

This interview is being conducted on Wednesday, March 27, 2019 at the home of Joseph W. Bartelt in Brookfield, Illinois. My name is Fran Prokop and I'm speaking with Joe, who served in the United States Army and is a veteran of the Vietnam conflict. Joe learned of the Veterans History project through his wife, my friend Gail, and he has kindly consented to participate in the National Archives Veterans History Project. Here is his story:

When and where were you born?

Berwyn, Illinois, MacNeal Hospital. March 11, 1944.

What were your parents' occupations?

My father worked for the telephone company in Illinois – Illinois Bell -- and my mother was basically a stay-at-home housewife.

Did you have brothers and sisters?

Yes. I had an older brother who was deceased in 2015 and I have a younger brother.

Were either of your brothers in the service?

Yes. My younger brother was also in Vietnam two years after I came back.

What did you do before entering the service?

Before entering the service I was in Junior College and just working part-time in a truck driving job.

Any other uncles or anything serving in the war?

I had my mother's oldest brother was a chaplain in the Navy.

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

Yes, I was drafted.

How old were you when you were drafted?

I believe I was 25.

Twenty-five, okay, that's old for being draft ed.

Yes, it was.

So you did not choose a specific branch of service – because you were in the Army.

Yes.

Where was your training camp?

Fort Knox, Kentucky.

And how did you get to Fort Knox – what means of transportation?

We flew to Fort Knox.

How were your early days of training – could you describe what a day of boot camp was like?

Well, boot camp was tough. I mean, I wasn't used to it –

Was this your first time away from home?

Yes, basically, yes. Boot camp was tough. I mean, you had to be disciplined and you turned around – you probably didn't understand a lot at that time, but you had to do what you were told to do and that's the way I was brought up. My mother and my father always made you say "Yes, ma-am" and "No, Ma'am" and that's how – I took boot camp in and did what I had to do.

How long did boot camp last?

I think it's eight weeks.

What kind of training did you have besides marching and drilling?

No specialty training; basically that's it; no specialty training.

Did you have classroom training?

No.

So what was it like – just marching and military orders?

Basically we were doing, I guess, mostly infantry training because they didn't know where they were going to put you.

Okay. So you said you had no specialized training or classroom teaching?

No.

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

I dealt with it like, you know, I guess I got disciplined enough to deal with whatever I had to deal with. We were told if we didn't do what we were supposed to do, we were gonna get thrown in jail, so , we did what we did. I got through it, I mean –

Okay, so after the eight weeks of basic training, what happened?

My first orders were in Louisiana at a – what do they call it – a missile site. They called them missile sites at that time. And I became a supply clerk at this missile site – Shreveport, Louisiana.

How long did you stay in Shreveport?

About eight months.

And was that your basic job – supply clerk?

I was a supply clerk.

What did that job entail?

Office supplies, general supplies for our company – that was it.

And you did that for eight months.

Yes.

What rank were you at that time?

I was just a PFC.

What's the highest rank you ever achieved?

A Spec 4 – that's I think just below a buck sergeant or something.

Where else did you serve? What happened after those eight months?

They were closing up these missile sites in Louisiana and we – everybody got orders. I got orders to go to Vietnam.

How did you get to Vietnam – any details of the trip abroad?

By airplane.

Do you know where you landed?

We had like at least three stops in between – to tell you the truth what each stop was I don't know – refueling, whatever, and that was it. You were able to get off the plane but you got back on and it landed in Saigon.

How long did this plane trip take with stops and everything?

It was supposed to have been a 24-hour trip – air time with the over-nighters – you were on the plane the whole time.

Once you got to Saigon, what did you do? Where did you go?

From Saigon they sent me to a Transportation Company and I was also a Supply Clerk at the Second Transportation Company; it was called Quin-yam (phonetic) Q-u-i-o-h-o-n – I think it is, and we were basically – I was a supply clerk for truck parts at that time. They were truck parts for convoys – supplies and food for the troops north of us towards, I believe, the DMZ; that's where them boys were fighting.

In your line of duty what was your job – what did you have to do?

Basically I had to make sure – I had to beg, borrow and steal – any way I could to get parts for that truck to be out there tomorrow morning. I worked days for six months; I worked nights for six months.

When you say “days” – you mean 9 to 5? Or do you mean from 6 to 6?

Yes. It was basically like a 9 to 5 and then you – then the other shift was basically the graveyard shift, and we had to make sure that convoy was running every day. They didn't want more than one truck down at a time.

How many trucks were there in the convoy?

I would say at least 20, 30; they were tractor-trailers – and a tractor that pulled the load; they'd turn around and had to be in working order.

Was that the only job you did in Vietnam?

Yes.

And for how long of a time did you do that job?

I was there little over a year.

And what did you witness while you were there – actions witnessed or duties?

I did pull guard duty, like everybody had to do that. Everybody had to do K.P. I, at one point, --

How was the food there – now that you're talking about it.

The food – if you're hungry you would eat anything; it was okay; and we survived. CARE packages were our favorite.

How about mail back and forth?

Oh, mail – we always got mail call every morning and we all got our mail. We didn't have no problem with mail.

How long do you think it would take a letter to get from Chicago to Vietnam?

Once you opened it and you saw the date on there?

I would say maybe 4 or 5 days.

Oh, no kidding!

I could be wrong but I believe it was about 4 or 5 days.

That's pretty good.

It wasn't really a very long time –

But you had a definite base there –

Yes, we were in a definite place.

Okay, and this was all in or near Saigon?

Yes, we were north of Saigon.

Did you have a regular base there?

Yes.

Do you know the name of that base?

No, I don't know the name of the base, but it was a whole bunch of transportation companies that were located there, and we -- basically lived in the motor pool in tents.

We lived in tents; no sides, wide open –

Really!

Yes. No air conditioning –

What was the temperature like?

Hot.

Even at night was it hot?

Until you got to the monsoon season and then you were damp and cold all the time.

Everything was soaked; everything was soakin' wet all the time.

So the monsoon season lasted several months?

I think it was a month; I think it was a month, probably; could be a little longer. It's tropical storms, so, you know –

So you were in tents with no sides?

Yes. They're roll-up sides and most of the time they could be rolled down. When we had the real monsoon you could roll them down – so everything wouldn't get wet from the rain.

What about the ground? Did they have boards on the ground or were you in dirt?

No. Our tents were -- our floors were basically wood, but our, you know, you lived in sand; sand was outside all over the place.

So you were off the ground in the tents?

Yeah, we were up.

Now, did you ever see any combat or witness any casualties or destruction?

Yes. Our Company was hit two different times with friendly fire –

Oh, friendly fire.

Yeah, that's what they said, So, I don't know.

Did our men get injured?

Yes, there was a few guys that got injured; luckily it wasn't me.

Did you have a field hospital out there?

No; they were sent to a field hospital.

Did you encounter hits from bombings or strafings from the enemy? Did your encampment encounter any enemy fire?

Well, yes, from time to time we always would have some type of – something happening in the hills around us.

It was a mountainous area?

Yes.

How did you stay in touch with friends and family back home – was it strictly mail and packages – no kind of telephone calls?

Yes, it was mail; no telephone calls.

How about friendships formed and camaraderie of service? Did you meet fellas there that you stayed in touch with after you returned home?

Not really; no, I didn't. I never stayed in touch; everybody was from a different state and everybody got out at different times and we never really corresponded with anybody.

When you were first drafted did you go in with any buddy – or just on your own.

No, I didn't .

Did you have any recreational or off-duty pursuits when you were done with work?

Was there anything to do?

Yes, we were able to go into town and party like any young G I was gonna do. And I did go on R & R, which was supposed to be Rest and Recreation. We were able to do that.

Where did you go for R & R?

I was in Tokyo once and in Taiwan once.

And was that after you served a certain amount of time?

Oh, yes, you couldn't take R & R right away; you know.

Did you fly to Tokyo?

Yes.

Did they make reservations for you or were you strictly on your own?

No, you had – it had to be approved through our company captain; luckily my good friend who I was corresponding with, he ran the PX; he got pretty much of a lot of leeway, and I

was his friend and he turned around and he'd say, "You want to go on R & R?" Oh, yeah, if I can get approved and you get approved – and we went a couple of times.

So you went to Tokyo and Taiwan? How did you find those places compared to where you were?

Well, that was just available – when we were able to go. That was available so let's just go there.

I'm asking you how you liked Japan?

You know, what's Japan when you mostly hang around in bars and whatever because you're just trying to get away from craziness, you know. And they were both the same way, you know.

So that's not some place that you'd want to return and visit – Taiwan or Japan?

No. Too far for me to go.

What other off-duty pursuits – when you were through with work from 9 to 5, after you ate, did the guys play cards, play sports –

We had movies; on our off-time we used to play a lot of football or baseball in the motor pool; and just the guys kinda hung out and did their thing. Everybody kinda got along real well. I don't think we ever had any problems with anything.

What I'm asking is if you had any organized sports – like one team playing against another team; one base or one company against another?

No; we just did it to occupy ourselves, you know.

Were those current movies that you got from America to watch?

No, they were just old movies – whatever. At one point I did have to – they just told whoever was the head to do this -- -- they pulled us for – uh, hill duty or whatever. The Koreans were pulled out and every company had to put a platoon together and I did

spent seven days out where them boys fought every day; fully packed; fully loaded and jumping out of a helicopter.

Really!

That was seven days and that was enough for me 'cuz we used to kiss them boys butts when they came in looking for brand new supplies and new uniforms; new boots, When they would come off of their duty out there, we used to burn all their uniforms –

Why?

Because of so many diseases – well, it was warm, you know, day and night for how long – who knows how long they had them on. The troops were out there in the bush all the time, so –

How long were they out there?

Seven days.

Well you were – but how about those men?

The other men – who knows how long before they were able to be turned around and –

Get replaced.

Pulled back – you know. They got out of there and were able to give them a break.

Did you witness any casualties when you were out on this –

I did – I did visit a hospital in our town where we were stationed and did see casualties – but that was the extent of it. I never seen –

But not on the battlefield?

No, no, I never was.

So you actually were only seven days out on the battlefield.

Basically, yes.

Well, how did you sustain the injury you now have?

How did I –

How did you get injured?

Well, I don't know – what injury do you want me to tell you about?

Whatever one you want to – I mean, I know –

I originally hurt my back in the service by moving material from one tent to another.

And I think my knees are shot basically because of the work I did here in the States for 34 years. That's why my knees are bad. But supposedly my heart and my lung problem are from Agent Orange, I guess; that's what they tell me.

You didn't know it at the time, but you were a victim of Agent Orange.

Yes, yes.

But you didn't realize it at the time that you were there?

No, no, I don't think any of us did.

Did it – was it a result of this seven days or was it just an ongoing thing?

No, see, because our motor pool; there was no vegetation; it was all burned down; so that was all sand. So we used to walk around in sand all the time, and that was our facility; we had no pavement. And we also, when I told you we played baseball and whatever, we played in the sand, so all that sand you would breathe and that probably had that in it.

So you don't know when you were exposed but you definitely were exposed.

Over the year, probably, that's what got into my system.

Yeah, you were there for over one year, in Vietnam, doing the same type of occupation.

Same type of work I did every day.

So, how were you notified when your time was up? Were you counting the days or did they let you know, or how did that work?

Well, I was less than six months when my date was up. And they asked me if I wanted to extend. At that time they were giving early outs – what they called “early outs” – and – so I did extend another, I believe a month or two months. And I turned around and that’s when our company was hit, in my extension.

What were you hit with?

I should have – well, friendly fire.

Do you know what it was – was it a bomb or just –

Oh, there was just shells that came in.

Were you injured during that time?

No, I wasn’t.

But your company was hit.

For the extension, that’s what I put up with, which I extended for because of – when I came back, by the time they – I got back and processed, I was under three months – so they would give you an early three months out before your date and you were out before your two years.

And that’s what happened to you – you were out before your two years.

Yes.

How did you return home then?

I returned home by – from Fort Dix, New Jersey - that’s when I processed out.

How did you get to Fort Dix – by plane again from Saigon?

Yes, yes.

And then you were mustered out at Fort Dix. How was your reception by family and friends?

My family was great.

You weren't married at that time, were you?

No, I wasn't married at that time.

How was your readjustment to civilian life?

Uh, me and my father went head to head a couple of times. I guess I was just used to being on my own for that time, and he straightened me out, and I ended up getting a job driving a truck for 12 plus years, met my wife in between there –

Did you drive for a specific company?

Yes. LaBuda Cartage.

And you drove for them for 12 years.

Did you ever take advantage of the G I Bill?

No, I haven't.

So, you have not been in contact with any veterans over the years?

No.

Are you a member of any veterans' organizations?

I've been a VFW member for 50 years; and the American Legion I've only been for about two years.

So you're an active member in both those organizations.

Yes, I am.

How do you think your wartime or military experience affected your life?

I think it was a good experience. Maybe I was dumb about it, but I just think that most, especially males, adults, kids, at that age – I think that's what we need. I think it straightened me out.

So overall you'd say it was a positive experience?

Yes, yes. Luckily enough I came out it with my four limbs, which a lot of other people don't. Yeah, I have health problems but I know a lot of other people who have more health problems than I do. And what I've heard some of the Vets get – right now I feel blessed about it.

Yeah, you do hear stories later on in life about what they think they have from being in the service.

Yeah.

So what life lessons would you say you learned from your military experience?

I really think that I was disciplined enough from what my parents taught me and what the service taught me – of running a business for 34 years; that's probably what gave me the incentive to run my business for 34 years.

And what business was that?

It was Blue Skies Window Cleaning.

You also did other jobs besides that?

Well, we turned around, whatever else we could do; snow plowing when it was cold.

So, once you left the trucking business you were on your own as a business person –

Yes, yes, there was no jobs available.

Well, good, you learned from the military; it comes out to your advantage over the years.

I think I did. And like I said, a lot of kids need it; Yeah, my mother turned around and had me in there for two years. Then I come back and my youngest brother was sent. So she had four years of one of her boys being in Vietnam, and I bet it really tracked with her mind a lot –

Yes, I'm sure it took a toll on her.

Yeah –

A mother worrying about her kids. Well, your brother came back okay?

Yes, he did. He's a lot healthier than I am. He's had a few heart problems but other than that he was pretty good.

Well, that's about it; unless there's anything else you want to add – any stories that you can think of or anecdotes that occurred over there.

No, I don't think so; I think I covered about everything or any episodes that might have happened.

Okay, well, it's been awhile – so thank you very much for doing this interview and thank you for your service to our country.

All right; thank you very much too.

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