

This interview is being conducted on Thursday, October 10, 2019 at my residence in Plainfield, IL. My name is Fran Prokop and I am speaking with Joseph Cortesi, Jr., who served in the United States Army and is a veteran of the Viet Nam Conflict. Joe learned of the Veterans' History Project through me, and he has kindly consented to participate in the National Archives Veterans' History Project. Here is his story:

Joe, when and where were you born?

I was born in Chicago, Illinois on January 5, 1950.

How many sisters and brothers did you have?

One brother, one sister.

Did your brother ever serve in the military?

No, he didn't. My father did – during World War II.

Do you know where he served?

He was a Tech Sergeant, which is basically the same thing I was. I don't know exactly where he served or what campaigns he was in or anything like that.

What were your parents' occupations?

My Dad was a Supervisor with the U.S. Postal Service. And my mother, until my father passed away, was a stay at home housewife – homemaker.

What did you do before entering the service?

Basically I was in school. I was going to college before I joined.

How old were you when you joined?

19.

How did you enter the service – were you drafted or did you enlist?

I enlisted.

Did you choose the Army specifically?

Yes, I did.

Any particular reason why?

Couple of reasons; I wanted to get into helicopter mechanics and I also needed to find a way to finance my college.

How did you enlist?

I just went down to the enlistment center; I think there was one in just about every neighborhood in the city.

Right. Okay, so you didn't have to go downtown.

No. We had to go downtown for our physicals and stuff like that, but the actual enlistment – no.

How about departure for training camp and early days of training. How did you leave – did you have to go downtown?

Yeah, and we took a train to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. That's where I took my basic training.

And did that last eight weeks – basic training?

Yeah, basic was eight weeks.

Can you describe a typical day in basic training –

From the time we got up –

Yes.

Okay; we had morning formation; then we would go in formation to breakfast. After breakfast we would either have specific training – that was going to be taken that day – or we would have PT – physical training.

Consisting of –

Anything from push ups and running – the obstacle course, forced marches --

Activities -- marching –

Yeah.

How about guns –

No. That wasn't part of everyday training; that was more specialized; you were learning the different formation moves, marching and stuff, and learning a lot of the regulations – the ranks – chain of command --

Okay rules and regulations. And what about classroom training?

Uh, there was a little bit of classroom training on your weapons, but not much. Most of your classroom training was done in your advanced AIT training.

And did you, during basic, have aptitude tests done to see what you were suited for?

No, actually that was determined before – we took an aptitude test just after enlistment.

But before basic training.

Right.

How did you adapt to military life – the physical regimen, the barracks?

I actually enjoyed it. Yeah.

Was this your first time away from home?

Basically, yeah, yeah.

How did you like the food and the barracks?

Well, it was different from what I expected. I really liked the structure of everything, you know, the discipline. They had offered me West Point, but I turned them down. Then they offered me Officer Candidate School, and I turned them down for that. I'm not a leader, you know, and I knew it – even at that young age, I knew it. Most guys bunked in an open barracks; squad leaders, former ROTC guys were bunked in separate rooms of four guys; I was a squad leader.

Yeah.

I would have loved to go to West Point for the education, but that was a nine-year commitment – yeah.

Wow!

You know, at 19 years old it seems like an awful long time, you know.

Today, when you look back –

Yeah, but I enjoyed – I really enjoyed the physical part of it – the running, you know, just everything physical.

The calisthenics – they used to call it.

Yeah.

So what years are we talking about? When did you go in?

I went in in April of '69 and stayed till May of '71.

Two full years – okay. So, the eight weeks of basic training is over. Did you go on to specialized training?

Yes, there in Fort Leonard Wood I went to what they called Wheeled Vehicle Mechanics – 63, B20 – was that MOS

So that was more technical –

Yeah, they found out that when I joined they found out that I couldn't go for aircraft mechanics because I'm color-blind.

And that's what you wanted – aircraft mechanic.

Yeah.

So they substituted with --

Yeah, everything mechanized other than aircraft. Everything in the military, all the wiring is numbered; it isn't color-coded.

That was the key – wiring is numbered and not color-coded.

Right.

How long did that class last?

Eight weeks.

And that was also at Fort Leonard Wood.

Right.

Your training came to an end, then what happened?

I went to Fort Knox, Kentucky for basically what's considered diesel training for track vehicles.

That was additional training?

Right.

How long did that last?

That was also eight weeks.

You were fairly close to home – did you ever return back home for a visit?

The only time that I returned home – I came home once from Fort Knox, Kentucky for a weekend – I had a weekend pass and I came home with a couple of other fellas that lived in Michigan City and another fella here in Chicago – and then back again. Let's see – I got my second promotion then to E-3. I got my first one after my first school.

So that was E-2 then?

Yeah, that would be a Private, then Private First Class, and then when I finished, I also got promoted to E-4.

So after you had all this training you were promoted to E-4?

Right. Just prior to my departure for Viet Nam.

So what happened after all that?

Well, once I finished school at Fort Knox, I received orders for Viet Nam and got a 30-day leave to come home.

How did you get to Viet Nam – physically how?

We flew to Viet Nam. There was a stopover in Alaska and then we landed at Long Binh. And from there we were given our unit assignment.

What was your unit?

The unit I went into was the Bravo Battery, second of the twelfth –

What did you say?

2nd /12th and that's the 23rd Artillery Group.

How many of you guys went over at one time?

Uh, whatever at DC 10 holds – and we were all strangers to each other.

Of course, yeah, yeah.

What I meant was we weren't deployed as a unit. In fact, the unit that was there at the time was a National Guard Unit and the Army was taking over; because they had been there for 16 months.

So you took over the National Guard Unit who then went home.

Um-hmm; the 2nd/12th – that particular unit was re-commissioned for the Viet Nam Conflict and in October of '71 was decommissioned. So it was only in existence – I mean it was in existence prior to that, but it was only activated when needed, you know. So a lot of the personnel were new in country at the time. I would say a good 35% or 30% were new in country and some of the guys that had been there for a length of time were either – had been in country with another unit and were transferred over to plug the holes, or were the remainder of the National Guard guys that were still hanging around to acclimate the new guys.

So really there's no details of your trip abroad; you just flew there.

Um-hmmn.

You went to Long Binh, so what happened after that?

We weren't even bunked; we were just assigned different duties until somebody from our unit came up and got us, which in my case took about six hours –

Okay, as soon as you landed – that day.

Yeah, uh-huh.

So what were your duties basically?

Well, like I said, my primary MOS was a mechanic so I was assigned to the motor pool.

And your job entailed – what did you have to do?

Basically maintain whatever vehicles we had – we had jeeps -2½ and 5-ton trucks.

Any and all vehicles –

Uh-huh – but typical small unit -- in the war zone we did everything. When I wasn't working on the trucks and that, I was working on the guns or helping out with the K.P. duty – wherever they needed me.

Did you ever do loading and unloading?

Oh, yeah, when projectiles, detonators and the powdered stuff would be airlifted in -- they needed to be uncrated and stored.

Ammunition – or ordnance?

Yeah. When that was brought in, we would have to separate it, fill up the powder pits, burn excess powder, which I did a lot of, you know – and latrine duty – ha,. Ha!

Ha. Ha.

You did whatever needed to be done.

And were you on an actual base

Yeah, the guns were 155 toweds – which means they were pulled behind a vehicle – and that was a base camp originally where the National Guard unit was. Once the Regular Army took over, they made it a mobile unit, so – a lot of the equipment needed for that had to be requisitioned.

What was the name of that camp?

You know, I don't recall.

But it was in Long Binh?

No, no, it was north and west, closer to the Cambodian border than – Long Binh was south and east toward the coast, I believe.

So, when you first got there you said the guy had to come and get you – so where did you go to – your permanent duty station that you're talking about now.

That's this base camp, yeah.

And that base camp was north and east of Long Binh.

Yeah, and it was also north and east of Saigon, if I'm not mistaken.

That was your main area –

Well, that was our base camp when the unit was first activated. We were later moved to Camp Martin, but that was like after we did six field moves and that was – I'd say in May – early May of 1970 – that became our base camp.

How many months did you actually stay in Viet Nam?

12 months.

During this entire 12 months – this was your job – mostly repairing vehicles and doing what you just described.

Yeah, yeah, support of the unit.

How far were you from the front at that time?

At any particular time we could be as close as 200 yards – but that was only one occasion.

Oh, really, so you were right there –

You know, to – the guns had a range of 11 miles so it really wasn't necessary for us to be right on top of the action. But then we made the move into Cambodia so we had to be basically right on top of things there.

Okay. So did you witness destruction or casualties, or anything like that when you were there?

Yeah.

Could you talk about that? Anything specific that comes to mind –

No, we, uh, we would shell known targets; we had our own three-man recon group that would target – soft targets – like ammunition and supply stashes, things like that. And then we also supported the 2nd Infantry.

Marines or Army?

Army.

So did you actually witness casualties in combat?

Yes, I did.

You yourself were not in combat but you were very close to combat –

No, I was in some combat.

Oh, really.

But it was very, very limited, I mean, we – when I mentioned 200 yards, that was in March of '70, Easter morning –

So you remember it.

Oh, yeah. Our unit and a light infantry unit and 102 Battery were all in a camp that was about 200 yards from the tree line, and that morning we experienced a ground assault.

And were any Americans killed – or who was fighting with us then –

Yeah, like I said, there was infantry; there was another artillery unit, 102 unit that was there; we lost 17 – I forget how many. The VC actually got inside camp.

Was there any hand to hand battle – combat?

Uh, I'm sure there was some.

You didn't do any of that, did you?

No. Actually I was on, what do you call, support for the guns, cutting powder. The problem was because the tree line was so close, a lot of shrapnel from our own guns was coming back at us – we so had to -- everybody had to stay low, you know. The guys on the perimeter that were returning fire; the VC also mortared us and rocketed us, so that's where most of the casualties came from – was the incoming artillery – well, they didn't have artillery – it was mortars and rockets.

Did you guys have foxholes out there?

No, we had – we stayed in hooches – what we called hooches, which were basically built from sandbags and metal – I forget what it's called – sheets of corrugated metal with a roof and then we put sandbags on top of that, like three layers of sandbags on top of that.

Okay, I can picture that.

We could erect one of those in about four hours. So once we would drop in – we were dropped in by helicopter. The guns too came in by helicopter; we didn't tow them in. and right after that I came back to base camp because we only had three guns there. So it wasn't the full six guns that we usually have. So I went back to base camp and they made -- those three guns in turn came back to base camp and the three guns that were there went out. So like I said, the unit itself made 14 moves in the 12 months that I was there. So we were in and out, in and out, you know, set up. But the only place that we actually had what I would call – I don't know how to say it – something similar to an actual military base was the base camp at Camp Martin.

These hooches – how many men would they hold?

Well, the ones in the field, we would get about a dozen guys in there. And that was basically the men for each gun would have their own hooch. And then the support would sleep in one of those hooches. So, I was with gun two crew – and this is where I'm talking about diversity. We only had one or two vehicles out in the field with us. It's not like we were moving around a lot. So my job was, like I said, to fill in, cut powder, put the ATs on the – to the projectiles, things like that, you know.

Support.

I would help load the gun sometimes, when we were short, or if it was a long mission. Most of the long missions we get to shoot from the field; mostly we shot from the base camps and those could be like 200 rounds or something.

And how long did these moves last?

The shortest I think was 8 days and the longest was probably three, four weeks..

And you did 14 of these?

Yeah.

Wow! That was quite lengthy. You have a lot of experience then. Did you do that for most of the 12 months that you were there?

Yes.

That was your normal routine, more or less –

Yes.

Okay, how about friendships forms and camaraderie of service. Did you meet many guys that you may still be in contact with today?

Yeah, I did meet a lot of guys. I mean, I got fairly close with the different gun crews and stuff, and the guys – there were only three of us in the motor pool. There was a sergeant and two mechanics, and I was there five months. My sergeant was recalled home – he was rotated and they gave me his stripes. I never took the Board – I never went in front of the Board for my stripes – they were considered Acting -- so I was considered Acting Sergeant even though I had the responsibilities.

So it was like a field promotion?

Well, it wasn't really a promotion – I was just “Acting” -- as a Sergeant.

Acting Sergeant?

Yeah – we called them AJ stripes. So I wore those stripes until I took the Board – four weeks before I returned home.

There in Viet Nam?

There in Viet Nam.

Did you have to pass the board?

Well, to be promoted, yeah, but I never heard.

Oh, you never heard? Because you were ready to leave.

Right. I left four weeks later. In fact, I came back a week early; they shortened it by a week.

What were your emotions relating to combat and the things you saw – the witnessing of casualties, the witnessing of destruction –

Uh, it hardened me. It also kind of instilled in me not to get too close to anybody – because the loss - you know.

Um-hmm.

One of the guys on one of the other guns there which got hit and – he just found out three weeks prior that he was a father.

Oh, no, and he got killed?

Young black fella, and you know – new in country -- parts of him here and there – it was just –

That's hard –

So about that time – it was really about the time I started just concentrating on my job – and I couldn't tell you but maybe four names of guys that I served with over there because I just forced myself to forget, you know – which does them a disservice to a point but it's one of the walls that I put up.

Right, it's your own; it's what you needed –

That's how I coped with it.

That's how you cope – um-hmm –yeah, especially when someone you know and like – they're gone before your eyes –

I mean, there were other times like – we would get a rocket or two – would come inside the perimeter, you know, but there wasn't any major battle; even when we made the move in Cambodia, there was – Operation Fishhook –

It does come back if you talk about it –

At least that's what he called it; I don't know if that was the official name. But that was right after we moved into Cambodia. Basically our unit was attached to the 2nd Infantry and supplied support for the guys that were going over the border, but we were also there to draw fire, you know, to see where their locations of strength were. Because prior to the move into Cambodia we couldn't return fire across the border, so a lot of the rockets and stuff that were coming at us were coming from across the border and we couldn't return fire.

That was an order?

Yeah, that was something from Department of the Army – something about the Geneva Convention because Cambodia was neutral at the time.

Oh, okay. Lots of things that we don't know. When you were there did you see kids – did you see children –

Yeah.

in a battle – type position ?

No

Did they use them as decoys, I guess, or something like that?

No, I didn't see anything like that. I did see them, you know, I saw some of the mountain people with their children. The couple of moves that we made where we actually pulled the guns – you know, they would come up to us for candy and stuff like that, you know. But not in a combat situation, no.

Just as people living there in their homes.

Right. Well, they didn't have homes; they were walking along the side of the road.

Well, yeah. I was going to say when you talked about getting hardened – there were like trust issues too as far as the - like the people on the other side –

I know what you're going to say – ARVIN by day and VC at night.

There you go.

Like we used to say. There weren't a lot of the locals that we relied on.

Right, could you really trust them.

Well, that was it. You know, we didn't. Even at the base camp the locals come in and would clean and do our laundry and stuff like that, you know, but you never really trusted them, you know. There was always somebody – one of us watching them or whatever.

One eye open, one eye closed. So did you receive any other honors, medals or awards during your service in Viet Nam?

Let's see – Army Commendation.

How were communications from home while you were in Viet Nam?

They were hard to come by because we were moving around so much. I mean they got us our mail fairly regularly.

But that was it; strictly by mail?

Yeah.

No telephone communications?

Nothing like that, no.

When you did get a letter from home and you saw the postmark, how long did it take for you to receive that letter?

Uh, I would say two or three weeks from the time it was written.

Till you received it –

Yeah.

And did you respond by mail?

Yeah. I didn't that much; I wasn't one to write letters, you know – I'm still not one to communicate. I mean I talk to my brother -- my brother lives in Schaumburg and we live here -- and we're talking 35 minutes away and I talk to him maybe once every two weeks, you know.

So you wrote very few letters back.

Yeah.

But you received letters.

Yeah, I had a couple of gals who would write me – of course, my Mother –

You were single at the time?

Yeah. In fact one of the gals that I met on my 30-day leave before I left I ended up marrying after I got back.

Oh, really?

I'll tell you that story off the record.

Okay. Right. How about recreation or off-duty pursuits. Were you ever off duty?

Did you have any –

Well, you were never off-duty but we did have down time, you know. Sometimes we would – especially at base camp – sometimes we'd go a day and a half or two days without a fire mission, you know. But the thing was we were very rarely at base camp. So we would play basketball; we had basketball nets set up; we would play basketball

No football?

No, no – some guys would throw a football around. There were guys that had baseball gloves and would just play catch, you know, but we never could get organized. Nobody had a bat – so – basketball was easy.

You never had teams – you just did sports on your own.

Oh, yeah, just a pick-up game, you know.

How about did you ever see movies?

Our original base camp actually had a movie theater that probably sat about 100 guys.

I think I saw two movies the whole time I was there.

Did guys play cards – how did they spend their time off-duty?

A lot of guys played cards; we played cards; a lot of guys drank; some guys smoked.

They didn't have a recreation room where you could go play pool or things like that

Not there.

You were in war actually. So when your time was up and you received your orders finally, I'm sure you were happy, but how did you get back home again?

Same way – flew . First time I think I flew out of Ben Wah – it wasn't Long Binh – and I flew into -- going to California and then from California I flew home.

Home meaning – did you go to another camp?

No, home Chicago.

So you got discharged in California?

No, no, upon return you also got a leave. I had 30 days coming.

So you came home for 30 days?

Yeah.

How was your reception by family and friends?

Uh, not what I expected.

Right. You were Viet Nam guys. You were not greeted with open arms.

No.

I'm sure by your family but not society.

No, I got off the plane at O'Hare , went home and surprised them.

Did you have your uniform on?

Yeah. Had a uniform on, coming through, had my duffel bag coming through the airport; had some jeers, you know.

Wow – how different today's times are.

Yeah. I'm so glad to see guys getting recognition

Yes.

Even though – that war was very unpopular back home – here.

Oh, yes.

There is more support, not for the war, that's going on now – or the conflicts that are going on now – support for the military itself.

Right, in general.

And a lot, I hate to say this, but a lot of that antiwar sentiment was from guys that didn't want to be drafted, you know.

Right. Exactly.

And we no longer have the draft, which I think – I have mixed emotions on it. I think that there should be a draft but only active members of the military should be deployed. I think everybody should do Reserve duty; you know, go through basic training and some type of advanced training, and then be in the Reserves.

I agree. It just prepares you for life.

Right. You know, and if need be, you never know, I mean – with modern technology, the number of personnel that are necessary to defend our country is so much smaller than it used to be when it was just numbers, numbers, numbers. But there could come a time when we need that, you know. You figure we never had a conflict here on U.S. soil other than against ourselves and when we first became independent. If we were to deploy the majority of our forces overseas and we were in turn attacked here in the States, yeah –

Right, I would agree.

Before we got back to the States – before I got back here, I'd like to touch on the racism – **Go ahead – feel free.**

That really was surprising. I was born and raised in Chicago and I went to a mixed school – inner city school. So it was nothing for me to bunk with a black guy or whatever, you know, shower together – whatever it happened to be. But a lot of the guys from down south were very much so. I mentioned about racism over there. I was really surprised by how much there was still going on. I was born and raised in Chicago, went to an inner city school and everything so being around other ethnic groups didn't bother me – whether you were Mexican or black. There were a mob of blacks that were drafted and they felt that it was, you know, the whites were suppressing them by, you know – they said that there weren't that many whites that were drafted, you know – and my take to them was “take a look around you,” you know, there's just as many white guys here, if not more than black guys, you know, but it was felt on both sides by the blacks and by the whites. And even, well, take basketball games, there was that division. You know,

I'd play ball with anybody, I didn't care, you know, but some guys were " what are you doing?" I'm playing basketball. "Yeah, with them?" What difference does it make, it's a ball, you know.

A lot of racial tension.

Yeah, and I noticed that, even when I got back stateside, there is a division because there was such a mix in every base. Guys from as far north as New York and guys from the south, so, you could see it. It really progressed after I got out as far as acceptance and now you could even see it in the blacks being promoted, you know, where, at that time, you didn't see too many non-coms that were colored. Not that they didn't have the experience and everything that was necessary; it was just that, I'm sorry but all of the brass and them, most of them were all white.

I think that they suppressed them, more than needed; more than necessary.

Yeah, I don't think, I know; they were. Okay, now we're back to stateside.

We took a little detour. How was your readjustment to civilian life?

Well, I let me put it to you this way. There was like eight months from the time I returned until the time I was discharged. And they were probably --

Oh, you mean you were still in the service while you were here?

Yeah. After my tour, I had over a year left.

Well where were you during that time?

After I came home from the 30-day leave then I went to Fort Benning in Georgia.

Did you have the same duties at Fort Benning?

Actually they sent me back to the same school that I had gone to prior to being deployed.

At Fort Leonard Wood?

Yeah, the school I went to at Fort Leonard Wood. It was in Benning that I was assigned and they turned around and transferred me to Fort Lewis, Washington, with the 2nd Infantry – and that's where my problems began.

Do you want to talk about them.

Yes.

It's up to you – we've got both sides of the tape.

The only uniform that I had when I got back was the one that I flew back in. So I had my khakis on and I had my stripes on. But I didn't have the rank; I only had the stripes that I

was wearing, okay. And when I reported to Fort Lewis, the First Lieutenant that was my Commanding Officer, and right away the first thing, when I reported in, he questioned why I was wearing stripes and I explained to him that I'd been wearing them for five months as an AJ and I took the Sergeant's exam and I expected my Sergeant Orders to be awaiting upon my return; it never happened. So he said "I can get you for impersonating." I said, "I'm sorry, sir, this is what I have. The stripes will come off as soon as I get a new uniform." So him and I started off on the wrong foot. He hadn't served any time in the war zone or anything like that so I kinda resented the fact that he didn't respect me as a soldier, you know. And I was having some problems with my marriage and stuff and I started taking some pills. I developed a – I wouldn't call it a habit – but I was taking, on occasion, some pills – because I didn't drink, I didn't smoke pot, so, you know, and that got me into a little bit of trouble – late for formation, things like this, well, I got written up a couple of times; received one Article 15 –

I don't know what that is –

I'll explain it to you. It was disciplinary action, which is basically a reprimand; so it goes on your record.

You don't have to go into too much detail; whatever you feel comfortable with.

It leads to my discharge, and like I said I had problems with this Lieutenant and two things happened. One of the kids in the unit was 17 years old and he got orders for Viet Nam and he came to me; he says – just asking questions – asking questions; he says "It kills me; they're sending me over there and I'm gonna fight and I can't even have a drink legally." So I attempted to get him an ID so when he was home on leave, he could drink. Second Article 15, ha ha.

Ha, ha.

And then it was like two weeks later, I come back from the motor pool and the MPs are waiting for me. And I'm like, What's up? (turn tape) – The Lieutenant had "found" his sword, spurs and another item from his dress uniform in my locker. Decorative sort of -- for his dress blues – in my locker.

Oh.

I don't know nothing about that; I mean, I made formation this morning, went to the motor pool and I'm just now getting back, you know. But, now they put me up for court martial.

Oh, Jesus!

They didn't put me up for court martial for that, but that was –

Third violation –

Contributing factor. They put me up for court martial for trying to obtain the ID for the young fella. At that time I was told that I'd be busted down to Private E-1 with a Dishonorable Discharge. Unbeknownst to me, chances of that happening were very slim. They might have reduced my rank or something like that, you know, but the AG offered me what's called Chapter 10, which is a General Discharge.

Okay.

I would be busted down to E-1, which is the rank that I entered and I would receive a General Discharge under other than honorable conditions.

Well, I didn't make it home for Christmas the first Christmas I was back, and I was engaged to be married and I was not about to spend any time away from home that I didn't have to. So I took it. I figures, you know, yeah, I know it's gonna follow me the rest of my life – it's not Honorable and whatever – but I also knew that I could appeal it. I felt I had a very good case to appeal. The problem was, and this is Army red tape, Your DD-214, if there are any changes to be made, they have to be made within the first ten months after discharge.

Oh, okay. I didn't know that.

But you cannot appeal your discharge for a year –

Ha, ha, ha.

So 14 months later, now I'm married, I went up to Fort Sheridan, went in front of a Board of Appeals, and had it changed so I could receive all my benefits –

Okay, yeah.

But my DD-214 still says other than honorable –0-

General Discharge.

Yeah, and what bothered me too, was at the time they stripped me of all my medals; they were still on my records. But then when I went in front of the Board and explained the situation, they looked at the charges that were against me and everything, and the one Colonel looked at me and says, "You're a decorated soldier. Did you honestly think that you – in that court martial you would get a Dishonorable Discharge or internment?" I said, "Yeah, I did, because that's what I was told."

And why would you doubt it?

I still, to this day, respect authority, respect rank, whatever, you know –

Yeah, right.

When somebody above me tells me to do something, you know, I'm following orders or he knows what I don't know, you know.

Right.

So I had it changed; I got my VA Benefits. I adjusted quickly to civilian life – I really did. I think I was – was happy to be out of the service because there was such a difference between stateside duty and duty over there. Some of it – I relished the discipline and everything; I relished the little b.s. between ranks and stuff like that, you know. Yet, I understood that there was a Sergeant, you know – and I wasn't a Sergeant – whether it was hard striped corporal versus soft striped specialist, you know – stuff like that – 'cuz we did everything.

Right, you did equal duty.

I had PFCs telling me what to do when I was over there – do it this way, do this and do that. It wasn't giving an order, you know, this is just the way things are done. Everybody worked together, you know. And it seemed when I got stateside a lot of that vanished; everybody was working against each other, you know, and I had a hart time – but once I got out I didn't have any trouble with stateside.

So where were you discharged from?

I was discharged from Fort Lewis, Washington.

So you got married while you were in the service?

No, right after I got out; in fact it was two months after I got out. And that was the other craw in my throat, whatever – when I asked for a three-day pass for home to get married, and that was three months prior to that – I said we set a date for July 10 to get married – so I asked for like a three-day leave, if I could, and he declined it right away.

Really!

When it came time to go home for Christmas after I came back, you know, there were guys below me in rank; there were guys with less time in the unit than me that were getting, you know, time off to go home for the Holidays – my CO refused – said I was needed there – for what? You know – and I understand – chain of command and all --

So when did you get married?

I got married in July.

Oh, you did anyway. Did you ever use the GI Bill when you got out?

Yeah; I used it for training; to get my CDL license, which is for driving a truck.

Did you go to a commercial driving school?

Yeah.

For the big rig –

Yeah. I had originally wanted to use it for electronics; because I still was big on electronics but again, with my color blindness, you know, and reading resistors and wires, so that's when I decided – and actually I was already driving over the road – I just wasn't driving a semi – and then I used it for the VA Loan for my house.

Yeah, it certainly came in handy –

And then when I went to go for VA benefits when I found out I had a hearing problem – I was denied medical benefits because I made too much money – that really stuck in my craw –

You have to be at a certain level – that's need-based.

Have you been in contact with fellow veterans over the years?

Yeah, been in contact with a couple of the guys from my unit over there.

Want to mention their names

I don't know. Ha, ha

So not recently –

Yeah, last year one of the fellas – in fact my ex motor pool sergeant contacted me. WE were on a shooting site – website forum – and hey, I know a guy, Joe Cortesi over in Nam, you know – and it ended up being him. But I kinda shun that, you know.

So you've never gone to any reunions of your units?

No, no

Are you a member of any veterans' organizations today?

No.

Looking back, how do you think that your wartime and military experience affected your life?

I think it made me more aware of other people and how precious life is. I think that's the biggest thing, you know.

True – when you see it gone in an instant, you appreciate it. So, what life lessons would you say you learned from your military service?

I think just respect for people that are above my station. I don't know how else to put it – my boss, whoever it happens to be, you know; they're in that position for a reason and I'm where I'm at for a reason, you know. And a lot of that discipline I kept –

Yes, that's lifelong.

I still iron my own shirts and drive Sharon nuts because she'll iron a shirt and I'll take it off the hanger and I gotta put my creases in it, you know – shining my shoes, things like that – you know, just respecting my own appearance and that.

Right. That's all I have. I was going to say if there's anything else you'd like to add to the story or anything else that you can remember, any incidents that you want to describe –

I think I am really proud of the fact that I served. I'm not proud of the way that I left the service, you know, but I'm proud of my service and what it has done for me as a human being. I think part of the problem in this country right now is the younger generation doesn't have any type of guidance like that, you know, and even just the possibility that somebody might get drafted makes them think about their choices; you know what I mean? So –

I talked to many veterans and I believe, the same as you do, I think a draft is necessary for men and women alike, at least for two years. Not necessarily to go to war, but for the discipline they learn; they need this, especially if they don't go on to college, they need that.

A lot of what I call “cupcakes” – who have had everything all their life – and they haven't had to work for it or answer for their actions, you know, some time in the military; even if it's basic training and some schooling in whatever field they would be serving at in the military –

Ancillary field; not necessarily fighting.

Yeah, you know, we got – for the first time this happened people that served during the Viet Nam Conflict, whether they served in Viet Nam or not, are considered – well, everybody's considered a veteran that served, but they received what's called a Viet Nam Era -- I'm trying to think of what it's called –

You can think of it later and tell me and we can put it in – not commendation –

No, it's a ribbon – they're allowed to wear a ribbon Viet Nam Era Veteran.

Okay. Do you have such a ribbon?

I have the actual Viet Nam Conflict Era ribbon – all three of them –

Medals, did you say?

No, well one is a medal, the other two are Awards. One was awarded by the Republic of Viet Nam.

Did you include that information? You should put it in here.

I don't know what they're called, other than Viet Nam Conflict –

You put that on –

Basically that's only – I think there's 5 or 6 of them that I had on my bar.

Okay. If you want to look at those and I will see you at our meeting, you can tell me what they are and they will be included. I have finished all my questions, so I thank you very much for doing this interview and I thank you for your service to our country.

Thank you.

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Joseph Cortesi has reviewed the above history and made corrections /additions where words were lost. He also added the medals, campaign ribbons and badges that he received during his military service. National Defense Medal, Army Commendation Medal, Viet Nam Service Medal, Republic of Viet Nam Campaign Medal, Sanctuary Counteroffensive of 1970 Ribbon, Presidential Unit Citation, Valorous Unit Citation, Combat Action Badge and Marksmanship Badge.