

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
James A. Tracey
25th Infantry Division, Vietnam War
2003

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Tracey, James A. Oral History Interview, 2003.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 60 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 60 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Abstract

James Tracy, a Madison, Wis. veteran, discusses his Vietnam War service as a truck driver and welder with the 25th Infantry Division. He talks about his induction into the Army, basic training at Camp Polk (Louisiana), transfer to an ordnance company where time was divided between guard duty and KP, and jungle training during the winter at Fort Knox (Kentucky). Tracy comments on the ship ride from San Francisco to Vietnam including the whole unit being seasick, transfer to an LST to land on Vietnam, and going ashore with only a rifle and no ammunition. Joining the 25th Division at Ton Son Nhut, Tracy mentions traveling through Vietnam during the night, his first impressions of the country, and living in Squad tents. He tells of life on a military base including the favorite rations, receiving supplies from Saigon, an instance when the cooks gave troops fresh bread, and the experience of being under constant mortar fire. He details an attack when the Vietnamese soldiers attempted to enter their camp, Tracy describes the fire from gun ships, airplanes dropping bombs, and tank fire. He recalls his confusion at the idea the Vietnamese government would keep sending troops against this massive gunfire. Tracy touches upon the use of Agent Orange, rubber plantations, problems caused by the rainy season, and being notified about the birth of his son.

Biographical Sketch

Tracey, born in Oklahoma, was drafted into the army in 1965 while an employee of Rock Island Railroad. He returned from Vietnam in 1967 and settled in Madison, Wis. after working for the Wisconsin Southern Railroad.

Interviewed by Jim Kurtz, 2003.

Transcribed by Mary Lou Condon, 2006.

Transcription edited by Abigail Norderhaug, 2007.

Interview Transcript

Interviewer: --February 28, 2003, and we're interviewing James A. Tracy from Madison, Wisconsin. Jim, could you tell us where you were born?

Tracy: I was born in Hotchkiss, Colorado.

Interviewer: And where did you grow up?

Tracy: I grew up in the Oklahoma panhandle.

Interviewer: And how long did you live there?

Tracy: Oh, I left home after, about 19 years old I finally left home, started moving around on the railroad, working all over the country.

Interviewer: So after you graduated from high school you went to work right for the railroad, is that correct?

Tracy: Yes, soon after that. Yes.

Interviewer: And what year was that?

Tracy: 1964.

Interviewer: And how long did you work for the railroad, and which railroads did you work for?

Tracy: Well, I spent about 20 years working for the railroad. I worked for the Rock Island Railroad, and then after it liquidated in 1980 I went to work for the Wisconsin Southern.

Interviewer: Tell us how you got into the Army.

Tracy: I was drafted, as most of us. Actually, I was the first one out of my hometown to be drafted.

Interviewer: And what was your hometown again?

Tracy: Texhoma, Oklahoma.

Interviewer: Texhoma, can you spell that?

Tracy: T-e-x-h-o-m-a. And I was actually the first one to be drafted. I went to boot camp October '65. In boot camp I actually ran into one of my high school buddies who was a year ahead of me.

Interviewer: Is that right? And what was his name?

Tracy: Gee, I don't even remember now.

Interviewer: Where did you go to basic training?

Tracy: Fort Polk, Louisiana.

Interviewer: And when did you get to Fort Polk?

Tracy: I'm thinking like October 25th, 28th? The 28th of October.

Interviewer: And how long was your basic training?

Tracy: Six weeks.

Interviewer: And what kind of living conditions did you have at Fort Polk?

Tracy: We lived in the old World War II barracks. Fort Polk was the basic training camp.

Interviewer: You had this one high school classmate that you went to basic training with. Were there other people that you knew or got to know well during basic training?

Tracy: Yes, probably, but not a one of us ever served together.

Interviewer: Never served together after that. So when you completed basic training, that would've been roughly December before Christmas of '65.

Tracy: Yes.

Interviewer: What happened to you then?

Tracy: They shoved us through boot camp to get us through in six weeks to get us out before Christmas. Then I was ordered to Fort Polk, Kentucky.

Interviewer: Fort Knox?

Tracy: Fort Knox. I'm trying to think where in the world did I go.

Interviewer: Yeah, Fort Knox, Kentucky.

Tracy: Fort Knox, Kentucky.

Interviewer: Which is just outside Louisville, right?

Tracy: Yes. And I was attached to training corps, training GIs to drive tanks who had been in the Army longer than I had. Of course, I had a big head with a buck private wearing acting corporal stripes, you know.

Interviewer: When did you report to Fort Knox?

Tracy: It had to be in January of '66.

Interviewer: And you trained people to drive tanks. What kind of tanks were they?

Tracy: We were in 48s and M60s at that time, just training.

Interviewer: And how long did you train people at Fort Knox?

Tracy: I was in the training corps probably for, oh, maybe four months, four or six months. Then I got transferred to the 16th Armored Group in Fort Knox.

Interviewer: And what did you do there?

Tracy: In the 16th Armor Group I was transferred to an ordnance company, the 61st ordnance. And we only had like 20 people in a company that was 60 squads, but we spent most of our time on KP and guard duty. Shortly after that we all received orders for Vietnam. Ironically our orders were all knocked down.

Interviewer: What does that mean, knocked down?

Tracy: I'm trying to think the word we used for that? We were all ordered to the 90th Replacement Battalion, and those orders were withdrawn, I guess is the word you'd want to use. Then we got orders that our company was going to be built up to a service battalion-sized company and go as a unit.

Interviewer: So your whole unit at Fort Knox got orders to Vietnam?

Tracy: Yes.

Interviewer: Did your company get built up with people before you got to Vietnam?

Tracy: Oh, absolutely.

Interviewer: So can you tell us kind of what happened there?

Tracy: It was just a trial of errors because every day we'd get new people in, you know. And whether they were coming back from European Service or coming from other units in the States, many times they were short and were going to be getting discharged, and some cases they had just come back from foreign duty so they couldn't go overseas again right away. Actually, our commanding officer had just returned from Korea and certainly realized that he couldn't go for some reason. I can't tell you whether it was because he'd just come back from Korea or whether he was getting short, I don't know. But he was replaced, so we ended up with a new CO before we finished training to go. We took our general training at Fort Knox in November.

Interviewer: Are there any things that stand out in the jungle training?

Tracy: I kind of thought it was ridiculous we were doing jungle training in the winter in the States in an area where it's not jungle, where some of us like myself had just come taking basic training in Fort Polk, Louisiana, and that was a tiger school for advanced infantry and for some of the ranger training.

Interviewer: You were taking this jungle training in the winter of '66?

Tracy: No. Yeah, it had to have been the winter of '66. Well, I'll say fall of '66. September and October of '66. Then we shipped as a unit. We loaded our equipment out in the first part of November. We loaded our equipment on flatcars, railroad cars.

Interviewer: What kind of equipment did you have?

Tracy: We had jeeps, deuce-and-a-halves, five-ton trucks, deuce-and-a-half trailers, five-ton tractors. We had ten-ton tank retrievers.

Interviewer: So you had a lot of vehicles.

Tracy: We had an—whole sundry of vehicles.

Interviewer: Were you trained specifically to do repair work? Or what was your specialty?

Tracy: Well, I had been a welder on the railroad before being drafted maybe had a reason that I ended up where I was. So I ended up as a tank welder or just a welder for the unit, the truck and trailer and all the equipment for doing anything in the field. We did most of our repairs right in the field.

Interviewer: Did you get a leave before you went to Vietnam?

- Tracy: Yes.
- Interviewer: So when was that, in November of '66?
- Tracy: First part of November '66 because I had to be back before Thanksgiving, and I think we shipped out two days after Thanksgiving.
- Interviewer: Where did you ship out from?
- Tracy: We flew from Louisville to San Francisco. Directly from the Navy we may have landed in Travis because directly they loaded us on buses and took us right to the ship, and we shipped out, left port that afternoon.
- Interviewer: So you flew from Louisville to San Francisco, bus to the harbor. And do you remember the name of the ship you were on?
- Tracy: E. F. Cohonen, I think. I'm not even sure. I've tried for years to try to remember the name of that ship. C-o-h-o-n-e-n? I've tried for years to remember the name of that ship.
- Interviewer: C-o-h—
- Tracy: E-n, try that. I'm not sure.
- Interviewer: And this ship had the equipment on it that you—
- Tracy: No, actually no. Our equipment left at least a week ahead of us, maybe two weeks ahead of us, and loaded out in New Orleans and then went through Panama Canal. We had some advanced party go with the equipment, but no, the equipment didn't go with us.
- Interviewer: Does anything stand out from your voyage across the Pacific?
- Tracy: Being sick, seasick for six days. And I was sick before we got under the Golden Gate Bridge. I was sick, I was deathly sick. I had a little warrant officer say, he was a W-4, and nobody gets seasick. If you're seasick you're just a panty-waist, a little more vocal than that. That poor guy got sick and they had him in sick bay with transfusions. But I just recall that. When I started getting over seasick, then everybody else started getting sick.
- Interviewer: What was a typical day like on the ocean?
- Tracy: Well, we all had duty. There were a poor-ass bunch of infantry company on board, and those guys had to run with full packs on the ship deck for hours, and they had to do calisthenics all the time. They were cleaning the

rifles every day two or three times, just continually harassing and training those poor guys went through. And the rest, some of the GIs, you know, we're not infantry. We had the same kind of harassment, but we were forced to do that kind of stuff. We had calisthenics every day and exercise and inspections. Everybody was assigned duty, and they had missed me in assigning duty, and they finally realized that I didn't have an assigned duty and they sent me directly to the mess hall, and that's a piss-pot poor place to be. I thought, oh my God, I'm going to be on KP for 22 days.

Interviewer: Was 22 days—

Tracy: Twenty-two days it took us to cross the ocean. I was sick. So I go down to the mess hall and lo and behold I run into my mess sergeant. And Sarge, you got to help me out. They sent me down here and I don't want to. Well, I need a day room orderly. All I had to do was keep the tables wiped off and keep them clean and would occasionally carry new pots of coffee or Kool-Aid buckets, that kind of stuff. I had it made. I could go through the mess hall line as many times a day as I wanted to. Every time my friends would come in I'd just get in line with them. But I was really worried when I got there, what am I going to do. It turned out to be good duty, actually.

Interviewer: Did they have any entertainment for you on the ship?

Tracy: No, we didn't have movies. I've heard about movies, but we didn't have movies. As I recall, I don't recall having movies. They may have had a few on deck, but I don't recall. I know once we stopped in Guam to refuel, and as I recall it was about four hours of shore duty that we had. We just got off the ship, walked down the dock, and there were a couple enlisted men's clubs right there. So we were told we couldn't go any farther, but I do know that there were some guys that had duty on Guam before, and they knew where the village was, and they took right off down the road, they went to town for four hours. But most of us just went to a little enlisted men's club and listened to stupid music, got drunk. I woke up in my bunk the next morning and had a pocketful of coral that I had picked up in the ocean and didn't even remember getting in the water. I guess we all sort of swam, but none of us remember on it.

Interviewer: Were there other ships in the harbor at Guam?

Tracy: No, absolutely there weren't. We were at a substation and there was not another ship in the harbor.

Interviewer: Did you see any B-52s when you were in Guam flying out of there?

- Tracy: I saw B-52s coming back, not going over. But the substation we were in Guam was basically just a fuel station and was a submarine station. There was not another ship in the port.
- Interviewer: So is there anything that stands out on your trip from Guam to Vietnam, I assume was the next port of call?
- Tracy: Yeah, I do. I remember the South China Sea being just as smooth as glass, not a ripple in that ocean, just as smooth as glass. For two days you could hardly tell we were even moving in the water.
- Interviewer: Was there any wind or anything?
- Tracy: Not any wind in the South China Sea. Like I said, for two days it was just as calm and there wasn't a ripple on the water.
- Interviewer: Did you see any sea life?
- Tracy: Oh, yes, many times. We'd have anywhere from 10 to 15 to 20 dolphins swimming right alongside of us, and they'd go for hours beside us. Then as we got probably a day out of Vung Tao then we had two battleships, cruisers, accompanying that stuck right on us all the way in. And as I recall then—
- Interviewer: Do you remember which battleships they were?
- Tracy: No. They weren't close enough for us to read anything on them; they were just cruisers, escort ships. I couldn't tell you what they were. As I recall, though, I thought okay, they're out here to protect us because we're basically an unarmed ship. Then as we came into Vung Tao we started seeing all the foreign shipping and freighters and all the ships, every kind you could think of. And at that time I recall the gunboats came up right beside us and escorted us in and helicopters directly over the top of us.
- Interviewer: Now, did you actually dock at Vung Tao?
- Tracy: No, we didn't. We were loaded onto LSTs and went in on the beach, and that was really a scary thing because you're in a combat zone and we'd been told all the nightmares and all, how we're supposed to be in fear for our lives. The life expectancy was 16 days at that time. We got off those LSTs and didn't even have a round among us, no ammunition among us.
- Interviewer: Did you have weapons?
- Tracy: Oh, we carried our weapons and everything, but we didn't have any ammunition.

Interviewer: What kind of a weapon did you have?

Tracy: We carried M-14s. As I told my wife here a while back, it was kind of a shocker when 300 of us got on an airplane in Louisville, Kentucky, and everybody's carrying a duffle bag and a rifle. And the stewardesses, most of them were white, just pale. But as I recall we walked on the beach in Vung Tau with not a bullet among us. But directly after that we were all issued all of our ammunition.

Interviewer: And were you picked up by trucks off the beach, then?

Tracy: Yeah. Shortly after that we were issued ammunition and then loaded, the transportation company arrived with trucks and took us on a very short truck ride in deuce-and-a-halves to an airport. It was only a few miles. Why we didn't march, I don't know. I was surprised. But they trucked us to an airport. And that was our first look at real Vietnam when Caribous and such landed to pick us up. The crew would get out of the plane, walk around and inspect their plane. And everybody carried a rifle or submachine gun in their hands, and that was our first wake-up call to okay; now we're in Vietnam for sure.

Interviewer: Do you remember what day roughly this was?

Tracy: No, I can't, because I know it had to be maybe the week before Christmas of '66 because, just gauging by about a 22-day boat trip. We flew from Vung Tao to Ton Son Nhut, then another transportation company picked us up at Ton Son Nhut, and we lined up for the convoy. And at this time we were finally told where we were going.

Interviewer: And where were you told?

Tracy: We finally were told that we were going to the 25th infantry division's headquarters in Cu Chi.

Interviewer: So your unit was attached to the 25th Infantry Division?

Tracy: We were attached to the 25th.

Interviewer: Is there anything that was remarkable to you at Ton Son Nhut?

Tracy: One thing remarkable? Yes. Of course, we had to probably wait the biggest part of an afternoon. We must've got to Ton Son Nhut somewhere around noon or shortly after and lined up for the convoy. The convoys normally leave early afternoon going back to Cu Chi for that afternoon convoy. There was some holdup, a terrible holdup, and we had no idea

what it was. But the transportation guys were really getting nervous. We had never gone up Highway 1 in the dark; you're going to be the first convoy up the highway in the dark. It gave us another wakeup call, too. Whether it was or not, but that was the first time that transportation company had ever taken a convoy up Highway 1 after dark.

Interviewer: How many vehicles were in the convoy?

Tracy: I couldn't tell you, but it was long. And you've got to realize, and you know from experience, that when the convoys line up all civilians line up, too, because that's their safe transport. And there were probably 200 civilians on mopeds and scooters and bicycles and those little taxis all going up behind us.

Interviewer: Did they have tanks and armored personnel carriers in this convoy?

Tracy: As I recall we didn't have tanks. There may have been APCs because that was generally they had an APC up in the front. I do recall because I rode on them later in my second(?) tour, deuce-and-a-halves with quad 50s mounted. There was quad-50 in the front and quad-50 in the rear.

Interviewer: You got to Vung Tau and you were there just a short time. Did you see any of the R&R that took place at Vung Tau?

Tracy: No, we weren't anywhere near that town.

Interviewer: What weather or climate conditions struck you when you got into country?

Tracy: You know, it's hot; dry and hot. That's all I can basically remember about December when I first got there, that it wasn't raining.

Interviewer: It wasn't the rainy season.

Tracy: It wasn't the rainy season. That was probably the best thing for us, although it seemed like it rained quite often, but it wasn't the rainy season.

Interviewer: What about smell?

Tracy: Diesel, gasoline fumes, just the smell of the villages, the mixture of sewer smell, rotting vegetation being mixed with diesel. And to this day sometimes something just clicks that memory and you just immediately smell that smell of a stinking village, of human waste, the garbage and everything mixed in in the village.

Interviewer: Did you have any impressions about the noise at Ton Son Nhut?

- Tracy: It was probably a plane landing and taking off with every few minutes. The fighters were landing, go back to rearm, and leave again. Helicopters continually coming and going. The old prop-driven fighters coming and going, how big and noisy they were.
- Interviewer: You're on the convoy. Did anything happen on this night-time convoy that you took?
- Tracy: No, to my relief, nothing happened.
- Interviewer: That's good. So you arrived at Cu Chi sometime in the evening, is that correct, a little bit before Christmas?
- Tracy: Yes.
- Interviewer: So what happened when you got to Cu Chi?
- Tracy: The 25th, some division of the 25th had erected squad tents for us.
- Interviewer: And what's a squad tent?
- Tracy: A squad tent is a four-man tent. And we crowded five and six men in a four-man tent.
- Interviewer: Did you have any flooring in this tent?
- Tracy: No flooring. We all had to set up our own cots, of course, and just crowded them in as we could. I remember in my tent we had five guys in our tent. In the maintenance company that we were, we were able to scrounge equipment. We scrounge pallets and floored our tent. I found a piece of plywood that was perfect and carved out the center of it, and we set it on the center tent pole so we had a table. I can't remember how long we stayed in those tents as we were building up—our company area was completely blank. It was empty, flat.
- Interviewer: Was it within the perimeter?
- Tracy: It was within the perimeter. Our nearest unit was three-quarter cav, and beyond them was the outer perimeter.
- Interviewer: Okay, three-quarter cav was a regiment?
- Tracy: A regiment in the 25th. They were a cavalry unit. As I recall, young Patton was a colonel at that time. So they were between us and the perimeter, and, gee, we spent six months. I don't know how long we spent. We didn't have a mission. I know our unit didn't have a mission,

so whatever they came to us they wanted repaired we certainly repaired. The rest of the time our duties, if we weren't doing a specific repair job of some kind for somebody, we filled sandbags. We built up, reinforced the perimeter.

Interviewer: Were you doing construction work?

Tracy: No, the normal buildup. It was actually expanding the 25th Division headquarters. The units come in, it keeps expanding. So we had to [unintelligible] build up our own unit. Of course, we had the squad tents, so immediately then we started setting up platoon tents, the big unit tents. We had duty every day. There were several in it. They just picked so many people for work detail every day, and you filled sandbags. So we'd go out and fill sandbags.

Interviewer: Irrespective of the amount of work you had to do on repairs.

Tracy: Yes. You still had the work detail of filling sandbags because we had to fortify all of our positions. So we put up the platoon tents. And, of course, we had to sandbag all the perimeter around them. Then we were progressively into building regular hooches.

Interviewer: So you had to build all your own facilities.

Tracy: Yes.

Interviewer: Now, were the maintenance buildings there or did you have to build those?

Tracy: Okay, well, we didn't have maintenance buildings, but our unit had maintenance tents which were big Quonset tents, and we had to erect those, of course.

Interviewer: What is a Quonset tent?

Tracy: Well, you know what a Quonset barn looks like?

Interviewer: Yes.

Tracy: Well, a Quonset tent is the same shape; it's just a canvas tent with—

Interviewer: With kind of an arch.

Tracy: Yes, it's arched. And we took everything with us. You have to realize we took everything with us. So it was okay, well, today we're going to start to construct a Quonset tent for, say, the engine mechanics. They've got to have a special place so that their equipment and tools can be out of the

weather—dirt, sand, rain. So it was progressive. We just started one thing, and when that was completed we moved to the next.

One thing that was interesting is I had gotten my truck and trailer unit all set up, so I had a truck, a deuce-and-a-half with all of my tools and equipment for a welder that a welder or a blacksmith would need. I had a trailer that contained my 400-amp welder, all my cutting torches, tanks, and that kind of stuff that I may need, aluminum welder and such. I even built a canopy that I could slide my canvas out and be able to work under canopy all the time. You had to do that to be out of the rain.

Interviewer: Sun, too, maybe?

Tracy: The sun, too, yes. But we were all working and we heard quite a scuttlebutt and had to call the EOD people in because—

Interviewer: What's EOD?

Tracy: Explosive Ordnance Unit. Ironically, Cu Chi fueled the headquarters for the 25th Infantry Division was set on an old French fort, an old French air base. And two of our mechanics happened to be working under a truck, and they kicked something on the ground as they were laying on the ground, and they crawled out from under there and raked the dirt off of where they were laying and there was a land mine like this about 12 inches across. **[End of Side A]**

Interviewer: When we turned the tape over, Jim, you were telling us about a land mine, so can you continue with that, please?

Tracy: So these two mechanics had been laying on a land mine, and they felt it under them. They crawled out and raked the dirt away to see what was poking them in the back, and lo and behold they found an old land mine from the old freight shore. It apparently measured about 12, 14 inches across, so it was a sizable mine. So the EOD took it away and exploded it. But we had these kind of things occasionally happen.

Directly to the, I think, south of us was the helicopter company of the 25th. I don't know which unit of the 25th, but as I recall it was a Hornet or something, there was an emblem on their choppers, and they were directly south of us. And one morning, as I recall, in the middle of the day it was hot and dry, and by the time you're in the middle of the dry season the soil was ankle-deep sand and dusty, and the choppers would come over the top and just dust us, completely dust us in the wind. It just got to where we'd ignore it. We ignored it a little too much. And there were four of us walking across the compound and a chopper went over the top, and something plopped behind us. Lo and behold, somehow or another somebody kicked a grenade out of that chopper as it went over the top.

Whether it was an M79 or what it was, it went off, and one of my friend's was wounded with shrapnel. And we were all walking together. He just happened to be the one that got a piece of shrapnel. He got a Purple Heart—

Interviewer: Without leaving the base camp.

Tracy: Without leaving the base camp. But that was kind of, it wasn't a funny thing to happen, but it was just one of those freak things that happen.

Interviewer: What was a typical duty day like at Cu Chi?

Tracy: A typical duty day? As I recall, we were probably up by 5:00 in the morning, 4:00 in the morning, who knows. It depends on what duty you may have had. It was pretty lax. You always had a formation in the morning if it was a normal duty day, hit the mess hall—

Interviewer: What was the food like?

Tracy: As I recall, food wasn't any different than it was in the States. Only one time I recall, I always swore that the Australians got all of our beef and we ate all their damn mutton. To this day I won't eat mutton. I ate so much mutton.

One time I recall catching duty with Mess Sergeant to go to supply pool and pick up rations, and it's only just Con-Ex containers, you know. If it's supposed to be—

Interviewer: Con-Ex containers are 10 x 10 x 10 steel box that just has doors on it and you lock it up and shut them. As I recall, we were going through picking up the rations. If it's cold stuff, it's just packed in ice, and that's one of the reasons for the convoy daily from Saigon is bringing [inaudible] supplies. And we were rationing steaks that day. We [inaudible] several boxes of steaks that we were supposed to bring back to the mess tent, and they were green. They were still cooked and devoured. Once you cook them you don't know what they looked or smelled like at that time, but I passed up supper that night. But rations weren't too bad.

If you were in base camp, hot meals every day. I don't recall that they ever brought any hot rations out to us when we were in the field. I've heard that the infantry were really tickled to death they got hot rations. As I saw, most of the time if they tried to bring hot rations out to the unit in the field they were cold by the time you got around to eating them anyway, so you might as well have C-rations. C-rations, when I first got to Vietnam, everybody thought that canned ham was the best thing there was, like a Sunday meal. By the time I left if you'd get scrambled eggs

and bacon or pork and beans, beans and wieners, that was the meal everybody wanted. After you eat ham for so long it doesn't even tempt you, and to this day pork and beans or beans and wieners are my favorite. I can eat those, but I don't think I could eat a canned ham or a canned—it took some real doing to learn to eat scrambled eggs and bacon out of a can, but I did.

Interviewer: In the area that you were, was there an EM club or PX or anything like that?

Tracy: There was a main post PX, and it was a good hike. It probably took me from our base camp, from our unit area it was clear over on the other side of the post. And maybe we'd go once a week or whatever, whenever you'd really needed something. You never knew what they were going to have; it was just a shot in the dark to get your toiletry items or cigarettes. We were rationed cigarettes, but there was never any reason why anybody couldn't get all the cigarettes they wanted. If you smoked filtered cigarettes you were out of luck because you weren't going to get filter cigarettes very often. But the main post PX was across the post.

I never went as far as going to find an EM's club. The enlisted men's club was near the main post PX. I think there was an officers' club near there also. Most of the units had their own clubs. Our first sergeant financed our enlisted men's club, and we just made it the company club. And one of the first hooches that we actually built was just supposed to be platoon hooch. We turned it into an enlisted men's club first, and I think we attached it later on. Later on we ended up attaching the officers' quarters to that, but the first sergeant financed it and put the money up to buy the supplies for it. It was decent.

Interviewer: Did you have any experience with being either rocketed or mortared in this base camp?

Tracy: Oh, if it wasn't on a daily basis they didn't miss us very often. They miss us for a week at a time. Yeah, we were continually getting mortared because we were so close to the heliport that we were continually mortared.

Interviewer: Did you have trenches?

Tracy: We had slit trenches. Of course all of our hooches were sandbagged after we got hooches built. As I recall, we still had a few tents. Originally we built the tents, the squad, the platoon tents, and then we built hooches and put that platoon tent for a roof. And then we progressed onto getting tin roofs on the hooches. And we'd still have it sandbagged up to, oh, five

feet above the floor, at least four feet above the floor so that if you're laying in your bunk you were sandbagged.

As I recall, that wasn't totally enough because I woke up one morning in the squad tent, it was in the first three months I was over there, and I had rigged a mosquito net above my cot, and when I folded my mosquito net up there was something on top of my mosquito net. I got a 30-caliber bullet that I carried on my dog tags the rest of the time I was over there. I thought what if that had been two feet lower and a little more power it would've hit me, but it was just a dead shell, a shot that came in. It came through the tent, landed on top of my mosquito net.

Interviewer: A dissipated round.

Tracy: A spent round.

Interviewer: I know that you spent some time outside of Cu Chi. Is there anything else at Cu Chi that stands out, like up until the rainy season the beginning of May?

Tracy: All I remember is if there was dirty work we had to do it, we did it for everybody. One of the treats we had is the division bakery. And bakery for a division or for any unit is just a trailer; it's a bakery oven on a trailer. And the 25th Division's bakery contacted us that two of their ovens had broke and we needed to repair those ovens. They baked for the entire division. You, as a veteran, knew there was no such thing as a treat. You never got a doughnut, you didn't have anything sweet. A mess hall cake was a pretty poor excuse for a treat, but this time we were pretty well on a pretty steady diet of c-rations.

As I recall, we went right to that unit, and they had two ovens that were broke, and we were able to cobble up and repair their ovens, get their ovens working. They were so thrilled that they had those two ovens working they gave us guys, four of us, they gave us bags of bread, I think about four bags of bread, loaves of bread in a bag. And they gave us, I don't know how many bags of them, but as I recall they were raisin bread, and that was like eating a cinnamon roll. We were so thrilled to have something that tasted that good and that sweet right out of the oven that we went back to the unit. Everybody got a loaf of bread that day. Cinnamon bread was like eating a whole big ol' loaf of cinnamon roll. That was the only thing that was kind of ironic.

Just before the rainy season started, and I have no idea what time of the year, we were getting hit continually. But for some reason Charlie thought he could come through the main perimeter, and that was our first—not our first, but that was our first experience of having gooks in the wire. And

we left them hanging in the wire. We had jolly greens(??) and Puff the Magic Dragon came over.

Interviewer: What was Puff the Magic Dragon?

Tracy: Puff the Magic Dragon was like a C-130 loaded up with mini-guns. And as I recall I ended up being on the perimeter, in a bunker on the perimeter, when Puff started returning the fire. And as you looked up at him it was just red fire coming down and green fire going up. And the ground was shaking; it was actually jarring us off the ground with his impact on the ground. And rounds were landing. They weren't anywhere near us. We had medium-range bombers come in and the prop-driven guys dropping 500-pound bombs within an eighth of a mile that would just rock you right off the ground.

Interviewer: And I assume that was not a successful attack.

Tracy: No. I had heard about in Korea and Japan they had talked about World War II and the Korean War, the Chinese would come at us in droves in Korea. And how stupid. I understand if you've got enough coming that would do it, but when Charlie came at us and tried to come through the wire, well, how stupid. Those bangle air charges from the 90mm. cannon rounds are just like walking into leaving nothing lay. I just couldn't believe that Charlie would try to make—

Interviewer: Were you on the perimeter when this happened or were you just back in your area?

Tracy: No, I was on the perimeter when that happened.

Interviewer: So what did they do? Were you on guard duty or did they just mobilize everybody up to there?

Tracy: It just happened we were on perimeter duty at that time. Under normal attack, whether it be mortar attack or infantry attacks on our base camps, it didn't happen often but it happened a few times, but normally mortar attacks everybody just hits your bunkers and your slit trenches, your ammunition, your rifle, your hard hat, and set it out.

Interviewer: But when there's an attack on the perimeter, then everybody gets out.

Tracy: Well, no, that wasn't the case either. I would say it was probably if they needed reinforcements on the perimeter then they would call up more. We didn't have to have additional reinforcements on the perimeter; apparently there was enough. But I know that there's infantry units that are basically

assigned to perimeter duty when they're in base camp, I suppose. We didn't ask for additional, but I wasn't in command of the situation either.

We had our own bunker and our own area to maintain or worry about. The bunkers were staggered on the perimeter, and there was four, between three and five of us in a squad in each bunker on a perimeter. And they were staggered in formation. And as I recall, one night sergeant of the guard and officer of the guard were checking our perimeter guard, and they got confused. Anybody can get confused, but they got confused and ended up in front of our bunker. And I remember the one guy that was on the M60, he didn't think anything, but he jacked his back and yelled Who's there? and pulled the trigger. But he forgot to kick the safety off. If he hadn't kicked the safety off we'd have taken out both of them. Those two guys dug a hole immediately and identified themselves, and we let them advance and come back in. They had just wandered and kind of, instead of making the staggering enough, they ended up in front of us rather than coming in behind us. Those kinds of things happen.

Interviewer: Yes, I can relate to that. Did you have experiences away from Cu Chi that you could share with us?

Tracy: My experiences away from Cu Chi would've probably been on convoy duty. At the time we were—

Interviewer: Where did the convoys go, back to Saigon?

Tracy: Saigon, Vung--Tay Ninh, Dau Tieng, Bin Cat (??) , various different places we had units because we didn't have enough work at the time with the 25th, and they split us up and sent our people all over the region.

Interviewer: So you would be sent out because the 25th had a base camp at Tay Ninh, Dau Tieng, and Bin Cat (??) was just a major city.

Tracy: I can recall, I wasn't in the 1st Infantry, I don't know where they were, but I was thinking somewhere around Bin Cat or somewhere we ran into—

Interviewer: At Bin Cat or Dau Tieng because I was both those places the same time you were. So you went up there to repair equipment?

Tracy: Yeah. We'd go and repair equipment or arrange to bring it back into us to repair. We repaired a lot of, we did APC's that you could stick your hand through. Tanks, we did all types of repairs to that we could, whether we did them in base camp or in the field.

Interviewer: Did you do any field retrievals of tanks and APC's?

Tracy: Yeah. When we did that we had a squad, we had two units, tank retrievers that their job responsibility was to load them up and bring them back in, if that was the case. And we'd go out to do that, go back in and pick them up. We figured if they're going to hit a land mine going in, it's better to hit that trailer 50 feet behind the truck. So we'd back in and pick them up.

At that time the Army was doing a lot of vegetation cleaning out the jungles. And I don't remember, we had the various different names for eradication of the jungle vegetation. Of course, we knew there was Agent Orange and what it was for and probably was around it and don't remember because they sprayed stuff everywhere.

Interviewer: So were you ever in an active spraying situation?

Tracy: I don't know that I was because we knew that they were spraying it, and we were out there working eradication. As I recall, and it's ironic now, we called them jungle crushers, and I've got a photo at home of a jungle crusher. Today we use them in our landfills, those big three-wheeled units that just grind stuff up and compact it. They were testing those in Vietnam as jungle crushers, and they worked. What it'd do is just grind that vegetation up and crumble it down.

Interviewer: Did you have any experience with the big bulldozers they called _____ plows?

Tracy: Oh, yeah. Yeah. We used dozers right along with those jungle crushers. What we were doing is--it was around Cu Chi at that time, and we were trying to clear out a fire zone. And we cleared it out as far as we basically could. We often wondered why we didn't take those same machines into the Hobo Woods and clean out the Hobo Woods. We'd go into retrieve equipment out of the Hobo Woods, too.

Interviewer: Could you tell us a little about the Hobo Woods?

Tracy: As I recall when I was in it, a beautiful place it was. The sugar, the rubber plantations were beautiful. There was a lot of vegetation on the ground. It was like a double canopy because the rubber trees were so tall and you had the other vegetation on the ground. What a pretty place it was. I thought, this is a beautiful place, but not a safe place that you'd want to be by any means.

Interviewer: This was a Vietcong sanctuary.

Tracy: Yes, it was.

Interviewer: Did you have any experiences in the Hobo Woods yourself?

Tracy: Other than just going in to get some equipment and bringing equipment out.

Interviewer: During the rainy season, which started from May and goes until around Labor Day, did you have any experiences?

Tracy: Well, that was a time we were never dry. It could be hot and rain in just a blink of an eye. It would rain, and I've actually seen it rain so hard you wouldn't see in front of your face. And you think, gee, I can't move from here, and I hope to hell nobody's moving around who can see me because we couldn't see them move.

I wondered, and I thought about the recon patrols. When those things happen, they've got to find a place and set because you couldn't see two feet in front of your face. It's hard to believe it rained so hard you couldn't see in front of your face.

I caught perimeter duty one night, and we went out and started setting up, getting ourselves ready for our tour. It was just about sundown you started setting up your Claymore mines. You'd want to set them down just about dark so Charlie didn't see you setting them. So I had just started setting mine up and it started raining, so I just waited until it quit raining. And when the rain let up, it was dark; I walked out and started setting up my Claymores. Well, as I laid down to aim my Claymores that I wanted to lay(?), of course you'd lay in the water about four-to-six inches deep. And so I got my Claymores set the way I wanted them, I went back to the perimeter, back to the bunker, and the later it got the colder I got. And, of course, no dry clothes. And that was the coldest night I spent in Vietnam. I thought I was going to freeze to death. And it was probably 70 degrees, and I thought I was going to freeze to death that night.

Interviewer: I know exactly what you're talking about. Any other experiences during the rainy season that strike you?

Tracy: Not that I can think of.

Interviewer: Did you have any contact with the Vietnamese people or the Army of South Vietnam?

Tracy: Yes, we did. When we first got there, as I recall, we had a lot of civilians working for us. And we had to stand guard over these civilians working for us. It was vegetation and brush removal, eradication, that kind of stuff. It was all under brush about shoulder height that we had to clear out of what was going to be our company area. We had civilians who were hired to do that, and we had to stand guard over them.

Then I remember that they wanted to bring in fill to raise our compound area so that during the rainy season we'd be a little higher than the surrounding ground for drainage area. And, gee, I couldn't believe how many Vietnamese can drive dump trucks. And their dump trucks would hold maybe a yard of dirt, and they were probably 1920s dump trucks and still running. If they broke down, they broke down right there and that's where they set until they repaired them. And if they had to pull a rear end out of one to repair it or a motor out to repair it, it'd sit right there until they got done.

Interviewer: Did you make any friendships that lasted beyond your tour in Vietnam with people in your unit?

Tracy: Yes, I had friendships that lasted, but as far as ever seeing those guys, I never seen those guys again. We said we'll all see each other again, we'll all get together. It never happened.

Interviewer: We haven't done anything very date-specific, but you got to Vietnam in December of '66, and I assume you left in December of '67. Is that accurate?

Tracy: I actually came home in October '67.

Interviewer: October of '67.

Tracy: I rotated out for discharge. I had a friend of mine in the States who as I recall was from Kenosha or Racine or somewhere. I was the only Southerner in this unit, so you've got to realize that this unit that I was in was all from Michigan, Indiana, Ohio, Wisconsin basically. I was the only Southerner in the whole unit. So the year that the Packers beat the Cowboys I was just ridiculed, you wouldn't even know. And I wasn't even a Cowboys fan at the time, but to this day I'm not a Packer fan either.

Interviewer: I can understand why.

Tracy: But I remember that young guy wrote his Congressman, Proxmire, and I remember the name. He got a deferment to go to Vietnam because his wife was pregnant. Now, his deferment was only good until the child was born. But I came from a Southern country family, middle-class family. We were too proud. I wouldn't write my congressman and ask for a deferment. I was the last Tracy to carry on my name. My wife was pregnant, and I was too proud to write and get a deferment, so I went.

Interviewer: So you went into the Service and you were married.

Tracy: Yes. I was drafted when I went in. I was married when I was drafted. And my son was born while I was in Vietnam, March 29th. First sergeant notified me the Red Cross had a message for me, notified me. The Red Cross gave me information that my son had been born.

A friend of mine had been to Saigon a few days before and brought back a fifth of whiskey, so we decided to celebrate. And we celebrated. And Charlie mortared us. And I hit the bunker the first time at the mortar attack, and it was all clear, and after a while it's all clear you go back to whatever you were doing. So I went back to the hooch and I went back to bed. Charlie mortared us again. That time the guys said I made it to the bunker with my rifle and my hard hat. The first time I made it with all of my equipment; the second time they said, yeah, Tracy made it to the bunker with his rifle and his helmet. The third time we got mortared that night I didn't even know it. The fourth time we got mortared that night I didn't even know it. So it taught me a very good lesson. I enjoyed that night celebrating the birth of my son, but I could've very well not have survived that one. But that was pretty heavy.

As I recall, we had the whole base camp hit pretty hard then. They were trying to hit the fuel depot and the heliport with the helicopters, and we just happened to be in the line of it. So we got hit pretty hard.

Interviewer: Is there anything else that stands out in your active military experience?

Tracy: Well, the few times that we were out of base camp on different duty, whether we went to repair equipment or were in transit somewhere, it's unbelievable that you have a feeling that you know you're going to get attacked or mortared or machine-gunned or something's going to happen that night. And you set up a perimeter, and the armored guys were the best in the world to a perimeter with because you've got all that heavy equipment around you. But when firefighting starts, just seems like that place is not a good hiding place after all. You've got to dig a hole and get real deep and stay real low.

Interviewer: How did you get back to the United States, then? You said you left in October of '67.

Tracy: I came home on a 707. By that time everybody was going and coming by Freedom Bird. And I know your experience, but out in the jungle or anywhere and you see that Freedom Bird and you think, well, how many days until that's my turn? Actually, I came home I think about 16 days, two weeks early or something because I was still counting down to when I knew that I was to rotate home for discharge. They sent me back; I got orders on the 16th of October and came back, so I got out actually about two weeks early.

Interviewer: Where did you go when you got back?

Tracy: Went back to Travis. I was on the discharge in Oakland.

Interviewer: And you went home to your wife and child.

Tracy: Yeah.

Interviewer: Where was that?

Tracy: She was living in Iowa with her folks at the time.