; that's what the five-ton tractor is. There's also the five-ton cargo. This was the five-ton tractor; I guess they were forty-foot trailers. And we hauled supplies in. At night, the night shift would take the truck and the trailer and go to either ammo depot, load it with ammo; may go to a food depot, load it with rations; it may haul barrels of oil; it could haul anything. And then they would stage them and in the morning we'd get up about an hour before light. And then we were taken to the staging area and got into your truck. And then you left in convoy and pretty much drove all day long. Get back at six o'clock at night, pull your vehicle maintenance, and go to bed. I remember one of my first, first trips as a standard rule was you had to stay at least fifty feet from the truck in front of you just in case you got in an ambush. Well some of these roads were so mined up already with holes in them, and at one point, I fell behind on a curve or something, and come around the curve and there's a split in the road. I thought, "Oh my god. Now what do I do?" I lucked out; took the right one just by chance. That was kind of scary then because I had no idea where these roads went and you just relied on the guy in front of you. I tell you, you ran the destination a couple times and then you could drive in the dark.

Berry: Did you drive the same vehicle all the time?

Borchardt: Um-hm.

Berry: So you got to know the vehicle?

Borchardt: Oh yeah. You took care of your vehicle. I painted names on mine, which you were allowed to do; nowadays you're not allowed to deface government property. But I put my flaps on it and wrote girls' names on it and stuff.

Berry: How about the crew of the truck? Was it just yourself driving it?

Borchardt: Just one; one per truck. One driver per truck and each convoy, as you went, there could be fifty to a hundred trucks in one convoy, but there could be five or six transportation companies. Each company hauled different things; there were tanker companies, reefer companies, I guess we were considered flatbed companies.

Berry: How about any interesting experiences during your first tour?

Borchardt: Nothing out of the real ordinary. I remember for a while we had a post of double duty. At night, we'd have to go into Saigon and pick stuff up off the docks. It was a short trip, so it only took maybe two hours at a time, but you had to do it at night in the dark. And then you ran with just your blackout lights. That's another experience; it takes a while to get used to because you can't really see anything other than the tail lights in front of you. And Saigon was a whole different—The port area was a whole different

experience.

Berry: Okay, tell us about your living conditions there at duty station, your main camp.

Borchardt: My first memory of it—In the hooches or barracks, certain higher up ranking soldiers got petitioned off rooms. Other got just bunks lined up with the mosquito nets, and so on, and so forth. Ours were not tents, we had regular—

Berry: —barracks. What was your rank at this time? PFC?

Borchardt: I was PFC and then I think in three months I was E4. And by the time I left, I was E5. And I stayed E5 then until I got out; I had like twenty-six months' time and grade as an E5.

[00:30:17]

Berry: Now how did your duties change as those ranks increased?

Borchardt: They didn't.

Berry: So you were a truck driver that entire tour?

Borchardt: The entire first tour, yes.

Berry: Did you make any lasting friends?

Borchardt: I did. I tried to contact a couple of them when I got out, and they couldn't be found. One in particular, he was a little—I want to say he was a lot older than me, but he was probably just a little bit older. He was a tall, come from the Ozarks in Missouri, so he's kind of rough. He was almost like a dad to me, so we kind of looked out for each other. I remember he hit a mine; I got pictures of him standing with his truck with the whole back end blown off. But I tried to contact him after we got out of the service and my wife did and everything once computer age came out; nowhere to be found.

Berry: Okay. Is there anything else you'd like to say about your first tour with the 86th?

Borchardt: That's pretty much it. It was pretty much repetition every day. There was about four places you went. You got the knock every morning and said what you're loaded for, and you knew where you were going.

Berry: Did you keep track of your times so you knew when your first tour was coming to a close?

Borchardt: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. [laughter]

Berry: Nothing short of a short-timer's stick or anything?

Borchardt: Nothing like the old short, especially when you see the newbies coming in with their

brand new greens and yours are all faded out to nothing.

Berry: How were the new guys treated? Did you kind of take them under your wing and show them the ropes?

Borchardt: In our company, they were. Oh yeah. Nobody was like, “You’re a newbie” and all because you knew that you’d been through the same thing and you didn’t want to be treated that way. I’m sure some did, but I didn’t.

Berry: When did your first tour end?

Borchardt: It ended then in June—Must have been June 30, 1969 is when I came home and then got another thirty-day leave.

Berry: What happened on that leave? You come back to Wisconsin?

Borchardt: Came back to Wisconsin. Like I said, there again, my family met me at the airport. I had a couple of real close buddies that one had already been to Vietnam—he was home—and the other one was another classmate, but he got a college deferment. So we pretty much, there again, partied for those thirty days and then I had orders to where I was going for my next post. That thirty days went fast.

Berry: Now when you enlisted initially, you enlisted for a three-year obligation. Is that correct?

Borchardt: Um-hm.

Berry: Okay. Where was your next duty post?

Borchardt: Then I was sent to Fort Carson, Colorado. And I was stationed in the 377 Armor Division. We were the headquarters in headquarters, so we were still a transportation part of the armor division. So as the armor division would go on their field trainings on the post, we went out with our five-ton cargo trucks with mess hall stuff, the food, other supplies that they needed.

Berry: Okay. What did you do now for recreation experiences when you obviously didn’t have to work all the time?

Borchardt: At Fort Carson, we had several weekends, I think pretty much all weekends off because at that post I would say at least 20-percent of our company lived off base in military housing or whatever they had then. So it was pretty much all weekends off. So one of my friends there had his own vehicle, so we would go into Colorado Springs every now and then, go to a bar. And I remember going up into the Garden of the Gods, taking a six-pack up there and see if it was right that if you drink two beers up there is like drinking a twelve-pack down below. And you could see Pike’s Peak right at the base with the snow.

[00:35:30]

Berry: Okay, returning a little bit to Long Bend. I forgot to ask you about recreational experiences then when you were with the 82nd. Did you get into Saigon and all on leave and so forth?

Borchardt: Nope. Never had R&R, never took leave.

Berry: And that was your choice?

Borchardt: I guess so. I really never knew—I don't think anybody that I know in our company ever went on R&R. It was just something that wasn't presented to us and then when I got home from my first tour, I'm talking to all these other guys who were over there like, "Oh I went to Japan on my R&R, and went here, and went there." And I said, "God I never was really told of the opportunity."

Berry: Okay, tell us about the duties you had at Fort Carson.

Borchardt: That was everyday you'd get up and go to the motor pool and pull your maintenance work on your truck. I detailed mine; painted white pin-stripes around the rims and painted white lug nuts. One day I went to the PX and got a can of wax, started waxing my truck. I had it shining pretty good and the sergeant came up to me one day and said, "You know you shouldn't be doing that." He said, "You're defeating the purpose of the [alla-drab] and all." But he let me do it. It looked all right, so anytime a higher ranking officer ever wanted to go somewhere in a truck, he would always request to have me pick him up.

Berry: This was a five-ton truck again?

Borchardt: Um-hm, five-ton cargo.

Berry: Did you enjoy your experience at Fort Carson?

Borchardt: Oh yeah. I met a lot of friends there because I was there a good year.

Berry: Now you served a second tour in Vietnam. Did you volunteer for a second tour?

Borchardt: I'm not sure if I volunteered or got volunteered. Another friend of mine was going and he filled out the paperwork, and before he did, I said, "Maybe I should just go too." So he filled it out and I guess when he was there, he told them that I was going too, and somehow I got—Which I really didn't care; I had nothing. It was starting to get boring there; I really wasn't afraid in Vietnam. I felt like that's where I needed to be, so I went back.

Berry: Now how about protests and so forth? We're at the point now where the war was much more controversial back in the United States.

Borchardt: It was, yeah. It was starting and I think that may have influenced me a little bit. I don't want to be there for that; I'll just go where everybody's the same.

Berry: Did you have any additional training before your second tour?

Borchardt: No, we just went over and assumed I was just going to be in another transportation company which it turned out that's what I was in.

Berry: So you didn't have specific orders for a company when you left?

Borchardt: Not that I'm aware of.

Berry: Okay. And how about the trip over there? Commercial air again?

Borchardt: Commercial air again. This one I really don't remember if it was PanAm or something. I know it was what you called when you were coming home was the Freedom Bird, and a lot of them were PanAm. So what I went over on the second time, that's a—But it was pretty much the same route; Fort Louis to Yokota in Japan and then to Vietnam. This time I flew into Kun Yang, I believe. I don't know if we flew in there, but that's where I ended up in Kun Yang at Camp Vasquez; actually it was Phu Tai or Phu Bai— Phu Tai—in the 597th Transportation Company. In my first glimpse of the company—We were a reefer company; that one was.

[00:40:06]

Berry: Reefer meaning refrigeration?

Borchardt: Refrigerated, yeah hauled the perishable foods, the milk. The other companies next to us; one was a petroleum, one was a flatbed. They supplied the 25th Infantry Division; that's who we supplied. And in this company, these companies now had what you called gun trucks.

Berry: Tell us about a gun truck.

Borchardt: Gun truck is a premade— not premade, made by GIs. The government did not make any. The GIs actually made them in Vietnam, fabricated them themselves. They were made from everything from just steel sides. And the more fancier ones, somebody decided to take a five-ton cargo, take the tracks off an APC and mount it on the back of a five-ton cargo.

Berry: So you have the box of an armored personnel carrier?

Borchardt: Um-hm, with all the weaponry; the .350-caliber machine guns.

Berry: Were their weapons standardized at all on the gun trucks?

Borchardt: Some on the APCs, they came with all the rigging for it. But on the ones that were fabricated, they fabricated posts where they could mount the .50 on or mount the .60. All the gun trucks had plenty of ammo. Your opened boxed ones usually hauled tires in the back for they were part gun truck, part maintenance truck. So I saw that when I first got there in our company, and I said, "Boy, I'd like to be on there." And he says, "Well

there's an opening coming; the guy on there's short and he's going to be leaving in about two weeks." So they put me on there and trained me then had to fire a .50-caliber machine gun; I'd had no experience with that when everything was with the small arms. And I already had my driver's licenses, so I could drive if need be. So the NCOIC left and then they promoted me to NCOIC.

Berry: What would that mean?

Borchardt: That's a Non-Commission Officer in Charge. So I was promoted. So then they took my speck five patch or rank away and gave me the buck sergeant because I was the NCOIC. So then I was on there until the end of my tour in January 30 of '71.

Berry: What was the purpose of a gun truck?

Borchardt: The purpose was to provide convoy security as otherwise, you were running 100 trucks in convoy and there's no security whatsoever. They could be ambushed so easily, so there was a gun truck station about a fourth of the way back, another way about three-quarters of the way back, and then the maintenance gun truck was on the rear. The front of the convoy was led by the Convoy Commander in a Jeep with an M60.

Berry: How many crew members on a gun truck?

Borchardt: A full crew on our gun truck would be four; the driver, the NCOIC, and two gunners in the back.

Berry: Now were the crew members cross-trained so they could do various jobs on the vehicle?

Borchardt: They all had to be drivers; that was probably the only cross-training besides the NCOIC needed to know how to operate a radio because there's a lot of radio operations. Every time it leaves somebody's area of operations and go into another company's, you had to change your passcode; you'd always get a passcode of what your convoy was called.

Berry: Where in the central highlands there from Kun Yang did you service?

Borchardt: We pretty much ran—ninety percent of our runs were through An Khe through Pleiku up the Mang Yang Pass, and then rest were up to LZ English; a lot in that area.

Berry: Tell us about the Mang Yang Pass, kind of a special place.

Borchardt: It is. It's a winding road through a very high mountain. The road is probably ten miles long but as the crow flies, it's probably three blocks because it is so steep. [00:45:14] And perfect area for ambushes because the vehicles can hardly crawl; in fact some have to be pushed by the semi behind it to keep it going because of the weight of the supplies they're hauling and the condition of the truck, it just can't make the hill on its own. So that's where all the bottlenecks start. And then when you're running in the convoy, the semi-trailer's the ammo and the semi-trailers the fuel; it takes one RPG to start a roadblock and then it's all over from there.

Berry: How about ambush experiences?

Borchardt: The one was we were coming back from Pleiku, our convoy, and another convoy was going. And we met them at the bottom of the Mang Yang Pass. And we were no more than maybe five miles away and I heard the Brutus holler, "Contact! We need help!"

Berry: And who was Brutus?

Borchardt: Brutus was another gun truck from another company, the 359th. So I turned around in the King Cobra and all I could see was plumes of black smoke.

Berry: King Cobra was the name of your truck?

Borchardt: King Cobra was the name of my gun truck. At that point, I radioed the convoy commander and said, "We need to go back." He heard all this conversation too. He said, "I want you to turn around," and he said, "I'm going to turn around," and he ordered the other two gun trucks in our company to take our empty convoy into An Khe and wait for us. So I turned around. So I was the first one into the fire fight. And the first truck I come across is Brutus and the stretcher's already laying out on the ground. So I don't know if another vehicle picked up the wounded soldier. So we made our way up through the Pass through these winding vehicles burning all over the place, returning heavy fire. About a third of the way up the Pass, soldiers from trucks that had already been disabled were hiding in the ditches, and were coming out one-and-one, and jumping into the back of my gun truck through the back door of the APC. Then about three-quarters of the way up the Pass, the cobra gunships arrived.

Berry: So these were helicopter gunships?

Borchardt: Right. Enemy fire quit soon as they saw that because their position would have been given away in a hurry from there. So we made our way all the way to the top; I think we picked up four soldiers. Got to the top and they had the dust off where the Medevac helicopter came in and took the wounded. Found out later that the driver of the Brutus gun truck had been killed. And pretty much all the vehicles were left there just to burn. I don't know really who went and got them then; they weren't our convoy. We returned, went down. At that point, I always carried a camera with me. Going back down the Pass to catch up with our convoy in An Khe, I snapped a bunch of pictures. So I got some pictures of all the burning vehicles and stuff. We went to An Khe and by then it's pretty late in the day, so we had an RON—remain overnight—at the base in An Khe, and then returned in the morning to our base in Kun Yang.

Berry: What were your thoughts while this combat was going on? How did you feel about it?

Borchardt: You didn't worry about it. You know, it was something you had to do and if I had taken a bullet or something, I guess it would have happened. My reaction was to defend; that's what we did. Our driver was shooting the M-79 grenade launcher out of the cab and .350s firing; two on one side, one on the other. [00:50:03] So we had some pretty heavy fire power. The worst is when you run out of the box of 300 ammo and one of your other gunners has to jump down and pull you another box up; we had a couple

extra on top, but not a lot, and get you a box of ammo. I couldn't get down being in the turret and all; for me to get down and get the ammo, they had the big open hatch so they could jump down and grab two or three. The whole bed of the APC was lined with ammo boxes; that's where all our spare ammo was held. And it was pretty much our sleeping quarters.

Berry: So when you're on the road there and have to remain overnight, you essentially slept in the truck?

Borchardt: Yep.

Berry: What did you have for chow?

Borchardt: We pretty much ate rations or we went to the PX and bought our own.

Berry: When you say rations, you're talking about sea rations?

Borchardt: Sea rations. Or you'd go to the mess hall in the morning and grab something because we were allowed to carry coolers on our trucks, so we had coolers; we always had cold beer. [laughs] You can edit that out if you want.

Berry: So you made a number of convoys up Highway 19 through An Khe to Pleiku. You also said you visited LZ English farther up Route 1? Tell us about that experience because that's mostly in the coastal plain as opposed to being up in the hills.

Borchardt: The one experience that I remember most—We were going there one day; it was after a four-day monsoon and the rice patties were full almost up to the road. And we get to this one place where there's this real small, narrow bridge. You know the Vietnam kids are standing there and looking down in the water. So I'm up high in the truck, so I can see. There's a pilot, obviously a helicopter pilot or a gunner, laying face-down in the water, obviously dead. He's still got his helmet on with the radio and stuff. So I radioed back to tell my company or headquarters that there's a GI in the water here. Do we have permission to get him out? They wouldn't let us touch him; they were afraid he was booby-trapped. So they obviously sent somebody in to get him, so I don't know if he was shot down out of a helicopter, or fell out, or who he was. Those are the things that kind of bother you; you wonder who he was. Was he ever recovered then?

Berry: What kept you going through all of this?

Borchardt: Just knowing that I was getting short and was going to be going home. But then we started—Pretty much my second tour was when we started hearing that at home was not the way it used to be. We were hearing from soldiers saying, "Whatever you want to do, you don't want to wear your uniform when you get back." So that was pretty much the—

Berry: How did you feel about that?

Borchardt: I didn't feel very good about it, I'll tell you that. When I first went in basic training and

had to fly home, geez the airport treated you—Veterans got kind of, you know you'd get standby, but you always got on and you wore your uniform then. And now all of the sudden, you can't. So LZ Lambeau was the welcome home for the Wisconsin, for the ones that were there I think really appreciated it. And since then and just recently now, I get more people coming up to me in the public that know I'm a veteran or I'm wearing something that shows that will come up and say, "Welcome home and thank you for your service," which that's something you never heard until a couple years ago for me.

Berry: Did you have any time left active-duty wise when you completed your second tour?

Borchardt: No. I was totally done.

Berry: So tell us about the trip home. Do you have anything else you'd like to say about your second tour?

[00:54:59]

Borchardt: Not that I can think of that stuck out. I remember one thing now that you mention it. I was an E5 and when I left to come home you had a stage where everybody reported to a certain area in Kun Yang, so like the whole planeload would be there. And I got put on KP. And I thought, "Geez, an E5 on KP?" All through my service, I never pulled KP; I don't know how I lucked out. So I never reported; what were they going to do, send me to Vietnam? So I had to report to KP and I thought, "Don't you have some new soldiers that are coming in that can perform KP instead of for other veterans leaving?" So I didn't—And then the thing always was when you got out and when you came back to Fort Losha [??], you got this big steak dinner supposedly; I don't know if we did or not. I don't recall.

Berry: Do you remember the plane leaving the tarmac in Vietnam?

Borchardt: Oh yeah. I remember the cheer. The whole planeload cheered; I think they all hollered "Sharp [?!]" and "Freedom bird!" and "Going back to the round eyes." And I believe we came back through Hawaii if I'm not mistaken because I remember getting off the plane there and that's the first time I saw a mini skirt, and that was a sight.

Berry: So you arrive back in California. Did you receive a new uniform and the steak dinner and that—

Borchardt: I think I just processed out. I think I had one pair of civilian clothes that I took to Vietnam with me just to wear if we had an off-day or something; I don't think I ever wore them. And then I remember getting on a plane and flying to O'Hare, and then from O'Hare into Central Wisconsin Airport where my mother, and two sisters, and my two youngest brothers met, and came home.

Berry: You flew home in civilian clothes, huh?

Borchardt: Um-hm.

Berry: Were you advised to do that in California?

Borchardt: I'd say yes; advised, not ordered. And most of that came from not a ranking officer, just other GIs that had gone through the experience.

Berry: Was your family glad to see you?

Borchardt: Oh yeah; had the "Welcome Home" signs on.

Berry: How about your brother? He served in Vietnam also. Was he home already?

Borchardt: He was home. He came home in I believe it was August of '68 so we were over there about two months together. He came home and then when I got home in '71—I'm trying to think where he went—I think he went to Fort Bliss, Texas, I believe, to finish his tour because he would have still had two years; I was a year later when he went in. And then when I got home, I think he was already maybe at a job or living at home and was working. Then my younger brother who was a year younger than me, he was in the service then; he was in Fort Bragg. He didn't end up going to Vietnam but he could have very easily, but he was one of the fortunate ones who did most stateside. Some had to do that too; some in my class there went to Germany, you know. But it was pretty much if you went to Fort Polk, you knew you were going to Vietnam from what I heard later.

Berry: You make any lasting friendships from your second tour?

Borchardt: The crew on the gunship or gun truck. The one—There was four of us, and back then there were two sets of people in Vietnam was the way we categorized it. There was the potheads and the juicers. My buddy from Oklahoma was a juicer and the other two guys were potheads.

Berry: What's the difference?

Borchardt: The juicer drinks beer and the pothead smokes a little marijuana. So everybody did it over there from what you could see; I never tried it, never have. [01:00:06] My other buddy from Oklahoma, I've contacted him. I found him three years ago; we hadn't seen each other for forty years. We met in Louisville, Kentucky and now we're going to see him again in September in Springfield, Illinois; he's going to come from Oklahoma and we're going to meet halfway. So that was fun getting together with him.

Berry: Now how did you feel about leaving the army, and leaving combat, and so forth? Did you have any adjustment concerns when you returned home?

Borchardt: It took a long time to get over the sounds and going back to speaking a little bit more correct English. When I first got home, I didn't realize it then, but I swore a lot more than I do now. [laughs] And we live close to town and my dad's on the fire department or was at that time, and every time that fire whistle would blow in the middle of the night, it reminded me of the aerate sirens going off. And I was quite jumpy for a while, especially fireworks; it took me a long time to get to the point you knew it was going to bang, but if you didn't know it was coming, I was shell-shocked for years.

Berry: What did you do after you returned home career-wise?

Borchardt: The first maybe eight months, I did what pretty much every soldier did back then; took advantage of the unemployment program. So I did that, grew my hair back out, just kind of partied for a while a lot. First summer, I played a little softball and the first thing I'd do was slid into second base and broke my ankle. So I was laid up for a while. Come the spring of '72, I think it was February, Dad said, "okay Mike, it's time. Get a job and get out." Not blunt like that, but, "It's time." So I did; I went down to Appleton, Wisconsin to job service or whatever it was back then. Found a job, and started working, and that's when I met my wife there. Lived there for a year-and-a-half; joined the fire department there. One morning I was going to work. I had a nice-looking car; '71 Dodge Demon 340, [inaudible], painted up nice, chrome rims. Going to work at 7:30 in the morning, an hour before school started. The local village cop picked me up for speeding in a school zone; I was going twenty-five miles per hour. He gave me \$160 fine. It made me so mad, I went to work and quit, and went back home and told my wife we're moving back to Wittenberg. Went next door and got a U-Haul. We loaded everything up, came to Wittenberg, found an apartment that day. Went up to Wausau, got a job there, started working there. Been working ever since; not at that same place. I've had two, three jobs totally in my career the last twenty-two years; that's where I retired from.

Berry: Now tell us again about meeting your wife after seeing her one time in Vietnam and you recognized that that was a familiar face? Did you and your wife talk at all about that situation?

Borchardt: Oh yeah. As soon as I met her and told her that the maintenance guy said you were in the band. She was telling—That's when she said Long Bend and I said, "That's where I saw you there." And we were confirming dates; sure enough, she was there. This and that, so—It was weird; I talked to her at work, but had never really met her totally. So I had gone home to Wittenberg. I was in an apartment there, we weren't married then. I'd gone home to Wittenberg to play baseball on the weekend. So coming from a baseball game at a local town, the team stops in at a local tavern to have a beer after the game. And who's in there but Dar. And we both look like, "What are you doing here?" "Well what are you doing here?" I said, "Well I live here; this is my hometown." Turns out she was at a graduation party for her cousin who also lived in Wittenberg. So all these little things fell into place.

[01:05:06]

Berry: Were you injured at all while you were in military service?

Borchardt: Nothing severe. Had twisted ankles, lots of bumps and bruises, but as far as any physical other than—My wife always says there's two types of injuries from Vietnam; it's the physical and it's the mental. I think we all have some type of mental thing you would like to erase.

Berry: How about participation in veteran's organizations? Have you joined any?

Borchardt: I'm a member of the Wittenberg American Legion Post for forty-five years.

Berry: Have you attended any reunions?

Borchardt: I've attended two Vietnam gun truck reunions; they're called The Gathering. And since then now, my buddy from Oklahoma's found out there's what they called Line Hall Reunion; it's for all transportation companies. It's held in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, so we're planning on going there in the spring. And this fall now in October, I'm going on a never forgotten honor flight to Washington D.C. to see the memorials, which I've never seen. I've seen the replica Vietnam wall, but never the real one.

Berry: Yeah, there was a replica at LZ Lambeau.

Borchardt: Um-hm, yeah.

Berry: It's a powerful place.

Borchardt: Yes it is. And I've got one classmate on the wall, one class ahead of me on the wall, and one class behind me, high school class, on the wall. One guy from the 86th that I knew real well on the wall, and then those two drivers from the 359th Transportation that are on there.

Berry: Okay. Looking back, how do you feel about your military experience and your combat experience? What has it meant to you?

Borchardt: I always say if I had to do it again, I would. There's just something about serving your country. I don't think I've talked to a soldier yet that says he would never, never—The only thing right now, I really don't want to go back; that's not the way I remembered it. I remembered it as a war zone, not a commercial city like it is now. It just wouldn't bring back the right memories from what my feelings would be. A lot of guys have gone back.

Berry: Did anything about your military service surprise you?

Borchardt: Not really because I had talked to so many other veterans before me that have gone through the basic training, the gas chamber where you take off your mask and repeat your service number, and all that. So you kind of know what's coming, but you don't really know what it's going to be. So it wasn't really all—You know, we all knew the first thing that's going to happen; they're going to scalp you and all this and that.

Berry: Well the museum certainly appreciates you taking the time Mike to do this interview. Why did you do so?

Borchardt: I guess it all started at LZ Lambeau and we were talking to Wisconsin Public Television there. And they said we should talk to somebody there; in fact, they wanted us to come down here to do a radio broadcast. But I didn't know if I would be ready for that. I like the more one-on-one, just talking like this. And my wife's got a story that's amazing, and between our two stories, it's interesting.

Berry: Well they're valuable additions to the archive in the museum. We certainly thank you for taking the time to do the interview. Is there anything else you'd like to add that we haven't addressed?

Borchardt: Nothing I can think of in particular. There's lots of little things, you know, say about the plane. I kept that can of beef that they gave us until about four years ago. [01:10:02] It was up in my attic and I cut it out, and it had swelled like it was about ready to explode. So I threw that out. And since the last three months now, Channel Seven in Wausau did an interview on Dar and I; she's got a whole other story about this helmet that one of the soldiers gave her and she found the owner, and has returned it to him now. And they did a story on me on the hijacking. And since then, I found two other soldiers that were on that plane; one lives in Arizona and the other one actually lives in Big Flats, Wisconsin. And they remember everything, and they too—The one from Arizona said he is so glad he found me. He said he and his wife were both starting to doubt that this ever happened because there's no record of it; you can go to the government. There's no—I've applied for like POW status or something, and they said there is no record of you ever being there. Even though you have all the newspaper articles, the telegrams, they don't believe you. And then my first conversation with him was I said, "You still got your can of beef and your cigarettes?" He said, "No, I ate my beef on the plane and I smoked the cigarette." [laughs] But he was just tickled that I had mine.

Berry: Well thank you again, Mike.

Borchardt: You're welcome.

[End of Borchardt.OH2006_file2][End of interview]