

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
KEN CHRISTOPHERSON
Company Clerk, Army, Vietnam War.

2008

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Christopherson, Ken, (1943-). Oral History Interview, 2008.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 55 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 55 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Ken Christopherson, a Valders, Wisconsin native, discusses his service as a company clerk in the Army during the Vietnam War. Christopherson talks about his family's military history, including an uncle who was wounded by friendly fire in New Guinea during World War II. He speaks about his activities after graduating from high school: attending Central State College (Stevens Point, Wisconsin), getting a job with a blister rust control program, a part-time job as assistant warden in Manitowoc County, having a veteran roommate, graduating with a degree in forestry, and enlisting. Christopherson touches on basic training at Fort Dix (New Jersey), characterizes his officers, and talks about marksmanship testing. He addresses engineer pioneer training at Fort Leonard Wood (Missouri), dropping out of Officer Candidate School, a month of R&R at home, and flying to Vietnam. Christopherson shares his first impressions of Vietnam and coming under mortar fire before he'd been issued a weapon. Assigned to Headquarters Company, 20th Engineer Battalion, he tells of arriving in Pleiku and characterizes his first sergeant. He reports how one of the clerks he arrived with was killed.

Christopherson describes his duties as company clerk, passing a general inspection, and a week of perimeter guard duty. He mentions a tear gas training exercise and learning how to type. He describes the rat control problem, using dogs to cut down on rat populations, and a personnel officer getting in trouble for selling the camp dogs to the Vietnamese for meat. Christopherson comments on living conditions, men getting sick with malaria because they didn't take their pills, and marijuana use in his unit. He details taking someone's place on the "war wagon" running supplies through "ambush alley" to the line companies at Kontum and Ben Het. He speaks of visiting his girlfriend's brother in Brisbane while on R&R in Australia and doing day tours while on R&R in Hong Kong. Christopherson describes putting on lieutenant bars and sneaking into the officer's club. He speaks about his discharge, the neutral effect being a veteran had on his career, and joining the VFW.

Biographical Sketch:

Christopherson (b.1943) served in the 20th Engineer Battalion during the Vietnam War from July 1969 to July 1970. He grew up on a farm near Valders (Wisconsin). After the war, he worked for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and eventually settled in Middleton (Wisconsin).

Interviewed by Jim Kurtz, 2008

Transcribed by Telise Johnsen, 2010

Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2011

Interview Transcript:

- Jim: January 12th, 2008. My name is Jim Kurtz, and I—
- Ken: 14th [low voice].
- Jim: 14th? I've been corrected already--
- Ken: [Laughs]
- Jim: --The 14th, and I'm interviewing Ken Christopherson at the Middleton VFW Post 8216. Ken, where and when were you born?
- Ken: I was born in Manitowoc County [*Wisconsin*], 1943.
- Jim: What was the date?
- Ken: December 16.
- Jim: And were you raised in Manitowoc County, then, or--?
- Ken: My dad and mother [clears throat]--well, I lived in, probably in Calumet County for a year. Then my parents moved into the Manitowoc County area, and my dad was a farmer. And he worked on different farms, and then eventually buying a farm outside of Valders, Wisconsin. And that's where I grew up—in about 1954 we bought the farm.
- Jim: And where did you go to high school, then?
- Ken: Valders.
- Jim: Okay. And is that where you graduated from high school?
- Ken: I graduated from Valders in 1962.
- Jim: In 1962 you graduated from high school. When you were growing up in the eastern Wisconsin, northeastern Wisconsin, area, were there any relatives that were veterans of World War II or Korea that had any influence or impact on you?
- Ken: Well, there'd be my uncle, Uncle Chris. He served in the Army. He enlisted in the Army in the end of November 1941. And, as everybody knows, December 7th they declared war on, on Japan--
- Jim: Uh huh.

Ken: And shortly after that, Germany. And so he was on a train down to, uh, Georgia or wherever the camp was, the Army camp that he was going to. And when he arrived at the camp they loaded him back on a train and headed him across country to Fort Lewis, Washington. And so he took his Basic Training on train, and they loaded him on a ship in the Seattle area and then hauled them across the Pacific.

I think they went into, uh, Hawaii, and they took their AIT [*Advanced Infantry Training?*] onboard ship and ended up in Australia. And there they grouped up and went into New Guinea, where he served until about 1943. And, uh, at that time he was wounded and strafed by a plane. His, his, uh, few of his friends were killed. And it was only years and years later, forty years later, fifty years later, that he found out that, uh, through a book that he received, that he was strafed by friendly, friendly fire.

And, uh, but he served his time there. And he spent about six months in a hospital in Perth—or, not Perth, but Darwin, Australia. And then he went back to St. Louis, Washington, and spent about another three months in a hospital there. He was shot behind his left leg, pretty much, uh--. They saved his leg and stuff, but he still is suffering. He's eighty-nine years old now, and he's still kind of limping around, and his leg cracks open and bleeds every once in a while. He still has shrapnel in his, in his lungs, er, uh, near his heart, near his spine, and pieces of that keep coming out years and years later. So--

Jim: Did he talk very much about his experience to you?

Ken: Nothing.

Jim: Nothing.

Ken: Not a word until--I'd say maybe the last ten years or so, now, he's started to open up and started to talk about it. And he would talk about times when, uh, they were in the Service, and he talked about, you know, land-, going into New Guinea. He said they spent months in the damned jungle walking from hill to hill. He said they could hear the Japanese pounding the drums and getting high on what they, I guess they figured it was liquor of some kind, sake or something.

Jim: Uh huh.

Ken: And he said they'd, they'd hear that screaming and pounding and horns blowing and stuff. And then about early morning hours usually they would, they would have a, a suicide attack, he said. And he said it was just pretty terrible, he said.

He never talked much about that, but I think from all accounts he was a machine gunner's assistant for the first year. And then after that I guess he was machine gunner, because the guy that he was working with died.

And, uh, but he just talks about, you know, some of the highlights. He, he talked about going from hill to hill and some of the landings, and the big ships shooting. He said they'd be out on the ocean. He said these big ships would shoot. They were on, apparently, on some sort of a battleship when he was there. And he said the whole ship felt like it was going to roll over when they'd fire their big guns. And so they'd pretty much pound the shore, and then they'd go in and, and set up camp and, and, uh—

Well, first, I guess, the Marines would go in. He always said the Marines would go in and take all the glory, and then the Army would have to go in and clean up, he said, which was the dangerous stuff. He said going in--
[laughs]

Kurts: Yeah.

Ken: --Into the holes, and into the jungle and trying to take care of the enemy.

Jim: What was his reaction when he found out you were going to be going to war?

Ken: Well, the only advice he told me, he said, "Don't volunteer for a damn thing," he said, "and keep your head down." [laughs]

Jim: After you graduated from high school, what happened?

Ken: High school? Um, well, I went to Stevens Point University at the time--it was called Central State College when I was there—and I spent about a year and a half or so going to school.

And then I had the opportunity to go out West and, and work for a summer on a blister rust control program, which dealt with the western white pine. And then I had the opportunity to work into the fall. And forestry was what I was really interested in. So I hung there for about a year. And then I came back, and I worked part time for the game warden in Manitowoc County as assistant warden.

And then I went back to school again the following January, which would have been 1964. And then I completed my degree in, uh, in forestry, basically. I had enough to, for a forestry major in any forestry school in the country, but because we weren't accredited during my stay there, I, I--. The school became accredited the semester I graduated, but the school

wouldn't give me credit for a forestry major because I was missing a course in physics.

Jim: Okay.

Ken: Anyway, I got out, and, uh—

Jim: When did you graduate?

Ken: I graduated in '68, and, uh, I knew I was going to be drafted just as soon as I got out. So I decided to enlist. I went down to Milwaukee and went and took the physical. And then I signed up at that point on a delayed—

Jim: I want to stop you before we go into that part of it. So, you were in college during the [*Vietnam*] War, the early war years, early to mid-war years.

Ken: Right, right.

Jim: Was there any discussion about the war while you were in school?

Ken: All the time.

Jim: All the time?

Ken: All the time, yeah. I roomed with a couple of fellows who were, uh, veterans themselves. One of the fellows served in Saudi [*Transcriber's note: Ken pronounces this "SAW-dye."*] Arabia. He was with the Air Force for four years. And the other fellow was with the Army, and had served in Korea for--he was in the Army for three years.

Jim: Uh huh.

Ken: So he spent time in Korea. And, you know, we, I got a different perspective of what the military was about. And I got a, you know, a pretty good impression of what they thought of all the anti-war stuff—

Jim: Uh huh.

Ken: --That was going on. And these fellows were pretty balanced in their approach, too. They didn't think we should've been in Vietnam at the time. They, you know, there was big money, big industry that took us into the, into Vietnam, at least they thought. And so when I went there, too, I kind of went looking and thinking—

Jim: Yeah.

Ken: --about what I was getting into. And one of the impressions I had when I first arrived in country was, "What am I doing here?" And I looked around and, uh, here were a lot of young Vietnam men my age probably-- maybe couple, few older, few younger--but here they are out pimping and selling narcotics. And they're not serving in their military. And I really began to wonder, you know, "Why are *we* here if these folks aren't interested in fighting their own war?" But—

Jim: Let's back up, now, to your training, and then we'll pick that up.

Ken: Okay.

Jim: So you enlisted for two years. Where did you take your basic?

Ken: I took my basic at Fort Dix, New Jersey.

Jim: And does anything stand out about that experience?

Ken: Not really. I mean, we had a pretty good group of fellows. We came from all over the country, and quite a few of us were college-age guys who had graduated and were now in the military.

Jim: Similar situations to you.

Ken: Right, right.

Jim: Did any of the cadre stand out in your mind as either being particularly good or bad?

Ken: Well, I would say they were all pretty good fellows. We had a pretty good group. My drill sergeant was an Italian—last name was Cappolo [?], Capollo[?]. He was quite a character. He couldn't write, and so he would ask the different guys who were--; college guys would write letters home to his mother and to his girlfriend.

We had a Black sergeant first class who was a hell of a good guy. One morning we were standing, getting ready for formation. It was about five in the morning or so; the sun was just coming up. And here we heard this car whining, screaming, coming down the back roads and squealing around corners, and came barreling into the yard where we were, screeched to a halt, blew smoke all over from tires squealing. And he yelled at us, "Get over here! Surround the car!" And we all went running over and surrounded the car. And three seconds later a [sic] MP came squealing through with the siren on and went past.

Jim: [Laughs]

Ken: [Laughs] He apparently was late for work.

Jim: [Laughs]

Ken: [Laughs] He had overslept and was speeding, and the cop was going to pick him up. So he avoided that.

We had another sergeant first class; his name was Chris, C-H-R-I-S. And one day we went out for record fire with the M-14 and the M-15. The first day we fired with the M-14, and I got onto a damn lane that the targets didn't fall. And the first lane I was on, I hit all my targets. Second lane I got on, I hit all my targets but they weren't falling. And the guy behind me, I told him, "I hit that one." He said, "Well, it didn't go down." And I said, "I hit the damn thing." And he said, "It didn't go down." I said, "Listen, goddamn it," I said, "you start marking these down or I'll turn around and fire in the other direction."

Jim: [Laughs]

Ken: He said, "Okay, okay, okay, okay." So he gave me credit for a few of them. And I said, I said, "*Listen* now." I said. "When I fire, you listen for that round hitting that metal bar behind the target."

Jim: Yeah.

Ken: Every damn target, I hit it. I hit the target, you know. So I, I know damn well I never missed the target. And I told this Sergeant Chris that. And I told him, I said, "They gave me credit for nine misses," which is still good for expert--

Jim: Yeah.

Ken: --which just totally ticked me off. So the next day he told me, he said, "Listen," he said, "If you can beat me on record fire with the M-14, with the M-15," he said, "I'll believe you." And so he said, "We'll each go out with twenty rounds." How was it? Forty, forty rounds, I guess we fired, and we shot at twenty targets. And he said, "Whoever comes back with the most rounds left in the second clip," he said, "will win the argument." And so we came back, we went out and fired. And I hit every target of mine. And I came back. And he laid his clip down, and I laid my clip down. And he emptied his out; he had fourteen left in his clip. And when he emptied mine, I had all twenty rounds in mine.

Jim: [Laughs]

- Ken: [Laughs] So he believed me. And then he gave us, uh, there was, like, ten of us that got R&Rs to New York. They gave us tickets so we could spend an R&R in New York. So we had three days in New York. So we had a pretty good time out of that.
- Jim: Huh. Where'd you go to AIT, then?
- Ken: Went to, uh--oh, what the heck was it?--Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri.
- Jim: Okay.
- Ken: And that was engineer pioneer training.
- Jim: Why were you selected for that?
- Ken: I think it had to do with the fact that when I joined in June of '68, I signed up for Officer Candidate School.
- Jim: Yeah.
- Ken: And the only school for officers available at the time was at Fort Belvoir[?], [Virginia], which was an engineering thing.
- Jim: Uh huh.
- Ken: So I think they sent me there instead.
- Jim: But you didn't follow through on the Officer Can--?
- Ken: No, I got in there, the class--that's why I signed up in June and waited until September--was because everything was set up. So if I'd gone to everything in order, I'd have made it into this schooling on time.
- Jim: Yeah?
- Ken: Well, everything I went to was delayed. It started right away with basic training. Basic training was delayed a week and a half, and so I was a week and a half behind. So, by the time I got to AIT, I had to wait another week and a half or two weeks for AIT. And then when I got to Officer Candidate School, we had to wait almost two and a half weeks before we actually got into the school. And at the time I went in, I really didn't want to spend time in the military.
- Jim: Yeah.

- Ken: And I got to thinking about it, and so I opted to get out. And I told them that before I even went into the training. But they made me go through the first nine weeks of OCS, I think for punishment [laughs] more than anything.
- Jim: Oh.
- Ken: But anyway, I went through the nine weeks and then I left. But, uh,--
- Jim: So you—
- Ken: I just didn't want to spend another three years after I was commissioned.
- Jim: So you had a three-year commitment after being commissioned?
- Ken: No, two-year.
- Jim: Oh, two-year.
- Ken: It was just two years. That was the understanding when we signed, and that was what I opted--it was like a standard draft.
- Jim: Okay.
- Ken: And so then I spent maybe, um--this would have been in 1969--so I spent about twenty-five/thirty days in a holding company. And then I was sent, uh, then I went on R&R for a month. And then they sent me to Vietnam.
- Jim: How were you treated in OCS when they knew you didn't want to be there?
- Ken: Like a gentleman.
- Jim: [unintelligible]
- Ken: The commanding officer of the camp was a captain, and he sent me to a lieutenant colonel. And the captain, you know, said, "Goll-damnit," he said, "you've got good marks, good grades, your physical thing," he said. "You're one of the three or four top guys in the company," he said, "I don't want to see you go." He said, "Why don't you go talk to [whoever this fellow was]."
- Jim: Yeah.

- Ken: And I went in and talked to him too, and he said the same thing. But he said, "It's your decision," he said. And I said, "Yeah, I think I don't really want to be in the military that badly."
- Jim: Yeah, [unintelligible]. When you went home for leave after all of this happened, I assume you went back to the Manitowoc County area.
- Ken: Uh huh.
- Jim: How were you treated, knowing that you were going to Vietnam?
- Ken: Uh, the family treated me well, and, uh, but the impression was, you know, by this time, things were really getting pretty bad with, with, uh, all the people objecting to the war. And they pretty much treated the veterans like they were the baby-killers. And we weren't treated with any respect. Uh, Manitowoc County hired me and, uh, but I, I wouldn't say they hired me because I was a veteran. I was hired mostly because of my parents' good name and the fact that—
- Jim: Uh huh.
- Ken: --they paid their bills and, you know, they weren't trouble-makers. And that's— One of the guys who was on the commission at the time told the committee, you know, that "He comes from good stock. I think we ought to give him a chance." Four of the guys of the seven voted for me, and--
- Jim: Now, this was after the war?
- Ken: This was after the war, about six months after, right.
- Jim: Okay, okay. Well, we'll get back.
- Ken: Okay.
- Jim: Okay. So when you left, did anybody give you any—left home from this leave—did anybody give any special words or anything like that?
- Ken: Not really, no.
- Jim: How did you get to Vietnam?
- Ken: Well, I flew from Manitowoc to, I think it was St. Louis, and then I hopped a plane from St. Louis to Seattle.
- Jim: Okay.

- Ken: And as, you know, as you went from place to place, when I went from Manitowoc, there was nobody else on the plane but myself. I was in uniform, arrived in St. Louis. And there I boarded a plane, and I would say there were—oh, there must have been twenty-five of us. And we're all heading to the same place. And then when we got to Fort Louis we--uh, I forget how that worked--I think we had to wait for a military transport—
- Jim: Okay.
- Ken: --to pick us up and haul us to the base, Fort Louis, Washington. And they were angry because our plane arrived, like, two hours later than it was scheduled to. And so they wanted to put us on AWOL—"absent without leave."
- Jim: Oh.
- Ken: One of the guys that was with our group, he was a little higher ranking than the rest of us. And he pretty much told the guy to stuff it.
- Jim: Yeah.
- Ken: He said, "You go ahead and do that," he said, "and I'll make life miserable for you too." And so—[laughs]
- Jim: [Laughs] So, did you go by plane, then, from Fort Louis to Vietnam?
- Ken: We did, yeah. We went--well no, we went from, we went down to the Seattle airport and boarded a plane.
- Jim: Okay.
- Ken: Then we flew from Seattle to Honolulu, Hawaii. We were on our way to, I think they were saying, Wake Island. And the plane apparently was having some problems. And so they landed in Hawaii. We spent about three hours on the ground. Plane was refueled, and then we took off. And, uh, this was on, like, July—what was it?—July third, fourth. I think it was July fourth. And about eleven o'clock at night we took off from Hawaii. And sometime during the middle of the night, you know, we crossed over the International Date Line, where we skipped a whole day.
- Jim: Uh huh.
- Ken: We went from July fourth to July sixth, I think it was. And then we found out mid-morning--you know, early morning, eight/nine o'clock in the morning--that the plane was headed to Manila instead of Wake Island.

And so we landed in Manila in some little hangar someplace. It looked like out in the back country. I don't know what part of--

Jim: Yeah. [Laughs]

Ken: --[laughs] of Manila it was. But it had "Manila Airport" on the front of the hangar. So it must have been on the runway someplace.

Jim: Yeah.

Ken: And then they must have refueled, because I don't think we ever really got off the plane. We could see the people on the ground. I know they opened up the plane and let some air in. It was so damn humid and hot,--

Jim: Yeah.

Ken: --we shut it up, and we kept the air conditioners running. And then we flew into, flew from there to Cam Ranh Bay. And as we were approaching the coast of Vietnam--uh, you know, everybody was talking, visiting and stuff--and all of a sudden an announcement came through: "If you look out the right side of the window, you'll see the coast of the Republic of South Vietnam." And everybody got real quiet then. We kinda, just kinda stared at the, at the coastline. Beautiful coastline.

Jim: Uh, so that's where you—before, you were talking about your first impression of Vietnam--is that where that happened, when you said, "Well, what am I doing here?"

Ken: No. That happened when I actually arrived in Pleiku.

Jim: Okay. Well then—

Ken: Yeah.

Jim: --I want to go back here. What was your reaction when you stepped out of the airplane in Vietnam?

Ken: I can't really recall much of anything, except that it was beastly hot and humid. And then we were assigned to a holding company, and we spent about a week in kind of a holding area. Uh, maybe not a week, I'd say maybe five days or so, anyway.

Jim: Were you given any duties while you were there?

Ken: None, none. But they took us from Cam Ranh Bay across the bay to another camp. And, uh, it was either the first night or second night we

were there, we were, we, uh, they came under mortar attack and rocket attack. And, uh, we, there we were, sitting with no damn weapons, nothing, you know. It's not like the units now. When they're assigned to go to a country, at least they go with the weapons they've been trained with and stuff.

Jim: And were you given any bunkers to go to or anything like that?

Ken: There were bunkers, yeah, but you didn't really want to go into them because they were full of rats. So we kind of—our, our, our, uh, building, our hooch, that we were in had sandbags and, you know, we made sure our bunks were below ground level—

Jim: Yeah.

Ken: --or below bunker level. But nobody ever came to tell us to get out or anything. We didn't know where to go.

Jim: Okay. So did you know where you were going when you got to Vietnam?

Ken: Not really.

Jim: Okay.

Ken: Not really.

Jim: Then when you got your assignment, what were you assigned to?

Ken: Well, we were assign-- I was assigned to the 20th Engineer Battalion, Engineer Hill in Pleiku, Central Highlands. And when I arrived in company there, it was later in the evening. It was getting dark outside already. And we walked into the Orderly Room of the Headquarters Company, and the old first sergeant was on the phone, cussing somebody up one side and down the other. And come to find out it was the battalion commander that he was cussing out.

Jim: [Laughs]

Ken: And there were about five of us that walked in, and we didn't know each other. And he said, "All right, which ones of you are--?" This guy was Italian, too—

Jim: Yeah.

Ken: --Br-, Bruno, I can't remember his last name. But it was, he looked like he came from the Old Country.

- Jim: Yeah.
- Ken: Looked like he carried a violin case, and you'd better watch your step. But he was a hell of a nice guy. Treated the men really well, and he gained respect in our eyes [laughs]—
- Jim: Yeah.
- Ken: --by the mere fact that he cussed out the battalion commander.
- Jim: Yeah.
- Ken: But anyway, he said, "All right, which of you guys are college graduates?" And nobody raised their hand. You know, rule number one: "Don't volunteer a damn thing," see?
- Jim: Yeah.
- Ken: So, it's coming back there from my uncle.
- Jim: Okay.
- Ken: But anyway, he said, "All right, god damn it," he said, "I know at least three of you have college degrees. Now which ones are you?" And all five hands went up.
- Jim: [Laughs]
- Ken: We were all college graduates. [Laughs] So then he went down the line. He was saying, "Okay, you and you are in the Personnel Company." He said, "You're in Company A, Company B, and you're in Headquarters Company." And I was on the end of the line, and so I got Headquarters Company. The guy that was right in front of me got assigned to a company. And we were all, the three of us were Head--, were company clerks.
- Jim: Yeah.
- Ken: That's what our duties were. The other two worked in personnel. So they were right there on the battalion, only maybe a building away from us.
- Jim: Yeah.
- Ken: But, uh, the guy next to me ended up getting killed, uh, about the, two months before we were discharged. He, he had come into camp. I spoke

with him. He picked up his meal and headed back to the line[?] company. And, and, uh, guy that was driving his, the vehicle with him, they had kind of an open stake[?] truck-type thing.

Jim: Yeah.

Ken: It wasn't a jeep, but it was a small truck—canvas top on it--and the fellow was riding in the passenger side. And he [*the driver*] was talking to him, and he said, uh, noticed he wasn't talking. Then he figured, well, he probably just wanted to take a nap. So he stopped talking to him. When he got to the base, stopped the truck and he's, you know, he said, "Okay, time to get out." And the guy didn't move, and he looked over, and here he had been shot through the head. Guy, you know, they had a sniper or something shot at them as they were heading back to base. And so he was dead. He, he died. So I often wondered about that, you know. Had I been—

Jim: Yeah, different place in line—

Ken: --when I walked in—a different place in line, if I'd have been—

Jim: Were you taller than this guy or not, something like--?

Ken: A little bit, yeah. [Laughs]

Jim: And so you were—[laughs]. Ah, so, what were your duties?

Ken: Well, they assigned me as the Headquarters Company clerk, and that was my duty in Vietnam while I served there. But I never, uh—the first sergeant wanted to promote me into hard stripes, uh, sergeant stripes. And the guy who was in charge of personnel wouldn't let him. And the reason being, I think, the first sergeant wanted me to re-enlist, was what his object was, you know.

Jim: Yeah.

Ken: And so I'd have gotten a higher—. I had a critical MOS [*military occupational specialty*] at the time, which would have qualified me for one of the highest bonuses. And then, he said, "I would have worked on getting you promoted to E-6," he said, "so that you would have gotten top dollar." And, but I told him, I said, "No."

Jim: [Laughs]

Ken: I said, "I want out." [Laughs]

- Jim: So you had, really, the most powerful MOS other than first sergeant and commander.
- Ken: That's true. That's true. The company ran, as you know, the company runs on the company clerk. [Laughs]
- Jim: Yeah. [Laughs]
- Ken: We passed our general inspection when I was there. That was the only thing I was worried about, because I didn't take any training for being a company clerk. And the fellows that were there ahead of me as I was in the office, you know, one of the guys left. The Headquarters company clerk left, I'd say, a week and a half, two weeks after I was there—about a week after I was there. Because I was put on guard duty for the first week and got to sleep with the rats in the bunkers and stuff for seven days. And then, after that, this guy left, and the fellow who was assistant clerk took over as the company clerk for about a month and a half or so. And then he left. By that time, then, I took over.
- Jim: Did you receive any training about Vietnam before you—
- Ken: Quite a bit, yeah, we had quite a bit. The OCS training I took I think really helped me a great deal. I had nine weeks of training there, and we received a lot of good information.
- Jim: I've got to turn the tape. **[End of Tape 1, Side A]** I was asking about training for Vietnam. What kind of training did you receive in-country?
- Ken: You mean in the United States?
- Jim: No, in Vietnam.
- Ken: Oh. None.
- Jim: None.
- Ken: Well, yeah I would say none. We didn't really receive any type of training at all. I mean, they ran us through some tear gas. They threw some tear gas in a bunker and made us all run through and check out our equipment and stuff.
- Jim: Yeah.
- Ken: One guy damn near broke his neck running out, because this thing was failing, and he came running out and bammed [sic] his head on the beam.

Jim: [Laughs]

Ken: They had to take him to the hospital. And so that was the end of all our training after that.

Jim: Yeah.

Ken: I don't think they ever decided [laughs] to do that again.

Jim: So, okay. What were your duties? What was a typical duty day like as company clerk?

Ken: Well, I was responsible. I didn't have to stand morning roll call in the morning. But I was expected to have the coffee hot and the orderly room ready when the roll call was over. And usually that was called about 5:30 in the morning. And, so by, you know, 5 o'clock, I'd get up when everybody else was getting up. And they'd head down for formation, and I'd get the water and the coffee going and get started on the morning report.

So by the time the first sergeant arrived and gave me the list of names of people that were either going on R&R or leaving or being reassigned, I have that information, and then I'd type up the morning report. And I'd say by 8:30/9:00 I'd have the—you know, we'd eat breakfast about 6:00/6:30, something like that—and then we would get the morning report printed and over to the battalion headquarters, and they'd run it off and send it out.

Jim: After you were done with the morning report, what did you have to do?

Ken: Well, then it was a matter of maintaining, you know--writing letters and stuff for the commander, our company commander.

Jim: He couldn't write either? [Laughs]

Ken: No, he couldn't write either, no. [Laughs] And I walked into the company when I arrived, you know, I graduated from college, but I didn't know how to type.

Jim: Yeah.

Ken: And I thought, "Holy crap, what am I going to do?" So I spent, when I wasn't on the line, I was taking lessons from one of the fellows, a fellow from California. He was kinda, I don't know what his duties were, but he was there all the time. So he taught me how to type.

But even at that, though, my typing amounts to typing with three fingers, or two fingers and a thumb on each hand. And I could get it up to about thirty/thirty-five words a minute, which was good enough, you know.

Jim: Yeah.

Ken: And those old Remington typewriters we had in the Army, they were manual. They weren't electric. And you literally had to use a hammer on each key to cut through the three or four carbons that you had to type everything in.

Jim: [Laughs]

Ken: You know, you had to have three copies of everything.

Jim: Did people kind of try to get close to you because you could help them with—

Ken: I suppose. I imagine, yeah, yeah, a little of that.

Jim: Did you ever have to pull any perimeter guard duty?

Ken: Only the first week I was there. And I pulled five/six/seven continuous nights of perimeter.

Jim: What was that like?

Ken: It was interesting. Uh, I was the--the spot I was sitting in, we had a big bunker. The whole area was lit up, so all the lights were shining out into the, out into the perimeter. And we had, it was like a console set up in the, in the hooch.

Jim: Yeah.

Ken: And you had a machine gun. You had your own weapon, and you had, uh--what was it?--eight or nine Claymore mines that were set up at different intervals out there. The biggest thing was remembering which was which so that you didn't set off the wrong one first.

But, uh, and then you had to sleep, you know, on, on line. Well, they—I went down there the first night, and I climbed into the damned bunker underneath and, and was, you know, tried to sleep. You had a flashlight. And as I'm sitting there--and it was raining out; it was kind of the wet season yet—so I had my poncho on. And here come the rats. And they literally came right out of the damned sandbags. I'll bet I had twenty-five

rats in there the first night. And, and I thought, “Well, this is nuts.”
[Laughs] And so I, I didn’t bother to sleep.

But then they pulled the truck up on the line, and we got to either sit in the front seat or they had cot, a couple of cots, in the back of the canvas truck. So we slept in there.

Jim: Did they do anything about rat control over there?

Ken: We had dogs, and that was basically all they could do. I guess they put rat poison out too, but the dogs would get sick then, too.

Jim: Uh huh.

Ken: But we had, uh—I was there, let’s see, about in May or so of 1970. Just before I left, this personnel officer decided to collect all the dogs, because they had so many of them. He collected over 300 of them. He hauled them, put them into a big, uh, five-ton garbage, er, uh, gravel truck kind of, and hauled them all into town. And the guys that had them had them as pets-- And boy, I’ll tell you, that warrant officer really caught hell from everybody, including the battalion commander and everybody, for doing that.

Jim: He took them into town. That meant those dogs were going to be eaten.

Ken: They were eaten, yep. Yep, they’d take them, hang them up by their back legs and just let them drowned [sic] in their own blood—

Jim: Yeah.

Ken: --because they liked that dark meat. And so they would use it, use it for food.

Jim: Uh, what were your living conditions like, uh, you know, after you got done with your—

Ken: Well, I thought they were pretty good until I saw how the Air Force lived. The Air Force had curbs and, curbed gutter streets and blacktopped driveways. And they ate off of porcelain and steel, uh, stainless steel trays and stuff, and, but mostly porcelain and glass.

We had old fiberglass trays that we ate off of. And, uh, we didn’t have anything resembling concrete or asphalt. It was all compacted, red, volcanic soil. So in the dry season you were walking in six inches of powder, and in the wet season you were walking in six inches of mush, mud.

- Jim: Is there anything, any events that stood out in your year at Pleiku?
- Ken: Uh, well a couple of things probably stood out. We had a few guys in the battalion that thought it was pretty cute not taking their pills for malaria. And they'd stand formation in the morning. And that little white pill that we'd take every day, they'd just toss that over their shoulder. They wouldn't take that one.
- Jim: Yeah.
- Ken: And then the big one that we'd take, what was that, I think we took it once a week—
- Jim: Once a week, yes. That was a good one.
- Ken: That was a big one, yes, yeah; tasted awful. And, but, you know, then these guys were getting sick with malaria. And we'd haul them in. I'd have to take them down, a lot of times, to the hospital, when I'd make my run into the central office.
- Jim: Was there any discipline for people not taking their malaria pill?
- Ken: I never saw that. They never gave anyone an Article 15 that I know of. I don't think—I think they figured the punishment of having malaria was probably bad enough.
- We had some problems with marijuana, uh, especially the—they called them "o-jays." They were kind of a marijuana-filled piece of paper that was soaked in opium.
- Jim: Uh huh.
- Ken: We had a few of these guys walking around with the black sunglasses on, because your eyes were so bloody from smoking that stuff you couldn't do. But they always seemed to perform their work and do what they were supposed to.
- One of the trucks came back from one of their runs, you know, blew off the back, uh, tandem off the axle, you know. This was one of the pot-heads that got hit. He said his ears rang, he said, for a month later. He said they were still ringing after being hit by that. It literally blew the truck up in the air, and he rolled it over in the ditch someplace. But there were other trucks behind him, so he was able to hop on another truck and get out of there.

- Jim: Was this a mine that hit this truck?
- Ken: Hit a, hit a road mine, yeah.
- Jim: Yeah.
- Ken: That's basically how I got this Army accommodation medal [one *oak-leaf cluster*], was, uh, one of the young fellows from the personnel office was assigned to go on the war wagon.
- Jim: Yeah.
- Ken: We had war wagon duty we had to pull. And so the headquarters—
- Jim: What was that?
- Ken: That was running supplies up to the line companies.
- Jim: Okay, describe that.
- Ken: Well, that was, uh, [laughs] that was quite an experience. First off, the first, my First Sergeant Hapley[?] was gone. He was on R&R. And it was a real quiet day in the office. I think it was on a Sunday, even, and--or a Monday, maybe. And, uh, uh, this young fellow came in, you know, and he was literally throwing up and, and crying when he walked in. And I said, "Well, what in the hell is your problem?" And he said, "Well, I'm assigned to war wagon duty." And I said, "Well—so?" I said, "That sounds like a kind of an exciting thing to do." And he was scared shitless. He thought he was going to die.
- And I said, "Well, why don't you sit in the office here," and I said, "I'll take that run." I said, "Just tell the captain when you get in." You know, that's what we did. We switched places. And so I took his place, and, uh, rode the wagon up, all the way up to a place called Ben Het.
- Jim: Hmm.
- Ken: At least, that's what we were told. I don't, I don't know if we actually made it to Ben Het. But we did make it to an outpost, and it was pretty damn [laughs] wild where we were. And, uh, as we traveled up we went from Pleiku to Kontum to Tin Canh to, uh, some other little no-name, and then across the ridge--they called it, uh, Ambush Alley--went down into the jungle and then, finally, we, we ended up at this post, literally had to turn around with all the wagon—all the trucks.

We had about—oh, hell, we must've had fifteen or twenty trucks at least—with a war wagon in the front, war wagon in the back. And on the way up, we were in the back, and on the way back, because we were in the back, we got to turn around first, and we led going home.

Jim: What was this war wagon?

Ken: It was a big old ten-ton truck that was equipped with twin fifty-caliber machine guns.

Jim: Okay.

Ken: It was loaded down with grenades, uh, grenade launchers, two, uh--what were the, uh, regular machine guns?

Jim: M-60s?

Ken: M-60s, couple of grenade launchers and then ammo for, for everything, and then our own weapons. You know, we carried our own.

Jim: So how many people were on this?

Ken: The wagon itself, there were just two of us in the back and two in the front: the driver and one fellow was kind of riding shotgun.

Jim: So how could you shoot all these things? I mean—

Ken: Well, that's a good question. We were asking ourselves that as we were heading up [laughs], you know.

Jim: Yeah [laughs].

Ken: This doesn't look like it's going to be much like a fun trip.

Jim: Because, I mean, like you said you had twin fifties?

Ken: Right. And that was taken out of an old airplane, you know, so it had—

Jim: Yeah.

Ken: --the swivel on it. You could kick it around, and you could swivel about 350 degrees or so. It was not quite all the way around.

Jim: I mean, it's like two machine guns and grenade launchers, two guys; you've only—

Ken: Right, right. We'd be firing one with each hand and our teeth, but—

Jim: [Laughs]

Ken: --but we made it up to just outside of Kontum.

Jim: Yeah.

Ken: And then they, they said, "Well the road is red right now," which, you know. And then they said, "Well now it's yellow." We were waiting for some choppers to come up and, uh, pretty much ride shotgun for you.

So, once the helicopters showed up, then we took off with the convoy and made it up through with absolutely no incident. The road was literally bulldozed a quarter mile in both directions off the road and every piece of vegetation had been stripped of, of the area.

Jim: Had they used Agent Orange there too?

Ken: I'm sure they had. They were using it while we were there. I mean, you could smell it. I worked summers at a grain mill in Valders [Wisconsin], and I knew what that spray smelled like.

Jim: Yeah.

Ken: It was in the air all the time. And, anyway, we got to the base and got the truck, got in there, and they started to unload the trucks. And one of the guys at the base hopped up on our wagon, and he said, "Let me see that fifty-caliber," he said. And he wheeled it around and aimed, got it sighted, and hauled off and started firing up on the side of this hill. [Laughs] Literally everybody was ducking for cover in every direction, you know.

Jim: [Laughs]

Ken: And he said, "We've been watching this bastard up on the hill." He said, "We're almost 100 percent sure he's gotta be Viet Cong," you know. But they just let him have it with those fifties. They never saw anything, but you could see dirt kicking up all around them.

And, uh, and I said, "Well, where exactly are we?" And he said, "Well, if you look at that hill over there," he said, "that's Laos." And he said, "That hill over there is Cambodia. So," he said, "that's where you are." [Laughs]

Jim: [Laughs] And this was an engineering unit.

Ken: This was an engineering unit.

Jim: What was their--do you know what their assignment was out there?

Ken: I think, basically, just build the road and then hold the base. I mean, they literally were out in the jungle. They had nothing but trees around them. They had three rows of, uh, different types of wire and mounds. It was all mounded up around them. And it wasn't a very high hill, because, uh, you know, the hills around them were higher.

But two of the hills that were higher were out of country. And the hill that was in country, I don't understand why they ever picked the base they did. Because the other hill was literally looking down on them, and it was not that far away, I'd say within a quarter mile or so away.

Jim: What were--what did this base look like?

Ken: It was literally just a hole dug out of the jungle. It was just an area that was cleared. And the, uh, Montagnard people were with them. It most likely was Special Forces with some of our men assigned to it. I don't, I didn't really ever un-, know, you know, what the story was there with them. And I'm guessing it wasn't that big of a base, couple hundred people probably, at the most.

Jim: Yeah. Did they have artillery there? Do you know?

Ken: Oh, I'm sure they did, yeah.

Jim: Yeah. So, did you have any difficulty getting back down on your return trip?

Ken: Well that, that's where the story kinda began with this fellow who got his, uh, hind end blown off coming back. He, he was in the truck behind us. And so--well, I shouldn't say behind us. He was several vehicles behind us.

But we came back in bunches; we didn't come back in one big train like we left. We kind of, we came back alone. And I noticed on the trip back we drove a hell of a lot faster than we did on the way up. But it was starting to get--

Jim: Dark?

Ken: --later in the evening, you know. We got back at daylight yet, when we arrived back at base. I'd say we got back probably about 5:00 o'clock or so, and it was still enough daylight.

But a few of the trucks didn't show up. And so we were wondering what happened. And we figured what happened was, you know, we had a heck of a base behind us and the next group. And so the story was that the Viet Cong must have slipped in, put a bomb in the road, you know—

Jim: Yeah.

Ken: --knowing that we were, we were ahead and, uh, left us alone, stuck that bomb in there. And then it was like a delayed charge on it. But because the truck was going as fast as it was, it hit the rear end of a truck instead of the, right under the driver. And so he was man-, he managed to just literally have his, the back end of the truck kind of flipped over forward and kind of flipped him into the ditch. He lost the rear tandem on his truck. They brought the truck back in, and it was pretty well damaged. And, uh, but that was the only thing. I mean, it was nothing much else to talk about.

Jim: Uh, did you get to go on R&R?

Ken: I did. I ended up going to Australia. And then I took a second leave and went to Hong Kong.

Jim: How did you--? Well, that's a dumb question. You were the company clerk.

Ken: Why? [Laughs]

Jim: Because [laughs] you, you knew what was available.

Ken: Exactly.

Jim: [Laughs] And you could, you know, handle that.

Ken: Uh huh.

Jim: That was really a dumb question.

Ken: So did the company commander and so did the first sergeant. [Laughs]

Jim: Oh, yeah. I'm not being critical. I'm just saying that that's the way it worked. Uh, did you like either Hong Kong or Australia?

Ken: Well, I went to Australia mostly because I had an opportunity to see it, you know.

Jim: Yeah.

Ken: And I wanted to go down there. And that's where my uncle had been when he was in the war, and I thought it'd be kind of neat to see what that part of the world was like.

And then, at the time, I was dating my wife. We weren't married yet, but her brother was working in Brisbane, which was about 800 miles north of Sydney. So when we flew in, we flew into Sydney, and I asked permission to travel up to Brisbane. And I got permission to go. I picked up my clothes. You know, we rented—

Jim: Yeah.

Ken: --clothes when you arrived in country. And so I picked up my clothes and ran out to the street and hailed a cab and said, "I've got to get to the airport. The plane leaves in--." I forget what it was; it was only, like, a half an hour. And that was back in the days when you didn't have to spend three and four hours ahead of time—

Jim: Yeah.

Ken: --getting in and being checked. And so I literally came skidding in sideways into the airport. And I ran into the airport, got on the plane, flew up to Brisbane. And I was thinking it was only going to be about a hundred miles or so, or eighty miles or so.

Jim: Yeah.

Ken: And here it was 800 miles [laughs].

Jim: [Laughs] Oh, my.

Ken: And I don't think I would have gotten permission to go there. But because I was visiting family, they let me go.

Jim: Yeah.

Ken: And so I spent three days up in Brisbane and just kind of got to see what that area of the country was like. And then I flew back and I spent some time in Sydney.

Jim: Well, what about Hong Kong?

Ken: Hong Kong, I spent five days in Hong Kong and got to, uh, I went up there mostly just to buy stuff--

Jim: Yeah.

Ken: --and see the country. They had a hell of a nice deal when you arrived in country for, I think it was—what was it, anyway?—I think it was thirty dollars Hong Kong, I think is what I paid for it. It was like five dollars American. And they allowed you to take three tours, three different tours. And so I signed up for the meal—every, all the tours, they had meals involved.

Jim: Uh huh.

Ken: So I had, like, a day tour. We went all over up into the New Territories. And we were on kind of an overlook looking down on the Republic of China, you know--you could see the checkpoint--and ate on a boat, and went on a evening tour, and saw a woman kill a python--or not a python, but a little hooded snake.

Jim: Yeah, cobra.

Ken: Cobra. Bit the, bit her in the back of the head and skinned it on the street and threw it into the meat and, you know, her use it for eating.

Jim: Yeah. And it was just like downtown Valders, hey?

Ken: Yeah, just like downtown Valders—a little, little more exciting.

Jim: [Laughs]

Ken: [Laughs] And then we went on another. And that one that we went to the way outback, we went to a nice little restaurant there and ate. And it was just beautiful country, just beautiful country.

Jim: When you got back to, going back to Vietnam, what kind of off-duty conditions did you have? Did you have an EM [*Enlisted Men's*] Club? Did you have any USO shows?

Ken: Yeah, we did; forgot all about those. Yeah, we had an EM Club just, maybe, 200 feet from where my hooch was.

And, let's see, about six months after I was there, we had a supply officer show up, assigned to us. He was from Texas. And he didn't have any friends. So he kind of hung out with me and the other company clerk. And so when I got my E-5 stripes, he put on E-5 stripes and went to the EM Club with us, the three of us. And we got hammered.

Jim: [Laughs]

- Ken: Came back, you know. And then when, uh, I don't know what happened. Something else happened. Anyway, he wanted me to go to the Officers' Club. And I said, "I can't do that." "No, no, you can. You can." So he got me some—
- Jim: Bars?
- Ken: --lieutenant bars [laughs]. And, wouldn't you know it? We walked into the place and were there maybe a half hour or forty-five minutes watching the show. In walks the company commander [laughs],--
- Jim: [Laughs]
- Ken: --sits down and puts his hands on both of us, you know. And so he kind of said, "Aw, don't worry about it," he said. He was a hell of a nice guy.
- Jim: Yeah?
- Ken: He was a, Smith, his name was. And he, you know, he bought us a drink, and—
- Jim: Yeah.
- Ken: --kind of sat there and drank for awhile and [laughs] went back, you know. But I think they could have busted us big time—
- Jim: Yeah.
- Ken: --for something like that.
- Jim: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. What discussions did you have about the war when you were there with your--?
- Ken: We didn't talk much about that amongst ourselves. We never really talked about it. I guess we all felt, you know, "Keep your mouth shut, and don't cause trouble," I guess, basically.
- Jim: What about, was there any discussion about the civil unrest back in the States, and particularly your home state?
- Ken: No, no, no. See, a lot of that didn't occur until after I got out of service. The blowing up Sterling Hall—
- Jim: Uh huh.

- Ken: --didn't happen until after I got back. and, you know, all of the, uh-- You know, I guess I, we talked more about that when I was in college than—
- Jim: Yeah.
- Ken: --than Nam, you know. I know the two guys I roomed with in school, they referred to the “rag-heads.” They said these guys were imported. He said, you know, both of them felt the same way, that the people that were doing most of the trouble at UW [*University of Wisconsin*] were from out of town. They were the rabble-rousers and the organizers.
- Jim: Uh huh. Have we missed anything about the Vietnam experience?
- Ken: Not really.
- Jim: Okay. When you came back—uh, you got separated from the military when you came back to the United States.
- Ken: Right, right.
- Jim: Did they tell you anything about what you should be aware of, or brief you about the GI Bill?
- Ken: Yeah, we received quite a bit of information about that. I know, we were more interested in simply getting out of there and getting out of uniform and getting home. But no, they did a really nice job, told us what to expect, telephone numbers to call, where to go for medical training--or service, you know--GI loans, schooling, and all that.
- Jim: Yeah.
- Ken: I wish sometimes I would've gone into the military right away and got my education paid for—
- Jim: --education paid for at the other end.
- Ken: Yeah, yeah. I never did take advantage of the GI Bill.
- Jim: How were you received when you got back to Wisconsin?
- Ken: You know, other than my family—and I expected the worst, I think, getting off the plane in Chicago and Milwaukee—I didn't know what to expect. They, pretty much people left you alone. They kind of, they didn't say, “Hello,” “Goodbye,” or “Thank you,” or anything. You know, they kind of looked at you, and you felt like, “Just let me get out of this uniform and get on with my life.”

Jim: Did you receive, do think you were ever discriminated against or helped because you were a veteran?

Ken: Well, I don't think I got any breaks because I was a veteran. I never felt like I got any breaks. But, the civil service exam for jobs, you know, you got five—

Jim: Points.

Ken: --veteran's points for that. When I applied for the job at the County, I don't think we even, I don't think that had any bearing on it. I think I got the job based on my own merits and not the fact that I was in the military.

When I applied for a job at the State DNR [*Department of Natural Resources*], that was different. I did get five points there, but I was applying with three other veterans who made the final cut.

Jim: So it was a wash.

Ken: It was a wash, and I think out of a hundred possible points I had a hundred and four and a half, or something like that in points. So that had no bearing on it.

Jim: How do you feel the Vietnam experience affected the rest of your life?

Ken: Well, you kind of put things in perspective. You know, you got a better understanding of what the military really had to put up with. You had a pretty good understanding, too, of where the people were coming from.

And then later finding out, you know, the lying and stuff, deceiving that went on, that pulled us into that war. At the time Johnson, Lyndon Johnson was president, I think that was one of the reasons why he opted out of it. I think he felt like he was, he was responsible for all those deaths--

Jim: Yeah.

Ken: --that, that occurred. I think it kind of, you know, kind of made him go bonkers at the end.

Jim: I know that you belong to the VFW. Do you belong to any other veterans' organizations?

Ken: No.

Jim: Why did you join the VFW?

Ken: I was pressured into it by my next-door neighbor John Bucan [sp?]
[*Transcriber's note: sounds like BYOU-kun*].

Jim: Okay.

Ken: We lived next door to each other for a number of years. And then his wife—or, not his wife, but his daughter—had her wedding party here at the VFW. And so, he pretty much talked me into it the night of the party. He walked me down to the bar here, and we signed a paper. And so I became a member.

Jim: [Laughs] Was that a good or a bad decision?

Ken: Good decision, good decision, yeah.

Jim: [Laughs] Is there anything else you'd like to say, Ken?

Ken: Nope.

Jim: Okay. Well, thank you very much.

[End of Interview]