Vietnam Era Memories, Tom Betschart

UNEDITED

Cara: This is Cara Vanderree of the Ashland City Library. It is March 15, 2023, and we are interviewing Tom Betschart about his Vietnam era memories.

Cara: Tom, what is your birthday?

Tom: 1/22/1946.

Cara: And this interview is being done through Humanities Kansas, in conjunction with the National Endowment for the Arts Big Read Project. The NEA Big Read is a program of the National Endowment for the Arts in partnership with Arts Midwest. Tom, I know you served in the Vietnam War, but what was your branch of service?

Tom: Army.

Cara: What was your rank when you left?

Tom: When I left Vietnam, I was a Specialist E5.

Cara: And what part of the Vietnam did you serve in?

Tom: I originally went in at Quy Nhon; then I was sent as a temporary duty to Pleiku, the place where I spent the bulk of my time.

Cara: Were you drafted or did you enlist?

Tom: Well, I would have been drafted, but I went ahead and volunteered for the draft just so I could get in there and get it over with and get home.

Cara: Why did you choose the Army?

Tom: That's where you got drafted at, I almost wound up in the Marine Corps.

Cara: Would that have been better?

Tom: They were drafting people into the Marine Corps and I almost ended up getting stuck in there, but anyway.

Cara: Where were you living when you enlisted?

Tom: Living here in Ashland, I was still at home.

Cara: With your parents?

Tom: Right, I had just got out of high school a year.

Cara: How old were you?

Tom: I would have been 19 when I went in.

Cara: What were your first days in the service like?

Tom: Horrible!

Cara: In what way?

Tom: The first meal in the mess hall was Thanksgiving dinner.

Cara: Did you get turkey?

Tom: Got turkey! When I was Vietnam, we got a whole boat load of turkeys way before Christmas and Thanksgiving, but we got them! We had no refrigeration to keep 'em, but we got 'em.

Cara: So, you had to eat it up.

Tom: We just ate it when we got it. The same way with eggs, when we first got over there, we had no refrigeration. So, when we got food like that, you'd just cook it and cook it and cook it and feed it to them anyway they want it and give everybody all they want. That's all you could do with it, you know, because it was going to spoil.

Cara: How would you describe boot camp?

Tom: For me, it wasn't too bad, because I scored high enough on all the testing going into the military that I was asked to go to Leadership Orientation Course. When I came out of that, I was a platoon guide, and I was a Temporary Acting E6 Sergeant. I was in charge of a platoon of men, a barracks full of men.

Cara: How many men are in a platoon?

Tom: I don't remember. Off the top of my head, it was like 30 guys or so, 30 to 40. It varies somewhat.

Cara: When you're responsible for them, what does that mean?

Tom: Well, that meant that I slept in a room by myself and they slept in the bay, all of them in one bay. I was in charge of making sure everything stayed right in that bay, that nobody got into trouble. They were in their bunk when they were supposed to be in their bunk and that lights were out when they were supposed to be out. The place was kept clean. They kept everything right. You know, their rifles cleaned, latrines cleaned, everything clean. We was in Fort Lennard Wood and we had the old wooden barracks that were built in World War II. We had coal heat, so we had to have a fire crew at night to shovel coal to the fire and guard the fire. They called them "Fire Guards," I think, if I remember right.

I had to make sure that they stayed on the job. There wasn't much heat in that building. It would freeze water in there almost all day and all night. The water would freeze and they had what they called "butt cans". You'd just put your cigarette butts in on the posts inside the barracks and those would be frozen solid. So, every few hours, you'd have to go run some hot water over them and dump the ice out in the shower and then go back and clean the cigarette butts up. It was a nightmare, that part of it. But at least I wasn't in charge, so I didn't have to do a lot of dirty detail stuff. I didn't have to pull K.P. and all that stuff because I was Platoon Guide. So, it was to my advantage to be. And then when I went on to advanced training, they sent me to LPC, which was Leadership Preparation Course. I was kind of the same thing in advanced training, but it was just because I scored high on my scores.

Cara: On the paper tests?

Tom: Yes, on a paper test. They'd sit there and give you... Oh, they give you silly little things like there's one gear turns this way and then there's another gear here and another gear here and another gear here, and which way does this gear turn? Well, I have a mind that thrives off that kind of stuff, so I could just sit there and just "doot, doot, doot,' and I'm done. You know, and I don't know why my mind works off that stuff. But it does. But I was done in record time and they didn't think I'd answered all the questions. That was one of the tests that I remember, because they questioned me, "Why don't you finish your test?" I said, "I'm done." "You can't be done!" and I said, "Well, I am." So, they graded it and I think I missed one question out of whatever there was in that paper, a 100 or whatever, in that pamphlet full of sheets.

Cara: How long was boot camp?

Tom: Eight weeks. I think we went through in six because of the Vietnam War, but normally eight. I think they had cut ours to six, crammed it all into six weeks, if I remember correctly.

Cara: I should have asked, what year did you join the military?

Tom: I went to Vietnam in '66 and '67. So, it would have been '66 when I went in.

Cara: What was going on in the war at that time?

Tom: I don't know how to answer that, because it was just everything. It was all basically the same stuff over and over and over again. You know, you go take this hill and then you leave it and then the Viet Cong move back in on it and then you go back and take the hill again, and that's just kind of the way the whole war went. They wouldn't let us win it. We were over there as guinea pigs. I always felt like they were testing our military equipment to see how good it worked, is what we were over there doing. Because they didn't want us to win that war. If they had, we could've won that war and we all said the same thing. "If you'd just turn us loose and let us do what we want to do, we could have this thing over in three or four months, maybe six or eight months. We could just take it and push it right off out in the ocean." But they wouldn't let us do it because we could not cross the DMZ (De-Militarized Zone). We couldn't go into Laos. And you know, you couldn't cross any borders. As a matter of fact, we were given orders when we first got over there, that if you see enemy activity in your area, you don't shoot at them until they shoot at you first to make sure it's the enemy, because we don't need any action that's causing problems. That's what we were told. You wait, you wait till they start shooting and then you can open fire, but you don't do it first.

Cara: And hope they're a poor aim?

Tom: You just hope you're damned lucky.

Cara: Is there anything that you would like people to know about what boot camp was like?

Tom: Not really, I mean it was just it was tough. Physical training was just was grueling. I mean when you came out of there... You know, I was trained. I was an athlete all the way through school. I wasn't the best in the world, but I tried my best and I always thought I had got in shape. But I had never seen what shape was until I got out of bootcamp, because I lost about... I was in pretty damn good shape because I'd bucked bales all my life and done all kinds of farm work and helped the neighbors haul bales and stuff. But I still, when I went to bootcamp, I lost around 20 pounds in six weeks and that's just taking off fat and putting on muscle and all that. I could run forever back then. But before we went to Vietnam, I was sent to Fort Campbell,

Kentucky, which is the home of the 101 Airborne. We went through all of their ground training, like their Escape and Evasion Course. Our C.O. wanted us to be trained for that in case we were ever captured. So, he made us go through all that training before we went to Vietnam, while we were waiting to go.

But I was put in an outfit that had been deactivated after World War II and then reactivated as a transportation battalion to go to Vietnam. We had to wait till... and I was the first guy to show up for the battalion. There was no commanding officer. Nobody even knew it was going to be happening! When I got to Fort Camp Kentucky, I walked in with a set of orders and handed them my orders and they said, "Where is this outfit at?" Nobody knew.

Cara: Did you just stand around till somebody showed up?

Tom: They stuck me in barracks and in the next few days there got to be like 15 or 20 of us. We're all going to the same outfit and they finally found out what was going on and for a while I was the commanding officer. I was just out of boot camp and training, but there was nobody else there. So, they made me an acting... in command, the highest-ranking guy there. We just laid around the barracks and did nothing. We'd go fall out and go eat. We did that for several weeks until they finally got some NCOS and officers showed up. But it was kind of a "who done it," kind of a deal, you know, "What's going on?"

Cara: Is that your best experience in the military?

Tom: It was the funniest one. Well, there's another funny one. When I was in Basic, before I went to AIT, for some reason I will never know, they came here to Ashland and interviewed people that I had put down as references. I'm trying to think of the word you use, when you're applying for a job. You know, reference people. They came in and interviewed every one of them and some other people. Come to find out, they were checking me out for security clearance. Why I ever had it, had the highest security clearance you could get in the military, I never did know why.

But it was kind of comical. Every time I moved to a new location and I handed the C.O. my orders, they'd look at it and say, "Okay, what are you doing here? Who are you with? What's going on?" And I'd go, "I don't know." "Why have you got this security clearance here? It says right here on your orders that you've got security clearance," whatever it was. I said, "I don't know why I've got that security clearance. I just do." I never could convince any of them for the longest time that I wasn't... They thought I was CIA or something, you know, in there looking for smuggling and people selling stuff on the black market or something. But it was crazy, because every time I had to explain to them that, no, I don't know what it is. I don't know why I got that clearance.

Cara: It may have made your life easier in some ways.

Tom: Yeah, it did, especially right off the get-go. When I'd first get there, they'd be really, really nice to me.

Cara: Do you remember any of your instructors?

Tom: Just vaguely, you're talking about basic. Just vaguely, I kind of remember my Platoon Sergeant was Sergeant York. He was an old Southerner and one phrase he throwed on me that I had never heard in my life, "Was we're going on to this training Tuesday week." I'd never heard this terminology in my life and I said, "What in the world is Tuesday week?" A week from Tuesday?

Cara: I think it's British.

Tom: Is that what it is? Well, they sure used it a lot down there, I found out.

Cara: So, boot camp was not as bad as for you.

Tom: For me, it wasn't, because I was a Platoon Guide. So, I kind of had it made, you know.

Cara: You weren't the one cleaning out cigarette butts.

Tom: No. I didn't have to do any of that. I still had to fall out and when we policed the area and picked up all the cigarette butts and any trash or what-have-you, I still had to fall-out and go with them, but I didn't have to do it. If we were short of help or there was a lot of trash, I'd have to help. But as a general rule, I just walked around and made sure, you know, inspected what they were doing to make sure they got everything picked up. It made it easy for me because, like I said, I was a Platoon Guide. I didn't have stripes sewn on my uniform, but I had an arm bandage slipped up over my sleeve and I had the E6 sergeant stripes on it.

Cara: And that gets paid just a little better?

Tom: Yes, but I didn't get paid. I was just temporary duty, so I didn't get paid for that, not in Basic. It was just a deal to show the other boys that I was in charge and I had the same authority to tell them what to do as an N6 Sergeant did, is basically what it boiled down to. So, they had to listen to me, just like I was an old hardcore sergeant who had been in the army for 15 years or what-have-you. But anyway, that's kind of kind of the way it worked.

Cara: All right, when you got to Vietnam, where exactly did you go?

Tom: Qui Nhon.

Cara: What did you do there?

Tom: We built a camp. They hauled us out in the country and dumped all our gear out in a pile and said, "Here, set up your house."

Cara: Ok, so what was it like when you first arrived there?

Tom: Bare ground. We had shipped all of our stuff over there as we went in what they called, "Conex Boxes." They were big steel boxes that they put all of our tents and gear in and they hauled all them out there and dumped them out on the ground. We had to start setting up tents, digging trenches around them, and all that kind of stuff. Another interesting thing, when I got to Qui Nhon and got ready to off load the ship, they didn't have docks and harbors and stuff like that that. They unloaded us on LSTs (Landing Ship, Tank).

Cara: What is an LST?

Tom: Land, Sea and whatever, I don't know exactly what it stands for, but anyway it's just a flatboat. The guys you see in WWII, when they run up there and they drop the ramp down and they come running off of it. That's what it is.

Cara: So, it's like what they used on D-Day.

Tom: Right, same kind of a vessel, well, they had rubber tires tied on the side of these and the ocean wasn't really smooth. So, they'd come together and hit and then they'd bounce apart about 10, 15, or 20 foot and then they'd come back together and hit. And you stood in this doorway on the side of that ship, just above sea level. And when they told you to jump, you jumped from one to the other. It would be like 10 or 15 foot from you, coming at you. But they had a guy that knew what he was doing to tell you when to jump. And if you jumped when you were supposed to, you'd land in the boat. If you didn't, you went down in the water. I saw a guy do that and he lost everything he had with him. You had your duffle bag and all that stuff with you, your gear, and your rifle. When he went down, he was smart enough that instead of trying to come straight back up, he went underneath.

Cara: So, he didn't get smashed.

Tom: Yes. He didn't get mashed. That happened right in front of me and it kind of scared the pee-wadding out of me.

Cara: How much would that weigh? Your duffle bag? Your gun? What kind weight?

Tom: You're looking at 60 to 100 pounds.

Cara: Did you weigh 130 then?

Tom: I weighed about 140 pounds, I suppose 150 or 160, maybe. When I came back I'll probably weighed 140. You just kept losing weight over there because you were just so hot you didn't want to eat or you didn't eat or you didn't have the food to eat sometimes, depending on where you were at. But most of the time, I had all the food I needed and wanted.

Cara: So, you get there. Are these like the tents that we're used to seeing? Did they have wooden frames? What kind of a tent was?

Tom: It was just a big old GP medium tent.

Cara: I don't know what that is.

Tom: It sleeps about six people, six to eight people, and you can put more than that in there, but that's for your living quarters. That gives you a cubical. It's probably maybe 10 x 20, maybe 8 x 10.

Cara: For six people.

Tom: No, for each guy. Each guy got an area like that, so you had enough room for... maybe not quite that much room. But he got enough room for his footlocker and all that stuff. But when we got to Vietnam and we started getting things over there, being in a transportation company, we could order everything we wanted, but we got nothing. Because they always told us, "If you need it, you know how to get it." In other words, steal it.

Cara: From your own side.

Tom: If you got a load of lumber coming in and you wanted some 2x4s or 2x6s, you just off loaded some of these. Wherever they were supposed to go, got shorted some. But I learned real quick, you could get away with murder doing that. As long as you didn't sell it to the Vietnamese, they wouldn't do anything to you. I stole a generator so we'd have electricity, a big generator, big enough to run this town almost.

Cara: You didn't steal it, you liberated it.

Tom: What do we call it? I can't even think the word I'm trying to think of now: requisitioned it.

Cara: Without benefit of paperwork. Oh, real quick, when I think of living in a tent, what's the weather like there besides hot? Does it rain a lot?

Tom: During the monsoon season, it never quits. We lived through a typhoon which we were only... We were close enough to the ocean that when the typhoon was going on, you could taste the salt in water that hit you in the face and run down your face.

Cara: And the tent survived those kinds of winds?

Tom: Some of it, some of them. By that time, we had framed most of them with 2x4s and 2x6s and what-have-you, and the ones that were framed up stood up real good.

Cara: What kind of wild life were you dealing with in a tent?

Tom: Snakes is your biggest problem.

Cara: Poisonous?

Tom: Oh yeah, they had little bamboo viper, they called him. He's only... I don't remember now, but it seems like he's less than a foot and a half long and not very big around. They always told us that if one of them bit you, bend over and stick your head between your legs and kiss your rear goodbye, because you're going to be dead in a few minutes. I don't know how true that was, but that's what they always told us.

Cara: Were there like scorpions and bugs?

Tom: They were a lot of bugs. Leeches were the one thing that bothered a lot of people. If you got into the water, you were going to get leeches all over you. The little Vietnamese kids would trap, and I don't know where or who they sold them to, but they'd go trap them big old pythons and stuff. You know, some of them would be 15 and 20 foot long. They kept trapped monkeys and would sell them to the G.I.s for pets and things like that, you know. They had a pet monkey over in the motor pool where they worked on the engines and fixed trucks that come in. And when I went to Pleiku, I was a forward point. As far as convoys went, from there on out, we'd just take two or three trucks under heavy guard out from there to locations around

Pleiku. Like the artillery outfit and the Green Berets. And that was our job, to make sure that they got their shells and whatever they needed delivered to them from our point to their point.

While I was there, the Vietcong overrun our perimeter and there's pictures in that book I let you have there of the trucks that they blew up. They blew up everything in the compound that night. They got in our ammo dump, blew it up. We had an ammo dump plumb full of ammo and they blew it up and destroyed a bunch of the trucks. I mean a bunch of trucks that were destroyed and I don't know. Have you ever seen shrapnel? I will show you some here in a second if you hand me that red box sitting right there on top. We had a mortar come down and hit our camp and these were in my bunk next morning. It blowed our tent down.

Cara: I have a camera here, so that's what they're shooting at you.

Tom: That's the fragments that come off of it. You've heard of people that say they have shell fragments and shrapnel in their body yet to this day. Well, that's what they're talking about.

Cara: May I take a picture of your stuff?

Tom: That's just junk, basically!

Cara: It's not.

Tom: I'm going to turn this over because it's got nasty deal on the front of it.

Cara: All I see is a fork and spoon. I just want to take a picture. Is this your first wife?

Tom: No, that's just a girlfriend. She was a neighbor girl.

Cara: Okay, I'm just wanting your name tag to show, that's all.

Tom: She was a couple of years older and a neighbor girl, and she was in the same class as my sister.

Cara: So, you knew her.

Tom: And we were in 4-H Clubs together and she used to come up and spend nights and we rode our horses back and forth. We lived about three or four miles apart. We'd ride horses back and forth. Your pins are right up here.

Cara: What was your job called when you were there at Pleiku?

Tom: I was a cook and ran a mess hall. We'd feed anywhere from... It varied. We'd feed anywhere from 30 guys to 130 guys. You know, just whatever come in on a convoy and was there still. They'd bring the trucks as far as us, those semi-trucks. They'd drop the trailer off, pick up an empty trailer, line back up and go back. The cargo trucks, they'd just drop them off, pick up a different truck, and take it back. Then we took the goods that were on those trucks and took it on to wherever it belonged.

Cara: I'm laughing because my daddy is a phenomenal mechanic, so they made him a cook.

Tom: I wasn't a cook by any means, but I had gone to meat cutting school, so they thought I ought to be a cook, I guess.

Cara: Did you see any combat?

Tom: Not actual going out in the field, combat, but we were under attack a lot of times in Pleiku from mortar and rocket fire. They overrun our parameter that one night and blew up our compound, blew up the ammo dump and a bunch of trucks. They had what they called a "satchel charge". It was like a kind of a mini-backpack and had a handle on it to carry it easy. They'd just run up to them trucks that were parked in our compound, open a door and toss one of those in it with a timer on it and then run down the line and just keep throwing them in the trucks. They blew up a bunch. There's pictures in that one book that I'm going to lend you. There were a bunch of trucks that were blown up that night in our compound, some of them not much farther than across the street from, you know, half a city block away. That ammo dump that blew up was probably an eighth of a mile from our tent.

We were on the outside edge of a helicopter company where all the helicopters in the Pleiku area were kept in that compound. I think they all were, because they were in and out of there constantly, day and night. Mainly day, but sometimes they'd come in and out at night, leave before daylight and come back after dark. I saw one or two of them get knocked out of the air. Luckily everybody always survived them because the ones I saw were close to our perimeter and they'd bailout and shank it over to get in our area as quick as they could. When one of them went down like that, they'd set off a charge inside that helicopter and blow it to smithereens because Vietcong had the whole area in front of our compound, had tunnels underneath, it, had mortars and rockets and stuff underneath the ground out there. And when something like that happened they'd just pop out of the ground everywhere and try to salvage what they could of it and steal the knowledge, you know, and all that good stuff.

Cara: So, they tried to make it useless to them.

Tom: Yeah, so they just blew it all up so they there was nothing in there they could use, you know, against us.

Cara: Do you have any memorable experiences of your time there?

Tom: Oh, not really.

Cara: Were you awarded any medals or citations?

Tom: No. I did tear up a knee over there because one night when we were getting harassing rocket and mortar fire, I came in with a water trailer and tried to unhook it. It took two or three guys to unhook one of them. Nobody would come out of the ditches to help me unhook it because I needed to get the truck away from the mess hall because I knew they'd aim at that truck to blow that truck up and get our mess hall blowed up. So, I tried to unhook it by myself. I got it unhooked, but my knee buckled underneath and tore my knee up and I never did get that fixed.

Cara: That happened like just a month or two before you were discharged?

Tom: Right, I was probably about four months from being discharged when that happened. They sent me every day down to the place to try to ship me to... I don't remember now, Korea or somewhere to get my knee rebuilt or, you know, operated on, and there was always too many wounded that needed help worse than I did. Then when I got out of the army, they said, "Well, you can either get it fixed now and you spend the next three to six months in the army, or you can get your discharge papers today and go home." I said, "Hand me the papers and if you can get it fixed, the V.A. will fix it later."

Tom: Well, when I went to the V.A., they said, "There's nothing wrong with your knee." They'd lost my health records over there in Vietnam when they shuffled me around.

Cara: It kind of sounds as though your health issues were affected in later life by your time in the military.

Tom: That's true. I'm 100% disability from military, from Agent Orange.

Cara: How were you exposed to Agent Orange?

Tom: Well, those helicopters that were flying in and out right on the top of me all the time? They were spraying it. You know they were dribbling and not shut off good. And the stuff was stored... Our mess hall was set up right against the fence where they were at. The only thing between us and them was Graves Registration when they bagged bodies to send them home, and that was right across the fence in our mess hall. But that that stuff was everywhere.

There's no way you could be in Vietnam and stay out of it. Because you stop and think about it just for a minute. They're spraying that Agent Orange on the ground everywhere and it didn't go away. It's there for some time. It rains a lot in that country. We got our water out of the rivers and stuff, which is not very clean, and run it through filtering systems and they put chemicals in it to kill the bugs in it so it wouldn't make you sick. Which I got some bad water one time; an idiot went and filled it in the wrong place. I got dysentery from it, but anyhow, that's another story that we don't want to go into. But anyway, all the water you took a shower in was just filtered water. It wasn't chemically cleaned. All the water you drank was not chemically cleaned because it still had that stuff in it. So, all the shower water you had, all the drinking water you had, it all had Agent Orange in it. If you were in that country, you got exposed to it. You know, they wouldn't tell you that, but that was my own surmise and testimony. You didn't have to have it sprayed on you.

Cara: Did they know at the time?

Tom: How dangerous it was? I think some of them questioned it. I think it was another guinea pig deal. We'll spray it on and see what happens to them. That's what I kind of felt like. You know, I don't have any proof of that, but I felt like the whole thing was that we were the guinea pigs to test out the military equipment. See how good... Agent Orange worked great, because where they sprayed that there'd just be bare trees sticking up. No, no grass around them, no foliage on the trees, just bare, bare, bare. So, it worked great that way. But they sprayed with airplanes, they sprayed with helicopters, they sprayed with everything and I think they sprayed with helicopters. I know they had things on that looked like booms. I don't know. I assume they sprayed that stuff, but well, then the Air Force base was right behind them. One way or the other we're getting flown over us all the time.

Cara: You were either bathing in it or drinking it. While you were there, how did you talk to your family? You weren't married yet. Did you call? Did you write?

Tom: I just wrote letters. I never was around the phone to call. My future wife sent me a Dear John letter and I got it on my birthday. I never wrote her and thanked her, but I should have. I may have. I don't remember now.

Cara: But you went ahead and got married when you came back?

Tom: Yeah, I knew as soon as I seen her that I still loved her, and she knew the same.

Cara: The next question is, what was the food like, but you were the one making it!

Tom: I tell you this, the mess hall I worked in, the first month I was there, we didn't know they had this deal going but they had what they called the Best Mess Hall. They'd go around and eat food out of the mess halls, these mess officers would, and they'd judge all the mess halls. The first month, we didn't know they were

doing this and they didn't even know we were there. So, we didn't win Best Mess. But the next 11 months we won it every time.

Cara: Why?

Tom: Because we were clean and good and we cooked good food. I didn't use recipes. I'm an instinctive cook, like mom was, my grandma, my mom's mom was, and I need to back up and tell you the story about when I was at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, the post bakery burned down. It made all the bread and rolls and muffins and biscuits and everything else for all of us. They come around the next morning and said, "We're not going to have any bread unless we make it ourselves and does anyone here know how to do it?"

And I said, "I can do it." So, I started making bread and after I'd done it for a few days, I thought, "This is baloney, measuring all this out." So, I just... flour came in 50-pound bags and I think sugar was in 25- or 30-pound bags. I don't remember how it come and your yeast came in jars or gallon cans. I don't remember now, but I just started dumping flour and sugar and yeast and everything, and you know how you make bread, and you start your yeast, of course, and all that stuff. But anyway, I'm not going into all the details. But I'm making bread and a high-ranking mess officer comes walking in and sees me doing that. He says, "What are you doing?" I said, "I'm making bread." And he said, "You can't do it that way, throw that out and start over." And the Mess Sergeant said, "Just leave him alone, sir, he knows what he's doing." And he said, "I'll be the judge of that." I went ahead and made the rolls and he come back and ate lunch and he come back and wanted more rolls.

Cara: But you were making it in bulk!

Tom: Yeah, I could make more rolls than you can imagine in a few minutes. I had cookie sheet-type pans. We had a big oven, it had a rotisserie in it at the mess hall at Fort Campbell. And as this thing come around, I think you could put four of these big cookie sheet type deals that were like two and a half foot wide and three-foot-long and cover those with rolls and let them rise and stick them in the oven. It turned real slow and when it come around, when they come back, and pull them back out of there and the rolls were done. The same with cakes and pies or anything you put in there, they were rotated around in that way. By rotating it, everybody got an even heat on them.

We got in a chocolate icing fight one time because somebody made way too much of it. Made a mess of the mess hall and we got in trouble over that one! We started throwing chocolate icing at each other. We were wearing cook whites, and somebody walked over and slapped somebody on the back with a handful of chocolate icing and the flight started right there. He threw it at the other guy to hit somebody else and everybody's grabbing a handful of it and throwing it.

Cara: I hope it was worth it!

Tom: It was. We had to clean the mess hall and we all got chewed out for it, but it was a lot of fun. It broke the boredom of being in the army. We were always having something like that happen.

Cara: You mentioned that if you got anything like turkey or eggs, you just fed it until it was gone.

Tom: Till it was gone or spoiled. We got pork one time, pork butts, and they spoiled. This is kind of hard to believe, but we didn't have any refrigeration. So, once they spoiled, I told the girls in the mess hall to take them and throw them in the garbage. Well, it was so hot that garbage would just sit there and bubble and boil, fermenting all the time. They'd throw that in the garbage and then would go out there and fish them out of the garbage and put them in boxes to take home.

I said, "What are you going to do with that?" They said, "We're going to eat it." I said, "No, that's going to make you sick. You can't do that." I said, "Take them over and put them back in that garbage and sink 'em in there." They dug them out and took them home anyway. They dug them out a second time and I thought, "Well, I won't have any help tomorrow."

That brings to mind another story that I probably shouldn't even tell but is very interesting to me. One of the girls that worked in there, I'm working alone in the back of the kitchen and holler to one of the girls to come help me. And I look around and nobody comes and I look around and there's no women in the mess hall. I look out the door and all the papa sans are sitting on their haunches out there just smoking cigarettes.

I'm going, "What in the world is going on?" I walk out here and ask them what's going on and they said, "Baby san, baby san." I said, "What?" They said, "Baby san, baby san." In the cook shack where we washed the pots and pans and trays and stuff, I walked in there and there was a woman in there squatted down having a baby. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I just froze, you know, and they go, "Get out of here, get out." I said, "No, I've never seen this. I want to watch this. I'm charge, you can't run me off." She squatted down, didn't lay down, and she leaned back against another woman's hands. Another woman got down there with a with a dish towel, caught the baby, put the baby in a box that had a towel in the cardboard box, covered it up with another towel to keep the flies off the baby.

I left, and I told one of the mama sans, "See if you can't find somebody to take her place tomorrow." "Oh no, no, she'll be back to work tomorrow." I said, "How is she going to work tomorrow? She's got to take care of that baby." "No, no, no problem, no problem." Well, what they did was, she showed up the work the next day but no baby with her. I said, "You can't bring that baby back to work." There's another mamma san had just had a baby, so she fed the babies in the daytime and the mamma san that was working fed them at night. That's how they survived. We paid them a dollar a day. That was the wages.

Cara: But they needed it.

Tom: Yes. It was high pay for them. That's why she wouldn't quit. You know, she kept working, but I think that's very interesting because most people won't believe that story, but it happened. She was right in the middle of having that baby when I walked in the door. That's why I just froze and stopped and watched.

Cara: Well, but everything was fine.

Tom: Everything come out just perfect. You know, I don't know how they cut the umbilical cord and all that stuff, because I didn't stick around. As soon as I saw the baby come out and saw it breathing and that it was alive, I thought, "Okay, we're good to go here." And they're wanting me to get out of there. So, I left it anyway.

Cara: Probably things the military didn't need to know. While you were there, did you spend the whole two years in Pleiku?

Tom: No, I was over there a year. I spent the first month or so in Quo Nhon, and then they sent me to Pleiku and I spent the rest of the time up there, till I was about two weeks from coming home, and then they sent me back down to Quo Nhon just to leave out of my home company.

Cara: What were your stresses while you were there?

Tom: Oh, just a constant thought, and you're not going to live till tomorrow.

Cara: Because there's so much...

Tom: There's so much crap going on. They're shooting at you, they're booby trapping things. You know, if they got inside a compound... They worked in our compound, the Viet Cong did, and we didn't know for a long time. We didn't know it. When I was in Pleiku, the barber shop I went to, there was like six barbers up there that was all Vietnamese. They would save your neck and your head and give you a shave with a straight razor. They were all Viet Cong. After that, after we found that out, one of them started to pick up that straight razor and I said, "No, put that down." Or I'd just pick it up when I walked in and hold it in my hand while they gave me a haircut. Because they could just cut your throat so easy, but just things like that. It was just things like that. And to this day, like going to church or going to a ball game or something. I don't like to get into a crowd of people and if I'm going around a bunch of people I want to be on the outside edge of it, close to the door if all possible. Like going to church, I won't get in the center of a pew. I'll get up and let other people in, but I don't want to go the center of it. Try to stay toward the back of the church and outside of the rows at a ball game. It's just something ingrained in your mind that you've just got to stay vigilant.

Cara: Was there something you did for good luck?

Tom: No, not really. Some nights you did a lot of praying when you were getting the heck pounded out of you, but I always wondered how in hell I survived that and why. You know.

Cara: What did you do for entertainment?

Tom: We didn't have any. Played poker and stuff like that, you know, and that was about it. I think I saw one show. You know, like a Bob Hope show. I saw one of those the whole time I was over there and my God, there must have been 10,000 guys there.

Cara: Where did you have to go to see him?

Tom: You know it was pretty... I think it was over on the Air Force Base. They had a kind of natural little valley and they set up a stage down at the bottom of it. Where we were sitting at, they was so far away that they looked like ants crawling around on the ground but you just went and sat on the ground where you could look down on it. You could listen to it more on anything else. But that's about the only entertainment. And once or twice, I saw white girls that were... What they did call them? I can't remember now. They were kind of like good-will girls. They'd come around and visit with you, you know, I saw them once or twice the whole time I was over there. It was kind of strange to see a full-grown average size woman after you'd been around the Vietnamese. They're all five foot nothing or four foot something, you know.

Cara: Did you ever get to go on leave?

Tom: I never went on R & R, I wanted to go to Australia, but they never did open it up and let us go, so I kept holding out for it. Finally, it got so short that I just said, "To heck with it. I'll just stay here." I never did go on R & R, like most guys did.

Cara: So you didn't get to do any travelling at all while you were in the service. Besides throwing chocolate frosting at each other. Were there any pranks or anything just?

Tom: Oh yeah, somebody's always pulling some on somebody.

Cara: Such as.

Tom: I don't remember the details, but just crazy stuff. You know, just hide stuff from them.

Cara: Entertainment.

Tom: Yeah, just anything to give each other fits over it, you know.

Cara: Were there any of your fellow soldiers or your officers that you really remember?

Tom: Oh yeah, I remember the officers really well.

Cara: Why?

Tom: Because they were good guys there. They were farm boys in Texas. Lieutenant Grey and Lieutenant Man were their names, and we just kind of hit it off. Lieutenant Grey was my mess officer and they designated me as their official driver so they could go partying to clubs.

Cara: Did you get to go in the club? No, it was officers.

Tom: It was an officer's club, but yes, I did. One would give me his lapel pins to put on because I had shirts that didn't have any stripes on them and I'd put them on my collar and impersonate an officer. They would have sent me to prison, but I'd go and sit down with them and drink with them. Then I'd go out and take those off because an officer wasn't supposed to drive himself. I'd take those off my lapel and drive them back to base camp. That was mainly overseas that we done that stuff. You could get away with murder over there. You know they didn't care for the most part. Anything you could find to entertain yourselves that didn't get you killed, they were good with it.

Cara: Did you keep a diary?

Tom: No, as a matter of fact, I lost all track of time. I shut time off in my mind. I had no idea what day of the week it was, what day of the month it was, what month it was. As a matter of fact, Christmas rolled around and somebody says, "What are you going to do for Christmas?" And I said, "Have you got any Christmas cards from home or something?" I don't remember what it was now, and I said, "I don't know when it's Christmas." They said, "It's the end of next week." I lost all track of time. I did that on purpose so I wouldn't be trying to mark the calendar like some of the guys mark off every day of the calendar. I didn't want to know that and I was surprised when one day a guy showed up there at Pleiku and handed me a set of orders. Or he had given them to my C.O. and the C.O. handed them to me.

They said I was to report back to Qui Nhon. I said, "What do I have to report back down there for?" I said, "I like it here. I'm used to being here." He said, "You're going home, you leave in X number of days, like two weeks from now." I said, "You're kidding!" And he goes, "It's time for you to go home." They made me a big offer and I don't remember exactly what it was, but if I'd reenlist, and stay in Vietnam for another year, I'd have to come home on a 30 day leave. They'd give me another stripe and I think it was like $6,000 or $8,000 they'd give me tax-free, which back in them days was a lot of lot of cash. It was real hard to turn that down but I got to thinking about it. I wanted to take it so bad because, man, I thought it'd be a heck of a start for getting married and what-have-you. That money, because I'd been saving a lot of money because I never kept any of my money, just like 20 bucks and 50 bucks a month in Vietnam, because what were you going to spend it on? But I got to thinking, "If I go home for 30 days, I'm not going to want to come back here and

I might want to go to AWOL and then I might wind up in prison and that ain't going to be worth it." So, I just dismissed the idea and came on home.

Cara: Do you recall the day your service ended?

Tom: Yeah, I flew into Fort Lewis, Washington. It was cold, drizzly and wet, about 50 degrees, and I like to froze to death because I'd been in tropical weather. Well, I spent six months at Fort Campbell in the summer time and went to Vietnam for years. So, I've been about a year and a half in tropical weather. The only time it was really cold in Vietnam was during the monsoon. It did get cold, it would get down to about 50 degrees and rain and wet and cold and miserable. But when I unloaded, it was foggy and drizzly and rainy. I thought, man, a hot shower is going to feel good. And there was so many guys getting out that the water was ice-cold in the showers. I mean ice-cold and my uniform, that I come home in, was hanging right up there. They issued me a new uniform.

Cara: Why?

Tom: Because they wouldn't let us come home in fatigues. You had to be in Class A's to travel in the States. It's just an army deal.

Cara: They wanted you to look good?

Tom: You'd look like a soldier and you're not officially out of the army until you are home.

Cara: So you have a brand-new uniform and you wear it for one day, two days.

Tom: A couple of days and somewhere around here, there's a lard can. I think it's sitting over there. It's got my duffle bag and my combat boots and that stuff in it.

Cara: I asked Susan if I could take a picture of your boots.

Tom: They're in that can over there. I think that's where it's sitting.

Cara: If you'll let me, I'll take a picture of your uniform.

Tom: Yeah, that's fine. You can take it out of that bag so you'll get a better picture of it. It doesn't quite fit anymore. I think the pants are sized 30.

Cara: Those were good days.

Tom: Darned if they weren't. I think the jacket's a 40 or something like that, but I was an E5. That's another thing. I made E5 with 13, 14, 15 months in the Army. Ordinarily it takes five, six, seven or eight years to make it to E5.

Cara: I've had several guys tell me that each time you go up a level that your pay gets much better.

Tom: Oh yeah. It gets better at every step. If I had reenlisted for another tour in Vietnam, I'd have been an E6. I can't think what sergeant that is. But I'd have had three up and a bar underneath and a rocker under it. That was really hard to turn down because have been pretty darned good pay grade.

Cara: But only if you live to enjoy it.

Tom: Yeah, but I decided it wasn't worth it. If I knew I could go right back to the same company I was with. I would have probably done it, but I asked him that and he said, "No, you'll be reassigned somewhere else." I thought, "With my luck, I'll wind up in a Green Beret outfit or something, you know, and I don't think I want to do this."

Cara: When you were discharged, you came back to where?

Tom: Well, I got a flight out of there to Denver. I got into Denver and of course it was the middle of the night. As a matter of fact, I was really a sinful guy on that day of flying home because I missed church twice on Sunday, that day. Crossing the date line that had two Sundays on one date!

Cara: Two skips on your record!

Tom: But anyway, I flew into Denver, Colorado, and I had a cousin there and I thought if worst came to worst, I'd get ahold of him. Well, he'd got laid off that day and so they were off partying because they didn't have nothing better to do. So, they weren't home and I was stuck there. I couldn't get a train, couldn't get a plane, couldn't get anything any closer to home that night. Finally, in the middle of the night, I finally got ahold of them. They came and got me and I got a few hours of sleep and a hot shower. And then I had an uncle that lived at Kit Carson, Colorado. Beings as he'd got laid-off, they hauled me to Kit Carson. My folks met us in Kit Carson and picked me up and brought me home.

Cara: How were you treated by friends and family when you got back?

Tom: Everybody was asking me where I was going to college. "Where have you been going to college at?" And I told them all the same thing, "I went to Saigon Tech."

Cara: Did you go to college? Did you use the G.I. Bill?

Tom: I tried to go to college. I took a course and I didn't do good in it. I thought, "This is not worth it. I'm working, I'm working and married. I need to make a living and I'm not going to mess with it." So, I didn't, but I have better than a college education because not only have I gone to meat cutting school; I'm a trained cutter. I'm a trained cook. I'm a trained welder and I can do anything I want to do.

Cara: Did you farm?

Tom: And I was a farmer, rancher all my life, or the biggest part of my life. I cut meat for Dillons after I got out of the army for six years, and was assistant manager in Dodge City in the north store, when it was still over there by Longs. I was assistant Meat Manager in that store. So, I can make a living anyway. I've got as good as a college education, as far as I am concerned, because I can get a job any darned place. I just wish I was young enough that I could go do it.

Cara: Did you make any close friendship when you were there?

Tom: You try not to, because they die. So, you just try to avoid getting real close to anyone. You have buddies, sure, more or less. But you just don't get real close because you never know when one of those damn rockets is going to hit the motor pool, or the mess hall, or your sleeping tent. We were lucky the night that one hit our tent. We were in bed sleeping in our cots, but they threw a salvo of rockets and mortars and things were blowing up We all dove out of there and were scrambling on our hands and feet. We were down low enough when that thing hit... when they shoot a rocket or a mortar at from over here to the right and it goes to the left. When it hits the ground, that shrapnel and most of that stuff keeps going to the left. It don't blow up in a circle, it hits and ricochets. You can see that if you ever see where it hits, you can tell what it does. But luckily, the only one that was on that side was me, the rest of the guys were behind it. I was down low enough that it went over the top of me. It got the back of my flak jacket, tore it up pretty good and put some dings in my helmet, but other than that, it didn't hurt me. No blood, no pain.

Cara: Is it really loud?

Tom: Yeah, it was. I was deaf. I couldn't hear anything. It knocked me out, I'm sure, for a little while, because I kind of woke up and realized that the tent was no longer standing up. I started hollering to the guys and I couldn't hear them hollering. But I could see people moving around underneath the tent because it had collapsed on them. I took my knife and started ripping the tent open so they could get out of there and get in the ditch out of the, you know. So they didn't get hit and we all got out. They were fine, nobody got hurt.

Cara: This was in the middle of the night, so you were wearing your flak jacket to bed.

Tom: They had warned us that we were going to hit. They'd always warn us, 90% of the time, 99% of the time. They'd tell us, "All right, you're probably going to get hit tonight."

Cara: How did they know?

Tom: Intelligence, I don't know. I always thought that if they know we're going to get hit, why don't they stop them?

Cara: Okay.

Tom: They hit us six-days and nights, continuous harassment, fire. They wouldn't let you sleep before they overrun our perimeter and that's the reason they did that, because if they don't let them sleep they'll be exhausted. And you just get to the point that you... well, when you're over there, you worked so many hours and did so many different jobs that weren't really your job, that you could lay down anywhere and go to sleep instantly. You could lay down a concrete floor, in the driving rain or in a water hole and go to sleep.

Cara: Cause you're tired.

Tom: You just learn to do that, and that's what they did to get you tired.

Cara: What is a flak jacket?

Tom: That's like a cavalier vest that the police wear around here. Same kind of stuff keeps bullets and shrapnel from coming through and getting you.

Cara: But it's just over your torso, not your arms.

Tom: Right, it's like wearing a goose down vest or wool vest or whatever. It laces up the sides so you can let it in and out to fit you better.

Cara: What's it weigh?

Tom: They're not light. I suppose they weigh 10 or 15 pounds. I don't remember for sure, but I know they're not light. I do remember that and they're hot. Oh my God, are they hot.

Cara: And you're already hot!

Tom: Yeah, so you don't wear them unless you have to, but you know, when you know you're going to get hit, you put it on.

Cara: So, it saved your life.

Tom: More or less, because I don't whether I would have gotten killed, but I'd have darned sure gotten hurt if I hadn't had that on, because I was down on my hands and my feet. I wasn't on my hands and knees; I was on my hands and my feet and my shoulders was the highest thing. Of course, and that's where it hit me in the shoulders and the back of my helmet. Of course, I had my head back like that, so it couldn't hit me neck because I was looking where I was going! Trying to get the heck out of the tent and get into a ditch. There was a big drainage ditch beside the tent and I was trying to get into that ditch. I don't remember exactly where I was at when it hit, but I think I was almost in the ditch because I woke up on the edge of the ditch when I realized where I was at.

Cara: You didn't quite make it.

Tom: I didn't quite get into the ditch.

Cara: Were the rest of the men in your tent okay?

Tom: Yeah, everybody was fine, nobody got hurt.

Cara: When you got back, people didn't realize you had been in Vietnam.

Tom: No. They didn't know, they didn't care. Back to that mortar hitting, I think one of the main reasons nobody got hurt was I think that mortar hit the top of the tent poles that holds a tent up. There's two of them, and I think it hit the top of that pole and that's where it blew up above us. I think that's why no one got hurt. I think if they'd hit the ground, I think it would have got some of us. But I think it hit high enough on that pole that it shattered the poles or that pole, and I think that's why nobody got hurt.

Cara: Luck of the draw.

Tom: Somebody was looking out us, was what we all said.

Cara: When you got back, did you join the V.A.

Tom: Yes.

Cara: What does the V.A. do?

Tom: Just do community service and stuff like that, you know, and do military funerals. We don't do much. We used to just raise funds to keep the building for the community to use. We used to have steak suppers and mountain oyster fries and stuff like that. About once a month, we used to do them and I used to cook for those all the time. Marvin McPhail was my father-in-law and he used to run the National???_____ Company right north of Spotts there and he used to just kind of ramrod those suppers and stuff. My mother-in-law made rolls and salads and stuff and I'd cook the steaks. I'd get everything gathered up and then I'd take off work early and go in and set stuff up and everything. I'd cook the steaks and stuff. After years of doing that I finally said, "That's enough of that. Somebody else can take over."

Cara: The guys from the Gulf Wars, did they join the V.A.?

Tom: You know, I don't think there's very many them guys ever... There's not a lot of a lot of them. A few of them that were around did, but I don't think there's very many of them here that wound up over there.

Cara: So your numbers kind of dwindled.

Tom: Yeah, just kind of dwindled away and now we're all getting like me, you know.

Cara: When you got back, you worked for six years as a meat cutter and you were an assistant manager at Dillon's and what did you do next?

Tom: I come back down here and went to work for Tom Salyer on the ranch, taking care of his cattle and farming and stuff. Then I quit him and went to work for a fellow by the name of Bud Helwig from Ulysses. He and another guy by the name of Milton Fisher and Bud's adopted son, running between 1,700 and 1,800 head of cattle down here where Mark Kaltenbach lives, and over on the Murdock Ranch, north of Freedom. I took care of all those cattle for them in the summertime. I'd start in December straightening cattle out and getting them ready for grass in the summer. I did 90% of it by myself. Most people in this town have no idea what I did for a living. Then I farmed a little on the side for myself and ran a few cows. I've still got a few

calves, but my son's got them leased from me because I can't take care of them anymore. I still got probably roughly 100 cows.

Cara: Who are your boys?

Tom: Well, I got two sons. One lives in Denver, Cody, and he's a nurse and then Shane Betschart. He runs his own outfit, now and has got my stuff. He's married to Jennie Giles Betschart. And then I got two daughters that live in Omaha. Then I have two stepdaughters. One lives here and one lives in Baton Rouge.

Cara: How are you related to Franz?

Tom: Brother.

Cara: Okay, now I'm connecting you.

Tom: We have another brother, Ken, that lives in Dorrington, Wyoming. Franz is five years older and Ken is five years younger. Then my sister, Ruth Ann, that lives in Protection, Ruth Ann Jellison. She's halfway between Franz and I. There's four of us kids, and my first wife had brothers and sisters out the wazoo, she had three sisters and four brothers.

Cara: What was her maiden name?

Tom: McPhail. And my current wife has six sisters.

Cara: You are so lucky!

Tom: I've got more sisters-in-law than anyone else in the world.

Cara: You are blessed. I'm assuming that you've kind of slowed down on attending the V.A. Do you ever go to reunions or anything like that?

Tom: No. I'm over doing that stuff.

Cara: In retrospect, how has your experience in Vietnam affected the rest of your life?

Tom: I don't know. I'm sure it's had a major effect on it, made me more, "You're going to get it done right the first time," I guess, than the average guy. And you just don't take no crap off nobody.

Cara: Has it helped you be more successful in civilian life?

Tom: I think it has. I think it would be a good experience for everybody, if they're at all capable, of having to go to the military for two years. It's just nothing else to teach you, because when you go into military, the first thing they do is tear you down to where you feel like you're about six inches lower than a snake's butt in a crack. Then they build you up to where you think you're King Kong, bulletproof, and after they build you back up, you just get a sense of well-being, that you can take care of yourself and your family. You can take care of the situation no matter what it is.

Cara: So, they made you feel successful.

Tom: Right, because I was, because I was a leader and they made a leader out of me, which I would have never realized had they not trained me to be a leader.

Cara: Is that how you feel about your service in Vietnam?

Tom: Yes.

Cara: That it made you a stronger person. Is there anything you would like people to know? Because, all right, let's go back to your health issues. The fact that Agent Orange has caused you some grief. When did you first know you had leukemia?

Tom: I have a slow acting kind of leukemia. Probably four years ago, I found that I had it. But you can live for years with what I've got and it won't kill you, sometimes. And if you'll notice, I don't have very much of an ear over here. It died because of leukemia

Cara: And they just had to remove it?

Tom: It died and fell off. I've also got them on my face. Those are the sores that kept me from getting my hip replaced for so long.

Cara: They wouldn't do it while the cancer was active?

Tom: Because of the infection. There's the rim off the other ear.

Cara: When did you get your hip replaced then?

Tom: Last December the sixth.

Cara: Did it help?

Tom: Oh yeah, I was in excruciating pain until I got that replaced. Now, I'm not in any pain, I just got to... I've been in this chair for almost three years and couldn't lay down in bed because my hip hurt too bad. I couldn't get in and out of bed because my hip hurt too bad. But anyway, I'm kind of like a baby now, I've got to rebuild muscles and basically learn to walk again.

Cara: Are you doing P.T., then?

Tom: I was and I'm going to. I've got an appointment tomorrow to maybe go back to P.T. some more down here. When I got the hip replaced, they sent me to the nursing home in Bucklin because that was the only place they could get me in that they could get physical training for me. They wanted twice a day, for five days a week, for 30 days, to get me back to where I could walk again. And when I got from Hays, where I had my surgery on my hip to Bucklin, the first thing that happened was I got COVID upper respiratory infection and the flu all at the same time. So I missed a bunch of my physical therapy there because I was too sick to do it and they didn't want to mess with me, some of them. Some of them come in anyway, but some of them wouldn't. I guess you might say I'm a tough old bird.

Cara: But you think you will be able to get around with a walker a little better then?

Tom: Oh yeah, I can get around much, much better than I was. I don't have any pain now. It's just, I've got to get weaned off the pain medicine, but I don't need it anymore, but I'm still on Fentanyl patches and you've got to come off that gradually.

Cara: So, things are getting better.

Tom: Oh yeah, I'm 100% better now than I was six months ago, because six months ago it took everything I had to go to the bathroom and back, it hurt so bad.

Cara: And was the military very helpful about helping you through the results of Agent Orange?

Tom: Not really, outside of that they put me on 100 % disability which has really helped financially. They want so darned much information and my wife hadn't had time to sit down and get it all gathered up for them to get everything going right on medications and stuff like that, but eventually we might get it all done. I don't know.

Cara: There's hope for the future.

Tom: Yeah, there's so much red tape to get through.

Cara: Is there anything else that you think people should know?

Tom: I think we've pretty well covered it.

Cara: Thank you for your service.

Tom: You're welcome.