

This interview is being conducted on Thursday, January 12, 2023 at the home of William J. Cooper, Jr. My name is Fran Prokop and I'm speaking with Bill Cooper who served in the United States Army and is a veteran of the Viet Nam era. Bill Cooper 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.

Bill, when and where were you born?

Evergreen Park, Illinois. January 29, 1943.

What were your parents' occupations?

My Dad was a World War II veteran. He served from January of 1942 to August of 1946, mostly in Special Services. My Mom was a – she worked in the Finance Department of Sears Roebuck at 62nd & Western Avenue in Chicago.

What did your Dad do after he got out of the service?

He was a Chicago Police Officer when he went in and when he came out. He retired in 1972.

How many sisters and brothers did you have?

I had three sisters, no brothers.

What did you do before entering the service?

I worked for Illinois Bell Telephone Company.

Did you graduate high school?

I did – St. Rita High School in Chicago.

And then you went to work at the phone company?

In high school I worked for them – 1961.

Did you have other family members serving in the military?

I had an Uncle, my Uncle Tom. He was a World War II vet in the Pacific theater. I had another uncle who was a paratrooper?

Were they Army?

Well, my Uncle Tom was Army. My Uncle George was a – I guess he was Army – whatever Airborne was –

That was Army – Army Air Force –

Paratrooper.

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

I was drafted when I was 23 years old. I was one of the – one of six members of our platoon were in our 20s. The rest were all teenagers – 18, 19.

You were old.

I was over the hill by then, yeah. We had no kids. They were drafting –

Were you married when you went into the service?

Yeah. Good old LBJ got us in there.

Married but no children; so you were drafted.

Yeah, got sucked right in there.

How did you feel about that? Were you happy or not?

Well, no, I didn't – I had a career with the phone company going; I was married for a couple of years by then; we were starting to plan a family and, uh, I was a little upset about it but I went in with no – with open eyes, open hands, and I did what I did. I did my duty and I felt pretty good about it after a while.

So you didn't choose that specific branch of service; you were drafted and they put you in the Army.

Yeah, I would have went in there anyway. My cousin, or my brother-in-law was drafted into the Marine Corps during the Viet Nam War.

Oh.

That was unusual; most went into the Army.

Yeah. Where did you go for training?

Well, I went down there for my physical with a small bag of clothes and that night we were all put on a train and all wound up in a place called Fort Campbell, Kentucky. They opened up that post for basic training because of the Viet Nam war escalating.

How long was your basic training?

Well, I was there for two tours because I hurt my back in the sixth week of basic training. I was in the hospital for three weeks. They brought me back the fourth week. I was going to be a professional trainee by then.

What did you do to your back?

We were out in bivouac and I – it was just a sudden strain and I went down and they told me my back was out of joint. In August 29th of basic training – I didn't get out until November –

something because I was there for so long. And I was transferred to Fort Dix, New Jersey for secondary training as a –

Was that considered specialized training?

It's called Advanced Training.

What did you do in Fort Dix?

Well, they taught me to be a company clerk. They taught me how to type in two weeks – which I never learned –

Is that because you had the problem with your back before – that they put you in an office rather than –

No, no, I have no idea why they put me there.

Okay. So you had classroom training during the Specialized Training.

Yeah, sure.

Anything else – did they teach –

Well, they found out that I was a telephone man and they had me do a lot of rewiring of the barracks, dayrooms and Officers' Quarters. I did a lot of that.

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

Well, uh, I told you I wasn't too happy about being there in the beginning –

Right.

But basic training was brutal for me because I was older. In nine weeks of training I lost 45 pounds –

Wow!

Ran my rear end off –

They say you can eat all you want –

Well, I was heavy when I went in –

I'm sure you ate in –

You have to let me finish the sentence – my pet peeve is when people interrupt me when I'm talking, okay?

Okay.

I lost my train of thought. What they did is they told us that the fat guys will lose weight, the skinny guys will gain weight and the guys that were in good shape would put muscle on themselves. That's what I'm trying to say.

Okay. Could you describe a typical day at boot camp?

Yeah, it was get up in the morning, at 3 or 4 o'clock, go to breakfast, run a mile, throw up. Then go back to your barracks get all kinds of, what they call, G.I. parties, I thought it was an actual party, but you clean the barracks with a toothbrush. And then you get up for lunch, get a big lunch, go out and run a mile and throw up again. Then you went to the range -- sometimes, you know, to qualify on your weapon -- four teams -- I qualified as a sharpshooter. I had two rounds left and the Instructor said, "Well, if you hit the target you can be a sniper in Viet Nam." I said okay. And I shot both shots in the air. So I was a sharpshooter, instead of an expert.

Half our platoon -- guys were from Kentucky and the other half were guys from Chicago.. It was like the hillbillies against the city slickers.

Okay. Did you say how long you were in Fort Dix?

Yeah, Fort Dix was near eight weeks. Yeah, I didn't do too much except what I call grunt work.

It was kind of easier then because it was during the winter time too. We didn't do too much outside stuff, and all that -- calisthenics and things; we did them inside. We just went to school in the morning; it was kind of easier. It wasn't too bad.

And what happened after Fort Dix?

Well, then I got my orders to go to a small NIKE Base in Long Island, New York, which was called Fort Totten. It was a NIKE base that the Army had taken over and had an Army base.

I got there as a Clerk/Typist along with four other guys, who were also Clerk/Typists. They were from the South. When I got there the Personnel Sergeant needed somebody in Personnel. I was the only guy from Chicago, so he got me into Personnel. The other guys became cooks.

Oh.

I still think about them once in awhile. So I spent my time at Fort Totten. I got orders for Viet Nam to go to a place called Quon Non, but they had levied me at the incorrect MOS -- Military Occupation Special -- they had me levied as an ammo supply clerk and I was a Personnel Specialist by that time.

So what happened?

We sent the necessary paperwork in and they revoked my orders for Viet Nam and they never reissued them.

Wow! So you were lucky!

Kinda -- Yeah, I coulda went – I kinda wanted to go, but I had my wife –

Yeah, you were married.

And what was nice about Fort Totten, I was able to have my wife come up and live with me for awhile. But when I got the orders for Viet Nam, I sent her home. She got an apartment in Chicago.

But you never did go to Viet Nam so did she come back or what –

No, she just stayed in Chicago because it was time for her to go back anyway. And then they closed up the base. They closed up Fort Totten and I got sent to Brooklyn, New York to Fort Hamilton where I was a personnel specialist there also.

What did you do in that job?

Well, most of the jobs we did was process levies; Levies is what came down from the Department of Defense with names on it with people ready to go home.

Were they like Orders – levies?

They were like Orders; they called them levys – l-e-v-y-s. The names were on there – John Doe is going to Germany; John Doe is going to Mexico; but most of them were for Viet Nam.

Okay.

So my job was to issue the Orders to the individuals that were going to Viet Nam.

So was this like a 9 to 5 job?

Yeah.

And was it like Monday through Friday or did you work weekends?

No, we didn't work weekends; Monday through Friday was kind of nice.

Did you live on the base?

I lived in barracks – three-man room.

But it was on the base.

Yeah. I was promoted to Sergeant at that time, which was kind of nice.

So you spent the rest of your enlistment, like a year and a half, between Fort Hamilton –

Well, I would say maybe seven months in Fort Hamilton, because Fort Totten closed, and most of us were transferred to Hamilton.

How long do you think you were at Fort Totten?

Fort Totten – from – I would say less than a year – ten months.

Did you have a car while you were there?

I did; had my own car. My wife took it back when she left, so I didn't have a car then.

Okay. How about friendships that you made during service – are you still in touch with any of the guys that you –

Most of the guys I was in the Army with lived in different places. I had a real good friend, Tom Bramlett, he was a real good friend of mine; he was a Viet Nam veteran. He was also – he was Personnel there also. He came back. He lived in Hannibal, Missouri; I never did catch up with him again.

So you're not in touch him today or anything?

No, probably they're all passed away.

So vets do it online now because there's Facebook and thing –

Yeah, I don't have any connections to any of those guys I was in the service with.

So, what medals, honors or awards have you received –

Are you finished with the other – I've got other things that I did when I was in the service.

Okay, go ahead then.

At Fort Hamilton One of our missions was to do body escorts from the numbers that came back from Viet Nam. We were sent up there to pick up the body and transport it to their home.

Sent where?

To Dover, Delaware.

That's where they all came in?

Yeah.

So you had to escort.

Body escorts, yeah.

Did you have your dress uniforms? Were there ceremonies?

Well, we had to wear our Class As and usually a local Post would send over a Color Guard or something and do the Honors. I was given the flag and then I gave it to the next of kin. I did seven body escorts. Part of my – well, I went up there, they liked what I did and they told me because of my age I could probably handle some more work at Dover, Delaware. So I was TDY

– temporary duty assignment. They put me up there for a couple weeks at a time. I worked with the dead that came off the plane. The bodies came in on what they call –

M A T S?

No, they would call them transfer cases; they were coffins; they were transfer cases. The bodies were embalmed in Viet Nam, placed in body bags, and then the transfer cases. When they came off the plane they were stacked about 6 or 7 high on the forklift trucks and brought into the mortuary. They call it the theater – for some reason – I don't know.

There was a special mortuary right there at Dover?

Yes; they must have had 40 or 50 embalmers that were in there.

Really.

When the bodies came in, our job was to open up the body bags. We didn't take the bodies out. We just kinda brought them like an assembly line for the morticians to work on them. They double checked to make sure they were embalmed correctly and they had ear plugs and stuff in them and things of that nature –

That's hard duty – my goodness!

Yeah, it was. That's when you really got to know what death was all about because there were so many and then there were so many smells. The worst ones were the ones that were burned.

Yeah.

The dismembered ones – from explosions -- all there was in the body bag were body parts – kinda tough.

Mmm – that's hard duty! Hard to do that -- Did you have to volunteer – tell them it's okay – that you want to stay there?

Well, they asked me if I wanted to, so It's kind of a volunteer thing.

Okay.

They didn't make me –

No, something like that – you have to –

Well, they said you're old enough. Would you want to do this – because there's so many bodies coming in.

Oh my goodness.

I said I'll give it a try and -- at first it was kinda hard. But after being there so long you become immune to a lot of the things.

Well, how long did you eventually end up doing that job?

For about three months.

Three months – that’s a lot.

And – the bodies were brought in; they were re-embalmed if necessary; they were washed and cleaned. They were dressed; we didn’t do that. After the bodies were placed in coffins they were shipped – they were sent out to us where we made sure all the necessary ribbons were on the soldier’s body, his name tag was there; his decorations on his lapels and things. All his personal effects were in a small box that were also placed in the coffin; and they were boxed up and then they were sent to a body escort. They were shipped home.

So they would not be assigned to you as the body escort –

No.

What was that job called – just temporary duty.

It was TDY – temporary duty – and you had to volunteer for that – body escort.

Oh.

So it was guys from different – most of them came from Fort Hamilton; some guys came from different posts around Delaware. Anyway, its 7 days to take the body home and report back to your duty station. So we had 7 days.

But when you were there volunteering during the TDY, where did you stay?

Most of the time we had barracks there. When I did body escorts I usually stayed overnight in the funeral home.

But when you were doing TDY and you were at Dover, Delaware, they had barracks at Dover?

Oh, yeah; they had them for the GIs that were over there

And you stayed there.

Uh-huh. Yeah, one body I brought home was – the first one I brought home was an 18-year-old and we drove – we took a train to Connecticut where he lived. The hearse met us at the train station and loaded the body up. Then we went to the funeral home and they uncrated him and brought him into the parlor. I stood at Attention – I stood at Parade Rest – for almost two hours in front of that coffin. I didn’t have to do that. I didn’t know any better. It was my first one. Finally the Mother came up to me and said, hey, you don’t have to stand there. I noticed that on his neck – the “Y” incision they do for the autopsy – it was showing so I had to pull his shirt up –

That's pretty hard –

And I moved his tie up. And then, after that, you know, I brought another body back to Decatur, Illinois.

Wow

And the hearse met us at St. Louis about 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning. We drove to Decatur and they had the body in the hearse. And they said we'll leave him in the garage overnight.

And I said , "No, you're not gonna do that; you're gonna bring him in"

Right.

Because, do whatever you gotta do but you're not leaving him in no freakin' garage. My job as body escort was to make sure that that the G. I. was given all the respect and honor that he deserved.

Right, right.

And I was very good on that. So they did. They brought him in and he was taken care of. Now that one was kinda rough. I slept in the funeral home for two days. So then they finally had the wake in the funeral home and I gave the flag to that mother or that wife. This guy was killed by friendly fire too.

Oh, man.

I brought one out to California – I brought a body out there –

Wow – that's a lot! Yeah. So you did this until you left the service.

Until I was discharged. What it did is it made me very cold towards death. Death has no meaning to me after seeing this.

You saw so much – yeah.

It took away all the emotion. And when my wife died I had no emotion; it hit me about 3 or 4 months later. To this day, every time I go to a wake I can smell decomposition. I don't know if it's really there or if it's in my head or my brain or whatever. But I filed for PTSD and I got a claim from the VA for my service.

So are you on a certain percentage or 100% disability?

Yeah, not 100%, that takes a lot of doing. I'm about 20%.

Um-hmm.

Anyway, 20% gives me my benefits, which is nice.

Well, that wears on your mind.

Well, anyway, I got discharged from the – from Fort Hamilton and they told us that because of the hatred for Viet Nam veterans and for war, we were told not to wear our uniforms to go home. Myself and two other guys, we wore our uniforms because we couldn't get stand by unless we did –

Right, right.

Well, we got off at O'Hare Field and we came through the gates and we were met with three scum-lookin' hippies. The first one asked me how many babies I killed. I punched him in the mouth, knocked him down, I was on him and the cop grabbed my arm and said, "Hey Sarge, go on, just go home." The hippie said I want him arrested, press charges – the cop said "Shut up." I'll never forget that.

Um-hmm.

Anyway, that was it. I got home and it was funny because the phone company was on strike back in those days; 1968 was a big strike, so I didn't go back to work because I was a union guy. My father-in-law got me a job working where he works. You know what they did? He made coffins –

Oh my God –

They were put into the coffins – they were like coffin inserts. September came and the strike was over and I went back to being a telephone man.

How long was that strike on at the phone company?

It was from May of '68 until September of '68. The longest strike in Illinois Bell history.

May to September of '68. Wow! There was so much other stuff going on with riots and stuff; I don't even remember that. Other than the terrible airport reception that you received, which was not uncommon in those days I understand, how was your reception by family and friends?

Well, they were very good. My – I didn't have too much of a relationship with my father and we never really got along. The two years I was away I never got one letter from him.

Wow!

And he was a World War II Vet and I couldn't figure that out.

Yeah.

Anyway, My wife was happy to see me –

I'm sure.

It was funny because some of the friends I had, we used to get together with them and they were kind of cold. I don't know if they were hippie-ized or something –

You just don't know –

We kind of fell apart. Sandy and I just kinda cultivated different friends and that was about it.

I was going to ask you, usually when guys are overseas I ask it more, how were communications from home – how did you stay in touch. Because when you're here, you could call—

I got letters from my wife all the time, and I sent her letters too.

And your Mother and Dad were alive but your father never –

My mother was the same way; she would send me a letter – I kept them –

She sent letters occasionally.

Once in awhile, yeah, you know; and I would call home a lot because I had a deal with one of the testers in one of the buildings. I would call him collect and he would patch me through to my wife. I never had to pay for the phone call – long-distance telephone call.

Being that you were a former AT&T employee, don't they give you – they used to get 50% off phone calls.

Yeah, but that was if you made the call; but not from where you were making the call. Like when I was in basic training – they had pay phones

Oh, I see.

Yeah, it was a – quite a deal. I think the long-distance operator was getting suspicious. I used to use the alias Fred Schwartz – and she would always question that, for some reason.

That's funny.

I came back from the service and I just went back to my job.

So you did go back to Illinois Bell.

Oh, yeah, yeah.

What was your job at Illinois Bell:

Well, when I left I was an Installer; install phones in houses. And I came back I was an Installer for awhile and then I got promoted to Repair.

And did you stay with Illinois Bell?

Oh, yeah, 35 years.

So you retired from there.

Yep. And my wife and I – my wife couldn't have any kids because of her kidney disease so we adopted two boys. Michael was born in '69 and my boss told me, he said, even though you're adopting, you get all the benefits of a guy who had his own.

Well, sure -- good.

I didn't know that, so. Now I know. Then I got promoted in 1970 to management – became a Repair Foreman for southeast side and west side garages.

And when did you retire?

Retired December 7, 1992 on Pearl Harbor Day. They were downsizing managers – 6,500 managers were let go, and I was one of them.

Well, you had many years –

Oh, yeah, my boss told me, he said, "You have to be out of here by January first. When do you want to go?" I said, December 7th. Pearl Harbor Day. That was it.

Ok.

Although I never look back. I always had jobs. I always had income.

Did you go on to do something else after you retired?

Yeah, I worked for a private pay phone company, for about a year.

Was that a full-time job or part-time?

It was full time; It was like a 1099 thing – like a contractor.

Right, independent contractor.

Yeah, yeah, I did that for about a year. And then – what happened after that? I know I got a job with the Department of Energy out in Las Vegas. A buddy of mine said what're you doing? So I said I'm driving a limo right now. He said you want to work out in Vegas? I said sure. So I worked for the Department of Energy – no, it was Department of Defense, it wasn't Las Vegas, it was the Nevada Test Site, 80 miles out of Vegas – once you got to the site, it was 20 miles into the nuclear – we worked right around Area 51, up there in Vegas.

Is that north of Vegas?

Yeah, that's north.

Is that where – near the Los Alamos Test Site?

That was farther away. But no, this was, I think it was called – anyway, we worked – we were putting in a – I worked for this company that made steel doors. And we were putting in a

facility that reclaimed plutonium from these NIKE missiles. If you could picture – there was like a round circle and then a corridor – there was a steel door here – a steel door there, a steel door there (indicating) so in the event of an explosion, the ceiling would cave in and the glass would be contained by these three big steel doors.

Wow.

And that's what we made – the big steel doors. So I did that for about 18 months. After that Sandy and I moved up to Galena.

Oh, Galena, Illinois?

Yeah. We had a cottage up there in 1990 – bought a small cottage and bought the lot next door so we built a house out there and lived there for 15 years.

Did you retire, when you went there?

I was already retired –

Yeah, but that was after the 18 months that you did the steel doors.

Oh, yeah, yeah, right after that.

So you retired to Galena, is that what you're saying?

I did odd jobs and worked at different things. I did telephone work up there for people who wanted phones and I got involved in politics up there. I was on the County Board for ten years. Then my wife started getting sick and our closest doctor was 42 miles to Monroe, Wisconsin. She had to go there quite often. And if she got sick and was hospitalized she had to go to Madison, Wisconsin.

Oh, yeah.

She had a lot of problems; she always got better; she never – and finally we talked her into coming back home to the Chicago area.

She was from Chicago too?

Yeah, well I knew her when she was 16; her and I went to the same grammar school; she was in 7th grade and I was in 8th grade. She served me this horrendous chicken a la king dinner for my 8th grade banquet.

So you did move back here.

Yeah, I finally talked her into coming back and we moved into a condo in Oak Lawn and I became involved with the Legion.

Are you a member of any veterans' organizations today?

Yeah, the American Legion, 42 years now, I got active in Evergreen Park and became the Commander there from 2017 to 2019.

Okay.

Then I was also the 8th District Commander for one year – American Legion – that was the District that contained all the small posts.

And you are a member of the VFW Post here.

No, I'm not. The American Legion and the VFW are not the same thing.

I know, they're two different organizations, but I thought you were a member.

I can't belong to the VFW I never went overseas.

Oh, you weren't in foreign service, right. So you don't belong to the post that's here in Carillon.

No, because it's a VFW and it's also been disbanded.

Right.

It's no longer in existence.

Right. So we've gone through quite a bit of your military and life after military – some reflections – how do you think your military experience affected your life?

Well, first of all it was an honor for me to take care of those KIAs – killed in action—most of them were. It was my honor. I felt very, very honored to do that. I learned a lot about the individual who I took care of. I had to face their family. If we brought back a body that was still in the bag, it was pieces and stuff – the parents or whoever wanted to see what was in the bag – our mission ended at that point. We left. Because too many times the escort was attacked – and they were – the relatives figured that they knew the deceased and were present at their death. Our mission ended if they wanted to look in the bag.

Did you tell them that?

Oh, yeah, I never took a bag home – I only took a body home.

If they were just in parts, they would be buried with a closed coffin.

Oh, yeah, just closed. The funeral director would tell the people – “You want to remember how they were, not how they are now.”

Right, exactly. Yes.

Some of them were pretty messed up.

I'm sure. Any life lessons that you learned from military service?

Well, my mission now is to give back to the military. Of course I didn't want to be in there but once I got in I enjoyed being in the service. I enjoyed the camaraderie of my fellow veterans in the service. I enjoyed the politics in the service – I mean, like finance guys, work with the personnel guys, got really good deals and stuff; that was kinda cool. Once I got out it was kind of different because it wasn't the same closeness that I had. But now I'm a Service Officer with my Post; so my mission now is to get guys help if they need it.

How do you feel about the VA?

I think the VA is the best place in the world for veterans. I got into the VA a long time ago. Now that I have a disability I get all my care from them for anything. But I've never had a problem with getting an appointment, finding a doctor or specialist if I needed one.

Um-hmm.

My appointments are – I make my own appointments sometimes if I need to. If I get sick on the weekend and the VA's not available, what they have now they call the Mission Act – where I can go to Edward Hospital, tell them I'm a veteran and I get my care through the VA. They got the necessary paperwork and any cost go to the VA for veterans' care.

Oh, I wasn't aware of that.

I get guys into the service now – into the healthcare service system because a lot of guys out here are widows now and what the VA did was they have what's called a Means Test, and what they do is they combine all the income from both the wife and the husband – and usually the guys don't need it because they make too much money. But now that they lost their wife, they don't count that anymore. I got three guys out here into the healthcare system. So I do that. I can help guys getting their DD 214s. We have a big problem where these older guys don't know where their DD 214 is; they die and they get no benefits.

Oh, yeah.

I got World War II guys that need to get their discharge papers.

So you do help other veterans doing stuff –

Oh, yeah. I do it with my Post and I also do it with the vets in Carillon. I get guys to call me about different things. I do the best I can. It's things I can't do that's the problem above my pay grade -- I refer them to the – there's a bunch of VSOs – Veteran Service Officers – at the Jesse Brown Hospital where their office is – I refer them down there.

Who is the Jesse Brown Hospital?

It's down on Madison Street –

In Chicago?

Yeah, it's a big hospital – veterans' Hospital.

Oh, Jesse Brown Hospital is a VA Hospital.

It's not Hines – that's a different one.

Right. Hines is in Maywood.

Jesse Brown is a VA Hospital near State and Madison; something like that. I've been down there a couple of times and – I think they take civilians down there too.

Oh.

But most of them are veterans. I think it is a branch of the VA also. I usually go out to Joliet; they have a clinic up there that I go to quite often.

Out of the VA?

Yeah. They have two CBOC – called a clinic – one is in Oak Lawn, one is in Joliet. I go to the one in Joliet a lot for therapy on my shoulder.

Is that by St. Joe Hospital, the one in Joliet?

It's by Silver Cross; it used to be Silver Cross but now it's in its own entity – farther west – a clinic there. I go there as much as I can; easier for me to go there than to Hines; Hines is a pain in the neck sometimes.

For therapy?

On my shoulder. I have arthritis in my shoulder. I've been going there for six appointments so far. I also go there for x-rays and blood draws.

For PTSD?

I do that and I go -- I talk to a psychologist at Oak Lawn, but we're done with the sessions there.

I go for dermatology there; I go for x-rays there; they do a lot of stuff there. I go to Oak Lawn for my primary care physician.

Ok, well I think that pretty much covers everything. Is there anything else you can think of?

No, but I can show you some of the stuff, photographs and stuff I have.

Okay. Specialist E5 – was that your highest rank achieved?

Yes, and then they made me a Sergeant after that – three stripes.

(Looking at photos and letters in scrap books – photos of body escort service.

The interview with Bill Cooper is completed and I just want to say thank you, Bill, for this interview and thank you for your service to our country.

Thank you.

William J. Cooper, Jr.

21731 Empress Lane

Plainfield, IL 60544

708-860-6517