

This interview is being conducted on Tuesday, January 5, 2016. My name is Fran Prokop and I'm speaking with William Nawrot, a veteran of the United States Army who served in the Viet Nam conflict. Bill 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:

When and where were you born?

I was born in Blue Island, Illinois on January 27, 1949 at the St. Francis Hospital.

What were your parents' occupations?

My father was a welder for the B & O Railroad. He unfortunately died in like '55 when I was only six years old, and my mother had to kind of take over and work and support the family. And my oldest sister, Joann, became like the like step in -- take care of the family person. And I have an older brother, George; he's the oldest. He unfortunately passed away 12 years ago.

Was George in the service?

No.

Were any of your other sisters or brothers –

No.

How many siblings did you have?

Well, George the oldest, I'm the youngest, and I have three sisters in between.

What did you do before entering the service?

I was a telephone man. I worked for Illinois Bell but now it's grown into A T & T. They broke it up and put it back together.

What was your job there?

I was – I collected – my first job there before I went in the Army was collecting money from pay phones.

Oh, okay.

Drove around in a truck, took the little boxes of money out, put new empty ones in. I ended up working there like, ten, eleven months before I went in the service, and then went back to there afterwards – actually retired from there.

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

I enlisted; they had a deal at the time – I knew it would just be a matter of time before I got drafted and they came out with what they called the two-year enlistment. It was different. Like if – most people, when they enlisted, they signed up for three years and they could pick what they were gonna do – their “M O S” or Military Occupation Specialty. The two-year enlistment was just like a draft the only difference was I got to pick what day I went into the service, and then just like a drafted person, they would decide what my job would be.

Okay, so you didn’t have much input about your job. You probably took tests And they decided –

Oh, yeah, there was a whole testing process.

So wait, first of all how did you physically – where did you enlist at?

Downtown – where was the office –

Oh, I went to Blue Island and found out it wasn’t there. I had to go to a recruiter in Harvey. I signed up in Harvey, Illinois and reported to the Van Buren Street Entrance Station – they called it – Armed Forces Examining and Entrance Station; that was in August.

That was in August of what year?

1968 – August 30, 1968. A little sidebar – before I signed up I went to O’Hare and I got on the waiting list to get in the Air Force Reserve – and nothing ever happened so I ended up doing the Army thing. And like two years later, after I was all done with the Army, they sent me a letter – “Hey, we got a spot for you.” Ha, ha, ha.

A little too late, huh?

I didn’t need it anymore, ha, ha.

How old were you in ’68 when you went into the Army?

Nineteen.

Okay, they put you in the Army and –

Yeah.

So you didn’t choose that specific branch of service, did you?

I just – no, I could have picked any branch. I just picked the Army, I really don’t know why.

No particular reason, okay. How was your departure for training camp and where did you go actually?

Okay, well, I got a whole thing here. The morning of August 30 I went downtown to the Armed Forces Examining Station on Van Buren Street in Chicago. Went through the whole rigamarole where they totally humiliate you, ha, ha, - check every inch of your body, the whole bit. And then in the evening, we piled on a bus, we went to O'Hare Airport, and I was going to St. Louis, Missouri, so, we get there and they grab like ten of us and say you guys go through that door over there. And all these big jets are there. Well, we go down the stairs and they stick us in this little bitty plane that's kind of like under the wing of a big jet. And I had never flown before. I was scared – wasn't scared enough going in the Army and leaving home, I gotta fly for the first time in this little dinky plane. So we take off, we did three stops before we got to St. Louis –

You're kidding –

Which is like normally a half hour flight. So another group got on a regular jet and they were already there before we got there.

For Pete's sake – why did they do that, I wonder?

Well, they just had a spot and they stuck us in there. And then we had to wait a couple of hours and they find they've got another plane from St. Louis that flew us into Fort Leonard Wood –

That was your end result – Fort Leonard Wood.

Yeah, Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, and we got there and kinda stuck us in some WWII barracks for the first couple of days, you know, while we were getting situated with our uniforms and all that. And then they took us to some nice modern brick ones, like after about a week in the service, and that's where we started our basic from.

So what they did is, they built you up, I gotta give them credit for that, you know. They start you running – you know, well run a half mile; and next day you run $\frac{3}{4}$ mile and the next day you run a mile.

Okay.

Also at the same time, they give you a belt with a canteen; and the next day it's a belt with a canteen and a shovel; and they kept adding weights – the more you ran – you got used to it, you know.

So how long did all that training take? How long were you there?

I guess it was about eight weeks.

So basic training was about eight weeks?

Don't quote me on that, I don't remember –

That's okay, just about. During basic training, how did you adapt – how was the food, the camaraderie, etc. –

Well, like I said, I was lonesome, but it was, we had like 6 or 8 guys in a room – and you gotta remember that they're breaking your spirit, so to speak, and building you up so that you'll learn to obey orders. So they sometimes treat you like dirt but it's all part of the process.

That's right.

And the food, I was always starving; they didn't give you enough – because there was so much activity – running around and all that. And you had to stand in line 20 minutes to get it.

But it was sufficient?

Yeah, yeah.

Now was this a combination of classroom teaching and drilling?

Uh, it was – basic was mostly marching and rifle and, you know, physical training and stuff like that. They had a little bit of classroom – the classroom came later on with my advanced AIT training.

Did you have specialized training?

Yeah, that was after eight weeks of basic training.

Where did you go?

I went to Fort Eustis, Virginia – that's their transportation base and they gave me basic – assigned me basic helicopter and aircraft maintenance. And that was, they showed you how to -- they called it safety wiring – like bolts, you can't have them – on plane, you can't have them vibrate loose, so when they put a bolt, there's a hole through it and you twist a wire and clamp it to something so that it can't turn loose. So they had us work on aircraft engines and small helicopter stuff and planes – it was just the basic principles of how to work with the tools and stuff. So it was a real short course. So that – the 20th of December I graduated and I was actually at the top of my class – I take it

back – 67A 10 was the course. So then it was about time for Christmas leave. I went home for two weeks to Chicago – suburbs and came back and even though we were done with training, the Army had a rule that they couldn't send you off to combat until you've been in the Army for six months.

Really? No combat for six months?

You have to be in the states, so they kind of stuck us in another old barracks in the same area and they gave us, you know, detail jobs to keep busy stuff, until we got enough time to go over.

What were those detail jobs – what did you have to do?

Clean guns and help other – help the guys with laundry – not laundry – I can't remember what it was –

No K.P.?

That came up quite a bit – unfortunately.

How did you adapt to military life, in general?

Oh, I just went along with it, you know,

You got over your lonesomeness –

Yeah, it was weird, you're never away from home and all of a sudden you're totally away from everybody, but, you develop friendships. And we went like – that couple of weeks we had to kill we had a lot of fun. We went to the movies almost every night and

How about sports? Did you have any baseball games –

I'm not into sports; the guys did but I didn't do any of it.

After your six months were up, where did they send you?

When that finished up I got to go home for a couple weeks leave –

Oh, again?

And then I went to report at Fort Dix, New Jersey.

How did you get to Fort Dix?

I hitchhiked – no, just kidding – by plane. I had to get there in a day. So I got all my gear there and everything – a little goofy story – the night comes that we're gonna ship off and they take us to this big room waiting for the bus. Well, I had to go to the bathroom. So I go up to one of the guys in charge, can I go to the bathroom – yeah, sure, go ahead. I went to the bathroom, I came back, in the meantime the bus came

and took everybody the room was empty. Ha, ha. Here I thought I was in trouble – the guy said no, don't worry about it, just take the bus tomorrow.

Oh, for God's sakes!

So anyway the next day comes and this time we get on a plane and it's – you kind of look at the globe and you think, well, if you want to go to Asia, you just go straight across the United States – well, it's easier to go over the top.

Right, the Arctic route.

So the plane I took, first stop we went to Anchorage, Alaska – had a stop over there for an hour or so where they refueled the plane. And from there we took off and went to Tokyo, Japan. So that's two places I've been that I've been to but never left the airport – but I can say I was there.

Yeah.

And then we got to Cam Rahn Bay, Viet Nam – where the center was –

That was your base?

They deployed you from there; that's where you came in and left. A place that was set up for -- actually, another point - they always show in the movie when you're on the C-130 flying in, everybody flew over on commercial jets. They chartered a regular jet, you know, with stewardesses and the whole thing. So this whole thing, actually, was over a day – it was a long ride. So the plane lands in Cam Rahn Bay; it's at night – what do you think happened? They start shooting rockets at us – not at us, at the base.

Oh, really!

And I -- if I wasn't scared enough already being in Viet Nam – so the one guy – the guys in charge just yelled get out on the ground and lay on the ground –

Wow, that was your introduction –

So I got out of the plane and just like everybody else we all ran like hell into the building; we didn't listen to the guy, ha, ha. So anyway, from Cam Rahn Bay, we were there a couple of days and then they flew us to Chu Lai, my ultimate place, and then we had like about a week of indoctrination – special training and K.P. as before, you know, And then after that they – it's kind of like -- if you ever saw the movie The Green Beret –with John Wayne –

I probably did –

They give a demonstration of what Charlie did with the trip wires and all that – they kind of gave what to watch out for –

To be aware –

Yeah. So anyway, from there they sent me to the 132nd ASHC – which stands for Assault Support Helicopter Company – which was the big Chinooks CH-47s, which are the cargo helicopters with the double rotors – they actually have two turbine motors – turbine engines that run them. And so there, I really lucked out because you hear all the – what – the hell some guys went through. I basically – I was on the – at a hutch in the South China Sea, overlooking the South China Sea and we just went to work at the flight line from there – they have a night shift and a day shift –

So you were an aircraft mechanic –

When the helicopters came in at night, we worked on them. And there was a whole ritual, you know, they don't wait, with a helicopter or any aircraft, they don't wait for it to break. They have, each component, they log and say this is good for 500 hours. At 500 hours they take the transmission out or the motor or whatever it is and they put another one in and send it back to the states for a recheck. So it was maintenance like that, and then like swapping the blades – the blades had to be changed every so often.

Those big rotor blades – wow! It took more than one person to do that.

Oh, yeah, well they had a crane – I was there at night but I wasn't on the crew doing it but there was one guy, they were putting a blade on a helicopter, and there's a huge pin that goes in that holds it and then there's like a shock absorber, that gives it just a little bit of movement. And the shock absorber wasn't lining up and this guy, I don't remember who he was, he stuck his finger in trying to line it up, and the blade came and chopped it right off.

Sure. Wow!

I got hurt one time, well minor, minor. I dropped a piece of armor plating; they put like a quarter inch steel around all the main heavy components and one of them slipped off a shelf and landed on my toe. I just lost my big toenail; I didn't get a Purple Heart.

No, you got a purple toe! Ha, ha!

So you spent most of the rest of your time there in Chu Lai?

Yeah, all my time, yeah.

And doing the same maintenance type of work.

Yeah – you talk about recreation later.

Bill has some notes he made to read from.

What was your highest rank achieved?

Oh, just Spec 4. I came in there as a PFC and got promoted while I was there to a Spec 4, which is still not – a spec 5 is like a Sergeant; that would be like somebody in charge. I never got that high but I had a good time.

So you never really were in combat.

No, no.

You didn't witness any casualties other than these injuries?

Or did you?

Well, the casualty, I did not witness, but, actually I would have missed it, but – giving a little background – they had a deal, if you came back to the states with five months or less you got an early out. And I ended up staying, I opted to stay there an extra month and a half so that when I came home I was out of the Army, so I actually lucked out and only served 19 months in the service. So anyway, March 17, St. Patrick's Day, it sticks in my mind, we lost a helicopter.

How did that happen?

It was a front transmission failure and all five of the crew perished. One of them was Doug Howes; he was my hooch mate – so he's the only guy that I actually really knew that died over there.

What's his name?

Douglas Howes H-O-W-E-S.

He died in that helicopter crash.

Yeah, they all did.

So you did witness casualties.

Well, I didn't see it but I was there when we lost one.

So your hooch mate passed away – how did that make you feel?

It was heartbreaking – so I've been – they have the Traveling Wall and I've been there and found his name and then through our Army reunions of our unit – I've been to the

Vietnam Memorial Wall in D.C. and found his name there. And like I said there were four other – the pilots and the other gunners –

You knew them all –

Not really. He was the only one I really knew. And then like I told you earlier, after I left there was another fatality on the flight line of a guy who got in the way of a blade when the craft was shutting down and the blade hit him. But that was nothing to do with combat; that was just human error.

But you knew him.

No. He was just – I'm saying – our unit – that was it, six. And there's another unit, our sister unit, which was right down the street; it was 178 Assault Support Helicopter – we shared our reunion group with them now. They had a lot of fatalities –

Why is that? Battle fatalities?

Yeah. They actually had a Chinook shot down that was fully loaded. It was the worst – I couldn't quote you exactly, but it was the worst aircraft fatality of a single ship of the war. And then we have our reunions, you know, and out of respect each unit reads the names of the deceased – and ours was just six, and theirs goes on and on – they lost a lot of men. They were just flying cargo; they had a couple of machine guns, you know, but they're not like the Cobras.

What happened? Were they shot down?

They were shot down – that one was shot down. The unit – our helicopter was a mechanical failure – nothing to do with –

Theirs was shot down. So did you witness any destruction of territory or people's homes, or anything like that?

No.

What kind of medals, honors or awards did you receive – I know you have them –

Yeah, the Viet Nam Combat Medal, Viet Nam Service Medal, two OS bars – actually one of them they gave to me when I was already out. I don't remember which one – and they gave me the option of going to Fort Sheridan to get it or mail it to me – so they mailed it to me. I tried to find it, but I couldn't.

That's okay. How about friendships formed and camaraderie of service. Do you still see friends that you met in the service?

Actually at the time, no, but since then through our reunion group of the units, I met Jerry Strout – he was originally from Bangor, Maine and now he’s the one who found him and got him back in the group; he’s down in South Carolina or something like that.

So do you have regular reunions like every couple of years?

No, they have a reunion every year and it shifts from place to place, yeah.

So every year it’s in a different location.

Yeah –

How many have you attended?

Four now, I missed the last one, but I’ve been involved with it for five years, or six years, but I did four in a row and last year was Texas – I didn’t go there, but –

While you were still in Viet Nam, how were your communications from home?

How long did it take for a letter – how did you stay in touch with family and friends – was it by mail strictly?

Yeah, I put that in there.

No telephone communication?

No, I made one telephone call – I think, my fiancée at the time – at one time I went – they had a thing where you could go to a ham operator and it was very, very embarrassing because they would put you on a phone and you had a ham operator next to you in Viet Nam, then there was another guy in the States who would call up who you were talking to – and you would say hello –

So you had a four-way conversation –

Yeah, and everybody’s listening in and room where everybody else is waiting for their turn to talk. And then another time, there was a room you could go to and actually make a phone call –

Okay.

And I waited forever, and it was like two dollars a minute, which back then was very expensive –

Yeah, and you worked for the phone company.

I mean, it was back then two dollars a minute; the people made \$80 a week.

I know; that’s a lot.

So I made a call but it was collect and they had to pay for it at the other end and that was it. And that’s another thing – some guy was on there like 20 minutes –

That's a lot of money. Right.

But still then there was limited privacy, but I mean nowadays you see them on their computers –

Skype and everything –

Yeah.

It's really so different today. So say now about letters – I always like to ask about letters. How long would you say that it took a letter to reach you from the U.S. in Viet Nam?

I don't know –

Was it a week or ten days?

At least a week, yeah, and you probably heard this before that it was free –

Oh, yeah, of course, but still it took ten days.

Yeah, yeah. And then I did get – they had a deal – Chicago Tribune got people to sponsor troops to get the Tribune. So I got the Tribune for awhile, about three months – I don't remember, I probably got his name somewhere in my files, but this guy in Chicago paid for me to get the Tribune for awhile.

Oh, how nice. I never heard about that.

Even though it was like a week late, you know –

Still, it's nice to read it.

And then after that ended, I agreed to buy it on my own, and even like they had, you know, Sears Tower – I had the newspaper where it said Sears Tower coming – that was on the whole front page. So that was kind of neat.

While you were there and off-duty, did you have any recreational or off-duty pursuits?

Yeah, well, probably we would go and actually drink once in awhile – that's one trait I picked up in the military.

Well, did you have drinks of your own – were you in any cities?

No, no, no, it's not like – we were – they just had little – just little NCO bars and you'd just get a beer, soda, whatever.

Oh, I see.

And they would bring in concerts.

Oh, Bob Hope.

Yeah, that one, but I mean they would bring in like Australian groups, a band and a couple of singers, you know, girls dancing and stuff like that; they would bring them in every month or so. That would be just on a little stage.

This is all at Chu Lai?

Yes.

You mentioned to me before we started this interview that you saw Bob Hope.

Yeah, Bob Hope came and actually I have the DVD –

You were there at Christmas time?

Right. I have the DVD of his Viet Nam shows and they show it there.

Would that be '69 then?

'69, Christmas '69, and actually our unit flew him in and out. I wasn't, you know, as a ground guy I wasn't on the helicopter, but our helicopters picked him up from wherever they were before, brought him to Chu Lai and then took him where they went next.

Who was with him there – do you remember?

Oh, Connie Stevens.

Connie Stevens – they show that a lot –

Yeah, there's a guy – I just read a Bob Hope book – this guy was kind of hard on him – but towards the end he was, you know, --

Well, he did good for the troops.

Yeah.

He did come there and he entertained –

Another entertaining thing – I got to Hawaii twice.

Oh, okay. Like an R & R?

R & R and then the second time it was – you got a week of leave and I just signed up stand-by to go there and I got right out and went there. It was nice to get to the states for a week.

Oh, yeah, sure.

Because some guys didn't take their leave, they took their R & R maybe, but they didn't take their leave, so when they went home they'd either get the leave or get the cash for it, and I got to go to Hawaii, you know.

Very nice. The war was still ongoing when your time was up.

Yeah, right; it went like three years after I was home.

How were you notified – did they send you a telegram or something, that your time is up. How were you notified that your service was ended?

Oh, no, I was a two-year enlistment and it ended up being 19 months. I was out except I got somewhere in all my archives here that I was actually in the Reserves till 1974.

Oh, okay.

My actual final discharge was in '74 – but I didn't do anything –

I was going to say did you do anything in the Reserves?

No, there was no Reserve; no it was just that I was not completely released –

Oh, you were still – like if they ever had to call you up you were there.

Yeah, if they had something they could call me back; but that ended in '74.

How did you get back home from Viet Nam?

We ended up –

By what means, plane, train, ship?

We flew out of good old Cam Rahn Bay – actually when I went to Hawaii – every time I left, it was through Cam Rahn Bay.

Okay.

And, so I finished up and I went to Cam Rahn Bay; and we were there for a couple of days waiting for a plane – and like before, we did stop off in Japan but this time I went into Seattle, Washington and I went through the process and got out.

So you actually got out in Seattle.

Seattle –

You were discharged in Seattle.

Right; they gave you the uniform; you could fly home. A lot of people have horror stories; I didn't have any problems with people throwing eggs at me or anything like that

Oh, that's right.

Thank God I never saw any of that.

So you flew home then from Seattle also, back here to Illinois.

Yes.

How was your reception by family and friends?

It's a distant memory but I was happy to be home.

You weren't married or anything at the time.

No, I got married the end of that year, the end of '70.

So how was your readjustment to civilian life? What did you do when you got back?

Well, I took a couple of weeks off and just went to the same job I had at the phone company –

You went back to A T & T.

And they were – I don't know if legally they're bound to do it or not –

I believe they are.

But they gave me, my Army time counted towards my seniority on the job.

Right. And you probably got raises that you would have received if you were there.

Yeah.

So what job did you have now coming back?

Well, I went back to the pay phone thing just for about a month, or a few weeks and then I went to a place called Hyde Park – like a suburb – an area of Chicago near the University of Chicago and there I went into finally really working on telephones. They start you out – first of all to get used to the truck and everything, they have you going around and picking up phones that are disconnected, and getting used to it. And then little by little they – I took a course – at North Avenue and Western – they had a school and they gave us the basic installation course, how to run wire and hook up the phone.

That was sponsored by the phone company?

Yes, it was their school. I was working for them – installation school and then I worked the Hype Park area in Chicago. I worked my way up into business phones and stuff. And in 1981 I got a transfer out of there and came to Lyons, Illinois as a Data Technician doing computer lines and stuff like that – and I did that until I retired from there in 1994.

So you stayed with them the whole time.

Yeah. I took an early out; they gave me an offer and then I went to a competing phone company for the next 12 years.

Wow –

So I was a phone man my whole life – 40 some years.

Have you had contact with fellow veterans over the years?

Not over the years; not long-term but recently, in '09 I found out that our 132nd Unit had a website and I got in contact with people there. And I've been going to the reunions since then. And then a year ago, I just happened to come across an article about a Marine who was gonna be the Grand Marshal for the Western Springs, Illinois VFW Parade – and they had a little bio that he was in Chu Lai from 69 and 70 –

Oh, wow.

So I got right on the phone and I got this guy and we started talking; I went over and met him and it turned out he's involved with the Western Springs VFW.

What's his name?

Bruce Hardin.

He's still there, right?

Yeah.

So even though you didn't know him over there, you know him now.

Yeah, we were neighbors there. So I went to the VFW Parade and marched, and everybody clapped; it was really cool. I was like almost in tears – you start – it's about a mile long parade, runs around the Burlington Railroad tracks, and then –

Was it on Memorial Day?

Yeah, Memorial Day Parade – and there was a group of us veterans walking, and as we walked along, the entire time we walked, they were clapping for us.

How nice; that's very nice.

So then after that, I joined them and so now I'm one of the guys putting on the parade.

That's good; so you're active in membership in veterans organizations.

Yes., the VFW, I'm a lifetime member now.

Okay – any others, like American Legion ?

No, no.

Just VFW.

Yeah, it's 10778.

Are there other men there that might want to be interviewed?

I'll present it to them, yeah.

That would be great.

Because I know somebody brought up doing it but going to Great Lakes or something.

Oh, you don't have to do that; I can do the interview at their house.

Yeah.

So, some reflections – how did your military experience affect your life?

I guess it helped me grow up, you know, discipline – you have to do what you're told, and stuff like that – typical teenager, you know, I was a little rambunctious and stuff.

So the life lessons you learned from the military service –

To be on your own, and stuff.

Anything else that you would like to add.

Not right now. My sheet only went up to Hawaii.

Okay. Any stories about Hawaii or anything you want to add?

Oh, no, no, no.

Any anecdotes that you want to include? Bill has photos here but none that he's willing to part with; he's got diplomas and other memorabilia – Graduation from U.S. Army Transportation School in Fort Eustis, Virginia.

I could actually give you pictures.

They will only take original photos; they don't want copies.

Well, it's not a copy; it's printed from the picture.

If there's anything you feel you want to include we'll have time to do it. I'll give you a draft copy of this interview for your review – to make changes or add something –

I think we covered it.

Okay, well, thank you very much for this interview and thank you very much for your service to our country.

I appreciate it.

We appreciate it too; thank you.

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