

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
NICHOLAS PAKOTA
Infantry, U.S. Army, Vietnam War

2010

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Patoka, Nicholas., (b.1950). Oral History Interview, 2010.

Approximate length: 2 hours 49 minutes

Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.

Abstract:

In this oral history interview, Nicholas Patoka discusses his service in the Vietnam War driving an M113 armored personnel carrier, his unit's part in the Lam Son 719 campaign, and returning home and trying to cope with the war. Patoka was drafted in 1970 and discusses basic training at Fort Campbell (Kentucky) and AIT at Fort Knox (Kentucky). He describes his feelings the night before going overseas, landing at Bien Hoa, and his first days with the 2nd of the 8th Mechanized 4th Infantry Division. Patoka discusses being moved to the 1st of the 1st Cav and becoming a driver for a M113 and describes many of his experiences while he was a track driver. He reflects on his first combat experience and his unit's first casualties and how those affected him. Patoka mentions being sent to Dong Ha and taking part in the Lam Son 719 campaign somewhere near the Laotian border. He discusses being sent to the hospital for hearing loss and finishing his duty as a guard on a rear base, and the problem of drugs on the rear bases. He then reflects on coming home and dealing with some of the after-effects of being in the war.

Biographical Sketch:

Nicholas Pakota (b.1950) served in the United States Army from 1970 to 1971. He worked for Menasha Carton Plant for twenty-seven years and works as an electrician for SCA Tissue.

Interviewed by Steve Piotrowski, 2010.
Transcribed by Alison Hyde, 2014.
Reviewed by Jennifer Kick, 2016.
Abstract written by Jennifer Kick, 2016.

Interview Transcript

Piotrowski: [coughs] Excuse me. This is an interview with Nicholas S. Patoka who served in the United States Army from April of 1970 until December of 1971, with service in Vietnam from September of 1970 to September of 1971. The interview is being conducted at the Veterans Museum in Madison, and it is November 23, 2010. The interviewer is Steven Piotrowski. And Nick, and you prefer Nick for—

Patoka: Yeah.

Piotrowski: Let's get started. Okay. You were born, what year?

Patoka: September 6, 1950.

Piotrowski: Okay.

Patoka: St. Nicholas Day.

Piotrowski: And your hometown is?

Patoka: Menasha, Wisconsin.

Piotrowski: Menasha, okay. And that's where you grew up and went to high school and all that sort of thing?

Patoka: Yeah.

Piotrowski: You did complete high school?

Patoka: I completed high school, yeah.

Piotrowski: You'd said earlier that you'd been drafted. How long after you finished high school did you get drafted?

Patoka: Ah, well they had the lottery in December. You'd graduated in early June, so I worked a few months over at American Can Food Packaging. In December I got the lottery, and then April I was to report.

Piotrowski: Okay so it was like a year after high school you were drafted?

Patoka: Almost a year, yeah.

Piotrowski: Okay, so within a year of graduation from high school?

Patoka: Right.

Piotrowski: Parents? Family situation, brothers and sisters?

Patoka: I have one older sister, two younger brothers, and a younger sister. I'm the second oldest.

Piotrowski: Your parents were both alive—

Patoka: Right.

Piotrowski: —when you were growing up. What did they do?

Patoka: My dad worked for Wisconsin Tissue Mills, he was the lead printer there. And my ma was a cook over at St. John's Catholic School in Menasha.

Patoka: Where did you go to school? Grade school? High school?

Patoka: At St. John's.

Piotrowski: I kinda figured if she was cooking there.

Patoka: Couldn't get away with nothing there [laughs].

Piotrowski: Yeah. And then high school?

Patoka: Menasha High. Butte des Morts for freshman year, and then Menasha High for the other three.

Piotrowski: You went to parochial school for grade school, but public school for high school?

Patoka: Right.

Piotrowski: Okay. Were you involved in sports or what did you do in high school? Talk about, you know, growing up, what it was like.

Patoka: I was actually an 'A' student at art. I, ah, but besides doing that I liked football, but I was really small and my parents wouldn't give me permission to go to football 'cause they thought I was fragile and everything 'cause I was so tiny. But I went out on my own to talk with Coach Weed, who was the coach at the time, but he asked me what size shoes I wore. And I, "Size six," and he said they don't have shoes that small [laughs]. So I went out for intramural football, which turned out to be just like the other football without the equipment, so [laughs].

Piotrowski: So did you wrestle, any other sports in high school?

Patoka: No, no.

Piotrowski: So you really didn't get involved in sports. You did some artwork. How about student body? Any of that sort of thing?

Patoka: Nah.

Piotrowski: Okay.

Patoka: Never went to dances, none of that stuff.

Piotrowski: Okay, so you were—

Patoka: I actually worked over at Norm's Steakhouse for a couple a years, but I'd get out of school go to there, work in the kitchen, busboy, washing dishes. And then the grades started failing, 'cause I wouldn't get home 'til after, like, one in the morning or so. I didn't get sleep, so I would take—making the sleep up while I was at school so that ended.

Piotrowski: Did you like school?

Patoka: From what my ma tells me from the parent-teachers meetings I was really smart, but I was bored. I would be sitting there fidgeting, and looking around and that. The teachers called on me, I'd always have the right answer but it wasn't challenging enough.

Piotrowski: Mm-hm. Had you thought about college, or anything after high school?

Patoka: Well, I would say that it wasn't gonna happen. My parents couldn't afford it. That's when they were both working. So unless I would've get in on an art scholarship or something like that, and that didn't happen so—

Piotrowski: When you were in high school, what was your plan? What did you see the rest of your life developing like?

Patoka: I think it was pretty much laid out when I'd come home and I'd watch the news and everything and there Vietnam always was on the news all the time. It was just a question of when I was gonna be going. I didn't make any formal plans, 'cause I didn't want it to get interrupted, so—

Piotrowski: That's one of the things I think is hard for people today to understand is how much that draft in the war hung over all our heads at that point.

Patoka: Yeah.

Piotrowski: And that it just stopped you from making real plans, because that had to be done first or taken care of somehow. What were you doing when you entered the service, or when you got drafted? You said you got drafted, so—

Patoka: I, ah, had applied for jobs at paper mills over in Menasha. There were the Tissue Mills and there was American Can, and my dad coulda got me into Tissue Mills and everything, but I decided to go in American Can 'cause they paid more. And I also didn't want that hanging over my head that "Your dad gotcha here." and everything else. I wanted to do it on my own. Again, like I said, I was really, really small, so I had to work with a hammer, a sixteen ounce hammer, to bust paper off a food packaging when it came off. And I was getting blisters the size of nickels on there, but I just kept on pushin' her.

Piotrowski: So you're working for American Can. Good paying job, type a factory job that was common at that time, and if the draft wasn't there you probably would have stayed for quite a while? Is that what I'm hearing?

Patoka: Yeah.

Piotrowski: So you watched the lottery. Found out you were number ten, knew it was gonna come pretty soon from what you said before.

Patoka: Yeah. Then I get, ah, two envelopes in the mail. One—both from the Army—one's a thick one, one's a thin one. I went, "Well I'll open the thin one first." The thin one was, "Greetings, you've been selected." The other one was just a bunch a, well, propaganda to enlist. And I just thought well go with the two years, 'cause I just didn't see me as a military person that was gonna make a career out of it, so—

Piotrowski: Okay. Tell me about the actual process of entering.

Patoka: Well—

Piotrowski: You got the draft notice that said to report—

Patoka: I got the draft notice, and I was gonna take off from Oshkosh. The whole family, you know, took me over to the airport and everything.

Piotrowski: Had you already gone down for your physical and stuff? Or did you go to physical first?

Patoka: Physical I had to go down to Milwaukee.

Piotrowski: That was before this?

Patoka: Yeah.

Piotrowski: Okay.

Patoka: Well you know—

Piotrowski: Yeah. I just want to make sure it's clear what happened. So when you got the draft notice, you went down to Milwaukee for the physical to see if you were eligible or not?

Patoka: Right.

Piotrowski: And passed the physical?

Patoka: Yeah, of course I passed it, so when I did get the draft notice I was 1A [Available for Military Service] it's—

Piotrowski: Yeah.

Patoka: I mean you'd think as teeny tiny as I was, but you know I didn't understand the Army at the time, and all you see on television were them hauling bodies out and everything all the time. I didn't know they had other jobs. Never thought of the Army as same environment as a city where you had firefighters and police officers and doctors and all that, so it was just—I just thought you had a gun and that was it.

Piotrowski: Mm-hm.

Patoka: So I went there and, you know, my grandfather on my ma's side was a medic in World War I. And he was under General John Pershing, "Black Jack" Pershing. And my dad's father was a—in World War I in the Navy on a ship. And then my dad was a cook in the Army on a ship during World War II, so it wasn't like we were strangers to the military service. You had your patriotic duty, you had—Canada wasn't gonna be an option, you know it was just the way you grew up in a working environment you had to do your part and everything. And, well, I got drafted. They sent me down to Milwaukee, and from Milwaukee I was gonna take my basic training at Fort Campbell [Kentucky]. Fort Campbell was home airborne, and our first sergeant was really adamant about pushing that through. It was Sargent Salas. I remember him being a hardcore little guy. And basic training you never leave the camp, you had to get with the program first. It ain't until the last—the last two weeks of your training where you finally get to go out and party or something. And, not that I never drank before, when I worked over at the restaurant in high school I was havin' little gin and tonics on the side and stuff like that. But well race was a—other than

seeing black people on television I never saw a black person in my life—in real life. So now I'm seein' 'em and I'm like, "This is all right. They're just like me, you know." Well I went drinkin' with 'em, and we were drinkin' Colt 45, and wow I'll tell ya—I got hammered. And I think I started doin' my bad boy routine and shortly after that, because in service, we had our service caps and National Guard that was there had their—like our dress uniform hats. So we saw somebody with one of those hats, we just naturally associated them with National Guard. And then I came back drinking with the Colt 45, I bumped into one of the—I think it was Henderson, Corporal Henderson, and he said, "Aren't you gonna salute this officer?" And basically I said, "I'm not salutin' no FNG [fucking new guy]" and swung at him. And Henderson—

Piotrowski: And this during—at the end of basic this is at?

Patoka: This *was* in basic. And Henderson, as black as he was, he started turning white. And I didn't know, and I went and collapsed on the cot and everything. And next I know I was—had to go to Battalion headquarters and had to clean everything and—

Piotrowski: So I assume you got an Article 15 [non-judicial punishment] out of that?

Patoka: Well I always threatened with Article 15's. And I don't how many times I was threatened, but they never actually followed through. Which I found amazing, you know, I mean I don't know if I was Gomer Pyle or what. You were so naive you didn't understand anything, and you just, I don't know, kind of—you were always out of place, always you know.

Piotrowski: Kind of slipped through because they could tell you didn't mean it as—

Patoka: I'm guessin' that. When I was takin' the test originally before I went down, I told you I was working in a food carton plant, so the test you'd take—some of the tests are they'd open up a box and then they'd show you multiple stuff and they show the finished product and you were supposed to pick A, B, or C which one of those. But I know which one it is, this is what I did for a living. And I'd always put the wrong one, 'cause I didn't want to go. I didn't want to get drafted. And I just kind of figured, "Well you can't push this too far, because they ain't gonna think anybody's that stupid." And I believe thirty-two would be the lowest you could get and they'd take you. And that's what I had a thirty-two.

Piotrowski: Okay yeah. That's interesting. I've never heard anybody talk about trying to beat that system, because it was so—

Patoka: Yeah. Well you could pretend you were gay or something—

Piotrowski: Well yeah.

Patoka: —but I wasn't gonna try that! [Laughs]

Piotrowski: So you went to basic at Fort Campbell. First time you met black people. Had no problem with any of that sort of thing.

Patoka: Got drunk. We were sitting there brawlin' hall[??] Couple of guys from Chicago and that. We were buying into the airborne thing. We all signed up.

Piotrowski: So you signed up for airborne in basic training?

Patoka: Yeah.

Piotrowski: Okay.

Patoka: And couple days later, we were standing in formation and they're callin' these other guys' names. But they didn't call mine. So I started thinking, "Well, I didn't make that either." But it turned out they got their papers back, I was the only one that was qualified. And they're all looking at me, again, like I'm a freak, you know what. But as—and I don't know what their qualifications are I just—you know answered it best way I could. But I had second thoughts about it afterwards, and I refused the training then.

Piotrowski: Oh so you didn't go to dome [??] school?

Patoka: No I got—I sat there thought—you know, I wanted to be cook when I first went there, but they were saying, "Oh you have to enlist longer, because of the training." I never heard anybody say good stuff about Army food except for my dad was the best cook in the Army, but then—

Piotrowski: That's your dad's story. [Laughs]

Patoka: Dad's story. And if you had Army food you're like, "Wow this doesn't take much to improve on any of this!" [Laughs]

Piotrowski: So you did basic there. What was your AIT [Advanced Individual Training] then? What were you sent to for AIT?

Patoka: Well I tried to flunk the test so they wouldn't draft me, but once I got in, in basic, then I was tryin' to pass everything. And I think I fell short of the dots and dashes [Morse code] and all that stuff, but I wound up being—they were going to project me to be a tank crewmen. So I was gonna go to Fort Knox for my AIT. I never drove a car before, now I'm gonna be driving a fifty-two ton tank.

Piotrowski: So you didn't have a driver's license in high school?

Patoka: No.

Piotrowski: Okay.

Patoka: No I never—again they couldn't afford the insurance for me. They were struggling just to support us kids and everything so—I didn't push it 'cause I didn't go nowhere anyways. So they'd get me to work and the other one would bring me back, so it wasn't an issue. But in the Army you just marched everywhere, so it wasn't like I didn't know how to do that.
[Laughs]

Piotrowski: So you were scheduled to go—you scheduled to Fort Knox. Sounds like you didn't go?

Patoka: I did go to Fort Knox.

Piotrowski: Okay.

Patoka: I went—I completed my training there. Pulled guard duty at Fort Knox. I didn't know they had underground bunkers where they kept missiles and all this, and cigarette lighters and why you weren't allowed to have matches in there and everything else. I did that, and I was in AIT with a guy from Denmark. Tryin' to think. I was Paul—Tauber.

Piotrowski: Denmark, Wisconsin?

Patoka: Yeah. His name was Doug Tauber. That was his name. And Doug, when he saw that I had orders to go to Vietnam, you know, it was just like he was reading my death sentence, you know. And I'm thinking well you know you go in service, I don't care what your AIT is, you're the best. That's what the Army tells you. You do your job, you're gonna be great at this. Patton Tank—I got eight inches of steel in front of me, I'm not afraid. But Vietnam, when I got there, didn't have Patton Tanks [laughs].

Piotrowski: This would have been—you finished AIT in probably August, or so?

Patoka: I say—I had—

Piotrowski: You had a month's leave.

Patoka: Yeah. I had my month leave before I went over.

Piotrowski: And you went over in September eleventh—

Patoka: Yeah.

Piotrowski: —I think you said.

Patoka: I actually threw away my folder figuring if it got lost I wouldn't have to go. Well military folders always manage to show up no matter where they are, and I had to go report to Oakland. And they had dividers all in a room, bunk beds so you could sleep, but when you know you're goin' to Vietnam I don't think anybody was sleeping. They tried, or whatever.

Piotrowski: Unless you're really hung over or something.

Patoka: Yeah, yeah. I think that'd be the only way I'd have my eyes—I was just fidgety. I don't know if—I don't want to say I was anxious to go, but at the same time, you know, you're hesitant, you're looking around at the other people and they're all alone with their thoughts. Well we finally got to—then we gotta take off 'til at night because they had all the protesters going on at the time. They wanted to get us away from all that. So we took off in the middle of the night, and we were standing to get on the plane. There were troops coming back. And the guys are coming off, you know, you're talkin' twenty year old guys that just looked aged big time. And I'd see the guys and I'd say to them, "Good luck." And guy looked at me and says, "You're the one that's gonna need the luck." Well I knew I was gonna need the luck, but I don't think they had an idea what they were in for with the basic shape of the country at the time. So you know, he's probably thinking, "What do I mean." And I said, "I knew what I was in for." For the most part. I didn't know what was gonna happen when the plane lands or any of that stuff because, well, I know I'm gonna—I have a combat MOS [Military Occupation Specialty] 11B [Infantryman] out of basic and I'm 11E, tank crewman. well we were flying in a commercial airplane, and one of the guys got a tape recorder in back and he's got Country Joe and the Fish playing on a tape, and—

Piotrowski: Fixin' to Die Rag [a popular song by Country Joe].

Patoka: —and we're sittin' there tryin' to stay, you know, keep your spirits up. And, you know, then we all got different MOS's that are on the plane and everything. I remember when we were flying over the Pacific, I look out the window, and full moon and all I saw was just water. And I'm like, "Wow". You know on good days, I can see across Lake Winnebago, and I ain't seein' nothing here. And eventually the plane turned south. We were flying along the coastline, but we were still above the clouds, but I could see flares shootin' up through the top. Parachutes. I'll tell you there was some pucker [laughs]. I didn't have any experience. We kept droppin' and everything, and you'd see the lightning but it was underneath. Charlie

owned the night. That's what was goin' on, you know, it was—we were going to land over in Bien Hoa, so it had to be just north of there because I'm pretty sure we stayed at a good altitude before that. I didn't know what to do. I had no idea what I was gonna do. I didn't know it was a regular airport. It was—we gonna jump out? They gonna hand us a gun as we're running? I mean I didn't know!

Piotrowski: I remember landing into Vietnam, they'd come in fairly high and drop suddenly and then land. Landing is pretty normal after that, but that first drop in is really steep.

Patoka: We had to get out of that thing in a hurry, and here they got caskets all lined up gettin' ready to get put on. And I'm lookin' at the buildings and there's a big hunk of corner missing out of it like it took a rocket. And an empty swimming pool over there which I guess they built and never did fill it. I'm like, "Wow? This is a rear area?" You know, I know I'm not gonna be in a rear area. Not for long anyways.

Piotrowski: You got into Bien Hoa and if it was like most of the time, they'd load you buses, take you to repo-depot [replacement detachment] and you sit there for a few days, right?

Patoka: And they give you the stuff what you should look for for booby traps. They give you a doc—you know—what to expect to see.

Piotrowski: That was at Bien Hoa, or that was when you went up to your unit?

Patoka: I believe that was at Bien Hoa, because—

Piotrowski: Okay. They may have changed that.

Patoka: I actually don't remember how I got stuck in the infantry. I wasn't gonna be in tanks. They put a big 4 I-N-F on this thing and I'm like, "What the heck?" All I know from basic training is that's the only stuff I know. I remember coming in, I believe it's Camp Radcliff, and we're driving on a red clay road, we hit a speed bump. And the speed bump turned out it was a python snake stretched across the road, and there's sign there that says, "Slow down. The replacement you hit might be your own." Again, I didn't know what I was going to be doin'. I was just stuck in the back of a truck with a bunch of other guys.

Piotrowski: Camp Radcliff is where?

Patoka: Ah, An Khe.

Piotrowski: Okay. Oh yeah that's right. The 1st Cav went up to An Khe.

Patoka: 4th Infantry. And I think it's Highway 1-9 that we go across like that.

Piotrowski: The 173rd was there before the 4th and the 1st Cav.

Patoka: And they put me with the 2nd of the 8th Mechanized 4th Infantry Division.

Piotrowski: So they signed you to the 4th? I thought you were with the 1st Cav.

Patoka: Yeah 4th. They give me a pack, an ALICE Pack [All-purpose Lightweight Individual Carrying Equipment], I don't even know how to set it up. The thing weighs almost as much as me. And they put you on a helicopter. Fly you out, drop you in the middle of the jungle someplace, and those have been the shortest days I've ever seen. It would get dark so quick there 'cause of the jungle triple canopy. And I said I don't even know how to set up an ALICE pack. The back has a spring steel, and I didn't know you're supposed to pre-bend this thing, and tighten it all up so when I was humpin' the bush with this thing I had that steel spring riding up and down my spine shaving all the skin off. It was just raw, and I didn't want to complain because, again, I was undersized and I didn't want 'em to think I was a little whiny little thing and everything so I just pushed on.

Piotrowski: So you were assigned to—what was called the Mechanized Unit, but you were leg infantry?

Patoka: Leg. And what they do, they fly you out and you'd hump back and you'd catch up with the tracks, come back to the camp, rest, and do it again. Put you on another helicopter. Drop you off someplace else. Hump the bush. Come back to the track. I'll tell 'ya, I never would have made it if I would have been doin' that the whole year. One of the guys noticed my back was all raw flesh and everything, then he showed me how to set it up which made it a little bit more bearable. We had to carry mortar rounds, and I have to think different than other people because when we stood in line they'd say, "What do you want?" And you'd say you want a "Willy Pete", white phosphorus, or HE, High Explosive. And everybody's askin', "Willy Pete, Willy Pete, Willy Pete" I get an HE, and they looked at me and they said, "You realize you take a round? You're gonna be paste?" I went, "That's exactly why I took it." I said, "You're gonna fry. And fry. And fry." And they thought about it a while. I mean you don't want to die, but you don't want to feel pain either. But if you're gonna go—

Piotrowski: Might as well be quick.

Patoka: Yeah. So then the guys all passed in their Willy Pete's for HEs then.
[Laughs]

Piotrowski: You got assigned to the Mechanized Infantry, and you went right out to— basically right out to bush. You were probably in 'Nam a couple weeks at the most at that time?

Patoka: Right. Yeah.

Piotrowski: How did people receive you in the unit? What did—were—

Patoka: Well, you're a pariah. You're a new guy. You don't know nothin'. And I didn't. Again, I was trained in an armored [tank]. Now they gonna stick me in this? Everything's Greek to me. I ain't got a clue what's goin' on. I just go follow. I had to go as forward observer at one point. A listening post. Me and another guy. I had this thing for grenades. I used to watch Vick Morrow on Combat! and everything. I kinda liked that, so I always had the baseball grenades with me along with my M16. I had the pack, and I left the top open and I laid the grenades there so they were handy 'cause you couldn't see nothin'. It was just pitch black. I couldn't see a hand in front of my face. Can't light up anything 'cause you don't want a cigarette, I didn't smoke anyways, but you couldn't have a cigarette because they knew that glow of the red would draw attention. I couldn't find the grenades, so we were gonna have to go back to camp, I couldn't find the grenades. And the guy I was with, he was just upset. He was telling us how Charlie's gonna be using those against us. I understand his concern now, but at the time all I could think was I wanted my grenades back. And I found 'em. They rolled off 'cause they were baseball grenades, so they kinda rolled a little bit but, again, I'm feeling in the dark 'cause I can't see nothin'. It was just creepy. You didn't see nothin'. You had to hear. You had to have good hearing. You just listen for snappin' twigs. Although, the Vietnamese, they chewed on that beetle nut juice and it was so strong you could smell 'em if they were comin' through there and they weren't makin' no noise. And the hair would just stand up on your back. And you're just waiting for a trip-fire to go off, but they changed directions, so you know, we'd smell it we knew it was gettin' close, and there was just two of us in that listening post. All I could think was [laughing], "I don't have enough ammo." I mean you can't see, so it's not like you're gonna pick a target, you're just gonna be shootin' at their flashes. It didn't happen. They changed direction. They missed our flares, and they went off into a different area. Nothing happened, but it was always like you're just bored, you're bored, you're sitting there listening, you're scared, and at the same time you tense up and then you get let down. It's like—I don't want to say we're looking forward to it—but at the same time, I didn't see me making it the whole tour without seein' something. You want to find out how good you are. You're only gonna learn from experience, because the guys wouldn't teach you anything unless you could show them something else. I mean you'd go out and get on those helicopters and look at that pretty countryside—

Piotrowski: With all the holes everywhere.

Patoka: —and unlike the movies you don't hear the gunshots. You can't hear nothin' over those helicopters except the punchin' in the heli—the holes punchin' in there.

Piotrowski: How long were you in-country or with the unit before you had your first chance so to speak? The first time you got fired at or fired back or whatever?

Patoka: It wasn't with the 2nd of the 8th. It was—I only spent a month with them, and the 4th was getting sent back to the States. I think they were going to Fort Carson or something. So a guy that I had met over there that was from Avon Lake, Ohio, Melvin Obermiller, he sat there, "Oh! We should sign up to be door gunners." And "Obie" just had this thing about him, you know, he'd almost talk you into anything. But I just went, "Well, I think door gunners see all kinds of action." You're not driving. You don't have control. You're gonna be sittin' there and the helicopter pilot might decide, "Hey, let's fly around this area some more." I was gonna do it. We both got orders we were gettin' sent to the coastal planes, 1st Cav up by Chu Lai, which was attached to the Americal Division. 1st Cav was actually part of 1st Armor, it's Old Ironsides. But they didn't bring that whole thing over there, they just took our unit and basically we were attach to Americal, but wherever they thought they could use us, they were gonna send us. So it was always gonna be—it's gonna be bad and they're gonna send us. That's all there was to it.

Piotrowski: So you went from the 4th to the 1st of the 1st Cav?

Patoka: I had to take a envoy through the famous An Khe path. And we sat on our duffle bags with our M-16s, but no ammo. All you heard about the An Khe path was how horrible it was—treacherous—how it wound through the mountains. And it went up on one side and down on the other, and Charlie's gonna be on the high ground. We're looking up, and we can't shoot. But we got the Republic of Korea, the ROKs, with us. And I guess they were hardcore. But the trip itself it turned out wasn't gonna be any—anything ever happened. It was just another of those things where they get you jacked up, and then nothing happened. And we drove back all the way to Quinn Yan, and we were supposed to take a plane from Quinn Yan going up. And all the duffle bags got piled on, pallets, and everything and we were just sittin' there. And I think it was a C-130. It was a big cargo plane, and it was stripped of the seats. We just sat on the floor. They had a couple of belts goin' across that looked like a giant thing, so that when they first took off couple a guys in that row would be able to hang on and you hung on to the other guy as they accelerated. Well, if you've flown on

commercial planes you know how a plane accelerates and leans you back like this and starts throttling down that runway and that front wheel comes up in the air and you wait for that last hop before you start going. And the plane lost power, and down she come.

[Break in Recording] [00:31:27.10]

Piotrowski: So you were talking about the plane. It accelerated, lost power, and everybody went to the front when it dropped back down.

Patoka: And down she come. And the floor in there was like sheets of aluminum. It wasn't one big solid floor in there, so anybody who was sittin' where the sections came together got their butt cheeks pinched, so they had major blood clots. I was a lightweight, so when that thing went sailing, I was just like one of the bodies at a Badger game at Camp Randall getting passed through the stadium. I just rolled across the top of everybody. Went into first class section. Well we all had to pile out. And we wound up sleeping on that corrugated steel tarmac over there. They unloaded our duffle bags, and I don't know if they worked on that particular plane, or what, but I saw some banana trees, so I walked over there and grabbed some. They were green. I got sick. Actually, I was lookin' for this fruit, and I still don't know what you call it. But it grew on the trunk of the trees in the central highlands. It looked like a clumps of radishes, and the scout that was with us explained that you can eat that. Well the other guys said, "Don't listen to him. He's Chieu Hoi, and he's gonna poison you." But actually I thought you be nice to the Vietnamese, you know, they'll like 'ya. Even if they're a bad guy, maybe they'll give me a break or something [laughs]. And we broke 'em off, and I stick 'em in my cargo pockets and they looked like—after you pulled the husk off—they looked like pearl onions. But it was sweet, and I don't know what they're called, and I'm still lookin' in stores figuring they're gonna be shippin' this over 'cause it was nice. I liked it. But they didn't have many of those trees around. Apparently they only use them in the central highlands, so I got sick on the green bananas. The next day we took off, and we landed in Chieu Lai. And now the weather changed. Now it's raining. It's windy. But I'm in a armored unit now. I'll be riding, so—now I can carry some personal stuff instead of just a rag, pad, and a pencil. I never—I don't think I wrote any letters when I was with the 2nd of the 8th. I just was just scared the whole time I was there. I checked into the headquarters. Threw the duffle bag in the building, and I went to the PX and I bought myself a camera. I thought I was gonna record the rest of my tour and everything over there. I went to the beach. It had a USO stage there, but I don't—it wasn't really an R&R center. You go on the beach and they'd have all of this, I don't know, like we were gonna stop a major invasion. Although I don't know—I just can't see a bunch of sampams [Vietnamese peasant boat] landing on the beach. They had all these bunkers set up. I don't think that was ever gonna happen. But then

again, I didn't know the North had either. So, you know, being up at Chieu Lai we're getting a little bit further up there now. I went through that, and I think I spent a week over at Chieu Lai before they finally sent me to Hawk Hill. I think it's Hill 29 where I hooked up—they were gonna fly me out and drop me off in the middle of—well a night defense position. I got my pack yet from the 2nd of the 8th. I land over there. I'm on top a hill. All the tracks are all pointed with their guns facing out, and I'm looking' around. I'm just sittin' there figuring well this was a good time to write letters. I'm sittin' there. I come in with the mail and the SP packs [Sundries Pack] the rest is supplies. I sat there writing and takin' stuff in. I look and there's a Sheridan tank over there. M-16 leaning against the road wheel and there's a guy up in the turret, and I don't know if the breaks let loose or what. The track starts rollin' down the hill, and barrel gets caught between the road wheels, it bends the barrel in it, and down it goes. And all I kept thinking is, "Oh my god, they stuck me in F-Troop." [Laughs] But it wasn't, it was A-Troop in the 2nd Platoon. Eventually the lieutenant called me over there, and he wants to know if I smoke so he knows what to hand out for rations for cigarettes and everything. I didn't smoke, and I was just gonna write on the back of the track at the time. And you had a tank commander on a track, a 113 [M113 armored personal carrier] a driver, and then you had two guys on the back that had M-60s. And I was just an extra passenger at the time, and I was just gonna take stuff in again.

Piotrowski: This is a tank or a track?

Patoka: A track.

Piotrowski: Okay.

Patoka: It's a—

Piotrowski: They—

Patoka: No tanks. I guess that in '67, '68 they did have 48s, but they went to the Sheridans. They were lighter, handled—oh god the muck that we'd be gonna through—and the suction that would hold them things on. As much as they weighed, you'd think nothin' would stop 'em but it was—you were constantly fighting Mother Nature all the time. It get rained, and you'd go in there and bottom's all flat on there and that's suction. It would just stick there. Once you lost the traction from your tracks, they'd be gettin' the cable together and they'd be pullin' you out.

Piotrowski: Both the tracks and the tanks did that, right?

Patoka: Right. The Sheridans. It was just a constant battle. You always thought that if you're gonna get hit, it was when you were most inconvenienced.

You couldn't maneuver and everything. They'd go out in the field for twenty-one days and come in for five days maintenance. And when we came in after that first time, the lieutenant said that he needed a driver, and what they called a "Mickey Mouse" guy; a guy who would set up mechanical ambushes. And that's when I met my best buddy Bob Thompson from Louisville, Kentucky. I don't remember if I volunteered to drive or if he volunteered to be the "Mickey Mouse" guy, but I wound up driving and he was gonna set up. And we all rode on the same track. It was a 8-2-4. And tank commander was from—a guy from Detroit, Michigan, James Gardner—Garten. Bob called him Gomer. The guy was thirty-two, thirty-three years old and he—he was a lifer. He tried makin' it outside, but he couldn't cut it so he wound up comin' back again.

Piotrowski: He was a lieutenant or captain?

Patoka: Sergeant.

Piotrowski: Oh! Okay. So he was a platoon sergeant—

Patoka: He—he just—and he was real hard of hearing. And I don't know how long he had spent over there, but if you're by track vehicles, you're gonna go deaf. They were just loud. I had another guy that was a sergeant from Texas. Sommers. He was kind of a smart ass. He liked playing tricks all the time. We'd be sittin' there in the back and he'd go underneath in the cargo area, and he'd pull the pin release for the turret and there Gomer'd be sittin' there behind that 50 and we'd be crossin' a hill and next thing you know the weight of the 50 would take him down the hill like this, and swing and swing back and he just had this dumb look on his face [laughs] and it's just like you know you don't want to tick him off. He does have that gun you know!

Piotrowski: He's got a big gun!

Patoka: Yeah! But Sommers like pullin' pranks like that on the sergeant. We never had the same crew for the whole tour. Guys would leave or—and guys from your track would get sent to a different track, or whatever. I, myself, was on three different tracks, and I can't tell you why I was off of 'em 'cause I was the driver. And the driver was—went with the track, so—

Piotrowski: Did they have mechanical failure or anything like that?

Patoka: You know I don't know. This is a mental shutdown on my part, where I lost 'em or what. And then they sent me to another one and I'd be driving. I don't know. I've had these questions, and I was gonna do an interview with Keith William Nolan who was writing—

Piotrowski: I know Keith.

Patoka: Yeah. And he was gonna do a book on our unit and I thought, "Well, he has connections. Maybe I can find out. Fill in blanks." Unfortunately, Keith passed on last year. So another guy finished the book, but it only went through '67, '68. Although I did get information out of his book into Laos[??] Lam Son 719.

Piotrowski: Yeah. Okay. Let's back up just a bit. So you spent the first, basically twenty-one day rotation, in the field and came back to rear.

Patoka: Well I didn't have the full twenty-one the first time out.

Piotrowski: But close to it?

Patoka: Yeah.

Piotrowski: And had you been shot at yet? I mean, I'm just real curious.

Patoka: No.

Piotrowski: So you'd been over two months in Vietnam, in the infantry, in the tracks, and you still haven't been shot at?

Patoka: Scared the whole time.

Piotrowski: Just wanted to clarify that.

Patoka: Yeah.

Piotrowski: Because a lot of people don't realize how long that can take sometimes.

Patoka: And you just sat on this thing. And you're out in Injun [??] country. And you're scared, but it wasn't happening. This was during Nixon's Vietnamization where we're turning everything over to them. And basically we were just policing this area, but it's not like the VC went away. They owned the night. I mean you'd hear about little harassment stuff on the radio where somebody be sittin' there and there'd be zappers in the wire and stuff like that, but it wasn't happening to us. And guys in my unit would say, "Well A-Troop had red squares on the back of their tracks," and "Bravo had blue squares," and Charlie troop had a different shade of green, and they said that the Vietnamese would recognize this stuff and they'd know who it was and they were afraid. Again this is when they're strokin' 'ya telling 'ya how good you are. But what my first impression with them it was watching that thing going rolling over gun barrels.

Piotrowski: When you're with the 4th you weren't—nobody helped you, welcomed you that sort of thing. Was it different when you got to the 1st?

Patoka: No. No, I was a new guy all over again.

Piotrowski: Okay. So it was the same thing—

Patoka: Again, they gotta see what you're made of.

Piotrowski: How long did that take? You said that after you went back to the rear the first time they asked for drivers and stuff, and so you got your own track—

Patoka: And not because I was undersized. When I sat in the seat, I couldn't see the tracks in front of me. And on a track vehicle, the guys that taken the most chances is the lead. There's a bomb or something buried—

Piotrowski: It's gonna blow up underneath him.

Patoka: —he's the one that gonna get it. And you were the second or third or fourth, whatever, you kept your left track in his left track and you didn't get off. And because I was small I had to sit on several cases of C-rations on this thing to get myself high enough. They had levers for the steering in this thing. Well the thing is—with the levers is—if you're on flat country it doesn't take much pressure to pull back on it to get it to turn, but if you really had to get on the binders, you don't have the leverage anymore 'cause you're above the levers pushing on it. We were sitting there going on night defense position, climbing up this hill that was really steep, so we were gonna corkscrew around going up to the top. I was still staying in those tracks, and I was following too close. I should have been further back, and the lieutenant decided we're not gonna go all the way to the top. We were as high as we were gonna go, so he wanted me to back up. I mean the view from the top of this hill—you could see all the different colored squares on the rice paddies from up in the air. I mean, it was pretty steep. And I was backin' up, and they got a ground guy out, and the ground guy, I don't know, I expected him to make me back up the hill and then roll forward to make the turn. But he had me back-up instead, and I was in the driver's seat, Gomer's in the cupola by the 50, Bob Thompson on one side, and George McGasgow, a black guy, on the other side who had a great voice for singing. But he never knew what I was gonna do. [Laughs] I was backin' up and the track was just sticking out over the edge like that—

Piotrowski: Because it's that steep, yeah.

Patoka: —and then—yeah—I was gonna pull forward and I took my hands off the control levers to reach down for the shifter to put it in one-two, and she teetered liked teeter-totter and down she went. And I tried to get leverage on those things but I wasn't stopping it. She's rolling down the hill backwards. And Bob, he was the first one off, he got to the front and he just jumped off that thing. It was pickin' up speed and all you could hear was the whining of those tracks going down that thing backwards and I'm pulling on there but—I just—being on top of those seat rest cases I couldn't get the leverage to pull on this thing. I was just gettin' a little drag, but gravity was overcoming it. And then George laughed and I think he fell off. And Gomer was the last one. He was taking his helmet off, CVC helmet [combat vehicle crewman], and puttin' on his boonie hat. He was gonna crawl out the front end, but I hit a bump in it. Made him come up a little faster. I rollin' down the hill and there was this huge boulder at the bottom, which I didn't see at the time, but I was sittin' there pulling and pulling on that lever, and she's whining, I just thought I was gonna die. So at that point I went, "I don't care I wreck this thing or not." I reached down and I threw it in one-two and I just stood on that gas pedal and those tracks were just spinning. I was spinning strips of mud on this thing, and she stopped. And then I sat there a while and my heart's just a-pounding. Lieutenant comes on the radio. Okay. I'll come back up. [Laughs] I sat there and I drove back up and everybody's lookin' like, "What the heck?!" You know! And I'm like, "He had to tell me at that balance point?" And I think at that point those guys must have figured that I packed some stones, 'cause I couldn't get out so I had to do what I had to do. And we got in position and we laid out our tarp in case it rained and our RPG [rocket propelled grenade] screens which is just a cyclone fence with sticks holding it up. I was experimenting with explosives, because I still had Bob along who was the Mickey Mouse guy. So I'd take cans of C-rations, empty ones, and pack 'em with C-4 and see how big a hole it would make. Take flares apart. Take the flares out and pack that with C-4, but all that would do is burn. So then I had TNT, so I packed it first with C-4 and then the TNT and those things would work, so if—we figured if Charlie was comin' up at night I could send those things off above their head, and at least keep 'em down while we sat there and saturated the area with lead from the 50s. But nothin' happened. It was just like you were always up, and then it'd be down. Always up and then down.

Piotrowski: So did you—when you were out in the field like that—did you relax? Do you feel like you relaxed at all or did that only come when you came back to rear area or didn't it then?

Patoka: I actually felt more relaxed being with the guys that you're used to all the time. The fifty guys in your platoon, 'cause you knew what they could do. I mean you seen 'em maneuver and when we'd go on dismounted patrols. It just seemed like they had control. And, again, I didn't have any combat

experience yet at that point. I hated the dismounted patrols, because, again, I was trained on tanks I expected all this thick metal around me, and now I gotta go on dismounted patrols. And we had Kit Carson scouts with us and we would find booby traps. One of the guys in the group, Tim Fralick, we were going up a hill and he tripped one. He pulled a grenade that was stuck in a can, it had the pin pulled on it, and it went off and it peppered the inside of his legs. I was like one guy behind him and we got over to him all he was worried about was that he lost his voice. And I was sitting there, and they're still there you know, I didn't want to tell him it's all superficial 'cause he had a bunch of little holes all over the inside of his legs. Then we had to call in a helicopter, but they brought one of those little Loach [Hughes OH-6 Loach helicopter] things that the officers flying overhead play their little chess games in, and we just stuck him in that thing. And Tim wound up coming back to the unit after they patched him up and everything.

Piotrowski: So it was relatively minor wounds?

Patoka: Yeah. But you know the metal from the explosion is hot and when it's going through you and everything you can't tell somebody it's nothing [laughs].

Piotrowski: And you really don't know because it can be—pieces deeper—

Patoka: And you don't know what it hit on the inside.

Piotrowski: So this is what about two-three months into your tour that this first guy actually—

Patoka: I would say—I'm guessin' that this was in December. It could have been November, but there was such long periods of—I don't want to say lull—you were always on your toes, but—

Piotrowski: Nothing happened.

Patoka: —no exchange of gunfire. You'd be sittin' there with news of stuff you would hear about Charlie Troop ran, and the guys hit a bunch of "Bouncing Bettys" [anti-personnel mine with two charges]. And they'd go rescue one guy and then they'd set off another one. And we're getting all this feedback, but it ain't happening to us. So I startin' to believe they're afraid of that red square on there, they don't want to deal with us so I started buying into this stuff.

Piotrowski: So you got there in September, so October, November. Three-four months you hadn't—the first guy you actually saw wounded in combat. I mean I assume there was a few guys injured in accidents and stuff.

Patoka: There were guys in my unit that were injured and they went with us. They belonged to the association. Same time I was there, they got wounded a month before I was there. But, again, you know—

Piotrowski: I meant in terms of—just because you had heavy equipment, all that sort of thing, I assume you had guys that got hurt various ways. A track ran over or they got their arm caught—

Patoka: Right. You had more stuff that you caused yourself—just like in an industry where your maintenance departments get hurt because they're in strange areas that's foreign to them. But as far as the actual battle with Charlie, it wasn't there.

Piotrowski: It's interesting how this changes over time or with what happens with people. So this is—we're into December and you've seen your first friend—first guy from your unit actually get wounded and that's by a booby trap rather than combat so—

Patoka: Yeah we had to continue up the hill, and as we went up we were finding more booby traps. Well I would always—I was a big fan of grenades so every time I'd throw one, I kept the pin out of it. I had my hat decorated with all these rings with the little cotter key in it. But we went up that hill, I didn't have any left. I just knew from being with the 2nd of the 8th that when you ran into stuff that had more booby traps, that this was an area that Charlie wanted to protect. So the more it had, the more he wanted to hide it. You know. I don't know if they were trying to convince us not to go, 'cause it doesn't work that way. When you latch on to something like that, you're a magnet now. You have to go, and just make sure you find all the stuff and at the same time you have to pay attention not only to booby traps but for the ambush.

Piotrowski: Yeah. And this is in the Cu Chi area somewhere?

Patoka: No, this is—I want to say up by Hiep Duc and the valley of antennas—outside of Chu Lai.

Piotrowski: All right I've never been to Chu Lai. I'm sorry.

Patoka: Yeah west of there.

Piotrowski: So it's up in Chu Lai.

Patoka: Yeah I Corps.

Piotrowski: I just want to make sure it's clear on the record. So what happened as you got to the top of the hill? Anything happen?

Patoka: Nothin' again. You know just like, "Did we miss something?" They call in on the radio again. I'm just a peon I don't know what's goin' on. There's other guys going through there, rather routine. They're investigating. Looking for tunnels and everything else. Tunnels are all foreign to me. I was in the central highlands before. There you had to worry about snipers in the trees. Didn't see any there, either. Nothing happened, again, other than Tim getting wounded. We got—different guys would rotate and we had a new guy come in from—New York. Had blonde hair. I had no shortage of wind when it comes to talkin' and I was supposed to—I was sitting in the back trying to explain to him how we watch for the booby traps. The lieutenant was irritated and wanted me to walk point. I don't like doing dismounted patrols, I really don't like walking point. And I had to bring the new guy with me. We're—still trying to explain to him how you have to watch this, but when you're walking not only are you lookin' for that you're watching for footprints, broken twigs, just different stuff that give you a clue that somebody'd been through this area. And at the same time watch out for movement, moving leaves, or anything for an ambush up ahead. It was a really early morning, sunny day, walking through the weeds and I'm sitting there with the new guy on my right side and all of a sudden it was just like we broke through the brush and now we're in the clearing and there's two "dinks" sittin' there having breakfast in green uniforms. I thought they were South Vietnamese. I had my gun hanging down. I had it slung over my shoulder but I didn't have it forward and ready like I supposed to because I was sitting there babysitting the new guy. The one "dink" jumped up, took a .45 pointed it right at me started firing. And he never got the first round off, and I had shoved the new guy out of the way and I swung the gun up and I put it on rock'n'roll and I just hammered away but I missed him. I just couldn't believe all the lead I sent out on that first one clip like that, and I had doubled clipped but I flipped it around and I lost all thought of correct procedure. I just went after him because now it was personal. It wasn't stuff off in the bushes where they sittin' there plinkin' at you or some sniper just harassing you, this is—I looked into this guy's eyes. I chased him. I started firing. I was on single shot now, and the new guy's following me and everybody else. It was like a Chinese fire-drill running through all of this scrub brush. It was over our heads, but it was real thick. And I kept thinking that one—song about the Battle of New Orleans where he ran through the bushes, ran through the bramble where the rabbits wouldn't go. That's exactly what I was thinking chasing him and shooting at him and he's running away and I just—one clip after another just chasing him. I lost him, and god I sat there, "I can't believe I missed him." I sat there. I was never a good shot at duck hunting or anything, but I didn't think I was that bad either. I sat still for a while and just listened and I heard this [sighs] and new guy tapped.

pointed here [??] he took his last breath. And everybody else caught up and we went over there, and I had hit him. I had hit him all on the right side of his head and shoulder. His whole right side. It was just all shot to heck. And the new guy starts crying and everything, and he's pointing at me and I'm going like this. I got blood. God, I don't know if I was just hyped or what but I didn't feel no pain from being hit. And I checked myself over, and I couldn't find nothing. But then it hit me—head wounds bleed a lot and he was spraying all over the brush and as I was running I was picking it all up. And everybody sat there looking, and I went through the guy's pockets and I found a picture of his wife and his kid and, you know, I just felt really bad. But at the time, he didn't have to shoot at me, you know, he made that choice. And everybody else is sittin' there quiet and they're looking for intelligence stuff and that. I sat there and went, "Hey. You know I couldn't have been squeezing the trigger, I must have been pulling on it." Because everything was going to the right side. And everybody's looking at me, "You're a cold motherfucker." And I'm feeling bad, but I'm just trying to lighten up the situation 'cause, what, I want this stuff hanging on me now for the rest of my tour? We sat there looking for the other one. Well then they spotted him at a distance. So I grabbed one of the guys who had an M-79, and I'm thumping off rounds. One thing I forgot about M-79 is you don't put your thumb on the top by the safety because when you fire it that switch comes back and you swear it's gonna break your thumb. And I dropped a round right behind him as he was running and I got another round out and I shot again and it dropped behind him. So I'm peppering his ass with all this little shrapnel from the M-79 but I'm not bleeding him enough. And lieutenants yelling at me, "Patoka! Patoka! He's out of our AO [area of operation]. And I went, "Yeah, but he ain't out of range." [Laughs] And again, you know, I got threatened with Article 15 because we can't go after him anyways. He got away, but they did get some information that he had, and they sent that on a helicopter and sent it out. So that was my first one.

Piotrowski: And that was in December yet? Or you're probably in your—

Patoka: I'm guessin' it was.

Piotrowski: I know from talking with Vets one of things you usually can remember is was it before or after whatever you guys did for Christmas.

Patoka: And that's just it. I could never say that this happened at a particular time, because we came in for Thanksgiving and we had a great meal. We had the turkey and the dressing and the cranberries and all this stuff, but Christmas we were out in the field.

Piotrowski: Mm-hm.

Patoka: And the cease-fire. Of course cease-fires are—

Piotrowski: Marginal anyway.

Patoka: Yeah [laughs].

Piotrowski: Who actually ceases? So you're about four months into your tour and you finally actually get shot at and have your first combat experience. Sounds, from what you said, that it did shake you pretty deeply.

Patoka: Yeah I was actually ready to cry after I saw a picture of his wife and kid. I sat there and just felt bad knowing that he's never gonna see them, they're never see him again. At the same time, while I didn't have a girlfriend or nothin' back in the States 'cause all I saw was Vietnam on the news all the time. Not that I think that would have made a difference. I was too puny—the girls were bigger than me. But, you know, you just thought you were gonna have someone to come home to—family and that.

Piotrowski: Mm-hm.

Patoka: And this guy—his family—it's gone now. Well we rigged the body with explosives, grenades, pull pins so that if they came back for him they're gonna get a couple more casualties. That went on. We moved to a different location. Did more dismounts. I was with—on the dismounted patrol where we came in where there was a group of woods in an area that was like all rice paddies but there was just woods in the woods. There's big bomb craters around and everything. And we were gonna split up to go around this way 'cause we expected something in there. But now, because I'm seasoned now, I don't have to go with everybody else. I can go by myself, or with one other person. And I had this little Mexican guy named Nicky Mendoza who's gonna come with me. Actually we were a lot alike. I mean other than he was Mexican and I was white, we were easy going personalities and we talked a lot. We were going through a field, well, it looked like a farm field like radishes or something, but it was actually peanut plants. There was a sign out in front, and Nicky asked me what it said, and I said, "Well, what do you think it says? It says, 'Mined Area'. Don't go through there." So we started walking in there, and then he's going, "I thought you said—" I said, "How the hell do I know?!" I said, "I can't read Vietnamese! Probably says stay out of the garden." I don't know. We walked, but I didn't walk on one continuous row, I just kind of walked so far, staggered, stagger a little bit, stagger a little bit so I guess go back another way. I just went through the whole—

[Break in Recording] [01:03:02.18]

Piotrowski: Resume. And let's see. You were talking about walking with Nick Mendoza, was it?

Patoka: Right.

Piotrowski: And you were—had gone through this peanut patch is what—

Patoka: Peanut patch.

Piotrowski: Okay.

Patoka: And we came across a big bomb crater, and there was an ammo can laying in the bomb crater like it was thrown in there. For a .30 caliber. So I was telling Nicky, "Hey, keep your eyes peeled. That's either a booby trap or bait." And he sat there on top. He kept watching me as I was sliding down this thing, and I got the bayonet out. I started probing underneath it, see if I could feel if there was anything underneath it. There's not. I don't know how big a bomb this was to begin with, but it was steep the way it had blown out, so I'm sliding down as I'm going in this thing. I had one foot high, one foot low. And then I was pokin', pokin', pokin' didn't feel nothing with the bayonet. Stuck my hand, felt with my fingers. Didn't feel nothin'. I thought, "Well, maybe they just tossed it in there. But maybe it's booby trapped inside." So I was flippin' back that handle, and I just lifted just a hair, just big enough so I could stick my fingers in there. Couldn't feel nothin', so I opened it up and it's all filled with paperwork. All in Vietnamese, you know, can't read nothing. Don't know what it is, but it's gotta be important, 'cause chances are we surprised somebody and they didn't want to get caught with that. Probably a villager. So I took it and brought it out with me. Carried it back. We caught up with the other guys coming out the other side. They're like, "How'd you get here so quick?" And I told 'em, "You know we walked through peanut plants." And they were saying, "That was mined!" And Nicky's mad, he's slappin' me and everything. I can't read Vietnamese! I don't know what it said. I was just thinking it was "Stay out of my Garden" or something. I said, "Well, we didn't trip nothin'." So then I showed them what I found in the bomb crater. So we took it back. Lieutenant turned it in. And at the time, they're sitting there talking about how they were planning to attack us, but it was all bull. What it turned out to be was all a list of all the PEs and VCs in the villages that were gettin' paid off. So I got—

Piotrowski: That's real important stuff there.

Patoka: Yeah. So I got promoted on fourteenth of January. Although they didn't tell me about it right away.

Piotrowski: So you got promoted from what? A PFC to corporal—

Patoka: To specialist.

Piotrowski: Specialist. Yeah.

Patoka: And, you know, I was like a little, "Hey, look at this!" So I was a little cocky now. But I mean, it only made sense 'cause it was out of the ordinary. And you go back to the first week of training that you're there. They told you how you look for stuff out of the ordinary. They're gonna stack rocks, they're gonna place sticks down. Hey, an ammo can in a bomb crater is out of the ordinary. So I got my promotion. They didn't—I had gotten it on the fourteenth, but news travels—good news travels slow. Bad news travels like wildfire. Actually, that was a country-western song at the time. "Bad news travels like wildfire. Good news travels slow. Everybody calls me wildfire, 'cause everybody knows I'm bad news."

Piotrowski: [Laughs]

Patoka: We were gonna put this on our tracks. Paint it on our fifty shields. Actually, I did it over at Hawk Hill. I was an art student in high school, and I was real good. But you didn't have a whole lot of selection for colors. You had green and white and red for the Cav units. Mix 'em together you had pink. So I painted a pink pig on the 50's shield [track vehicle] with a CVC helmet on. And we called it, "Gomer's Pig". Because it was sloppy, it wasn't that organized. It was a demolition track. It carried a case of C4, a case of TNT, five Bangalore Torpedoes, two spools of det cord, and a forty pound shaped charge. In addition to all your .50 Caliber ammo and for the 60. I mean this is why they were lookin' for a driver; they had to find somebody to be, again, you'll be paste [laughs]. You gotta go, you ain't gonna feel nothin'. I painted that then a couple other guys wanted stuff painted on their shield. Cherry-busters and had a bunch of little cherries and everything. We did all this and the captain comes by, and he goes ballistic. "What's the matter with you guys? They're gonna see us comin' from miles!" What's the matter with you? They can hear us comin' from miles! I mean, Jesus, you get a whole column of track vehicles they're noisy as hell. Well I had to paint 'em all green and everything. We went back out in the field, and in the end of January we had—it was a sunny day and we were driving through, basically that scrub brush that when I first walked in—in the first VC I saw and as we were going the guy in the track vehicle on the back end ahead of me is directing my eyes to the right. And I look and in the trees there's a bandolier for M79 grenades. That's like those eggshell crates, and it's tied in the tree and it's pointin' out back away from us but toward where we're going. So I got on the radio right away, and I told everybody, I said, "Hey. This area is booby trapped." I told everybody on the radio. I didn't use no protocol. I just told 'em to stay sharp and pay attention. I was assumin' there was

gonna be three of them because of the way the egg shape was pointed on there. We had turned through there and kind of serpentine through all this stuff, eventually got to the top of this hill. Pulled in. Made our circle. They gathered guys together for going on a dismounted patrol. I sat on the front, and they opened up a case of C-rations. We always took turns of pickin' through who had first shot. I was never too picky except I didn't like the ham and eggs. Other than that, I didn't care. But as long as I had first pick I figured I'm going for the coup de grace. I'm gonna have my beanie weenies. I'm gonna have peaches and pound cake. And I jumped off the track, ran towards the back at an angle like this and picked through the thing. Got my stuff. Come back. Crawl up on top the track, and instead of sittin' in behind the 50, for some reason I sat and leaned against it. Sat in front. It—it never made sense to this day why I did that. Why would you sit where you not have control of the gun, just in case? But it was a sunny day, and it just seemed a walk in the park.

Piotrowski: A comfortable place.

Patoka: The guys are out there, and I was just gonna sit there watchin' see if I could see 'em comin' back. And you could see at a distance when they'd wander around, but as they got closer the shrubbery would hide them. As I sat there they came out of the woods, and I was eatin' my peaches and pound cake and "Recon Ron" Stevenson from Pennsylvania, who never told his family he was out in the field, come through. We exchanged hellos, and this guy always had a great sense of humor. He was a lot of fun. He walked to the back of my track and stepped on a mine. And the guy on the 60 behind me, Kelly, had his leg hangin' over the side and it just filled his leg out with shrapnel. And to the right Sargent Small was walking and he got hit with shrapnel. And Ron was down. And before I could even get off from the explosion, I ran around. They were already attending to him. They asked if I had bandages. I jumped back in the driver's seat and grabbed the bandages I had underneath there. And they patched him up. And Ron, his body was intact, but it was almost like he was sweating blood. It was coming through his pores. He's moaning. He wasn't in good shape at all. I didn't know Kelly had gotten hit in the leg. He said there quiet until I was running back, and that's when I saw him. I said, "Well you know we're gonna get medics. Stay cool. You're okay." Like I said, Sargent Small was leaning down pickin' his head up and nobody was tending to him yet. We're all sitting there worried about Ron. They got a dust-off [medical evacuation by helicopter] to come in, packed him up. And Ron had been carrying—had a vest on with M79s and all this, and it was all just all wrecked. So then the helicopter came, and they took him up. And then we were gonna grab all his ammo that he was carrying and we can destroy it. And Gomer was gonna get off the track and he grabs the stuff. And we're telling him, "Stay in the tracks where we had already driven." But like I said he didn't have all his hearing, and he

walked and I was gonna back the track up so that he could get on the ramp. Wouldn't listen. I sat there backin' up and then there was another explosion, and Gomer's down. And they had guys go over there to pick him up to bring him in the thing. They didn't put him in a body bag at all, they just put him in the back where the shelf is where the tracks would be underneath. And I sat there inside, and I looked and he had lost all his fingers. All he had was his thumbs left on his hands. His slit was on his throat. He was all black from the powder burns. His eyes are open, but he's dead. And he had no legs from below his knees. All he had was the flesh hangin' there.

Piotrowski: Right. That was a big 105 or something?

Patoka: Well whatever he stepped on ignited all the stuff in his hands and everything else, too.

Piotrowski: Oh okay.

Patoka: And he was down right away, but his nerves were still going so he was movin' around. It still bothers me today. VA gives me this stuff so I can try to sleep through it, but if I'm having a bad day then this stuff just all comes back and everything. When we got outta there, I started crying 'cause you know two guys that I really liked a lot, even though we picked on Gomer all the time, I felt bad about it.

Piotrowski: And you'd just spent three months with them.

Patoka: Yeah.

Piotrowski: Scared the shit—

Patoka: Yeah. We, well, we got out of that area and once we got out of that area we got a helicopter pick him up. They put him in a body bag and got him outta there. And I had the sergeant from Michigan, and he was asking me if I was all right and I snapped at him. Like, "Hey, it's not me that stepped on it." But, you know, I shouldn't have snapped at him, but I was just all upset because, you know, everything was going quiet and quiet, just minor little stuff and now all of a sudden everything is just falling apart big time. And I told 'em on the radio that the area was booby trapped, and it's just like nobody listened you know? That was it. And we got outta there and then that was on the twenty—I keep thinking the twentieth or twenty-first—

Piotrowski: Of January.

Patoka: And, ah, January. And we had come back from there to go the rear area and gather ourselves. They had a big operation going on. And, well, we were sittin' there checking over all the vehicles and we—or no, we went to Hawk Hill for the stand-down, but now we went right to Chu Lai to where the ships are, and we were going to load the personnel carriers and the Sheridans on LSTs [Landing Sink Ships] and lieutenant picked me out because I was a good driver and I could follow ground guide signals. So they put one track on one side and one on the other and I, whichever track it was, I'd get in it and I'd back in in the middle. By this time I had a got a package from home from the holidays. It's a little—about a month late, but you know.

Piotrowski: Got it.

Patoka: I got cookies and candies and everything. Big package that I had inside the track. After we got 'em all loaded, we button this thing up and we'd go out to sea. I can't remember if there was four LSTs and we spent three days, or if we had three ships and spent four days out there, but we're bouncing around on this and I was never in the Navy. They had hammocks, and they'd be sittin' there swinging and bouncing. I went, "This is bull." I'm gonna sit there, go topside. But I went down to check out the cookies, and I'd share it with other people but they'd, you know, go like that [snaps fingers]. Well my mom made this candy called "sea foam". But because of the heat they melted, and it looked just like C-4. So there I was on the deck walking around with a coffee can sticking my hands in there, grabbing this stuff—

Piotrowski: Eating C-4.

Patoka: —and grabbin' a finger full and fillin' my mouth and they're lookin', "What the heck are you doing?" I was like, "I, ah, I." You know they're wanna believe what they want. I say, "Hey, anybody got a blasting cap?" [Laughs] And we'd chuckle. But we'd be on that ship and we'd be watchin' see the horizon, then it'd disappear then up and down up and down. You know, scuttlebutt everything. We're going to Hanoi. And at this point, we just lost two of my best friends over there. Hey, I wanna kick Ho Chi Mihn's ass myself! So we were hyped. We thought we were gonna be sitting there—

Piotrowski: Of course Ho Chi Mihn was dead.

Patoka: Hmm?

Piotrowski: Ho Chi Mihn was already dead.

Patoka: Yeah.

Piotrowski: [Laughs]

Patoka: Yeah, but we still talked about Ho anyways. But I mean we really wanted a piece of North Vietnam big time, because of the politics and everything that went on. I don't know why we never did. I think it would have been over with shortly if we would have made the major push, but Congress is in charge and whatever, so. And I still have a problem with this today. I just think that when all negotiations fail, and you decide to bring in the military, let the military do their job. Don't sit there, "You can do this, but tie your hand behind your back." This is—I been in instances where Bob was carrying "The Pig", the M60 and I was his ammo guy. Bunch a "dinks" running across a rice paddy. Can't shoot at 'em. Gotta see a weapon. Well they're quite just far enough away where you couldn't see unless you had binoculars to identify a weapon. Then they'd go in the village. Well, guess what? We go across there, and soon as we got there—they'd get all the way in the villages. Just like in the movies, that water's dancing up around you like this, and I was sittin' laying in the shit there with my head on the dyke feedin' the ammo to Bob and I'm laughing. He didn't think it's funny whatsoever. I mean right by your feet we're watching water just splash up. Who came up with this stupid rule that you can't shoot them until they shoot at you first? I mean—I was just—and I wasn't afraid at that point. I just—this is just stupid. This is loony bin. We're all in this big mess and they're tying your hands behind your back. You can't do it the way you want to do it. But gettin' back to bouncing around on that ship, we landed in Dong Ha. It was like "Alice in the Looking Glass" where you would—came out the rabbit's hole and it's all different. Now all of a sudden the sun's shining with all the dykes. It was dark, overcast and we were gonna hook up with the 1st of the 5th and the 101st now, our unit. Infantry Americal they're all still down by Chu Lai. We're up there.

Piotrowski: Are the Marines still up Dong Ha, or had the Marines been pulled out?

Patoka: I believe—I don't know if they were in the Dong Ha area. I know they were still in that area.

Piotrowski: Okay. Because it was always a Marine area.

Patoka: Because—and I don't know this for a fact, because you know, it was just like we were going to North Vietnam and we really weren't. But, later on they were sitting there and they made a point that they were in trouble and we had to go rescue. And because I work with Marines I always have fun sittin' and tellin' 'em. And on our website they had the 1st Marine Division as a patch with us, 'cause we were supposedly attached at one point. I don't know. Again, I was just a peon—

Piotrowski: I was just curious.

Patoka: —and I just went where they told me. They were gonna open highway—I believe that's 9 that goes across up on there and Lang Vei and everything it's at the top. And we were gonna reopen it and go into Khe Sahn where the Marines held off the army there for God knows how many weeks. Bridges are blown out. The roads going out. There's bomb craters. The plows are falling into the bomb craters. We're just—we're moving at a snail's pace. We were just going to go into a herringbone for the night.

Piotrowski: Now are you with these other units? So you're just going to—

Patoka: We're still—

Piotrowski: It's just—

Patoka: Just the 1st Cav. But supposedly when it comes up to orders, we're takin' 'em from—

Piotrowski: I just wanted to make sure you weren't—I wanted to clarify how big of a unit this was. This was still your battalion?

Patoka: It's still the 1st of the 1st Cav, but now instead of being with Americal and the 196th and all of this working with them, we're working with—

Piotrowski: 101st and 1st of the 5th.

Patoka: Yeah. And it's creepy, 'cause you can see that when we were in the shipyards all these vehicles for as far as you could see that this was a major, major operation. It's like—you felt good, but at the same time you knew you were gonna be seein' action now. This ain't just, like, they're gonna let this stuff go. And I didn't know it at the time, but what it turned out to be was they're gonna make a push and bust up the Ho Chi Minh trail. But we were just gonna be backups. The South Vietnamese Army was actually gonna do all the—we're gonna be flying 'em in, they're bringing in their 1st Armored and everything. It was all supposed to be top secret operation, but you know the way secrets are. If you and me know and one of us is dead, that's the only way it's gonna be a secret because it just doesn't happen on that kind of scale.

Piotrowski: Yeah and you see that many—

[Both talking at same time]

Patoka: Especially with the Vietnamese, because they know something, they gotta share it with their relatives and everything, and their relatives might be VC.

Piotrowski: Yeah.

Patoka: I think that was the most scared I was the entire time I was there was when we spent that night, and we had our vehicles in a herringbone on both sides. The brush was right against the front. Didn't have our areas of fire cleared. All I can think is that they can just walk up and drop a grenade right in that driver's seat where I was. I couldn't sleep that night. Nothing happened. Nothing. But that was the most scared I was the whole time. I been in other instances where—well this is part of training, this is normal, this is what they expect. But that, they never told you anything where you were gonna be sitting there with your nose stuck in the weeds—

Piotrowski: And especially—

Patoka: —in an area that's not secure whatsoever.

Piotrowski: And that close to the DMZ and all that—

Patoka: Yeah. Especially. Well nothing happened and we went further down the road passed the big rock pile that they had somewhere around Lang Vei which was gonna be the big area where they were gonna set everything up. And then we were gonna go, and we'd get off that route and we'd go up into the hills and mountains and everything else, and do what we do. Look for trouble. That's what reconnaissance does. You go try to draw them in, and the idea is you get 'em after you but you draw them into the larger stuff. I can't think of one instance where it ever worked. It was always— but you'd be surprised with a platoon the firepower that they have is just—it's just awesome.

Piotrowski: How many tracks in a platoon?

Patoka: There's ten tracks, three Sheridans and the rest are one-one-threes. So you got three 152s, ten 50s [laughs]—

Piotrowski: Plus twenty 60s and whatever are on the tank—

Patoka: Yeah and M79s and your personal weapons.

Piotrowski: I worked with 11th Cav for a month, and it was amazing what they had.

Patoka: Yeah, I mean, when the shit goes flying it just, like, it's just awesome the lead that's flying out there. It's amazing anything could live through that.

Well we went up into the hills, and I had my movie camera so I'm takin' pictures every once in a while. I took pictures of the Khe Sahn airstrip, buildings on the sides. We went right to the Laotian border, but we weren't allowed to cross the river because no Americans was supposed to go into Laos. Although, you tell somebody not to do something they might want to tip-toe just to touch their feet over there. I was in—they brought in, oh, Cobras and they're sitting there pounding rockets and everything. And we're sitting there and we're in our little area watching them softing up the NVA [North Vietnamese Army]. We had a rude awakening 'cause we got word that one of the South Vietnamese things got hit with jet-dropped bombs on. It turns out it was one of their own jets dropped cluster bombs on 'em. So it was just a big mess for them. But they weren't ticked off, they figured that's part of war, because they'd been doing it for years already. So they—but after that, even though they had their tracks and their main guns all covered with camouflage. They had fluorescent orange tarps over the tops, so [laughs] they could mark 'em. I'm, like, we got word that we're gonna see tanks and jets up here, but they ain't gonna be ours. I went, at that point, 'cause I was a duck hunter, I'm takin' the 50 'cause I know how you gotta lead 'em off. I don't how fast jets are movin', but I know you gotta lead 'em off and they let them run into it. I swinging that around just to get used to it, so if they came 'cause you're only gonna get one shot at 'em and they're gonna drop the big one on you and that's it. Never happened. Never happened, you know. We waited, and again, puckered up sittin' there, we're thinking the worst. Didn't happen. Well there were jets though. Jets would come in and they were droppin' napalm and high explosives. I took movies of it, and I had a uncle that was in the Marines and when they got the films back at my ma and dad's house, they were little fifty footers. They could play it, but no explanation-no sound. They didn't know what they were lookin' at. But couldn't figure it and, "He's takin' movies when they're tryin' to sit there droppin' bombs?!" And I explained to him when we come back, "Hey, I don't know about you, but they're droppin' bombs on you, you're usually duckin'. They ain't shootin' at you. It's a good time take pictures." That went on, and I was sittin' there reading in "Stars and Stripes" [military newspaper] where they were sitting there talking how they thought it was successful, but the way they pulled the South Vietnamese outta there they're hanging from the skids of the helicopters. I was like, "I think they're seeing a whole different picture from what I seen."

Piotrowski: Just a couple questions about that. I read about Lam Son—that was Lam Son 719 or whatever it was called. They actually did have North Vietnamese armor during that.

Patoka: Oh yeah.

Piotrowski: They ran into actual armored units from the North.

Patoka: Yeah.

Piotrowski: But you didn't see any of that?

Patoka: No. We knew they were in the area. Again, you know, the hype. We got the red squares. How they would know anything about us up there, I don't know. I mean, they don't know. All you get is the military intelligence that sits over there playing the big chess game saying that this particular unit is here and this is here and this is here. But they only tell so much information to your captain, and your captain only tells their lieutenant so much, and your lieutenants don't know squat. So, you know, what you know is just rumored stuff. But we're still ticked. We're still ticked 'cause we lost Gomer and Recon Ron, so you know. Bring it. Bring it. We're ready. We were sitting there waiting for it. But other than going out in the field for twenty-one days and five days, this started at the end of January. I was so deaf at this point, well no—let me—before I get to that—we had moved to different areas, north and south of the highway. I can't remember if it was end of February or later or sooner, but I do know that on February 28th, which is my brother Glen's birthday, we had been traversing through this area and I was the last track in line. I'm on a different track vehicle now. I'm on—I don't know if I'm on 26 or 25 or what have you, but I wasn't on 24 no more. We were driving, and all I hear is noise all the time. The crackin' of the tracks and the straddling of the diesel and moving and every once in a while I'll pick something up on the radio set and there's—we had gone into an ambush and my best buddy Bob Thompson was on a Sheridan at the time and he took an RPG. Sherdians don't have ammo like a 48 where you have like the giant rifles shell with a big brass with your round in front. It's caseless ammo and it's made out of a pressed paper, so you stick the round in there and this paper behind it and it's set off electronically. And there were rumors at the time that they were having electrical malfunctions with Sheridans and they were cookin' off, but, well they got hit. The rounds are blowing. And I didn't know it at the time, because there was big dust-off and the whole crew was gone, they were calling me on the radio telling me to find a way around the mess. And I'm sitting there asking for directions, you know, "Where do you want me to go?" And they're just screaming at me, "GO! GO! GO!" "Go where? Go north? Go south? Go east? Go west? Where?" I didn't know where to go, and they're just screamin' at me, so I'm ticked off. I just floor it, and I go busting into the trees. If there was an RPG team out there, I wasn't gonna wait for them to shoot 'em I was gonna run 'em over. I was knockin' over trees, and I'm just screamin' through this thing. God knows what's going on on top of these guys just sitting there, 'cause I'm doing this stuff at high speed. I finally pop out on the other side, and the other tracks eventually followed my tracks around it. They set up a night-defense position, and the next day we were gonna go back. Well when we went back, here's all this

caseless ammo spread out all over the side of this hill that we had been traversing. And we had to pick it up, and we had to—you can burn it. You just punch a hole in it and burn it, cook it off. We were trying—and we were gonna have to destroy the Sheridan 'cause we ain't gonna get this thing back up there. So we had to blow it in place. I'm worried about my buddy Bob the whole time, and I got word later on that he had got third degree burns on 'em. What happened was the driver—I remember him being from Hazard, Tennessee, because I remember thinking about "Dukes of Hazard" at the time, Phil Logan—the rounds were burning in the turret and his back got fried. He didn't wait, he got outta that thing and he ran. To this day I guess he's not right. He's pretty messed up in the head. And Woody, Brian Woodbury, and Bob were on the top. Well, when it blew Brian flew off and broke his leg, and Bob went down to get Phil out of the driver's seat when he reached in there those rounds were cooking off, that's how he got burned. But, well the driver's not there no more, so they get him out, dusted-off. I was getting word through letters, and his aunt—'cause I would write his aunt all the time—and his Aunt Ester called me, "Charlie" 'cause he had a brother named Charlie and it was like I was lookin' out for him. I only had one month experience over him and nothing happened, so—

Piotrowski: But you were still the old guy.

Patoka: But he was from Louisville, and that's where Paul Horning was from, so everybody knew Paul Horning and they were a Green Bay Packer fan. So, yeah, at the time Green Bay Packers had just come off the World Championships, so you know, look at him! Like I said, that was on the twenty-eighth, and it the following week it really just got horrible. We started losing more tracks on rocket-propelled grenades and more guys. One guy lost an eye. Another guy went and got hit. He survived in this explosion, but when he had crawled out he got shot in the back and paralyzed. It was just like from ten tracks they were just getting smaller and smaller, and I had—my lieutenant was Lieutenant Jennings. Lieutenant Jennings was the son of Martha Mitchell of—

[Break in Recording] [01:34:35]

Piotrowski: Okay you said we're talking about Jennings who was the lieutenant and was the son of Martha Mitchell who—

Patoka: Martha Mitchell was married to Attorney John Mitchell in the Nixon Administration at the time. Him and me went round and around several times. I just—I had my difficulties with him. Where most officers would look with their starched uniforms, this guy was undersized, his uniform was oversized, he had this great big beak sticking out from under hat, and he probably was a nice guy but at—the way I was seeing him he just—we

just didn't listen to the lieutenant. It was always our sergeant. Sergeant was the guy that had all the experience, the hands-on. We watched officers come and go 'cause they only had six months of tour, and we had vehicles stuck in the ravines and we had to cable 'em all together. I was lead track and we're gonna pull 'em out. And on track vehicles you have to have a ground guide, and they have ground guide signals that you go though, that you learn. And when you're giving ground guide signals, you're supposed to give 'em to the way the driver sees them. So if I'm facing you and I want you to make a left turn, I will clasp my right hand shut, because as you see it you see it you want to pull on your left lever and that's gonna make it go left as opposed to doing right and—

Piotrowski: You having to convert it.

Patoka: Yeah. And I knew what he wanted to do 'cause I knew I couldn't make a left hand turn, because the ravine came around and you don't want all the tracks to go in the ravine. So I knew he wanted me to go right, but, as a matter of principle, I figure well he's giving me a left turn I'll go left a little bit. And he blows up, and he's screaming at me. So I'm yelling at him telling him, "Hey, if you had a brain in your head to learn how to give ground guide signals, you'd know what you're doing!" And he's mad, and he's threatening to send me to Long Binh Jail, "Hey there's only one man running this show around here, and if you wanna find out different, you're gonna find out the hard way!" And his voice is cracking like he's going through puberty. I laughed at him. I sat there, and everybody else is stinging there—they wanna laugh, but they don't wanna be under the wrath of the lieutenant. But well send me along to jail, take me away from all this! Hey, buddy, you know [laughs]—

Piotrowski: It's not exactly bad.

Patoka: You know if you're gonna threaten somebody, you have to threaten to scare 'em. There's nothing, nothing he's gonna do that's gonna scare me more than what my regular job is. So we went through that and on other occasions he was calling into artillery for support. And we had a white phosphorus round go off right above us. And at the time, I was cooking. I had a can of Sterno that my ma sent me in a care package, and when that "Willy Pete" went off above our heads—I mean I was off of that track in a hurry. I knocked that can of Sterno and it poured off the side. I got purple flames rollin' up on the track and I got underneath it, because white phosphorus doesn't stop. Eventually somebody's yelling and screaming, and, again, me and my best buddy Bob we have a difference of opinion about it. He sat there and blamed the sergeant for calling it in, and I'm telling him the sergeant's only following what the lieutenant told him. I said, "For all you know, the sergeant could have been arguing saying, 'yeah, but—' and he says, 'just do as I said,'" Hey, I'm not gonna be a

career soldier. Bust me, I don't care. So I had my differences with the lieutenant. He—after that I start losin' track, which would be the first week of March, it was gettin' more tense because, obviously, he's not contributing to the well-being of the platoon. At least I'm not seeing it that way. And, again, I don't know the big picture. Maybe he's doing the best he can with what he's got, but it doesn't look good to me. We got to a point where we're constantly under fire when we're out there, getting sniped at—

Piotrowski: And this is still at Khe Sahn?

Patoka: This is still up there—

Piotrowski: Highway 9, whatever it is.

Patoka: Yeah, well, like I said this was gonna be—instead of working twenty-one days this was going to be several months. I was thinking like, well maybe like a month, month and a half. I didn't know two months, three months, four months, you know. It was just—we're talking hardcore, we're talking the pit helmets, the green uniforms. This ain't little guys in black pajamas just instigating trouble, this is—we're goin' in a major chess matches here where they're gonna line up and we're gonna start sending the light at them, and they're gonna send it back at us. They have stuff where they're drawin' our tracks in, and—track vehicles if you throw a track at 'em you're done. You're a sittin' duck. Try to put a track on under fire. I've had the wear on the vehicles startin' to get bad, because instead of the twenty-one days and five days maintenance, they're just constant. I wore a spindle out that would be hold—looks like a giant shock absorber. You fill it with grease and that puts tension to hold a track on—

Piotrowski: I was gonna say it keeps the track in place.

Patoka: —and the back wheel just fell off. So they left me all alone. Well, they left me with a mechanic and my crew, but we had to get that track on by ourselves. See, we're on our own. I'm like, "Man, this is just like, you know, just tossin' a little chunk of cheese out there." Maybe they're using us for bait. Again, I don't know what was goin' on. I wasn't comfortable being in that position, but I am a fairly good driver, and I haven't thrown that many tracks but I do know how to do it and get 'em back on. We had that thing on [snaps fingers] in no time, and we hooked up and got outta there. But we're losing 'em. And at one point we're down just a couple tracks—

Piotrowski: Out of ten.

Patoka:

I had to get a new engine in mine, and the rear area there wasn't like a rear area. It's kinda like when they're talking about "Mary Ann", "Firebase Mary Ann", it's a rear area for the guys that are in the field, but it's still a forward base. It's not the rear area. We had gone back, I went with the vehicle because I was the driver and I had to get a new Detroit Diesel put in the thing. We're there and I can relax a little bit now. I'm sitting there writing letters home, and this black guy comes up to us and says, "Hey, I gotta go test-fire my weapon." Hey, thanks for the warning, because any time there's shots you sit there and you're up on your toes. He had disappeared and I was continuing to write my letter, and I could hear him pop a couple rounds and stop. Next thing you know, I see all these people running, and here he had a round jam in his M60. I don't know what—where his head was at—what he was thinking, but he got in front of the gun barrel and kicked back the jackhammer on the thing to try to take it off and when it pointed forward it shot him and hit him in the head—blew out the back of his head. They were putting him on a stretcher, and they got him outta there and I'm like, "Hey, you know, I just talked briefly with this nice guy, and just like that it's all over for him." And then that night, zappers got in to where they had the ammo storage and those rounds are all kickin' off. And, you know, as bad as it was gettin' stuck in the mud and everything else down over in Hiep Duc and that area, as I sat there, was starting to look really good. I rejoined the other guys and—guys will find any kind of excuse to get outta there. They have a rear job. We had a guy in the group we called him, "Teacher", he was a—my tent commander for a while and they had a opening for a mail clerk, a short-timer, now I don't think he had as much time in-country as I did at that point but he had special skills being a teacher, so he was going to get a rear job being a mailman. That was it for him. And Obie, we were on a night position once, and I don't know what was going on but I could hear him talking clean across our little area there. And he had fell off the top of the personnel carrier, and we had tanker bars driven in the ground with a tarp stretched across the leg with a tent stake and he impaled himself on it. It went in by his groin area and travelled on the bone and he was hanging upside down by his knee. And he's talking; he's not screaming in pain or anything, he's just, "Help. Just get me down from here." And guys got over there to tell him to shut up, because it was dark at the time and here's he's talking. All you hear is his voice. When they pounded those tanker bars in the ground where it would taper off like that, it wound up mushrooming much like a bullet when it hits and expands. And when they were pulling him off of that thing, he was screaming big time because it was tearing everything up when they got him outta there. So off he went. They patched him up. He wound up being the driver for the lieutenant back in the camp after that. But guys were going down left and right. We're on top of hill once and lieutenant calls me over there, tell me about a ___[??] unit was in trouble and he wanted me to go down there, and—I don't know what he wanted me to do. But I'm like—

Piotrowski: Help.

Patoka: I only got me and George. I don't have a crew. He says, "Nick, you gotta go down there." And I'm like—I said—I'm arguing with him, "I think you're trying to kill me." I said, "I'm going through all of this stuff. I'm doing what you want and it just puts me always in worse scenarios all the time." I just didn't see how one track vehicle is gonna make a difference when another unit is all screwed up. And I didn't know if it was one of our platoons or what. To this day I don't know who they were. All I know is that their uniforms were different than us, which is why when you were talking about the marines before, I started thinking, perhaps, they were marines. But I was ticked off, and I sat there, "I'll do it." And I got on there, and I'm trying to sort stuff out in my head. What can I do with one vehicle, you know? So I thought, well I'll come in—like the Cav does—here comes the bullet of bugles, here the horses come in there, we both go rip and tear. So I floored it going downhill. And, like I said, George—George never trusted me. I think I scared him more than the VC scared him, 'cause he never knew what I was gonna do. It took everything I could driving that thing at high speed with things rolling one way or the other and I'm trying to keep it straight. And we're flying down the hill, and everything's all green vegetation, but the grounds that rusty color—

Piotrowski: Gray.

Patoka: —dirt, clay, whatever, and I can see green traces out of the right side. I can see red traces flying out the red, and I'm coming down the hill and I can't see the unit that I'm supposed to be rescuing, because most of them are back—I have to make a left—a hard left turn. But I do know where the green tracers are coming from, and George is firing but he's not sittin' up in the seat. He's standing down on top an ammo can shootin' what he's shootin high, so everything's flying over his head. And I can't talk to him on the radio, because it's taking everything I can to steer this thing straight. So I turned it right towards where the green tracers are coming from. I figured [laughs] run 'em over. I went through, I couldn't even stop the thing if I wanted to anyways, well drove over the top of 'em and that was it. She stopped on me and the engine was gone.

Piotrowski: The engine was done.

Patoka: Yeah. I didn't know it at the time, but they took a bunch of rounds underneath it. There was a steel plate that covers the engine and that was all scarred. It was taking rounds. Again, you're in the driver's seat, your head's stickin' out of the thing and maybe your shoulders and I was so skinny the thing was like clapper on a bell in that helmet I was so tiny. Well once it was it was .51 and once I ran that over all the other small

alarms started to fade away and everything. These guys comin' out and I'm lookin' at 'em, they got white bandages around their heads and around their wrists and different areas—but they're white and ours were always OD colored. I'm thinking, "God, they stick out like a sore thumb with that." Again, I don't know who they were, but they had a push me back up the hill and the engine wasn't gone it turns out the final drives on the thing were all cooked. So I had to get them fixed, but I was just looking at the lieutenant and, you know, everybody's sitting there telling us, 'Oh you know you guys are gonna be getting Bronze Stars. That was awesome." You know, you don't think in terms of medals because what you're thinking of is surviving. All you wanna do is you wanna get through this thing and you wanna help you buddy. But that's—you don't care about the other stuff. If you're a career soldier, maybe, maybe it's a little incentive. I don't know.

Piotrowski: After the fact it's kind of nice, sometimes.

Patoka: Yeah.

Piotrowski: But yeah.

Patoka: Yeah, but you don't go out there thinking I'm gonna go earn this one on this one and that, because there's no rhyme or reason to what's actually happening. It's just a big melee. It's a Chinese Fire Drill. We never did get anything out of it. I was anticipating it after we settled down, but I guess lieutenant got something out of it. Yeah well you know—

Piotrowski: Of course.

Patoka: —I gave him the orders the go in there so—I'm on the one that, you know. So, again, I don't hold the guy in the highest esteem. I never thought he'd make it back, either. I thought, "Somebody's gonna take care of him." Actually, after I was stateside, I saw him on "Good Morning America" or something. I just about fell over. [Whispers] "He made it back?" But I wound up gettin' out of there on April twelfth, they had to send me to the 95th Evac [95th Evacuation Hospital of Danang] because my hearing was so bad they were taking an antenna extension to tap me on the left shoulder to make a left turn, right shoulder to make a right turn, tap me on the helmet to stop. You know, nobody wants to drive this thing, because they've seen what happens to the driver. That's the first casualty. But at the same time, I've had guys ask me to show them, because they wanted to learn. They were infantry guys. And I'm like, "You know, I wouldn't mind showing you if I'm leaving, you know." But I don't want to be the guy on that track, and having taught you and you didn't listen. You just said, "I know, I know, I know." Because I don't want you to wander

off and we hit something, 'cause they get ugly. Those things are only made of aluminum.

Piotrowski: Yup.

Patoka: So, again, there's all the demolition in that stuff in addition to the ammo, so—

Piotrowski: You got sent down to the 95th in April, because your hearing primarily—

Patoka: Yeah and that was it for me. I had bumped into a Major Powell over there, Dr. Major Powell, and he give me a medical profile, "I can't be around loud noises. I can be on guard-duty." They sent me back and they were gonna take over this Camp Faulkner, which was a Marine base three miles south of Danang just north of Marble Mountain beach area. Well I was gonna be there after I come out of the hospital. When you're in the hospital for hearing and you're walking around, because all you have is this ringing in your ears all the time, and you'd see people talking but you're only catching just little bits and pieces. It's hard to feel sorry for yourself when you see guys walking with gowns on and an IV rack on wheels and their head shaved and they got stitches running from their forehead to the back of their head down their entire length of their spine all the way down to their butt. You're like, "I'm not that bad." You kind of feel ashamed that you're in this same hospital with what these guys had to give, and all you have is the hearing loss, you know? But at the same time, I didn't miss being out in the field [laughs].

Piotrowski: It's kind of this or that.

Patoka: Yeah and you know it gets down to when they threaten you; they have to be able to scare you. Now at that point, if they threatened to send back out in the field, well okay, now that might work. I didn't tell 'em that, but I went back and we were in a—basically in a secure area now.

Piotrowski: But you were back to the same unit? 1st—

Patoka: 1st of the 1st Cav. But now, instead of being by Hawk Hill 29 outside of Chu Lai, now we were gonna be out by Danang and operating out of that area which was also a bad area for where the Marines were. They got in big fights there. But I had a rear job now. Supposedly I was handpicked to be a security police officer, because that area was really bad for where the VC would push heroin on our troops.

Piotrowski: Mm-hm.

Patoka: And they operated out of Marble Mountain. But we never sent guys over there, but they come in and they wanted us to frisk the guys down—they'd tape the little plastic vials inside their leg by their balls and everything figuring you ain't go touch 'em there. And you tried to keep the guys clean. I had to laugh at the movie, "Platoon", because there was an area there where they were showing that Charlie Sheen where he goes into one camp and they got country-western music playing and the guys are out drinking hard liquor and you go in the other one and they're playing Detroit soul and everybody's smoking pot and everything, and that was pretty accurate. But I could go with either one of the groups. I got along with everybody. To me, there was no color. It was basically just like they told us in basic training, "There are no blacks, there are no whites. Everybody's green." Dark green was getting back of the bus [laughs], but I got along good with 'em, because I had George MacGaspow as a tank commander. He thought I was all right. He sang a song about me called, "Mind Road Blues". He's sitting there telling—well basically they called me, "Junior", I was, "Dynamite Junior" 'cause that what they called Gomer. They called him, "Dynamite" and I was "Dynamite Junior" 'cause, again, I was naive enough to not understand the big picture of things. I did serious drinking then, VO [whiskey] no wash. Hooked up with a guy from Pennsylvania. I take that back, from Boston. Brady. And he extended his tour because he didn't like blacks. All he'd do was he'd get drunk and he'd go start fire-fights in the M-Club. Now, I got along with the blacks. I got along with Brady, too, but at the same time I'm like he'd get drunk and he was just a different person. He started fights in the M-Club 'cause the blacks would come in, you know, they'd be doing their _____ [??] And they'd stand in front of the projector where you can't see the movie. Brady goes, "Down in front." Next thing you know there's chairs and tables flying all over the place. I'm security police; I'm supposed to bust that up. I go back. I got one of these little plastic grenades, CS [riot control gas], and they were solid before 'cause we always the canister type. But this one was a baseball-type plastic, and when you threw it and it exploded—plastic. So guys were getting plastic stuck in their ass, and the CS going off. I had my .45, I fired rounds up in the air like that to get their attention. The MPs come in and they question me. "How many rounds did you fire?" Blah blah blah. Hey, don't you want to know about the fight? No, they want accurate description of everything I did. I'm like, "I'm trying to bust it up! I'm trying to stop 'em from tearing the place apart." Ah, had that happen had to go on guard duty. And, again, although there the sand was real white and you'd have patches of weeds, so you'd watch that at night 'cause you'd want to see if the weeds were actually moving.

Piotrowski: Mm-hm.

Patoka: And then the barbed wire—we'd hide cans of gravel in it, so it'd rattle if they tried sneakin' in. And even though it was the rear area, we'd get

mortared. But gettin' mortared there didn't scare me, because when we were over at the Khe Sanh airstrip we took 122 rockets. I can't even keep my feet underneath me. I try to run with this blastin', my legs were asleep on me from the way I was pinched the way I was laying down. I couldn't keep 'em—and we had to go into a connex[??] they had sandbagged, and the guys are all yellin' for me and I didn't have my glasses on because I had 'em in the helmet. We had to wear helmets and flak jackets, so I'm scramblin' and all this stuff. I think they dropped like little 60s and stuff on there, but that stuff don't scare me.

Piotrowski: [Laughs] It's a little different. So, is that what you did the rest of tour was the security police? Or did you switch to something else?

Patoka: I—basically I sat there and just rebuilt a new little shack, and we'd travel around perimeter of the camp. Check on guys that were on guard-duty. It was a lot slower pace, but on June thirtieth they had a—I think it was like a three-quarter ton truck full of ammo and everything on the helipad in the camp. And I don't know who the officer was. I don't know if he was a lieutenant colonel, I don't know what, I do know that they wanted to frag him bad, because he insisted that they get that ammo truck off the helipad. And there was—the ammo was piled already on the—they wanted it all piled on the truck to get it out of there. Well you don't stick blasting caps on the same vehicle that's carrying the explosives. They're supposed to be in a separate vehicle, and this officer wanted it all out now. They put it on the truck and guys were leaving and I don't know if somebody set off a radio or what have you, but it set off the electrical blasting caps and the whole truck lifted. I heard that they found a hand like a quarter mile away. But it was just a hole—what are we talkin' here—about nine feet around. And the only thing there was was the front bumper and everything else was just gone and buildings were just totally demolished all over the place. Another guy's wounded from the wood splinters and everything else. Sheet metal hanging from communication wires. And I had come off guard duty from that night and I was sleeping. This was like right around nine in the morning. I'm at the far end. I'm right where 201 is, and I could feel that blast from that. So I went over there. I took pictures and we were just ticked 'cause we wanted to find this officer, you know. I don't know—rumors were they were gonna "frag" him and everything else that's about all I heard but I never heard about anybody actually carrying it out, so.

Piotrowski: But he didn't hang around there.

Patoka: No. It was a mess. [Coughs] I'm gettin' dry.

Piotrowski: Well we can take a break here if you need to.

Patoka: Yeah.

[Break in Recording] [01:59:54]

Piotrowski: You were talking about being in the rear and being the security person and having this ammo blow up and this lieutenant colonel or whatever being on the hit list, so to speak.

Patoka: And you know this stuff goes through your head like I just spent all this time sitting here dodgin' Charlie and all this, and you're in the rear area now it should be more secure than this. You're still losing people. We had—the guys would go back to the routine going out in the field now. Twenty-one days and come in. Well then they'd come into the motor pool area and line up all their vehicles and _____ [??] units would line the perimeter. We had a junkyard right next to the camp, and there was everything you could think of in there. Somebody told me there was even a submarine in there it was so big. It was a big junkyard, and it was always smoking and everything else. It was the perfect place for Charlie to sneak through, and we had guys in there and here we had at night I saw a flare go off on the side, so we piled in the truck and we started going over there. Well, I had been reading a "Sgt. Rock" comic book, and I don't know, you're sitting there reading this stuff and Sgt. Rock is gung-ho and all these details in those cartoons, you know, they're showin' like a foot gettin' ready to stomp on a mine and everything else. But you're reading this stuff, and I'm not that kind of person, so I didn't know why I was absorbing all this, but I'm sittin' there bouncin' around reading this stupid magazine and the guys driving to where the flare went off. We hit a bump and I dropped the comic book. I went down to pick it up, and I come up and there was a bullet hole through the window and the driver [says], "That's enough of this crap." I'm like, "Well we gotta find out what's goin' on on the perimeter." He's like, "Screw this shit." I got out. I said to _____ [??] all I had was a .45. We're getting mortared. Mortars droppin' over on the sand over here. There's a little—it's nothin' spectacular like in the Hollywood movies. It's just, "boom" like this. But some of them went through the roofs of some of the—where we have personnel and that droppin' there, so there's guys gettin' wounded there. Well then I had one drop off right in front of me, and it kicked a bunch of dirt in my face and scratched my eye and I couldn't see anymore now. I'm sitting there just—wearin' pink 'cause I got this—and I don't think it was shrapnel 'cause, like I said, shrapnel's hot this was just dirt 'cause it got underneath the eyelid and everything, but it scratched the eyeball so I had to go in and they had to fill this all out. But we were gettin' attack and the guys on the perimeter were holding 'em off, but one of the tracks took an RPG and one of the guys wound up losing his arm. Again, this is stuff you contend with every day out in the field. You're in the rear area. This ain't supposed to be happening. This is supposed to be a secure area, but we are three miles south of Danang so I suppose that was normal—

Piotrowski: "Secure" is a relative term, right?

Patoka: Yeah. But, you know, we always had this thing about "REMFs" [rear echelon mother-fuckers] when we were out in the field, and now I'm a REMF, you know [laughs]. I'm sitting there, like, this is out of their area of operation, 'cause they're not used to this stuff. They're used to whatever it is that they do every day. They make sure their blankets are tight on their bunks and everything. That went on, well, until it was time for me to leave. Although, occasionally, I would ride with "Obie" Melvin Obermiller and we'd go to R&R Center up by Danang, sneak through the fence and go to the beach. I cut off a pair of khakis—and I can't even swim but it's shallow water. You can be lousy, but you're gonna be okay. And that was the only time I saw white women over there. They had Australian nurses over there, and it was like—not that there was anything wrong with the Vietnamese women. The young girls looked nice, but they don't age very well. Boy you'd sit there like this, "I'm in love." [Laughs] But, you know, we couldn't approach them, because they were probably officers, too.

Piotrowski: So for the rest of your tour you basically did the security police—

Patoka: Yeah.

Piotrowski: —sort of thing, and you just did a one-year tour you didn't extend to get early out or anything else?

Patoka: Well I actually thought of extending, but then they brought up the point that I have a medical profile and I'd have to toss the medical profile. Well, the security police sounded a whole lot better than going out in the field, but I'm like I don't know if I want to extend it 'cause it's hard to see a new guy come in and you're lookin' at him and he's just a youngster and you're maybe only a year different in age but you've aged so much from experience because stuff that they're not even thinking about you know that it could lead to something else. You're still on pins and needles. It might be a false alarm, but at the same time you don't know that yet. And your reflexes are so much sharper and you're not gonna be as slow as I was the first time I had to pull the gun out. It's gonna be there already, I mean, the westerns they never had a faster gunslinger when it's time for you to actually get down to business.

Piotrowski: Yeah. Well it's amazing that somebody's who is there a month longer than you, like you said, with your friend—

[Break in Recording] [02:06:04]

Piotrowski: Okay we were just talking about how quickly you become an old-timer compared to the new guy, and how difficult it would have been to extend. So you decided not to extend.

Patoka: Right. I sat there—the thing is I'd be coming back in September. I'd get a month of leave, and then I don't have to go back in for two months, because they had a 45,000 man cutback at the time, so that would have been it for me.

Piotrowski: But you knew that was coming already?

Patoka: I didn't know it at the time, and I knew I wasn't gonna get along real good stateside with the spit-and-polish, because—

Piotrowski: There was none of that [laughs].

Patoka: Even when I was with the very first unit, the 2nd of the 8th, and they were gonna have a parade to give medals out to some officers, we all had to stand in formation—I fainted standing out in the sun. I didn't really faint, I just didn't want to be an idiot standing out in the sun, so I pretended I fainted and I went out in the shade. Then, of course, they made me walk back to the camp, I couldn't ride in the truck because they were all ticked off that I was a little more clever than [laughs], but ah—

Piotrowski: Oh well. So I do wanna before we go into how your last couple of months were stateside and other things—you talked just briefly that there was a lot of heroin coming in and that's part of what your job was.

Patoka: Right.

Piotrowski: Talk about all of that. You know one of the images that came out of Vietnam is that everybody was either a junkie or smokin' pot constantly or that sort of thing, so just talk about—

Patoka: Well that really wasn't true that everybody was. For one thing, when you're out in the field you're straight. You have to depend on everybody else. Not so much with the 1st of 1st Cav, but when I was with the 2nd of the 8th when I first got over there and it was time to pull guard duty, the guys were real slow. And when you woke 'em up to pull their duty, and I hate to make it sound cliché but it was always a black guy. You sit there and you'd shake him and sit there like this and he'd go, "Yeah, yeah" but he'd roll over and sleep. I'm not gonna be on guard duty the whole night. You know, you gotta get up. You have to explain to them that Charlie is gonna sneak up in the dark, he's gonna cut your throat, and he didn't care. We had a medic, and as you know, all medics are called, "Doc", and this guy in particular his last name was "Holiday." He wanted you to be on his

side, and what he did over at the 2nd of the 8th was they'd smoke pot, but it was dipped in opium and they called 'em "OJs" and he's trying to get me to smoke this stuff. I'm lucky I had my gin and tonic stuff when I was in high school let alone anything like that. I didn't know, all I knows I was gonna turn "schizo" and everything else, but he pulled out this big Bowie knife and convinced me that I gotta take a couple drags on it. And I liked it. [Laughs] I thought I was—God, I hate to make it sound like this 'cause you really don't want anybody doin' this stuff, but it was like your senses picked up and everything. I could—of course I still had hearing at the time, but it was like I could hear everything. I mean, I could hear crickets running on the ground. And they had laid Claymores out. I was up the whole night. I watched the sun come up. I could feel the shaking of the track vehicle, and it was Doc Holiday, he was comin' up with his Bowie knife he was gonna cut my throat 'cause he thought I was sleeping on guard duty. I was awake. I took—I was sitting behind the 50 but I had my M16. I swung around and I pointed at him, and he freaked out. I had to go—they made go pick up the Claymore. They didn't tell me at the time that they stuck grenades under 'em because Charlie had a habit of turning 'em around on you, and when the spoon flew I dove over the dyke in the rice paddy and that thing went off. I mean, this was my own guys gettin' me [laughs]. I didn't know, you know, 'cause nobody told you they did that. Actually, I didn't say this either but when they first dropped me with the 1st of 1st Cav in the middle there the next day I had to go on a dismounted patrol right away to pick up a mechanical ambush. I didn't lay it out. Why would I want to go on this patrol? I was further in the back. I wasn't all the way in the back, but I was close to the back, but as we walked through I looked up in the air and I saw Claymores in the tree. I just froze. I was so scared I didn't even see in color. It was like all the color ran out. All I saw was black and white. We walked in our own mechanical ambush. It never went off because a wire came off the battery. Well we got back to camp, I had Lieutenant Meyers at the time, I tore him a new asshole. I told him this is bullshit sending guys out there. You send those out *with* it, you send the same guys to pick it up. And he was preaching to me about short-timers and everything, I said, "Well I'm never gonna *be* a short-timer if you're gonna be sending me out pickin' up somebody else's mess." It's stuff like that that happens the whole time that, you know, they're well meaning. I understand he had care for his guys that had more time in, but I'd like to see them have that kind of care for me, too.

Piotrowski: [Laughs] Yeah.

Patoka: You know, I'm unproven. I mean, I had a month in at the time, but—

Piotrowski: Not with them.

Patoka: —different circumstances.

Piotrowski: Yeah.

Patoka: Even with the first unit the first time out, well I had lost grenades in the dark before I was done after the first month I was already—I mean I knew how to set up the pack and everything else, but it was other stuff that would happen. You're gonna rest. You have this pack on your back. They told you about Bamboo Vipers: a “step-and-a-half.” “Well what's a step-and-a-half?” “Well, a bamboo viper. They bite you, you take a step-and-a-half and you're dead.” “What do they look like?” “Well about a foot long, and blah blah blah.” Well we sat there going bustin' through the bamboo, I still got scars on my fingers from sitting on the track trying to go through it. Snake falls on me. I throw it off. Rock'n'Roll. I blast the hell out of it. Everybody else starts shootin', too. “What are you shootin' at?” “Bamboo viper.” “They just—they gotta gnaw on you. They don't just bite.” “What!?” “Well, yeah, they can only bite you in between the fingers or under your ear lobes.” “You asshole! Why didn't you tell me that!?” You know, I sat there thinkin' they're gonna bite you and that's it! Jesus!
[Laughs]

Piotrowski: Actually they can bite you that way, but—

Patoka: Yeah!

Piotrowski: Anyway. All that stuff you learn over time.

Patoka: Right. You pick it up, because there isn't any clear cut thing where a guy's, you know, that's gone through this stuff sits you down and tells you this and that and this is the way we do stuff. This is how the orders—none of that happens. You—go and what happens happens. You know, they're hoping that you're trained. Well, I wasn't trained in—I had basic training. Basics is, you know, you're a band member. Yeah you got basic training, but how long is a band member gonna last out in the—

Piotrowski: Yeah.

Patoka: You know?

Piotrowski: So, were there things that you remember that were really funny or about the whole thing? Or was the experience not that way?

Patoka: Well I had my chuckles and everything. I mean when I got stateside and we were doing stuff with the camera goin' on the top of bunkers and trying out the slow motion, jumpin' off it and stuff. Still being a kid, although, you're not a kid.

Piotrowski: And yet you are.

Patoka: And you're sending the films home to give a message to your family that you're okay, look at me I'm still a nut—I'm still doing this stuff. And I remember my younger sister Kay when I come back saying, "Ah, same old Nick." And she said that, and I was thinking, "No, I'm not."

Piotrowski: Mm-hm.

Patoka: But you wanted to be the same person that you left, but it—no—those days are long gone right then and there. Stuff that you tried to preach to people. And nobody wanted to hear about Vietnam when you come back, you know. It was a big pain for the country and everything, but you try to explain to them why you are like you are—why you're on edge and everything. A car backfires and you're sitting there going like this—I was over at Iola Military Show. I didn't know they were gonna do reenactments. This is just a few years ago, and I had gone in there and I'm looking at the tables where they had that, and they started boomin' off guns and everything in the valley. I sat there knocked the table over and scattered stuff all over the place. They're coming over to see if I'm okay. "Huh? I'm okay! What the hell was that?!" You know? "Why didn't you say that they're gonna—" They said, "Oh yeah, they're doing reenactments of a battle in ah—"

Piotrowski: Yeah. Especially when you hear that AK or the 16 that you recognize.

Patoka: Yeah, I mean, you know where you are. You know you're home, but it—it doesn't go away.

Piotrowski: There's somethin' back there.

Patoka: It's a—as a matter of fact I was at a funeral a couple weeks ago. Bumped into my cousin who was wounded over there. He was in artillery, and he's got shrapnel in his spine. I always go talk to him 'cause he's the only one I can talk to in the family that was there. He told me, he says, "Nick, I'm over and done with that. I've moved on." Well he's in artillery, and I understand, but you've moved on? How can you—how do you—what do you gotta do? What's the magic—what—what?

Piotrowski: There is no magic.

Patoka: Yeah. When does it go away and when does everything become normal again? It doesn't seem that way.

Piotrowski: Talk a little bit about how you were treated when you came home? You briefly said, “Well the country was tired with it and nobody wanted to hear about it,” but just talk some more about that. It's, for me, very interesting.

Patoka: You know you, like I said, you come back and nobody wants to see you, so you want to move on yourself. Moving on for me, I'm gonna get a car now. I drove a tank, I can drive a car. But I have a problem with authority.

Piotrowski: [Laughs]

Patoka: And I'd be speeding, and I'd get pulled over, but when I'm speeding my speeding is beyond five, ten, fifteen miles per hour. Mine's like fifty-seven over the speed limit, something like that. I just got a speeding ticket a couple weeks ago. I gotta go to traffic court for seventy-one in a fifty-five. I told him I was coasting at the time. You have the police officer just doing his job. I understand that, but he's still an authoritative figure, and if I have a polite police officer, I'm polite. But if I have one that thinks he's hot or like the one I had two weeks ago who's approaching the vehicle with his hand on his weapon, I'm tryin' to think of a nice way to tell him that if you're agitated by somebody else's driving and you finally break free of them by passing them only to get pulled over, now you're more agitated. The last thing you want is if you have military vet plates on your vehicle is have him approach you with a hand on a weapon, 'cause I don't care if it's a toy, I don't like it pointed at me. I know that they think that they're in a superior position, because they have the weapon—even if you don't have one, but I don't think they have a grasp of the—you're older now. I hear this all the time—you're older, you don't have the reflexes. They're wrong. When I run my Harley at the drag races, I've had reaction times of 3/100,000ths of second. I'm racing younger guys. They're not that fast. I'm gone. Shannon over at Docs calls me “Quick Nick” 'cause he can't believe you're talking to a guy that's approaching sixty years old that sharp. I go, “You're anticipating it.” You're anticipating when you're out in the bush that you're gonna get ambushed. Of course you're gonna be sharp. Of course as you learn stuff you're gonna have a routine, or what have you, that you'll prep yourself. You'll have magazines taped too so you don't have to reach in there and get that other one out. You're—there's different stuff that you're gonna do that when you first got over there you didn't have a clue, but as you picked up experience you're gonna prep yourself better. And you're gonna get into a routine. And you're gonna look at the new guy as a youngster. [Laughs]

Piotrowski: So when you came back you ended up with a couple of months in service and you had a month's leave and you had a couple months left to do in service. What'd you do after that?

Patoka: Well when I first came back I had my month time off, I got myself a free hunting license 'cause I was still in the military. So I went duck hunting with my dad, and my cousin was in another duck blind, and I was a pretty good shot back then. My dad was callin' out one o'clock, two o'clock I'd point, bang. Duck would drop. And then we didn't have a skiff, so I had to go walk into the potholes to go pick 'em up. I walked in that stuff before. I still got my jungle fatigues on. I was gonna walk out there. My dad, "Wait! You can't leave your gun back here. DNR comes and they're gonna bust me. You gotta take it with you." Well, I took my Model 12 Winchester, I had it above my head, I'm walking in I thought I was making a lot of noise. I mean when you're in Vietnam and you had that little metal clip you'd tape that up so it wouldn't clank. Again, it's the prep work. But I'm not there. I know that. I'm stateside. I'm duck hunting. I'm gathering a meal. And I thought I was making enough noise. Some ducks came in and they settled between me and my cousin. My cousin couldn't see me 'cause there was cane in front. Well he waited 'til the ducks came in and set before they dropped and he fired and caught me in the left shoulder. I had a leather vest on sheepskin lined, which is a good thing 'cause that took the brunt of it. Although, I did get pieces in my neck and my shoulder—lead. It blew me backwards, and I couldn't just drop the gun. I took a beat on him, and I was gonna shoot back. And he's screamin' and I realized, "No, no, no. I'm not there no more. I'm okay." But that was it. I didn't duck hunt no more. I've deer hunted, but it wasn't really hunting. It was—you're a flue out in the woods. You just go in there, and I'm watching. I'm watching porcupines. I'm watching fishers. I'm watching squirrels. Don't wanna hunt [laughs].

Piotrowski: I just wanna clarify—you actually were, quote, "never wounded" in Vietnam then?

Patoka: No open wounds. Other than—

Piotrowski: I mean where you got awarded a Purple Heart for being wounded?

Patoka: No, no Purple Hearts. Other than having the eyeball scratch from the sand which all they did was load it up with watered down Vaseline, and when I was with the 2nd of the 8th I did sit on a Punji Stick [VC booby trap].

Piotrowski: Ouch! [Laughs]

Patoka: Yeah. Yeah. I had another hole to match the other one as I recall. I thought I was gonna get lock-jaw. It hurt. It got good laughs out of everybody else. It was a flesh wound. It was not a big deal. I didn't even leave the field for it, you know. But, you know, of course you got a funny medic, "I'm not suckin' the poison out." [Laughs] I just, like, it was just split bamboo. And whether or not it was, you know, what are your chances of one piece of

bamboo stuck out like this? Was it really a, you know, maybe something just got busted off? I don't know, but it was just one of those where we sat in a rest area and I wanted to pull the quick-release on the thing and sit down and I sat down on the thing, so that was it. Yeah.

Piotrowski: You talked—they said you were gonna be given a Bronze Star, but you never got it. Did you get any other medals, any other awards?

Patoka: I got a Army Commendation Medal with the Oak Leaf cluster, so basically it would be three of them. And then I got a Good Conduct, which they actually mailed me after I got out, which was, you know, with the Article 15 that they threatened me with all the time, but they got—but I'm like, "A Good Conduct medal? You gotta be kidding? How'd I get that?" It's not like I thought I was a difficult person, but I would question because I'm from that generation that, well, question anybody over thirty. Of course, when you hit thirty then it's like, "Well, I know better." [Laughs]

Piotrowski: Yeah, and, that made me think of something else. Yeah, okay, it doesn't matter.

Patoka: Yeah I had my ninety-day service in National Defense, Vietnam Service Medal, Vietnam _____ [??] Medal. Then our unit had a presidential citation and a Cross of Gallantry with palm.

Piotrowski: I just was curious—

Patoka: And a CIB [Combat Infantryman Badge].

Piotrowski: Yeah, because you were considered infantry as an armored infantry.

Patoka: When they did dismounted, I was infantry. That's what I say, I'll talk with people that were in service, but when they ask your MOS, and they're like, "Well I was Military Intelligence and I did this and—" No you didn't. I said, "I'm the kinda guy that gathers the intelligence. You get it out of a file and give it to an officer." And he looks at you. You can embellish your stuff the way you want, but that's not real life. I said all my MOS's 11B, 11D, 11E are all combat. It's pretty obvious I'm a terror.

Piotrowski: So after you got out of service, what'd you do then?

Patoka: I drank heavily.

Piotrowski: [Laughs] For about two years at least!

Patoka: I came back, and I was—I drank hard stuff there without wash, so I started doin' that at home. Then I started thinking, "Well they did save my job for

me,” where I worked at the paper thing so I should go back. Well the day I showed up was the same day they got the paperwork tellin' me that I was back from service. So he said, “Well if you would have been here one day sooner, you would have beat the paper.” So I showed up back at work. And when I left, as puny as I was, I bulked up some now. 'Cause I was only 140 pounds when I graduated, and I was 165 so I was bigger and taller, but still skinny. They had called me “Hercules” before I left, because I was so skinny but I'd be liftin' fifty pound boxes and throwin' it on stuff, so you know it was a joke, but at the same time, now I would do this and they moved up—they moved away from those hammers. Well the only ones I could talk to were other Vietnam vets over there. We had a guy he'd still wear his cargo pants, so we called him “Pockets,” because he had the big cargo pockets on there and everything. He was infantry. He got wounded over there, too, but he never went to the VA. I told him, “Jesus. Go! You know? They'll help you out.” He was just always distant, but at least when we would get in a conversation him and I could have a decent conversation as opposed to if somebody else tried to join in and then they're askin' questions, askin' questions—well here you're back to the new guy again. You know? Now you gotta sit there, “Well I didn't want to give you a big history on all this stuff.” You know, 'cause you're tryin' to move on, but it—you can't.

Piotrowski: So you worked at the paper—canning company—

Patoka: I worked there—there are people that find me difficult.

Piotrowski: [Laughs]

Patoka: And, actually, they had biker shirts that said, “Does not play well with others.” They said that would fit me, but I don't look at myself that way. But at the same time, when I came back I was pounding out, but they moved to pneumatic hammers but then I got this thing where I'd move up on the machines. Well, they give me a little training on how this—how to do this. One day I came in on a Monday and I was gonna be the operator. They said, “Well that's on a ____ [??], think you can do it?” I said, “Well, once I get started it might come back to me.” And by the end of the day, I had the machine running, and the bosses are poking, “Hey, he's got it!” You know? Then I'd—when I'd run the machines I'd run so fast mechanically I was beatin' 'em to death. And the mechanics were complainin' to the electricians to put a governor on it, because I was stressing mechanical parts. Bosses didn't care. They were gettin' production, so all good stuff. You know everybody would be sitting there thinking this and everything else. No this is—this is, again, when you do stuff they have—there's not a quota for you to do something in service. It's—but you have a job to do. It's my job—my job makin' food packaging. I'll knock as much as I can, you know, they'll pay me the same

no matter what, but you had this own personal investment in this thing where you wanted to do. And I ran that machine, and they give me a bigger challenge to go on a machine that was difficult for other operators. Do the same thing there. Get the thing goin' beat the hell out of it. They had a big shot come in from Virginia—yeah from James River, Virginia and he was the president of the food packaging, and they said you got any questions you can ask him. And I had my problems with authority and everything, but I thought, “Where is this guy? I'd like to talk to him.” They said, “Well, you got a question?” I said, “Well I didn't have anything in particular, but I might think of something.” The machine I was on—they didn't have all the correct parts. The machines were made in Sweden, and they didn't want to pay shipping costs, so I had rubber bands and red tape, you know, hundred-mile an hour tape holding this thing together, but I made it work. And this guy shows up, and silver hair, tie tucked into his shirt. “Hi. I'm Norm Ryan. President of Food Packaging James River Corporation, James River, Virginia.” “Yeah? Well I'm Nick Patoka. I'm a operator of Six Box, Menasha Carton Plant. Menasha, Wisconsin.” I'm being a smartass. He just thinks I'm identifying myself. He says, “You got a question?” I said, “Yeah. When are you gonna stick some money into this place?” And he looks over at the plant manager and all the other guys down there. I said, “Don't look at them. They're a bunch of yes-men. They're just gonna tell you what you want to hear.” I said, “I'm tellin' you things ain't that rosy as they paint the picture.” I said, “My feeder on here is held together with red tape and rubber band.” And he's gettin' irritated with me. And he says, “Hey, you really feel that way?” I went, “What way?” He says, “Your shirt.” And I didn't—I always have a t-shirt that have sayings on 'em, and I didn't put much thought into what I had on that day. It was just a clean shirt, but when I looked down I had a—it said, “This job sucks.” I thought to myself, “Wow.”

Piotrowski: [Laughs]

Patoka: But I wasn't gonna back down. I told myself, “Well, actually, I feel a lot stronger than that.” I said, “For what you pay us around here, that's all I could afford to have printed on it.”

Piotrowski: [Laughs]

Patoka: So he whispers to me, “Well I suggest you go find a job someplace else.” I said, “Well, Norm, I could do that but it's important for you to understand I'm not the only one that feels this way. I'm just the only one that's gonna tell you. Have a nice day.” And I walked away. And when they got him outta the plant, I had management and the union come over, “What the hell is the matter with you?” “What?” You know? I asked him a question. He didn't have answers. He just goin' through his little preppy stuff. I said I don't wanna listen. So anytime they had bosses come through after that,

they'd find a job in the basement or something. They had a opening for a electrician and a pipefitter and a millwright. And this was in the—oh this is the late '80s, because in '84 I was really depressed. Actually, I checked into the VA 'cause I was suicidal. I thought I had a skiing trip coming up to Colorado, and I thought, "Maybe if I get over there I can clear my thoughts." I went out there with my cousin and his wife, and it was the first year that they opened the north peak over there in Dillon County. I was riding up a ski lift with this millionaire. Guy's name was Marshall Friedman and his wife Cathy. And he was asking me what I do for a living, and I told him I worked in the thing and I was really sick of it. He says, "Can I offer you a suggestion?" Hey, go ahead. Ain't gonna hurt. And he says, "Go back to school." He says, "Get yourself an education and try to improve on things." And you know, at the time, it's like it's easy to think that but you have to have an opportunity. You have to have—you have to pay bills and all this. You can't just quit your job. But I went back and they had the openings and that and I put in and signed for all three postings. And I breezed through the tests. And they were like—they were kinda shocked, because apparently I project this persona of being a moron or something. I mean, yeah I know I sit there and talk dumb and all this stuff, but I was good at the machines. You would think they would have picked up on it. They asked me which job I wanted. I said, "Well I took auto-mechanics when I first got back, but I broke away from that 'cause they went to the pollution stuff." So I didn't want to do that no more. I knew I could do the millwright job. I said, "I don't want to do a pipefitter, 'cause I don't want to be working on no plumbing after a party or something like that." I said, "I think I like the electricians job." And they were tryin' to talk me out of it. He's tellin' me how hard it is, and all this stuff, and if I don't make it I'll still have my seniority but I'll be all the way at the bottom of the stuff. I didn't care. I said that's what I'm gonna try for. They started overloading the curriculum on this thing, makin' it set up so I was gonna fail. I surprised 'em. I went to night classes and everything else. They sent me to Louisville, Kentucky to learn about programming logic controllers with the boss. I blew 'em away over there. They just couldn't believe I could pick up on this stuff, and I'm like, "God, I don't think you understand the concept that the government trusted me with a machine. Hundreds of thousands of dollars." And I went, "I was never elected the best driver there. I was the second best." Although the guy with the ___ [??] liked that I had to pull him out already. I never was stuck, but I did throw a track one time but it was a mechanical failure. So I said, "It's not like I don't know. It's just that I only need so much to get through, because there's no challenge anymore. It's not—it's not life and death." [laughs] So I went through the course and I breezed through it and the boss was just freakin' out. He told me at the graduation, he says, "You know, I was trying' to talk you out of it." He says, "It would have been the biggest mistake of my life if I would have succeeded." I said, "I know you were trying to get me to fail. And that's why I pushed harder." I said, "It's just

what I'm made of nowadays.” When they expect you to fail at something, I said, “Our motto when I was in service was, ‘The difficult we do immediately. The impossible takes us a little bit longer.’” And he freaked out, so when I graduated the first thing that the bosses over there did was they had me install a press—ink color press. I told ‘em, “Are you nuts!?” I mean I just got through my apprenticeship. And they says, “But we think we can do this.” I said, “Well, you know, it’d be your fault if I fail. I mean I think you’re overloading my plate.” He said, “No, no, no we think you can do it.” And I had a young boss that was electrical engineer, but he got pulled away to where I work now. They were—the plant manager was emailing him tellin’ him how I was kickin’ ass on this project. I’d do it under budget and everything. And it was flawless. I had three apprentices underneath me, and I was a slave driver. I was hounding just like you would an FNG. I mean I was just sitting there tearing ‘em a new asshole all the time.

[Break in Recording] [02:37:39]

Piotrowski: Okay you were talking about electrical—and becoming a—

Patoka: We had that machine up and running, you know, _____ machine[??] and then they wanted to put in a second one. So they says, “Hey. We wanna put in a second machine, and we want you in charge.” I said, “No.” They says, “What do you mean no? You can’t say no.” Yeah, I can. I’m the lowest guy in the shop. Put one of the other guys on it. They said, “Well you did the other one.” I said, “Well I just did it ‘cause I wanted to see if I could. I don’t have to do it now.” They said, “Well we still want you to do it.” I said, “Tell you what, gimme crew chief pay and then I’ll do it.” No negotiation with the union. Nothing. They said okay. So, I did that. Had that one going. They told me, “Don’t go upstairs. We’ll tell you when to go up.” Again, I don’t listen, so I went up there and here they were laying the base—big concrete columns on this thing, and they’re puttin’ the oil pan on top. And I looked around and there’s supposed to be these six-inch holes in the floor where all my cables were supposed to go through. No hole. Can’t put ‘em in now, ‘cause they got the oil pan on top. I go down to the plant manager and I told ‘em, “Hey where are my holes?” “What holes?” I said, “You’re supposed to have holes.” I said, “I got color press that—a monitor where they set the balance of the color for the photographs. I said, “Each bank on the press has thirty-six motors. They’re little bitty ones that turn—that would shape the blade that spread the ink out.” I said, “And they all gotta go to that color console, and I ain’t got no way of gettin’ ‘em there unless they trip over them when they’re going up and down the steps.” He drops a pencil and runs up there. “Oh my god!” And he’s just shocked that I would pick up—I told ‘ya. They had a guy underneath there sittin’ there drilling with a Hilti in the basement, and he’s cursin’ and everything. I said, “Hey, I want you to know I’m the new guy here. But let me tell you,

they probably told you it was my fault but I'm telling you it isn't." I said, "I'm the one that caught that they didn't have the holes in there [laughs]." I just wanted the worker to know that I'm not the one that—I know what I'm doing. I did that and then I had to rewire a couple of the other ones, and between me and my crew chief that I had we were the two best ones they had there. I was—I still didn't feel—somethin' still wasn't right and I wasn't happy. I wasn't making enough money, so I wound up quittin' there and I had twenty-seven years in. I went to where I am now which, at the time, was—God we still called it Tissue Mills, but it was owned by Georgia Pacific.

Piotrowski: Yeah it's been sold about six times.

Patoka: Different owners all the time. Right now we're owned by some place in Sweden, it's SCA. But I came in the shop there and the guys in the shop are half-and-half. They get mad when I call 'em that, but they're E and I, electrical and instrumentation, and I'm just pure electrical. They're schooling wasn't anything like mine. I, like I said, they were trying to get me to fail so they were sending me to stuff that the guys talk about the color spectrum of light, they go, "I don't know about that." I don't care about it either. I had to learn about it. I sat there, electrical code. How can you be an electrician and not know the electrical code? They just pointed at the book. I said, "What's Article 100?" "Well I been outta school so long I forgot." I been outta school longer, I still know what it is. I mean it just—

Piotrowski: Because it was important. I think we've covered most of the stuff that—with the military. I know you have the VCR and stuff like that or DVD of it. My sense is with that it would be just as good if you just kind of take—I don't know if you have a tape at home or anything like or can you do it on your computer onto a narration of it? Because it's gonna be hard, unless it's real short, it's gonna hard to narrate and connect it to the tape. But we can try.

Patoka: Well what I did was, at the very beginning of the movie, I was gonna narrate through the whole thing, but then I found cassettes I had from Armed Forces Vietnam Network that I taped off cassette off the radio. So I put that music on this thing—

Piotrowski: Oh okay.

Patoka: —and what I did was put title overlays.

Piotrowski: Mm-hm. Oh so you have titles on what it is?

Patoka: I have titles of what you're looking at. We found POWs. So then you sit there looking and we can see us throwin' CS in there, and the guys are standing around there and you can—

Piotrowski: Okay.

Patoka: Or I'll put on there, “Softening the NVA,” and then there's “Cobra Super Rockets” and the smoke's flying and then I'll put, “Heavy-Duty Softening” and then it shows dropping the bombs.

Piotrowski: So yeah—I think that gives them most of what they need in terms of record here.

Patoka: But you don't have time to watch it now. I can give you a copy.

Piotrowski: Oh okay.

Patoka: Because I made a whole bunch.

Piotrowski: I will. I will take a look at it.

Patoka: This stuff here, on the cover, that's me with an RPG. She actually called me, “Babyface” but I started callin' her that 'cause I could never pronounce her name. But then she said I was a butterfly. Well, I was a virgin, you know? What's a butterfly? Well you hop from flower to flower. No, I don't. I'm just nice. And that's Gomer, he's the one who got killed there. There you can see explosions from the jets. This is John Cryer, couldn't get a better last name than him. Nice guy, but every time it was time to go out in the field he'd start crying and he'd get the shakes. Sargent Small. I can't remember his name. That's me in the middle.

Piotrowski: Have you gone to reunions of your unit?

Patoka: I went to one in Kansas City where I showed 'em the movie there, and everybody freaked. I was getting a standing ovation. This is the hole from where the truck was.

Piotrowski: I'll take a look. Trying to think what else—

Patoka: But all the pictures I turned it all in here to the museum.

Piotrowski: Yeah when I first started volunteering here that was one of the things I did was copy the pictures, so they were preserved. And that's the biggest thing they're looking to do. I've always wondering that why they don't, after they copy, see if they can get you back in to have you describe what the

pictures are as best you can. But they haven't gotten that far yet, but I think they will.

Patoka: They were taking those when I was talking. I think we were more in a hurry at the time. You know, if I'm on a long weekend like this, hey you wanna spend a day doing it I can sit here and tell you what I can still remember, but I'm starting to lose it.

Piotrowski: It's forty years.

Patoka: Well I'm starting to get paranoid thinking the VA is doing this, because they're giving me drugs 'cause they told me I'm suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. I said, "No I'm not." They said, "Well I think you are." I went, "Well I'm not." They said, "Well we've been doing this a while now, and we think you are." I said, "I'm not the one that's suffering. It's everybody else that suffering." I sitting there, I'm enjoying every bit of it.

Piotrowski: So just questions of a personal level. Did you ever get married?

Patoka: No.

Piotrowski: So you stayed single.

Patoka: God knows why. When I was in high school I took a class called, "Modern Living," and the teacher's name was Laverne Franke and she told my ma that I was gonna be a perfect husband—perfect husband. Never happened. The girls I'd hook up with—I'd have a nightmare and accidentally smack 'em throwing my arms around like this, "Go get help," blah blah.

Piotrowski: Yeah it takes a lot of luck. I ran into a woman who put up with a lot and that's—so I've been married—

Patoka: Then you're lucky.

Piotrowski: Yeah I got real lucky.

Patoka: I know guys that were with the 25th and they went through three of 'em. And he's done. He's—I'm like, "Three of 'em!? I couldn't afford the alimony."

Piotrowski: [Laughs] Trying to think if there's anything else. You used your Veteran's Benefits and all that sort of thing. Are you involved in any vets organizations at all?

Patoka: I'm a life member of the DAV [Disabled American Veterans]. I don't go to the meetings. I actually don't like meetings at all. Even at work they have 'em. Even the safety meetings. I haven't gone to a safety meeting in two years, and I'll get letters. Again, They're threatening me, you know? Same thing as Article 15, doesn't go on your record. But then they send me letters, "Hey, you been with this company fourteen years, you never had an accident." Hey! How 'bout that! And I haven't had any of your stupid meetings. I _____ [??] for number one, you know?

Piotrowski: Okay. I will close this off now and thank you very much. It's been real interesting talking to you. I don't know if there's—is there anything you want to say finally about your experience in the military.

Patoka: Well like I said before—I still have a problem with the politics part the government in general. I still believe that if you tried everything—negotiating every avenue that you had open and it didn't work and you turned to the military then they should let up. Let the military do their job. Don't tie their hands behind their back. I have a problem nowadays where Congress is negotiating how much they want to apply to defense, because now it's more personal. I don't have a son or a daughter, but I know that they're the ones that are gonna be payin' the brunt of this. It ain't some company. It isn't some department. You're talking—you're gambling with young peoples' lives, and I just have a problem with the politics part of it. I wouldn't wish anybody going to war, even my worst enemy. It's—tears you up, it does.

Piotrowski: Well thank you very much.

[End of Interview]