

Interview with David S. Hurd by Richard Killblane at Ft Eustis, VA. 26 September 2001

Killblane: Just tell me quickly about your military background up to when you got into Vietnam.

Hurd: I went through one of the first enlisted classes that ever came through this school [Transportation School at Fort Eustis, Virginia]. Before that only officers went through this school. Just me and two or three other guys came down here from Fort Dix, New Jersey, to go to school for four months to learn how to be to be truck masters. That's what I did. I wouldn't change that for the world. They tried to change my MOS [Military Occupations Specialty] several times. I went overseas and requested assignment here. I came here and was in a light truck company. Then, they needed a truck master group to go to Vietnam. I had orders in my hand to go to Europe. I got solicited with the 61st [Transportation Company].

Killblane: 61st? So that was right before they were going over to Vietnam in August 1965. Okay.

Hurd: Everybody was taking leave and so forth. We took all brand new diesel trucks. They were so brand new that in order to keep them running the CO [Company Commander] went to the nurses to get Kotexes to put in the filters.

Killblane: Why did they do that?

Hurd: They couldn't get the filters for the trucks.

Killblane: Oh, I see what you're saying.

Hurd: We drove the trucks over to Norfolk and left them on the dock. Then we flew to California and boarded a ship for Vietnam. I don't know how long it took to get over there, but when we went ashore we did not go to shore where we thought. We went right to shore at Qui Nhon and the trucks were sitting there waiting for us. The only thing missing were a couple of jeeps, I think. One of the other companies was using them. The 597.

Killblane: Yes. They were the 597th Medium Cargo Truck [Company].

Hurd: They were in there before we were. They were using a couple of jeeps. 597 was here and we were right next door; you could walk through the fence to them.

Killblane: Do you know what battalion you were assigned to?

Hurd: 181 I believe. [181st Transportation Battalion was in Germany, the 27th Transportation Battalion was at Qui Nhon]

Killblane: Okay.

Hurd: Again, I'd have to check, it's been how many years?

Killblane: About 30.

Hurd: When we first went ashore over there, we did not haul fluid. We hauled all the equipment, CONEX containers that belonged to 1st Air Cavalry Division, before they went into operation.

Killblane: You said you're hauling CONEX containers but your trucks were fuel trucks. You were a refueling company.

Hurd: We were using trailers from the 597th Stake and Platforms. We were using those any way to get that stuff up on the hill [An Khe]. They [1st Air Cav] were supposed to be air movable, but they were not.

Killblane: When you were making these hauls did you still have the tanks on the back of the trucks or did you drop those off?

Hurd: We didn't use the tanks. When they started operating they had a tank farm. Have you ever seen one of those?

Killblane: Yes.

Hurd: They had a tank farm up there. That's what we called it. When they got in an operation you couldn't haul enough to keep up with them. Then you had all the bridges to go around and over and under.

Killblane: Tell me about Qui Nhon when you first got there. Who else was there, what was it like to be right in Vietnam?

Hurd: The 597th was the only outfit close to us and then down the road, maybe a couple of miles, there was a light truck company in the same area. Me and that truckmaster got to be pretty good friends, (I'll be darn if I can't remember his name now) because we had to change drivers. Some of them weren't qualified to drive the big rigs, but they could drive the smaller trucks. We had to change a few drivers. You might have it listed there.

Killblane: Theirs were 5-ton cargo.

Hurd: Yes. When you come out of there like I did, I don't know about a lot of other people, but I tried to forget a very unpleasant experience. In the first place it seemed to me like a lot of people went bananas and forgot how to operate.

Killblane: Why was that?

Hurd: One of my drivers came back and said, “Some major jumped in my truck and took these down and I had to do what he told me. I couldn't do what you told me to do.” I asked, “Did you get his name?” Stealing trucks was a common occurrence. If they had gone through channels, they'd had gotten it anyway. But, what they did was mess up two assignments by doing that, and it wasn't that we weren't trying. We mostly worked seven days a week. If you got a day off you were lucky. You had one foot in the grave and the other one on a banana peel.

And the heat was unbearable. They put us in a [Shrang] valley. It was a three-sided valley. When it was just about ten o'clock, it could be 90 to 100 degrees, depending upon what time of year it was. And when it rained you just couldn't keep it off.

Killblane: What did you live in when you first got there?

Hurd: I don't know if I should say this. Somebody went down on the dock and stole a couple of tents. That's what we did. We didn't have any for ourselves. We didn't have anything to live in. We went down on the docks and got several tents; the same way with the shower. We didn't have any shower facilities. We built our own shower facilities. As a matter of fact I was the one that was instrumental in getting that started. I went down on the docks to get floating docks. Sometimes one or two of them would get holes punched in them and they would pull them up and throw them on the beach. I got two of those and carried them up to the company. We welded them up so they'd hold water. We used those and made our own shower.

Killblane: What did you do for chow. What was your mess facility?

Hurd: We had a tent. Eventually they came out and built a dining room with a steel roof and everything. They came out and built an outhouse [latrine] too. That burned down, because of the way you got rid of your waste material. You hooked it [the cut down 55-gallon drum] and pulled it out and if your kids didn't pull it far enough then you burned down the outhouse. I rebuilt it when I wasn't on convoy, when they didn't need me. The captain went every day on convoy. Most of what I did was check the trucks when they came back and chased the guys out of the beer hall to go back and fix their trucks before they went back drinking their beer.

Killblane: Where was the beer hall?

Hurd: We had a tent. Everybody had their own beer tent. One convoy I went on, we were going up the mountain to An Khe or Pleiku.

Killblane: Pleiku was beyond An Khe.

Hurd: This was the furthest one. They had an artillery outfit all strung out on the road this way [perpendicular]. They said they [enemy] are coming this way. I said, "Oh boy." And we were sitting with a whole convoy of gasoline and a JP4 [jet fuel] and everything imaginable a half mile back down the road.

Killblane: And artillery was on the road blocking your movement.

Hurd: It's usually a false alarm because nothing ever come of it. That was kind of scary. We were supposed to go from point A to point B. That was my understanding of it. But they took those trucks right up into the combat area and they come back full of holes. I can't remember the town they went to, but they were having a hell of a fight up there. They needed fuel and stuff and so they drove the trucks right up there.

Killblane: That was a one-time mission?

Hurd: Yes. That was just a one-time deal.

Killblane: Okay. What was your duty when you were over there?

Hurd: I was a truckmaster.

Killblane: Truckmaster? Describe to me what you were supposed to do as a truckmaster?

Hurd: Anything and everything to keep them trucks rolling.

Killblane: You were in charge of the maintenance?

Hurd: No, we had a maintenance sergeant.

Killblane: But you dispatched the trucks?

Hurd: Yes. Everything that would roll rolled.

Killblane: Now, you also became a Convoy Commander, right?

Hurd: I have done that a couple of times. The day before I came home the new CO came in and said, "It's all messed up here?" And I thought to myself, "So, I don't care." He asked, "Would you take a convoy up on the hill?" I asked, "Is that a request or an order?" He said, "Well, I'll make it a request," and I said, "Heck no, I'm not going."

Killblane: Would it have been Dak To?

Hurd: Yes, it would have been. I don't think we had any business in Dak To with those tanks?

Killblane: Okay. So, what happened when he asked you?

Hurd: He just shook his head and when on. I shouldn't pick on him. His name was, let me see, Captain Gibson.

Killblane: What was your First Company Commander's name?

Hurd: Katz. Gibson took over for Katz. The second or third night he did something that we all thought was wrong. He had an assembly out in the company area which they frowned on because it was easy enough for any Vietnamese walking by to throw a hand grenade up there and kill a whole bunch of people. He introduced all the officers, which I thought was wrong. This is so and so and he's got all this education. These kids driving those trucks, some of them had never finished high school, let alone college. But anyway he and I got along. He was one of the reasons I said, "I've had enough of this. I'm leaving."

Killblane: How long was he there before you left?

Hurd: A couple of months.

Killblane: Did you finish a full one-year tour?

Hurd: I sure did.

Killblane: Did most of your guys rotate at the same time or did they spread them out?

Hurd: Yes. We all went over in the same company, and they all rotated home in a company. I had three or four months left [before retirement]. I said that I was not going to reenlist. Everybody in my whole company had orders go home and I was standing there with my tongue hanging out. It so happened, my wife worked at Colonial Williamsburg at the time and I wrote back and said, "I don't know what's going on. I haven't received any orders. The whole company has gotten orders except for me." She wrote back right away, "I know Senator "so-and-so" from California because I fixed him up with some reservations in Colonial Williamsburg and he said if I needed anything to please give him a call." I don't know what you call him but each Senator has a military man that takes care of all the military stuff. She called him. I got my orders almost immediately from the Pentagon. Not from them people over there. "Where did you get those?" I said, "Those who want to get home have ways." That's how I got out of Vietnam.

Killblane: What are some of the transitions or changes that your company made from peace time or war time? What were the things you learned about trucking operations in Vietnam?

Hurd: We learned to fix things on the go. They took as few trucks away from the system as they could to maintain them, if I may say it that way. Because we needed all the trucks to do what we were doing, if a truck broke down then it went in for a specific repair and they performed the preventive maintenance on it too, within reason. If it was due in the next couple of weeks it would get its maintenance then, so you would not lose it twice.

We were lucky, we had brand new trucks so we didn't have a lot of problems. We had problems with the filters like I told you. We talked the nurses out of a whole carton of Kotex to keep them running. Another thing that helped us was that they were multi-fueled [M52A2]. They were supposed to be running on diesel and one time for some reason or another no diesel showed up but I'd gone to a class here in this building [Building 705, Fort Eustis] and they explained how this works and so much oil for so much gas and everything. I didn't think I had to have permission. I did it anyway. I put gasoline in then a lot of oil in and off we went. Of course the maintenance officer of the battalion come firing over there, "Who told you that you could do that?" "Well, I did it on my own, why?" Anything to keep them running. As far as I was concerned no unit that was in combat was going to run out of fuel if we could run those trucks.

We had very few people that goofed off, very few people. There were one or two you had to keep your eye on, but most them understood what was going on. They understood it was serious business. We had some problems getting in and out of town though.

Killblane: Which town was that? Do you remember?

Hurd: Qui Nhon. We'd come back off the hill and the MPs would be stopping them out there with their tail lights out and this is out. I got sick of it and went down to the MPs and explained to the desk sergeant who I was, and said, "This is the third war that I've been mixed up in, and the MPs usually help us, but," I said, "you people aren't helping a bit. We're having a problem getting in and out of town. We're having a problem with your people stopping my trucks for the foolish things like a running light is out and writing up a truck for all this mess and that." The CO said, "You didn't." I said, "I did." I said, "I get tired of that kind of stuff. That's plain old out and out chicken shit. Whether you like it or not." Within a week, 10 days, they had us a way in and a way out of town.

Killblane: The MPs were at check points?

Hurd: The MPs were getting us in and out of town. We were taking those trucks right down through the middle of town and anybody could have thrown a hand grenade on top of one of them and blown the hell out the town and everything else. But, after I complained about it, they got off our backs and let us do our thing.

We did have some problems with the POL [Petroleum, Oil and Lubricants] point because at the time there wasn't one and we took over what was there. The guy that was in charge didn't

want to open it when we wanted to be there. Here's all the trucks sitting out in the street and nobody was refueling the trucks to get them back up to the base. I asked, "What seems to be the problem?" "Well, he won't you open the gate?" I went up and stuck a .45 [caliber pistol] in his face. He looked at me and said, "You wouldn't shoot me." I said, "Don't you count on it. You either open the damn gate or we'll find out if I'll shoot you or not."

Killblane: You guys were in combat and he was not wanting to top your vehicles off and they were lined up down the road.

Hurd: Vietnamese weren't all that cooperative.

Killblane: Oh, these were Vietnamese. Excuse me.

Hurd: Some of the Vietnamese weren't all that cooperative. They thought we didn't belong there. In hindsight, maybe we didn't. I wouldn't say that in front of an infantry guy. That's bad.

Killblane: So, you relied on the Vietnamese for topping off your vehicles?

Hurd: We were just using his facilities. He had a facility where you could pull in, I think four trucks at a time, and fill them up. And all the fuel came off our ships into this while they were building a new facility on the other side of town. But the whole time I was there they were building a tank farm out there. If history is right they could tell you they finally built the tank farm in Qui Nhon.

Killblane: So you were completely relying on the Vietnamese then?

Hurd: At that time.

Killblane: Tell me about convoy operations. Describe the route. You mostly ran Route 19?

Hurd: That's 19 that goes from Qui Nhon up to Pleiku. That's the only way we went.

Killblane: Describe what it was like to drive up 19.

Hurd: When we first started running it, it was a little rough, because they hadn't realized that some of those truck would sink up to their axles when they would go down into a riverbed. It wasn't long before they got the roads in pretty good shape so we could travel.

Killblane: It was dirt roads at that time?

Hurd: All dirt roads. Every bit of it. Once you left town you were on the dirt, with clouds of dust all over the place.

Killblane: Tell me about the switchbacks going up to Myan Yang and An Khe Pass.

Hurd: Well every truck driver does a little bit of a different thing. When you started up the switchbacks the CO used to get a little upset and get the truck behind to push the truck up front.

We had all kinds of bad bumpers. But they got the trucks up the hill. One driver was a better driver than the other. He knew well when to shift down. Some of them would lag a truck till it died before they would shift a gear. The best way to do it, bring that picture up and I'll show it to you. He [Paul Blosser] had a video camera and probably got a better deal than I got. I got a little picture like that. When you first look, it looks like nothing but dust.

Killblane: Was the jungle right up to the trails at that time.

Hurd: No. They had already used the Agent Orange. Some days you can see it, that's Agent Orange [pointing to a rash on his hand]. What they tell me anyway. One of the drivers that worked for me over there still lives in Williamsburg; he's got it on his face. He's got something like this.

Killblane: You're talking about the rash on your hand?

Hurd: You have to look right here. That's what they did with Agent Orange. They had sprayed that on both sides of the road. I don't think I wanted to run a truck up and down that road. There was a sharp corner and all the guys knew it.

Killblane: It was called the Hairpin.

Hurd: Yeah. They put a truck in a rice patty full of fuel.

Killblane: How did they do that?

Hurd: Going too fast around that turn.

Killblane: Oh. Okay.

Hurd: Some second lieutenant went up and pulled the plug on it and let all the fuel drain out into the rice patty. Some VC [Viet Cong] came along and threw a match in it. I think the tanker and the truck and a jeep went up. I was not there to see it. I was already home but I still had a couple of friends over there who wrote and told me about it. He said, "You missed it." I said, "I didn't miss anything I didn't want to see." I told them every time, "You guys be careful of that corner." "Awe Sarge."

I've got several guys in Williamsburg who were in my company over there. About four I think. They came over to the company one night and said, "We need you to haul four or five trailers from up on the hill down here for the ammunition." I said, "You've got no business on that road at night." They said, "Oh yeah, it's safe." So I went over and set up five trucks and a jeep. We went up on a hill and every bridge we came to was manned by Koreans, and they weren't too happy about us driving that road at night with the headlights on. And I wasn't too

happy about it either, but that was what I was told to do. We got out, got the trailers, headed on back down, got back in Qui Nhon, pulled in the ammunition dump, and I counted 38 empty trailers in the ammunition dump. And you wanted to see one mad sergeant, that was me. I said, "I gotta get out of this Army. That is ridiculous."

Killblane: What was the problem here?

Hurd: The problem was, we were supposed to be hauling fuel and every time they got in a jam they took somebody out of my company to get them out of it. But it wasn't a jam. If the trailers came back down the hill and had some maintenance work on them, the guys would dump them off at the ammunition dump. There were about 40 cargo trailers down there and we went up on the hill to get some. And less than a thousand yards off that road we were running with the lights on, the VC went in and shot the pee out of that village.

Killblane: When you said run it up the hill what do you mean?

Hurd: We were talking about that switchback and all that, the [An Khe] Pass. That's the hill. I'm going to have to think about and come back. Tell it some other time.

Killblane: Tell me about the convoy procedures. Did you have a briefing ahead of time?

Hurd: After so long all those guys knew what to do with keeping the distance. We didn't have too much. As long as they were ready to roll in the morning that was all they cared about. Whoever was the convoy commander took them and off we'd go.

Killblane: What about when you get ambushed? What was the procedure?

Hurd: You didn't get ambushed.

Killblane: Oh, you just got shot at.

Hurd: Nobody knew that truck was shot at till after it came back.

Killblane: That's the only time you got shot at was that one time that truck came back full of holes?

Hurd: The only time they got shot at. I had mortars follow me down that mountain one time.

Killblane: Describe that incident again about the vehicle getting shot.

Hurd: They went up to Dak To and nobody knew till they got back to Qui Nhon that anybody even shot at the truck. I looked at it and there were bullet holes down the side of the truck, one right behind the driver's head in the canvas. I said, "Did you know what this is?" And this guy who was driving on the truck said, "Awe, sarge." And his eyes got as big as silver dollars. I said,

“Well, lucky this time.” And that's a fact. The battalion took that trailer, patched the holes and used it as water tank for showers.

Killblane: When your convoys went out did they go out as a company.

Hurd: Yes.

Killblane: So it was nothing but POL? They weren't mixing POL and cargo?

Hurd: No.

Killblane: Okay.

Hurd: We got a time to roll and that's when we rolled.

Killblane: Is there anything else that you can think of?

Hurd: One hot, endless summer really. I went from 220 pounds when I went ashore off the ship, and when they clocked me in the hospital seven months later I weighed 169 pounds. I said to the doctor, “What's the matter with me?” He said, “Well, there's a lot of things over here we don't know, so we're treating you for everything we don't.”

Killblane: You don't know how many truck drivers I've talked to who have told me how much weight they lost when they went over there.

Hurd: We all did. The thing with me is I go and eat and when it's hot I don't want greasy food. One of the guys went down on the docks and he worked a deal for a crate of cold storage eggs. And darn if the cook didn't scramble them. I could have killed him.