

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
JOHN R. KOEPPEN
Mortarman, Army, Vietnam

2011

OH
1509

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1509**

Koeppen, John R., (19). Oral History Interview, 2011.

Approximate length: 5 hours and 41 minutes

Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.

Abstract:

In this oral history interview John Koeppen from Milwaukee, Wisconsin describes in great detail his service as an infantry man and a mortarman in Vietnam from February 1970 – March 1971, including his role in combat operations with the 9th Infantry Division, 6/31, the 25th Infantry Brigade, 4/23 and 25th Infantry Division, 27th Infantry regiment.

Koeppen grew up on the north side of Milwaukee and graduated from Custer High School in 1968. He discusses losing his draft deferment in 1969, making the decision to enlist in the Army and his family's reaction. He signed his papers on September 29th 1969, attended basic training at Fort Campbell (Kentucky) and Fort Polk (Louisiana) for his infantry and mortar training.

Koeppen arrived in Bien Hoa, Vietnam on February 3, 1970 and was assigned to the 9th Infantry Division, 6/31. Koeppen describes Firebase Chamberlin, Firebase Gettysburg, foot patrols, eagle flights, boat patrols through the Plain of Reeds and his unit's role in the Cambodian Invasion. He recounts anecdotes about a soldier hitting a booby trap while they were patrolling in a pineapple plantation and soldiers getting sick from a variety of parasites. Koeppen's unit was given orders to return to the United States as troops were withdrawn from Vietnam. He explains how Firebase Chamberlain was turned over to the ARVNs and briefly re-assigned to the 199th Infantry Brigade, 1/2 before they were also sent home.

He was re-assigned to the 25th Infantry Brigade, 4/23, in Xuan Luc and operated in an area known as the Iron Triangle. Koeppen describes driving the armored personnel carrier, working with New Zealand and Australia soldiers and difficult encounters with local children. This unit was deactivated in December 1970 and Koeppen discusses being sent to Long Binh before being assigned to the 27th Infantry Regiment at Camp Frenzel-Jones. Koeppen took his mid-tour R&R in Bangkok, Thailand and discusses sight-seeing tours, prostitutes and feeling like he was "back in the world."

The 27th Infantry Regiment, "The Wolfhounds," patrolled around Xuan Loc and the Iron Triangle. Koeppen recounts asserting himself in the new platoon, getting his nickname, "The Crusher," and working with inexperienced infantry men. He describes having close calls because of incompetent command, the details of setting up Claymore mines, and his unit taking casualties after running into an enemy camp.

Koeppen describes leaving Vietnam on March 29, 1970. Koeppen reflects on negative experiences when he returned to the United States including discrimination by employers, general feelings of alienation, anger and a lack of appreciation for Vietnam Veterans. He lives in

Racine with his wife and is a member of the Mobile Riverine Force Association, Vietnam Veterans of America and the VFW. He contributed to the book *Voices from Vietnam* by the Wisconsin Historical Society. He describes how the book tour and speaking events have been a positive way for him to reflect on his experiences.

Other Keywords: Mekong Delta, tiger scouts, NVC, ambush, free-fire zones, Vietnamese civilians, bunkers, infantry tactics, Ace of Spades.

Biographical Sketch:

Koeppen (b.1950) served with the service as an infantry man and a mortarman in Vietnam from 1970 – 1971 with the 9th Infantry Division, 6/31, the 25th Infantry Brigade, 4/23 and 25th Infantry Division, 27th Infantry regiment. He now lives in Racine, Wisconsin with his wife and is involved with the Mobile Riverine Force Association, Vietnam Veterans of America and the VFW.

Archivist's Note:

Transcriptions are a reflection of the original oral history recording. Due to human and machine fallibility transcripts often contain small errors. Transcripts may not have been transcribed from the original recording medium. It is strongly suggested that researchers engage with the oral history recording as well as the transcript, if possible.

Interviewed by Rick Berry, 2011.

Transcribed by Colin Knight, Brooklyn Smith and Rachelle Halaska, 2018

Reviewed by Rachelle Halaska, 2019.

Abstract written by Rachelle Halaska, 2019.

Total Interview Length (05 hrs 41 mins 35 secs)

Interview Transcription

[Beginning of OH1509.Koeppen_tape1_A_access]

Berry: This is an interview with John Koeppen who served with the 9th Infantry Division during the Vietnam War. This interview is being conducted at the Wisconsin Veterans Museum, at the following address 30 W. Mifflin St. Madison, WI 53703 on the following date, December 9th, 2011. The Interviewer is Rick Berry. Thank you John for agreeing to do this interview, can you tell me something about your background and about your life circumstances before you entered military service?

Koeppen: Sure, I grew up in Milwaukee, what was called the Northwest side of town. I grew up in what was called the housing project, which were housing that was built for veterans after WWII in Milwaukee. I grew up in a place called Berryland which was on the Northwest side around 41st and Forest in Milwaukee. My father had been a World War II veteran. He had been in the 82d Airborne and he was a glider man and so that's how we became or got housing with the veterans. So I attended Catholic grade school in that area, St. Albert's on 35th and Forest. So I grew up in the blue collar family. I was a Catholic and I was raised Catholic and at that time, the Cold War was going full blown and you know there was the Communists and then there was the American way. So Catholicism was probably very important at that time and one of the things is we were fighting the godless Communists. So I did the normal routine, I had a paper route, worked jobs, I went to Custer High School, which was on the Northwest side of town and I was a typical high school student who thought he would do a lot and graduate with a whopping 1.8 grade point average. Back at that time, and by this time we had moved to a different part of town, and my dad was finally able to buy using the GI Bill, and he had worked for the city of Milwaukee, what they would call a garbage collector but he worked for the sanitation department and I came from a family that had three brothers. There was a family that had four boys.

And so when after I graduated from high school, my older brother who had been in the service, he was an electronics technician, he worked on training mini guns for helicopters and my grandfather was in World War I so I had a strong military background of serving country, duty and honor; my uncle had served in the Navy, and at that time that was typical of the time. And so when I graduated from high school in 1968, I had a 1.8 average. I remember you could either get a college deferment, get a draft deferment, you could go in the military, you could get married or you could take your chances with the draft. I ended up going into the working force, and I started working at JC Penney Warehouse, and then I ended up at a company called the American Can Company, and that was on that part of town making cans, and I got called in on my first draft. I was past my physical at that time so I was classified as 1A. At that time I decided to try college at UW... University of Wisconsin [Milwaukee], I took the entrance exam and back then they had a college entrance exam, you didn't have the SAT or ACT but even

though I had a low high school average they had a college entrance exam which I took and I apparently I scored very well on it, I'm not sure why I'm a little dyslexic, and it was multiple choice so I think I may have lucked out on some of those questions but I was offered an opportunity to go to the University of Wisconsin-Madison and it was called the Education Program, ah I can't remember it was the Special Education Program for Navy Kids [Experimentation Program in Higher Education], something similar so there was about 200 students involved and I'm a white person and there was probably ten white people out of this, it was designed for low income people who scored high on the college entrance exam, but did not have the grade point average in order to get into college. But the caveat still was you could take nine college credits but then you had to take at least 3 credits in remedial English and math in order to strengthen your skills in order to be successful in college.

So in September of 1968, or I'm sorry after I graduate high school, I started working June of '68, so in January of 1969, I went to college. So I wound up getting a 3.0 average, it was a little higher than that. And my major was fine arts, so I was taking some drawing classes as well as some social studies and English. And at that time then I had a college deferment. And after that semester, in June of 69, the Department of Defense and the Army draft board decided that the draft deferment, I was no longer eligible for the draft deferment, because I was taking enough college, what they called college credits. So at that point I lost my draft deferment, and I was still working in the factory so at this time I decided that maybe I should join the Army because I think at that time they were still drafting about 30 or 40,000 guys per month. I got a second notice to take my physical, so I went in that summer, and took my physical and was reclassified at 1A. And pretty much at that time if you were 1A, you had a pretty good chance at being drafted. So at this time I went down to a recruiter and I took some tests and I qualified to be a helicopter pilot. So he said, okay you know we'll sign you up and you can be a helicopter pilot and I thought it was exciting because helicopter pilots on the news at this time were exciting and so he set up a day for me to go down to the station or to the draft board to the recruiting station,

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Koeppen: I was going to sign and I was going to go under a three year enlistment and then go into helicopter training and become a warrant officer and so forth.

So on September 19, I quit my job, I woke up with my parents, I kind of took my kit bag, my little ditty bag they told me to do because they said you might go today. So I went down to the draft board and the recruiting station and I went down and signed and at that time they were drafting a number of people so the place was quite busy, and I went through the process of getting interviewed by the recruiter and talking to the doctors, they're looking at my records, and finally it came time to sign the papers, and I said I'm here for helicopter school and the person said, well helicopter school is not until November and we don't have any openings right now. So at that point I said ok, I'm just going to go back home and I hadn't signed any papers, so the sergeant said wait a minute, wait a minute he

said, you know you might get drafted right away so can you hold on a second, and I said ok. And so at that point he went around into kind of a different room and he came back to me and he said you know, you're going to get drafted and at this time I'm pretty young so I'm going to believe him, and he said I'll sign you regular Army two years, and it was called, it was under a program called Project 1000 [100,000]. And so at that moment I decided ok, and the other thing he said to me was once you get into the service, you can transfer into helicopter school it'll be no problem, so at this point I said ok. I had gotten tired of the pressure; I had quit my job so I decided I'll take the two years.

So on September 19th, 1969, I signed my papers and I joined probably about another 80 or 90 people that were drafted or regular army. And then I called my mother and said I wasn't going to come home for dinner. My dad, a World War II vet volunteered to come and get me if I wanted, he said you don't have to go if you don't want to, I'll be happy to drag you out, and I said to my dad, I just want to get it over with. You know let's get it done, I don't have a student deferment, I don't want to worry about that [the draft] and at that time some companies weren't hiring you if you were draft eligible. They were worried if they trained you and you end up getting drafted, then they end up losing all of that. So on that day I left, I left Milwaukee, I didn't go home. They gave us a lunch and we kind of hung around. As we got ready to get on the plane, at General Mitchell field, I was given the papers for everybody that was going to go on that flight, all the records, and the Sergeant said to me, well you had the highest score on the test, you're supposed to be going warrant officer, so we're going to make you responsible. So we sat in General Mitchell, and basically left late that night on one of the old airlines, North Central Airlines, prop and then we flew down to Fort Campbell, Kentucky and once I got there, I remember very strongly the plane opened and a Sergeant came out, the top sergeant came out and said who had the records, and I said I did, I'm the person in charge, and he said give me these records, you're no longer the person in charge, you just sit there and obey and listen to me. And so that was my blessing or kiss of welcoming into the military and basically we all sat on the airplane and we went and sat on military buses and they drove us to Fort Campbell, Kentucky. It was the middle of the night; I don't know why they always seem to do it in the middle of the night. And we got assigned barracks and we went to one thing we called a holding area all the buses came out and you just went into the barracks and you just stood by a rack once that barracks was filled and they went to the next barracks. There was quite a large amount of people at that time; they were coming from all parts of the country.

So during the next week, you got your hair cut, you did your testing to basically find out what your military occupation would be, you did some clean up, you did some KP, you started to learn the basics of the military as a group, I could remember they'd call us out in formation, and at that time they weren't too hard on us because we were just kind of learning the routine of getting up for wake up call, going to bed at night, when to meet, when to muster for lunch, when to muster for breakfast and for dinner. And at that time you got issued your uniforms, and you got issued your boots, and you turned in your civilian stuff and

it all got packed away somewhere, and within seven days after the testing, you then were assigned various bases depending on what your military strength training was going to be. So I wound up staying at Fort Campbell, and I was going to go through basic training, and so for the next two months, for Eight Weeks I went through basic training and I went to the, usually you learn about the military system of justice, you do the PT training, you learn about standing basic weapons, the spirit of the bayonet fighter, you learn about hand to hand combat and some of the other things that were necessary for the basic; understanding of the military rules and regulations, chain of command and for eight weeks, we were in kind of a concrete bunker, not a straight bunker but a blockhouse type of environment. It was three floors and you had your footlocker, you had double barracks and everybody went through training at that point. The interesting thing is we were mixed with some National Guard from New York at that time, and so the company was about 200 men and a lot of them were older, the drill sergeants and some of them were younger drill sergeants that had just come back from Vietnam. I had some very vivid memories of being in basic training

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One of the first things I learned in basic training was not to put your hands in your pocket. I was in Kentucky at this time and so September and October got a little cold and within the first week, in front of the barracks, you usually had I think they just called them field grounds or something, where you're dressed for formations, the DI would come out in uniform and tell you your days of training, what you were going to do that day and then at the end of the day, you couldn't really go back into the barracks unless they gave you permission because you didn't want to dirty the barracks, you didn't want to hang around, basically getting you into the military style of life, breaking you down and setting team concepts and all that. I was standing out there listening to the Sergeant talking about dinner and what was going to happen and I had my hands in my pocket, and a drill sergeant from another area came up and growled whisperly behind my ear and he said, "Son, what do you think you're doing [with your hands in your pockets] do you think you're back on the block?" And at that time my hair in the back, what little hair I had left kind of curled up and he said just drop and start knocking them out, and what he meant was to start doing pushups. And at this time I was just terrified. And I started doing pushups. When I hit around fifty, my arms were just quivering and at that point the platoon sergeant, who happened to be a young African- American and tall, and he was a very good one who had just returned from Vietnam and he kind of wanted to know what that DI [Drill Instructor] was doing because he knew he wasn't from our company, and at that time he said, "Well this man, this troop, this boy was standing with his hands in his pocket." And so my DI kind of looked at me and said, "You fucked up didn't you Koeppen." I said, "Yes Drill Sergeant I did." And meanwhile the guy said keep pushing them out. By this time I was crying tears were just coming out of my eyes, I was so scared. So I got to about eighty and I just could not do anymore and so my Drill Sergeant told the other drill sergeant he would take over and he could go back to his and stop messing with his people. And so then after a couple of

minutes and meanwhile, everybody is watching this whole scenario, there is fifty or sixty guys basically said, "Okay get up," and I got up and he said, "You know, don't you ever do that again," and he said, "Don't you ever do it and let that guy see you do it because you're an embarrassment to me." And at that time I was just quivering from the physical exertion I had gone through and just being scared.

The other thing that happened to me was one of the things when you came to Fort Campbell. A couple of things I remember from training, you had no sugar, you had no soda, and you basically had no candy or sweets because they basically really wanted you to break down and become physically fit and did a lot of what they call PT training.

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Koeppen: And so basically they wake you up in the morning before, and it was always before dark so I'm going to say, about four o'clock. You had time to get ready, to wait around and get breakfast, and the thing was in the dining room, you weren't supposed to talk to anybody because there was other people waiting and they could only do thirty or forty people. And a couple things I remember from the basic training, you couldn't talk to anybody and if you were in there for more than five minutes, the drill sergeants would go around and yell at you and say " what are you doing hanging around here, you need to eat and get out of here!" And you always had to finish everything on your plate. You could not take food that you were not going to consume.

Berry: How was the food quality wise?

Koeppen: The food was pretty standard cafeteria, but I mean it was meat and potatoes. Breakfast was pancakes or eggs, you know Army style, but the thing was the food was pretty good. You'd have probably a little dessert and you could have milk, as much milk as you wanted, but you had to make sure you drank it all. And they had water and then juice along with that. And so that's how pretty much everything went... so then after that we would break out into a run. And we would run a couple miles and at this time you were still wearing combat boots you know, and it depended the interesting thing was if somebody wanted to wear their field jacket because they were cold then everybody had to wear their field jacket otherwise you would have your work jacket or you would run in your t-shirt. And as you ran, there was always cadence, there was always a song and one of the ones I always remember was, "I was going to be an Airborne Ranger. I was going to live a life of danger. I was going to go to Vietnam. I was going to kill old Charlie Cong." And it was up the hill, down the hill, through the hill, under the hill and it was Airborne, Ranger, Danger. And you'd give a little growl "errr" and they had some other ones that I remember um especially when marching because a lot of times you'd do forced marches which would be five or ten miles per day you know depending on how far the range was or if you wanted to get from one range to another. They usually went from about a mile to two or three miles but then there were a couple extended. I think we had one twenty-miler that was an overnight marching to a range and we learned how to shoot the .45 [standard issue

1911 .45 cal pistol], hand grenade training. Now at that time I was the last class to use the M14 rifles so we were still using the M14 which was the NATO round [7.62mm as opposed to 5.56 NATO in an M16].

And then another interesting thing happened to me was when you first came into your, when you first got assigned to your company, they put you in a movie theater and then these guys from the Airborne Divisions came and showed you a movie about Airborne troops and so they had the 82d and they had all these great films, almost very Hollywood about showing the heroes and the courage of the paratroopers during World War II and previous wars and how they were the elite members of the military and if you wanted to sign up, the bonus was you'd become an Airborne paratrooper and that you would get jump pay. And that was about \$35 extra per month and so if you wanted to sign up this was the time you'd sign up. Well I'm sure half the company signed up so we all signed up and then they said later in training you would have to sign again. Apparently the government had taken some steps with working with some of the people that you had to sign up twice. And so we were going through training, and I was pretty lucky, we didn't have too many hard drill sergeants. The interesting thing was you're living with people in very close quarters from all different parts of the world. There were people of different makeups, you had Hispanics, you had blacks, you had people from New York and people from down south, from West Virginia, from California, from the Midwest, Florida, from Texas. It was interesting thing of you had to gel and get along with one another. And if you didn't well you would start fighting with somebody, they would have, they'd bring out the boxing gloves. And then if you had a difference at the end of the day, sometimes when you had just what they kind of call free time, you just would mill around on the parade ground, they would arrange boxing. If you had a grudge match, you could have a boxing match with somebody, and they would kind of score it but the whole thing was, you could have your adversary and try to knock him out or you would get knocked out or knocked down or something to that effect, and so that was staged a couple of times.

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Koeppen: One time there was one guy, a black guy who was very big and kind of a bully and always getting people in trouble and at this time for each, we were divided up into platoons and squads and they always picked somebody to be like the ad-hoc squad leader and it was somebody they thought had potential. And so this one squad leader kind of got in the face of the person who was always causing the trouble and so they challenged him to a fight and I remember one of the things it was really under-sized and this other gentleman was just really bigger than him, and he just kind of beat the crap out of him and you know, at the end of the fight; the bigger guy felt kind of good but I think everybody overall felt like that just really wasn't good. The temporary sergeant, the acting sergeant you know I had some respect for standing up to him but it just was kind of an ugly scenario. And then towards the end of training it was rainy during that time, but towards the end of training, we had to take the second time to be a paratrooper.

Berry: And did you let them know you kind of expected to go to flight school after basic training?

Koeppen: I told them that and they said after training you can work on that. So at this point I didn't realize I was getting the runaround from the military because one person said, "you're in here for two years right now, we don't have to make any changes you just have to get through your training." And so when I went to sign the second time, we were kind of in a long hall like a school, you know? The barracks were more like dorm rooms like in the fifties style colleges. And we were standing in line and they had the muster up and I remember the head drill sergeant came by and he was looking at all these guys and meanwhile I was looking at the same people in the line and I was kind of looking like, "hm I'm not sure I want to do this." And on one of my calls, on the weekend we got to make calls, and I told my dad that I was going to become a paratrooper and he was like, "Don't do that that's absolutely crazy." And I was like, "Dad you were a paratrooper." and he said "Ya I know, and that's why I'm telling you not to do it." And so I had begun to have my doubts and so as we were standing in line to sign the second time, the head DI came by and he looked at me and he said "Koeppen, what the hell are you doing in this line." I looked at him and I was kind of confused because I thought he must be proud that I'm joining up to this, and he said, "Take a look around at you." And I looked around at me and I saw the people that were probably not in the top part of the platoon, what I would call education wise or the smartest people of the group and so there were the people who were like the bullies and the toughs and some of the people that wanted the extra money, and he turned them in and he said, "Just remember there is two things that fall from the air, bird shit and paratroopers." And I said, "Ok drill sergeant." He said, "If you've got any guts you'll go in there and tell them you're not going to be one." And by this time after I listened to my dad and I looked him in the eye, and I said, "Yes, Drill Sergeant."

So you had to go in the Captain's office and it was a mere formality and the Captain I thought was kind of a pompous guy and he was a young guy, just out of West Point or just out of Officer Candidate's School, and when he asked me to sign I told him no. Well this caused a minor crisis. First off, he began to berate me for how much paperwork I was going to have to cause him if I did not sign up. And so he then told me I was chickenshit. No guts, no balls, blah blah blah. And at that time you couldn't really talk back, it was more that I was being asked a question that I was being told I was not being man enough to be a paratrooper and he said to me then, "Who told you not to be a paratrooper?" At that point I said, "My father, my father was a paratrooper in World War II, he was a glider [in the glider unit], he took part in the Battle of Bulge, and he landed at D-Day," and this kind of softened the tone of the Captain at this point. And I said that I shouldn't sign up to be a paratrooper and I'm honoring his wish. I said if you want we can give him a call and at that point, he said no we don't have to do that and he said, "I'll tell you what you stand over there at attention." So I stand at attention as ordered, well the next twenty guys came inside and they tell me how this chickenshit soldier doesn't want to sign so by the time it was all done, I was

dismissed and sent back to my platoon. There was no other repercussions, but I thought it was a pretty humiliating experience at that time. But it also gave me the resolve to be able to say no, I don't have to agree to everything here and so that was kind of a learning experience for me.

Berry: Did you make any lasting friendships while you were in basic?

Koeppen: Actually no, and that's something I kind of wish in basic training, there wasn't too many because after we got our military MOS's [Military Occupational Specialty], which was our military occupation, I had taken a test, the three top for me was medic, military police or infantry. Infantry was number three; I think that was kind of like a catch-all. You know the first one was medic and the second was military police and depending on what the slots needed, the Army doled it out, so we graduated, and then we got on buses and basically, we had one Cinderella Liberty while we were in basic and we got to go to Nashville and we stayed overnight and there was one guy, Denise and his last name was Koch, K-O-C-H, and I should probably look him up because he was the only guy I remember [from basic training]. He was from Milwaukee and we went to Nashville and it was interesting because we walked around in our uniforms and we had a little money and the erratic thing was we had to beware of muggers because they knew we had money and they were trying to drag us into the clubs and stuff like that and you end up just going to the restaurant to eat and getting a cheap motel, bought some booze and some beer and got a little hammered and caught a bus back home. And so then at that point, I took my bus and we ended up going to my AIT [Advanced Individual Training] training which was Fort Polk, Louisiana. So we took a bus from Fort Campbell, Kentucky. The interesting thing was...

Berry: I'll bet you have fond memories of Leesville don't you?

Koeppen: Well Leesville was just outside, I didn't actually didn't go into Leesville, only one time, I went in for about an hour and I was a young guy and it was kind of like Ok, it was nothing but hookers and bars and rough looking characters and thugs and took a bus in, I think we went and got something to eat, and took a bus out right away. I was home back in my barracks way before midnight.

Berry: And when you were at Fort Polk, this was Infantry AIT?

Koeppen: Yes, Infantry AIT. As I was saying, we took the bus and it was eye opening because we went through the back roads, and about that time they didn't have an interstate. And for me, it was kind of shocking to see how people were living in the deep South, along the Mississippi, seeing homes on stilts, a lot of minorities, you know a lot of African Americans, a lot of the poor people. And rundown shacks and you could just tell there would be no doors to the houses and it looked like they had electricity. We were driving through at night, sometimes they'd be driving and you'd see a kerosene lamp in the window or something like that. So as it was dark, it was a fairly long drive. We had one stop at a cafeteria, got a meal and just got back on and by that time, we felt pretty confident we got through basic. You know, a little chatty and all that, and guys telling stories or talking

about home, and then we pull into Fort Polk which was out in the middle of nowhere, and we do remember as the bus was driving into Fort Polk, there was a giant billboard, and on this billboard it had a man, an American soldier bayoneting a Viet Cong. And what was written on the billboard was welcome to Fort Polk, Tigerland, home of the combat infantrymen for Vietnam. At that point there was just a little settling quiet in the bus because everybody kind of dawned on them that we were basically going to infantry training for Vietnam.

And so then we pulled into some barracks, the Drill Sergeants came out to hustle us off and we got assigned at this point, I was assigned the military MOS of 11 Charlie. And so I was assigned to be a mortar man, instead of a standard infantryman. And what a mortarman was, was I was trained in indirect fire, and I was trained also in the infantry using the M16, the .45, you know, using Claymores, C-4; but I also was trained in the 81 millimeter mortar and also the 4 deuce mortar. So I had a little, they told us we were the smarter of the infantry guys and that's why we were selected for the mortarmen. Are we still going?

Berry: Ya

Koepfen: Okay, and so we got into our guards that night, in Fort Polk, Louisiana, and the interesting thing was it was these old WWII barracks, they had these still old cold pot stoves to heat them, and the next morning we woke up and we basically fell out, learned the rules of what AIT was and we did a couple formations, we had breakfast, on the side of all of our barracks, were kind of these building that were condemned, and they had been used since WWII but they were being used because they still needed barracks for all the troops because so many infantry troops were coming to Fort Polk. And so there we divided to platoons, and we were divided into squads, and so that began AIT training. Some of the things that were interesting in training that I never really figured out, but what I remember mainly from AIT was in the middle of the barracks, there was called the middle aisle. And in other words, the bunks were double high, they were double bunks. It was a wood barracks, you had your footlocker, you'd had just your Army gear, and you had to keep your footlocker neat, you had to keep your socks in one place and you had to keep your t-shirts neatly folded, you know all the basic hygiene. If you hung things in your locker, they had to be two inches apart and everything in it had to be straight and facing the same way but in the... [Tape cuts off]

[00:31:24]

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[Beginning of OH1509.Koepfen_tape1_B_access]

Berry: John we were talking about your AIT at Fort Polk? Would you continue that please?

Koepfen: Sure, at Fort Polk, I was in AIT and basically we were learning to be mortarmen. So this is starting my second phase of training and the daily morning would begin. We'd wake up, and they were getting us more physically intense, so we would do

our PT, we'd get up, we'd do our morning run generally in the dark. We'd come back to the barracks, for the people who could smoke them, they could smoke them if they had them. And then the barracks would be open and we would go and clean and then this was kind of a smaller facility, so as opposed to basic where they had a large dining hall, this was just kind of a small dining hall, kind of a small wooden barracks that had the kitchen in part of it and the dining in the other. So you were limited on the amount of people that could eat all at one time. Again, it was the same thing you were expected to not talk. If you were caught talking, you'd be kicked out. Everything you put on your plate, you were supposed to eat. The food was palatable, it wasn't a French restaurant by any means but it was edible. I don't think anybody got sick eating any of that stuff

Koeppen: One of things they had was called the monkey bars [a row of metal bars above the ground that you would hang from and swing from bar to bar. There were about ten in one direction with two rows next to each other] so as you went to get breakfast, you would stand in line at attention and you would go through the basic drills of at ease, come to attention, take one step forward, somebody would go in and then go back to the at ease position, one step forward. But before you went in you had to go through the monkey bars successfully. There was a sergeant watching. So the first week, you had to do maybe twenty monkey bars and there was about twenty, you had to go to one direction and then as we gradually got more into training, you would have to do two, you'd have to go there and back. And then at the end you pretty much had to do four times, there back there back and if you happened to drop or fail, then you'd go back to the end of the line and you'd have to wait until you get in again. If you continue to fail, sometimes the sergeants would just say go on and eat and you get the usual shake down of what's blah blah blah pussy, you can't do it. Interesting thing is you used to develop these callouses on your hands, from the monkey bars and they'd get really tough. Then they would split and bleed and that was always kind of one of the things but that was all part of the toughening up process.

And so at AIT, basically you went through training that was all geared more to combat. You would have first aid training, we learned to use the radios, the PRC-25, and basically we got to fire live mortars, we got to fire four-deuce mortars [4.2-inch mortars], we also did live fire training. We crawled underneath barbed wire with machine guns firing overhead. This was done at night, and we did more night time training for night time orientation. We had one exercise where we went out for three days and we marched out into the woods. Fort Polk was a very woodsy place and basically, we dug mortar pits, we dug trenches, we set up a pseudo firebase for two nights and we had people simulate ground attacks coming, we learned how to use the radio, learning how to use commands, at night we laid fake Claymore mines and we had to set up our marking posts to sight in our mortars because there was a sight on the mortar, and basically you had two poles. So the mortar itself had kind of a sight piece and it was kind of a crosshairs and for the mortar crew [...], I should probably talk a little bit. For the mortar crew you'd have two or three what they would call ammo bearers, and basically when we had a fire mission, they would get the ammo ready. We'd pull the

safeties on the fuse clips, we'd set fuses if they needed to be, and on order there was these charge bags you had nine charge bags, and it was filled with gunpowder. And so when the mortar was dropped into a steel metal tube, at the bottom there was like a sharp nail and that would hit the firing pin which would ignite a small fuse that would ignite the gunpowder that was around in these fuse bags, and so basically once that started, it was almost instantaneous, there was a plastic ring around the mortar round that would expand and all this force behind it would push it out. And that's how the mortar would get thrown out. And so the way you'd aim the mortar would be depending on three things. It would be depending on how much gunpowder or how many fuse bags you had on it, which would determine the range, how far you could shoot it, and it was a lot of math, because the mortar used a lot of geometry angles, you would shoot up to drop down, so you always had to have an azimuth. And then with the sight, there was a separate piece called the sight that you would level off, that you would level off and it was based on 360-degrees like a compass. So what you would do is try to find somebody to call in coordinates off a military map, and then you would find those coordinates on the map, you would level out your sight and then you had two marking posts that you'd set to true North. And so then after you had them set to true north, you would move your sight around and that, depending on the angle you'd have to measure out and this sounds complicated, you'd have to measure out the perfectly balanced and level and that would determine the angle and how far the mortar was going to shoot. So they would have one person on the site, and these mortars were held up by a tripod fork in front of it. And one person would work the fork, and the other people would be the gunners and we rotated roles, so there was usually five or six people to a mortar squad.

And so we did a number of training on that and own there in the pit, we did a lot of simulation, and then we learned jungle survival, we also had an escape and evasion night, where there was one night where they would take everybody out to the stands and you were expected to, they'd take you to a point and I think it was five miles away or something like that and they would drop you in a group and you would have to use a compass with a small group of people, and you had to make your way through the forest in complete darkness, with two or three people and what happened was the drill sergeants were out there and other people were out there trying to capture you, and they would capture you and take you as a POW. And so that was the whole idea of training you to evade the enemy, be able to navigate at night, get to from point A to point B, using the skills that you supposedly had learned. They gave you no food, they gave you one meal before you left and they gave you a live chicken, you were supposed to kill the chicken and pluck it; cook you meal over a campfire, eat your meal then head out as soon as it got dark enough. And they'd send people out and some of the people are trying to capture you would have fake, they would have blanks and they would be shooting weapons and they'd be shooting blanks in the air and they'd have simulated explosions. You know, they'd have simulated grenade explosions, or booby trap explosions. So as you're going they're trying to create as much confusion. So that was one of the exciting trainings that we had. The other thing is

they had a Vietnamese village set up with houses. And so since we were the mortar guys, because every company had I think five platoons, and there was one platoon that was a mortar platoon. The other four were regular infantry. We would be what was called the aggressors, so basically we would go out to the area where they had these simulated Vietnamese things and our rifles were loaded with blanks and we would ambush the training platoon that would come by, or in the villages we would hang up in the rafters; we would hide in the wells. There was a couple of days and we did that, where we would just be aggressors in simulations of ambushes and village search and destroy.

And then we did that exercise yourself a little bit. You'd always be looking for tripwires. You'd set up phony tripwires and you know, kind of bait traps, so that was kind of fun in that part because we got to be somebody else other than just the strange troops. One of the other things I remembered, I was just talking the other day about somebody was when we went through AIT training, and you went for combat, one of the things they had was how, you'd learn how to pace yourself out so by using a map, if you're going a thousand meters, you had to learn how long your footstep was because you'd learn how to count by steps because you would have to measure how far you were going. And so that was always the interesting part, learning how to use the compass, learning how to navigate through the woods, now I think they have a special name where people go out and they kind of go from point to point and they count their steps, see how far they got, shoot an azimuth, the certain direction to go and a certain direction to go from point A to point B. And so the other thing they used to take us into areas behind berms, they would call trying to determine where the fire was coming from crack and thump. And they would shoot various types of weapons at various areas and try to ask you where did you hear it's coming from, what direction is that coming from, and it was all designed to get you more keen to understanding fire, gunshots and how to react to it.

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Koeppen: And then we'd do simulated ambushes, combat assaults, we didn't have any helicopters but we had a fake helicopter. Basically we'd be on the ground, we'd learn how to get on a helicopter, get off a helicopter, we learned to medevac somebody if they needed to be, we learned about stretchers, so there was a lot of combat training going on constantly, all the time. During this part though Christmas came up and then so at that time we got a little special Christmas leave and the Army set up a charter flight. I think we flew into Milwaukee, because we had about twenty-five guys but the charter flight I think stopped in St. Louis, Chicago, Milwaukee, so we got kind of like a week home for Christmas, which was kind of nice to go home and see my folks.

Another thing I remember at Fort Polk was they had a really cold snap and so most of their Army vehicles and this was on our overnight, didn't have anti-freeze in them. So all the radiators froze up. And a lot of times they wound up flooding their engines. And it was interesting that all the troops or all the boys from the Northeast or the Midwest, knew exactly what to do and all the people from the

South were just dumbfounded that we could figure out how to do this it was flooded, take the air filter cap off do a couple things and start it and there it was. Some of the other things I always remember was the troop trucks. And these were large, they called them cattle trucks and basically they were just semis, running over rough dirt roads and they would have benches on them. And so they would transfer, transport you around. They'd either have big trucks or deuce and a half's. Even though they sound horrible, you always like to because you do, you didn't have to march then. You got picked up by truck and we usually got picked up by truck if training went really late. Because training would be anywhere from nine to nine. It was a good full ten hours a day. You had your weapon, you came back at that time you were issued a weapon. So you had to clean it, and you had to carry it around and at the end of the day, you had to clean it and it would get checked back in at the armory, and so the cattle trucks were always kind of an interesting thing. You always liked to be in the first cattle truck, because if you were in the third one there would be enough dirt and dust coming around and that's where you learned some of the famous expression like nuts to butts and drive on, because you wanted to make sure you got everybody on and naturally the army didn't have exactly the amount of trucks you needed. They always seemed to be a truck short or something like that so everybody had to crowd on and so I always liked it when you'd be sitting down and you got kind of comfortable and you had your field jacket if you were kind of cold and all of a sudden there was maybe ten or fifteen other guys that had to get out and the Drill Sergeant would come in and say, "Atten-hut!" And he'd do like, you know turn right or something I can't remember, and he'd say ok forward march, and he'd say keep marching until you can't and it'd be nuts to butts drive on. So everyone would be close enough where we'd have room for fifteen or twenty more guys, and they would get on. Sometimes you'd just end up standing the whole time instead of riding. The other thing that was interesting was the field exercises was they'd come up and set up temporary for lunch, generally you'd have your lunch and the cooking tin would come out or the cooks would come out and they'd set out these temporary with the, I can't think of the cans are called, they'd bring hot food, hot chow, and then you always had to clean them. And they'd have those garbage cans boiling, and they'd have the boiling water.

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Koeppen: Sitting at the fire, because you always wanted to make sure your utensils were clean and so then you had to wash them and scrub them and dump them in the boiling water and then dump them in the cold water and then just kind of wait until it dries and they sometimes brought out the old water buffaloes where you got your water, they bring out water to you. Because you only carried a couple canteens, you didn't have a full combat gear, they would only give you ruck straps and they had a belt to carry your canteens and a couple of things just to get you geared up.

So after that we graduated. One of the fun things we had was in the last week, all the companies would compete against each other in a PT challenge. You had the

six minute run, you had the mile run, you had the bars and so you would establish [platoon] teams so there was this friendly competition. In our company, they were all pumped up. We always wanted to win and so we went to the field trials they were called I think. In basic, I remember running in my combat boots. I think I ran about a five minute mile in combat boots and I was ready to die. There was one guy that beat me, but we were just running as hard as we could. These boots were hard to run in and it was a small oval and people would cheer you on and everybody had to go through the bars and you know, depending on how you could score. So our company ended up winning that competition for that cycle of troops going through and I remember marching back because we were kind of doing double time and we were singing our songs and at that point, I became the guide-on carrier. And so, if you carry the guide on, you'd always have to have it straight up. And then sometimes you got fancy, you could twirl it, and you could do all kinds of things. And I remember doing that and they gave me the guidon for some reason so I was out in front and it was fairly hard. I'm not a tall guy, only about 5' 8", 5' 9", and you had to do it without dropping it on the ground or you had it touch the ground. And we were all singing our little songs. "I wanna go to Vietnam, I wanna kill Charlie Cong," you know, "Jody's got your girl and gone," and what was the other one, "Bury me with my ass down," and there was others, I have them written down somewhere, I ought to look them up because we always were so proud of singing our songs and chants, it took your mind off it.

So we got to the barracks and the Captain congratulated us, and as I said earlier, I was in the barracks; we had to keep them clean. Now I was with the squad that we got toilet duty. And so we'd always make sure the toilets were clean, and I'd always tell people that life was pretty basic then because they had the crappers lined up, there were six of them, there were no walls, they were just crappers there. And on the other side, where the guys shaved and then they had the urinals, so it was a very open, common area. There was nothing to be hidden. And the other thing is, we were always limited to toilet paper. You only had two rolls per day per toilet or something like that, so they always emphasized not to be wasting toilet paper. And it was always interesting for me to be able to come in and take your shower because you had to walk to the toilet area and go to the shower, there would be a number of people doing their thing and there were people that would be washing and the urinal was just a metal trough, that's all it was and I always thought boy that's really basic life there, nothing is to be hidden. And my squad was always, we had to clean it up and there was always a competition within the company for cleanup. And you wanted to win the award every week, and I think you got an extra twenty-four hours or I think you got to go to the PX, you know and buy some paper or you know they'd let you drink soda because again, there was no sugar, or maybe they let you go to the payphones and call home, because they had a set of payphones but you just couldn't sneak out. And so, as the daily duties would be, the platoon I was with, I think it was third platoon, we always managed to win. And there was another platoon that was tied to us, so after a while, people started doing things to sabotage because after you had breakfast, after everybody got dressed for the day, we'd go and clean and nobody could go in the barracks until the Captain inspected it, and I don't think he did it every day,

but the big days, it was clear that the Captain and the Drill Sergeant would come through. The Drill Sergeant would inspect it every day. And naturally, they always found something wrong because you could never do it perfect. But we were tied neck and neck with this other platoon, and so we had to devise a way; and this is kind of the funny stuff of the military, we had to devise a way of beating the other troop, the other platoon. And so as the other platoon came out, we came out we were all standing around, we managed to sneak one guy in their barracks.

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Koepfen: Because there was a little fire hatch in the middle of the floor. And he went in and he did a number two in one of their toilets and didn't flush. And so he managed to sneak out and we didn't know anything about it and then inspection came through and everyone was in front, and Captain came through and it came out that this platoon who was so close to us could not believe that someone would not flush the toilet. And they knew that we had pulled a trick on them. They were just furious and they couldn't figure out how we did it. And so we always had to be on guard with that. That was one of the fun things we did in the service.

Sometimes we'd play pickup football and we'd sit around and chew the fat. But the interesting thing about barracks life and I'll tell you a little bit about this was you always had to sleep with the windows open because there was always a chance of spinal meningitis. I think every base I was in there was a case report somewhere. Or at least that's what they told us. And so you would sleep with all of the windows open, you only had a couple of blankets, and it got cold at night! But then they'd have potbelly stoves, but you only got so much coal to use but the other thing was you always had to pull some kind of duty. You know in basic I pulled KP, I think I pulled; and the Captain you had to do some kind of administrative or somebody's always got to be on duty twenty-four hours a day. But the other thing that was always one that was amazing was the fireguard. Somebody always had to be on, had to be up at each end of the barracks in case there was a fire. We might not have the stove going but it was just because of a fire. This was kind of a routine; I think they did just to get you to understand, just to have you up in the middle of the night so we would pull guard. And so that was the most amazing thing where you'd get woke up in the middle of the night, sit in your underwear for an hour at one end on a chair waiting, trying to keep your eyes open, because the case of the fireguard. Then after that you'd have to get the next person going. And they always had it so that every third night, you'd have some kind of fireguard duty. And we had two floors to these barracks; we had the first and the second floor. So these were just some of the things they always used to make you do. It seemed to be pointless but I'm sure it had some kind of mission behind it.

Berry: How about recreation? You had some free time in AIT; you had a week off obviously for Christmas. What other sorts of things did you do recreation-wise?

Koeppen: Well there really wasn't a whole lot. They had a movie theater that you could go if they were showing a movie. You had the PX, and then other than that you just pretty much played football or wrote letters home. Because training was pretty much six days a week. On Sunday you could go to church, but there wasn't a lot, you couldn't go very far. They had a library there, you could go to the library and read some books you know you could take a little walk but usually you had to be at a certain point at a certain time. They had what they called a rec room. And the rec room had a pool table, and usually it also had an old TV in there. And so they might show a little TV on that but I don't remember a whole lot except we played touch football, we played some volleyball; and that was about it.

Berry: How long a period of time did AIT last?

Koeppen: AIT lasted me think another eight weeks. With the Christmas break, because we got out of AIT towards the end of January, and then I got like two weeks to go home. So I flew back home and reunited with my parents, there I was a soldier; I had received my orders for Vietnam. In fact just before I left, stepping back a little bit to AIT, of the two hundred and some guys, I think ten did not go to Vietnam. One went to armor and some went to Germany but most of us went to Vietnam. And one of the things we did the last couple of days since we all had our orders and there was no training, they kind of let us go. There was a little kind of EM club, and you could kind of get some beers if you wanted. One of the last things we did was walk up and down the middle aisle that we had polished so carefully for the Drill Sergeant. That was our last act of defiance. And I was with the gentleman named Greg Blunt, and it was Roger Knauss, and another gentleman named Dan White [from Wisconsin], who was our Drill Sergeant. Who I had just reunited with after LZ Lambeau. He was somebody who wrote the book and we kind of ran into each other, and I realized he was my Drill Sergeant. He was a shake and bake from Racine, and he was my Drill Sergeant for our platoon ["shake and bake" is a term for Sergeants that go to schools instead of attaining rank through service]. But Greg Blunt, when he went home for Christmas, he was from Milwaukee from the South Side. He drove his car back, which was against all the rules and naturally they had a fit. So he had his car, he drove his car back to Fort Polk.

So after we got our orders for Vietnam, we drove back to Milwaukee. We had his car so I didn't have to fly, so we drove back to Milwaukee and that took a couple of days. Interesting thing about that which always sticks out in my mind was as we were going through Louisiana, and I looked at Louisiana as a real Southern State. We stopped in a little town to get gas and I had to go to the bathroom. And I kept asking the woman, where's the bathroom and she says it's around back, and I went around back and I couldn't see anything, there were some doors, and I said, "I'm sorry Ma'am, I just can't find it is there a sign?" She said, "Oh it's the first big door," I said, "Oh I didn't see anything." And she goes, "We don't put a sign up there, we don't want no colored folk going in there." And at that time I was just surprised because I grew up in a blue collar neighborhood, it was mixed ethnic backgrounds and I was just surprised that was still going on after watching all the

Civil Right activity. So we got in our car, Greg and I talked about it and I said, "Oh my God can you believe it?" I felt like I went back 20 years. So I went home and met up with my friends and parents and I don't remember very much and then I got a plane, I had an uncle in California. I was lucky I had an uncle that lives in California that had a little bit of money, so I went out a couple days early and stayed at his place.

Berry: How did your parents feel about your assignment to Vietnam?

[00:25:08]

Koeppen: They were both worried and that's a great question because one of the things that my dad said to me, and I remember playing; it could have been Risk or Scrabble or something, and I was going to go the next day, and he kind of hugged me and he said, "You know I really wish you didn't go to Vietnam," and I never heard him say anything like that in my entire life to me. You know and he was happy he was in the military, and he said something to the fact that he'd give anything to the fact that I didn't have to go to Vietnam. And I remember that and a couple things that my dad told me. Before I went into AIT, or before I went into the Army Basic training, I asked him, is there any advice you can give me? He said, "It's up to you, you can either have a good time, or you can have a bad time. If you want to get in trouble, you'll have a bad time. If you want to have a good time, just do what they tell you and you'll get through it okay." And then just before I left for Vietnam he didn't want me to go, and he actually ended up crying at that time. So I felt very bad about that, and my mother was completely worried, and she didn't want me to go so it was pretty stressful you know? It was a real awkward time, you're feeling a little bravo and yet at that time, your parents are very worried. And it was harder on my mother than I realized because when she passed away, you know she had saved my letters, I don't know if I had mentioned, if I repeat myself I'm sorry, I had found out at the funeral, that in her group of friends, and this was a strong Catholic community, that she, a couple of her friends just unfriended her or did not have anything to do with her because they could not believe that she would let her son go to Vietnam. And I always thought that was a horrible burden because she had no control over it, and now she had all these fears and that she'd get ostracized by a couple of people, because they thought that she had sent her son to Vietnam. So that was pretty sad when I found that out.

Berry: How about your high school friends and so forth?

Koeppen: They were all going to college, you know? They were all like okay, take care of yourself and all that, and the interesting thing is that I still connect with some of them at reunions, but when I came back I could see that, well the friendships started to disintegrate. One of the things is when you came from home, one of the first things when I came back from Vietnam, was they would talk about certain periods and they would say, "You remember that John?" And I would go like, "No," I would say, "When was it?" And they'd go, they'd give me a date in '70s and I'd go, "Oh I was in Vietnam." And they would go like, "Oh, yeah you weren't around." So it was a very awkward thing so at that time you know, we

went out and celebrated and wished me luck and all that kind of stuff and said they were right and so I just kind of went up and of that group of friends, I was the only one to go to Vietnam. There were a lot of them were football players, so they ended up having scholarships going to little colleges.

And so I went to my uncle's house, spent a couple of days there almost got myself in trouble because I ended up going a day late, but I had gone down to Tijuana, and at that time your military haircut gave you away, and my uncle; he had some friends and so there was a woman, a girl my age, and she said John let's go down to Tijuana, and we went down to San Diego, went down to Tijuana, and as I was crossing back on the border; one of the border guards said, "Are you in the military?" I was like, "Ya", he said, "Where is your orders?" "I don't have them on me." At that time you were supposed to carry your orders at all times, I said, "Oh I don't have them on me," and he kind of looked at me and he said, "You know I can arrest you." I said, "I got to go to Oakland to report tomorrow to go to Vietnam," and he said, "Alright I'll let you go, but he said don't walk around without your orders." And I thought Oh my God, there was a day AWOL! And so I thought about taking a few more days, because what are they going to do, send me to Vietnam? It was the worst thing ever; you know I'm going to enjoy life a little bit.

So I gathered my stuff and I remembered it was a Sunday, and I reported, I got on a plane, flew up to Oakland, picked up [an army transport] bus and reported to the processing center at Travis, well at Oakland processing [center], you went to Travis Air Force Base. And I just remember this day so vividly because I got off the bus, I got in there and I was a little nervous about being a day late. It's Sunday so there weren't too many people around there and I opened the door and there must have been a hundred guys lined against the wall, because you came in and processing over here, orders over here there were some chairs and there were all these guys standing on the wall, it was a long aisle. And so I looked and I asked the clerk, I said you know I'm here to report in, and I'm going to Vietnam, and he said just stand over there, get behind that line. And so we're standing there and kind of looking all up and down and guys were all talking going to Vietnam, you know ya ya where you from all the small talk, and after about thirty minutes, this Sergeant came out, he was so angry. He was so angry. And he looked down and he said, "Where the hell did all you people come from," He said this is Sunday, we don't process on Sunday. And so we are all looking at each other and he said "There is only a small amount of people that were supposed to be here on Sunday." So he went back behind his cubicle, and a couple more guys went in and he'd come back out and he goes ok I can't, we are going to have to straighten this out. By this time, we're all kind of looking. He said how many people here are on time. And so maybe twenty guys, he said step to the left and twenty guys stepped left. He said you get in line over here. He said how many people are here less than two days late, so I got with another group and we stepped over a little bit. He said how many people is here—

[00:31:17]

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Berry: Ok John we are back on here and you were talking about various groups of people here and you were getting ready to go to Vietnam?

Koeppen: Ya in the processing [center], and so there is still about twenty people, that I'm guessing left and he started going like, "Ok, how many people here are thirty days late?" Aand so then a little more move over to the other line. He said, "How many people here are six months late," so then a little more moved over to the line. Now there is only like two or three people. He goes, "How many people nine months?" So a couple left, now there is like two individuals left. And he said, "How many people nine to twelve months?" And the one guy who was over there, it's this lone guy and he's in civilian clothes, he has a beard and long hair, and love beads. And this Sergeant was totally besides himself. He comes up, he's fuming and yet he's looking at the irony of this thing and he goes up to him and he goes son, how long ago were you supposed to report in and he said something like oh, fourteen months. He said, "Son what are you doing here? Do you realize what this is going to cause and how this is going to wreck my day and everything that you're going to do and what are you doing here, what made you come in today?" And he goes, "Sergeant I just want to serve my country." You know at this point he kind of gave an exaggerated little [scream] like God I can't believe this, and he said get over there, you know then the MP police came and they pulled him away but I always laughed at that, the irony of some people just reporting late.

So then we spent two days, a couple days in Oakland, I think you know you went under one roof and you never got out in Oakland, I don't know if, well I went through all that, so you got in, you basically got your orders then you went through, you got your clothes. They would do a quick physical check, you would get your vaccines, they would give you vaccines, they would give you a shot record, you'd do a little indoctrination of what's going to happen, what their country [Vietnam] is like and you got your clothes, you got your jungle fatigues, you turned in your old clothes, you got to keep one gym bag to take with you, you got your duffel bag full of your jungle fatigues, and you just went to a big staging area and you just kind of waited and there was some bunks but it was just like a giant warehouse with just painted lines where you could go. You waited for your name to be called and they had a cafeteria. So I think I was in there about a day and a half I don't know maybe twenty hours or something, and they finally called your name out. And then you went to another staging area because you were going to get your flight, and so they had some bunks there, we just kind of rested. Never really took off your clothes and that and got on a flight to go to Vietnam and I flew from Oakland, from Travis Air Force Base, and again it seemed always at night it seemed dusk at night and we flew to Hawaii, and we stopped in Hawaii for about 6 hours to refuel and that, and we ended up flying to Vietnam and that. People were tired on the plane over I remember and some of the guys had brought some Rum, and the guys from Puerto Rico had brought some rum and so everybody was kind of, they were kind of getting a little drunk and hammered,

and there were the people that were kind of nervous and watching, and it was a long flight. I just remember we got to Vietnam.

Berry: Was this a commercial aircraft?

Koeppen: What were they World Airways or something like that? And so then we came in and you saw it from, and it was daylight and it was you know very green and lush and we came in and we landed at Saigon Air Force Base, so we came in and landed and we were all kind of there and nervous a little jittery. The officers were there in the front and there was the NCO's and there was the enlisted men. I remembered when they opened the doors, the rush of heat and humidity came in and it was just, it was like a fog that came in really quick. And then we had a senior top sergeant or an E-7 or E-8 came in and then it was just a matter of getting right back into the military, "Listen up, this is how it's going to go, we got mortared last night so if you're in mortars I want you to move quickly, I want you to move fast. We need to get you off this plane, we need to get the plane turned around, and get it refueled." And so he said, "I want officers up front, officers you go first, NCO's go first I want this done orderly and quickly." And so we just kind of went through the rows. We filed out, and the officers went one way, the NCO's went one way and the enlisted men just kind of formed up in a file and I remember going in, there was an old hangar. It was bright, it was hot by this time you were just sweating already, you were carrying your duffle bag, and you were just kind of marching in formation, and you're just looking around and there was jets going on and there's helicopters flying around and it was just a very active place.

Berry: When was this, when did you actually arrive in Vietnam?

Koeppen: February 20, 1970. And so, it was in the middle of the day and they kind of pointed us over to an area, and you had some plastic seats you could kind of go sit and when we went there we passed a group of Vietnam vets going home. And they were bright [happy], you could just tell they were tan, some of them were still in jungle fatigues, a lot of them were in jungle fatigues. And as we walked by, they were pointing at us like you're my replacement, see you sucker, good luck! And they were kind of jawing and jeering and they were jeering at us all at the same time and they were talking about, "We're going back to the world!" And that was the first time I heard that expression, going back to the world. And they were going back to the world, and they were so happy to see us. And we just went down and sat until they straightened out our orders, there was somebody that took all our personnel files and straightened out where we were going to go next.

So then some buses came and picked us up, we went to another staging area which was Long Binh. And I remember we got on the buses, and the buses had little wire against the windows, and we got in there and they were telling us these are in there for grenades in case anybody wants to toss or you know throw grenades on the bus, or any kind of explosions and so this [trip to Long Binh] was like an all-day thing. We got there a little past noon and the buses picked us up, it was always hurry up and wait, and we drove through the airport, it was on dirt

roads and it was muddy and we saw the palm trees and the different types of grass and they had, the airport had the Vietnamese workers, and they had all the normal things of Vietnam, the stucco houses and it was just such a different environment. It was like you were used to cities but now you're in this lush, almost kind of like a farm and it was the culture, and there just seemed to be a lot of water and the sun just seemed to be brighter than you've ever seen it. And it was red dirt and mud and so we just drove in these buses and the buses were dusty and they took us up to a staging area and we all got out. We went into an orientation, they talked about turning your money in, get MPC [military personnel currency], they talked about black syphilis, they talked about you know obeying orders, you couldn't go AWOL. That if you went AWOL, the only way you could get out of the country was through military plane, you need to go report to your unit, stay away from drugs, if you're just so much, if you keep your stuff together, if you keep strapped you can get out of here in a year and go home. And it was basically telling you not to screw up trying to find out what building you were, trying to make sure your papers are in order, and the typical checklist of going through administration and so after that they let us go change our money, we had about an hour to do that. I remember Roger Knouse, who I met on the plane and went through AIT with, actually went through Basic with, and we went through AIT. And no I'm sorry just AIT, forget about the basic. We went through AIT together so we started hanging around together and they had little, we used to call them Gook Shops, they were just those little shops where you could buy candy and boonie hats, so we were walking around and saw everyone with boonie hats and had very dark green fatigues on with the baseball caps [stateside military baseball caps] so we went over and bought a little bit of those fake boonie hats that they used to sell. Had some money in our pocket, and then we got picked up by the bus and we went to the staging area where it was at Long Binh. We just went to an old barracks. And we just kind of waited to get assigned to a unit.

[00:08:55]

Berry: Now did you have orders for a particular unit when you left the states? Or

Koeppen: No this was part of the in-country processing that they did. I remember they had a Catholic priest talk to us about, talk to us. One of the interesting things about that is being raised Catholic; I was shocked to learn that we had general absolution once you entered Vietnam. In the Catholic Church, general absolution means as soon as you die you go to heaven; it's like a ticket to heaven [you don't need to confess your sins, ask for forgiveness or have last rites performed]. No matter what you're doing. And later on in my tour, it was like God I could die in a whorehouse and I could go to heaven as long as I was in Vietnam fighting the war, and I thought, there is something ironic about this and this is why I thought my belief in the Catholic church is not as strong as it used to be. They were kind of condoning it, because we were there killing the Communists as I had learned in grade school. I remember seeing the black and white movies with the Communists raping the nuns and all that stuff for the Korean movies.

Getting back, on the way back we went to Long Binh, it was I just remember it was a dirty area, it was dirty just simply because it was dusty. It was something I wasn't used to. And again you got assigned a temporary barracks, you got a bunk, you signed the roster so they knew where you were, and then they told you what time you could eat and what time was breakfast and all that, and I remember there was just ah a lot of troops, and there were people who were stationed there permanently like the cooks and some of the other people, drivers that were stationed longer, and then there were all the new recruits. And so we just kind of hung around the bunks, just listened to the noise. Everyone seemed to have their own little radio, playing – the American military – AFVN radio [Armed Forces Vietnam Radio]. People had stereos. These were more of the permanent troops that were stationed in that area. They had a basketball court; they were playing basketball except during the day. They'd play all night long, but during the day it was too hot. I remember the first time I went to the cook to go eat, and I was watching him prepare the food and it was so, and there were flies and there were Vietnamese and there were concrete floors and they were washing things. Things looked so dirty I didn't eat for two days because I didn't trust any of the food.

They had a swimming pool that you could go cool off in and they'd show movies and it was just kind of keeping us troops busy. And in one of my cultural experiences where I went to a long, we call it bathrooms, or latrines. They would just call them shitters, and it was about a twenty-holer. And as I was going to go to the bathroom, this Vietnamese woman hopped on the one, one seat over, one hole over, pulled down her pants and started going to the bathroom, and at the time I was kind of like excuse me Ma'am, this is not the bathroom here, this is the men's room and she was an older woman. She had the beetle juice in her teeth, she had the cone hat and she just kind of looked at me and said something. I have no idea what she told me but I think she told me just to shut up and mind your own business. She went to the bathroom, did her little dip dance to dry off, then just kind of left, and I was just sitting there totally stunned. And I was like Oh my God, and there were a couple other guys that were with me that were going like Oh my God, what are we doing. What's happening? So I kind of realized at that point civilization was changing.

And so I think I was there a total of three days and I got my orders to the 9th Infantry, and I was lucky enough Roger Knouse got his orders and so we started a line [at this barracks area that was marked off with points for different units to line up at]. There was the 101st, there was the 1st Division, there was the 25th, the 9th and they called your names off and you ended up going and standing in line and then they told you okay, this time what time you had to report in, and this time to get your flight to get to your unit. You've been assigned to this unit. So it was just almost like picking teams, and they had these telephone poles, with the units and everybody lined up and they'd check and double check, like they do in the military. The process took, oh maybe a couple hours but at night you went to bed, knowing I was going to go to the 9th Infantry, and I was assigned to the 6th Battalion, the 31st Infantry of the 9th Infantry, we were known as the Go Devils Brigade. And so that morning is probably when I got my first taste that I was

really in Vietnam. Despite all the sights and the sounds, we got up early, you got a quick breakfast if you wanted, you'd get toast. I'd never eat the green eggs and all the powdered eggs they used to make, I could never eat that. And so then we went and it was a large assembly staging area, and then you just kind of sat on the ground close to where your units were. You'd kind of group together for your units. And there was new guys and there was old guys. There was guys that maybe had to come back on emergency leave, maybe they had something to do when they were going back to the unit in country. So you had the out of country transfers and the infantry transfers and just as dawn was breaking, we heard this little sound. This sound I never heard before, it was just kind of like a little [makes noise] off in the distance maybe about a hundred yards away, there was this little poof with a little "pow", with a little "boom!" And we're all kind of sitting there and everyone is kind of sleepy and we're looking and some guy is hangover and the next thing you know, about twenty, and another one came in and it was about twenty yards closer. All of a sudden you look and there is a puff of smoke and you saw the sparks, and there was just another explosion, boom and there was another one and it kept coming closer and finally one of the older guys yelled, "Incoming!" And so it was just like a Chinese fire drill, about a hundred guys trying to get out of the way, jumping behind their bunkers and things like that so that was my first taste, they threw five mortars into the assembly area. Nobody got hurt, but this was the point where it's like oh my god, this is really Vietnam. This is combat.

And so everything proceeded smoothly, we got on a small plane. It was a small C7 or something like that. There was only about fifteen or twenty of us going to the 9th infantry. And at that time the 9th infantry was located South of Saigon. And it was interesting because in TIME Magazine, they had published a week or two before that part of Nixon's Vietnamization program, there were no more troops South of Saigon. But as we got on the plane, a Sergeant kind of got up and said, "You are now in the 9th Infantry Division. You are going to such and such place," and we were actually going to a place called Tan An, T-A-N-A-N and you'll be mustered out to your unit. Then he said, "That is South of Saigon despite what the newspapers say, and you guys are South of Saigon and don't worry about it." So we got on the small plane, typical military plane, it was like a little transport plane. You just had to wear the straps, you didn't have regular seats you just had aluminum poles with webbing, and then you just kind of sat in the webbing, fastened your seatbelt and it was a two prop and it was very, very noisy and the back end was open. It had a drop down, but it was open and the crew chief came on. So we took off and we're on a muddy runway. We took off and flew for a little bit, and I was just looking out the window when I could. Just looking at the rice patties, the nipa palm and just seeing this totally different environment, the rivers, and the little dykes and then we got into a real tight circle. We flew into Tan An and it was just, my stomach kind of went up because I never been in such a dive and we kind of went in and the guy was telling you, "Ya we gotta do this in case we get ground fire," and it was like Ok! So we landed, got off and got in a little ¾-ton truck that kind of came to pick us up and then as we drove to another processing place, the interesting thing was we drove by the morgue. And so it was

kind of an eye-opener, seeing this big building it had US Army morgue on it and you could see trucks in there and people doing things and you really got the idea that people die here. And so we went to our processing station which was just behind the hospital and morgue, and then for a couple of days, we were there, waiting to get assigned to our units. Now I was getting assigned to the 6th of the 31st Infantry Battalion. There were some other units in the 9th Infantry, 2d and the 47th so there was about five battalions. So even though I was in the 9th Infantry Tan An camp, I was assigned to my individual unit at that time. And so while we were there we had to pull some guard time and some KP and so one of the first vivid memories I have was me and Knouse, we got to pull guard duties. And there were these long towers, probably thirty feet up of telephone poles. And they had sandbags on the top, and you had barbed wire fence out, behind over in front of the berm. They had phu gas barrels out in the front there, and so we were

Berry: Explain what a phu gas barrel is.

Koeppen: Phu gas were 55-gallon drums [buried in the ground] that was mixed with diesel fuel and napalm. Kind of like a homemade napalm device. Basically what they would do was pack C-4 in there [the barrel] and it was pointed out toward the front [of the berm line]. It would be like the fire zone or the kill zone, so when you exploded these things, it would shoot all this flaming napalm out to the front for about thirty or fifty yards. It was designed to first off to put fear in the enemies heart.

[00:18:48]

Koeppen: And to burn anything in front of it. And the other thing was to light up the area a little bit. And so a lot of the established base had these phu gas 55-gallon drums embedded in the berm. They also had Claymore mines and we were on a post that had an M60 machine gun and plus two individual weapons. And there were 3 of us. And so we were close to a gate, and so that night, it was Knouse, myself and then this artillery guy. And they were asking who wants to carry the M60, who wants to carry the M16's and we got a radio because we had to do a SIT report every hour [SITREP or a situational report] on all the posts throughout our sector. And so this artillery guy said, "I'll come along with you guys," and we didn't know him from Adam and he was like, "I'll take the 60." So we said ok and so we had to climb this wood pole this wood fence or I'm sorry this wood ladder up to this bunker that was twenty to thirty feet off the ground and in front of us were spot lights so we could see out. It was all flat and we set up the machine gun and Knouse and I were setting up our M16's and we were talking to the guys from artillery and you know, one of the first things he said to us was how does this thing work? And we looked at him and said what do you mean? And he said well I've never had M60 training, and we were like what'd you take it for? And he was like well I wanted a machine gun. And we were like oh my god. So we had M60 training so we set it up, but for that whole night we were terrified because this guy had no idea what he was doing. And he was just kind of a typical guy we met in the service. Yeah he wanted to do something, had no training and I just didn't

think he was very disciplined. Plus he thought he was artillery so he didn't have to worry about that kind of stuff. He never thought he'd be out in the front lines.

So one of the scary things about this duty was we had to walk to the front gate to check to make sure it was locked and nobody had put any booby traps on it. So every hour someone had to climb down the tower and walk on top of the berm, under the spotlights and go to the front gate and check it out. Now this was my first fearful day there, because it was very ominous looking and you felt very naked walking under the lights to go check the gate because the lights only went so far and then there was a curtain of darkness you could see beyond the lights. And in Vietnam there's no streetlights, there was no nothing so there was just pitch black out there.

So we had to walk this and at about ten o'clock, out in front of our position, probably a click away or something, it turned out that a recon force got into a quick contact. And so as we're looking out and we see these explosions, you can see the fire they had tracers and their weapons so you could see the bullets shooting. The Viet Cong had green tracers, and we had red tracers so it was a small, really sharp contact. They called in gunships, first time I got to see gunships. Gunships went in and they were using their miniguns so this went on for about a half hour. And it wasn't that far away. And so then we could hear on the radio, we had the radio so we could monitor the traffic. We were able to guess which frequency that small group was on and said we were able to run into a few VC, we got in contact with them, they shot a couple and then they had a wounded guy. So then they called in a medevac, and so the medevac goes by us. And it's a helicopter and picks up this guy and this brings him back, and we could hear it get off the landing pad and we could hear this guy screaming. He was in horrible pain and it was just screaming and screaming and then you know we're watching them get him into the hospital, and so it was just kind of like your eyes were really wide open just seeing this and like in an hour I had to go back down on this berm and take a walk along this bright, lit path by myself. And there were a couple times we decided to not even take the walk. We're like ok we can see it from here; we're not going to do that. We're just so petrified. And then the night ended and we were finally glad, we went back and we got back to the barracks and we didn't have to pull guard the second night. We found out the one guy got shot, he didn't die or he wasn't killed, he went back.

And then the second night we were in there [the barracks], basically there was a couple older guys that were in country transfers going home on emergency leaves and they had all these horror stories you know. They were telling you stories about oh, you guys are the new guys and we're called the cherry boys and said you know you're going to have to do all kinds of things, you know you'll have to dig up the graves, you're going to have to you know, if you guys kill a VC, you're going to have to carry those guys and all that and then as the night went on, naturally all of the new guys wanted to hear the stories. They were telling stories and I remember his story was that you know his first time, they went out to an ambush, and they killed a couple VC or NVA and then basically he had to guard

the bodies all night long. That was his job. And so you know he'd talk about, you'd think they're dead and you'd swear to God they'd move and you don't know if you got to shoot them again. You're in the dark, you're in an ambush, and you can't give your position away. And you have to sit and watch these dead bodies all night and he was talking about well that's what the new guys have to do. You know, you'll have to be the machine gunner; you'll have to do this.

So the next morning, we finally got heading to our unit and we were just kind of glad but now we're fearful, we've got no idea what's going on, the false bravado of coming from training and kind of being the superman a little bit but we were still full of confidence. So we got in the ¾-ton truck and we headed down I think it was Highway 1, it was an asphalt highway first one. And we got up early in the morning, so we headed out and another great fascinating this is we're driving along, I can see a guy in a little Honda, and they had the Honda 60's and the Honda 90's. And there was two Vietnamese and they're on this Honda and we're coming to an intersection where we've got to turn. They were sitting on the edge [of the truck] and the guys on the motorcycle never stopped and they drive right into the side of the truck. We make the turn and they just kind of like, [makes crashing noise]. So then the driver stops, at first he wasn't going to stop, but then he stops and you know now he's like Oh Shit! I'm going to get in trouble now, because I hit some Vietnamese civilians, and the MP, we used to call them Vietnamese White Mice, they had the white uniforms on, they come running over and we come over and so we kind of watch this event and everybody gets around the motorcycle, and they pick it up and they look at it. Everything looks ok. Now the two guys are still lying in the road. Nobody is looking at them, and so then the military police wave us on because the motorcycle is alright, one of them started it up, it's ok and it rolls, and I remember the Army driver goes, "Let's get the hell out of here." You know, meanwhile the two guys are still moaning on the road, the motorcycle is ok and so we head to our basecamp and we headed off. Soon asphalt left and we were just driving on these dirt roads and we were driving around curves, and there's all kinds of jungle or there'd be fields or there'd be banana [groves] and I just, we didn't have a weapon and we were all scared because we thought we'd just be ambushed at any time. Any time, these guys would just jump out, blow us away and nobody would ever know.

Berry: So you had not been issued your individual weapon?

Koeppen: No not yet, and so we finally got to the base camp, or at least to the camp that I was going to be issued; it was Ben Luc. Ben Luc was named after a river and there was a bridge, and this was the battalion base camp for the 6th of the 31st. Ben Luc was a major river South, it flowed into the Sea of China.

[00:27:04]

Koeppen: And it was a fairly wide river, I would say probably anywhere from five hundred to maybe a half mile wide at times. It was big; they had a small naval base there. So then I, then we pulled into the base camp there and that's where we got assigned to the individual units. I got assigned to Alpha Company, 6th of the 31st

and they had a mortar platoon so I was assigned to the mortar platoon. So at the time the unit was out in the field when they were coming in. So they kind of gave us some bunks and they had an EM club for it and we checked in. We got our weapon, we were issued a weapon [M16]. We got some ammo, and at that time I had lost my duffel bag with all my jungle fatigues. So I only had the pair that I was wearing, and so they told me to go get some and they had a pile out in back, and these were all jungle fatigues from some of the wounded and dead guys, so we went back and I didn't find anything I wanted, so I said, "I'm not going to take any of that," so they sent me to the supply depot and then I was able to get a few new pair of fatigues. I was just like oh my god, this is this is this is the reality of it. It was a flat base, it wasn't totally new but it had been built up. The carpenters had been there, and so for the headquarters, they had the double stack, WWII style bunkers where the headquarters come in and the armor and all that was located, and behind that was what they call the clean barracks so they had some walls, and they had a top with some sandbags and there was just really heavy crude wood, it was probably three inches thick and six inches wide, there were these long planks probably twenty, thirty [feet long].

So the next few days we waited for the company to come in, we helped build them [the troop barracks], we filled sandbags, and then the company wasn't coming in, so they flew us out to Fire Base Chamberlain. And that's where three of us, Roger Knouse, myself, Flannery and one other guy. Flannery's from Maine, and then we all flew out and we waited for which was Firebase Chamberlain, it was outside of a village and it was an established firebase, and we joined there and we checked in with the Forward Headquarters Company. And then we learned that we'd been re-assigned to the mortar platoon. And it was a typical firebase, it had three artillery pieces [for Alpha Company], and it was an old one [firebase], it had been there a long time. And so you know it had bathrooms, a shower facilities. It at least had a mess tent, had ammo depot. But it had been worn down, the sandbags had been worn down. It was outside a village, it was kind of a farming community and there were a lot of small rivers, and then further west was the Plain of Reeds, so we got closer to Cambodia and that. So the area itself, and how do I say it, it was kind of a calm area. You know we had the occasional mortar round, or an RPG, but it wasn't the activity too much against the camp. But we went out and did a lot of search and destroy, or we went out and did a lot of what they called eagle flights, based on army intelligence what you would do – if they had coordinates set up, they would either see bunkers from the air, they would have Huey pilots fly and looking for signs of enemy activity, trails, anything by the rivers, or if they flew the sniffers at night if they would pick up the scent of humans. Viet Cong kind of transported too, because it was not a route that was an infiltration route to Saigon. So that was basically what the place was set up to be was to block it.

Berry: You were being transported around by helicopters yet right?

Koeppen: Right, well helicopters, we'll get to the next one.

Berry: Keep going

Koeppen: Ok there was two phases, we had helicopters, you had eagle flights you might do six stops a day, they'd pick you up in the morning, you'd hit an area and you'd sweep it [eagle flights were the helicopter pick up missions and "sweeps" were when the troops would land and patrol the area on foot]. If you found a bunker you blew it up, you maybe got a little contact, you'd engage the gunships or something, and hopefully it wouldn't be too big. And then the other thing we'd do is we'd get on the boats and they'd drive us to the small naval station, we'd get on the boats and then we'd do landings. And we'd travel in all kinds of boats. I traveled on a landing craft, a Tango Boat, and Alpha boat, and one time we were on boats that were similar to down in the swamp boats, with one of these giant fans—

[00:31:46]

[End of OH1509.Koeppen_tape2_A_access]

[Beginning of OH1509.Koeppen_tape2_B_access]

Berry: Hey John we were talking about moving your unit around using helicopters. Ah could you continue with that?

Koeppen: Sure, basically what we would do was we were in the wet part of the country, and so we had two modes of operation. We would either be on the boats, and I was part of the Army unit that was connected to the Navy for the Brown Water Navy. And the other thing was we'd be on helicopters, we'd be flown out, and sometimes we were trucked out. We rarely marched out because some of the areas we had to go was in a free fire zone [free fire zones were areas where ROIs stated no warning was needed before firing a weapon]. It wasn't around the village and it wasn't a matter of just marching out, it would take too much time. So for the helicopter operations, they were called eagle flights.

Now the standard [operation] was, they helicopters would fly us in and then maybe we'd set up an ambush and work an area for a couple of days. And then the helicopters would pick us up or the trucks would pick us up. And basically the operations were, we would go out and search for enemy activity, we'd look for bunkers, for caches, for trails, or if the military intelligence said that there was a VC unit in the area, we would try to track them down or engage the enemy. Otherwise we were just bait out there and just hopefully that they'd see us. And if they wanted to gauge us, they'd shoot at us, and it was a war of attrition so then they'd bring in the gunships, they'd bring in the artillery. The whole idea was we're supposed to kill more of them than they're supposed to kill of us.

The other helicopter activity we had was eagle flights, where they would have five or six different locations, where they [company command] would have maybe four to eight helicopters pick us up in flights and they would drop us in a designated area. This was done during the day, and then we would sweep into abandoned rice patties, or maybe plain [open] spaces where they might find or see a bunker, or they might find some enemy trails. And this was basically reports

from helicopter pilots or from intelligence. I remember one time we were on a chase trying to find a tax collector. The tax collector [VC tax collector] was going around collecting taxes from the villages. He was rumored – this is one of the great things of the Army [Vietnam urban legends]– he was rumored to carry like a half million dollars on him, and so everybody wanted to catch him. And the thing was if we caught him, what were we going to do with the money. You know we had all these crazy ideas as young kids trying to figure out what would happen. They make movies about this now, but at that time that was the real thing. And those were the main things for the helicopters and the helicopters would pick us, we'd drop six, seven, eight times and then we'd go back to the firebase or we'd set up a night ambush.

Now the greatest danger for us in that area besides getting engaged and contact with weapons was booby traps. because this was an area that had a lot of small villages connected, but there was a lot of water so a lot of the trails were on top of berms, or on top of dykes or on top of high ground so that's where a lot of the booby traps were set up. Some of the crops they grew around there were bananas, pineapples, rice and most of the other staples. And so the thing with pineapple plantations, and I remember this pretty vividly, they're very large. They had water running on large rows. Like if you've seen farmer rows, well imagine a row being two or three feet high, and then a stream of water maybe two or three feet, waist deep running next to it. And then all these row would be across the field, and they would plant the pineapples on top of these rows because they needed a lot of water.

And I remember one time as we were going through a mission that we were in a column and we had to go over these rows, and the guy's name was Joe Donnelly, and I remember that because he was from Milwaukee. And I was carrying a radio at the time and he was carrying a radio, and he was carrying the headquarters radio. And he was in front of me and he slipped off the dyke and he landed against one of the rows and there was an explosion. And I just remember how time kind of stood still. You knew something happened, you didn't know what happened and the seconds turned it seemed like into minutes, and it just was a couple of seconds and then all of a sudden, you know we knew he had hit a booby trap. He had hit one of the booby traps that was made out of old sardine cans, and you'd have it just was a pressure booby trap that had three prongs on it. He had slipped off the dyke and fell against it with his knee, and it went off and at the time, we all kind of stood around looking, except somebody realized that he was carrying the radio and he was under water. And so he jumped in the little small dyke or canal, pulled him out and another guy and out him up on the dyke. At that time I took my radio off and we started counting the casualties. Now the guy behind me got hit and the three guys behind me and I never got hit [narrator correction: one guy in front of him got hit and three guys behind him got hit]. And it was just one of those ironies of the whole thing.

And the reason I remember it so vividly was I grabbed my first aid pack and we stretched out Joe and we called the medic and the medic came forward and you

know with his clothes on, he looked okay. And then I was holding his leg with another guy and we noticed blood coming out of his pants. And we're like look he got hit in the legs, there's blood, and so the medic then cut his pants open and all this blood gushed out and basically it had blown all the flesh off his knee and his calf. The artery [?] was flipping out, spurting blood all over the place, he was spurting blood all over us, and so the medic grabbed in and I had the compress while he tied down the tourniquet, and we got him patched up and then we called in the medevac, and now I remember we set up the defensive position, there was a flat area, and I ended up calling the helicopter and one of the ironic things I remember was the Sergeant came over, I was still fairly new and he says ok, clear the landing zone and we looked and it's all grass, and we're like what do you mean clear the landing zone there's nothing here. He says well you guys got to check for booby traps, and I remember Roger Knouse and another guy and I were like check for booby traps, in training I don't remember that. What do we do? And finally it kind of dawned on us like okay, just walk around, because the grass was waist high and if you hit a booby trap that means there's another one there. So basically we tromped out, at least a twenty by twenty [meter space] because as the helicopters come in we gotta make sure there's no pressure devices or anything with the down draft. And so that was one of those things where I realized, you know all the training they taught you didn't really matter [in combat], you really had to learn on your senses, and start to formulate your own ideas on how this worked.

And so basically, Joe got on the helicopter, we got him out, and one of the things its seems comedic now, but one of the things as he got on the plane, he was just so grateful we saved his legs. We didn't really save his legs they didn't get blown off but then he kept asking the doc if his balls were there. His main concern was whether his balls were still on him. And so he got on the plane, and the doc kept saying yeah your balls are okay, your balls are okay don't worry about it we gotta get you on the plane. Or the helicopter I'm sorry, we got him out of there and we just continued on. And it was just one of those things where you'd march around, you hit a booby trap, call in a medevac, medevac the person out and then just keep marching on to your next goal and so that's what we would do.

[00:07:39.15]

Koeppen: On these eagle flights and just hop around the country. Then and we didn't do them everyday, some of the other types of operations we did was off, what we called off the brown water navy. And so we'd have boats. We had different types of craft, we had landing craft, tango boats, monitors, and some little small [speaking to Berry] did I already tape this already? Or, ok so small boats, we had Evinrude motors on there just like rowboats, we had some that were like swamp boats, with the giant fans and so we'd race up and down these canals and then they'd put us off and we'd get off into the bank, and go through what we called nipa palm, and nipa palm was like a palm tree except it didn't grow, it didn't have a trunk. The palm basically grew right out of the base, it would be one or two feet. And all the banks were covered with thick mud. And you would sink up to your

ankle or your knee or sink up to your waist especially if you were carrying all this gear and so it was always very hard when you got off these boats to get in with it being very muddy and without trying to get pulled off it. I always remember when we landed you were just like sitting ducks, because you know you can hardly maneuver in this mud and if the enemy was ever there waiting for you they could just blow you away. And there were times that we'd go in these boats and they had bunkers built right into the side of the river banks and they would blow them up and we'd have to go in and then sweep to look for the enemy dead and engage the contact or find some caches.

And um, all the times different boats, and this activity, some of these boats were called The Monitors, because they were just like the Civil War boats, they just had a single turret, they were all heavily armored, we had landing craft just like in WWII when the ramp would go down and you'd all pile out. And then we'd go work an area for a couple of days, set up some night ambushes on suspected trails or suspected areas of enemy activity and then they would come and pick us up. And then it was always a dirty, wet I always hated that part because it was just so dirty the whole time. And it, since I was with the mortars, if I took the mortars out, the ground was very soft and so if we ever fired mortars, and we used to do sometimes for nighttime illumination. Illumination is when you fire a mortar round up into the air, and a hot flare would burn, and it would just light up everything, it would be, ah I don't know I think it was called like 50,000 Candlelight or something like that. And it would just hang a small parachute. It would just swing back and forth, it was very eerie. It would light everything up and alot of times for the mortar crews that's what we would do. We'd light up any time we got a contact, or if they needed to see if someone was passing through we would, we'd shoot illumination.

Well the force of the mortar would push these baseplates into the mud, and so literally if you shot ten or fifteen rounds, you'd have to literally dig them [the baseplates] all out, reset your gun, reset your mine, your marking post and you'd have to do the whole process over again. So we didn't take the mortars out that much because we were still under the umbrella of several artillery pieces, and basically artillery pieces and so they could provide illumination if need be. And so that was it, and then in that part of the Vietnam, it was the wet part and so we only went out from maybe three to ten days at the most. And one of the reasons for that was jungle rot would set in. In other words, your feet would get immersed. You'd get foot immersion and so if your feet got wet all of the time the skin would start to peel off, you'd get fungus, your toenails would fall off and so one of the things the army tried to do was rotate us into, out to the field and rotate us back in to the firebase, and at the firebase, you were literally issued flip flops to walk around. If you didn't have anything to do they always used to recommend to sit out in the sun, the sun would you know beat down on your feet, just so it would help dry it out and if the funguses needed killing it would kill it off. Now that part of the country we used to get ringworm a lot. Ringworm used to be prevalent and one of the things, I remember one time somebody was taking a shower and I couldn't believe how much ringworm was on his body and I asked him I said, "how much

ringworm do you have to have to get a profile?" He said it's gotta be over 80% of your body. And ringworm is a small, little I don't know how to describe it, skin disease. It forms like the size of a quarter, you get little bumps and I think there's little parasites in it. But the thing is it's very itchy, and you itch and you basically open up sores. And one of the things about Vietnam, they had a thing called jungle rot, and I'm sure this is in every war, because of the humidity and the temperature and the dampness, everything always got infected. Or it seemed like it always got infected. And so this jungle rot would take an open sore and turn it into like a skin ulcer, and it would just be open and just constantly be bleeding, so you always had to be worried about that. Getting scratches, there was a lot of thorns, a lot of bamboo that would scratch. You'd get long scratches, and that would get infected. In this part of the world we had a lot of leeches. Any time you walked around there would be leeches, and so two or three times a day you'd be checking yourself for leeches, and pulling leeches off your body and maybe helping your friend out.

So you had that, along with malaria. There was mosquitoes and in the Southern Part of Vietnam, they had two types of malaria. I can't remember what they were but we had to take two types of anti-malaria drugs. We had to take a big orange one that you took once a week, and then we took a small daily one that you took every day. The big orange one we always used to kind of joke about, because as soon as you took that, you instantly had to go to the bathroom. And so you know along with taking the malaria pills, and all kind of various diseases and fevers, along with the leeches, it was just kind of a miserable experience. You'd always have to take soap tablets, you couldn't trust the water because the water was always kind of funky. There was, this was an area that had a lot of water buffalos, and for the villages when they farmed, they would defecate into their rice paddies, and the buffalo would defecate into the rice paddies. That was how they fertilized their fields and so it's so different from Americans and so you're constantly fighting disease you'd get diarrhea. I remember Flannery, he was a guy from Maine, and he got diarrhea one time and we thought he was going to die. He just couldn't keep anything in him. He got down to ninety pounds at one time. But they [the medics] weren't going to take him to the hospital because he just wasn't incapacitated yet, but he just kind of recovered so that was another thing.

When I was in this part of the world I got pinworms. Pinworms is eating uncooked beef. And basically at the firebase they had cooked up some pork and it wasn't done. And so it had these pinworms and I discovered it only by going to the bathroom and noticing there was these little white worms crawling in my stool. And one of the things I do remember was that we were out on a mission and I went and grabbed the medic, I showed it to him and I said, "Doc what's that?" and he said, "You've got pinworms." And I said ok, and he said, "That's serious stuff." I was like alright, I thought ok, they're going to call medevac in for me. And so I was kind of waiting around, you know and just kind of thinking in my stomach I got all these worms crawling in it. So then he comes over and says, "Okay when we go back to the base camp tomorrow I'll give you some stuff," and I was like, "You mean you're not going to call in a medevac?" He goes, "Nah." "I

thought you said it was serious?" He was like, "It's serious but we're not calling medevac in."

So that night I didn't sleep because I kept thinking of that nursery rhyme, 'the worms crawl in, the worms crawl out, playing tag in a dead man's mouth.' And I was only nineteen and I was like, oh my god, and I was wondering what kind of long-term damage. Well not a lot of long term damage, but I ended up going back and I had to drink this like cough syrup stuff, it was the most awful purple tasting stuff for two weeks, then for every time I had to go to the bathroom I had to put latex gloves on. And so I became kind of the butt of some jokes, because every time I'd get my latex gloves out, they were disposable. You know they were calling me Doctor Poop at that time, because you're going to go take your poop John except Koeppen [Berry chuckles].

Of course one of the things in Vietnam one of the things is you never used your real name, you'd always had a nickname. My nickname was [K-Par??], because I was named Koeppen. Guys had names like Chief, Blade, Zookeeper, PR for the guys from Puerto Rico, but it was always interesting you know. People from Iowa were called cornhuskers and all that. And that was probably one of the most amazing things about being in Vietnam, is that you remember a lot of guys but you really never got to know their real names because they always had a nickname. So..

Berry: When you were out in the field, these were normally company sized operations?

Koeppen: No, mainly platoon sized. Once in a while we'd do a company, but no platoon and squad size at this time and this was 1970. And then we worked on a number of firebases. Firebase Chamberlain was by the Ben Luc River, or I mean I'm sorry Ben Luc. The [Ben Luc] basecamp was by the Ben Luc river. Chamberlain was a little further out [near the Van Co Dong River], and then we had another one that was called Tre Cu which was by an old French fort. And this was in the Long In Province, and basically they had there was a canal with a few French were there. They had this little fort and it was Tre Cu and it was, all it was was a mound of earth that was above the water line. Because the area that I worked in was so wet and so almost level with the sea, that sometimes in some areas where the tide came in, basically the water levels would rise inland and they were from four-six inches.

[00:18:19.13]

Koeppen: And when the tide went out and the rivers and the canals would just kind of drain down waiting for the tide, which always amazed me because we weren't close to the coast at all. I mean probably thirty or forty miles into the country, maybe more. And then we had Tre Cu, and that was kind of a free fire zone, there were no villages around at all. It was just swamp, elephant grass and again, we were just blocking the infiltration routes because they were bringing sampans down the river. They had all these little creeks and canals and river ways where they could transport and be hidden.

The last one was a place called firebase Gettysburg and this was on the edge of the Plain of Reeds. The Plain of Reeds bordered the Cambodian border. And again we were blocking the infiltration routes from Vietnam [correction: Cambodia] for men and supplies to Saigon. And Plain of Reeds was flat, and again they had some old French forts just, and the French forts consisted nothing more than a blockhouse built maybe ten or twenty feet at the base, another blockhouse built on the top and that was maybe it. They usually were around the rivers. The Plain of Reeds was unique because it's this flat plain, and it's constantly underwater, and then when the tide goes out there's maybe two inches of water, and when the tide comes back in, it goes up to six to eight inches of water. And firebase Gettysburg was only available out of the year maybe six to seven months, because during the rainy season the water was just too high and the firebase would be completely submerged. And it consisted of three artillery pieces, some 105's on one end, and then they had, what we called, twin mikes. So some 40-mm dusters – which are old tanks – they'd have 40-mm guns mounted on the [turret], 40-mm is the size of the shell, and they were old anti-aircraft guns. What they did was mount these on turrets, and they would fire rapidly, they would [mimicking gun noises] poom poom poom poom poom, and they would go to fire along a ridgeline or a hedge line. But they were heavy tractors, so the tractors never left the firebase. They would drive up and down the firebase but they would never leave because they could sink into the ground. And then on the other end we had the mortars and the landing pit, and then we just had where the [...]

Berry: These were 81-mm mortars?

Koeppen: 81-mm. And then they had a heavy mortar which was a four-deuce [4.2 mortar crew], which was attached to the company but I wasn't part of that squad. And then they had a quick tent, and they had what we'd call the rear, headquarters the resupply. It was all temporary, under tents. And then we just had a small berm line [around the base] and basically what we would do is, but the unique thing about this was they had, the Army had three hoover crafts. And these were large experimental vehicles that could go on land and water, and basically they were probably thirty feet long and a couple, maybe twenty feet wide. And they had giant fans that would raise basically the vehicle off the ground. It would hoover on a cushion of air for just about two to three inches. It would go over the land, it would go over the rice, the rice paddy dikes.

And so I had a couple missions and I'm sitting on top of the hoover craft. And so they used to go out and they had a minigun on top of it. And it had a lot of firepower on it, it could do up to thirty miles an hour. And the Army brought three of them in. And by the time I left they only had two left, because what the VC had figured out was at Gettysburg we had radar. Basically they'd have a radar station. Since the area was so flat, they'd have radar and they'd look for sampans or people sneaking through, and they would give the coordinates sometimes they'd have gunships handy. But they'd give them to the hovercraft and the hovercraft would go out and try to crush them, they'd run them over. And so they got kind of wise to that, the VC did, and so one night they set a trap. They sent some individuals

out of their troops, and they knew the direction the hovercraft was coming in, and they had the hovercraft pass over a 500lb bomb. It set it off and basically exploded the hovercraft. It exploded in half, killed a number of guys and wounded. But they were smart enough to figure this out, and one of the things about the VC NVA is that they're a very smart troop. I mean they were great soldiers, they were as good as the Americans, they just didn't have the equipment that we had. But they were savvy and very good at what they did and very clever at figuring out things and so once this happened, then the hovercraft had to kind of adjust on how they were going to do things and how they'd pick us up.

So this was kind of a unique experience. One of the other things is once in a while, they'd bring in artillery on barges. And again the last time they did this would have been the Civil War. And they'd have artillery pieces just on barges. And then we would go out and do our mission, we'd come back to the barge, dry out, resupply and then we'd go out and it would be our fire. That would be our cover, because we'd be so far away from the big guns and the firebases then we didn't have anything. So I just thought that was totally amazing. You know guys would throw hand grenades off.

Berry: These were 105 mm artillery?

Koeppen: 105mm, maybe they had 155's, but the ones we saw were just 105's. And so for the artillery guys they were living on this barge. I used to throw hand grenades off the side and they'd explode in the water, and then you'd see the dead fish pop up and some would grab some of the fish. So it was just kind of a really surreal type of atmosphere, at least all of the experiences I had.

And with firebase Gettysburg, to I don't know what direction, it always seemed like it was to the West, was the Cambodian border. It was only four clicks away. And so we were very close to the Cambodian border, so we were running a lot of missions trying to stop the infiltrators coming through. And they used to, we only used to go out in platoon or half platoon squads, because they [the enemy] would come in little groups of two or three. I remember one night we had a huge scare. The ground radar had picked up a large number of things moving out there. And it was in the direction of Cambodia. And they were telling us it was like two, three thousands things. They couldn't distinguish how many things they were. And so this was just before night and we went on total full alert. I think we brought the company back in. We were on alert all night long, and we were just waiting for, they were just heading in our direction. So I thought we're getting this great ground attack. Apparently they figured out later it was some farmer with ducks, on the other side of the border herding ducks. And they had picked up this activity. It was interpreted as the enemy agents. So this was the type of environment, you were constantly on guard, and there were all these things going on, you actually had combat going on. One thing is you just had all these caveats and it was just kind of amazing.

One of the things I remember about firebase Gettysburg was because it was in a really open area, we were there one time under a full moon and as we come back,

I was holding berm guard duty. I was able to read a book under a full moon, it was that bright out. And that was the amazing thing about Vietnam. There were no lights so you never saw as many stars and you never saw as many bright moons as then since I come back. Except maybe when I go to a National Park where there is no light. Because you are truly out in the middle of the jungle out in darkness and civilization was just miles away. Thousands of miles away actually back in the world.

Berry: What kept you going through all of this?

Koeppen: Well that's a great question because I was nineteen at the time, I was like I just want to do my tour of duty. I was lucky I got with some good guys, and I just seemed to be lucky but, the only thing I was looking to... I was counting the days. Not so much right away. But then I'd hit six months it became intense. I'd be counting the days and go yeah I get another week in. I can get through this. I can get another week in you know? I'm nineteen years old, and it's getting closer. But ah...

Berry: Did you have a short timer's stick? Or a calendar that you'd tick off each day?

Koeppen: Not until I got later in my tour of duty, we'd talk about it but we didn't talk about it that much. We'd just make sure we'd want to get through the mission and we'd make sure we wanted to make sure nobody got hurt and but you always had in the back of your mind, you're only going to be here for a certain time. A lot of times, you'd want to make sure of the day to day stuff. Making sure you had enough water. You know sometimes we'd go out on a mission, and some of the guys would collapse from heat. And you'd have to bring in a medevac, and the mosquitos. I know I touched on the mosquitos, but the mosquitos were just the most incredible thing. And I always remember at dusk, once it started, when the sun would go down, we were in an area with so many mosquitos, they almost were like a buzz. You could just hear a... it would be like this low drone coming up and you'd just know it was the mosquitos. You'd have to put on your insect repellent, and it was god awful. It would sting if you got any open cuts. It was just thick and oily, and you'd button up your field jacket and you'd wear our sleeves down. At night when you slept, you'd sleep underneath your poncho liner. You'd try to not keep anything out. You know I always used to call it, you'd learn how to sleep in a coffin because your poncho liner would only cover so much. And your poncho liners, you were issued ponchos and you had a liner to keep warm. Warm wasn't, so we really wouldn't keep around the ponchos that much because you wouldn't get wet anyhow. If you put on a poncho, you'd sweat so much underneath it. You'd be just as wet as if you didn't have it during the rain. And the rain would come and go, it didn't always rain constantly. So the key thing you carried was your poncho liner, you could dry it out. You could make a little tent out of it. It would help you in the days where the sun was really hot. And at night you slept over it with it covering all your extremities, trying to not keep anything exposed.

And so what we'd used to do when we'd go out on these ambushes, we'd go out on these platoon sized ambushes, or half platoon size ambushes. We would go out and find what we called a day hold. And basically, they would decide where we were going to ambush later that night. It might be 1,000 meters away, it might be 2,000 meters away. They always tried to find little ambush spots by what we called the blues, the rivers, because that was the way they kind of moved and food and water were always things people would need. So Viet Cong and the NVA didn't carry as much water as we did. So they were constantly resupplying. So the military was always trying to guess where they might be, or if they had military intelligence. Or if they [army intelligence] used previous contacts, so we would go out and set up our night ambush and basically during the day we'd have a day hold, we'd sweep for half a day, set up a day hold, get some food, get out of the sun and try to get rested up. And maybe a little sweeping in another spot and figure out where we were going to set up our ambush. We might send one or two guys out to just take a look at it from 500 meters away or something. And then we'd go set up our ambush, and basically we'd form a circle, the radio would be in the middle, you'd buddy up and the Army always had a buddy system. And you'd buddy up which meant two guys would kind of sleep together. Then you'd complete your circle, and then as a defensive position, then you'd set up Claymores out to the front, and then basically you wanted to have your Claymores pointed in the right direction. What I say by that is if we were by a trail then maybe we'd had most of the Claymores pointing at [or down] the trail. Instead of completely around us in a circle, we were trying to set up what we'd call a kill zone [A kill zone was an area where everything in that zone would be killed very quickly]. And set up the machine gun and then set up you know, everybody's individual... For the platoons, well that's what we did, and then at night if it wasn't high alert, you got maybe two hours of sleep and one hour off. You usually ran on 30% [every 3rd soldier would be awake and on guard]. And then on high alert, you might be on 50%. You know sometimes in a really safe area, you might be on 25% which was one out of every four guys would be up. And a platoon typically consisted of anywhere from twenty-five to twenty guys. A lot of times platoons were supposed to be bigger but rarely did I see larger platoons. Maybe they just needed replacements, somebody had to go back for dental, somebody was sick. There was always some reason why somebody didn't come out in the field, so you usually were between twenty-five and thirty guys.

Berry: And I'm sure you got to know those twenty-five or thirty guys pretty well.

Koeppen: Well not as much as you would think. You'd kind of hang with whoever your squad was you'd kind of know. Then you'd know there was somebody you'd like and somebody you'd like to talk to. And so most of the platoons consisted of two machine guns. And if you had four squads or three squad depending each squad would have a radio. You'd have a couple of grenadiers, you'd have somebody that maybe would... [tape ends]

[00:31:54]

[End of OH1509.Koeppen_tape2_B_access]

[Beginning of OH1509.Koeppen_tape3_A_access]

Berry: John, we left off the last tape when your unit was about ready to go into Cambodia. Could you pick it up there and talk about that situation?

Koeppen: Well, basically we had been—Just before the Cambodia invasion, we went in—looks like, I think, on May 3. And the ARVNs had gone in at the end of April. And so they had gone into a couple of areas, and they were looking for-- It was COSVN. C-O-S-V-N, which was supposedly the headquarters of the North Vietnamese in Cambodia and their supply roads. And so basically, as the ARVNs went sweeping through with the armor and the infantry, my company, the 6th of the 31st, my unit, we began working the Cambodian border out of firebase Gettysburg, which was eleven kilometers away from the Cambodian border. We were just kind of west of that. And basically, what we were trying to do was interdict any VC or NVA regulars that were escaping the ARVNs by coming into Vietnam instead of retreating back into Cambodia.

And so, we were all working on this plain [Plain of Reeds]. It was very interesting for a number of reasons. First off, we were all kind of hyped up with the news of what was going on in Cambodia. And as we were patrolling and doing sweeps, and doing some landings, we could see and feel the B-52 strikes that were happening across the border. And for me it was the first time, and I just remember one night—It was completely dark because you're out basically in what they called "Injun Country", free-fire zone, there's no villages, there's no roads, there's no lights. And you would just look to the west and you would see these flashes of light. And it almost looked like lightning, except it was at the horizon. And you could just see 'em [the lights] as they [the B-52s] would go across the horizon as the bomb loads would just go. As they would drop they would just stretch, maybe a mile long. And basically, we would see them and in a mere ten or fifteen seconds, you'd hear the rumble; and it was like thunder. And you can actually—there would be like a slight breeze from the concussion, and you could feel the ground shake because the strikes were happening probably within less than five miles of us. Some of 'em were a little bit closer. And so at night it was kind of exciting seeing that. And we would sit out there, and the terrain was pretty flat. We had our starlight scopes. And we were just looking for any enemy figures. We were pretty much on high alert. 50%, one person up, one person down.

And so we did this for a number of days until a decision was made that our unit was going to join the 25th [in Cambodia]. Because at that time the 1st Cav had gone in a little north of us, and the 25th was gonna go in. And so, then there was the decision made that the 9th Division was gonna go in; 6 of the 31st. And so we were picked up by helicopters just before nightfall, and we were dropped outside Firebase Gettysburg. And we were resupplied, and the Captain gathered us that night and told us we were gonna go into Cambodia. [coughs] Excuse me. And so we kind of sat the whole night outside the firebase just in the grass. And then in the morning, just before— just before the sun came up—we got picked up by a an

Eagle Flight. And that's what we call it, was an "Eagle Flight" when the helicopters came in; they'd end up being groups of four, or eight helicopters at a time. And we got picked up by eight, 'cause it was a large lift. And basically, we all got on got in the choppers. We were all fully loaded; we had extra water and extra ammo. And basically we headed to Cambodia, and we could see on the horizon, from the choppers you would see smoke from burning villages and explosions. And one of the things that really stands out was as we got closer to the Cambodian border, it had a moonscape-type look. There were so many holes from air strikes from helicopters. And as soon as we crossed the Cambodian border the ground was unblemished. There was no bomb craters, no holes, because at that time the U.S. was not bombing or firing into Cambodia because it was considered a neutral country. And it was just amazing, the stark contrast of seeing all the pock marks on the ground and then just going in and seeing normal rice paddies and little villages. And so, then we kind of banked, and we could see where we were going into. And it was just one of those bright, crisp mornings. It was still early. Felt a little dewy. And then we went into a little village. I don't know exactly what it was called. But we were in Parrot's Beak; there was an area called Parrot's Beak in Cambodia. And the artillery had been dropped and were going to establish what was called Firebase Seminole. And so as we went in, my company went in on one side. And we were told it's gonna be a hot LZ. And as we went in, it was just a surreal sight. Something out of a movie, or what you see in World War II.

[00:04:58]

Because it was a village, we landed outside of—most of the hooches or buildings were on fire; they had been wrecked. You could see all the ARVN armored unit tracks from the tanks and the armored personnel carriers that had gone through. It was flat with rice paddies. In the center, just behind us, was a grove of trees, and that's where the artillery units were. As we landed we all went out and did the prone—you know, jumped off the helicopters, everybody got in a prone; making a big [circular] defensive position. We could see figures three, four hundred meters away. Obviously, they were NVA, or VC, or villagers, and they were still running around. They saw us coming in there. I saw one guy directly in front of me hop on his bicycle, he came out of a little hooch. And he just started heading off. And he was too far [for me] to fire at with the M16. We were still kind of loading, so everybody was at cease-fire.

And a couple things I really remember was, we had a lieutenant colonel called Gervin. [sp ??] And he had gray hair, and he was called "The Gray Ghost". And as we were laying there, and the choppers lifted off, and they went to get their last load, he kind of just started walking amongst us. And he had pearl-handled .45s, and they were crisscrossed [across his waist]. It was just kind of like out of one of these John Wayne movies. And he had no helmet on; he had his executive officer and the radio guy follow him around. And I just remember him saying— he was saying this to everybody, he was like, "Goddamn it, I love it. This is war.

Goddamn it, this is great." And so then his chopper came in, and he took off. And right next to us, Delta Company came in. And they were fifty meters just to the right of us. And they came in, and they landed right in the middle of a mine field. The first chopper came in, the first guys hopped out, and two guys hit booby traps right away; Bouncing Betty's [anti-personnel mines]. And so, another chopper came in and a couple guys get off, and they hit Bouncing Betty's. And so within the first couple of minutes we landed in a safe zone. Right next to us guys were getting off the helicopters—the choppers, and they were just stepping on Bouncing Betty's. They were right in the middle of a minefield. And so the—none of the choppers got impacted, but they took off. And basically, everybody [from Delta] got back on the helicopters, and they took off. And so there was this minefield there, and we had to get the guys, and medevac 'em out.

And so then, during the course of the day, everything landed. People landed, the rest of the companies did. Some of the companies landed in the little [inaudible] villages outside. At that time, we set up the border outside of Firebase Seminole. We were kind of a trip wire because it was a pretty much temporary firebase. They weren't going to build any kind of berm around it. They had a central headquarters, and then they had the mortar platoons; little companies were out a couple hundred yards in front of it. We'd set up defensive perimeters. And at this time the guns, the artillery pieces, were just firing randomly. They had fire missions going on. There were planes and jets screaming overhead. There was the Cobras, there was the helicopters, there were spotter planes, it was just a hub of activity going on all around you. Plus, you could see the fires from, you know, whatever was burning, whether it was a village, there were dead water buffalo laying around. And so, we set up our position and it took a couple of days. We did some recon patrols, and it was a fairly big village. I think it was Ba Tru; it's B-A-T-R-U, and it turned out to be kind of a supply depot. But it was like a small city with all these little outlying villages. We basically would go and sweep and try and clear 'em out and check out the bunkers. And they had all these mines that have little signs with VC hats and crossbones—skull and crossbones on it. So that would kind of tell you that this area was mined, and it was something for the villagers to know. Because before we came in there it was just a working village, but since now the Americans were in there, they had set up some booby traps. And they [the NVA] just didn't want the villagers— to alienate them.

And so we spent two weeks, and as a border group we kept doing fire missions. We'd provide illumination. But the scary part is since we were outside the main firebase, there was infiltrators and snipers, and they were throwing mortars and rockets every once in a while. And so, a couple of things happened. We actually would have to sleep pretty much, we were in a rice paddy below the berm because we were constantly being caught at a crossfire, we'd have the security element with their M60 machine guns; they would do random fires. And there was a couple times when infiltrators got in, and there was these little fire fights. And so, we were just caught in the middle of a crossfire with bullets going over us from various groups. And sometimes we'd be firing, and so it was the most bizarre

situation. Um, completely dark, and bullets going around, you couldn't tell friend or foe. And after a while it got more established. And so then it got a little more settled, and we had a CDIG [CIDG: Civilian Irregular Defense Group] Irregular Group came and joined us as part of the defensive perimeter.

Berry: What does that acronym mean?

Koeppen: I think it's a Civilian Defense-- Injurious-- I don't know what the rest of it is-- Guard, or something like that.

[00:10:04]

And they would basically pay Cambodian mercenaries, and other mercenaries, and they had a couple of Green Berets with them. And they would, kind of came out and joined us. And then one night there was a small ground attack about fifty, sixty, they took the brunt of it. But it was just a long night for at least a couple hours of intensive gunfire and shooting. 'Cause it was just a probing attack. And they kept, for a couple weeks the NVA would always do these little probing attacks, either on our end, or on the north end, the west end, and east end. So there was always something going on. And then, as we swept out to some of the villages, and basically were, you know, checking them [the villages], looking for armored caches, for weapon caches, any kind of information. A couple of incidents I remember is in one area, we pulled out these Cambodians [from an underground bunker] and basically they were being held as prisoners for not cooperating with the NVA. And the thing that struck me was there was men and women; they were so emaciated that they were just nothing but skin and bones. And it reminded me of my dad's pictures when he was in World War II; when they went into the Nazi concentration camps. And these people couldn't walk, and you could see every bone in their body. Like the woman had no breasts, and her pelvis was, you know, exposed. It was like a living skeleton. And we helped clean her up, and they [Army interrogators] were questioning her; and we found out— basically what they told us was, these were people who didn't cooperate with the NVA, and so they would force them to just live in bunkers. And they would literally starve 'em to death. They wouldn't feed them, and they were just shown as examples to the villagers for not cooperating with them.

And so we had that incident, and that really stuck out in my mind. There was another time where I remember, uh, where the recon unit—I was working with the radio at that time—and the recon unit was in a heavy contact and we were supporting with mortar fighter. And basically, they had a couple of guys who had been killed, and they wanted to pull back because it was just too intense with the heavy machine gun fire. The colonel kept saying that they didn't want them to leave the guys—the bodies behind. And it was such a decision; it was just a real drama going on for about a half an hour of the commander on the ground pleading to pull back; the colonel asking if he can confirm whether they're dead for sure. And this whole drama played out, and they eventually had to leave the bodies

behind—that were recovered. But it was just the intensity, and the whole decision-making that I got to listen to while I was on the radio. And I just was stunned by the drama, and I came away from the fact that this colonel was just kind of a real braggart. He wanted to win a lot of medals. This was his moment, this was his war, this was his incident to make sure that he was gonna get recognition. And then after a couple of weeks— we had a couple of big battles. There was one village, and I can't pronounce it, that was surrounded by Alpha Company and Delta Company and Charlie Company. And I read later on that we were acting as a battalion, but we only had a company strength. And it was like a two or three day battle between us and the NVA. Eventually the villagers left. The thing that's really striking was at LZ Lambeau I ran into somebody from my unit. He was a machine gunner. We talked about how at one time they [the enemy] stampeded all their animals, the water buffalos, the cows, and all that through the gap in our lines. And the villagers walked amongst the animals, and they basically were trying to escape. And we think a lot of the NVA slipped out that night, but we didn't really shoot because there were civilians there. You didn't know really what you were doing. Meanwhile, Firebase Seminole was just a hub of activity. And we were unloading the ammunition, the wounded would come in and we'd help move them from one helicopter to another helicopter.

Berry: What sort of rule of engagement did you have? Did you have to wait until you were fired upon? Did your squad leader tell you when to shoot? How did that work?

Koeppen: We had, the rules of engagement was pretty much, we--We were told it was a free fire zone, but then we were told it was-- there was civilians, so it wasn't really a clear rule of engagement like the free fire zones. And so you had to make the judgment calls, and we had a Captain Lavasey [sp??] who was a really a very, a commanders commander. I mean, he was there with the guys and he always was in the lead, and he always helped out. And one of the things that was striking about this thing is you could actually see the soldiers, the NVA. Because many times, you know, in an ambush you don't really see them because they're already hidden. But this was more like we were bumping into them, and they were, you could see soldiers running with their weapons off through the distance. And I'm talking fifty, seventy-five, a hundred yards. Or they'd be, taking positions and usually at that time, then they—the civilians would hide down into the bunkers.

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You know, the sad part is if we came and tried, and would clear out the bunkers with hand grenades, we couldn't tell who was in there. But for most of the stuff, it was a very different situation because we were in an area where the NVA was not really prepared for us. They didn't have a lot of set defenses because this area had been their rest and relaxation area. We had gone into the [NVA] training center, and there was benches set up; there was a park area. They had a movie theater set up. They had classrooms with black boards on it. One of the things we found very

interesting and I'm sure you didn't see this, is they had a little line, they had a firing range where they had a string set up [high]. And they had little model helicopters. And what the tiger scouts told us is they learned how to shoot and lead the helicopters by putting these helicopters and letting 'em throw on—motivate them down this string. So they'd learn how to lead [the flying helicopters] correctly with their weapons. And we found all kinds of food, and we found typewriters, we found fifty-five gallon drums with toilet seats on them. We found a lot of American products there. We found typewriters, filing cabinets. You know, all kinds of things like major offices. They had copy machines, and a lot of this stuff was just lying out in the open generators. They had little kitchens set up; they had cots. So, it was just like a rear base for them. And it was just amazing some of the things they had. There were trucks, and jeeps, and motorcycles, and bicycles all over the place.

One of the things that came out of this that was again another incident-- striking-- was as we were doing this-- And we'd go back to the mortar group and get ready for the night position. 'Cause we fired a lot of illumination in that area. But the helicopters would come in, and we'd unload; and we'd load up whatever we could help out with. And one helicopter came in, and it just was by itself. And it was just kind of bizarre; they called a bunch of us to come over and unload it. And as it came in, the pilots were looking around—and we looked in, and there was no ammunition, there was no water, there was nothing like that. Because a lot of times they would come in with water and we'd take it off, and we'd disperse it in the firebase. Or we'd put it on a different chopper that would be going to another group. And it was covered with plastic, and it had filing cabinets in there. And the filing cabinets were kind of, the plastic was covered with gore and blood. And so we kind of hopped on to get it, and one of the helicopter pilots asked what we were doing. And we were like, "We're supposed to be unloading this." And we took a couple boxes out, and the next thing you know, a pilot turned around; he pointed his .45 at us. And he said, "You guys gotta stop doing that. Stop it." And we looked up, and the other pilot told us to put the stuff back on. And so we put it back on. And it took off again, and we were just very shocked that an American officer would point a gun at us. Later on, we found out that these—our unit had run into a treasure trove. 'Cause we were at this base camp; there were all these filing cabinets. And what had happened, the filing cabinets contained information of VC agents, NVA agents in Saigon. And whoever would come through this base camp, they had pictures, they actually had pictures and photo IDs with complete records. And so after we were back in Vietnam, they told us this was like the largest treasure trove of information ever found in one spot that would identify the enemy agents within Saigon and the area. And supposedly that a lot of them were rounded up, and I don't know if they went to prison, or became part of the Phoenix Program, or what. But they said after Cambodia, Vietnam was probably quiet for the longest period until back in '71 when they started restocking and getting all of their agents back. But it was, it was just a real frightening thing.

Then lastly, the other striking incident was this colonel was just full himself. He really wanted to win his honors, and his medals. And so when we got orders to go back to Firebase Gettysburg, there was a long argument—and I was on the radio that day. And one of the things about being in a small group, and with the radio-- You would have the radio, your PRC-25, and you can listen to what was going on. And you would know other frequencies, and you can listen to like the helicopters, and that. And sometimes they have little speakers, and so you could turn on the speaker, and then other people could listen. So this was going on during the day, and once we got orders, you know, to pull back. And so it would just filter down from the colonel down to the captain, to the lieutenant, and you started securing gear and getting ready to pull back. And our unit was just gonna pull back, but Firebase Seminole was gonna still stay there [in Cambodia] for more operations. But there became this long, heated conversation between our colonel and the military command because he wasn't gonna go. He told 'em this was his time, and he wasn't pulling back. And there was a lot of swearing going on and it was just interesting. Of higher commanders saying, "Okay, you've got your orders; you need to follow 'em." And this colonel, and we called him the, "Gray Ghost" 'cause he had gray hair saying like, you know, "Fuck it. I'm not doing that. I'm staying here. This is my moment. We're kicking ass, we're getting bodies. This is what we're doing."

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This went on for a couple of hours, and then finally somebody's code call sign came through. And the general that was probably talking to our colonel said, "This is coming from" and he gave a code sign, and he said, "This is it. You're gonna have to do it, 'cause otherwise you're gonna get court martialed." And he was like, "I don't care about my rank!" And all this. But as soon as he mentioned this person's code name, then the conversation stopped. And then we get arranged, and we were eventually picked up and went back to Gettysburg. And we started doing some routine patrolling, because at that time a lot of the troops now were at Cambodia, so we were kinda thin. And it was always rumored that that code name stood for General Abrams, who was the top commander in Vietnam. And he literally was telling this guy he needed to leave and follow orders, otherwise he was gonna lose his rank. But it was one of the most dramatic, or interesting, radio conversations I ever heard, hearing the power struggle that was going on.

So after that we went to Firebase Gettysburg, and then we started doing a lot of patrolling. We left the mortars there, and we just started doing a lot of patrolling because we were now covering areas for the 25th Infantry Division; because the 25th Infantry Division had sent a lot of elements in [into Cambodia]. And so now we were kind of patrolling areas around— it was called Tây Ninh Province. And it was home of what we called the Black Virgin Mountains. You could see the Black Virgin Mountains in the distance. There were three mountains, and from the horizon they were all dark. And basically, that was a big area close to Cambodia that had been a VC/NVA base camp. So, there was a lot of activity. So

since the 25th was gone, we [our company] kind of filled in and started doing a lot of patrolling there. And we had a lot of crazy patrols, basically. I remember one time we were patrolling along the border, and you'd see the B-52 craters, and it was kind of hot. And these craters were empty, and you'd look in the craters and sometimes you'd see a skeleton, or a couple of skeletons, or bones. You know, of people who were killed by these strikes. And then we were started patrolling. As we go along the border we'd run into rivers. And that was an interesting sight because on the rivers, to support us, they brought in these barges with artillery pieces. So they had floating barges with 105 artillery pieces on 'em, and they would float on the river and basically support infantry units. Because that way we would have enough artillery support to do a mission. And so a couple of things—first off, seeing these barges. And they're like, the only time they had been used before was maybe in the Civil War. And so we had a couple of really crazy missions. Meanwhile, we're still doing a lot of patrolling; ran into booby traps, a little sniper fire, but contact kind of went down. There was very little contact at this point. But we were always on "hot intelligence." They would always have some hot intelligence that we had to follow.

And I remember one night, as we were working with the river, the artillery barges, they wanted us to go [out on patrol] and they had this hot intelligence, and we had a company-size sweep. And we were outside a little on the river. And so they brought us in during the day. We called a day hold. We'd rest on the barges and keep us out of the water. The barges were really, really hot, 'cause in the heat the metal would just get warm. And so, you just find a place to kind of sleep and rest up, and some guys would go fishing; they would throw the hand grenades in the river, and then they'd go off and try to see what fish would float up. And it was just kind of something to do. But I didn't do it, and not a lot of hand grenades because you weren't gonna get resupplied. So there was always one or two jokers that would always kind of do that. But then at night, we had a couple nights where they came up with this idea of an operation that we would go, we'd get off the artillery barges, and then we'd set up our day hold. And a "day hold" was where you would gather a platoon, talk about your mission. You'd do some scouting about where you were gonna set up your night ambush. And a day hold was usually in a clump of trees, or maybe in a low area so that, you know, you wouldn't be seen. You could rest up; you could eat, and you could check your weapon. Do stuff like that. And then just before dark, you would predetermine where you were gonna set up your ambush spot. Well, for this mission was a little different. After we set up our predetermined spot, we basically would go to that. And that night they wanted us to—every hour, to pick up and move. And so they had this company coordinated of maybe five different ambush elements spread out maybe a klick, or something like that. In complete darkness. Trying to move to predetermined spots.

[00:25:02]

And we were supposed to be trying to catch some kind of NVA battalion, or VC company as they were trying to infiltrate. That was a crazy night because it was a stormy night, so it was raining; there was a lot of lighting going on. And plus, being pitch black, you couldn't see anywhere you were going. It was close to the river; it was very muddy. And one of the incidents that happened was, we didn't know it at the time, but it [the area] had a lot of bomb craters in it. So, what would happen, and this happened to the first point man. As he was walking, he took a step into a bomb crater. Now, the bomb craters sometimes can be very deep. And this was a deep one because we found out later they were five hundred pounders, five hundred pound bomb craters. And we were in an area that was very clay, clay-like, and so it got wet and slippery. And so the point man took a step, slipped down this bomb crater, and went completely underwater 'cause he had his pack on, and all that. And he struggled, and he finally came back up. And that's when we realized that we were walking around bomb craters. And so this changed the whole complexion. And so instead of following direct orders, we then made a decision. And so after doing—I think we did a total of three get up and move's, set your ambush. And the thing I was struggling was you had to set your Claymore mines out, and then you had to bring 'em back in. You couldn't rest, you were totally wet, and it's lighting on, going on. You have bomb craters. People are bumping around in the dark. There was one time we bumped into another group. We almost fight on each other, and then we just kind of figured out we're the same group. And at that point, we had a seasoned sergeant, couple of sergeants, and they just did the old Vietnam [expression], "Fuck it. We're not doing this anymore. We're just going to find a place, and we're gonna stay there." And so what we did was find a level spot and stayed there. And what they did was figure out how to call in false reports. They would say we had moved a hundred meters to the west, a hundred meters to the east; a hundred meters to the north and south. We didn't really move, but we were close enough to where we were supposed to be so nobody would fire on us.

Because as this [mission] was going on, [our] artillery was doing what they called "Interdict H&I fires", which is called a "High Explosive Interdiction". [HE: High Explosive; H&I: Harassment & Interdiction] And they would just fire off random rounds at a certain spot that they [the command] thought the enemy might have come through. Because the day before, maybe the captain or the lieutenant out— went out in the helicopter, and they look for possible ways or routes of infiltration. Or, if the enemy was coming, this is where they would do— this is where they would be at that moment. And so this was random, and the thing was to keep the enemy off guard. And so they might fire two or three rounds to this spot maybe one time during the night, and then they'd fire to a different spot. It was always to keep the enemy supposedly on the edge when actually, I think, it was more like protecting ourselves, or at least giving us a sense of protection.

So that's how we did the false report, and we did that two nights in a row because it was just crazy; we were getting exhausted, we were getting filthy. We're not really accomplishing anything, and it's pouring rain. And one of the things that

after a while—you're in the infantry you learn— well, we called 'em "common sense tricks." We began to learn that the enemy's no dummy. [laughs] You know, there was a couple times we'd go into these swamps; we'd sink up to our waists, we'd struggle through the swamps. And you could tell it was just a big swamp. Sometimes the swamp might have a high ground, and they might build a bunker. But after a while you figure out it's just a swamp, and you would say, "They're not gonna be here. They're not fools." The VC/NVA are very smart soldiers. They're a great enemy. They're not gonna sit in the middle of a swamp up to their neck in water all night long when they can find an alternate route to take. They know the land, they know where the good places are. And so we called it common sense, of figuring out where you are has nothing to with the enemy. All you're doing is exhausting yourself. Maybe putting yourself in a position to get ambushed because they might be on the side of the swamp, or the bamboo grove, or the forest where there's more open area, there's more trails. Because it's where they are. And so at this point, when we started doing the false reports it was just a matter of common sense; no sense in trying to find something that doesn't exist because the terrain wouldn't allow it to exist.

So we did that for a couple of missions, and then we stopped. And then it stopped raining, and then I had, one of my best memories of Vietnam was we went out on a little six-man platoon, 'cause then we started going out on six-man platoons. And so we had this one platoon, and we were still working with the artillery barges, and we came and there was a ridge; and it had a lot of high elephant grass. And I remember that we set up our day hole, and we kind of figured, up at the lip of the ridge there was a trail, uh, twenty meters— well, there was a trail coming down. And so we found a nice spot where the grass was growing over and it was fairly level, about twenty meters off the trail.

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And so we did our day hold, and we got to eat, and we slipped into our night position and set up our Claymores. 'Cause this trail came from the back, and then it went down into like a little valley. And the valley was filled with rice paddies, and during the day when we were there, we could see there was a couple of hooches; and so there was farmers and a water buffalo. And then that night the weather finally cleared, and it was a bright moonlight. And we were sitting there in our little day hold, and everything seemed a little calm. And basically, sometimes what we did is if we're on guard at night— if you're doing your two hours, and you had a little eight-track and eight-volt radio, you'd put in the little earplug and listen to the radio station at a very low, low level as you watched through the starlight scope. And I remember just sitting there, and "The Sound—" the song from Simon & Garfunkel, "Sounds of Silence" came on. And I remember looking out—because you could look out and see pretty far **[tape ends]**

[End of OH1509.Koeppen_tape3_A]

[Beginning of OH1509.Koeppen_tape3_B]

Berry: Okay, John, we were talking about your experiences on a night ambush? You were listening to the radio?

Koeppen: Right, and I think maybe "The Sounds of Silence," came on. And it was just such a peaceful night because the weather had cleared. 'Cause it-- in Vietnam, thunderstorms would roll in, and they'd roll out. I mean, that was part of the beauty of the country. It would come in and rain, and you'd have this thunderstorm; and then, next thing you know, it would clear, and it would be peaceful and calm. And everything would be a little wet, so it had like a new, fresh feeling about it. So on this particular ambush, "The Sounds of Silence" from Simon & Garfunkel came on. And I was listening to the words, and I kind of was relating it to the moment. And we were looking over this valley, and there was this little hooch. And everything looked so peaceful and calm. And we were watching the little hooches where the villages were, and you could see 'em preparing for night. You could see the lanterns going from one building to another building. There was only three or four buildings. And then the lantern would stay outside the the hooch, you know. And eventually, as it got later in the night, they kind of were extinguished. And then the full moon was out; you could just see the hooches. And naturally, we were looking to see if there was any enemy activity, people coming around, or that. But I thought, what a silent, peaceful moment this was. And how, you know, war is just crap. And if people would just leave everything alone— All people want to do is have their farm, make a little money, and raise their family. It's a moment I often think about. And I always think about it when I hear "The Sounds of Silence" from Simon & Garfunkel.

And so that night went without any kind of incident. And a lot of times there weren't much incidents going on. We were doing a lot of patrolling, and Cambodia was still going on. I think Cambodia went all the way till the end of June. But we were just having these strange experiences. There was another time where we were on an ambush along the Cambodian border; and it's flat, and there's no civilization around. And so it was pouring rain, and one of the things I remembered about it was, I was sitting there doing guard, or sleeping. I was thinking, "Oh, it's raining. Good. The mosquitoes aren't gonna be out." 'Cause you would sit with your poncho on and be hot. You're getting wet. But then, the mosquitoes would stick to your skin. So they kept coming in at my face, and I felt like I was just scratching them off. You know, thousands of mosquitoes because it was a swampy-type area. And on one of these little missions. And this went on for just like a week, or so. There was a guy named John Jones, and basically, he was on patrol [guard watch]. And you're trying to look out and you could hardly see anything. And this wild cat came up to him. And it was about three feet high, not a full-sized lion but it weighed about fifty or sixty pounds. And he was in our platoon, and he was telling us about how— because we got woke up by a single shot— And so later, we all woke up and there was a single shot. And then later in the day when we were talking about it and he was shaking. He said, this wild cat

kind of went up to him and started licking his hand. And we figured a couple things: first off, the animal had never seen a human, so it had no human interaction. Or maybe it was a tame one set free. But it was licking his hand for the salt. Because on missions like this—Vietnam is so hot. We'd always be taking salt tablets. You'd take two or three salt tablets a day just to try to retain some water. And so we were always just sweating salt like it was... I mean, it just would never stop. So this thing would lick his hands and he kept licking his hands, and he didn't know what to do! I mean, he's nineteen years old; he's totally frightened. And he remembered he was looking at the cat, and it was kind of like maybe a foot away, or eighteen inches, but looking straight at him. And not doing anything. It was just kind of purring a little bit. And so finally he kind of made some motion, and shooed him, and it kind of walked out of the perimeter. And then it came back in. And at this point he didn't know what to do, so he took his weapon, his M16, and he just shot him in the head. And there it was the next morning, laying there. It was a beautiful cat. You know, we didn't know if it was an ocelot, or whatever, because one of the things about Vietnam is you always had these strange insects and animals. So when the helicopters came to pick us up, we literally brought the cat with us. We cut a bamboo out, strung it up, took it back. And we went back to the village and we were by Firebase Chamberlain at the time. And all the villagers came out, and the tiger scout took it and skinned it. And brought back this beautiful pelt. And it was just one of those amazing, freaky stories that happens. I'm sure everybody in combat has one like that. And so that was one of those experiences.

And we kept patrolling. We were patrolling all these areas. One time we had to tear down a firebase. And basically, when you tore down the firebases, this was Firebase Jackson, it was close to some villages. And so in Vietnam, people were so poor that they always wanted to take the wood; they would take whatever metal.

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They would use it to make things out of it. Where we would throw things away they could always find something to do with it. They'd look for empty food, you know, we'd throw food away. So what we tried to do was keep the villagers away by using tear gas. Which probably wasn't the right thing, but that was the only thing we had. You didn't want to shoot 'em. You'd fire over their heads, they figured out we weren't gonna shoot 'em after a while. So we constantly had this tug of war thing going on. The other thing that always was frightening was, intermingled with the villagers, they would literally sit outside the firebase, outside the perimeter. And I'm not talking about one or two. There might be thirty, forty. And I remember one time— they must have known we were gonna leave— there must have been a couple hundred of 'em out there. And so we tried to throw tear gas at 'em. And at this one, Firebase Jackson, they [the enemy] set the jet fuel on fire. We still had some jet fuel there, some bladders, 'cause helicopters were coming and going as we're dismantling the firebase, taking down

the fire direction tower, and that. And they set the jet fuel on fire, and it burned for like three days. It was just heavy black smoke. And we'd see the villagers, and you could see, sometimes, individuals with weapons. And we didn't know if they were ARVNs, or if they were NVA. I remember, this sniper would take his scope out. He would look, and he would go like, "Oh, that guy's got an AK-47; that's got an M16. What do we do?" And getting to your question, the rules of engagement, we couldn't do anything unless we were fired on at that time. We couldn't shoot anybody unless you had been fired on. And so we had this constant struggle between the villagers trying to steal stuff—and they'd steal ammunition; we'd always have to watch our weapons. And they would come in and do daily chores, like pick up the trash. They might do some cleaning. And then they'd have to leave at night. Or maybe they'd come in with the barber, you know, would cut your hair. They always had little sundry duties that they would do at the firebase during the day, and we'd have them leave at night.

And I remember one time, after we had [enemy contact]— it wasn't our platoon, but our company. One of the platoons had ambushed some of the enemy, and basically found out one of the guys was the barber. He was a barber that used to come in to this firebase of ours. And so when we got mortared we figured out they would know where the command post was, and all that because these guys were just being little spies. But this leads to probably the funniest story ever created in Vietnam, was as we were pushing these villagers out— we'd have a little $\frac{3}{4}$ -ton truck— and we'd drive up close to 'em and throw CS [tear gas], or smoke grenades, and they'd scatter, and then they'd come back. And so we had these surplus tear gas pods, and these were pods that would shoot out forty little pellets of tear gas at one time. And so, then they had three or four of 'em laying out on the truck, and you could cover a football field with these. So one time we went out with a couple of guys, there was Roger Knouse, myself, and somebody else. And it was during the day and this was after the jet fuel, so we're trying really to keep them away. And so we went out in the truck and we popped this tear gas pod. And so all these tear gas pellets went out and exploded, and we had this great cloud of tear gas. Well, we either judged the wind wrong or the wind shifted. And so it began blowing back to the firebase. And we were sitting in this $\frac{3}{4}$ -ton truck outside the firebase, maybe fifty, sixty yards. And we could see all the guys running from one side of the firebase to the next, and we were like, "Oh, shit. We just tear gassed the firebase." And so guys were yelling at us, swearing at us, and we didn't want to go back into the firebase. Finally, another truck came out after about an hour or two. We were just sitting out there going like, "Oh, man, we're really fucked now. What are we gonna do? These guys are gonna hate us." We finally came back, the guy drove with his truck and said, "It's okay." And we said, "What do you mean, 'It's okay'?" He said, "You can't believe what happened." He said, "The captain was in the shitter at the time. And so when your tear gas hit the camp he was in the shitter with his pants down. He came stumbling out of the shitter, his pants down, fell into the biggest mud puddle ever. And everybody just laughed their ass off. They thought it was the funniest thing they ever saw." Because we had just gotten a new CO. After Cambodia, Lavasey

went home and we'd just gotten a new CO; and everybody thought he was kind of a jerk. So we got self-redemption. Maybe God was watching over us, or that. They still were mad at us, but they still thought it was one of the funniest things that'd ever happened.

And as I said, we kept doing this patrolling. We'd go through banana plantations and pineapple plantations. I remember the pineapple plantation, uh, somebody hit a booby trap and I was carrying the radio. And the guy behind me was hit— two guys behind me were hit. The guys in front of me were hit. One radio operator went down and we had to pull him out. 'Cause the pineapple plantations would have almost hedges, like Normandy, and between the hedges they had these three feet deep canals of water that would water the plants.

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And what happened was the headquarters RTO —Joe Donley [sp??] hit a Bouncing Betty with his knee, and it blew off most of his knee, and that. And then he just kind of fell under the water. And when this whole explosion happened, everybody just kind of stopped. It was like a movie moment. Everything just— poof. And I remember hearing a loud clap, trying to figure out what happened. And somebody yelled out, "Okay. Booby trap." And so we took care of the wounded. We got Joe out and patched him up; sent him on his way. And so we kept marching through this pineapple plantation. I remember Roger Knouse— we were going through mud and swamps and this was going on— and all of a sudden this [Vietnamese] farmer came out and he was off to the side [of us] because there were farmers 'cause of the plantations. And he started to point out booby traps. And so we were so grateful 'cause he pointed out two or three booby traps that we didn't end up hitting. And I remember Roger getting cigarettes from everybody and giving him the cigarettes just to thank him because we thought, you know, Wow. Here's a great guy. You know, he's really risking his life to show us where the booby traps are so we didn't get hurt. And I'm sure the farmer was thinking like, good god, if one of these guys get killed or something like that, they're gonna come after me. So that was one of those moments of humanity where you realize people just wanted to move their lives along without getting in any trouble and making the best decision at the time.

And so we did a little bit more of that, but like I said, the war was winding down. We were just doing little missions, and not getting in a lot of contact, but just find a lot of booby traps, and blowing up bunkers from some of the intelligence. They [enemy bunkers] usually were pretty empty. And so at this time, discipline got a little lax, and so the firebases, the guys who stayed in the rear— you had the guys smoking pot, and the guys getting drunk all the time. And, you know, one of the nice things was we got to do movies. If you went back to the firebase, one of my least favorite jobs was the shit burning detail. And what I mean by the "shit burning detail" was the firebases would build latrines, and you would have holes; two-seaters, three-seaters. And they would just defecate or do their business into

these fifty-five gallon drums. And every day they got pulled out, and you would have to burn it with diesel fuel. So that was one of the smells of Vietnam that you'll never forget is shit burning in diesel fuel. And it had to be done every day. And it just was one of those gruesome tasks. And if you got in the firebase, you know, you might be burning forty, fifty barrels; smaller ones, you didn't. And so then these warehouses would pop up around there, and also you'd get your little-- buy your jungle fatigues off the black market. There was always little souvenirs people were selling. And the other thing was movies; you got to see some movies. They'd bring in movies. They didn't have a theater. I remember they used to take a deuce-and-a-half, a 2 ½-ton truck, drop a sheet and they would show it. And one of the movies that I remember the most was *Night of the Living Dead*. The original *Night of the Living Dead*; with the zombies, and all of that. And so I saw that movie-- and it was just kind of scary. I was a young guy, you know, you didn't believe in zombies. But the next night, we had to go out on a mission. And so then we're out in the middle of the jungle, and I remember we're at this little swamp area. And I kept thinking of that movie all night long, and I kept hearing little noises. 'Cause when you set up your ambush in the jungle, or if you're on the edge of the jungle, or on a swamp, there's always little creatures going around. And your senses become so attuned that you would hear things. And maybe a frog making a little swimming motion, you might think it was a person walking through the water. So you're always kind of on this edge of, like, okay, is somebody coming to me? Am I seeing something, or is that just a little creature? And I had this stupid movie running through my head. [Berry laughs] And it just gave me the heebie jeebies about it. I go, "Maybe there's really zombies out there." I just remember that, and I was thinking, "Why would they show a movie like that? Why would they show such a stupid movie?"

Berry: What was the food like back in base camp?

Koeppen: Well, the food was basically water buffalo meat. In the firebases they had a cook. Some of the established firebases have cooks, and so you had the creamed corn, the corn and mashed potatoes. And that was for supper. You could maybe get Kool-Aid, lot of Kool-Aid, lot of water; they could get milk. Sometimes you might get ice cream or cake. And just a vegetable, usually a meat, a vegetable. And it was always kind of some kind of beef, it always seemed like. Or maybe a hash, or a meatloaf. For lunch, it wasn't really too much. I never really remember having lunch. I used to remember you'd always have breakfast and dinner. Lunch, I'd always eat C-rations. I'd always find some C-rations to eat. And for breakfast they just have eggs, and pancakes, and grits; and maybe some oatmeal, some of this stuff. And the eggs were never that good.

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If they had fresh eggs, it was good. If they had canned eggs, that was just crap 'cause they always looked kind of greenish when you ate 'em, they cooked 'em up. And they would put bacon in 'em, and they would put some ham in it, and maybe

some green peppers. But some of the cooks were better than others, and some meals were better than the others. But it was just mainly like cafeteria food.

Berry: And did you have mess tents set up, and places to sit where you could eat?

Koeppen: Well, you'd have mess tents always got it on a paper plate, or plastic plates, and you'd take it back to—when you came back to the firebase— if it wasn't real established you had certain tents. There was bunkers along the berm line, and then there was maybe a tent, a couple of common tents where they'd have some cots and you'd be able to get under the sun. And so as you rotated, you know, out-- it wasn't set for each company, but you would rotate out. And in this common area, whatever company would come in, they could put all their gear there. And then they would leave and go back out in the field. And then the next company would come in. Because usually you got three days; three days in a firebase, to take a hot shower, to check your weapons, to get rearmed, to get rid of old, rusty ammo, get caught up on mail, get a couple of hot meals. And, you know, anything like that because the firebase would usually have a little headquarters tent or hooch. And what I mean by "hooch" is they would just make up a bunker; some heavy wood, and they'd cover the sides and the top with sandbags. They'd get the ammo boxes, fill 'em up with dirt. And so you would have the communications, you'd have the TOC; which is TOC-- T-O-C: Tactical Operations Center. And then you'd have a rear area, and you'd have kind of like a supply area, and then you'd have a little ammo depot. So you would be able to get your grenades, your trip flares, ammunition; you know, more Claymore mines. And then they'd have a supply guy that might fix a radio, if you had to turn in the radio to get a new one, or fix the M60. Usually they might have an armorer. If you needed Claymore wire, if you need more field badges. They'd have some of those conex containers, and what they were were just containers, like ten by twenty, and they would drop 'em off and they would have 'em filled with certain goods. And then the supply sergeant on location would be able to open it up, give you what you needed. If you needed to get new uniforms— sometimes the uniforms would rip and rot out. You know, we call it DX'ing. You know, you get rid of 'em, turn it in; you get a new one. You might come in after three days and turn in your old, dirty uniforms for clean ones. And then they would rotate 'em out. They would wash them. They'd do it at the local village. So you had the opportunity to just kind of regroup and rearm yourself, and hopefully get some rest. You usually would have one or two bunkers that you would have to pull guard on at night.

And for some of the older firebases, sleep in the bunkers was not really a good thing. Simply because there was so many rats. And the rats usually got the size of small cats sometimes. So sometimes in the [bigger] firebases, you'd have a little enlistment club where they'd maybe have some planks; maybe be playing some rock 'n' roll, have some playboy pinup pictures. Usually they'd get cold beer; you'd get cold sodas. And so all the heads would go out and drink beer. I was from Wisconsin, so I was a beer guy. Like, you know, Pabst. But you never saw the hometown beers. You always had, like, Black Carling, Falstaff, Schaefer

Beer. Some of these beers you'd never heard of, would come from different parts of the country because it was all part of the government contract to spend enough money with different breweries. And so guys from Wisconsin like to have particular beer, but we never had it. We always seemed to have Falstaff, which—beer that's been in Vietnam probably has been sitting on a tarmac, which is just an open field, for maybe a year; baking in the sun before it got passed on to somebody else in the field. Maybe longer. And usually the guys that had the EM clubs would work with the cooks, so they had ice. Ice was always a precious commodity there. But they'd have ice, and they'd put it in the containers [conexes], which were insulated containers for hot food or cold drinks. There was this little underground market in Vietnam where you could always get pieces of equipment you didn't know where you got 'em from. But they always seemed to get them. And so you had a little EM club; maybe the barber came in and get your hair cut. You might have a little PX there; somebody selling some candy, maybe some film. If you wanted to get your pictures developed, you could hand them to them and they'd come back in a day or two. They'd take them to the local village and did it. So it was a little bit—on some of the more established firebases, like at Chamberlain, they actually had a dining hall with a concrete floor. They had a wooden structure they'd built and had been there for years. And so they had built it up a little bit better. They have a little volleyball court; they had a barbeque pit. And so when you went to Chamberlain that was—that was one of the best 'cause we had Firebase Jackson, Chamberlain, Trà Kiệu, Tan An, and Gettysburg.

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And out of all of them, the best one was Chamberlain. But getting back to the rats, what you would do is, sometimes to amuse yourself, we'd have a little rat patrol; you'd try to kill the rats. I remember one or two guys always seemed to manage to get a pellet gun from back home. And they would take the pellet gun and they'd basically shoot the rats. And then we'd gather them all in a pile, all the dead rats. Of course, there was rat poison all over the place. And no matter how many rats you killed there just seemed to be ten more. It was a never-ending task. And then we would burn them, or at least, this is what we did, I'm sure every group had their own. We would burn them; we'd get the extra power charges from the artillery guys, or the mortar guys. And basically, for each mortar round or artillery piece, they would have the maximum load of charge on it. But if they didn't use it, they would take these extra charges and actually burn them at the end of the day. Because they didn't keep well in the weather. And so we'd have a rat burning party where they would take the rats, pile them up, put them under this gunpowder, this high-explosive gunpowder, which would burn very rapidly. And then they'd set this huge fire. And they also would burn the scrap wood. It seemed like every firebase had a little dump outside where the scrap wood would go, or trash, or things that weren't needed because we didn't really recycle things or send them back. They would just burn them or bury them. And that is why when the firebases were abandoned, all the Vietnamese would come and dig up all the stuff

that we didn't think was useful. But they would they would end up making it useful. And so that's pretty much how the firebases were.

And so getting towards the end [of 1970], Nixon was announcing troops were going home. And so our unit was gonna go home, and so we pretty much had easy duty. And then at Chamberlain, we loaded up for the last time. And the village, we had been there a long time, so they were kind of sad to go, we were part of their economy by that time and— oh, one other incident happened just before we left. And like I say, there was crazy things. One night outside of Chamberlain, they saw these headlights. And this was dark, and it was very unusual. And so, everybody thought an enemy tank had somehow appeared in Vietnam and we heard all these loud noises, and then I remember everybody was just running with electricity of like, "Oh my god, what's going on? Tanks!" And we never did find out what happened, but you could see them [the head lights] and they were a couple hundred yards out. And they were digging something, it looked like they were digging things up. And we had our starlight scopes, and you couldn't figure out what it was. And we called in helicopters with searchlights, and they were searching and all this stuff. And we tried to send out artillery [illumination], but, you know, once you got outside the wire in the dark was like, oh my god, we didn't really wanna put ourselves in jeopardy. And so in the morning, we [our company] searched and all we found was a big hole. So we don't know if it was a weapons cache, or just something normal. Where somebody had stored some goods, or whatever. But it was one of these exciting things where we thought tanks were gonna be in the wire. And everybody was getting their antitank weapons and trying to figure their tank training. Looking back at it, it was pretty hilarious, but at the time it was pretty exciting.

And so this was Chamberlain, we were getting to leave that. We were gonna turn it over to the ARVNs. We really weren't gonna tear it down. And so then we got on these trucks, and we got on a big convoy of deuce-and-a-half [2 ½-ton trucks]. We must have had twenty, thirty trucks; maybe more. And so everything that you could pile on that we were gonna keep, we put on the truck. And then platoons were assigned certain trucks, and we had this giant convoy. And I remember the convoy going through – because we were gonna to Dĩ An. And that was the point where we were going to stand down [leave an area or disperse to another location] And we got to go through Saigon. And it was interesting because Saigon was off limits to the infantrymen. Apparently in earlier days they got a little too wild with their weapons, and got in fights and caused a lot of havoc. So, Saigon was actually off-limits to the infantrymen. Unless you had a specific pass, you couldn't go in there. And so we took this wild ride through Saigon, and it was so amazing to me at the time to go from these little villages, and out in the middle of the rural areas, to go into a big city. And see actually what the Vietnamese structure looks like. And you could see the French colonialism; you can see how they had little shops, little pool halls, little markets, little houses, and motorbikes all over the place. The closer you got to the hub of the city, you'd see their marketplaces, and you'd see all the black PX black market out there, you know. We'd see our

weapons, our uniforms, we'd see our gear. And they're all selling stuff that we're supposed to get, we can't get. It was just totally, boots. All kinds of things from the black—the black market must have been huge in Vietnam. So we took this convoy; it took the whole day. And it was just kind of interesting. But one of the main things that happened is as we went out and some of the guys [GI's] were tossing tear gas into the [Vietnamese] hooches as we left.

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There's always a couple of guys in the infantry, I think, because they were getting drafted people, and stuff. And some people that were just mean-spirited were tossing tear gas into the hooches, and that always caused a little disfavor. Not a lot, but one or two. And I remember we had to stop the convoy. The captain came around looking for the culprits 'cause they were going to arrest them. 'Cause it just was not right, but war doesn't make people better; sometimes it makes people worse. But then we went on this exciting ride, and saw the sights and the sounds of Saigon. And we went through it-- and there were trees, and there was boulevards, and there was cars. It looked like it was just a normal city, except they were all Asians. You know, there were all these Asian people. They're all small, and they were driving like what we consider mad men.

And so then we end up getting to this place called Dĩ An which was an old main base for the 1st Infantry Division, which had left Vietnam. And so there we were just kind of waiting around to be reassigned or go home. So it was two weeks of what we would call stateside duty. You had to clean your uniforms, you had to get your hair cut; you had to salute your officers. They had a couple of parties for us. There was movie theaters there, there was pizza places, they had a USO. They had Red Cross girls, so we saw what we called the "round-eyed girls." It was the first time we saw western girls. And you could write a letter to home, and we would play all these stupid bingo games. But it was fun because we hadn't done anything like that [since being in combat]. And so it was just mainly staying out of trouble. You'd get [assigned] to work details until you got your orders. And then after about two weeks everybody's orders came through. And then we just kind of got mustered out going to different units.

But I remember one incident where we had our tiger scouts with us, and the tiger scouts were kind of unauthorized. And the thing about the tiger scouts, if they served in the U.S. Army when they were out in the field, they didn't have to worry about the Vietnamese police, the little white police; the military police to come after them. Because my understanding was some of these guys probably were supposed to be in the South Vietnamese Army, but they weren't. But then they were in the American Army, so as long as you were with the Americans, it was okay. And so we had this one formation, and all of a sudden these Vietnamese MPs came and grabbed our two tiger scouts, and they were dragging them away. And the tiger scouts were appealing to us, they were literally shouting to us to save them, and stuff like that. So I remember the whole company all kind of ran over, and we formed this circle [around the Vietnamese MPs]. It was like one of

those ugly scenes out of a movie. People were going, Hey, what the hell are you doing? That's our tiger scout. Get 'em off. And tugging of war, and finally the American MPs showed up, and two guys, they were young guys, and I felt very bad for them. Not at the time, but now I do. But at the time, they came and they were trying to explain that these guys were deserters from the Vietnamese Army, and they were taking them in so they'd go in the ARVN Army. And the tiger scouts didn't wanna go in the ARVN Army; they wanted to stay with us because they respected our troops. And so we had this huge tug of war. And I remember the one guy was panicking, and he pulled out his .45. 'Cause we had a circle around them, I'm talking fifty, sixty guys, and we're telling 'em, You ain't taking those guys anywhere. It wasn't me, but you could hear the voices. And I remember one guy who was this machine gunner. [The American MP] must have been a sergeant, a young sergeant pulled out his .45. And he said to him, "You better put that thing back in your holster, or that'll be up your ass sideways before you even know what happens." So the guy's face was white, and he was like, "Well, well..." and he just like, "Put it away." And so he put it away. And finally, the officers came, and this little drama went on for about an hour before they sorted out. But they did take two guys away and it caused a lot of murmuring. And people were very unhappy, disgruntled with the whole idea. And the officers were trying to cool it off. And we didn't think it was fair, but this is war; some things just aren't fair.

And so at that point we said our goodbyes. Some of the guys went home because they had enough time in-country to go home. But then, a lot of the guys like myself ended up getting transferred to other units. Some guys went to the 1st Cav, some guys went to the 25th, 4th—You know, any of the units that still needed combat troops at this time. And so at this point, I got orders to go to the 199th Light Infantry Brigade. So, I don't know, do you want to take a break, here?

Berry: Sure, let's break there.

[End of OH1509.Koeppen_tape3_B]

[Beginning of OH1509.Koeppen_tape4_A_access]

Berry: John you were talking about your transfer to the 199th.

Koeppen: The 199th Light Infantry Brigade. And I went to the 1st of the 2nd [1-2], it's an old guard unit, a unit connected to the army unit that does the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, it's called the Old Guard, it's one of the oldest units in the military. And so I spent a couple of days getting to my unit and it's kinda interesting in Vietnam because they didn't really have a formal way of bussing you to a unit or taking you to a unit. Basically you went to a little TDI [TDY, temporary duty station]- a transfer point - I remember this one, there's usually two or three barracks and you report to a sergeant and he would check your name and he'd say, You're there, and you would give him your orders and then I remember I went to this part of Long Binh, this area where they had two or three barracks they were permanent barracks they had concrete floors with bunk beds and each

bunk bed had a mattress and a blanket. And so basically you checked in they told you where the mess hall was so you got something to eat they told you where the EM Club was if you had a little money the MPC, money the military currency that was used and I went there [TDY headquarters] and they told me the unit that I was going to go and we'd try to figure out where I was gonna get some transportation. The unit that I was gonna go to I needed to get a helicopter. I couldn't drive to it. And so, uh for two days there was a little helicopter pad and I would go to a little shack and I would tell them where I was going and the helicopters came in all day long and they would tell me first if there was room on the chopper and if there was room if I could get on. They would let me know ahead of time because then I would have to go back and let the sergeant know that I was gonna get on this flight. So that took two days and two days I finally got a flight to the 199th, to a major fire base and then I got on a truck and so the truck was gonna take me out to a remote firebase that was in the middle of some rubber plantations and I remember it was kinda a gray cloudy day because at this time in September, I think is the rainy season there. And so we got on the truck and I was with some other people that were either going back to their units because they had to go to the rear, for dental or they had emergency leave, there were various reasons, maybe getting out of the hospital and maybe some new replacements. We got on the truck and everyone said their usual cordials, that you just waited for the ride, it was deuce and a half and I remember it was like two or three hours long.

But the thing I remember was I went to the darkest rubber plantations that I've ever seen in my life. The rubber plantations were really cool, I had never seen one but the trees are all planted with such precision in rows and every row is the same. And this is a huge rubber plantation they said it was a Michelin plantation and as soon as we went to the plantation it was the time of year when the leaves were really full, you almost went into a dark tunnel and actually I'd taken a picture it is at home somewhere. I took this picture from the truck and in the distance you see this bright light, it's not really bright but it's a light and that was the end of the road through this rubber plantation. And it was a couple miles long. And I just remember saying what one of the most interesting sights of nature that I just can't forget.

So then I got to this fire base, it was a temporary grimy little fire base, and since I was a mortar man I was picked up by what was called Echo Company, in the 9th I was with Alpha Company but I was picked up by Echo Company in the 199th because Echo Company had the 4.2-inch mortars which were the heavy mortars and they also had recon and so I remember the things that struck me most about this place was that we were in the middle of the rubber plantation, trees were only fifty to seventy-five maybe a hundred meters in front of us, otherwise there was nothing but trees. And having been in Vietnam for as long as I had I kept thinking, Jesus this really doesn't look comfortable because they [the enemy] could come close as they wanted to a take a pot shot at ya and you would have a hard time because they had their natural cover, they had all the rubber trees. And it [the firebase] was on three-quarters – the rubber trees were around and then on one-quarter there was kinda an open area and so I got in checked in to the

company. They sent me to Echo Company. So I went over to Echo Company to kinda introduce myself, showed 'em my orders, and they found out I was the new man and they didn't need anybody in the mortar platoon. In other words for the 4.2-inch mortar they already had, they already had the gunner and the ammo carriers and you have about five people assigned to each mortar.

[00:05:01.04]

In Vietnam a lot of times when the older infantry men – and when I say older I mean time in country – so they weren't necessarily older people but maybe they had been in country from ten months to eleven months and it was a common practice, not standard [not Army policy] that some of the commanders would pull the guys who had been in the field the longest back to what we called a rear job, a rear echelon REMF [Rear Echelon Maintenance Force] and basically what they would do is basically guard duty or clean up duty at the firebase which was considered safer [than being in the field]. But that's not always true sometimes the firebases were worse.

But I ended up getting there and the thing I remember the most was red clay, sticky red clay everywhere it was one of the red clay areas of Vietnam. So they didn't really have barracks there and so you kinda find a place to sleep so they [the platoon leader] told me I was going to join the recon platoon as soon as it came in 'cause I had infantry experience and they were short in their recon platoon. At that time they [the company] had this little recon platoon that would go out for two weeks at a time and basically they would go to remote places and try to be quiet, try to gather enemy information they would look for visual information. They would look for trails. The thing that was a little different about recon than patrolling in a regular infantry platoon, was a recon platoon would stay put for a two or three days maybe up to a week. They would find a location they would stay, they would basically be observers and that is how they gathered intelligence, they would go along areas where they knew there was trails or enemy activity and they would basically try to hide as best they could. There mission really wasn't to get engaged with the enemy, only if they were threatened and what I mean threatened is if they had been discovered or if they were going to get over run. But otherwise they were just supposed to remain quiet and gather as much information as they could.

And so for the first two or three days I just kinda hung around the mortar platoon. They gave me a poncho and I remember I just kinda hung a poncho with a stake, a couple stakes and they gave me a cot to sleep on and I just made a makeshift lean-to against one of the berm walls or one of the walls for the mortar pit cause the mortar pits were six or seven feet high with filled sand bags. I just kinda went to the mess hall and kinda hung around by myself and stayed out of trouble and then the recon platoon came in after three, four days they [the mortar platoon leader] introduced me to them. So then the recon platoon leader asked about my experience in the field, if I ever carried a weapon, if I went out what did I carry

what did I know about Claymore mines. And I told him my experience and he said, Okay that's fine we'll take you. And so I got my gear, got a new weapon, got my ruck and so I got enough gear to go out in the bushes again, C-rations, ruck maybe, a pop flare, a couple trip flares, a Claymore mine, some extra ammunition, my bandoliers, my helmet any kind of grenades, smoke grenades and so then I went out with this recon platoon.

And so we had just been a week into it [our mission] and we got word that the unit that I just joined [199th] was going home. And so that was kinda a lucky streak for so me in the middle of the mission it was interrupted and I remember the one sergeant saying, "Well you're a lucky guy, you don't have to be in recon anymore." Because even though recon was exciting it was kinda dangerous work. And so I went back to the firebase and basically got on another truck and went back to Long Binh and had to get reassigned all over again. So I went turned in my equipment, and this was after a couple weeks, went back in. By this time I was getting to be eight months in country now, nine months in country and so basically I went back, turned in my gear and got assigned to another unit in the 25th Infantry Division. So I got assigned to the 2d Brigade of the 25th Infantry Division, I got assigned to the 4th of the 23d they were called the Bobcats and I found out they were mechanized infantry and I thought, This is great! I'm not gonna be humpin' anymore this is really great. And since I was a mortarman I got assigned to, what they call a mortar track. So it was the Army A117 armored personnel carrier it had a 4.2-inch mortar, it had a .50 caliber machine gun, these guys managed to acquire an M60 machine gun, so we had an M60 machine gun mount. Plus we had all of our personal ammunition and so it was a squad of about ten guys.

So went back to Long Binh, got reassigned and ended up in place called Xuan Loc and so at Xuan Loc the mortar group came in to get resupplied and this was Alpha Company it was a mortar group and so they got resupplied, they picked me up got introduced [to the platoon]. What they [the unit] had been doing was doing a highway security [mission] along a rubber plantation from Xuan Loc, which was northwest of Saigon to another point which I don't remember. But we had been working – what they called road security – and they would do a couple forays into the jungle, but we were basically providing security for the New Zealand and Australian troops— the engineers that were building a road. They were building a road in that area. And so I got picked up by this armored unit and we went out to the temporary firebase we had with the New Zealanders at this time right on the outside of a rubber plantation headquarters. That's when I learned I was going to become the driver and basically when the sergeant told me I was going to become the driver I said, "I can't become the driver, that's not my MOS, I've never trained on it." And they [the sergeant] were like, "No worries. Don't worry about it we will train you on it." It had been an older guy, Hispanic guy from California, he turned out to be a really nice guy, but basically they made me the driver of this armored personnel carrier. And at the time I thought it was pretty exciting, I was young. Then I found out the reason I was the driver was the driver was most likely to be killed first. If you went over a road mine or anything

you were most likely to be killed first because most people on the track either rode on the outside or they rode in the back like the TC, the Tom Charlie or the Track Commander, would stand up right on the firing position. And the driver would have to stay inside in order to drive the track. So for the next two months I ended up working with the drivers and basically we did, there were three firebases, we went to Xuan Loc, which was the main town there and they had a huge base camp there and basically get refitted, resupplied, diesel fuel, one of the things I had to learn was how to change the oil on a track. There was this huge plate underneath the track you had to untighten the bolts, drop it down, it weighed a couple hundred pounds, you go and change the oil filter you have to get oil. That's where we got diesel fuel to refuel because had a huge tank but we didn't have any diesel fuel out there. At this firebase with the Australians we had some but it was very limited supply because they would have trucks and bulldozers and stuff. So we would have to drive back to Xuan Loc.

Which brings up one of the great track stories that I have in my life. After we got resupplied, we got new ammo, I was leaving Xuan Loc and I had just been taught how to be the driver and so I was kinda new at it, I had driven a couple of times, they were breaking me in. They were showing me how to break track, which means on the armored personnel carrier there's a track that goes around it doesn't go on wheels but sometimes you have to break track because the rubber will wear off or the track will break. And so for the next two or three weeks was a lot of routine, road patrols and helping the Australians we would do fire missions for in support of some of the troops [fire missions consisted of firing 4.2 mortar rounds to support the Australian troops when they were in contact with the enemy], we would do illumination but very little contact a little sniper. It was kinda easy duty. But as I was leaving Xuan Loc this one time I heard this siren and we like, Jesus. And so the track commander told me to pull over. This little jeep came by with the MPs they had an old fashion siren going [makes siren noises]. And so the guy stops in front of me and out comes an E-8 or an E-9 or a first sergeant and he starts yellin' at me. Tellin' me I'm going to be arrested for speeding. I was going to be arrested for speeding in the middle of a village. We were like, What are you talkin' about? He was like, "Speed limit is only fifteen here." And there's no speed dial that tells me how fast I am going on the track. There's very limited controls, you have the fuel gauge, you had an overheating gauge and I couldn't even tell you they told you how many miles per hour you were going. So we got into this little discussion where they literally wanted to arrest me for speeding, at this point the TC commander was, "You need to back off, you need to know where you are, this is Vietnam we didn't mean to do it," blah, blah, blah. And it got heated. Finally one of the guys locked and loaded the .50-caliber and kinda pointed it at the jeep and said, "Leave us alone, we are leaving, we will never do it again and we are leaving." The sergeant wasn't very happy with us. He took our track number down and told us he was going to report us. It was going to be an Article 15. And we just took off and I remember how ridiculous it sounded that I was going to be arrested for speeding in a war zone, but it was a town, they had rules and regulations I understand it. But it was just kinda the irony of being in combat and you are doing things that you are supposed to be trained to do and yet you

have to follow certain civilian type rules and there's not speed signs around. Nobody knew how fast you were supposed to go. There was this sign that a fifteen on it, and he goes, "Well that's the speed sign." And we go, that's not a universal sign how am I supposed to know that. So meanwhile we went back to Xuan Loc, and it gave us a lot of talk about this incident and the just talk about the folly of war.

[00:15:30.26]

So we were working with the New Zealanders and a lot of 'em were what we call Maori Indians and they were highly respected [soldiers]. These guys were just really professional soldiers. You know you always hear about the New Zealanders and Australians and how good they are. We are in this makeshift firebase with where we've got the tracks on the outside and we had a center track with command post and we had a medical command post because they'd go through the little villages for the rubber workers and so it was kinda, we had a berm around it, it was the rainy season. It just rained and rained and just huge mud. We didn't have a mess tent. You pretty much ate C-rations. Sometimes they would bring out hot food or you would go into Xuan Loc—which I couldn't remember but it was about an hour's drive in and we could get a hot meal if we wanted there. Otherwise you just had C-rations or whatever you wanted to cook up.

And the New Zealanders, I just remember being awestruck, they wore very little standard army gear, they didn't wear steel pots they had their little boonie hats, they didn't wear flak jackets but they carried enormous amounts of ammunition. I remember this one guy was a huge man not tall so much, maybe about six foot but wide as a block he was the M60 gunner and he carried it like a handgun and he would wrap belts of a thousand round a piece, and just carry them through and these guys went out and the folklore was that they were feared by the enemy. And they were no nonsense because what happened during this phase of the war when you got to an established basecamp when you did guard duty the little kids would come and try to steal the explosives or the Claymore mines out of the berm. You would have your barbed wire around and you would have your phu gas and you'd have some Claymore mines which are, if you got attacked these are weapons that you can initiate in order to hold off an enemy attack, or a ground attack or a probing. So we would have Claymore mines, we would have phu gas barrels; you know you have certain fire points. But what they [the kids] would do is steal the explosives and then they would sell them to the VC. The VC would give them money. So the kids weren't really VC or NVA but they were just earning money. When you got close to a village it always seemed to be a money game, the Americans had money, it was a money game. One of the things that happened when I was just there was, the New Zealanders had part of the berm and then Americans had another part of the berm. So one kid came in, a couple kids can and they were gonna try an steal the Claymore mines and the New Zealanders warned them once, the warned them twice and then the New Zealanders shot a kid in the leg. And you know we were kinda taken aback by it but it was like this is it, you don't do that. We're gonna give you that. They didn't kill him. As I remember,

they [the New Zealanders] explained. We could have killed him, we just shot in the leg then they went out and patched him up. And you know the parents weren't very happy but the result was that we never had kids stealing Claymore mines again. They found out very quickly that this was no nonsense and the New Zealanders were very helpful people, kind people but they followed the war rules right to the T.

We worked with the New Zealanders for about a couple of weeks and then the Australians came in. And they were a little more friendly and probably less formal. But they [the Australians] were excellent troops and I remember we worked and we would transport 'em out or we would pick 'em up or we would fire missions for 'em. We had good report with 'em. They were protecting the [Army] engineers and they would go out and find these enemy bunker complexes, and we found a number of 'em and they would blow 'em up. They had a couple of contact. In fact, I still have somebody that I still communicate to in Australia and I went to go visit him when he got married and I found one of the most embarrassing things to me was he would introduce me [to his family] as, John the American Who Saved His Life. And what he was referring to is they got in a very serious contact, almost over run, and the four-deuce [4.2-inch] mortars – they couldn't get artillery support – we were the artillery they had. And so we fired support for maybe two or three hours, going through ammunition and then we helped them beat off the attack. And he would always tell people if it weren't for the Americans they would all have been dead. You know. And I can understand that but for us we were not in danger we were just doing our job and I always feel honored that he thought that was true.

[00:20:05.04]

They [the Australians] also liked us because we had cold beer. One of the things about being in the tracks in armor is that you always had the ability to get ice 'cause we could drive back to Xuan Loc and get ice and ice cream but we could get beer and soda and store it. Because when you are an infantry man you are carrying everything on your back. You don't have any room nor do you want to carry the extra weight. But in a track you can have a couple cases of coke or Pepsi, which seemed to be everywhere. You always had a can, a [unclear][mermite] can, you always got ice, there always was this underground market for ice coming up and people would share it a little bit or you'd buy it, put it in one of these insulating containers [Mermite containers]. We would always share our beer with the Australians. They didn't get it. They were always so grateful.

So we had some fun when the Australians would come in and we would have fun during the day. We would have friendly rival volleyball matches, they always seemed to beat the Americans, they were good at it. We tried to show 'em how to

play football and so we had some fun, we would do the filling the sandbags and doing the shit burning but at this little remote area there was a lot of free time if you weren't running road patrol. It was good camaraderie and they always thought we had some much stuff. The Australians were still carrying stuff from World War II and Korea and we always shared. We would give them ammo if they needed ammo because we could get it, there wasn't any limits. And they always had to requisition it. One time with the tracks we took 'em back to their base camp which was Nui Ba Den and we spent the afternoon there and they cooked up some great steaks and this wonderful little base camp, their main base camp which was called Nui Ba Den right outside of Vung Toa [??].

I remember that as a pretty good time. There weren't too many scary moments. We did have a couple. two or three of the ones I remember was when you are doing road patrol basically what you would do is ride down the road and you would try or look for any kind of depression in the dirt or anything that has been dug up because you are trying to see if there's any kind of booby traps that have been planted overnight. Because we rode the road everyday so the VC and everybody knew it. The mortar guys usually didn't have to go out first. There was a group [another Army unit] that would go from Xuan Loc to the 2d Brigade base camp and back and then we would go out and put security...in other words we would go out and maybe for four hours at one point, one check point or maybe where the road took a turn or a dip. We would set up little defensive perimeter and we would have a track by the side of the road, maybe two or three guys would be spread out in the perimeter looking for enemy activity or just kinda staying in a defensive position so nobody could sniper you or set up a booby trap. So this one morning we had to go to the Brigade right away to get fuel and so the first road guard would go right at the crack of dawn. The idea was when I left our little firebase is I would have to follow them. But I would not be following them in a procession, I would look for their tracks on the road because you usually see at the, in the morning with the dew and that you could see where the fresh tracks were on the road.

So I remember going along and you could see up ahead that there were some tracks off to the side of the road we didn't know exactly what it was. So as we got closer we saw a track had hit a booby trap. There was a big hole next to the road, this track had been thrown off on its side and I don't think anyone was killed but some guys were injured. I remember slowing down and at that point I didn't know what to do. So I assumed that I had to keep going. So I remember slowing down looking to the side and there were three or four tracks and there were all the guys off the tracks and they are all kinda watching us. I remember as I was driving by that two or three of 'em were putting their fingers in their ears. Waiting for something else to explode and I remember my heart just started racing and I went a little further and then, the Track Commander started banging me on the helmet. I don't know what he hit me with but it made my ear rung and he screamed at me to stop and I stopped. And he was like, "What are you doin?" and I was like, "I don't know what I'm supposed to do at this time." He's like, "Well nobody has gone ahead of us." I'm like, "okay." He's like, "You could hit a booby trap and get

us all killed." And I'm like, "Okay so what do you want me to do?" So then we kinda pow wowed and he said, "I want you to go slow, I want you to watch the road carefully." So then I drove all the way to the 2d Brigade base camp which was a fairly big camp. Mainly because this is where they kept the asphalt and some of the heavy equipment for the road building project. So I remember we got back in and everybody is giving me a hard time and I'm just like, Look guys, what do you want me to do? There really was nothing to do, there wasn't a strategy. It was just; everyone just did not want to have to do this. Simply because of the danger involved.

[00:25:16.04]

So then we went back and we kept doing this mission and then as there was another troop announcement withdrawal. It became evident that the 2d Brigade of the 25th was gonna go home, this was after two months. So we had to drive into the 2d Brigade base camp which was at the end of this road and spend a couple of nights there. And a couple of incidents I remember happening there was basically in this base camp was fairly large, big square camp with traditional military base you had a north, south, east, west and you had a couple of roads and you had headquarters and semi-permanent facilities and they had an area where if your track was broke they had mechanics there that could fix it. If not, they had trucks that would retrieve blown up tracks so they had a lot of different equipment and I remember one night a berm guard, we were doing berm guard, some guys got kinda bored I think, I don't know, they said they saw movement in the asphalt barrels. It was a huge stack of asphalt barrels. Maybe five hundred, six hundred and they started throwing M79 rounds at it and they finally set it on fire. And so it burned for two or three days it didn't completely burn. Naturally the military authorities, the brass, was just totally upset and wanted to know who did it and like, well I don't know who did it. But it was one of those boredom moments I guess for GI's that just keep themselves amused. Because duty was pretty easy there wasn't much contact except we had one incident where a helicopter came in in the middle of the day and as they were taking off the helicopter pilot got shot in the neck. So he had to land his craft right away and then we had this little sniper fire going on and so that was probably the biggest excitement.

Then they [command] wanted us to go out and sweep the berm line and the guys that went sweeping the berm line and another group of armored tracks came in. They stopped and told us that we were in a mine field. All of a sudden these tracks started setting off all these little [anti-personnel] mines because for some reason there was a lot of mine fields in Vietnam but there was not a lot of areas where it was marked. Fortunately there were no casualties we got out and then basically we started stripping down the firebase and we were doing it in sections, in quadrants, because it was divided into four quadrants. One of the quadrants had been abandoned we have taken all the gear out, we were consolidating things and we found some VC and NVA so we had some enemy soldiers in there. For an afternoon we had this little firefights going on and we had to try and go figure out bunkers – and they were our own bunkers – and I remember I was on one of those

little missions it was just so scary because it was completely flat and open and yet we knew they were in our bunkers and they could see us. Nothing happened to me, that was kinda nice, we finally got outta there and kinda left that firebase behind. And then we went to Xuan Loc and we had to turn in our M50 machine guns and our M16s. We had to strip 'em down. So the whole process was we were gonna then go to Long Binh again and then we were going to a place called Camp Frenzel-Jones. So we went to Long Binh where we had to clean the tractors up, clean 'em, strip 'em off and then turn 'em over to the government. When I meant the government I meant the US military, they [the US military] were going to turn 'em over to the ARVN's. We had to scrub 'em clean. You couldn't turn 'em in dirty, which I didn't understand.

So then we had a long convoy. We were going into Saigon—this is probably awful of me – and I remember going through the streets, the streets were crowded and we were trying to get through this crowded street and the people didn't give a rats ass. The Americans had been there so long they didn't care. I remember I clipped this large truck, in Vietnam they had these logging trucks they were like large deuce and a half with a cover. And I just clipped it with my track and nothing happen to my track but I'm sure I bent the frame of the truck. As soon as that happened. I remember looking at the track commander and he looked at me and just said, "Keep going." As we looking in the back we could see the Vietnamese people obviously upset, screaming running us down and he was just like, "No" and he was telling me –we had little headsets – "Do not stop for any reason, just keep following the track in front of you." I always felt kinda bad about that. But I wasn't gonna stop at the time because I was just following the sergeant's orders.

So then we went to Long Binh and we had to turn in these tracks and I thought we were just gonna drop 'em off but we weren't. So we had to take 'em in and basically clean 'em. But what they did to us, we came in and they were expecting, because we are in Long Binh and Long Binh was this huge, I think it was forty miles, just a huge base, maybe twenty miles, but they had swimming pools they had pizza parlors, they had massage parlors, they had PXs, University of Maryland had classrooms. They had all the big headquarters. So they have all these barracks and so we think we are going to get these great barracks instead they directed us to this parking lot. So we were on this dirt parking lot and that is where we had to bivouac until we turned our track in. And so the first night we were there were like, What's goin' on? We had a first sergeant who was pretty much a drunk. He was a lifer, he had been in the military but he was just drunk all the time, nobody listened to him. So somehow he arranged this, and he always managed to have beer and booze in his track and for the next couple of days we had to survive in the middle of this dusty parking lot among all these structures [nice barracks] and so one of the things that happened was we had to walk about a mile down to take a shower and I walked down with this one guy and we went to take a shower, we asked the guys where the showers were and this was a company of data clerks and so all they did was data processing so [tape ends]

[00:31:39.12]

[End of OH1509.Koeppen_tape4_A_access]

[Beginning of OH1509.Koeppen_tape4_B_access]

Berry: Berry: Okay John, we were talking about your bivouac area at Long Binh.

Koeppen: Yes. So we had this dirty, dusty empty parking lot. We didn't have a chow hall. We didn't have any latrine facilities. In order to take a shower we had to walk down the road. So me and a couple of guys are walking down the road and it was kinda established, Long Binh was like a little city, so they had this— it was almost like back in the world— they had this little barracks set up for these guys who were working in payroll or data clerks and we asked them where the showers were and they pointed up to us and they had a wonderful little shower, they had a shower house and they had a big water tank on top and so we went and showered. They had shower heads and they had a dressing room and it was concrete and they had benches. It was just sweet! We took a shower and as we were cleaning up, this guy this orderly came in and he said, "Top Sergeant wants to see you." We said, Okay. So we got our boonie hats on and we got our fatigues, we don't have any name tags but you can tell we are all infantry or grunts because they are all bleached out and faded. So we went in to the first sergeant's office at headquarters, because they had this headquarters building and they had all this sweet little buildings. And the first sergeant starts reading us the Riot Act and he wants to know who the hell we are, who the fuck we think we are to be taking showers. And we kinda told him our situation. And we said, We're turning in tracks, we're with the 4th of the 23d Infantry, and uhh this is the only showers they told us to go to. Meanwhile he continues on this rant about, "You know what? I don't want you people in my showers, you're taking my people, they work hard all day. They need a hot shower, you're taking all the water for them. You are denying them a shower and I don't want you people around." Meanwhile inside we are all going, the term Rear Echelon Mother Fucker – The REM – the guys who didn't do the fighting, got the combat pay, got all the privileges of living in a regular army, not putting their life on the line. And yet guys like myself, and other infantry troops we don't get half this crap. There's no PXs, no swimming pool, no pizza parlors. Nothing. And we're getting reamed out because we're taking his precious water. We don't shower every day, we're lucky if we even get showers. So we said okay and we walked out of there and we were just grumbling.

Then we went back [to the bivouac area], we had this company, we had about ten or twelve tracks and we had a little circle and we found out where – Long Binh had buses – you could hitchhike, it was like being back in the world. So we found out where there were some movies and some EM Clubs and they let us in.

But after the third day the MPs all come racing in, they are in these little jeeps and they kinda surround us, and there's three or four of these jeep. So the head sergeant comes down and he wants to know who the hell is in charge there and our first sergeant comes out and he's drunker than a skunk and so they get in this big argument and you know the, Fuck you! Fuck you back kinda stuff. Turns out some of the guys had gone and blew a little hole in this little hot water set up that we weren't allowed to get into. So basically they screwed the REMs by knocking their shower out. It was more like, you know if you're not going to be gracious hosts let us use it we'll be damned if this is gonna happen. So the MPs were accusing us of blowing it up [the forbidden shower] and guys had this silly little smirks going, Wow, must have been enemy infiltrators jeez wasn't anybody on guard at the time? And so they never arrested us but they told us that they got their eyes on us. So it was just one of these moments where we felt the infantry is getting screwed again you know. So we just gotta protect ourselves.

So then we found another place down the road to take a shower. Talked to their guys and their orderly and they were very nice and they told us about the EM clubs and stuff. So we were there maybe three or four nights. They had regular busses you could hop on a bus. So they told us about one big [USO] show that was going on cause they had engineers there, aviation groups, support groups, it was just like a little manufacturing city with all these support personnel. We went and saw this band, this Filipino band, it was great. They had cold beer, they had tables like a little night club and they had fake palm trees. So a couple of us went and had a couple beers and on the way back we started walking and trying to figure out where we were. So we were walking by, they even had street lights on the corners, it was just a sweet deal. So as we are walking down this one road there is a field next to us and then there's this structure and it was very ominous and imposing. There are search lights on it, so we are walking along it and looking at and there's barbed wire and it's got these high walls, it's completely dark in there. We get to the gate and we see there's a big sign that says it is Long Binh jail, LBJ, and were like, Oh my god Long Binh Jail. They had little warning signs saying step off the road and you'll be shot. There were other signs saying you should walk on the other side of the road 'cause we were on the side that was closest to the wire and so we naturally got to the other side of the wall and we looked at it like, Oh my god LBJ, Long Binh Jail.

[00:05:28.23]

So then we came to an intersection and we didn't know where we were but there was an MP station so we went in it and asked the MP station to kinda describe where we were and actually one of the guys gave us a ride in the jeep. But they were telling us about Long Binh Jail, ya know you always heard about it. And in Vietnam if you got in trouble you were going to LBJ and you don't ever want to go there because it is a horrible place. It was totally dark at night but at least I got

to see LBJ and they took us back to the where the tracks were and finally we turned our tracks in and got on a truck and went to Camp Frenzel-Jones which was inside Long Binh Jail. They actually had a Camp Frenzel-Jones a camp inside Long Binh Jail just for the infantry. They also had barbed wire and a berm around it. Basically they had guards on it and so the infantry when they went into Frenzel-Jones which was fairly large, they weren't supposed to mingle with the rest of the other troops, 'cause they were infantry. Infantry had this reputation of being, maybe well deserved, we were kinda out of control people and they weren't believed to be trusted.

So then we went to Frenzel-Jones and I got my next assignment. The 25th Division was going home, and it was comprised of three brigades. The 1st, 2d and the 3d Brigade and so the 1st and the 2d Brigade was gonna go home but the 3d Brigade was gonna stay there. So I went from a mechanized unit, then I went to a unit the 1st of the 27th, The Wolfhounds [27th Infantry regiment, which fell under the 25th Division, 3d Brigade]. And this was in a December time frame, this was my last unit. So far I have been to three different units and I had about ten months in country now. So now if was from Frenzel-Jones and I was assigned to the 1st of the Wolfhounds which is a famous unit in the 25th. They have the Wolfhounds. And I thought the ironic thing was they are called the 1st of the Wolfhounds because they were formed in World War I, maybe previously but they were notorious in World War I because they were one of the units that was sent to Russia. After World War I American units fought Russia up to 1921. They were part of protecting the White Army and part of protecting the Siberian Railroad. So they got their nickname the Wolfhound for being in Russia. So the last unit I was in was called the Wolfhounds, the first unit I was in was called the Polar Bears and the first unit Polar Bears also served in Russia in 1921. So here I am with the two prominent units that served in Russia. I just thought that was ironic.

But anyhow, I am now here in the 25th Infantry. So I take a, I can't remember if it is a bus or a truck, to Cu Chi. Cu Chi was the main base camp of the 25th Infantry and it was a huge base camp and it had been put on top of a complete tunnel system in Cu Chi. Even though the Americans had set up this base camp for the 25th Infantry, there were underground tunnels all over underneath this base camp. Which is now a huge tourist attraction in Vietnam. So I went in the basecamp and they give you like week orientation but since I was like called an in country transfer with some of the other guys I didn't have to go to what they called cherry school. If you were new guy [to Vietnam] you were called cherries. So cherry school was they taught you how to do booby traps, familiarize yourself with customs, familiarize yourself with do some retrain for explosions, setting up Claymore mines. It's like a refresher course. But one of the things that was interesting was that when you went to this camp they gave you your personnel records. So a couple of the old timers were sitting, in the army you have to hurry up and wait, so we went to a waiting room where we checked in and so somebody noticed that you can look through your record. Somebody noticed, hey I got this Article 15 here, well I'm gonna throw this damn thing out. So we went through and I found this letter from when I was late reporting. So there was a letter in

there, I was late reporting when I first got in country 'cause I was about a week late. So I was supposed to get an Article 15 this letter said so I took this letter and threw it out too. So all these guys were going through their records taking out, getting rid of all the bad things that ever happened to 'em and getting rid of them so when they checked into the new base the commander wouldn't see it and if you got in trouble again he would say, Well I saw you got an Article 15 back here, I'm gonna do worse. So you almost came in with a clean slate. I went there, it was about a week and they had a wonderful mess hall, good food, they had a movie theater, a swimming pool, they had baseball diamonds and I was in this temporary barracks so for a week before I got going out to the 27th it was just really sweet.

One of the things that was pretty interesting was that I always liked magazines so I always went to the library so I went to the library and they had these, I noticed there was a visitor sign in book and I'm lookin' through it to see if there is anybody from Wisconsin. Because when you were in the military that was your connection, you were always finding whoever was from your home state maybe from your hometown. So I see a named called Herb Trebah, who I had gone to high school with, he was a year ahead of me. But he was in my neighborhood; we played basketball and all that. He had signed it like two days earlier. So I thought, Wow, Herb Trebah then I couldn't remember what I was doing but I went to the showers and they had a big showers, it was really nice and I go in to take a shower and I'm kinda lookin' at the guy next to me and the guy next to me goes, "John Koeppen?" And I go, "Herb!" And he's so funny he goes, "What are you doin' here?" "Well I don't know Herb what are you doin' here?" Then we just started laughing. He was with another unit of the 25th and I just thought it was ironic that of all the places in the world you run into somebody from high school when you are sittin' in the showers. So we chatted for a little bit and he was with an engineer group and I was with the infantry goin' with the Wolfhounds and we thought nothin' of it. I ran into him about ten years later we still talk about that. How we ran into each other in the showers in Cu Chi in Vietnam.

[00:11:52.28]

So then I went to the 25th [correction: 27th]. The 25th [27th] had a section of Cu Chi. And so I reported to the new unit. And they had a lot of pride and they were considered tough guys. One of the things that was interesting to me was some of these bivouac areas, when I say bivouac the rear area would have these, like a little headquarters and a barracks, because these were pretty much permanent quarters. They have weapons and supply and all that. So everybody had their own little section, had a giant barbeque area and but I walked in and some of the companies would have human skulls on sticks. So I got the feeling that these guys are pretty serious and they were kinda filled with a lot of bravado. They came back from Cambodia, they did a lot of stuff the 25th was well know. But that was the thing, it was the first camp I had been where they had skulls on steaks and so it was kinda interesting. Then I just got kinda assimilated. So the 25th [27th] Infantry would come in maybe about a week, cause they had come back from Cambodia, they were getting refitted and replacements were coming in and for

some reason there were there for about two or three weeks which was really longer than usual. I came in about midway.

Well one of the things that sticks out in my mind is that I came in with a bunch of in country transfers and so a lot of times when you serve with a unit you would have one good set of fatigues that you always kept in your bag that you kept at the rear base for your company. So you always got a duffel bag or a little bag where you could put in your personal clothes or your personal effects. They'd lock it up in one of these conexas. I got my bag and I got – what I considered – dress fatigues. They were sharp and they had my name on 'em and stuff like that and they had little patches. When I was with the 6th of the 31st, we were called Alpha Company we had an ace of spades patch and on the big ace of spades we have 6th of the 31st. The reason we had the ace of spades set up was two things, it was alpha so you got use the ace and then in the days of Vietnam, and I'm sure in every war we had, the captain had sent to the maker of the famous card company – I can't think of the name right now – but they sent us a bunch of ace of spades, a whole deck of ace of spades. So that was our calling card. So every time we blew up a bunker complex we would stick one on a tree, every time we would killed an NVA or that we would pin an ace of spades on 'em. You wanted to let the enemy know who was there and try to put fear, that whole psychological thing. There's a really different set of mindset when you are in combat then when you are in a civilized world. And when you are in combat you do things that probably are wrong, not probably pretty much wrong or you wouldn't do in a normal thing because of...civilization isn't supposed to be. But you do it in combat. And there usually is some sort of perverted reason for it. So we had the ace of spades patch.

[00:14:55.14]

So I just remember we were walking around with another guy, Gerald Patton, he was another guy [in country transfer] and we all have different company patches and this first sergeant sends an orderly out, comes and pulls us into his office and tells us how proud he is to have us as new replacements in his unit but he isn't going to tolerate any uniform violations. So we're wearing those little patches we need to take 'em off. He's not gonna allow that in the company area. This was a grizzly old life-er he was kinda a chubby guy, he was smoking a cigar all the time, never went out into the field. We always thought he was skimmin' some of the petty cash that came into the companies. He always had plenty of booze and he always had steaks. He also had a dog, he wasn't supposed to have a dog and he had his little jeep and driver. So it was just like the movie *Catch-22* when you become like the supply guy you become in charge of your own little kingdom here. You know who to pull [what string to pull] and who to stroke and what you can get away with. He was one of these kind of guys and I really disliked him. So we were in there we did a couple of missions.

One of the things that I have never forgotten it was a horrible things I have never forgotten was when I was on guard duty at the 27th we would go climb these tall towers and they were like twenty feet high and they were on top of telephone

poles. During the day it was close to village and so a lot of these little kids were stealing the Claymore mines and so you know we would throw tear gas at 'em but this incident always stands out in my mind is that there was one kid that was really getting close [to stealing a mine] and so we fired some warning shots and he wasn't flinching at all and this is something I am totally ashamed of but I ended up putting a round, I took a single shot round and I bounced it off the ground right in front of him and that was one of my moral moments when I realized, what the fuck am I doin? Thank god he stopped. I wasn't going to shoot anymore but thank god he stopped because I knew at that moment, he looked at the tower, he thought I've come pretty darn close, I've come too close and he walked away and we didn't have to worry about the Claymore mines anymore and I didn't have to do guard duty anymore and I was just like – you know that is one of those moments when you make a moral decision and I thought thank god nothing really happened because I don't know what I would have done if I would have gone through with it and shot a kid even though under Rules of Engagement it was perfectly legal.

So finally we got out of Cu Chi and we were back, we got out into the field at some firebases which to me was much better because there were too many drugs and drunk guys going back at the major base camps and when you got in the field people really had to keep themselves together. Well let's take a break now.

Berry: Pardon?

Koeppen: Take a break.

Berry: Sure. Let's stop here.

Berry: Okay John. We are back on tape.

Koeppen: Okay, I'm talking about Cu Chi and when the 27th was gonna leave. One of the things about the 25th and at this time in Vietnam units were leaving and so in country transfers were coming to...as the army was consolidating the units one of the things that happened was that Nixon made a promise when he suspended the draft was that he wasn't going to send anymore drafted troops or troops from America, combat troops, to Vietnam. So as the war continued with the casualties the number of combat troops began to shrink. So I was an infantry man so that became kind of an important MOS and that was one of the reasons that I kept getting bounced to more units. They were bringing guys in from Germany from some of the infantry units from Germany and stateside but when they had lottery draft was, one of the promises that Nixon made [to the American public] was that he wasn't going to send [drafted] combat troops [to Vietnam] now he could send engineers and all that but he wasn't gonna send actual combat troops so there was a lot of in country transfers and you get a lot of odd guys. When I joined the 27th I kinda looked for the guys from Wisconsin and I ended up bunking with a guy who was in the mechanized unit [I came from], Gerald Patton, but there were a couple of odd ducks in there and I think that people don't realize in the army that you have a huge collection of people. There was this one guy who never received any letters from mail call we could never figure it out. But he was a story teller.

He said that somebody had told him that his parents thought he was killed in Vietnam and so that's why he never got any letters and it was just one of these odd characters. There was another character that I might as well talk about now and then I'll get back to my tour. When I was in Vietnam, again I keep saying that I'm sorry, but there's some of these odd characters some guys you could trust and not trust.

[00:19:58.13]

I remember coming off R&R, I had just before we left to Cu Chi I went to R&R so I was pretty lucky I went to Bangkok, Thailand and when I came back I got, went out to a different base camp, I can't remember, it's part of Long Binh but I was just getting mustered in and we were going up to Cu Chi. There was a formation of guys either, dental new recruits or whatever. But there was one guy, a couple of the new recruits, new guys coming from Germany some new troops from back home who had volunteered to go to Vietnam. So there was this guy he was about six two, six three he seemed a tall husky guy, he seemed like a character from *Of Men and Mice*, he wasn't the bright guy. I remember they were calling of the names and the sergeant goes, "Oh Koeppen you are back from R&R good. You're gonna go back out to your unit." And this was Alpha Company. I remember this guy after formation broke he tapped me on the back and started to ask me what it was like in combat. There was a couple of us and we were like, Well it's really hard to describe. But he started asking questions that started making us a little uncomfortable like should I keep my weapon on safety? Or do I need to take it off safety, should I have a round in the chamber all the time? Just questions that you probably would learn to do but it's not something that you would really ask. And we were just saying, you need to keep, don't keep a round in maybe keep it on safety until you figure it out and get a little more experience.

Well he was kinda an odd duck and he basically got assigned to my platoon so later on we were doing a mission and we were working through some old forest that had been sprayed by Agent Orange so instead of being a typical jungle there were a lot of dead trees. There was a lot of this overgrown undergrowth. Since he was such a big guy they made him the M60 gunner. Now the M60 in a platoon is very important position because he carries a lot of your fire power. When you get into a contact the whole army strategy is once contact is initiated and there is a kill zone and they have an ambush there's two forces opposing each other. The ambushing force usually has the upper hand because they are firing first and as a defensive maneuver of the party that is being attacked you basically try to put out more fire power than the person shooting at you. You are trying to overwhelm them. It is kinda like in a snowball fight. One person throws one snowball at you, you want to throw five more right back so they are ducking and they are not throwing snowballs at you. And so the machine gun was very important so this guy was walking around and this was the first time they had given him the machine gun and I was an older troop so I was kinda the squad leader they made me an Acting Jack. An Acting Jack is like saying you are a sergeant, we're gonna put you in charge of people but we're not gonna give you the rank or the pay. I

was okay with that because I had just been [combat] seasoned and I wanted to make sure that you know I had a little control of my environment and we had older guys so we wanted to be safe, sure and confident and a lot of trust. So this guy got assigned and they gave him the machine gun and he wasn't in my squad but I remember as we were walking and he had his boots open his laces weren't tied, his shirt open he was getting exhausted he was carrying the machine gun by the handle like it was just a piece of luggage and as we are walking along he would hit himself in the face every once in a while. And we're kinda asking him what he's doin'. He's kinda mumbling incoherently and he kept doing this [??] and so that night we set up we decided not to let him have the machine gun anymore because you really have a little control in your platoon. You try to get the best people for the radio, you try to get the best people for the walking point, who was gonna be the backup all of those different position. So in this one instance we had set up our defensive position we were with some Thailand troops they were doing a sweep push of the enemy towards us and we woke up in the morning, nothing happened that night, I mean there was usual artillery and things like that but we weren't engaged in it. But we woke up and we were making our breakfast, you know getting ready to do the next days movement and set up our blocking position when the sergeant noticed that he had shit all over him. So I remember people going, Sarge you got shit on you. He was like, Yeah how did that happen? First we started laughing we thought it was funny that maybe he accidentally slept in shit but he hadn't. We started talking how could this happen and finally the big guy says, "Well I had to take a shit last night I thought I was outside the perimeter." And everyone had this kinda stunned look. Like we knew he wasn't sleeping outside the perimeter and we just realized he took a crap on this guy. So at that point sergeant, myself some of the squad leaders got together and we were like, we gotta get rid of this guy we gotta get him outta the field.

So basically we got the resupply chopper and we put him on a chopper and we got him out and it was because it was like one of the most bizarre things. We were looking it as, what is the army sending us now? There's people out there that, this was just really strange. So the fact of the story was, a week later he was on another resupply chopper coming back out to the field and he was supposed to rejoin the company and basically I got together with the sergeant and the lieutenant and we were like what the hell is goin' on here. They [the Army doctors] said he's perfectly fine he's just a little overly aggressive and we were like, No. So we managed to take some kind of informal vote and he went to the base camp and he just kinda disappeared. It was just one of these strange things that sticks out, here is this guy he's carrying a weapon, he's carrying hand grenades and he's definitely mentally imbalanced or he's trying to act mentally imbalanced.

[00:26:23.28]

So getting back I took my R&R I went to Bangkok for a week. I finally got my R&R and I guess we don't talk about that. [laughs]

Berry: No, no if you would like to tell us about your experience in Bangkok please do so.

Koeppen: Sure! It was interesting I was twenty at the time so I was a young Catholic boy and I went to Bangkok and R&R was kinda run by the Army. My first choice was Australia and I didn't get it because you only got so many slots. Each company got a slot and it depended on your seniority, like if you were an old timer. So I got to the 27th I was an old timer I had a lot of time and so before I had to go [back to the bush], I joined my platoon, my company. But I went to the field, a slot came up for Thailand. So I took it and so I went to Thailand. It was just amazing.

We got on this plane, and it is all run by the Army. So you got on a bus and they took you to the orientation center and they had these wonderful brochures – I still have it at home I might donate it to the museum—it's called Tommy's Tour Agency. It was always rumored that the generals or the generals' wives were always running this thing. Or the senior enlisted man in the army. I think they finally got convicted at one time. But they had this whole set up where you came in to a room they were feeding you beer and Thailand beer was really great but it was really strong, so you're half in the bag, and then you pick your hotel. I think I had a couple hundred dollars I had saved because in Vietnam you could actually save in a bank. I don't know if, I don't know what bank it was but I opened a savings account in Long Binh and they took automatic money and they were making like ten to twelve percent and you weren't paying taxes so your money was actually making money there. So when I went on R&R I told them I had to get some money which they understood. There's this little branch in Long Binh, a little branch bank and you went in and there were teller and you had your little account. So I went in and took two hundred, two hundred and fifty buck. So when you got to the orientation center is that they would have all these hotels and you would book it for the week. So you would pay for the week. And that was so you would have a place to sleep without running out of money so you could pay for the whole week. So I remember I picked up one hotel and I think me and another guy, it wasn't a fancy one but it was a little cheaper than the rest and so then they would have you sign up for tours. They had all these tours you could sign up for you know it was like going to a travel agent with these packages and I ended up signing up for what was called, the market place boat tour. Bangkok has all the canals that run through, a lot of floating markets and canals and so I would get picked up and spend a half day on the floating canal. I picked up for the Giant Pagoda [correction: Giant Gold Buddha], the giant gold pagoda– the six story one that lies on its side– and I signed up for the night club tour which meant we went out one night to a night club and you had a dinner and a couple other things that I can't remember. So you signed up and paid for that and then I probably had about a hundred and fifty bucks left. So then I went to the hotel and a little bus picked you up, everything was run by the government, a little bus picked you up. Dropped me off at the hotel, they gave me the paperwork I checked in and you know one of the things that they encouraged you was not to carry a lot of money, so the hotel had a safe so I put some money in there. I only needed twenty or thirty bucks. And then they would take you to the steam houses and the bars where all the whores hang out. So the whole idea was you went to Bangkok got drunk, got laid, got rid of some of your ambitions and you were having a good

time. Rest and relaxation. The interesting thing was how the government controlled it. They would tell you at orientation do not pick up a prostitute without a medical ID [card] and so this whole thing was controlled so that the prostitutes that were working in the clubs and the steam parlors [girls] would have a book and you could check they needed to get checked weekly for any kind of social diseases. So when you picked whoever you were gonna be with that is the first thing you asked them. It was very business-like. Very bizarre at the time. And I thought it was one of these Hollywood movies or something like that that you have never seen before.

So then I went to the hotel and they give you a free steam bath meanwhile you are just drinking beer pretty much drunk and if you wanted to get a prostitute from the massage parlor you know, that was instead of maybe ten bucks a night it was fifty bucks a night. So I was gonna run outta money so I didn't do that. So then I went to a bar and then the bar owner approaches you and then if you would pay fifty buck for the whole week you would take any prostitute outta his place. Basically there was a dance floor there was American music and there were maybe forty girls and they all had number on 'em and so whatever one you wanted that is the one you would pick.

[00:31:35.21]

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Berry: Okay John, we were just talking about your R&R in Bangkok.

Koeppan: Yup and I was just referring to at the bar the [Thai] girls had numbers on. So, you could pick the number and that was your girl for the night and the bartender was, if you paid your money up front then you pretty much didn't have to worry about it for the rest of the week. So I went for that deal and got a free beer and there was a cab driver and the cab driver, I don't know you give 'em twenty bucks, and he was there for me all week if I needed to be. They supposedly were taking care of you and just got hammered and took home pretty girl back to the hotel and yup. And uh I, I had her for a couple of night and she was kind enough, took me out to the market and we walked around and uh but usually the girl would come back to your hotel and spend the night and leave in the morning. And the hotel had a wonderful pool and it was interesting for, I had three girls, I changed girls while I was there, and uh basically I asked a girl to go swimming and they would not allow the girls to go swimming. None of the locals could go swimming in the pool jut the Americans. And there were only two or three of us Americans there and one of the likes about Bangkok was that they all spoke English. Very proficient in English. And this place had a little hamburger bar. So you could come back and have some hamburgers.

And so for the tours that I signed up for, one was really great. The floating tour was great. I was in a little sampan[??] and we went through the whole canal and it was just interesting seeing all of the markets and the one girl came along and she explained it. You know it was kind of awkward but this is how these women from the rural area came and made their money and uh, so it was kind of an interesting experience and basically doing the floating canal and they explained everything then went back to the canal and usually took a nap. And then another tour I took went to like a typical Thai rural village and I ended up riding on an elephant and they had a kickboxing show, there was a bunch of GIs, and they showed chickens [cock fighting] and talked about the culture and like I said they had a kick boxing exhibition, they had an elephant you got, you rode on the elephant, so I rode on the elephant for a little bit. Then the other time I was taking a tour of the city, we went to the Golden Pagoda and went up to that, or the Golden Buddha, I'm sorry, it was a gold Buddha lying on its side.

And the other thing that was going on at the nightclub which was really interesting because you had like a seven course meal or a six course meal and at this time the girl you had came along because you paid for dinner for two at the bus pickup and the cab driver and it was just really interesting because it was like an old forties Hollywood movie, you had all these tables and fancy tables clothes and they had a little light in the middle of the table and there were four people to each table. And then they had a stage and I remember this beautiful woman came out and she started singing songs and they were all like songs of the forties all these ballads. And they had a little orchestra and glorious place, and she had a single spot light on her I remember some people were smoking and you could see the smoke curl up into the spot light as it rose to the ceiling because it was a real high ceiling. It was just a real formal place, it was well decorated and I just thought that I was, that I was just sitting on top of the world at that time, you know, you could listen to American music.

One night in the club, so American, Americans came in and they must have worked at the embassy or one of the Thai bases with American women and so I went over and had a drink with them and talked to them and it was kind of interesting. You know, I was just so happy to go see American women, to go talk to American women. 'Cause everything was Thai people and even though they are a very gracious people, just talking to somebody who came from the world, home was so exciting. And so, they [Thailand] had the Asian games going on, I still have a little souvenir a little coin, and so couple days in the hotel lobby I would sit with the bell boys and they are watching all of the Asian games. Like there was soccer going on, badminton was very big, there was a lot of badminton going on and, and so there was excitement in Bangkok with these games. And then I walked past the US embassy and went to the PX there, they had a PX, so I walked in there. Can't remember what I got but I got a couple of things and just thought it was so interesting coming from Vietnam and then just going to a normal city, where there was no weapons, no explosions, people aren't in green uniforms. It was just like normal every day, and you kinda thing like, wow people

don't even know who we are in Vietnam, they are just living their lives and the rest of the world was going by.

[00:04:45.14]

So then after my week I went back and then I rejoined my unit out in the field. And so one of the first things is, since I had kinda been the new guy, they really didn't know me, we came out into the field and there was this big plane and there one part of the company on one side and one part on the company on another side and I remember I walked in to the lieutenant and he was telling me that I saw Gerald Patton, the guy that came with another unit and he was carrying the radio and I said, "Gerald, what are you doing carrying the radio? You've got time in country." He said, "Yeah, I know this is what they gave me." And when I say time in country, there is certain positions in a platoon that were harder than other ones so if you had a certain position that required more work, more effort you really didn't want it, it usually went to the new guy. Carrying the radio was really hard because the PRC25 [pronounced "perk twenty-five"] which was called, weighed twenty-six pounds and you had to carry the extra battery, you had to carry smoke, grenades, you also were in a position of danger because you always had the antenna, if you ever got in contact you either had a twenty foot, twenty-five foot antenna which was the long one or you had a six footer. And in order, if you were in contact, to coordinate the helicopters any kind of medevacs or artillery strikes, you had to whip out your antenna. So our enemy, the NVA the VC, they knew what the antenna was and they knew, they would look for the radio operator plus you had to follow the platoon leader around who might put you in an exposed position. So carrying the radio had its pluses but it also had its minuses and so when I saw Patton carrying the radio I was like, my god I can't believe it.

And so I remember the lieutenant saying to that I was going to be the assistant machine gunner and I kinda defiantly said, "No I'm not." And they all looked at me because there is the squad leaders, and the sergeants and I said, "You know what, I got nine [ten] months in country. I'm not going to carry that, who's got shorter time in... I got a lot of time." And they were like, "Whaddya mean you got nine months in country?" And I said, "Well, I just came from the 9th Infantry, came from the 199th, just came from the 2d Brigade of the 25th." And so there was this little awkward silence about like, ok what are we going to do with this guy? And I kinda said to them, I'm not going to carry – the assistant machine gunner used to have to carry anywhere from a thousand to twelve hundred extra rounds plus his own personal gear. And so, talking about what a personal grunt would carry, you would carry your water for three days which would be ten or thirteen quarts of water, carry from anywhere from a hundred and fifty to two-hundred rounds for your M16, you got your M16s, Claymore mine, two or three hand grenades, a couple of smoke grenades, maybe a couple of pop flares. You also had to carry three days rations. You had to carry maybe an extra shirt, some

trousers maybe in there, a book. So you carried a lot of gear, so to carry extra ammo wasn't something that I really wanted to do.

Then finally I said, "If you don't like me send me back, give me an Article 15." Because if you took an Article 15 you didn't have to be out in the field. So I was kind of challenging them, saying if you don't like my decision send me back, I'll go sit and wait for the Article 15, which might take a week, two weeks, three weeks to process. I could ask for legal counsel, I had been in the service long enough, I had been in Vietnam long enough that I had the common sense of, Alright you are gonna try to give me something and I am not really happy with it, then I am not going to take it. And so basically the lieutenant and I struck a compromise. He said carry the ammo for a week and I will find someone else. I said okay, I'll do that. I wasn't trying to be that disagreeable. But I kinda learned then, this was a new platoon, new guys and all of sudden we kinda learned if they were good or not. And this goes to the comments on combat, you try to realize when you get into a platoon and I had been there ten months, Patton had been there ten months, actually a little longer than I, so we buddied up right away. Because in the Army you always have the buddy system. Especially in the infantry. You always want to have two guys going together so in case one guy gets lost or something happens the other person can let you know. Kinda like swimming and the buddy system. So Patton and I buddied up and what I meant was we would always talk to each other, we would always eat our food together. If we had to spread our night position. You usually slept two people to a night position, somebody would put their poncho on, lay it down, and your rucks and you would kinda sleep side-by-side. Not always because somebody usually would be on guard and the other guy would, so I hooked up with Patton and so we kinda became buddy-buddy and he eventually got rid of the radio and I got rid of the assistant, I got rid of being the assistant machine gunner. Just because the fact that we had been in country a little more and once they realized how long we were in.

We kind of assimilated and we kinda gained some of the respect of the new guys because shortly after I went and landed with this new platoon they are still talking about the [previous] days mission and they are going through some things there was another 9th Infantry guy, I can't remember his name, he kinda looked at me and we looked and here are two dinks, gooks, NVA, are walking up. Three of them actually. And we kinda looked around and there is nobody on guard, nobody is watching. Usually when you are a day hold you have a forward position and backward position but somebody's got to be watching. So these guy were kind of sloppy and they are all getting their gear trying to figure out what they are supposed, what they're gonna be doing. We watch these VC guys walk up and there's two of them carrying weapons and one is carrying a ruck sack. And so I got into a little defensive position, Patton and I. What I mean by that is we got our ammo, we are still in the jungle, they're walking in the open field, we kinda got in a little position trying to alert people on the opposite, people what we are doing and the finger to the lips to be quiet.

[00:10:43.25]

All of sudden everything got kinda quiet because guys were noticing that you know, this other guy from the 9th was up by the CP, which is the command position with the LT, he starts talking, trying to talk in Vietnamese, "Ding moa, Ding moa," so a few Vietnamese guys look and they start moving to it [to the CP], and all of a sudden they realize that it isn't who they thought they were so they drop their [rice] sack and couple of the guys open fire and needless to say there was some blood trails with these guys. The position Patton and I were in we couldn't really fire because fifty yards on the other side was the other side of the company we had set up in a "U" position and we were on the end and we're on the end and we'd seen 'em but we tried to alert them, and then we kinda realized, okay these guys, this was in broad daylight. This was like nine o'clock in the morning. These guys are a little sloppy, they don't really have, what we call, their shit together. And so we, you know, found the blood trails and we got the rice and that begun my career with them.

And one of the things I was lucky enough to do was to get with the platoon early, or at least this new squad of guys who were all new country transfers. 'Cause we had a captain who...It was his second tour, his first tour was in '68 with the 101st Airborne and he got wounded, he got shot and shrapnel and so he didn't have a complete first tour. He also was a West Pointer and so for him to continue his career he had to get a second tour in. Well he came back and he had a lot of problems with his knees, and so basically what happened was that the medic was giving him Percodan all the time, he was on Percodan pain killers all the time, trying to command. So he was probably a poor leader.

So, that was one of the faults with this group. But they were a good group of infantry guys. And then the platoon I was in the lieutenant that I'd already kinda argued with, got replaced by another guy and he was just a green guy. Lieutenant, I can't remember his name, but he was just kind of awkward and he didn't like the older guys either cause when we were out in the field we didn't shave. We probably looked a little unkempt but we knew that if you shaved out in the field, first off you are using your precious water, secondly anything with shaving cream would have an attraction to mosquitos and bugs because it had a sweet smell to it. And it just seemed so totally unnecessary. And so, one of the things about this squad or half platoon of guys who had been in the field, we had been sent to combat; we kept our weapons clean our gear was good we were not very noisy. We knew how to set up an ambush; we knew how to move through the jungle. We didn't get caught up in a lot of things. It was a great bunch of guys cause we ended up all having nicknames. We ended up having an M60 gunner named Freddie John from Pennsylvania. His nickname was The Zookeeper and when we got to the platoon, he's the guy that came in and kinda gave me a nickname, he introduced himself, he came over and said, "Hey, new guy, what'ch your name," and I introduced myself. And then it was, "Where you from?" "Well Milwaukee," then he goes "Hey! you know The Crusher?" I said, "Yeah, I know The Crusher,"

The Crusher was, Dick the Bruiser and The Crusher were two wrestling guys on the wrestling circuit back in the days of the sixties and seventies and if you watched all-star wrestling back in the time when there were only four or five channels, it always came on Sunday. And so Crusher was a big famous name, kinda talked with a gravelly voice, talked about running through Milwaukee training with a beer keg on his back. He was a big beer drinker. And I said, "Yeah, I know The Crusher," and I had blonde hair so at that time, my hair was almost bleached white. So he said, "Hey, your name is Crusher, we're gonna call you The Crusher." I said "Okay." So we had The Zookeeper, we had Crusher, we had Chief - who was Native American, we had a guy named Zobalski he was called The Big Z, we had one guy who had a real Polish name and he was called Pollack, we had another guy called Beagle, I don't know why he was called Beagle. There was a guy named, can't think of his name, Branden Gingham or something like that, his nick name was Blade, he loved to walk point. He was very good at point. So we had a whole squad, a collection of guys with nicknames who we really didn't know each other's real names. We knew where we came from and nicknames. So Zookeeper gave me my name. So I became The Crusher. So we got to be a pretty good squad. The whole time I was there we had not that many people killed. Not many people, casualties of the whole, of the Alpha Company of the whole division we probably had the least amount of casualties and we also had the highest number of kills. We just a strag group. We had our stuff together. So that is how I assimilated in.

[00:15:41.28]

Koeppen: And so, we had some pretty interesting times, some pretty interesting times as the war was winding down we got to work in the areas that were had been handed over to the ARVNs after '68 and supposedly were safe areas and we ended up running into more contacts in bunker complexes than I can ever remember in my first six months. And the reason being is that the ARVNs didn't patrol 'em they never did anything, they never cleaned it up so for the 27th Infantry when I was back in the bush, and right after this incident where we had the three VCs kinda walking right to us we were kinda along a jungle line and then off [unclear] were some villages and it was around Christmas time and so we were doing some patrols and we were running into old battle fields. I mean we would find decomposing bodies, and we could tell they were old battle fields cause you would see the brass cartridges all over and you would find bandages field. And so one of the poor things is that the military never let you know if you were going into another old battlefield. Kinda had to find out. It would have been nice if we would have looked at the maps and it said that two years ago we had a contact here, a year ago we had a contact here. We never had that information, we were always kinda flying blind because, at that time the Army just wanted us to establish contact and once we did that then they would bring in the artillery the gunships.

So it was around Christmas time and so, we had been doing patrolling for a couple of days and it became Christmas day, so in the Army, in the service of the

Army you always brought you a hot meal. So they were going to bring a hot meal out to us, it was turkey, it was Christmas and that was one of the nice things about it. So we kinda got into an area and we set up our little [defensive] position and we were going to have Christmas come in so then, the captain asked, or the lieutenant asked if anybody here is not Lutheran. And so a couple of us raised a hand, I was Catholic and all that. So then he said, we are going to have a chaplain come in. We said okay. So we went out, we are in a tree line in the jungle line and there were some open space where, some small bushes and some grass and so we get set up a nice perimeter. So a couple of us will all grab their little weapons and grab their gear and we went out to different points and the chopper came in. And the thing that shocked us was we thought he would come in, drop 'em off. He didn't, the chopper just cuts its engines went into a rest. So the chaplain was going to do service, so he goes over and does service and the next thing that I know, the next thing that we hear is that he had brought a tape recorder and so he was playing church music, probably as loud as it could be and we are listening to all of this Christmas songs and we are all sitting there, the guys who were out on the perimeter were like, Holy shit! You know you can hear this for a long way and we couldn't believe it and then he did a whole hour service. Gave us communion and all that. Got back in his chopper— and plus the fact that the chopper came down and sat down there for a whole length of time, we were afraid that any enemy in the area could have seen that, did the chopper go back up? Want to run home and get his little mortar tube or something like that? See if he could throw a mortar or two. But fortunately nothing. He took off and then we had our hot meal and it was just one of those moments when we were like, Good god is no one thinking about what they are doing here anymore? And then we had Thanksgiving and that was okay, I mean Christmas, I'm sorry.

Then we did a couple more days and one of the things that we hoped, we were out on Christmas, that maybe we would get New Year's Eve in the firebase so we can have a decent meal, have a hot shower. And plus at this time we were running missions of seven to ten days. You would be out in the field for seven to ten days. And then you would go back in and re-stock supply or whatever. Sometimes we would run for a couple of weeks. But, we were out for Christmas and then we got stuck in the position, where we had to, Bob Hope comes around and does all of his tours. So he is going to do one in Cu Chi. So a lot of the line companies people always say, think that we saw the Bob Hope show but the line Infantry companies usually had to go out and run a perimeter defense so my platoon had to go to an area which they thought would be rocket launchers or they thought that they would launch from that at Cu Chi and there were the distance that the 120 rockets that they used to send, or the 122 rockets that they used to send in. Which is like four or five miles, so we got to go out in these little defensive position looking for the enemy. We got to listen to Bob Hope through our ear phones because it would be broadcast through the Armed Forces Vietnam network.

Koeppen: And I always thought it was funny because the next letter I got from my mom, she wanted to know if I was at the Bob Hope show because she coulda swore she saw me in the front row there but she just wanted to make sure that I was there and I had to tell her, no I wasn't there I wasn't anywhere close, Infantry guys never get to go to that kind of stuff. You know if you were in the hospital you did but otherwise we were out in the boonies.

We were working in some areas with some old, the 1st Infantry Division and the ARVN's had some of their old firebases and for the last month till I went to March 29th we got in some pretty hot contacts. And first off we were running along all these blues and bunker complex and running into booby traps and we would run into contact with—we would run into small groups of the NVA or the VC or the enemy that was operating in the area. And one time we were running along Highway 1, which ran from Cu Chi up to Tay Ninh and we were on top of this little mound over the highway so for a couple of days we were just running ambushes and missions. And one time there was a village close. So this one night we set up a position along this road, and it was a road that because there were rubber plantations and it was getting close to dusk and so our platoon, 1st platoon had set up its [ambush] position and then 2d Platoon was a little [further] down the road, 3d Platoon was still a little [further] down the road. And at this time I was, no longer carrying the gun, no longer being the assistant gunner anymore but I was running the rear squad so we were setting up the mechanical ambush. And setting up the Claymores, so there was road so I was going to set the mechanical ambush. Mechanical ambush was something we created where we took Claymore mines and you set two of the [mines] together. And what you did was take fish line or you take a real thin wire and you stretch it across and tie it to a tree. So you are kind of setting up a trip wire. And what you would do is take your Claymore [electrical] cord and split it and expose the [bare] wires and then what you do is take the plastic spoons you use to get the C-rations and you would run one wire [end] through plastic spoon, run another wire [end] through a plastic spoon and you would kinda make a [tie] tension for these two spoons. Then you would take the one, another spoon and you would put it between the two contacts and you would tie that to the end of the trip wire, so what would happen is you would not have the complete [electrical] circuit. But as soon as somebody come by it would pull and make the circuit and make the Claymore mines go.

So I am setting up this mechanical [ambush] and I am down the road and it's dusk so light is fading. I look left and right and I don't see anything and I had another guy a sergeant who was supposed to be watching my back, and this sergeant wasn't that good, he hadn't had a lot of time in country, hadn't had a lot of contact [experience] so I said, "Are you gonna watch the road?" Cause I had to string this a long way. So I didn't want to carry my weapon because it would be dragging. And so he said, "Yeah yeah, I got it." And so I go to the other side of the road, I tie up my trip wire and I am starting to thread it across the road and I don't know why but I kinda looked up and all of sudden I see three of the enemy about a

hundred yards away from me. And I kinda look up and I am saying to myself, Shit, I don't have my weapon. And I look at the sergeant and he's lookin' somewhere else and so then I look back and I see these three guys and they're walking, you can see 'em and they're talking. All of a sudden they start slowing and stop and I see bend down and they are looking at me, and I am looking at them and we are about fifty yards apart. And probably the best thing was they were as scared as I was. 'Cause they ended up taking off, they ended up running down and even though you think things are fine in combat there's a lot of mistakes made, they [the three VC] ran right through the 2d Platoon ambush. 2d Platoon was beat, these guys, so imagine a campfire, you got twenty people there's a big circle in the middle is probably where the radio is, these three enemy run right through it. Run right through, run right by it, everyone is eating their meal, nobody's picked up their weapon, they got away. Nothing happened to them.

Meanwhile I'm looking at the sergeant and I go back to the other side of the road and I don't have my weapon, so I am on the wrong side of the road without my weapon and I said, "Did you see em! Did ya see em!" And I am whispering as loud as I can. He said, "What what?" I said, "There were three, three gooks." He said, "No, no!" He looks at me and his eyes get real wide and he runs back to the ambush site and I'm like here I am by myself, I've got nobody with me. So then I run across the road, I get my weapon and I make it back up to the platoon. Meanwhile the lieutenant, he is getting all panicky wanting to know, to call in artillery blah, blah, blah, this and so we all sorted out [this mess]. The big decision that was to pick up and move our ambush site because these guys have seen us or do we just sit and hold tight for the night because we had a Claymore set up and because it takes a lot of coordination to do this. To have people go out and pull the Claymores back in, re-wrap 'em, without someone getting hurt and its dark and do we do this. So we kinda decide we are just going to sit there and so we sat there that night. The next day some armored tracks come in 'cause they're workin' along the road there. They are from the 11th Cav and the captain wants to know what I saw and I had to explain the whole thing to 'em. The guys from 2d Platoon are just totally embarrassed. They just, they couldn't capture 'em, they couldn't kill 'em, they ran right through the whole ambush position.

[00:26:37.14]

Koeppen: And so then the next day we had a couple [more] contacts and so we ended up killing a couple of the enemy. The one that really stick out in my mind—the cruelty of war is... We were coming to this one area and it was a hill and it has been cleared by the Rome plows, which were giant plows that would knock all the trees down so it was just bare dirt. And we come out to the opening and [we] had flushed some of the enemy, we see two of them running up. They're too far for us to shoot [with our M16s], they're probably about a thousand meters away, the M60 gunner tried to walk his gun up but he couldn't get it... What I mean with

“walk it up” was he would fire a [bullet] load about a hundred meters and try to walk up [the rounds] and see if he could get his, M60 to shoot that far. But it just wasn't going to do that. So we had a sniper along with us that day, he pulls out and, and it was like watching a TV movie and he comes up, sets up a shooting position, he fires and there's two of 'em, and both are running and there are almost close to the tree line and he shoots one round, and he's got a tracer so you can see it go and it just goes over the one guys head and goes by his ear and so that guy stops and the next round goes right through his mouth. And the other guy, he never stopped he just kept running and made it to the tree line, so then we had to trudge up and found him, and the sniper had just shot 'em at a thousand meters and like that, he had his kill and, which snipers are supposed to do but it was just the most surreal type situation. That happens in combat.

Then we had a couple of other missions that were just, I just remember so vividly, one of 'em was— 'cause we were running [on military] intelligence and they had found, they thought they located this bunker complex. So all our maps were a thousand meters by a thousand meters in squares and so they [the Army] came up with this plan that we were gonna go in [this area] and they [the Army] were going to take two klick, they were going to do two by one, they were going to pour a thousand rounds in it. A thousand rounds from everywhere. And so what we were going to do was, be dropped off and then walk in, get as close as we could, hunker down and then at a certain time, they were going to do this thousand round and it would just last an hour. And then they were just gonna blow the shit outta this area and then we would go in a sweep it. Well everything was coordinated, we did the hunker down and for this, for us infantry it was a little scary because, one out of every ten artillery rounds was a short round or dud at this time, they pretty much knew it, it was interesting reading the Stars and Stripes when they say, another – it was kinda like the infantry man or the American combat paper – and there would always be little articles about bad ammunition found here and so we knew [one] out of every ten would be a short round. Plus we talked to the artillery guys, because there were firebases that would tell us this. So we hunkered down and it was like ten o'clock and the firing started and it was from all over and so a lot of these rounds were coming right over us. You know we could here a couple exploding behind us. And you'd hear a lot of them going to the target and they were all different sizes. 105s, there were 155, some [self-propelled] propelled Howitzer and it was just uncanny this sound you had to listen to this whole hour as they expended a thousand rounds and they would come over and they would sound like boxcars and some didn't [sound that way] and there would be all these explosions.

After it was all done firing, we got up and we headed into this area and it was just a huge tangled mess of trees, like they had been cut down and uprooted. And you know were thinking that nothing could be alive outta here and it, there were like talking trees that were thirty, forty feet tall that had just been knocked down, torn up and then there would be the one tree standing up. All its branches are stripped and so we kind went through that whole thing [area] and we had to crawl over these giants logs and crawl under and it was like you couldn't see five feet in front

of you because there was such a mess. And so we did this for a day or two. We didn't find anything. And then, my group [platoon] left and, that's Alpha Company, and we went off in a different direction because the captain was pretty much convinced that the enemy had escaped. They [the enemy] were off in a different quadrant and he was going to punish us because he wanted to send us kinda flanking by ourselves. Because the captain just really didn't like us. And so we had to go off...and so another platoon..

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Berry: John, you were talking about actions after your sweep

Koeppen: After the sweep into this area that was all churned up, the first day we were there we swept and we sat that night in ambush and we couldn't find any trails or anything like that. So the captain was going to send us off in another area that was running along a creek and that's usually where we found contact and so he was going to kind of punish us and so we went out in this direction. It was pretty thick grass and we could hear movement but we couldn't see anybody and then the other, 2d Platoon went in the other direction, and they ran into the bunker complex that we had been looking for. So they literally got chewed up, a number of guys killed and wounded. So when that happened, at that point we had to completely reverse directions. And we had to stop because it was so hot and we had to get water dropped, the helicopters were dropping water out of these, we call 'em like hot dog tubes, they were like these tubes and they had plastic and they were, they were red and there was no place for the helicopter to land but they could drop 'em in these water tubes would hit the ground but they wouldn't bounce but they would burst sometimes, sometimes they did sometimes they didn't. 'Cause we needed water were desperate for water.

And so then we had to turn around and go back to where the 2d Platoon was. To help and support and rescue them because of the killed and wounded and they kept getting into smaller things, they had to run into the bunk complex and the VC were actually waiting from the, the enemy, they ambushed them, they had guys were tied up in the trees they had snipers were tied up in the trees and were shooting down and it was just a really chaotic thing. And so we had, to basically as straight as we could and basically and we were coming through the field of fire so that was always kinda of interesting, where the Americans were shooting at the, the enemy and we had to come directly as quick as we could to where the bullets were flying so, you know it wasn't too bad until you got close and then you had to kinda duck and then we flanked off to the side, we came in and it really was kinda a chaotic scene where there were a number of guys hit and wounded and we had to go engage the enemy go up to the forward, set up a defensive

perimeter and then we kinda stabilized the situation, there was this, it wasn't intense but there's these little shots going back and forth a couple hours and then finally we had some armored personnel carriers come and broke through [the jungle] from the 11th Cav. They [the 11th Cav] came up, and by this time it was totally dark and so we were trying to coordinate getting the wounded out, the seriously wounded and we kept the dead [soldiers] that night. There were three or four that were killed and we just kept 'em cause we couldn't get 'em out. We got the wounded out that night and the next morning we got up and we had a fairly tight perimeter. We had a track in front and there were three or four [tracks] on the side, one of the armored personnel carriers had a mini gun mounted on it, it kinda [inaudible] a mini gun and bolted it on, they had a electronic firing system set up.

So as we woke up, 'cause we were making breakfast 'cause the whole night you could hear movement all around you. They [the enemy] were getting their dead. There was no, nobody was shooting at each other, it was kinda like one of these moments that happens a lot in combat where you just get tired of punching each other. It's like okay you know you are not going to win so let's just get our dead and our weapons and whatever we can and, and leave [the area] best they can. And that's the way, that's the way sometimes the enemy operated. I mean, we did the same thing. If we weren't gonna win we would pull back, so the next morning we went out and swept and began getting ready to blow up the bunkers. We found a number of the [enemy] wounded, and these were wounded that weren't going to live, one guy had been shot in the head, but what they had done is tied their hands with medical gauze to clickers and clickers were set up to these Claymores, they had the enemy Claymores, and so the clicker is a device that you would close and it would generate electric charge to then set off the Claymore mine and so they had was three or four of these guys and they had basically booby trapped 'em because they were still alive, they couldn't do anything for 'em, but they figured if we shoot 'em or if they had any kind of reaction that they would close this clicker and set off these Claymore mines. So we disarmed them and we spent the next couple of days just getting small contacts and blowing up the bunks and it was a huge bunker complex and had been there a long time. We got out of there and 2^d Platoon really took some heavy losses.

This was kinda like the [enemy] action that we were going on in this era, we would go into forest or jungle and you would find these old track trails, like armored personnel would go and knock all the trees down or the brush and then they [the underbrush] would grow back up they [the trees] wouldn't grow as fast. But we'd find all these trails, track trails, well these are like trails for the enemy to use then. They are like fast highways for these guys. And so we would run into these [trails] all the time and we would have to wonder what is going to happen. We followed a little creek, we could pretty much assume there would be a bunker complex. So there was another time when we found a large trail and we set up our Claymore, and the automatic Claymore went off, they trip 'em and there were three of the enemy killed and the Claymore, one of 'em, Claymores were so strong, Claymore mines had six hundred double shot pellets with a pound and half

of C-4 went off. It could spread across a football field. It was designed to kill within fifty meters and wound, and the one guy that tripped the mine, this... device was so powerful, both his legs were gone, they were just shredded, it was like they were just cut off. They just kinda disappeared with the impact of the the shot gun pellets and so we had killed three of them, then and then there were some more blood trails because then we got a little run in engagement this happened right at morning when we were making breakfast. 'Cause that's a lot of times when the enemy moved. Twilight and the morning.

[00:05:52.27]

So the interesting aspect is that they called in dogs. It was the first time getting to use dogs. And so they [the Army] brought in dogs that were hunting the blood trails and so we're working this area hunting blood trails and the dogs would go on alert and we would see some movement in the but we couldn't see anything and so sometimes we would try to shoot a couple shots to see if something [was there], but you don't really want to do that because then you're giving away your position. So went on for a couple of days of this [search] and again we had this lieutenant who wasn't very good at what he was doing. So one of the things that he did was—so we had these dogs and we were searching trails and finding all kinds of signs of the enemy, we'd find enemy latrines, and we'd find one or two bunkers that were way stations and we were around water and this lieutenant was really getting excited, the captain was getting excited cause he was hoping we'd run into contact and find somebody and we never did. But at one time we were, the dogs had alerts, so we were on a hot trail, so there are twenty guys and we were ordered to drop packs on the trail. So we dropped our packs on the trail. And we left two or three guys – The Big Z and The Pollack back to guard the packs – which was a mistake because they didn't have a radio. We had two radios, we took both along and this was kinda the LT's decision. He left these guys back with no radio. So we're in the general area and we're trying to figure out you know where we are, and some of the older guys were counting our steps. So we know where we are we have maps and this lieutenant is leading us on a goose chase. So then we call in some helicopters to see if they find anybody so we get a call from the helicopter saying they have packs on the trail, they have enemy activity, they can see the enemy. Through the jungle, now the jungle was there, at this point a couple of us had figured out that they [the helicopters] were looking at our guys. The lieutenant was convinced no. The captain was convinced no. And all of a sudden he said, "Go after 'em," and these [chopper] guys started gun runs on 'em and so it turned out both the guys [our guys] got wounded but not seriously. But the irony of it was that the lieutenant wasn't doing a good job and didn't know what was going on. So finally after we called the gun ships off they figured out that it was okay and they made a mistake. It was interesting, we were like, Can't you recognize...[then] they just kinda flew off.

Which I can understand, it's a mistake it happens, two guys didn't get hit too bad, our packs got all shot up, and so at this point we are really starting to question the leadership in the group and we went out a couple more days and then one time he thought there was, the helicopters guys thought there were enemy bunkers. Now we had called in some bomb strikes so we had some craters, and they thought [these were] enemy bunkers and they can see enemy. And we were going to do this Civil War type on line charge over a hill through the jungle. Captain and lieutenant wanted us to do this and we were – the guys with common sense – are going like, This is crazy, we're gonna go up hill, over the hill, down the hill into supposedly a company enemy in fortified bunkers. I mean it was like a slaughter. So we did it but we got up to the hill and we realized that there was no enemy bunkers and no enemy. So by this time you know we began talking to captain and lieutenant you know [saying], Let's get outta here, let's get back to our pack and lets go. So that was just one of those crazy missions that went on forever.

And so as we're working this area we had a number of incidences, like a situation where one time working with the Thai troops and we were going in columns, five [columns]: Headquarters, 1st, 2d, 3d, and 4th Platoon. We're going in columns through the jungle, separate columns we set up positions. Well one time, we set up a position and we could hear noise. I could hear people talking, 'cause I was at, with my squad near the rear of the platoon at the time, I was going to [walk on the] rear and flank. We could hear people talking but the jungle you can't tell what it was. Making a lot of noise. And so I altered the whole platoon and they set up a little defensive position up and it's along a trail, there's a little creek. Trail makes an L, so I am trying to make the L shape ambush. So in the back of my mind I know it's the Headquarters platoon, I know it's the stupid captain. And he's talking away, he's on Percodan, so we set up the thing and five other guys are like, Oh my god, we have the perfect ambush with the machine gun. So we set up the kill zone and then finally I said, "I'm gonna go out [in front and check]." It was Patton and Zookeeper, "I'm gonna go out and I'm gonna go out and if I see who it is and you know, I'm gonna come back [to our position] or I am gonna hide behind a tree and you guys just open up. If I see it's the enemy I won't fire [first]. If I see it is our guys I will come running back." But I didn't want to get caught in the free fire [kill zone] and you know so then I went out in the fork and I'm exposed there and sure as shit, it's the stupid captain, blabbing away. So I come running back a we're like, Oh my god. So we got our ambush set up so, Headquarters comes walking through and he's blabbing away and comes walking right through our ambush. And he's looking at us, smiling and talking to the lieutenant and we're saying to the other guys, This is our ambush, we almost shot the shit out of you guys. They are all looking like, We can't believe we are with the captain. There was a Wisconsin guy who was like, "If I get out of here alive I will be happy," because this guy was so loud and all kinda doped up half the time.

So we passed that incident. And then we had a couple more and... One time I was in the firebase 'cause we were working with banana plantations. Well this was more of a narrow escape for me where we were at this firebase and we had set up a firebase perimeter protecting a village that the enemy had some in and killed a number of the village, the village chief and family and laying 'em on the road when we first set up this firebase [Firebase Carol]. So we were in this firebase and another one of my narrow escapes, I had a couple, we were sitting on the berm line, we set up the berm we set our little temporary firing positions. At night we're sitting there because we are just getting settled in [doing guard duty] and we have the artillery, they did their thing, they did adjusting their fire so they had all their coordinates right. So that night we got mortared and so we're surrounded by banana, we do our little [inaudible] of fire. We didn't get too much fire. So we settled off, so the next day we go out to sweep the berm to see if anything is there. And the bunker that I was sitting on, at the time [when we were mortared], we go out and look and here is an M60 mortar round, not more than four meters from where we were all sitting [last night]. It was a dud. This was getting close to the end of my tour. And I was just like, "Oh good god, thank, god," cause it could have gone over and blowing it up and it is just one of those things where— how lucky you know, here is a dud round where it coulda been live round. It coulda you know, fucked us up pretty good.

And then we had one more, I was getting really close, at this time I was already passed a year on my thirteenth month. So we are still in the jungle doing a lot of patrolling and, and some of the bizarre things were happening, we're doing patrols along a river and the ARVNs were holding the bridge and so we were sweeping positions and they were always firing their .50 caliber machine gun and the 50 caliber is a fairly heavy bullet, it's a copper bullet. So one time we had this [ambush] position and I don't know where they were shooting but the bullet were flying from the sky all around us, hitting around with these big thunks "THUNK THUNK." So we had to kinda dig little foxholes while this whole shooting thing, it was broad daylight, we don't know what they were shooting at. But then we had about fifty round, probably about thirty or forty probably, just hitting the ground next to us as there're at the end of their flight you know, they are just thumping into the ground they're burying about six inches. We're just like, If you get hit in the head or hit in the leg it would probably break your arm or your leg or something.

But some of the interesting things, we used to find wild peppers, there would be like a little patch of sunlight coming through the jungle and the forest and it was always interesting there would be like just a little pepper plant growing and we would pick the peppers. By this time we, some of us had gotten so familiar with Vietnamese we would go [ti a village], we'd get the tiger scout to buy some rice and we'd take the shredded [C-ration] pork or the canned pork and we'd make kinda a little, take our little canteen cup and make up a little stew to eat hot. And we'd heat it with using C-4. 'Cause we has C-4 for the bunkers and the thing

about C-4 is you break off a little bit and you light it with a match and it burns really fiercely. Now if people want to know why it didn't explode, for an explosion you need heat and shock, so if you lit it and stepped in it with your boot you would probably blow your foot off, but if you just lit and cooked up [it was okay]. People used it to cook up coffee or hot cocoa and we'd make little stews. And so that was kinda like the little beauty of the jungle. You had all these creatures. I remember, I swear there were bumble bees that were blue and red and yellow and giant praying mantis and centipedes that maybe eighteen inches long and maybe a foot and half and they would crawl in your pack and you'd have to watch out for their stingers. And you'd always have mosquitos, and the fire ants used to fall down your neck. The fire ants would be in trees and they'd form balls and they would string from tree to tree and form columns and then, if they fell on your neck or if you got 'em, and if they'd bite your skin, if you pulled 'em off the head would still be there, just like a little vice grip. And they wouldn't kill you but they'd [the bites] just burn and drive you nuts. You could always tell when the point man ran into it because they'd be walking quietly and then next thing you know they'd be doing some crazy dance and throwing off their packs and throwing off their jackets and you'd be trying to pull it off.

Ticks, we had ticks all over the place. One time we had a sergeant who got a fever, he was hairy guy, we couldn't figure it out he, we're setting up these missions and our little ambushes in the jungle and you know he kinda finally collapses and we medevac him out because we used to have guys that collapse from heat. I remember one time the medic, his temperature was 105 and we were trying to cool him down. Pour water to cool him down because of the evaporation. We got him out. But this guy who got fever because everybody was getting sick then, I'm sure there's a number of troops that died from strains of diseases, we found out later that when he went back to the hospital that they [the medical staff] had shaved his legs, he was really hairy, and he had over two hundred tick embedded in his legs, his leg blew up and it was just, he all these black spots we didn't know what it was. So all these ticks embedded into his skin causing a fever and he never came out back to the field.

[00:16:58.25]

But that was, there was one night, one other day when we'd set up an ambush and I am was on morning guard and it's just at twilight you want to be at your best. And there was this noise, swishing and it was swishing through the jungle and you could hear it, it was like the rustling of leaves on a fall day. I couldn't see anything and I probably alerted everybody we're all on [high] alert and we're all looking, you know, got our weapons - off safety, there's a round in it [the chamber] we're all pointing, we're at ground positions, we're behind trees and that. I remember at this point, I just closed my eyes - because I couldn't see anything - [and said], "Dear god," because I am getting to the end of my tour, "Don't let me die here, don't let me die here." This thing brushes by my leg and it, crawls up a tree. After I got out of the service I found out it was a Three-Toed Tree Sloth. It was like a reddish color but you couldn't see it because it was going

through the underbrush and it crawled up this tree and looked down at us and we looked at it and we were like, Man, there are some strange things here. 'Cause you know it's the jungle and you know chameleons and you have lizards. The Fuck You Lizards that you used to hear in the trees and they made a sound like, "AHHK youuu, AHHHK youuuu" and everybody thought it was called the Fuck You Lizard.

And so I am getting towards the end of my tour and we're still running through the bunker complexes, then we ran into one where we had one more. The lieutenant came through some old trails, tracks, what we later determined were slip trenches, there were these little trenches running parallel to the ground and we stopped there and we couldn't figure out what it was and the only thing was that there was this strange smell – and this is like in the middle of the day – and there was this smell, and I remember Patton and I, "What is that? What is that?" 'Cause it wasn't a jungle smell it was like cooking. So we didn't think anything about it so we went so we did a little semi-perimeter so the lieutenant sends three guys ahead he wants them to do a recon, and again we're like you are letting them go without a radio and so. We got some tense moments there and all of a sudden there was this great explosion, gun fire going on. It's going on for ten or fifteen minutes and a lot of the guys are kinda stunned and so me and a couple of the older guys kick everybody into defensive position and our lieutenant who got panicky and was screaming at the top of his lungs, calling the names of the guys [the three guys sent to recon] to get back here right now. Meanwhile, you can hear the shots going on. He's like, "Get back here, get back to position, we need you back here!" And so the radio operator literally knocks him out. Punches him out.

I grab The Zookeeper, myself and Patton. We grab some weapons, we got everybody in a defensive position we take the radio guy we put him about ten meters behind us and we said, "Okay, we're going in [down the trail], you stay here, if you don't hear back from us or somebody doesn't come back, you bring another squad in." And we had the machine gunner was ready to come in, so here we went in and they [the three guys sent on recon] had walked into a little [enemy] base camp. And it was a training base camp. They walked into a group of these guys – enemy – eating. And the smell we had was rice and there were about ten of them. And we came in there and they had their table, the rice bowls were there. So there were two main trails that we were exchanging shots down the trail with these two [enemy] guys. So one of the sergeants – of the three guys that went out – was looking on the ground for souvenirs, and they [the enemy] had a cook, they had a kitchen with a big cooking pot. The cook ran up and shot him in the arm with a little .45 and they all took off. But that [he] was the only casualty.

But I remember Blade, the point man, he was sittin' in this half dug bunker and his heart was just pounding and we were like, Blade what's going on? And he just pointed [down the trail]. At this point, we exchange some rounds, The Zookeeper comes running up with a machine gun and just raps off about five-hundred rounds, you know, just shooting down the trails. Then suddenly everything subsided. We got the rest of the platoon [to join us], we set up this defensive

position and here we run into a bunker complex, fifty to twenty well equipped bunkers, and here it is a training center and we found a telephone wire, there was a telephone wire, running back down along the ridge. And we're in one area and the headquarters [company] in another platoon is following another trail and we could see this telephone wire running towards this direction. So we're on the radio, because I'm kinda the squad leader, 'cause he's asking what's going on, we tell him what's going on, we call in some artillery, help flank us five of the enemy has fled just to do some of that we called in a chopper they're around lookin' – an attack team cobra.

Then his group [headquarters and another platoon] is on a big main trail and they come up to, there's a tree stump with three stones on it. And this is point where our training tells us this is a marking trail. Where [the enemy] they have markers on the ground like that, that's like the point of the kill zone, and so the platoon kinda stops, they had some ARVNs with 'em, the ARVNs turn around and leave. The tiger scouts won't go down and this captain who is trying to get all the awards, orders the platoon down it. And we're on the [radio] phone telling him, Don't do it, don't go down that trail. I don't care what he tells you, don't go down that trail. They walk down the trail and they run into the ambush so we've just got our little engagement or contact broken up, there's probably I don't know ten or fifteen of these guys. We had a little shoot out, it's all calmed down, we call in artillery, he ends up sending this platoon down this trail and it just all erupts and it, we end up getting all packed up we gotta head back to where we were, we're running along this ridge, it's getting dark and they end up having, I can't remember, there's a number of killed and wounded and the stories that came out after [the ambush] were just shocking that this captain would even order them to go down this trail.

[00:23:07.24]

So one of the most poignant moments I remember is when we got there we set up the defensive perimeter, we had a helicopter come in and we're doing one of those jungle penetrators, getting the wounded out, couple of the dead we don't [take out now] and Doc, the medic, and I remember this because the medic was still out there. So as the relief platoon we go up and secure it and gotta go get the bodies and so one guy comes back he goes, "Docs still out there," and I said, "Well who is bringing them back?" and they're like, the guys who were out, were new guys and they weren't gonna bring them [the KIA soldiers] back. So I went with another guy and got the new guys and [stated], "Gotta get Doc, gotta get Doc back." So we get him, he's kinda laying under tree, his eyes are wide open and that's why the guy's wouldn't touch him cause his eyes were wide open. So I went over, I closed his eyes, you know, you just kinda learn to do that. Picked him up and put him in the poncho we had and he looked so peaceful. What happened was he was given, he was helping a wounded guy out, giving him artificial respiration and an RPG just came and ripped his whole back off, there was nothin' but bones when we picked him up took him back to the command post where we set up, put him in the body bag and you know, everybody out.

And this was just a disaster waiting to happen. With the choppers coming in, we had one chopper that would hover over kinda by a big tree and so a big branch from the tree falls off, hits a guy in the head knocks him out. Get's a big lip, he's the RTO for the captain. So we had to medevac him out. So it's just like, one thing after another.

And the reason I remember the [KIA] Doc so much is that he had just come back from R&R and he'd gone to R&R to patch up his marriage, the first mail call we got he got his divorce papers from his wife dated a week after the R&R. So, before we got into this contact, the captain was trying to get his survivor benefits changed to his mother instead of his wife because he had done and then within a couple of days he ends up killin' – we always thought it was kinda a suicide. Because he was a good guy, he was a medic, but he didn't have to do what he did. But he was at the point where he just didn't care anymore you know, and he was just a young guy.

[00:25:24.29]

Koeppen: And so we just kinda blew up the bunkers we were spending about a week in this it was a huge complex. And then my line number got called. The line number is, you're in the field and they use radio traffic, they don't use names, they don't use John Koeppen, they don't use Richard Berry. They use line numbers, they use 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9. So then we are in this bunker complex we had head out we were blowing up these bunkers we cut out a little landing zone where a loach [Light Observation Helicopter] could come in and bring explosives because this [operation] was going to take some time. And so my line number gets called up and I go to the LT and I go, "What's up?" And he goes, "You're goin' home." And so at that moment I had a couple hours to say good bye to everybody and basically I got my orders to go home and one of the things I always wished was I got some more addresses [from my buddies], I didn't. I had to say good bye to some of the guys and then about an hour later a chopper a little loach comes in...

Berry: Tell us how you felt with respect to saying good bye to these guys that you had spent time in combat with.

Koeppen: Oh I was so excited. I'm goin' home, goin' home. I was like, I'm gonna miss, you know Patton, Zookeeper and I'm like god, I'm gonna miss you and all that and everybody was happy for me and plus everyone was just still doing things. They were cutting down trees and things and I was trying to say good bye to as many guys as I could plus I didn't want to miss my helicopter and I was really excited and...I get a little emotional now but I was just like wow, this is like the best day of my life almost. And so I got on the chopper, I had my rucksack on, I had a pith helmet [enemy helmet]. Picked up a pith helmet 'cause there was a bunch of these helmets laying around this whole [bunker] thing and the chopper guys were so

excited. They were like, Wow look at this cool souvenir you got! What is that pith helmet? It had a red star on it. I'm like yeah, "Yeah it's really cool." And I said, "You want it?" 'Cause I knew I hadn't registered it and so I gave it to 'em and they were just like, Oh man this is so good!

Flew me out and then, they flew me back to...I went back to Long Binh and so I got there, went back to the company headquarters took a couple days [to process]. Turned in my weapon, turn in your—check your shots make sure your shots are all up to date, check pay roll records. Then, it was Long Binh. Then I went to another area, an area where you transfer out, the depot, and I just remember I was there for a couple days and that was really another strange thing 'cause you just sit around waiting for your flight number to be called every day. You had a formation in the morning and the evening, if they called your name you might go out that day and one of the things is that the [processing] captain was giving instructions that you shouldn't take any drugs when you get back. 'Cause you had guys from the front and guys from the rear, you had all kinds of collections [of drugs] that the army guys [kept]. So the guys in the rear really had access to drugs and things like that.

And so no war [inaudible], if you had souvenirs you had to have them registered. You needed to make sure your paperwork was in order. And I remember we went into one area and they had a contraband barrel and I was like most guys, I had some pictures of the dead. Again one of the corruptions of war is sometimes to brag about, Well my platoon got [killed] these guys, my platoon got these guys. And so I made sure that I dropped all that stuff in the barrel. Some guys had hand grenades and smoke grenades they were going to sneak back home and did that. Probably the saddest story was, we did this orientation on contraband and were just kinda waiting around. They had a basketball court, you could go swimming and stuff they had a place to sleep as well. The one captain warned about drugs and so the first day, I got there went through that [orientation], the second day just kinda hangin' around and then at formation he makes a big announcement about how don't get involved in drugs because even though we are in the rear a lot of Vietnamese would sell drugs. They would sell people pot in sealed cigarette packs, twenty one perfectly rolled and it was all, you could get it for a can of soda or five bucks or whatever. And here one guy was ready to go home and he got caught by the MP for doin' some drugs and he ended up getting arrested and so he was going to go to Long Binh jail instead of home. To this captain, he made a big plea he said, "You know what, just for the next couple days keep straight. Don't do anything wrong. Don't fuck up. Go home." And he said, "When you go home just go back and try to live your life, you know people [Americans back home] don't give a shit about ya, don't worry about it." And he was so true about it. And so then my number gets called and we went to the airport and there was no plane in and we were just heartsick. And then as the sun was going down the one says, Hey, you know Vietnam had just these huge red balls of sunsets, they used to go down and in the middle of the sunset was a little black speck it got bigger and bigger and it was our freedom bird. The plane was Trans World Airways or

something like that and we all sat there and we all, I'll never forget, the plane took off and it just was the best feeling in the world.

Berry: Was there a cheer when the plane left the ground? Why don't we stop here? Why don't we stop there John and we'll get another tape.

[00:30:47.03]

[End of OH1509.Koeppen_tape5_B_access]

[Beginning of OH1509.Koeppen_tape6_A_access]

Berry: K, John we're back online here and you're on the freedom bird leaving Vietnam.

Koeppen: Right and, and we're all on board, the plane is full and we're all giving a big cheer and it was dark and I remember flying off into the night thinking, Here, I'm twenty years old and spent thirteen plus months in combat and came home alive. So it was a pretty glorious feeling. The stewardesses were all pretty nice to us. The guys were, started sleepin' and we flew to Hawaii and then we got to Hawaii and it was morning and we just, they had to refuel there, so we got off the plane. So that was kinda nice and so I remember the guys were getting off the plane and then kissing the ground and I can't recall if I did it or not. Then there was just a little, little gift shop we walked through and I just, wandered through looking and thinking, God, I am going back to the world. This is what your whole goal was and everything was so bright and colorful. It wasn't the old gray and dingy and brown and dirty. It just seemed like there was a new clean slate coming. And we were pretty much in our jungle fatigues so people knew who we were but we were in an area where we couldn't go to far.

So we got back on the plane and flew to Oakland Air Force for processing out and, I remember it must have been on a Sunday 'cause we came on day when they [the processing station] were not really expecting us. So we came in and we're all kinda tired from the flight and I don't remember if I slept or not and I just felt like I was so excited. When we got there the processing wasn't really set up for a plane load apparently, we got on some buses that took us to a base when it was dark and it was pretty much deserted. And the thing was, there wasn't really any place to sleep. They didn't have bunks. And they weren't gonna start processing us, they put us in a big room that had these pews and somebody came out and said that since it was this time of day [night] that they weren't going to process us. So we would just have to sit until morning came around and they weren't going to provide us with anything to sleep on and I remember an officer got up and he was a captain or something and he kinda exploded saying, "This is bullshit!" And he was like, "You'll get somebody and you'll get somebody now." Some of the guys who were home on emergency leave that needed to get back because some relative was dying or parent, they needed to go, they weren't about to wait six to

eight hours for somebody to get up. So there was a little commotion which is typical. And finally an officer came in from the processing and they started getting things done and processing people that needed emergency leaves and found us a place to bunk so we ended up just going to bunk to sleep and somebody came around to wake us up because one of the things was [when you returned home] you were supposed to get a steak dinner when you came back. You were supposed to get a home cooked meal. So I remember walking through the corridor and basically you're carrying your paperwork and here was this steak dinner and so there was this steak dinner and it was supposed to be all you could eat. But I think we only got one. And so then we got our steak.

And then we started processing and you had to go through tests to check that you're okay, your medical condition and I don't think they did a good job on that and then they gave you dress [uniform], I had dress khakis to take back on. They took, you got to keep one or two things and I ended up keeping my boots. You could keep your field jacket or your boots or I can't remember what the other things. The rest of the stuff you had to turn in and then they gave you new khakis or, I got dress greens. I still have it at home. A dress green uniform. Poplin shirt. Then they gave you your money and I think I had about six hundred dollars I still have the paystub. It was all in brand new printed money and the reason I remember it was printed is I was like, Wow this is printed money.

Then they started giving us orientation talks and this took up twelve hours. One of the first things that shocked me was they told you that, if you went to the airport you had to be careful walking around once you left the base. It was recommended that everybody take a cab, because like many military bases there's a bunch of bars and you know there would be prostitutes and cab drivers all preying on the enlisted man, or the service man because they knew if you were walking out of there that you just came from Vietnam, you had cash in your pocket. 'Cause you had no identification, but you had cash in your pocket. You had to surrender your military ID. And they gave you orders, I have the original orders from home, you know it's not like you have your driver's license 'cause it's not like you carried that over to Vietnam. So I had a little water buffalo wallet and I had my money and the thing that stuck out was that they gave me the talk about telling you, if you are going to take a cab you should take at least three or four guys [when you go off base]. 'Cause you couldn't even trust a cab driver with two of 'em, they'd set you up to get mugged. I don't know how true that was but it was just a real frightening, not a real thank you welcome home. That you came back to the world and you had to be on guard cause people were just going to prey on you and take your money and they didn't really care what you did for your country or your service.

[00:04:58.06]

And so, I was pretty fortunate I had an uncle living in LA and so I got with a bunch of guys and we ended up going to San Francisco airport. Then I remember standing in line to get a ticket and I was trying to get the military discount and I had fifties and a twenty and I had six hundred and twenty-nine dollars, so I think

all of it was in fifties except for the twenty-nine dollars and I remember, the clerk at United Airlines giving me a hard time and asking for my identification and where I got the new bills. There are people behind me and I'm getting a little humiliated and my face was burning and I told her I just got out of Vietnam and they asked me to step aside and the manager came out and demanded to know where I got the money. Like I had stole it or I had printed it or something. I tried to explain it. So finally he said we will give you a ticket this time but you need to have identification if you're ever going to fly and I was telling him that I had to turn in my military ID, I don't have an ID, I don't have a driver's license, I don't have anything I just got back from Vietnam.

So, I got on the plane and flying to LA to my uncles house and I remember the stewardess came by and I wanted to order a beer and she said, "Do you have an ID?" And you got to be twenty-one and I said, "No I don't have an ID, I just came back from Vietnam." And she gave me a snippy comment like, "All you military guys are the same, you got no IDs, you wanna get a beer, you wanna get a drink I can't give it to you. You're not getting a drink." I remember tears welling up in my eyes, feeling so humiliated that you know, I thought I could you know come home and have a cold beer and go see some people and I was being rebuffed by all these [American] people that didn't seem to really care [about me] and didn't want to believe my story. I remember a couple sitting next to me felt really bad and they were going to buy me a beer and I was like, "No, no." That's it, you know, I told my [Army] story and they just felt so bad.

Then I got to LA and by this time, you've been traveling for a couple days you are really exhausted. And so my uncle lived there, he had a nice house and I remember taking a cab, and when I got to LA it was a little different. I told the cab driver, just got back from Vietnam and I can't remember if he'd been in the service or if he had a son in the service and he was like, "Oh man aren't you glad to be alive!" And all that and I was just like, "Yeah!" And so I told him where I had to go and he drove me and he gave me a discount you know and I went to my aunt's house 'cause I had originally called and nobody answered the phone. Course back in those days you didn't have answering machines so you know they had always just [were close by]. I gave 'em the address and I went there knocked on the door and there was my aunt and there was my [cousins], all just shocked to see me. You know you just felt good and I was really tired. Been up for like thirty-six hours or, just trying to sleep, it was sunny. I remember she made me something to eat and Chrissy my little niece was there and TC was there and there all shocked to see me, happy to see me. Chrissy was five years old and the whole reality kinda came when we were eating, she turned to me and she said, "Did you kill anybody?" And I remember my aunt saying, "Don't ask that, don't ask that!" I remember saying, you know like trying to answer to a child and I just said, "Well I didn't kill anybody by shooting at them but I did shoot my weapon so I don't really know."

I remember just stopping eating and the whole idea that I was really back in the world was coming over me. You know here I am I'm not in an environment where

you show pictures of the dead enemy or put cards on 'em or you talk about blowing up people or braggin' about how many you killed or how many kills your unit had. I remember I went to bed and I had a bedroom and I think I slept for almost twenty-four hours. And I talked to my aunt today and they always talk about when I came there and how she said, 'cause I remember trying to sleep at first in the bed and I couldn't. It was just so uncomfortable. Then I just tried sleeping on the floor and at one time I went out in their back court and maybe I was going to sleep on the lawn. But they had dogs so I had to go back in and so somehow I got some sleep and I finally knocked my aunt said she heard so many, noises and sounds coming from my room that she was just afraid to even come in there. And so then I stayed a couple days and I flew back home and it was March. I got discharged on March 29th.

So I flew back home and it was just the beginning of April and it was snowy and cold and I remember my parents meeting me at the airport and they were happy to see me my brothers were there. I had three brothers and my aunt was there and I remember my mom was there. She was so worried. And I remember she hugged me and the first thing she said to me, she said, "Well I'm glad you're back home," and she goes, "God you haven't changed a bit, you just look the same and haven't changed." Inside I was thinking you have no idea. You have no idea. Then I came back and I remember, one of the army guys in orientation said, "Go collect unemployment, relax for a little bit." And I came back wasn't trying to get my job back and I remember for a couple weeks just living around and finally I was going to go get my job back and I went to the factory and you know I had quit telling them I was going in the service, thought I was going to get my job back and they were like, Well we don't have to give you your job back. So you know it was kinda like our reality of I can't believe this is happening. Then they called me back in a week and gave me my job back after I talked to my former foreman he went to said "Yeah, I'll get you back in don't you worry." And he had been in the service so I got my job back and then I got laid off. You know it was 1971 and so there was a minor recession going on and I got laid off.

[00:10:43.07]

And so I went to collect unemployment and it was funny that in Milwaukee the first guy I went to file for unemployment, told him who I was what I was doing he was a Vietnam veteran. He had been with the 11th Cav. He was doing this and he was like, "Don't worry about it." 'Cause at this time you had to go every week to three employers and have them sign a card that said you applied in order to keep getting your unemployment. He was just like don't worry about it. Take as long as you want. So for a couple months I just bummed around and partied. Met up with my friends and tried to reconnect and acquaintances and you know.

Berry: What was the reaction from your friends to your service?

Koeppen: They were all happy that I came back but that's a great question because you know it became ironic I was the only one of them that had gone to Vietnam. They were football players and they had gone and got scholarships and some dropped out of school and so I was the "Nam Vet" you know, John just came back from Vietnam! You know this kind of thing and we'd go out and drink and party and I started playing baseball, 'cause I was a baseball player, I got on some teams and thought I was playing again. You know I was just kinda living life large, as much as I could you know. But the ironic thing was that it was really, we would get in conversations and people would talk about something about the two years I was gone, that were in the service, I just remember this comment they'd be talking like, Oh, you remember this John, don't you remember this? And I'd go, "No, when did it happen?" and then I'd go, "Oh yeah, I was in Vietnam" Then there would be this little silence like, Oh, you weren't here. Like yeah, I wasn't here. And then the subject would change and then it was just so awkward and they didn't really ask a lot about it [my time in Vietnam] and sometimes I got a little too much to drink I'd tell 'em stories and they would sorta look at me. I remember, Karen Hartman who married Mike Hartman, I saw he later at a high school reunion and she was like, "Some of those stories you told John, god those were awful things." I was thinking well, it just how combat is. It's awful.

And so, and then I just kinda, well I tried to go back to UWM [University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee] and got to UWM and signed up and this was in September of '71. I was taking a couple of classes, the program wanted me back. I [originally] had been going to UWM under a program when I lost my draft deferment I went back to a program called The Experimentation Program of Higher Education. Doctor Spatz. So when I told them that I came back, they were glad I was back. When I left, when I had lost my draft deferment, the whole idea on the program was to get people on the honor roll with a 3.0 plus average, when I was going taking my three collage classes and my three remedial credits I had scored a 3.4. They were just ecstatic, the more success stories, the more this program could go. So I called back, and told them I was back and I was going to go to school and they were all excited and they called me to come down to the office—and this was kinda thing that was happening for people who came back from Vietnam—so I went in the office and I sat there and met some bright college students and they were helping out and they were telling me how good it is and you know they didn't really have a sense of awareness. I remember one person going, "Oh you've been gone for two years, where ya been? And I said, "Oh I was in the service." And they go, "Where'd you go?" and I said, "I was in Vietnam, I went to Cambodia and Asia." And there was this awkward service and one of 'em says, "Well what did you do there?" and I said, "Well we went there to kill people." And you could hear the whole room just go like...“uhhp”...there was just like the air had been sucked out and there was this awkward silence. But I was getting so frustrated like, I was in the army, I was overseas, you don't get it do you? You're totally ambivalent to that [the war] [because] the draft had ended. They don't care, they're moving on with their lives.

So then I got back in the program and I didn't last a semester. And one of the things that [happened]— it was the anger building. It was there was an English teacher and he was some guy from New York and he was bragging, he was a Jewish English Professor from New York and he was here in Milwaukee so we got to stories and he always had stories about Vietnam. And he had one story about Vietnam written with 'em [veterans] as baby killers kind of scenario and in the middle of class I told 'em to, "Get fucked, that this is bullshit this isn't right. This is not true, this is just a story." And he got all huffy about this, "Well what do you know?" and I said, "I know, I'm a veteran damn it. I just got back." And so then it became I was the Vietnam veteran in the classroom you know. Some people kinda congratulated me for kinda standing up to him but his anger just never waned and I had to go do another writing assignment for him and he just said how stupid it was and I just dropped out. I went and told the program I'm not going to put up with this crap you know there are still protests going on [on campus] a little bit. But I felt so much of an outsider compared to what, the students I was with or relating with, they had no idea and so I just went back and started working in the factories again. I got my job back at the canning company. And then that closed down and then I went to AO Smith which was a big manufacturer and worked there you know until the auto industries went out in the eighties.

[00:16:07.06]

But the short time I was laid off, wanna get back to that [previous time] I was [talking about], the one guy, the one [veteran] unemployment counselor told me not to worry about looking for a job, I'll take care of you. Well, my case got transferred to somebody else. And so then I had a different counselor. He wasn't a veteran. He was not a military man at all. And I remember him giving me a lecture about thinking [that since] I just came back from the service and that I could just lollygag and collect unemployment benefits without making any effort to do this [find a job]. So he told me I had to get out in the job market if I wanted to keep my benefits and so I went out to some employers.

One I remember was Briggs and Stanton, which was a big place in Milwaukee. I remember going for a job interview there and I was just looking for factory work, I had machine operator experience and at that time there were a lot of manufacturing jobs. I remember getting' in [the interview] and the guy said, "I see you've been in Vietnam," and he goes, "are you a drugee?" 'Cause there were all these [TV] program about guys on drugs and I said, "No." And he was like, "well, you know there's alot of stuff going on TV," and I said, "Yeah that happens in the rear, you got the REMFs doing that," and he said, "Well how do you feel about taking a drug test?" And you know at this time I was like, "What the fuck you talking, you drug test everybody?" He was like, "Well no, but a lot of Vietnam veteran we want to make sure they're okay." And I said, "No, I'm not taking no drug test. I don't need your damn job." I got all into this, don't insult me and I just walked out of the office and I was just like, Jesus this is what I have to put up with. So that, at that point and from then I just started to not put my [military]

service from Vietnam on there. I just put in the military. If they asked I would tell them but otherwise I wouldn't get into it.

So for those three or four years I thought you know, we're part of the generation that became the typical Vietnam veteran, you know a chip on your shoulder, you know walked around, not [bothering] everybody. I wasn't married and you know I was just hanging around, playing baseball with some of the guys and in the eighties, I got involved with rugby. So I was just hangin' around with some guys and had some failed relationships and that was it. I didn't get married until I was late in life. I don't have any children, one of the things that I think I don't, I don't have any children one of the reasons I think is that I still remember shooting [at] that kid. And I still remember what a feeling that I had, like what an awful... I must be a horrible person to even think that is an okay thing to do. That and it was one of those moral moments you know. And I was lucky I found [a wonderful woman] that I'm married to, my wife now. She doesn't have children and we get along really well but I have a lot of friends that would say, You would be a great father, you would be a great dad. To me that whole incident [in Vietnam] exposed an ugly part of the human nature, the beast that's inside you and I always was afraid that I never could control that.

I remember coming back and hanging out with my guys and it wasn't a couple times I got in fights and there was one guy Mike Fredricks—a guy I played baseball with, went to high school with—and we're out partying and I don't know he did something and he was a big guy and I got mad and I jumped on him and I wasn't beating the snot outta him, but I was beating the snot outta him and you know he whacked me one and I put my hands around his throat you know and you know everybody was like, Just cool down! And I was thinking, There's this anger part of me that I really gotta watch. And so you know we ended up still being friends but I think, My god you know all that rage inside of me, all that anger. I just really have to be careful. I think it is still there a little bit but I'm an older mature person and I'm just not gonna let it control me. But when I come back I would spend money and party and live life like there's no tomorrow.

Berry: Did you have any injuries when you were in the service?

Koeppen: I didn't have any wounds. You know, I had sickness with pinworms I had a couple times, spraining the ankles jumping outta helicopters and all that. I probably have hearing loss because I was in mortars and as the Racine County Service Officer said anyone that has been in combat, especially infantry has at least ten to fifteen percent hearing loss. I've never had it tested you know. I've always felt great, everything was there. So no.

[00:20:16.09]

Berry: How about illness problems from Agent Orange that you are aware of?

Koeppen: Not that I am aware of. But it's something that I always think about, constantly. This [question] get's back to the, you think that the thing about the Vietnam veteran, which in my opinion [when] we came back we were scorned on and thought of as whiners and losers by other generations and it's taken a long time for the Vietnam generation to really get respect. A long time we didn't. Two years ago I had a growth on the side of my head, like a mole got infected. So I went to get it removed and I was working at a company and I took my health insurance and I talked to the doctor and was like, "Oh yeah we'll take care of that." And I said, "Yeah, and just let me know what it is," I said, "In case...I've been exposed to Agent Orange, you know, if it's connected to that [Agent Orange] I would like to know." And this doctor – and this is two years ago – started lecturing me on how that is all a bunch of crap. That the politicians have filled our [veteran's] minds with lies and poisoned our minds and that he grew up on a farm and Agent Orange is just fine. I don't have anything to worry about and don't go around expecting a hand out here. And I sat there and I didn't say anything and I said, "My god, there's still kickin' the Vietnam veteran." All I asked him was tell me what it was, in case it was [related to Agent Orange]. And I was just dumbfounded. There's nothing that I know of.

Berry: How about friendships you made in the service have any of those continued after you've gotten out?

Koeppen: No. That was probably the sad part. But recently after LZ Lambeau connected with a couple. I've connected up with my old drill sergeant from my AIT, Dan White, and we've gotten together even though we didn't serve in Vietnam together, we have a common bond. I found one guy that I did serve with, he lives in Texas, his name is Roger Knouse I emailed him and we've kinda gotten in contact. Roger isn't too much of an outgoing person so I want to go down and visit him because we did spend six or seven months together. Other than that no, after the service, Zookeeper, Freddy Johns I called him but I was always callin' him late at night when I was drunk so, so he told me not to bother him anymore and then Gingham, Blade, the guy we called Blade, he retired from the military and so I don't really have any close friends from the service. I always wanted to run into guys.

Berry: Did you join any veterans' organizations?

Koeppen: Yeah, I belong to a couple. I belong to the VFW and this is later [in my life], I didn't belong to any in the beginning. I went [to one group], when I was in work, there was one guy that was a VFW person and he asked me to join the VFW and I went and at the time, VFW was calling everybody "Comrade." I remember sitting at the bar talking to Jerry saying, "Comrade? That's what the Russians used to say. Why you guys calling yourselves comrades?" He goes, "Well that's how it is." And you know there's a couple comments about, Oh Vietnam, you guys lost the war, and so I didn't join. But I did find a t-shirt that I really liked. It said, "WW-Nam" It was the big one for me. And so I enjoyed wearing that. So I joined eventually, eventually joined the VFW became a life member because I think they support veterans which is important. I also belong to, the Mobile Force Riverine

Association [Mobile Riverine Force Association], which is the Navy and Army from the 9th Infantry, MFRA. And I belong to the VVA, Vietnam veteran organization I belonged to one in Milwaukee, when I moved to Racine I joined that one. Those are the three. And those are enough. I was pretty active in Racine in the late nineties. I was a Racine area veteran's console head and that was a loose organization of all the veterans groups [in Racine], the American Legion and all that. Well we used to do is coordinate the Memorial Day parade and the Veterans Day ceremonies. So I did that two years and I was treasurer for a couple years and I was treasurer for the umm Vietnam Veterans group and was a committee member.

Berry: And you were also making presentations now to school groups and so forth to... explain.

Koeppen: Right, I had hooked up with a project called Voices of Vietnam with the Wisconsin Historical Society. And what had happened is that they [the Wisconsin Historical Society] were looking for [Vietnam veteran] letters, and this was in the eighties, of veterans. And when my mother died she had kept a large number of my letter from home, which I did not know at the time. I really thank her for that. So basically what I did was contact the Madison group. It took about six months to get me on board. Because I remember calling Kristen Foster who was heading this project and I asked her, why the Madison communist, pinkos, lefties looseys would want my [very personal] letters? What were they going to do with them? And she patiently explained that they had the largest anti-war collection in the United States but they didn't have anything on the Wisconsin veterans. So I donated my letters to her. And then I got to know her. Two hundred and eighty some veterans donated their letters and transcripts and a book was published and I was very grateful she had a picture of me in it and she also had two of my letters in it and then after that I worked with her to get other veterans to donate their letters. We did a number of book talks in '92 when the book was published and probably twenty to thirty of those. I've also done some grade school presentations in Racine for people who know that I'm a veteran. For the past six years I have been doing presentations for Marquette University American History class. I've done some presentations at UWM, prior to that, when this book came out I went around to a lot of the colleges and offered to give 'em a talk. Talk about the book. I did a couple at Carroll College.

[00:25:59.16]

Koeppen: I was fortunate enough to do enough for the Menomonee Indian Nation up in... Kreshem, or Keshena[??] somewhere up there. So I'm in contact with them, there's a couple [veterans up there]. I did one for the Menomonee community college also up there. So I've been doing presentations for ever since about '92 which is a long time. I enjoy it. It has been good therapy for me. A good way because when I came out of the service I worked in a factory and then got into the bar business, probably drank too much. I wasn't in a relationship, I had a lot of [them]. Was playing rugby with a bunch of guys. I went to the beginning of the vet center a couple of times and, thinking I was starting to lose it. But the

interesting thing is when I went to the center and I listened to the other veterans' stories I would say to myself, "These guys are nuts, I'm not." I might be depressed but I'm not nuts like some of these guys were. Some of these guys, they would tell stories about waking up in the park in the middle of the night dressed in fatigues and it was just like, you know, [I was] nowhere near this. But that [the book talks] was very therapeutic. It's been enjoyable. Just like this experience was very enjoyable for me.

Berry: Looking back how do you feel about your military experience and your war experience. Are you proud of it?

Koeppen: Yes I am proud of it. And I was proud of it all the time and it took a long time and it has taken a long time to say i'm proud of it to other people and you know. I have some Vietnam swag that I do wear on certain occasions and you know I do bring up to people sometimes, we'll get into a conversation and we'll talk about something and I'll go, "I am a Vietnam veteran." There was a time when you didn't want to do that because it was so awkward. But, what was the other part of that question?

Berry: Just the war experience.

Koeppen: Oh yeah, the one expression I like to borrow and use is, it's a million dollar experience that I would not give a million buck to do again. But I'm pretty much like all veterans you know. I remember when '75 when Saigon was falling and the Vietnamese government was trying to recruit foreign veterans and they had a whole bunch of em' lined up in LA and places who were ready to go back and fight again. So if I had to do the experience all over again I would I probably would do it the same way I did it.

Berry: Alright John, is there anything else you'd like to say.

Koeppen: No I, this has been really rewarding and I appreciate the opportunity and, and umm there's probably a hundred things I will think of on the way home.

Berry: Well the museum certainly appreciates your, your willingness to share your experience with us. Just an outstanding interview. Thank you.

Koeppen: Thank you.

[End of OH1509.Koeppen_tape6_A_access] [End of Interview]