Stephen Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an interview with David Holdorf on the 28th of March 2001 at approximately 9:20 Lubbock time. I’m in Lubbock, Texas and Mr. Holdorf is in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Sir, why don’t you go ahead and begin briefly discussing your early life. In particular where and when you were born and where you grew up.

David Holdorf: Born and raised in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Still live here on the north side of the city. Went to public schools, public high school. Basically went into the service and when I came out of the service, continued education with the Milwaukee Area Technical College. Worked for Outboard Marine Corporation for thirty-three years and retired June 30, 1998. I also run a home inspection company that I started using schooling that I had taken AT/MATC and classes going back to high school.

SM: When did you graduate from high school?

DH: June of 1965, Custer High School.

SM: Between 1965 and 1967 when you joined the Army, you were going to additional training school?

DH: No, what happened there is the high school that I went to is sort of like a technical high school. It was one of the few in the city that had either trade classes or business classes. I took architectural drafting and construction shop courses through the last three years of high school. Businesses would come into the school and take applications, so right out of high school I got a job as an architectural draftsman working for August Wolfe Company and I stayed there
for maybe about a year and I left there and went to a small manufacturing company. I worked there for a short amount of time and then went to Outboard Marine Corporation.

SM: What led you to go into the military in August of 1967?

DH: I was drafted, and after I was drafted, I spoke to a few people in the area—everybody was getting drafted. Basically, I had a good friend that was also looking into the service and he enlisted before he was drafted and he recommended since I was living in a one-parent family and couldn’t afford college, that I enlist for the extra year and then go to school after the service on the GI Bill, which I did.

SM: What led you to the Army versus the other services?

DH: Probably the biggest factor was the Army was three years, if I would have gone into the Navy, Air Force, that’s four years, I’m not sure about the Marines. Since I did come from a one-parent family, I figured the three years would be long enough to be away from my mother who was ill with cancer.

SM: When you were going to school, was there ROTC, Junior ROTC, or anything like that available to you?

DH: Are you talking about before the service?

SM: Right. In your high school was there Junior ROTC?

DH: I don’t believe so. If there was, I probably wasn’t interested. I don’t remember anything offered there as far as military classes.

SM: Was there anything about the military that you were drawn to in terms of your exposure to popular culture, movies, things like that?

DH: Not really. I think the basic idea was I was going to be drafted anyway. Take the extra year, go for the education, kind of figuring if I had a better MOS—Military Occupation Specialty—that I wouldn’t be a grunt walking around with a rifle in the jungle and basically that did turn out to be that way.

SM: So in August of 1967 when you joined the Army, you had already taken the battery of tests, did you already know at that point that you were going to become a mechanic, a vehicle and track mechanic?

DH: Yes. I don’t remember going to a recruiting station, but I’m sure that I must have done that. They basically show you the areas that you can get involved with. Because of the fact that I had been involved with automobiles, racing, hot-rods, that type of thing…I didn’t realize
that they may have had architects in the Army, so I decided to go into the field of mechanics.

Then instead of being offered one school, I was offered two of them. In that respect, I went through basic training which was the normal eight, twelve weeks, whatever it was followed by two AITs, one for I guess they call it general wheel mechanics and then the other one I took in Ft. Knox, Kentucky which was a track mechanic school.

SM: Why don’t we go ahead and talk about what you understood in terms of the Vietnam War from the time you graduated, when you graduated in June of ’65 we were at war—although not declared—and then two years. Did you keep up with it in the news? Did you know kind of what was going on?

DH: I don’t believe I knew a whole lot of what was going on there. Why, the politics of the war. I lived next door to a large family. One of the older boys was a Green Beret and he had come home a few times. I believe he went over in I believe around 1964 or ’65. He didn’t speak too much of it. I don’t remember seeing a whole lot on TV at the time before I went in. I basically felt that I was going to have to go over there, try to get a job that’s away from most of the action and put in my time and get out of the service.

SM: Did you have relatives that had served in previous wars, World War II or Korea?

DH: I was adopted when I was 15 months old, so I did not find my natural parents until about ten years ago. So that left me as an only child in an adopted family and then those folks that had adopted me divorced when I was seven. I don’t have much knowledge of my adopted parents…their background as far as any war service. I do know that my natural mother’s brother was in World War II and had spent quite a bit of time at Wood Veteran’s Administration Hospital here in the Milwaukee area in which he had some problems, but I don’t know the details.

SM: What did you know in terms of what was happening in Vietnam, why was the United States involved when you enlisted in 1967.

DH: I didn’t have a clue. I had no idea why we were over there. I didn’t know the history of Vietnam, as I do now, with the involvement of the French going back into the ‘50s and that type of thing. All I knew was that we were there supposedly fighting Communism. I’m assuming that I got that information from word from other high school students and whatever little we could catch on the TV.
SM: So when you went into the Army, basic training, you did your basic training at Ft. Campbell. Why don’t you go ahead and describe your first experiences, your introduction to the Army and what basic training was like.

DH: Well, my first introduction was, if I remember right, I think we took a train from the Milwaukee recruiting area where I think we took a kind of a physical there before we went…although we took a physical to be able to go into the service…I think we took a physical there again. I believe we were put on a train and went down to the Chicago area and then flew into Ft. Campbell, Kentucky, put into these big green buses and I think we went into a general area where we were issued a lot of green clothes and a big duffle bag, shoved all that stuff in there, went and got a military haircut and dropped off in front of a big building that we were going to be staying in. From then on it was ‘Yes, sir! No, sir!’ and getting straightened out into the building, into the living area, making beds, putting our stuff away, being told how to fold socks and that type of thing. Then we basically started initiating classes. Classes all the way through on the military code of conduct. In between classes a lot of physical training, exercising, running. I believe we did have some type of contest between other battalions to see who could get the most points as far as physical, running and being physically fit. I think that lasted for at least three weeks before we were able to go into an on-post bar to have some 3-3 Beer. After that we were allowed, I think another week later or maybe another two weeks later, we were allowed weekend or a one-day pass to go into town. Although when we did go into town, there were signs off of Main Street that the military wasn’t allowed into the other section of town. Then we had rifle training to see how well you could shoot a rifle; gas mask training—that’s an incident that everybody, I think, remembers real well—go into a contained area, put a gas mask on and they droop a pellet into some water and then the gas would come up and they’d tell you to take off your gas mask and then put it on and clear it and then some of the guys were tearing, you know, from the tear gas, and that type of thing. The gas would get into your clothes, so the rest of the day when you sat in classes, you were falling asleep. Then you basically graduated after about eight or nine weeks. A lot of physical activity, run two miles before every meal, a lot of food, ate like a horse, gained weight, felt good. That was the end of the basic training. We did have some time there where we could go to the shows—on-post movie theatre—café, music room, library, so there were some things that you could do after about the fourth or fifth week. Although before that, they kept you pretty busy.
SM: What was the most challenging aspect for you?

DH: In basic training? That would be the physical aspect. I was tall and not real muscular. I didn’t have any problems with the running aspect but with the…they had these ladders that you had to do like five or six lengths of ladders before every meal and push-ups and all that type of thing. It took me a while to get used to that. Towards the end, I didn’t have any problem with it.

SM: Were there any particular incidents you recall from your basic training? More specific things?

DH: Well, there was like a food wagon that would come around once in a while and you could get a sweet roll, which was much different than the rest of the food they were feeding you. Quite a few of the guys looked forward to doing that. Policing up the area for cigarette butts, that was like an everyday thing. Waxing the barracks floor with Paste Wax, try to make it look like wax when these buildings were like ancient. Cleaning up in the bathroom, going to the bathroom with no partitions in between was a little bit different than normal living. I had a Sergeant Peoples, I forget what they called him, but he was a sergeant that basically told you what to do all the time. He was a little guy and the information he always he kept telling me was to keep my feet together, because I have big feet, duck feet, and they stick out a little bit and I didn’t always keep my feet exactly together. Taking the rifle or shooting…we had to score because of the fact that I had glasses, I didn’t do as well as I wanted to. It was raining and I got rain on my glasses. I wanted to do better, but they wouldn’t let me. For some reason, I wanted to do well in that. Went into Elizabeth Town I believe it was, no it wasn’t Elizabeth Town it was a town that was out of Ft. Campbell. With that one-day pass when we realized that the signs were up in the town where they didn’t want us into the suburban area, we did go in there with about four or five men. One of them was black. When we asked for some beer, the owner of the place or the bartender told us that he wouldn’t serve the black guy that was with us. Which was the first time that I ever ran into anything that racial, although right before I went into the service, we had some riots here in Milwaukee. That’s about it.

SM: Well, what was the racial and ethnic make-up of your platoon, your basic training platoon?

DH: Jeez, I would say, maybe 3-5% African American. A small amount, it seemed.

SM: Any other particular groups that stand out? Hispanics or Chicanos?
DH: No.
SM: How did you guys respond to that, how did that soldier respond to this blatant discrimination?
DH: I don’t really remember what the soldier did, but the rest of us told the guy to take a hike and we left without purchasing anything. I don’t remember where we went after that, if we went into another bar or what we did. But I do remember that incident real clear.
SM: Do you remember any other racial tensions or racial incidents while you were going through basic training?
DH: None.
SM: How did your drill instructors enforce discipline?
DH: Physical therapy, not therapy but…do some push-ups, run a mile, that type of thing. We might have got some extra guard duty, you know get up at one o’clock in the morning and stand guard for four hours. Or maybe some policing of the grounds, that type of thing, nothing…no physical contact.
SM: Was there anybody injured or killed in your basic training group?
DH: No, I don’t believe so. Other than like myself, turn an ankle or something while you’re running or during training, but no big injuries.
SM: Well, you went from your basic training to your AIT, initial AIT, which was at Ft. Huachuca, Arizona, correct?
DH: Correct.
SM: That was in…when was that…October of ’68? Is that correct? October…
DH: I went in in August of ’67, so figure on 8-12…three months. I can’t remember if I had a little leave in there. I don’t believe so. And then it followed right after the basic training,
SM: So went to Ft. Huachuca from about October until December of ’67?
DH: That sounds right.
SM: Why don’t you go ahead and describe that transition. How different was AIT from basic training and just the general experiences.
DH: The areas that we slept in, the buildings that we slept in, were almost the same. It was sort of like…older buildings, no privacy, bunk beds—one up and one down—and a bunch of guys in like a one-room building with a shower in the front of the place. No grass around. Instead of mowing lawns, down there they rake sand. It was hot. We didn’t have summer
khakis, we had winter khakis that we were issued in the Ft. Campbell area, so that didn’t help. We did have to do some parade type things—get dressed up in those khakis and perform some parades out in this field for some generals or whoever. We had the jail across the street from us, so you could see some of these guys walking around in jail once in a while. We had the cook school next to us, or fairly close to us, so they kind of used some of the stuff they made on us to see if we liked it. The schooling was good. They had good classes, good instructors. We didn’t pull as much extra duty. There was more to do in our time off, there was a bowling alley there, I think there was an EM club, cafeteria. There was a Sierra Vista town, I think it was abutted to the Ft., although it was basically…I think they had a bowling alley and they might have had a bar or two, and the rest of it was all trailer houses. We called it ‘Sorry Vista.’ It got to be 115°, 120° some times. At night it went down to 70°, 70°-75°, and it felt cold, but much better than basic.

SM: Just out of curiosity, you mentioned the prison near you. During basic or during your AITs did anybody lose it and have to be punished more sternly than just through push-ups and sit-ups?

DH: I don’t remember anybody from our unit, from the classes I was in. No.

SM: Now your AIT training, your initial training…

DH: That was the first AIT training.

SM: Right, at Ft. Huachuca. This training was specifically in what?

DH: That was in what they call either light or general wheel vehicle training. Gas engines, for the smaller vehicles, Jeeps, ¾ ton trucks, 5-ton trucks, gas and diesel engines.

SM: At what level of maintenance were you trained? All the way down to breaking the whole vehicle down?

DH: No. This was…we wouldn’t rebuild an engine, we wouldn’t rebuild a transmission, we might rebuild a rear end. Basically it was tune-ups, replacement parts. Kind of like the same type of thing you might do in your garage for your own car, but if you needed more detailed work, you’d send it in to someplace else. I think the higher type education would be called battalion maintenance, where they might tear an engine down and rebuild it.

SM: What was the most challenging part of this training for you?

DH: There wasn’t really anything that was challenging in that. I got great grades, they asked me to be an instructor in that area. About the only thing that I didn’t care for was the fact that I was quite a few miles away from home, my mother was sick. I didn’t like the heat. I
wasn’t used to seeing sand, flat, you know, no green, no trees, that type of thing. I just didn’t care for the area.

SM: Was there anything in particular from that school that they didn’t discuss, go over, with regard to the wheeled vehicles that you wish later on when you were in Vietnam and if you did work on wheeled vehicles that you wished they had talked about?

DH: They basically covered just about everything that we needed to do over seas as far as those vehicles are concerned. At that time, they didn’t have computerized engines, so if you did have electrical problems…they could have maybe gone a little bit more into electrical, but they still gave us the ability to check electrical. The problem was that we didn’t have the electrical equipment in Vietnam, in our battery anyway, to do that type of checking, to follow up on electrical shorts and open wires and that type of thing.

SM: During either basic training or your first AIT, how many of the instructors were Vietnam veterans?

DH: Well, I know that in basic, that there was one of the sergeants, an Airborne sergeant that was a Vietnam vet, but I’m not sure if the rest of them were or not. I don’t remember seeing a lot of the badges or anything on their uniforms and even if I did, I probably wouldn’t have been able at that time to recognize the fact that it meant that they were a Vietnam vet.

SM: How about for your second AIT?

DH: You mean as far as the Vietnam veterans?

SM: Yes.

DH: I think our second AIT was more civilian instructors than Army instructors.

SM: During you training, at either AIT or in basic training, did they talk much about Vietnam?

DH: They being who? The instructors?

SM: Yes sir.

DH: No. I didn’t hear a whole lot. Most of the discussion on Vietnam came from within the group that was being trained, as to ‘Well, I wonder if we’re going to go. I wonder if we’re going to come back,’ that type of thing.

SM: But you didn’t receive any type of training about Vietnam?

DH: I don’t remember. There is what they call a jungle school that’s been mentioned. I can’t remember if I went to that in Ft. Campbell, Kentucky. I know that they had one in
Vietnam, but I don’t remember going to it in Vietnam, and it was short—like a one-day little area. It sort of looked like a small village or a hamlet and they kind of showed you where some booby traps might be or that type of thing. That was it.

SM: When you received your orders for your second AIT, did you know already that you were going to be going to that school which was Armor school in Ft. Knox?

DH: Yes. That was arranged when I signed up for the extra year.

SM: So first wheeled vehicle and then track vehicle?

DH: Correct.

SM: Then you left in December of ’67 and went to Ft. Knox, Kentucky?

DH: Right. I think I left about the middle of December. I believe I had a two-week furlough, or whatever you want to call it, and then I had to be, I was supposed to report on New Year’s Day in Ft. Knox, Kentucky.

SM: What was the training like at Ft. Knox?

DH: It was a little bit different than the first training, a much nicer area, nicer buildings. I was what they called like a little platoon leader or something, I kind of like interpreted or passed on orders to some of the rest of the guys. The housing was sort of the same, but for three or four of us guys that were sort of like the group leaders within the class, you got a separate little room with four bunks in it. No more KP, no more cleaning up, no more...I don’t remember being in a parade in Ft. Knox. It was basically all school. The mess hall that we ate in was all civilian run, there was no military in there and we didn’t have to pull KP, they had people there that were civilians that did that for us. Training was, I feel, better than Ft. Huachuca. The buildings and equipment that they used were a little bit better. The instructors, I think, were a little bit better. The Ft. was nicer. There was more to do at the Ft., you had more free time. Basically the military personnel that was in charge of that building and would take us to classes and that was not quite the same as basic training in that the shouting orders and that type of thing ceased. It was more like going to a college.

SM: What was the most challenging part of that training for you?

DH: I think the hardest part of that training was the fact that it was January in Kentucky. It was cold, colder than what I thought it would have been coming from Wisconsin. We did have some field, what they called field mobility training, as far as tank or track vehicle training if you had a vehicle that needed to be recovered, we would go out in the field in the middle of winter.
and we’d have to go through...we’d drive tanks through the snow. I remember one time, we
mistaken what we thought was earth, not realizing that it was too flat and it was a pond and we
went through. A big piece of ice came up and almost hit the driver because he had his hatch
open. That was about the most challenging as far as that class or that school.

SM: To what level of maintenance were you trained?

DH: That would be basically the same as the first school. We might pull an engine out
of tanks to either replace the engine...it was easier to replace a starter on a tank by removing the
engine than trying to get down into that area to remove it. We had instruction on large, real
large, gas engines, which they actually weren’t using anymore. When we got to Vietnam, they
were all diesel. So that training really didn’t help us as far as the gas engines went. We were
taught how to replace tracks and how to replace the [torsion] bars, those large [torsion] bars
under the...that control the wheels, pressure on the wheels because of it being so heavy. We had
a little bit more of electrical training, not as much as I figured that there should be. Not enough
[turret], you know, the tanks have [turrets] on them, not enough [turret] training; but [turret]
mechanic was another MOS, so that was another specialty.

SM: The vehicles you were trained on at Ft. Knox, did these include tanks and self-
propelled artillery? Both or just one or the other?

DH: Ft. Knox was an armor Ft.. There was no artillery to speak of that I’d seen there.
But the unit that I was in in Vietnam basically was the same body. The only difference was that
instead of being a Howitzer that was towed behind a five-ton or a ten-ton truck, it was mounted
on the track vehicle, and I’m assuming that’s why as a mechanic, a track mechanic, I was put
into an eight-inch, self-propelled Howitzer unit.

SM: Now did the tanks that you worked on at Ft. Bragg, they did have any…

DH: It’s not Ft. Bragg, it was Ft…

SM: I mean, I’m sorry, Ft. Knox, Kentucky. The tanks that you worked on there, what
were they, what nomenclature?

DH: If I’m not mistaken, they were...I think they were the M-45. They may have had
one M-60 tank in there, but I believe they were using older tanks for instruction. If I would have
went into an armor unit it would have made a difference, but since I went into an artillery outfit,
I basically got the general idea.
SM: So when you went to Vietnam, the power plant, the transmission, the chassis, whatever, everything on those self-propelled artillery vehicles that you worked on, they were the same as the M-45s, or different?

DH: Obviously, they were updated. But it was general Motors diesels that were in the artillery pieces in Vietnam. The transmissions were basically General Motors, I can’t remember exactly the name of the company that actually made them, but Cadillac used that technology in their first 1970 El Dorado’s with the front-wheel drive and with the planetary gears, that type of thing used for front-wheel drive. So it was basically the same as the tanks, except for the fact that the one engine they were training us on was an old gasoline engine. The only gas engine that we had over there was in our Jeeps and three-quarter-ton trucks. Everything else was diesel.

SM: The training on the tanks, no accidents, no problems?

DH: Not as far as…for me. I had a good buddy Lonny Sopher that lost the end of one of his fingers because he didn’t remove his hand from an area after trying to release a torsion rod and it took that off and he had to go to the post hospital. That was, I think, the worst of it, the worst accident that I remember.

SM: I don’t know if you would work a part of the vehicle that would be similar to this, but the vehicles, the tanks that you worked on at Ft. Knox and the self-propelled artillery track vehicles you worked on in Vietnam, did either of those have the fire-on-the-move stabilization systems?

DH: No. No. You’re talking about the newer tanks now where you see on TV they’re cruising along at 40 miles per hour and they’re shooting at the same time.

SM: Right. Being able to fire on the move.

DH: No, we didn’t have that. I’m assuming one of the reasons is the fact that the guns that we had over there were so big and powerful…when the artillery people in the gun section set-up our guns they had a big spade in the back that they had to dig into the ground in order to keep them in place. So it wasn’t like…they didn’t traverse that far. You basically had to have that spade behind you in order to shoot in one direction. You couldn’t turn that turret sideways and shoot with the track vehicle being opposite of the direction of the gun tube, it would roll the vehicle right over.

SM: So the physics of it meant the vehicle had to be stationary had to be facing the direction you were firing the gun.
DH: Correct.

SM: Well, is there anything you wanted to discuss with regard to your training before you went to Vietnam?

DH: I think I mentioned that in the typewritten area that I though the training wasn’t quite up to what we needed to know in Vietnam. One of the reasons being that a lot of guys were transferred in and out, we only served one year. By the time you learned the ropes, it was almost time to go home. So it was a constant training over there also. If a turret mechanic that was trained higher in an electronics or hydraulics area transferred out of the unit and you didn’t get a guy to replace him right away, you were told to go fix that. So that was a learning situation there. You basically had to try and figure out what was wrong and then learn that as a process as you went through this year. By the time you went home, you could probably fix anything on the gun, but then you were going home, so it didn’t do any good.

SM: Well, it’s kind of jumping ahead, but since you’ve brought up the subject, knowing that if the system had been different, you would have been staying longer. Do you think they should have had a longer term for soldiers serving in Vietnam?

DH: They did have that option of extending.

SM: Option. Should it have been a compulsory aspect of service? You go to Vietnam, you serve two years.

DH: I don’t think so in Vietnam. I think if they wanted to extend anything, they should have extended the training in the States and gave you your one-year over there. A year in Vietnam is plenty.

SM: But cover more in training so that the learning curve in Vietnam was less.

DH: Meaning what? I’m not sure I know…

SM: In other words, train more here in the United States so that when you do get to Vietnam the learning curve and the training curve, that is, you don’t have to be trained or taught as much when you finally do get over there.

DH: Right.

SM: Why don’t we go ahead and discuss your transition to Vietnam. When did you receive your orders? You did volunteer to go to Vietnam, is that correct?

DH: No.

SM: Oh, you did not volunteer to go to Vietnam.
DH: I volunteered to go into the service for the extra year after I was drafted. No, I didn’t raise my hand and say ‘Let me go!’

SM: Well, what did you think when you received orders?

DH: Well, I basically figured that I was going to get them and once I received them, I figured, ‘Okay, I’m going to be going. I’m going to have to do a year over there. I hope I come back.’ And I was hoping that I would have the type of job that didn’t put me as much in harm’s way as I would as a grunt soldier. I don’t remember what I thought when I received the notification that I was going to be in an artillery outfit. I guess I must have assumed that I was going to be in either like a maintenance or possibly an armor outfit, but I got an artillery outfit. So, I guess I didn’t really know what I really had in store as far as artillery.

SM: How scared were you?

DH: I was scared. I knew that there was a chance that I wouldn’t come back.

SM: Did you have correspondence with your family, with your mom at this point? Were you writing back and forth to each other?

DH: Are you talking about from my last AIT or Vietnam?

SM: Both. Well, from basic through to your last AIT?

DH: Not a whole lot of writing in basic training. A few letters. They kept you pretty busy in basic. When I got to Ft. Huachuca, I had correspondence via mail and telephone. Same with…well then I came home for two weeks, so I spent two weeks with my mother. Then I went to Ft. Knox and that was basically the same thing, kept in contact via letters and telephone. Then I came home and I believe I had another two weeks of the month that you normally got and then I headed out for Vietnam. When I was in Vietnam it was letters only contact.

SM: What emotion did she express when she learned you were going to Vietnam? Anything in particular?

DH: I would say average for a mother. Wondering if I was going to return.

SM: How much of a break after your second AIT did you have before you left?

DH: I think it was about the same. If I remember right, I think we got like, I’m not sure if it was two weeks or if it was a month a year that you got what they call leave of absence. But if I remember right, I thought I got two weeks in between…after the first AIT and the second and then before I went to Vietnam I think I had an additional two weeks.
SM: So where did you leave from, from the United States, and go ahead and describe the trip over.

DH: I flew from Milwaukee to Ft. Lewis, Washington. Landing in the, I guess they call it the SETAC airport there. Once there, we didn’t stay there too long, I think we were there long enough to receive jungle fatigues, a few items like that. I don’t think we were there any more than maybe three or four days. From there we took a large jet, I believe we stopped in one or two places on the way there and one or two places on the way back. I think we stopped at Hong Kong on the way there and then flew into Vietnam from that first place we stopped. When we were coming into the area where we were landing in Cam Ranh Bay, one of the things that I remember was that it was really dark. We were flying at night, landed at night, compared to flying in the States where you see homes that are lit up and all that type of thing. So I was a little more scared when we landed. Once we landed, when I reached the door to walk down onto the airport landing strip there, a lot of heat, a foul odor hit you and that’s about all I remember until…then we spent about three or four days in the Cam Ranh Bay area, I think they gave you a little bit more clothing and then they shipped you up to the area of the service battery of the unit that you were going to be in. Once you got to the service battery, I believe that is where they issued you your weapon. That took me up to getting into the service battery of the unit that I was in.

SM: What were your first impressions of your unit?

DH: Well, first of all, being in service battery is not like being in one of the other batteries. Our unit consists of A, B and C Battery which were batteries that were…those were the gun batteries then we had a service battery which basically it was called a service battery because they serviced the three gun batteries and then they’d have what they call a headquarters battery which is the administrative portion of it. The service battery was at Phu Ket Air Force base around Qui Nhon, that area you stayed in and pulled some detail until they figured out which battery that they needed you most in. You basically pulled detail while you were there. One of the details that I was put on was moving some large railroad ties. Three of us were moving that; one of them lost their grip. The railroad tie fell on one of my big toes. So then I wasn’t able to go to the gun batteries, so I was pulling detail there in service battery as to my condition. The condition didn’t enable me to do a whole lot of walking at first. I rode shotgun on a gasoline truck. I figured that was close to like the worst job you could probably get in
Vietnam at the time. That was my first experience as far as service battery went. On my first trip to A Battery at Landing Zone Pony we were mortared while we were going there; mortars landed behind the truck, I guess I realized what I got myself into at that point.

SM: Now, what kind of briefings did you receive when you arrived? Any kind of in country brief telling you what you should and shouldn’t do, things like that.

DH: I don’t remember what we received as far as coming into the service battery. I’m sure that somewhere along the line either in Cam Ranh Bay or service battery, they probably gave you a little pamphlet on what you should be doing as far as who you can contact as far as local people go, how to conduct yourself, that type of thing, but I really don’t remember ever getting that.

SM: Do you remember being briefed on rules and regulations concerning interactions with Vietnamese people?

DH: I don’t remember getting that, but that would be like what I was just explaining. I’m sure that they had something like that.

SM: You mentioned earlier being shotgun on that gas truck…to your knowledge, or did you ever hear of any gas trucks being targeted and hit.

DH: No. No. I know I didn’t see any that were hit, and I don’t remember anybody ever saying...spreading the rumor or whatever.

SM: What did you think, or what were you told was the mission of your unit? Who were you supporting and what were you trying to accomplish?

DH: When I finally was sent…I was finally sent to C Battery, which was one of the gun batteries that was located in Ben Khe on highway 19, I was advance party with a first sergeant and another fellow. The gun battery was in Ban Me Thuot, which was quite a distance away, and then they finally came back. I basically understood that once I started my normal job, my job was to keep everything running, keep as many vehicles running as possible and we were there to support the infantry battalions that were in our area. We shot support for a couple of Airborne outfits, the 1st Cav I think was across the street from us. We set up with Republic of Korea infantry 1st Tiger Division that also was located in...part of them were located at LZ Diamondhead where our first location was. While we were in that area, we also set up with a couple of other locations that the Korean soldiers were with us. So we supported the ROK soldiers up until the time from mid to late April up until late June or early July when we moved
to the Upper Highlands, and that’s what our objective was, was when they needed us, we had to
be ready and we had to give them artillery support.

SM: Before you got to C Battery, when you were in service battery and when you rode
shotgun, did your unit come under any kind of contact with the enemy?

DH: I don’t remember being mortared or anything like that while we were at Phu Ket
Air Force Base at that service battery location. The only contact I remember was on the road to
A battery at LZ Pony, after that, when we were at LZ Diamondhead in Binh Khe I don’t
remember being shot at or getting mortared. It wasn’t until we moved to Artillery Hill in Pleiku
is when we first, when I first experienced incoming.

SM: What was the morale of the unit like…go ahead and if you would, discuss the
morale in service battery first and then the morale at C Battery when you arrived there.

DH: I wasn’t in service battery long enough to really discuss the morale of the people in
the service battery. I kind of figured it would be a little bit better than the gun batteries that
would be out in the boonies. As far as C Battery goes, I think the morale was good. I don’t
remember any incidences that would lead me to believe any different. We did have times when
we would get together in the mess hall or out on guard duty or whatever and there were times
there that we had some laughs, that type of thing. It was tough, obviously we didn’t like moving
around as much as we did, and C Battery was one of the three that seemed like it moved more
than the other ones did. We did what you called ‘hip-shoots’, there was four guns in the battery.
They originally started with four 8’ Howitzers and I think they changed two of the tubes to
175mm for extended range. A hip-shoot is when two of the guns, usually the 8’, would be called
out for a short mission that we couldn’t reach from the landing zone that we were based at. So
the guys didn’t like…you know, you had to pack up everything and get on this gun and get back
on the road again where you were more vulnerable to the enemy, go into a jungle or a different
area, hurry up and set up the guns, and then do your fire mission and when that was done, then
you went back to the landing zone, which was considered your base camp. So, it was tough.
Even though, I don’t believe that the morale was bad or low.

SM: What was the make-up of the battery? How many men? Charlie Battery.

DH: From most of the…I’ve sent to the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis
for the morning rosters. It appears that most of the…I don’t know what the total strength should
have been, but it looks like it averages between 115 and 120 men. I wasn’t in a gun section, I
was in the motor pool. I believe a gun section had somewhere between eight and twelve individuals and I think they kind of like rotated sort of like twelve-hour shifts. The rest of the people were in fire-direction control, the motor pool—I believe in the motor pool we had about six mechanics. Some of the sections had clerks. We had a clerk in our section. Each gun section had a section chief, which was usually an E-6, and E-5 or an E-6 sergeant, some ammo people, ammo drivers driving 5 ton trucks full of these big projectiles that they would get from either service battery or from other areas, you had ration trucks that would bring in food when you were in an area that could be reached by road, water trucks to bring in potable water, a couple of FDC track vehicles, or one FDC track vehicle that had the radio equipment in it for when we were on convoy, three or four what they called M-548 track vehicles, which was basically a track with a big open area that you could load in shells with. Each gun section had one of those so that they could move their…if you did have to go on a hip-shoot you could load shells in those and move those on the hip-shoot. You had probably, I’d say maybe, four or five, five-ton trucks or five two and a half-ton trucks, some drivers for those. Some of the guys did multiple jobs when they weren’t doing a fire mission, they’d drive a truck. Everybody rotated pulling KP, you had the mess section which was run by a higher-up sergeant, then I believe you had like a spec-5 in there or something like that and then a few other, maybe three or four other cooks, some of which would maybe bake during the evening hours so that you’d have food in the morning, and then you had a first sergeant that was the top NCO. You had a captain, you had an executive officer—either a first or second lieutenant—that’s about it.

SM: Of all those vehicles, did you primarily only work on the 8’ and the 175 mm’s, or did you work on all of them?

DH: I worked on all of them. Actually, I probably worked on more wheeled vehicles than I did on the track vehicles because most of the problems that we had with the track vehicles involved hydraulics. There was a lot of hydraulic lines on the Howitzers, and from the extreme pressure from shooting those constantly had leaks and stuff like that. So you had what you called an artillery mechanic or a turret mechanic that would work on those. When he wasn’t available or if he was working on another gun and a different gun needed to be worked on in that respect, then I would be asked to go out there and see if I could repair the job.

SM: How much did you interact with the crews, the gun crews?
DH: Usually, the Army has like a system, you do like quarterly and yearly maintenance. If we were at a lull period, you might go out on a gun and go through a list of checking things and mark it as either green, yellow, or red which meant: red meant, no you can’t use the gun, absolutely can’t use because we have a problem; yellow would mean this problem could cause some problems and we wanted you to watch them; green would be, O.K. maybe you’ve got a problem, but there’s no problem using the gun. When I went out and did that to a gun, I would have a fellow from the gun section with me to help me. If we had to pull an engine, you would have either what they called the cherry-picker which was like a crane on a truck, or you had a M-88 tracked tank retriever which had a big boom on it and then you would have to pull the engine and transmission out of it, then you would have a few other guys from the section helping you, not just one. The section chief might assign two or three guys to help you. So in that respect, the motor pool, I being in the motor pool, had the interaction with those gun sections and obviously, you’d finish one job, you’d go to another section, you’d talk to those guys in that respect. Then you’d have interaction with everybody if you were in the mess hall or in that respect.

SM: When you weren’t working and you were just hanging around with each other, there was a lot of interaction, intermingling, you weren’t like…motor pool people didn’t necessarily just hang out with each other?

DH: I would say most of the time, guys hung in their groups. Most of the time, when us motor pool guys would hang out in one area or something like that. You pulled guard duty. The motor pool usually had one outpost and then we would rotate pulling guard duty, but you always had two guys in that outpost. Sometimes you might get an ammo driver, they might be assigned into your motor pool area for pulling guard duty, so you’d pull an eight-hour shift with a man from a different section.

SM: How about racially, during your down time in particular, was it self-segregating?

DH: When I was there I didn’t really notice the African-Americans getting together in a group like some may have seen before. I think we were pretty interactive in that respect. I heard from other members in our association now that later on—I was there only until April of ’69—I heard that later on in late ’69 and into ’70 that they had some racial problems, that’s hearsay, though, as far as I’m concerned, I don’t know.

SM: Before you left for Vietnam and then after you got to Vietnam, how much about the anti-war movement had you heard about?
DH: Before I left for Vietnam, it was like nothing. I wasn’t aware of it. I’d seen a little on TV. What was going on right before I left in the Milwaukee area was the racial riots. I think we were more concerned with that than what was going on in Vietnam right at that particular time because our governor called out the Guard. We had military trucks running up and down the street that I lived on. So I wasn’t involved in the anti-war movement either before or after I got out of the service.

SM: Well, not so much active, I was just curious what you’d heard about it.

DH: Even aware of it. As a matter of fact, even in Vietnam once in a while my friend, my next door neighbor buddy would send a copy of the Milwaukee Journal, didn’t really see a whole lot in there. We also, once in a while we got Stars & Stripes over there. You’d pick up a little bit, but I think it was, who knows, it may have been edited out. My buddy also sent me a small, not a cassette, but a small reel-to-reel tapes of radio stations once in a while that I could play on a recorder—didn’t hear a lot then. The only rumors that I remember in the unit themselves was some talk about Nixon, but not a whole lot of actual, direct anti-war movement information.

SM: Just before you arrived in Vietnam was the TET Offensive of 1968. When you got there did people in your unit talk about TET, tell stories about what happened?

DH: Actually, when I got there, no. TET happened, that was January 31st of ’68. I got there April 5th. I don’t remember a whole lot of people talking about TET from C Battery, although I know now that it was a pretty hot landing zone where C Battery was at the time—at that time they were at LZ English. But no, they didn’t mention too much about that. Supposedly there was supposed to be another TET after that in ’69. I don’t remember what exactly the dates were, but I do remember that when I was in the upper highlands is where I seen a lot of the action and I’m assuming that I was part of that.

SM: When you were working at C Battery, were there many shortages of certain pieces of equipment or items that you needed but just couldn’t seem to put your hands on, or just didn’t have a lot of?

DH: In the motor pool area we had a large two-and-a-half ton truck that actually was an office. It had a couple of counters in it on each side as you walked into the back door which was at the center, you’d walk up some steps to get in there. We would have smaller parts in there below the counters and above the counters were drawers where you would keep parts and the
clerk would have them on a roster and then you would also have a trailer that we pulled behind that with larger parts. Yeah, you would run into…what they would do is they would allocate what parts that you should have on hand. This would be something very similar to my job as a machinist at Outboard Marine Corporation; if I needed a certain part for my machine and I went to the tool crib and I asked for it, ‘Well, no those are on order. Well, we’re only allocated one and so and so got this the other day.’ So that’s what we ran into. What we would do in that respect is one of the jobs that I learned from our old motor sergeant was our captain used to give us these sundry packages. Sundry packages are a cardboard box that’s about two feet square, and in there there are a carton of cigarettes, candy bars, other candy, soap, shaving equipment, that type of thing. Those sundry packages were for people who were out in the sticks, that weren’t at a landing zone, that didn’t have access to those items and weren’t able to get those items. What we did is, we took a couple boxes of those and would go to the local whorehouse. We would sell those boxes to the mamason, or whatever, that was running the place for one hundred dollars a piece. We would then go into the battalion maintenance and pay off the first sergeant that was running that place to get a new starter rather than a rebuilt starter and then we would go back to the unit and we would have the part that we needed.

SM: You would have to pay off an American to receive a piece of equipment?
DH: Right.

SM: Did anybody think to report this?
DH: Well, you know when you’re like twenty years old and you got a whole lot of people that have been there in the service longer than you are, you just kind of figure ‘I’m here for a year, I’m going to go along with the program. This is what’s been done in the past, I’m not going to make any waves. I’m going to do what needs to be. We got our new starter, the equipment is running, we’re there if they need them.’ I don’t know if I thought of it at the time or not. I certainly didn’t mention it to anybody.

SM: Have you talked to other people…your active in the 15th Field Artillery Association. Have you talked about this type of issue with other members of the Association since that was formed?
DH: When we’re at reunions or I have a pretty close buddy of mine that I went to high school with that was in the same unit, a little bit before, we’ll discuss that, different things that went on.
SM: Do you know if they experienced similar instances?

DH: No. Nobody had told me that they did that, or has agreed to it, or whatever.

SM: Was this an isolated incident or did this happen on a number of occasions?

DH: Well, I did that when I was in the area of Binh Khe and An Khe at landing zone, LZ Diamondhead. I did it once when we were in the Pleiku area and after that, I think we were getting the parts that we needed, or whatever. I don’t remember doing that the second half of my tour. I do remember that in that first half-year, though, we weren’t getting what we needed. We were moving around a lot and I know that some of our vehicles, some of our tracks hit land mines, that type of thing, and we were replacing parts. The motor sergeant was transferred out, we were operating without a motor sergeant for a while. Just basically doing what we needed to do to get along.

SM: Do you know if your CO was aware of this type of stuff?

DH: I have a feeling that he was because it was my understanding that the motor sergeant was given those boxes from the commander.

SM: Do you know if your CO was aware of this type of stuff?

DH: I have a feeling that he was because it was my understanding that the motor sergeant was given those boxes from the commander.

SM: To take to the prostitutes to trade for the money to get the parts.

DH: Yeah.

SM: Was that your only interaction with Vietnamese people? Going to the whorehouses to trade your sundry boxes for cash? (laughing) Or were there other exchanges?

DH: We had just about wherever we went, if there was South Vietnamese people around that wanted to make some money, we could have them fill sand bags for us, some of them helped with the mess hall area, when we were in an area that had somebody that would wash our uniforms—they would wash them and they would starch them with something that smelled like fish, when you got the uniform back it was clean, it was pressed, but as soon as you started to sweat, you smelled like fish. At certain locations, at LZ Blackhawk, we had some gals that would come in and clean the hooches for us once in a while. I think at LZ Oasis we had a Vietnamese barber, and that’s about all of the interaction that I actually had. Usually when I was…I think they must have gotten somebody else to run parts and that type of thing because the second half of the tour, I didn’t do that too much, have too much interaction with the Vietnamese people themselves.

SM: You mentioned earlier hip-shoots. I was curious, when a section of the battery would go out for a hip-shoot, would they typically go out alone? Would they have an officer
with them, a fire direction control vehicle with them, that kind of stuff? How did that typically work?

DH: It basically would depend on what location that you were going to. For instance, right before I left to go home, we were doing a hip-shoot at another landing zone, LZ Action, where there was already a 105 or a 115 [towed] unit set up. So they would have the FDC, the fire direction control equipment, already at the landing zone. So in that case, you wouldn’t need to take that vehicle with. Not being in the gun battery or gun section myself, I don’t know that much about the fire direction control and the forward observers calling in these directions to bring in the first shell and then how to adjust, that type of thing. But I would assume that if a couple guns went out, that the FDC vehicle was with us. And probably a two-and-a-half ton truck with some C-rations, you’d have to take an M-548 out there…two of those with shells in them, and then depending on how long you were at that location, you’d have to run ammo out to them either by truck, or you’d have to bring it in by helicopter.

SM: I’m not sure how familiar or how much information you have in this regard, but from a firing standpoint, in terms of distance and accuracy, to your knowledge which weapon was better, an 8’ or a 175?

DH: It’s my understanding now that I’ve been involved in this Association that the 8’ was much more accurate than the 175. The 8’ didn’t shoot as far, but it was more accurate. The distances vary from what one person says to another. Some of them say that the 175 shot 26 miles and that the 8’ shot 20 miles, some people say that it might be 20% less than that. And as far as accurate, I heard that an 8’, obviously the first shell needs to be called in by a forward observer and the whole country was laid out in grids. The first shell would land. After that they could bring it into an area…the first shell would land into an area about the size of a football field and then they could adjust after that.

SM: In terms of maintenance, which weapon was easier to maintain and had fewer mean times between failures, stuff like that?

DH: I can’t determine between the 175s and the 8’ because basically the only difference in those would be the tube, everything else would be the same on them. I know that we had one gun which was…the gun sections would always put a name on the tube. Candy2 was the one, most of the pictures that I have of me performing maintenance is on Candy2. That gun, we were always having problems with it, one thing or another. I think basically it lead to electrical wiring
problems, which weren’t corrected during this long time that we were working on it. I also ran
into problems with the way that the fuel tank was a large area inside the gun area that was part of
the hull. So if you ran over a road mine and the bottom was warped from an explosion or
something and it had cracks in it, you might have leaking. I heard that later on they were
considering putting rubber bags in there as a way to stop that problem. I don’t know if they did
or not, though. The rest of the problems were always with the rear spade. You had a large rear
spade that you dug into the ground that took the shock of that big gun, that’s what took the main
shock, so you were constantly re-welding portions of the spade. The other problem was they had
an autoloader on them. These projectiles, depending on which one, went from 160 to 200
pounds. You had a large tube with a hook on it, the two guys would grab that tube, or sometimes
one, move that shell to this autoloader at the ground level, the autoloader would hydraulically lift
the projectile onto a slide, it would then move in-line with the back end of the tube. The guys
would have the breechblock open and then this autoloader would push the shell in and then they
would put the powder behind that. So that autoloader was one of the problems because it was
used a lot. Sometimes those didn’t work and either you could repair them or you would have to
load the howitzer without the use of that.

SM: I’m sorry, you said this gun in particular where you had problems, was that an 8’ or
a 175?

DH: That was an 8’.

SM: From what you remember, was that typical or atypical? That the 8’ers had more
problems?

DH: I couldn’t say. I just remember that one particular gun. I found the driver of that
gun. He told me that the gun was replaced while he was still in country; he was there six months
longer than I was.

SM: In terms of maintenance scheduling, would most of these vehicles and guns be
rotated out at certain intervals for major overhauls and repairs? Every six months…

DH: I don’t remember that as far as being on a regular basis. I think they were sent out
as needed and there was battalion maintenance units in Vietnam. I remember one in the Pleiku
area; I don’t remember the number of the unit. We’ve got some photographs on the website
which shows a gun inside, it’s like a large metal building, and they might take that gun in there
to put in a new engine or put in a new transmission, when we didn’t do it out in the field because
we had done that type of work in the field, too. I shouldn't say in the field. I meant at a fairly
secure landing zone.

SM: When back in say a fire base type of situation, did your areas get hit very often,
with enemy mortars and rockets?

DH: The first portion of my tour up to late June, early July of '68 I didn't experience too
much of that. When we first got on Artillery Hill, the first or second night we were there we had
incoming mortars. We would experience that once in a while we were there. From there we
went to several other locations, occasionally we would get hit with mortar, usually mortar or
rocket, and then we moved into LZ Oasis. LZ Oasis is where we were constantly being hit with
mortars. We had, I don't know which group it was, but the enemy would come in and would
throw satchel charges in the outposts where they would actually physically try to come into the
landing zone. That was the hottest location that I was at and before I went home I was at LZ
Blackhawk. There we took mortar and rocket fire and while I was at Blackhawk we did the hip-
shoot to LZ Action in between the Mang Yang and the An Khe Pass and there we also took
mortar, incoming mortar.

SM: Did you lose many people from your battery?

DH: From our battery, I'm not sure how many are from our battery, but we know that
there are, I believe, nineteen on our unit wall that we found, that we know for sure.

SM: From when you served?

DH: No. Our first casualty was February 2, 1968 in C Battery, in the battery that I was
in, but I wasn't there yet. That was right during TET, although it was not hostile fire, it was a
racial problem. So that was basically murder. The rest, one was I think a finance guy killed in a
convoy, we had a couple other people killed in convoy. We had four people that went down in a
helicopter, we had one man that was blown up carrying powder for the gun. A spark or
something hit it, he was disintegrated. We had a suicide; we had a few suicides after. I can't tell
you exactly off hand.

SM: While you were there for that year, do you know how many were lost to enemy
fire?

DH: No. I've got the dates, but I'd have to look that up.

SM: Did you know anybody personally?

DH: No.
SM: Did your unit use helicopters for recovery purposes at all, or transportation?
DH: The one helicopter that went down, that had some high ranking people in it and I believe that they were moving from one battery to the next, probably checking things or whatever. We’re not sure if it went down because of enemy fire or if it was a mechanical problem. So we did have helicopters. We had these big Chinook helicopters. I don’t believe that they were actually our unit, but they were either attached to our unit or they we used to supply ammunition and parts that our motor pool used and they would bring those parts and ammunition into our landing zones.

SM: Do you know how much an 8’ or a 175mm self-propelled track vehicle weighed?
DH: No. That would probably be at our website. They’re heavy, big.
SM: Do you know if they were ever sling loaded?
DH: I don’t think so. I’ve never seen one of our sling loaded. When we had to move…if we moved one of our vehicles without using its own power, they were moved on what they call ten-ton lowboy trucks.
SM: How much infantry support did your battery have and how much protection did infantry provide to your unit?
DH: When we were at LZ Diamondhead, the first part of my tour, we set up with the Republic of Korea 1st Capital Tiger Group that was an infantry group. They helped guard our outpost. When we went to LZ Jenny and LZ Linda we pulled guard duty with them to help secure the area. When we went up into the upper highlands in the Pleiku area and along the Cambodian border, we were basically supporting the 4th Infantry Division up there, some Special Forces in which case some of those units used the same landing zone, LZ Oasis. We had first of the sixty-ninth armor that had a tank division, not a division but a tank unit up there that helped hold our perimeter. We had 4th of the 60th Air Defense Artillery Dusters, which were like big four-barrel 40mm guns on a track vehicle. We had those dug in just about everywhere we went, one on each side of the perimeter to help perimeter guard. Those were very impressing guns to have on a perimeter to help if the enemy was going to be coming in. That’s basically it besides our own group pulling our perimeter guard.
SM: You mentioned those were air defense artillery quad forties that were trained into an area to actually provide anti-personnel cover.
DH: Yes, I think that’s their main purpose. I don’t believe that those were actually ever used for anti-aircraft weapons. They were mostly put on for perimeter guard. That’s the only place I’ve ever seen them used.

SM: You yourself, what did you carry for your personal weapon?

DH: We were given an M-16 in service battery when we first came in country. That was the first time that I held one. I was trained with the M-14 rifle and that’s what I had in basic training, that’s what was used for qualifying. Never really given any instructions on how to tear it down or anything, you kind of had to learn that from the other guys that were there for a while. After we were there in…somewhere along the line, I don’t know if it was in LZ Diamondhead or when we moved up into the upper highlands, they pulled our M-16s from us and gave them to some of the infantry, I think they were the ARVN units, and re-issued us M-14s, which I liked better than the M-16. Then I also purchased locally, I purchased a what they call a grease gun. It looks like a grease gun. It has a tube that you screw into the front, it has a slide you can pull out in the back to push up against your shoulder. It shoots a .45 caliber round that was available for the service revolvers that the officers used. It was a great gun to carry when I was on the road going for parts or kind of like an in-close gun.

SM: And you bought that.

DH: Right. I bought that from another vet that was leaving country which is the same thing that I did when I left country I sold it to someone else.

SM: Do you remember how much you paid?

DH: Fifty bucks. It had two straight chambers that held twenty rounds apiece. It came with two clips. You loaded both clips so you had forty rounds and taped the two together, you know, up and down, so you’d have forty rounds available to you right then and there and it was a slower automatic so it wouldn’t, as compared to the M-16, if you had that on fully automatic and pulled the trigger your, I don’t know what that held, how many rounds, but it was like they were gone in an instant.

SM: Was this actually a military weapon that was just accommodated…

DH: I can’t remember the name, but I did look it up on the internet and it was used, I think it was used toward the end of World War II. If I’m not mistaken, I think that’s the gun that Sergeant Saunders used to use on Combat! because I used to make jokes about when I was overseas.
SM: But the one that you bought, wasn’t that probably owned by the military?

DH: I would assume it was owned by the military at one time or another. I don’t know how it came into county or how it got in that area. I don’t believe that it was issued by the United States to somebody there in Vietnam. Either somebody sent for it or it was a weapon that was in county that was purchased from locals or something.

SM: What times did you actually have to fire either the M-16, the 14 or the grease gun to defend yourself or to security or in a combat environment?

DH: The only time that I actually fired a weapon at the enemy was when I was on guard duty. Other than that it was all what they called a mad minute, which was before sun down when anybody that wanted to check their equipment, to fire it, you could go to the outpost, to the perimeter of the LZ and fire away from it. Other than that, it was using I believe it was called a M-60 machine gun that used the same type round that the M-14 did. Fully automatic submachine gun on a turret and that was used during…each outpost, guard outpost, had one of those set up. It was like a Quonset hut that was dug into the ground and then sandbagged and they took a torch and cut out a long slot so that you had a span of the area in front of you. When we were at LZ Oasis, when we had the enemy coming through to the wire, we basically just kept loading it and firing it just to keep rounds out.

SM: Was that one of the times where you personally had to fire your own.

DH: That was the only time.

SM: That was the only time you had to fire your own.

DH: That was the only time that I fired a weapon at an enemy.

SM: How did you feel?

DH: Scared. I just wanted to keep on putting bullets out. I didn’t want to give anybody the chance to get closer in. You could hear the rounds, you could hear them going through the air when they passed you.

SM: How far away was the enemy?

DH: Two hundred yards, two or three hundred yards.

SM: Were these Viet Cong or North Vietnamese Army, PAVN?

DH: Couldn’t tell. It was…I wouldn’t know. It was…they had hats.

SM: Like pith helmets or…
DH: Yeah. The guys that came through the wire they did have uniforms. They had their legs and arms wrapped up with sheets, linen and no shirt, no hat.

SM: When you were being supported by the Republic of Korea soldiers and they were providing your infantry support, defense, whatever, how much had you heard about the Korean forces? What did you hear about them in terms of their reputation while you were there?

DH: Tough. Tough guys. Didn’t take any crap from anybody. I’d seen them at LZ Jenny, I’d seen them shoot at kids—they were coming into the dump looking for food to eat. I’ve seen a Korean officer hit a guy on top of the head at a military police outpost, on top of the head with a machete, I’ve seen their captain at LZ Linda, had three guys in the front-leaning rest position, you know what that is for doing push-ups, in that position with a horse whip. Whipping his soldiers on the back with a horse whip, one of these sharp whips about three feet long with little fine strings on the end.

SM: Did you have a preference in terms of infantry support, that is people who were providing your perimeter with security?

DH: I guess I didn’t at the time. At the time, I imagine that I figured any help, put more men out on the perimeter, whatever it takes so that the enemy doesn’t come in. The language barrier with the Koreans was obviously a problem. We used those in C Battery though when we were in towards the coast area and then after that basically we pulled our own perimeter guard and I would have rather had somebody there that I know.

SM: Were there any particular incidents that you recall or activities that you recall that you want to discuss?

DH: My recollection of the times that stay in my mind are at up in the upper highlands area when the enemy was trying to over run LZ Oasis, they threw satchel charges into bunkers and killed some of our people. I recall seeing a body bag at the end of the mess hall that was one of our people, was an American soldier. I had seen plenty of the enemy that we blew apart that were trying to come in that looked like they went through a meat grinder, but it’s a little bit different when you see your own people in a body bag. I was wounded in a convoy. That incident was the biggest event that I still live with.

SM: Why don’t you go ahead and talk about that.

DH: We were in LZ Oasis. It was on, I believe, the 15th of November. The day before I was wounded we were…the captain had asked for some of the people from maintenance to take
two M-48 track vehicles into the Duc Co area near the Cambodian border where a 105 or 155 towed artillery unit was overrun while working with, I think it was fifth Special Forces, and they needed vehicles up there to pull the guns out of the jungle area or overgrowth area. We took, I think there was four of us, two in each M-548 and we drove down highway 19 West to an area that they said just keep going down this road and then you’ll see the area, it’s real obvious. We turned off the road and went through a heavily wooded or jungle area. It was basically like walls up to the area where you could just get the vehicle through. You couldn’t see maybe five feet into the brush. We drove down that road and then you came to the opening of the landing zone and you could see that the area was really blown apart. Once we got in there, there was a few people in there and the guns had already been pulled out using five-ton trucks. So it was getting late and we were asked if we would like to stay with the fifth Special Forces at a Montagnard village near the border and we discussed it between us guys and we figured we’d be safer if we drove back to LZ Oasis and that’s what we did. On the way there we burned out one vehicle. We had to tow it back into the landing zone, we got there at dusk and right away the captain came up and said ‘Pack up. We’re leaving. We’re going right back to where you were, tomorrow.’ So we spent the rest of the night getting ready. The whole battery kept getting ready and we left somewhere around 1:30 or so, p.m. Around 2:00 in the afternoon, or shortly there before, our FDC unit stopped running, which is a track vehicle, it looks like an MPC personnel carrier. Being in maintenance, we were always at the end of the convoy, pulled up behind the vehicle, asked them what was wrong, the vehicle just stopped, I opened the engine compartment, it seemed that the fan belt for the generator had came off. The belt was still in one piece, I put the belt back on where it was supposed to be and we were using an ammo truck, a five-ton ammo truck and I figured well we’ll put this back on, turn on the ignition and we’ll see if we can push it to start it. My buddy John Rodriguez was driving, we had a first lieutenant, a passenger and one other guy in the center and a few guys up on top of the truck and I stood on the outside by the driver on the running board and I kind of motioned to him, I said ‘Okay bring it up, bring it up a little bit closer till the front bumper met the back of the vehicle and then stop’ and I said ‘Okay. Let’s start pushing it.’ We started pushing it and we figure that there was a remote detonated land mine in the road that the enemy triggered and it blew the hell out of the two vehicles. Me, being on the running board, I ended up being blown way up in the air and landed on the road, my ears were ringing, I had mud packed in my eyes, I landed on my knees and my elbows and I
guess I was just in shock. I didn’t realize what happened. I had a buddy Robert Annino that
came to help me. He pulled me off to the side of the road, washed my eyes out with water,
brought me my glasses, brought me my weapon and stayed with me until the medevac chopper
came. In the meantime we had a cobra gunship company that was located at LZ Oasis that were,
I believe they must have been already in the air following the convoy and before the medevacs
came in the gunships were spraying the areas along the tree lines. Basically stayed down until
they cleared the area and then the medevac choppers were brought in and I was medevaced out.

SM: How long was your convalescence?

DH: From there I went to like a MASH unit someplace and then was transferred to
Pleiku. From Pleiku I was taken down to Cam Ranh Bay and I stayed in Cam Ranh Bay sixth
convalescence center until mid to late January of ’69.

SM: While you were there at Cam Ranh, do you remember there being any particular
services available to you to help spend your time there more productively, library facilities, that
kind of stuff.

DH: I know that they had a big canister in the ward that I was in. People from the
United States were writing soldiers, so if you wanted to write somebody you could pick out a
letter and then write. I think they had movies set up on the beach. Once in a while they had
some type of a club there—I don’t know if it was an officer’s club or whatever—but I didn’t go
to it. They set me up in a room with a captain and a first sarge. We kind of helped each other
clean wounds and stuff like that. Most guys would bring me back a cocktail once in a while
when they went over to this place. I think Ann Margaret was there with Bob Hope, they asked
me if I wanted to go to that, but I would have to sit in the sun for several hours waiting and I
wasn’t up to it at the time. That’s about all I know as far as services there.

SM: In general, were you getting newspapers like the *Stars and Stripes*, did you have
radios, portable radios, that you could listen to music on and stuff like that throughout your time
in Vietnam.

DH: Somewhere along the line, we did not have that all the time. Somewhere along the
line I think I must have went to the air force base in Pleiku and purchased a small, it was a small
like 3’ reel-to-reel tape recorder and it had a radio built into it I think. I don’t remember listening
to a lot of radio, but I did have my buddy send tapes, you know, he would record the local
WOKY station here from Milwaukee and then I’d play that over there.
SM: Did you have access to newspapers and magazines?

DH: I don’t remember reading too much of anything as far as Stars and Stripes. I don’t remember seeing a Stars and Stripes, maybe once or twice while I was over there. A couple of newspapers that were sent to me from home and that’s about it.

SM: How about letters, did you correspond much with anybody back home?

DH: Yeah. Whenever I could. That was one of the things that a lot of us guys relied on. Yeah, as often as I could.

SM: Do you remember listening to broadcasts from Armed Forces Radio, that kind of stuff?

DH: No.

SM: How about incidents involving animals, wildlife? A lot of snakes, bugs, cats, that type of stuff? Monkeys?

DH: Yeah. When that first sergeant, myself and this one other guy went in for an advance party when C Battery was still out at Ban Me Thuot we spotted a large black cat that was moving around in the area at LZ Diamondhead. Basically we just stayed in the hooch at night. We never saw it really during the daytime, but you could hear it on the top of our hooch after we spotted it at dusk one evening. George Catlidge and I decided that we were going to bait it after it scared the hell out of me on one of the outposts in the evening because it was within two or three feet of me looking at me through this area that was cut for a machine gun. That night that I saw it, I fell off of my stool and onto the fellow that was sleeping in the outpost with me. We had told the captain about the fact that there was a big cat out there, but nobody believed us. So George decided that he was going to get some hamburger meat from the mess hall and bait it and that’s what we did. We put the meat on the perimeter wire and we never did get the large cat, but we shot a smaller cat, about the size of an ocelot. Other than that though, up at…I painted that cat Army green, olive drab, and we took it down to the dump and put it at the local dump. When we came back from parts, the Vietnamese locals had it on a spit, they were cooking it. The other thing was rats in the hooches. Once in a while you’d see them running around on the floor or in the evening they might try to jump and end up hitting you or bumping you or something like that. Spiders were huge. Everything is huge over there as far as animals and spiders and things. Then they had a little, kind of what looked like a chameleon, but
bigger than what you’d see here in the States. That made a strange sound almost like a
screaming sound. That thing would come out at night.

SM: Was that the F.U. lizard.

DH: Don’t have a clue. I know it looked like a green chameleon only larger.

SM: Well when it screamed, when it screeched did it sound like it was saying something
in particular?

DH: No. I don’t remember that. I remember it was an odd noise. Whatever noise it
was, it didn’t sound like it should be coming from that little…you know.

SM: You mentioned the big cat; you said you killed the smaller cat, but the big cat you
never did kill. When you say big, about what size do you mean by big?

DH: This thing had to be at least 80-100 pounds. The one that we shot was probably 40-
60.

SM: No tigers?

DH: Never seen any of those.

SM: How about snakes?

DH: Nope, don’t remember seeing those, either. We had a parrot, a parrot. I’ve got
pictures of that up next to our motor pool hooch at LZ Diamondhead and when we moved, I
think the parrot stayed and then we had a couple of pets, small dogs. Grease, yeah, we called
him Grease. Motor sergeant stepped on his back coming out of the motor pool truck, so he had
to kill the dog and I think later, right after I left, they got AWOL, another little puppy.

SM: How available was alcohol?

DH: If I remember right, I think we had like a ration of two beers a day. It seems to me
that if you were on the road, you could get it alongside the road. You could get as much soda as
you wanted, but I think the captain or the commander kind of basically told you, you have your
two beers a day and that’s all you need here. Then obviously you needed ice, so when that was
available…I’ve got pictures of us chopping up large pieces of ice, you’d try to get potable ice
instead of unpotable ice. I remember buying a good bottle of scotch from the Koreans at LZ
Diamondhead and I remember buying a bottle of either, it must have been Canadian Whiskey at
LZ Oasis. I got in trouble for that. I’ve got a picture of me pouring out the rest of the bottle in
the morning at the suggestion of the first sergeant.

SM: What about drug use?
DH: I remember somebody having some grass, I remember trying it once and like I don’t see what the idea is here, it didn’t seem like it affected me. I remember one of the guys from the ammo section that apparently did like it. I have a feeling that he was smoking that stuff every time that he was on the road. I didn’t really have anything against him. I suppose if I was an ammo driver, driving through these passes with all these big rounds of ammunition in the back of the truck I may have been smoking the stuff every day, too. I don’t know if he lit one up, or if tried smoking one time on guard duty, but I told him, I said ‘No, not here, not when you’re pulling guard duty with me.’

SM: What was the commander’s position on, your CO’s positions on those things? Did you ever get told, talk to you about it.

DH: I don’t remember a discussion. In the first place, we had very few formations where they get everybody together, and when we did I didn’t think it was a good idea, you know, let’s everybody get in this one spot to talk. I’m sure that they probably mentioned it, but I don’t remember an instant like that.

SM: Was anybody ever prosecuted for using it, to your knowledge, in your unit?

DH: Not that I know of.

SM: Were there any major disciplinary infractions, problems?

DH: In C Battery, right before I got there, there was that murder.

SM: How about while you were there then.

DH: No. Other than getting busted you know for…that was happening all the time. Some guy screwed up, either he got caught at the whore house or was sleeping on guard duty or got into a fight with somebody, so they busted you for six months.

SM: Now while you were in country, did your perspective at all change, did you develop maybe a better understanding of why the United States was in Vietnam?

DH: I don’t think it got better. I think my attitude was, why bother. Why are we here, I don’t understand this. Keep your gun with you but don’t keep it loaded. Don’t be the first one to shoot, wait until somebody shoots at you first. In an area that had got a civil war, unless the enemy is in a uniform, you can’t tell who is your enemy and who isn’t.

SM: What did you think about the Vietnamese people, both the civilians and also the ARVN that you worked with or interacted with?
DH: Well, in the first place, my experience with the South Vietnamese people, basically if they were loading sandbags for or possible cleaning for us or in the mess hall or whatever, didn’t really interact, didn’t learn too much of the language. I was very leery of them at first. I thought it was disgusting that they would walk along the road and squat and relieve themselves. The country just reeked and I’m assuming that it was because of the lack of waste systems. Their food, I thought, turned my stomach. When you’d go into their markets it seemed like the stuff they were selling, food items and that, I’m assuming that they weren’t too sanitary, I didn’t care for the odor of that. I think that kind of reflected on my feelings towards them as a whole. It got somewhat better before I left, but even in my dealings with Asian people here in the States, at work before I retired and that type of thing, I just didn’t care to be around them.

SM: From what you could tell, what did you think about the way the United States was fighting this war? Did you feel at all like we were winning?

DH: No. Not at all. I do remember the fact that I think I was there during some type of cease-fire or talking about it or something like that. It seemed like there was too many rules that we had to follow that didn’t make sense to me, while you could see, for instance, forces from other countries that just didn’t take any crap from anybody, but for the Americans, ‘Well, you’re a guest here. You have to do this, you have to do that. Don’t keep a round chambered’ that type of thing. You wanted to do that because myself, I didn’t trust any of them. I don’t know who was my enemy and who wasn’t.

SM: Is there anything else that you’d like to discuss about your in country experiences?

DH: I don’t think so.

SM: When you left, did you feel like you had accomplished anything?

DH: Well, I came home alive. I think that’s about it as far as for myself. Obviously I’m sure that there was some people out there that we supported that were glad that we were doing what we were doing as far as giving them support. We did have several captains from infantry units coming in and praising us, ‘Thanks for being there’ when they needed us, that type of thing.

SM: When you got that kind of feedback, would you get estimates of how many enemy killed, things like that?

DH: You mean numbers? No. I had very little information on what was going on when I was there. I guess I didn’t have the right job for that. If I would have been a clerk working for the captain or executive officer, maybe in FDC or commo or something like that, I might have
been a bit more in the know, but as a motor pool guy I was up to my elbows in grease fixing
guns and never had an idea, other than the name of the area that I was in, never seen a map.

SM: What was it like coming back to the U.S.? What do you remember about re-
entering the U.S.? People at the airport, that kind of stuff?

DH: I remember going down to Cam Ranh Bay right before I left. I remember seeing,
they had a couple of two-and-a-half-trucks pulled back to back and they had a band playing
there. I listened to them for a while, got on the jet, we stopped at either Guam or Okinawa, and
I’m not sure which it was but there was like a ton of these B-52 giant bombers parked there.
While we were there, we had several hours layovers, and they said that ‘Don’t bother going into
town these people don’t like us here.’ Then we flew back to Washington State, into the SEA-
TAC airport, supposedly I guess, everybody gets a steak dinner—I don’t remember eating it.
From there, you were issued Class A uniform, a couple of medals, other things you could stick
on your uniform and then you went home for a thirty day leave. I remember walking into the
Milwaukee airport feeling kind of proud, but people didn’t exactly say ‘welcome back’ or
anything like that. Obviously Mom was great, she was really happy to see me. It was great
being back. I started dating a gal that I started writing from Vietnam, ended up marrying her.
But some of the attitudes that some of the people had…I don’t…you know you hear people
calling you ‘baby killers’ or something like that, I didn’t ever experience anything like that,
anybody saying that to me. But once I was home, I did realize what type of anti-war effort was
going on. I was kind of ticked off that I missed Woodstock! That would have been great to go
to! Although now that I’ve seen it, I don’t think I would have really enjoyed it as much as it
sounded like, it was supposed to be great.

SM: But you didn’t yourself encounter anti-war protesters or anything like that?

DH: No. I don’t remember ever seeing anybody here in the Milwaukee area that was
burning flags or anything like that. Things that I heard that were going on in the Chicago and the
Los Angeles area.

SM: What did you think as the war progressed and the Paris Peace Accords were signed
in ’73 and Saigon fell in ’75.

DH: Thinking what a waste of lives and time being there was. Not really accomplishing
anything. Even though back then I felt why…I still didn’t really know that much about it as I do
now. Especially after kind of taking command of this artillery association and being sent
information and videos and that type of thing. Seeing the movies from public radio, or public television, getting more of an understanding of how the war started and evolved and went through to the end. To me, I think it was a big, big mistake.

SM: Would you say that this is how your attitude toward the war and your understanding about what the war was about has changed the most?

DH: I don’t understand the question.

SM: From the time you left to go to Vietnam until today, how has your attitude about the war changed the most?

DH: I guess it went from a feeling of I was one of the many that were drafted and I was going to go over there and try like hell to get home, to get back, to one of what a useless idea it was to draft that many people and put us in that situation, run the war the way it was, and end up actually losing the war and having the North Vietnamese come into the country and destroy more and more lives. It was a bad idea and my same opinion is every time I see us going back into another area of conflict.

SM: What do you think is the major lesson, or what is a major lesson we should take away from our experiences in Vietnam, as a nation? Is it to not do that kind of stuff?

DH: Well, it seems like we’re the world police department. Even though there was other countries involved in that, we’re always, even though I guess we’re the mightiest, our politicians are real quick to send us into areas, into harm’s way and I don’t believe that some of the reasons…maybe their reasons are better explained to them, but I haven’t been explained those reasons and I think we should learn the lesson from the Vietnam War that we shouldn’t make hasty decisions as to putting our people in situation of war.

SM: The questionnaire addresses the issue of Agent Orange. I was curious, I forgot to ask you while you were country, while we were talking about your in country experiences, was there ever any time when your unit used any of the defoliants in backpack form, whatever, to go and just spray perimeter areas and that kind of stuff, that you were aware of personally?

DH: Okay. When I was in country, I was not aware of it. I was not aware of it at all. It was dealing with this artillery association is when I learned that some of the units put these spray cans on their back and would go out and spray foliage when it started to overgrow, that type of thing.
SM: Do you, yourself, feel like you’ve suffered any kind of debilitation because of Agent Orange or anything like that?

DH: Yeah. When I first went into country, I had no skin problems. When I was there, I think maybe about four months or so, I started breaking out with acne. As soon as I came back into the States, I was still in the service, as soon as I came back I went to doctors for the problem and I’ve been on medication for it ever since.

SM: You’re still on medication for it?

DH: Yes.

SM: How do you think the war affected you most personally? What did you take away from that experience that is most important to you?

DH: I’ve got a bad leg from that explosion. I’ve had to live with that all my life, that’s a daily reminder.

SM: Is there anything positive?

DH: Well, I guess just about anything that I need to do here in the States is a lot easier than what I did over there.

SM: If you could go back and do it over again, would you change anything?

DH: I wouldn’t be a mechanic. I would probably go to OCS or something like that for whatever unit was in the safest area.

SM: Is there anything else you’d like to discuss or add?

DH: I don’t think so. I think the only thing would be possibly finding the first reunion for the group that I’m in now. Over the years, I think I found them around 1995, and through the last five or six years dealing with, talking to these people, dealing with the association gave me a little bit better understanding of what the war was all about. It was a big lapse there that I probably thought about it but didn’t really discuss it that much.

SM: So when you came back, you did not talk with many people about your experiences?

DH: No. I went to the Veteran’s Administration to apply for a disability for my leg, which they gave me – a twenty percent disability. They gave me a hard time about that when I first went. I had to write the hospital administrator to have them do tests on me, which did show that I had nerve damage in the left leg. When I was at the Veteran’s Hospital, I seen a lot of guys without legs. It kind of lead me to believe that I don’t have it as bad as I thought I did. But at
the same time, I ran into people in the waiting rooms there that seemed like abusing the system. Maybe it was my misunderstanding of what they were doing. I never joined a VFW post or anything like that because I guess I kind of feel like it was a bunch of people feeling sorry for themselves, talking about their bad experiences. Now I’m part of two associations and I run another association and I probably maybe should have gotten involved with one before.

SM: Was it a difficult adjustment for you going back?
DH: Coming back from Vietnam?
SM: Mm-Hmm. Did you kind of transition back into American life pretty easily.
DH: Yeah. I think it was pretty easy. I had already applied at Outboard Marine Corporation. I went back there, I think I had a month off or so, but when I came back into the service from Vietnam, I had about fourteen or sixteen months still to do. While I was in Vietnam my next-door neighbor helped me through the Red Cross to get me a compassionate reassignment because I had orders to go to Germany. Red Cross helped me to get a compassionate reassignment to the 5th Army area and I ended up at Ft. [Sheridan] Illinois, that I could drive everyday and help my mom and then while I was in Ft. Sheridan I asked if there was anything open in the Milwaukee area because I knew we had some reserve sites and that type of thing. A first sergeant helped me out there, he said that they needed a mechanic in the Milwaukee area at a Nike site. I spent my time, the rest of my service, working at a place that was only about two miles from the house and living at home. So that turned out pretty nice for me. I did apply as a civilian to run the motor pool in that area, they didn’t want to offer me the money that I wanted, so then I went back to Outboard Marine Corporation and it’s a good thing that I did go back because the NIKE sites started closing because of the Redstone missile coming into existence, so they didn’t need the NIKE sites. Then I just went back to Outboard Marine Corporation and I probably worked about a year before I went back to the VA and applied for educational benefits and I ended up going to night school for about thirteen years, on the GI Bill for about ten of those. They’ll still pay for books and tuition in certain instances.

SM: How do you feel today about your service in Vietnam?
DH: It’s probably the most unique thing that I’ve done in my life. I don’t think there is anything here in the States that is going to compare to that. I think that’s about it.
SM: Do you still feel proud?
DH: Yeah. I wouldn’t let anybody face me and tell me that I was a bozo for being over there. It wasn’t exactly my idea. Yeah, I’m proud that I served.

SM: Anything else you’d like to say?

DH: That’s it.

SM: Let me go ahead and end the interview. This will end the interview with Mr. David Holdorf. Thank you, sir.