

Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center

Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with  
JAMES F. VINCENT  
Scout Vehicle Driver, Army, Vietnam War  
2005

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**Vincent, James F.**, (b. 1945). Oral History Interview, 2005.

User Copy: 2 sound cassette (ca. 71 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 2 sound cassette (ca. 71 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder)

**Abstract:**

James "Jim" Vincent, a Madison, Wisconsin native, discusses his service in the Army during the Vietnam War in the F Troop, 17<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment, 196<sup>th</sup> Light Infantry Brigade. Vincent describes graduating from Madison West High School in 1963 and attending the University of Wisconsin for two years before he was drafted in 1966. He discusses the political climate at UW-Madison: he witnessed one anti-draft protest, but antiwar activities were minimal because it was early in the war. Vincent reveals he was against the Vietnam War from the start. He briefly describes his basic training at Fort Polk (Louisiana). Vincent recalls a strategy to avoid deployment used by some of his friends: they would enroll in Officer Candidate School but turn down the commission, spending their two-year commitment in training instead of Vietnam. This strategy did not work for Vincent, however. He was placed in Noncommissioned Officer School where he had to administer the reception responsibilities to new inductees. Vincent comments that he bonded with the inductees because he felt "it was those guys and me against the Army." He speculates this is why he was turned down for OCS. Vincent touches upon the racial, regional, and socioeconomic make-up of his basic training class, mentioning there were draftees from Wisconsin mixed in with troops from the south side of Chicago (Illinois) and east Houston (Texas). Next, Vincent describes his Advanced Infantry Training on tanks in Fort Knox (Kentucky). In July 1967, Vincent left for Vietnam. He reveals that, by this time, he felt he should not be exempt when all his buddies had to go. He outlines his voyage over on a Braniff commercial jet from Hawaii to the Philippines to Cam Ranh Bay (Vietnam). He explains he was assigned to a scout unit in the 17<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment, which was attached to a light infantry brigade in Chu Lai (Vietnam). He mentions he was received in Chu Lai "very standoffishly" by veteran troops, but after his first combat experience, they accepted him. Vincent describes his typical missions: he would guard the perimeter of the Chu Lai airbase or would spend three to six days on various observation posts on hills around Chu Lai. Vincent mentions that General Abrams and General Westmoreland stopped by his observations post once to assess vulnerabilities of a Marine base. Vincent expresses amazement that they acted like "just another soldier." Vincent describes the equipment used in his cavalry unit: they drove unarmored jeeps with M-16s, but halfway through his tour, they switched to armored personnel carriers (PCs). Vincent was a PC driver and later a PC commander. Towards the end of his tour in Vietnam, Vincent reports a new, inexperienced lieutenant came into his unit and got six of seven PCs stuck in a rice paddy while under enemy fire. Vincent was the only one who did not drive his track vehicle through the paddies; he implies his experience and ingenuity helped rescue the others. Vincent also talks about his interactions with the Vietnamese people, which were mostly mercantile in nature. He states he found the Vietnamese honorable and trustworthy "on a personal level," but admits he "never had any illusions of participating in anything that was beneficial for the Vietnamese people." He criticizes the Army for making no attempt to educate American soldiers in the Vietnamese language. Vincent provides his views of the Viet Cong as well; he reveals he was intrigued by finding books of poetry on the bodies of dead VC. Vincent describes recreation in

Vietnam at length. He remarks he and some fellow soldiers invested in a nightclub just off the Chu Lai airbase and made money with a bar, stereo system, and musical acts. He points out that alcohol and marijuana use was high, and the number of soldiers who smoked marijuana rose from 1% to 95% by the time he left Vietnam. Vincent also outlines his three R&R (rest and relaxation) trips to Bangkok, Tokyo, and Kuala Lumpur. He explains R&R was traded within units “like a commodity” and used as collateral in poker games. This meant Vincent earned (or won) two extra R&Rs. He mentions he was in-country during the Tet Offensive and describes the changes to the landscape in Tam Ky which “had been devastated.” Despite the war, Vincent feels Vietnam is a beautiful country. He criticizes career military people, veterans of the Korean War and World War II, who “had a sense of patriotism that the soldiers in Vietnam didn't share.” He characterizes the attitude of most draftees as a sense that “laws forced you to be there...so it was just getting through it anyway you could.” In 1968, Vincent was granted an early release from his Army contract to go back to college. He finished his service quickly at Fort Knox. He tells of returning to a supportive family in Madison (Wisconsin) and remarks upon the escalation of protests at the University of Wisconsin. Vincent did not hide his service and enjoyed engaging classmates in debate and explaining his views that the draft “was the last vestige of democracy in the military” because it kept the military honest and accountable to the people. Vincent tells how he supported and advised friends who were drafted in the late 1960s. He felt it was important to correspond with soldiers in Vietnam, and he often made tape recordings of friends at dinner parties and sent them to soldiers overseas. In Madison, Vincent joined Veterans for Peace and was an active member, but he left after a few years because he felt they were “too conservative” for his “slightly more anarchistic” views. Vincent is a member of the VFW post in Middleton (Wisconsin). He calls the Army a “stabilizing experience” and feels that realizing his own mortality was an important life lesson. He also opines that the all-volunteer military today (in 2005) is “less responsive to political decisions and more responsive to the decisions of the administration,” which Vincent claims is “a formula for ultimate disaster.”

### **Biographical Sketch:**

Jim Vincent (b. 1945) was born and raised in Madison, Wisconsin. He graduated from Madison West High in 1963 and attended the University of Wisconsin for two years. In 1966, he was drafted into the Army and served one tour of duty in Vietnam. He served in a scout unit as a jeep and personnel carrier driver in Chu Lai (Vietnam) with the F Troop, 17th Cavalry Regiment, 196th Light Infantry Brigade. After the war, Vincent returned to UW-Madison and became active in Veterans for Peace and the antiwar movement. He is also a member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, Middleton post.

Interviewed by Jim Kurtz, 2005.

Transcribed by Jean Wood, Wisconsin Court Reporter, 2007.

Format corrected by Katy Marty, 2008 and Darcy I. Gervasio, 2009.

Abstract written by Darcy I. Gervasio, 2009.

**Interview Transcript:**

Kurtz: Today Is February 16th, 2005. My name is Jim Kurtz and I'm interviewing Jim Vincent, who is a Vietnam veteran from Madison, Wisconsin. Where were you born --where and when were you born?

Vincent: 1945, July 25th. I was born here in Madison.

Kurtz: Thank you. July 5th did you say?

Vincent: July 25th.

Kurtz: I can't hear. And where did you grow up?

Vincent: I grew up in Madison.

Kurtz: Is there anything memorable about that growing up experience in Madison?

Vincent: Oh, just that it was a great place to grow up, and I always said if I, you know, had kids myself, I wanted them to grow up here, too.

Kurtz: Did you have any parents or relatives that were veterans?

Vincent: Yes. My grandfather on my mother's side was a veteran of World War I and my father was a veteran of World War II.

Kurtz: Did this have any influence on your life one way or another?

Vincent: The military wasn't really--you know, wasn't a big part of my growing up.

Kurtz: Okay. Where did you--where did you go to high school and when did you graduate?

Vincent: I went to Madison West.

Kurtz: Okay.

Vincent: I graduated in 1963.

Kurtz: 1963. Then what did you do, Vince?

Vincent: Then I went to--enrolled at the University of Wisconsin, spent two years in the university.

Kurtz: So you went to the university for two years and then what happened?

Vincent: Well, I dropped out one semester and got drafted.

Kurtz: Dropped out and got drafted. Is there any story about getting drafted? Was it--how old--let's see, how old were you then? You were--'65. That was about--

Vincent: Must have been about nine--twenty.

Kurtz: Twenty.

Vincent: Yeah.

Kurtz: Yeah. So your number just came up.

Vincent: No, no numbers back then.

Kurtz: Oh, okay.

Vincent: This is 1966. There were no numbers. It was if you missed your draft physical--

Kurtz: Oh, yeah.

Vincent: --twice, which I did, you were subject to induction.

Kurtz: Did you have any impressions of Vietnam at this point in time?

Vincent: Oh, I thought it was absolutely wrong. I thought the Vietnam War was a mistake. Didn't think there was any reason that we should be concerned. I didn't believe in the domino effect. So I didn't believe in the war.

Kurtz: Okay. Were you involved in any protests or anything like that before you were drafted or while you were in college? Was there anything happening in Madison?

Vincent: Yeah, there was a--a draft protest. There was one draft protest, that was about it.

Kurtz: Where did you--where and when did you go for basic training?

Vincent: It was--must have been September of 1966. Went to Milwaukee for my physical and was subsequently drafted and put on a plane and sent to Fort Polk, Louisiana.

Kurtz: So you-- you went right from the physical to the airplane to Fort Polk?

Vincent: That's right.

Kurtz: Okay. And did you have any memories of your basic training?

- Vincent: Oh, yeah. Yeah. I was--from Wisconsin, being from Wisconsin, we were probably about 30 people in a basic training company of 100 or 150 or however many there were.
- Kurtz: um-hum.
- Vincent: Four platoons, I guess. And--and out of that basic training company--well, all the rest of the draftees were minorities, either from south side of Chicago or the--I think the east side of Houston.
- Kurtz: So there was--okay. I understand that. So did you--were there any racial problems at that point?
- Vincent: Oh, racial problems, we all felt like we were--you know, I think we were equal under the law.
- Kurtz: Yeah. Certainly. Did you stay in contact or did you know any of the 30 people from Wisconsin that you went to war with there--or I mean went to basic training with?
- Vincent: Oh, yeah, yeah. I still keep in contact with-- with three or four of them.
- Kurtz: Okay.
- Vincent: Yeah.
- Kurtz: Did you then go to AIT [advanced infantry training] at Fort Polk?
- Vincent: No. We were tested and--and allowed to go to officer candidate school or at least apply for officer candidate school. And at that time the strategy was that it would take long enough in officer candidate school to go through the school, refuse the commission, and not have enough time left to go to Vietnam. So that was a strategy.
- Kurtz: Did it work?
- Vincent: No. I was thrown out of officer candidate school before I had a chance to do that. I actually never entered officer candidate school. We were put in a position of administering the reception platoons, the new--
- Kurtz: OCS [officer candidate school]?
- Vincent: --draftees.
- Kurtz: Oh, draftees. Okay.
- Vincent: And we were put through an NCO [noncommissioned officer] school where we

learned how to be sergeants and—and given sergeant stripes and then told to indoc--  
told to administer the reception responsibilities--

Kurtz: Yeah.

Vincent: --to the new inductees.

Kurtz: And is that where you get where they wouldn't let you go to OCS or--

Vincent: Yeah, yeah.

Kurtz: Can you describe what happened?

Vincent: Well, I think after--you know, I did that for three months, more or less, and after a period of evaluation they realized that--you know, I--I reached close bonds with my receptees.

Kurtz: um-hum.

Vincent: They usually chipped in and bought me things when they moved on to, you know, well, basic training, I think out of appreciation for what I did for them. I basically looked at it like it was those guys and me against the Army.

Kurtz: um-hum.

Vincent: And I don't think they--I don't think whoever evaluated me appreciated the way I handled my responsibilities.

Kurtz: Okay. So they didn't think you were officer material, did they?

Vincent: They thought I might have been a good leader, but not in the right army.

Kurtz: [laughing] Okay. So then you, I assume, went to AIT after that little interlude?

Vincent: No. That--they sent me to AIT in-- at Fort Knox, Louisiana, and--

Kurtz: Fort Knox, Lou--

Vincent: Yeah.

Kurtz: Kentucky, isn't it?

Vincent: Or I mean Kentucky. Fort Knox, Kentucky.

Kurtz: yeah.

Vincent: yeah. And--and then they--the officer candidate school thing and the NCO thing or reception company thing happened there after AIT.

Kurtz: Oh. Okay.

Vincent: So I was in AIT in Fort Knox.

Kurtz: okay. So this--this reception thing happened at Fort Knox.

Vincent: After AIT.

Kurtz: Yeah, okay, gotcha.

Vincent: yeah.

Kurtz: Gotcha. Is there anything that stands out from the AIT? Did you think that the training was any good or--

Vincent: Well, we trained in tanks, you know.

Kurtz: yeah.

Vincent: It was impressive--

Kurtz: um-hum.

Vincent: --if nothing else. You know, "remember to close the hatch before you shoot the gun." I mean, you know, there were some valuable lessons there.

Kurtz: yeah. Were you trained as a gunner, driver, or trained on everything in the tank?

Vincent: Oh, pretty much everything.

Kurtz: Okay. After you completed AIT and you had your interlude with receiving basic trainees, did you have an assignment before you went to Vietnam?

Vincent: No. I went right from the base--right from the reception company thing to [inaudible].

Kurtz: Did you get leave before you--

Vincent: Yeah. I got a one-week leave.

Kurtz: How did you feel about the fact that you were going to Vietnam?



Vincent: Oh, I think at this point I was apprehensive, but, you know, I--I realized that there was no particular reason that I should be protected or privileged not to--not to do this when other people, you know, certainly the people that I went through training with, didn't have a choice. So I think I--there was a part of me that sort of looked forward to it. "Let's find out what war is all about" and—and see how people reacted and--

Kurtz: How did--how did people react in Madison? I assume you came back to Madison on leave.

Vincent: yeah.

Kurtz: How--what was your reaction to your friends here and family?

Vincent: Oh, I think it was more sympathy.

Kurtz: Did your father see combat in World War II so that he--

Vincent: No. No, he didn't.

Kurtz: So he didn't really have anything to offer you from that standpoint.

Vincent: No.

Kurtz: Did you have--know what unit you were going to when you went to Vietnam? Sometimes you do, sometimes you don't.

Vincent: No, I don't think I did.

Kurtz: Okay. Where did you leave--leave for Vietnam?

Vincent: I left from Oakland.

Kurtz: Okay. And do you remember when that was?

Vincent: It must have been somewhere around July of 1967, maybe June.

Kurtz: Okay. And how did you go? Did you go by commercial transport, military transport, or [inaudible]?

Vincent: Braniff airlines.

Kurtz: Braniff airlines. A lot of people went by Braniff. Did you know any people on the plane that you were going over with?

Vincent: No.

Kurtz: Is there anything you remember about the trip?

Vincent: Yeah. You know, it stopped in Hawaii for four hours, so you got to go--I think we got out-- we got to leave the plane.

Kurtz: um-hum.

Vincent: You got to look over the airport at the-- the mountain there in Honolulu, whatever it is, Waikiki or--

Kurtz: Yeah.

Vincent: And then we--we again stopped in the Philippines.

Kurtz: Okay. Did you get off the plane there?

Vincent: Got off the plane in the Philippines briefly, a shorter time. I think they changed planes.

Kurtz: So where did you fly into Vietnam?

Vincent: I flew into Cam Ranh Bay.

Kurtz: Okay. And did you have any--do you remember what time of the day you ran— what time of the day you came in?

Vincent: yeah. I think it was just shortly after noon.

Kurtz: And did you have any immediate impressions when you came into Vietnam?

Vincent: Well, I remember when the pilot announced that we could see the coast of Vietnam from the airplane nobody wanted to sit in the window seats.

Kurtz: [laughing] Okay. That's--that's good. I've heard that. Then--you wanted-- then did you receive your assignment at Cam Ranh Bay or--

Vincent: Yeah, yeah.

Kurtz: And what--what were you assigned to?

Vincent: I was assigned--assigned to a scout unit, cavalry unit attached to a light infantry brigade in Chu Lai which is north by Da Nang.

Kurtz: And so how did you get to Chu Lai?

Vincent: I think it was a C-130 transport.

Kurtz: What were your first impressions where—when you were, you know, kind of at Cam Ranh Bay flying up to Chu Lai?

Vincent: Well, Cam Ranh Bay was—I think I was there for 24 hours.

Kurtz: Okay.

Vincent: So--and I had--I had bonded with the people that were on the plane with me. They—they were going various places and we talked about where we were going. Nobody really had any idea what was going on at any of these places and thought it was a good--you know, it was a good social 24 hours—

Kurtz: um-hum.

Vincent: --camaraderie and drinking and--and just carousing--

Kurtz: Okay.

Vincent: --at the--at the base there. And--

Kurtz: so then you flew to Da--I assume you flew to Da Nang to get to Chu Lai, is that—?

Vincent: I--

Kurtz: --or did they have you--

Vincent: Yeah, I think I flew to Da Nang and then caught--I caught some sort of a transport from Da Nang to--Chu Lai -- it was an air base.

Kurtz: yeah.

Vincent: So, yeah, that's the way it happened.

Kurtz: Okay. And you then reported to your unit I assume. And what--what--how were you received there?

Vincent: Very standoffishly I'd say. The—the guys that were there, they had done what they had done. They had experienced the war and they didn't really appreciate new people coming into the company.

Kurtz: Okay. And did--did you receive any briefings on, you know, SOPs [standard operating procedures] and--or any particular training?

Vincent: No training. At that time we were pulling--we were patrolling the air base and I was immediately assigned to a platoon, put in a barracks, and--and then assigned to a squad.

Kurtz: okay.

Vincent: And we just basically went out and patrolled the area around the air base.

Kurtz: okay. Now you said you were in a Cav unit. Did they have vehicles, I mean APS—

Vincent: Jeeps. Occasionally responsibilities were to escort convoys with jeeps that had M-16 machine guns mounted on the jeep.

Kurtz: Were they armored in any way these jeeps?

Vincent: No.

Kurtz: Just a regular old jeep.

Vincent: Regular old jeeps.

Kurtz: What were your feelings when you came into this unit and not received warmly?

Vincent: Well, you know, I looked around for a--a friendly face.

Kurtz: yeah.

Vincent: And there-- there was one fellow that, you know, seemed to sympathize with my situation that held me out, introduced me to people and—

Kurtz: Tell you what the deal was, how you--

Vincent: Pretty much, you know, told me what was going on and—

Kurtz: Is that a person that you stayed in contact right with when you were in Vietnam?

Vincent: Baker actually lost his life there so--

Kurtz: Okay. Did your--did treatment change? I mean, how long did it take for you to be accepted?

Vincent: Oh, I'd say a month maybe at the most.

Kurtz: And was there an event like a--a contact, you know, that they said, well, this guy knows what he's doing, he's pulling his own weight or--?

- Vincent: Yeah. We were in a--fairly quickly after I was in there, maybe a week or so, on a convoy we were attacked, so I had an opportunity to be in contact with the enemy in a rather large firefight.
- Kurtz: And so after that they said, "well, this guy's doing his job" and--?
- Vincent: Whatever. I wasn't a virgin anymore.
- Kurtz: No. Okay. So that's--that's the dif. So did--in your time in Vietnam did you spend that whole time with this 17th Cav unit?
- Vincent: yeah. um-hum.
- Kurtz: And what were your duties there while you were in this unit?
- Vincent: Oh, to drive a jeep for the convoys, to—with my squad to pull patrols around the perimeter of the air base, to pull OPs where we went out to observation posts.
- Kurtz: Could you describe what was involved with being on an OP [observation post]?
- Vincent: OP was, basically there were areas, hills or mountains, that were--had a view of the--the area surrounding the air base and they would--they would have posts on the top of these hills. The hills would have names, basically like "213" based on--that's elevation--
- Kurtz: Yeah.
- Vincent: --above sea level or whatever. And then, you know, our responsibilities were to go out and observe.
- Kurtz: Okay. And were these established bases? I mean that they had a bunker out there?
- Vincent: Yeah, they would have a bunker out there.
- Kurtz: okay.
- Vincent: One of the--one of the OPs that was closer to the air base, they actually put a 106 recoilless rifle out there.
- Kurtz: okay.
- Vincent: That was never used, but it was there.
- Kurtz: Did you ever get probed when you were on any of these OPs?

Vincent: Oh, yeah, yeah. You know, the probing was-- it was fairly overt. I mean, I don't think there was ever any intent on the part of the probers to disguise themselves or to hide. They were far enough away that they were pretty certain that they wouldn't be shot.

Kurtz: okay.

Vincent: But they were there.

Kurtz: And did they mortar you or use RPGs [rocket-propelled grenade] or anything like that or did they shoot at you directly?

Vincent: We--we only--we didn't--never got shot at and were--and we only were mortared maybe two or three times, but briefly only.

Kurtz: Okay. So how long--when you were out on these outposts deals, how many people were there and how long were you there?

Vincent: Well, it was three people and--I don't know, and the tour was either three or six days.

Kurtz: Three or--so did you get resupplied during that time?

Vincent: No. No. It was rolls.

Kurtz: So you carried your C-rations or whatever you had with you and—

Vincent: yeah.

Kurtz: And how did you get out to these? Did you walk out there or--

Vincent: No, we were flown out.

Kurtz: Flown out in a helicopter?

Vincent: A helicopter, yeah.

Kurtz: And did, you know, a squad leader, platoon leader, anybody ever come to see you when you were out there or just--just to go out there?

Vincent: Well, actually one time on--on 213 General Abrams and General Westmoreland stopped by.

Kurtz: Is that right? What did you--did you give them any advice?

Vincent: [laughing] I can't remember if I did. I don't think I had enough guts.

Kurtz: Did you have any impression of these two gentlemen?

Vincent: They seemed like regular guys. That was amazing. They--they talked to us like they were just--like, you know, one of the—just another soldier.

Kurtz: Did that in any way influence your attitude about the war, that they would come out --leaders, like, at that level would come out to see people?

Vincent: Well, I don't think they came out to see us.

Kurtz: No.

Vincent: What they did is they wanted to--to just—to observe the marine air base and to look at the surrounding area, assess its vulnerabilities possibly and—

Kurtz: um-hum.

Vincent: I'm sure they didn't come out to that to just see us.

Kurtz: I imagine you were disappointed about that. Did they bring you--

Vincent: No. [laughing]

Kurtz: Did they bring you anything?

Vincent: All I remember is getting a--a cryptic sort of message on the radio that indicated that perhaps we should probably clean up.

Kurtz: [laughing] okay. Did you go on any operations when you were there, you know, like--you were there during the time of search and destroy. Did you go out and search and destroy?

Vincent: Well, what happened is about halfway through my tour they traded--we traded our jeeps in for personnel carriers.

Kurtz: okay.

Vincent: And at that time there were some operations that we were involved in, you know, transporting infantry troops and whatnot or transporting engineers or--

Kurtz: Did--what was your job with APC [armored personnel carrier]? Were you a driver or a gunner or--?

Vincent: Yeah, I was a driver, and then I graduated finally to a PC Commander or whatever.

Kurtz: Did you have any interesting experiences while you were driving an APC or—?

Vincent: yeah.

Kurtz: Care to share any of them?

Vincent: The most interesting was being, oh, probably a short-timer of three--three weeks left in my tour and having a new platoon leader right green out of the States, out of OCS, that came in and he was going to take the company out, just travel for no particular reason. Oh, I—I remember, they were taking a group of LURPs [long range reconnaissance platoon] out to--and they were going to drop them off and--but the platoon commander, he was getting a kick out of busting through the rice paddy dikes with the PCs [personnel carrier]--

Kurtz: um-hum.

Vincent: --and all of a sudden he was--he managed to get all but my PC stuck in the rice paddies. And at that time we were attacked with seven out of the eight tracks stuck.

Kurtz: Probably want to—

**[End of Tape 1, Side A.]**

Kurtz: When I turned the tape over you were stuck in a rice paddy with seven vehicles stuck and yours wasn't and you were being attacked.

Vincent: Yeah, the seven vehicles that were in the rice paddy. In his infinite wisdom, the platoon leader had decided that, you know, if they just connected the tow chains from one vehicle to the next, that eventually they'd have enough power to pull them—pull all the tracks out of the rice paddy.

Kurtz: Did that work?

Vincent: No, that--that wasn't working. That resulted in every track that went in to try to assist and do this becoming stuck as well. So when it came to our track, I decided that it was ludicrous to--to take our track especially under fire into the rice paddy, hook up the tow chain, and get stuck—

Kurtz: yeah.

Vincent: --like all the rest of them. So I suggested to the lieutenant that we try connecting all those tow chains together and hooking them--hooking the combined tow chains up to our track which was free and towing the tracks back out of the rice paddy one at a time. The lieutenant didn't want to [laughing]-- didn't want to relinquish his command to someone like this. And fortunately for me the helicopter with a--a



helicopter showed up—several helicopters showed up to try to provide support for us.

Kurtz: yeah.

Vincent: And one helicopter showed up with the battalion commander. And they attempted to land so that the battalion commander could get out and take control of the situation, and--and immediately his chopper was opened up on. And we basically being in the last track, we had to go and rescue him. Fortunately we did, got him in the track, he took command, and then eventually we got everybody out.

Kurtz: One at a time like--?

Vincent: One at a time--

Kurtz: --kind of like--

Vincent: --using--using my suggestions. [laughter]

Kurtz: What kind--you said you were under attack. Were there snipers or was there--?

Vincent: No, it was pretty heavy. It was probably a platoon-size Viet Cong force, I would say.

Kurtz: Did they have machine guns, mortars?

Vincent: They--no mortars, just machine guns.

Kurtz: um-hum. Oh, let's see. Did you have any other—these were pretty good memorable experiences. Did you have any other memorable experiences?

Vincent: Well, you know, the whole thing was memorable, you know.

Kurtz: um-hum.

Vincent: I had several--it wasn't all--I don't know if you're referring to combat or--

Kurtz: Well, both. I mean, yeah. Did--did--do you have any combat experiences that stand out in your mind and then I just--

Vincent: [laughing] There are a lot of things that stand out in my mind. For one thing I think when I arrived in Vietnam I was pretty much--people were--they had access to--we had access to--we could buy --as a company we could buy beer.

Kurtz: um-hum.

Vincent: We had some sort of beer allocations that, you know, went from Schlitz or Budweiser down to Balentine—

Kurtz: um-hum.

Vincent: --down to some Korean beer if you were—we were really desperate. And then we occasionally, on the black market or whatever, could get ahold of a good high-quality cognac and things like that.

Kurtz: um-hum.

Vincent: So it was basically--you know, the socialization back in the hootches was--it was a drinking socialization for about a month--

Kurtz: um-hum.

Vincent: --into the tour, and then gradually it became--socialization became more pot-oriented.

Kurtz: um-hum.

Vincent: --and it was a combination of--of drinking and smoking. And that--the percentage of people who smoked grew to the point where by the time I left grew from probably maybe 1 percent to about 95 percent--

Kurtz: Did this--

Vincent: --at that [inaudible].

Kurtz: Did this have any affect on your being able to do what you're supposed to do or--?

Vincent: Well, I think there were horrendous stories. I remember after the Tet Offensive, you know, our unit was sent up to Tam Ky to guard a battalion infantry perimeter.

Kurtz: um-hum.

Vincent: And--and I remember a point in time when the--the battalion commander went on tour of the bunker line and didn't find anybody awake.

Kurtz: What--were there any repercussions for that?

Vincent: I think they were too embarrassed to even admit that that could have happened. I don't remember any repercussions.

Kurtz: So they--it was just kind of ignored, is that what--would that be an accurate way of--

Vincent: [laughing] I think they were in denial, yeah.

Kurtz: okay. So that clearly--and--and I assume that you bought the pot on the local economy; is that right?

Vincent: As I recall, the local hawkers, the coke girls or whatever, they would sell pot in pre-rolled cigarettes, ten to a pack, for about 50 cents.

Kurtz: Okay. Did you have any other memorable experiences in--in combat or--?

Vincent: Well, I remember getting shot at by my own helicopter. That was fairly memorable.

Kurtz: Yep. How did you get them to stop?

Vincent: We basically shot back.

Kurtz: Well, didn't that irritate them?

Vincent: They were--it drove 'em off.

Kurtz: Okay. [laughing] Did you have any--much contact with the Vietnamese people?

Vincent: Quite a bit. You know, when we--when we were involved in supported convoys, we frequently went to Da Nang or Qui Nhon or--

Kurtz: yeah.

Vincent: And that would be a day or so at these places or maybe before the return convoy would—would get organized and come back, so we had quite a bit of contact with the Vietnamese.

Kurtz: Okay. And what was your impression of them?

Vincent: I liked them. I found them to be honorable and--

Kurtz: Did you trust them?

Vincent: Well, probably on a personal level. Politically, you know, you couldn't--obviously you couldn't. You didn't have any idea where they stood. I never had any illusions of participating in anything that was beneficial for the Vietnamese people.

Kurtz: yeah.

Vincent: --so--

Kurtz: How do you think they regarded you?

Vincent: Oh, I don't know. You know, our level of communication wasn't--was fairly primitive, but I'd say that they were basically mercantile more than anything else.

Kurtz: In other words, they wanted to sell you stuff.

Vincent: yeah.

Kurtz: Did you have any contact with the ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam]?

Vincent: Oh, yeah.

Kurtz: Any feelings about them?

Vincent: Yeah. I thought they were--I just looked at them as--as if they were more mercenary than anything else. They--they were brutal.

Kurtz: Did you think they were effective fighters? Did you, I mean, experience--

Vincent: No way. No.

Kurtz: What about the VC [Viet Cong] and NVA [North Vietnamese Army]? Did you have any contact?

Vincent: Well, the story always was that at the—that the VCs took their R&R [rest & relaxation] the same places we did, at Vung Tao or whatever.

Kurtz: um-hum.

Vincent: In that-- in that everybody put their guns down, they went in and socialized. The Vietnamese, the VCs that we shot, or particularly the-- on the bodies of the North Vietnamese, you'd quite frequently find books of poetry--

Kurtz: um-hum.

Vincent: --that they would write, which impressed me.

Kurtz: When you mentioned R&R, did you have some in-country R&Rs?

Vincent: No in-country.

Kurtz: Okay. So that was just anecdotal that the VCs took R&R in Vung Tau and--

Vincent: Yeah, that was--that was anecdotal, yeah.

Kurtz: Did--where did you go on R&R out of country?

Vincent: I went to Bangkok and to Thailand and to Kuala Lumpur.

Kurtz: Did--three different R&Rs or just--

Vincent: Three. [laughing]

Kurtz: Three. Now how did that happen? You were only supposed to get two.

Vincent: Were you supposed to get two?

Kurtz: One. Excuse me.

Vincent: Yeah, only supposed to get one.

Kurtz: yeah.

Vincent: Well, R&Rs were--to a certain extent were a--they were a commodity. They were allocated to units.

Kurtz: yeah.

Vincent: And because things would happen in the unit, someone would get injured or, you know, things would happen and--and the--they'd still have the allocation, so it was--there were opportunities there for people to have more than one and these--as a--as they were allocated and--they became a commodity and collateral for poker debts or anything.

Kurtz: So, in other words, if you were in a poker game and somebody was eligible for R&R and they'd bet their R&R and lost to you, that--that you would have--

Vincent: You would get it, yeah.

Kurtz: Now what--what did the military organization feel about that? I mean, did--did they know? Did they care?

Vincent: Well, inasmuch as the first sergeant and executive officer were--were frequently in the games, they--you know, it wasn't even—it wasn't even an issue.

Kurtz: Oh. Okay. So, in other words, the leadership was co-opted into this system, also.

Vincent: Oh, of course.

Kurtz: yeah.

Vincent: yeah.

Kurtz: Was there any merit going to awarding them to people that used them as commodities or—

Vincent: Any merit?

Kurtz: I mean, like, in other words, if you went out and really did something good and--

Vincent: Could you have another R&R?

Kurtz: yeah.

Vincent: Oh, I'd say that--yeah. I'd say that maybe one of my R&Rs was allocated that way. One of them was won. One of them was just the regular R&R. Bangkok, which was the normal R&R. Tokyo was maybe allocated because of--because of--they had extra--

Kurtz: um-hum.

Vincent: --allocations of R&R, and based on what we were doing at the time or whatever--

Kurtz: um-hum.

Vincent: --they--I was lucky enough to get that one.

Kurtz: Did you have any days off when you were in Vietnam like where you stand out to just do whatever you wanted to do?

Vincent: Oh, all the time. Yeah, yeah. The OPs were considered hazardous--so quite frequently after you'd come back from OP you'd have, you know, a week off or--

Kurtz: And did you--you stayed at the base but you didn't have to pull perimeter duty and stuff like that, is that what it was?

Vincent: Pretty much. Sometimes you--sometimes you had to pull perimeter duty, but frequently you--you just got time off. They had excellent beaches there and, you know--I mean, you--you basically didn't really have any duties unless you were being disciplined for something.

Kurtz: Okay. Were the beaches safe?

Vincent: Oh, yeah. yeah. Chu Lai the air base is right up--right up next to the beach, so that beach was very safe. It had a USO there and surf boards that you could rent, although there was no surf.

Kurtz: Um-hum. Did you get to see any USO shows like Bob Hope or anything like that?

Vincent: Not like Bob Hope. We--we had a club. We were--our--our base was just outside—just outside of the perimeter of the air base itself.

Kurtz: um-hum.

Vincent: We were off base. And we had--we actually made a deal with an engineering company. We traded cases of beer for a--a--a hooch that served as a clubhouse.

Kurtz: um-hum.

Vincent: And several of the people from our company, myself included, invested money in the club. And you know, we had a nice stereo system and coolers and a bar and a stage and--and we were able to book acts. We actually booked acts.

Kurtz: So this wasn't an NCO club or an EM [enlisted man] club. This was just a private club?

Vincent: Private club, completely private. And we booked acts.

Kurtz: Did anybody raise any questions about that?

Vincent: Oh, eventually they shut it down because so many people from the base were leaving the base to come to the shows at the club that, you know, it finally—the base commander finally got wind of it or, you know, just thought that it was getting out of hand and closed it down.

Kurtz: Do you remember what the name of the club was?

Vincent: We called it the--oh, what the heck did we call it? The something hooch, but I can't--

Kurtz: Okay. Not all that important. Did--let's see. Did you have any good luck charms when you were in Vietnam?

Vincent: No, I don't think so.

Kurtz: Okay. Were you ever sick or wounded?

Vincent: No.

Kurtz: I forgot to ask you about this. You were in-country during the Tet Offensive. What—did that have any impressions on you or anything like that or where were you or--?

Vincent: Well, we were at--still at Chu Lai.

Kurtz: um-hum.

Vincent: But Tet never got--you know, didn't—[Tet] got to Da Nang but it didn't get to Chu Lai, so we were at one point--you know, probably a week into it we were sent up to Tam Ky--

Kurtz: Okay.

Vincent: --to help out.

Kurtz: And did you have any--we went--we talked about Tam Ky a little bit. Did you have any impressions that it was any different than anything else that happened at that point?

Vincent: Yeah. Tam Ky was different. You know, the countryside had been devastated pretty much. You know, you could see evidence in the road of mines and holes here and there and everywhere and buildings destroyed and whatnot.

Kurtz: Were there any Vietnamese people still there?

Vincent: There were, there were, but they were—you know, they looked almost like—like they were stragglers or, you know, didn't know what they were doing there. I mean, the vegetation in the whole area by the DMZ [demilitarized zone] had been deforested or was in the process of being deforested.

Kurtz: um-hum.

Vincent: So it was like a--it was like a desert more or less with little stumps sticking up all over the place. And just--you know, just kind of a -- that's my impression.

Kurtz: um-hum. Now this is kind of down the final lap here to kind of assess what your experiences-- what did you think of the terrain, climate, vegetation of Vietnam?

Vincent: I thought it was a beautiful, beautiful country. You know, sometimes the--

Kurtz: Did you like the climate?

Vincent: I actually liked--I got used to the climate. I mean, it was--you know, it get—got to a point where it would be--you know, the temperature would go down at night to maybe 77 degrees and it would be cold--

Kurtz: yep.

Vincent: --you know, and you'd wear a blanket--



Kurtz: um-hum

Vincent: --you know.

Kurtz: Did--do you have any feeling about the cultural differences between you and the Vietnamese people?

Vincent: I just--I found it fascinating--

Kurtz: um-hum.

Vincent: --to--you know, I--sometimes when we would be on patrols that would go through little hamlets here or there--

Kurtz: um-hum.

Vincent: --we'd have an opportunity to meet with, you know, the hamlet elder and sit down with his family and have--have a meal. We would share our LURP rations.

Kurtz: um-hum.

Vincent: That would just absolutely fascinate these people. They were just amazed that you could take a powder and put water in it and boil it up with a little c-and there would be a meal that you could share. They were very reluctant to taste it at first, but when they did, they were amazed.

Kurtz: Now when you--on these patrols were you in vehicles or --

Vincent: No. These would be foot patrols.

Kurtz: Foot patrols.

Vincent: Yeah.

Kurtz: So how often did you get involved in foot patrols?

Vincent: Oh, more at the beginning of the tour than at the end.

Kurtz: Okay.

Vincent: And at the end it was mainly just pulling the OPs.

Kurtz: um-hum. What was your impression of the mil--the food that the military provided you?

- Vincent: Oh, our food was, because we were stationed at the base, was excellent. I mean, we probably had Australian steaks, you know, three or four times a week.
- Kurtz: Did you have any feelings about the weapons that you did--you were provided? Did you have trouble with the M-16s?
- Vincent: Yeah, the M-16 was--you know, you had to keep it clean. It was problematic. It would overheat and it was--it was problematic. The M-60 was a good weapon. That was a very good weapon. My weapon, you know, basically was a so--and I was never really ever sure that it worked, but it was there.
- Kurtz: You could throw it at them.
- Vincent: Oh, it made a good hammer tool when you had to--you know.
- Kurtz: okay. What--what did you think of the leadership that was provided? You know, let's start with platoon--you know, at the platoon--squad leader, platoon sergeant level, and first thing we'll talk about company grade.
- Vincent: Yeah. There--they were--they were across the board. There was some great leaders and there were some just horrible leaders. The worst--the worst people in Vietnam as far as I was concerned were the career military people.
- Kurtz: Why was that?
- Vincent: They had--they had experienced war on a different level in Korea and--and World War II and they had a--a sense of patriotism that the soldiers in Vietnam didn't share.
- Kurtz: Could you describe that?
- Vincent: Well, I think that in World War II and maybe even to a certain extent in Korea there was a--there was a perception that you were fighting to actually save your country, that your country was at risk, that there was a real threat. World War II certainly--we had been attacked. There wasn't that same sense in Vietnam.
- Kurtz: What was the sense in Vietnam?
- Vincent: I think the sense in Vietnam was that this is something that--you know, that there were laws that forced you to be there and that you had to serve your time, and once you served your time, then you were out, it was over. So it was just getting through it any way you could.
- Kurtz: So what you just said there, that goes across NCOs and officers basically. I mean, did--did you have any feelings about the platoon leaders or company commanders?
- Vincent: Well, some of them were--were great, you know.

Kurtz: yeah.

Vincent: But the ones that were--I think the ones that were the best were not the career soldiers.

Kurtz: yeah. okay. Did you know what your mission was when you were in Vietnam?

Vincent: I'd say no.

Kurtz: Did anybody try to tell you why you were there?

Vincent: Well, they tried to explain it in a number of different ways, but nobody could really successfully. I don't think any of the officers understood why they were there, really.

Kurtz: Okay. How did--did you think you were properly trained for the experience you had there?

Vincent: No.

Kurtz: Any particular thing or is it just in general?

Vincent: Well, you know, you're trained in Kentucky to--to drive a tank and then you're sent to be a scout in Vietnam in a completely different environment with different temperatures and--and different vegetation. And--and as far as I know, there was no attempt to educate even on a basic level any of the soldiers linguistically.

Kurtz: How did the Vietnam experience affect your life?

Vincent: Oh, I think it was a stabilizing experience.

Kurtz: Can you describe that?

Vincent: Well, it caused--it caused me to--

**[End of Tape 1, Side B.]**

Vincent: Then I couldn't have been the leader of the pack. [laughing]

Kurtz: When the tape--when the interview--interviewer was sleeping, the tape went off. You were saying that this stabilized your life and it caused you to take life more seriously. Do you care to explain on that?

Vincent: Well, I--I just think that one way or another when you're confronted with the possibility of not being alive maybe another minute or another second in--in a real-

life experience where your life is at risk, being alive means a little more to you. You don't take it for granted--

Kurtz: um-hum.

Vincent: --like you might without having had that experience.

Kurtz: How--how did you come home?

Vincent: Oh, Braniff.

Kurtz: Braniff. Did you leave from Da Nang or--?

Vincent: Let's see. No. I think I went back to Cam Ranh.

Kurtz: And what was your feeling when you knew your tour was up?

Vincent: Well, I was worried about the plane crashing. [laughing]

Kurtz: Yeah.

Vincent: You know, I--I got all the way back--eventually got back to Chicago and then got--caught a plane from Chicago through to Madison. It was an old DC-7 or whatever.

Kurtz: Yeah.

Vincent: A prop plane. And I could feel the plane going sideways and thinking "Good grief" (laughing). You know, I--at that point I was willing to walk from Chicago back to Madison, you know.

Kurtz: So were you out of the military at that point when you came back to Madison or did you have [inaudible]?

Vincent: No. I had—I had applied for a early release which is granted for--up to three months for being able to go back to college.

Kurtz: um-hum.

Vincent: So i was enrolled in college and I was able to get an early release. So I spent maybe a couple of weeks to a--three weeks maybe in Fort Knox.

Kurtz: Did they have you receiving troops again?

Vincent: No. They had me driving Sheridan tanks. And--and some of my--two of my buddies who were--that were in the OCS program with me and in the reception company with me--

Kurtz: um-hum.

Vincent: --had done their OCS tour, they had resigned their commissions, and they were still there at Fort Knox, so we got back together again.

Kurtz: So that-- the system worked if you could--

Vincent: The system worked for them, yeah.

Kurtz: Yeah, it did

Vincent: It worked for them.

Kurtz: Did anybody who hadn't been to Vietnam inquire about the whole thing to you? I mean, a chance to mentor anybody when--the--the few weeks that you were down at Knox?

Vincent: You mean to--to mentor people that were about to go?

Kurtz: Yes.

Vincent: You know, that's not a real memorable thing. I mean--

Kurtz: okay.

Vincent --I had friends that were about to go. Once I was out of the military--I was able to mentor.

Kurtz: Oh, okay. But not down at Knox?

Vincent: But not down at Knox.

Kurtz: What did you share with the friends that were going into the military after you got back?

Vincent: Well, you know, you took a look at it. You--you look at the risks involved with being involved in something like that and--and you evaluate those risks compared to things that you could be involved in that weren't--

Kurtz: um-hum

Vincent: --related to war necessarily, and you—you can see that your--your prospects for survival were really pretty high.

Kurtz: um-hum.

- Vincent: So, you know, I just tried to coach people. I tried to explain how it was, you could make the most out of this situation, the kinds of things that you could look forward to, and--and not to be--you know, not to be concerned. and, you know, I always managed to keep in touch with my friends that were there subsequent to me, and we corresponded by sending music back and forth and--and we would--you know, I'd quite frequently have dinner or a party at my campus apartment. We would quite frequently run a tape recorder in the back with a microphone and just allow the music from the party and voices of the people at the party to come over and to speak to the--to the person that was in Vietnam and then send them the tape.
- Kurtz: How did they react to that?
- Vincent: Oh, they--they loved it. They would share the tapes with their fellow, fellow--
- Kurtz: um-hum.
- Vincent: --soldiers. And they all looked forward to it. They were writing--write back and continually ask for more tapes so--
- Kurtz: okay.
- Vincent: --we'd do that frequently.
- Kurtz: Did--did you discuss your personal experiences with anybody other than, you know, like this--these friends of yours are kind of a little different situation.
- Vincent: You mean when people would ask?
- Kurtz: Yeah. Yeah.
- Vincent: Oh, yeah. You know--
- Kurtz: Did many people ask you?
- Vincent: Oh, sure, because, you know, we--you were—you know, I was an anomaly. I was a Vietnam veteran on campus at the University of Wisconsin which is one of the most radical campuses in the country, involved in all sorts of organized protests and--and whatnot, and everybody wanted to know what the experience was like. And, you know, it went from “How in the world could you ever allow yourself to do this? Why didn't you leave the country?” to, you know, “you poor bastard having to go through such a horrendous thing” to just curiosity, “what the heck was it like?” well, you know.
- Kurtz: um-hum.

- Vincent: And, you know, I had a--an opportunity to—to quite frequently get in heated discussions about people that were opposed to the draft because at that point I was convinced that the draft was probably the last vestige of democracy in the military.
- Kurtz: um-hum.
- Vincent: That was the only thing that kept the military honest, the fact that they had to be accountable because they were taking people out of the country and sending them to a war. It forced them to be accountable. One of the scariest things to me was to have an Army without a draft.
- Kurtz: Does your feeling continue today?
- Vincent: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely.
- Kurtz: How did these people react when—these anti-draft people react?
- Vincent: Usually I'd win the discussion.
- Kurtz: Yeah. yeah. Well, that's interesting. Did you join any organi—veterans organizations?
- Vincent: Well, I—I joined Vets for Peace, of course, when I got back.
- Kurtz: Were you active in it?
- Vincent: I was active in it for a while. My--I think my suggestions were--were not taken seriously.
- Kurtz: What kind of suggestions did you have?
- Vincent: I--I wanted to be slightly more anarchistic than--than most of the--most of the veterans in the Vets for Peace in my opinion were too conservative. They needed to shock or to--you know, they needed to get more attention somehow or another--
- Kurtz: um-hum.
- Vincent: --and they--and they weren't doing it.
- Kurtz: Do you have anything you would care to share about what they should have done?
- Vincent: You know, the--the thing that probably caused me to leave the Vets for Peace was a meeting where it was a--there was an attempt to organize something on Memorial Day, and there was to be a parade or whatever or there--you know, and there's a typical honor guard type thing from the American Legion and the VFW [veterans of foreign wars] and all this kind of stuff. And then there were—you know, we were in

the middle of the war. It was 1968 or maybe '69. I guess it was '69. We were in the middle of the war and people were dying and nobody was paying attention. So--and I was just not happy with the sort of the timid type of suggestions that were coming out of the Veterans for Peace. And at one point, I just glibly said, "well, you know, if you're gonna get some people's attention, you got to do more than sit in on the steps of the capitol." I said "you'd get more attention if you shit in than—."

Kurtz: yeah.

Vincent: And at that point, you know, the conversation got a little heated--

Kurtz: Okay.

Vincent: --and I went my own way.

Kurtz: okay. So are you active in any mainline veteran organizations?

Vincent: Well, not active.

Kurtz: okay.

Vincent: You know, I'm a member of the VFW Middleton post.

Kurtz: okay.

Vincent: But--and then I like—I like going to the VFW on Park Street occasionally for lunch or whatever and—you know, and most of the people there are—are veterans

Kurtz: yeah.

Vincent: You know who the Vietnam veterans are. They're people my age--

Kurtz: yeah.

Vincent: --basically. Very rarely get into conversations about the war.

Kurtz: Have we covered everything that we should cover?

Vincent: Did I want to make a statement?

Kurtz: Yes.

Vincent: Now let's see. Well, I think the strongest statement I can say--I can make is that--that the--the strongest thing about the Vietnam War was that the military still at that point was part of the democracy and that we were--that we were fulfilling a duty--social duty-- as a result of being Americans. Whether it was right or wrong was a



political decision, but we were committed as Americans to doing what our politicians decide. And I think that at this point in time the military is less responsible--or responsive to political decisions and more responsive to the decisions of the administration and this is a tragedy, and it's a--probably a formula for ultimate disaster.

Kurtz: Okay. Good. I think then we're done. Good.

**[End of Interview]**