

## **Questionnaire answered by Chester Suchecki, 24 February 2002.**

### **1. How did you end up in the Army?**

I joined the Army in July of 69 and arrived in Fort Dix on the 15th of August 1969. That was the weekend that Woodstock was happening. I left Boston Army Base that morning on a bus with a whole bunch of guys from New England. I remember being very hungover because my parents threw me a going away party the night before. We arrived in Fort Dix in the afternoon and were immediately greeted by our, to put it mildly, fun loving drill instructors who gently guide us through our orientation into the green machine.

### **2. How did you become a truck driver?**

When I enlisted I wanted to go into the Army's Navy but the recruiter told me there were no openings there so I picked truck driving. To this day I think he lied to me about the opening thing. That's another story.

### **3. When did you get assigned to Vietnam and why?**

I got orders for Vietnam after AIT [Advanced Individual Training] at Fort Dix and was sent to Vietnam orientation in Fort Dix for two weeks of Nam training.

### **4. How did you feel about going to Vietnam?**

I was scared at first but I knew I was going to end up there. In AIT we were kind of psyched by instructors that that was where we were going to end up. So I guess you could say that there was no doubt about it. I think only 10 guys ended up going to Germany and one guy ended up at the Pentagon as a driver but I think he had family connections.

### **5. Where did you arrive?**

I was to depart the US from Fort Dix and we flew out of McGuire AFB. We stopped in Anchorage and Tokyo, which was being burned not too far from the terminal. I said, "Oh God, what was that." I'll never forget it. The heat was brutal too. This was early January and it was monsoon season, but it hadn't rained in a couple days. I remember that we spent the night sleeping on the ground waiting for orders to get shipped out. I got orders for Da Nang and was flown out the next day in a C130. That was a wild ride. The pilot told us that we had taken a couple rounds on take off but there was nothing to worry about because they didn't hit anything critical. So off to Da Nang and another night of waiting for orders. At least I had a cot this night.

Next morning got orders for the 805th Trans Company. I flew out about 3 or 4 in the afternoon and arrived at dusk. I was picked up by the company guntruck at Phu Bai

International Airport which was about a mile from the company area. We pulled up to the company headquarters and I reported in to the OD [Officer of the Day] and was assigned a platoon and a hooch. There were two of us, but I don't remember the guy's name to this day.

## **6. How was your reception?**

The reception was the usual US Army cordiality. When I arrived at my first company the 805th TC, I had no idea what to expect at all. For four days after I got in-country, all that I saw was mess halls and clerks' offices. Sleeping on the ground and the heat and humidity were oppressive. Well anyway, I reported in at dusk so I didn't get to see what was going on. I was assigned to a hooch with 6 other guys. I came with another "cherry" [new guy]. We were immediately harassed about being FNG's [f\*\*king new guy] and given beers. Well we got totally plastered and stayed up till about midnight. The next morning a corporal came in and woke us up for breakfast at about six. Mess was powdered eggs and bacon, the usual. Next I was off to the motor pool for driver training. Since this was an S&P [stake and platform] company, I had to take training all over again. This took about a week to get a license for an MOS [military occupation specialty] change to heavy trucks, M52A2s. Then I was to ride shotgun for two weeks to find out where things were, Navy Ramp, ammo dumps, PX's, supply depots, etc. It was incredible where we had to deliver stuff. I was only in this company a month and was transferred to the 515th.

## **7. What unit were you assigned to and what was your job?**

I was assigned to the 26th Group, 39th Battalion, 805th TC [Transportation Company]. After about three weeks or so I don't remember the exact dates I was assigned to the 515th TC. This is where I spent the rest of my tour.

## **8. Who were your NCOs and officers and what were they like?**

I don't remember the officers too much but some of the NCOs I do. We had a First Shirt [First Sergeant] named Sergeant George Washington. He and I and a couple other guys built the company theatre in the gully between a hill. When I first got to the 515, they would show movies and had USO shows there. It was a natural amphitheater. About half way through my tour, I was given the task of helping Sergeant Washington build a roof over it. It took us about a month to do it. With lots of help from the company wrecker. Sergeant Washington was great. We always had lots of beer breaks during the day. Soon after we finished the theatre, we got a new first shirt. I don't remember his name to this day either but I do remember he was from Hawaii and a real nice guy.

I never saw much of my platoon leader as we were on the road a lot. I think it was September. My platoon got a brand new butter bar [second lieutenant] that was a royal a\*\*hole. We had our own rooms in the hooches and this jerk shows up and makes us take out the walls and paint the place army green. Since I was the only one in the

platoon with any building experience, I got the job of doing this nasty job of changing to the Army norm. The guys were bullshit at me for a couple days because I had to get their stuff out of the hooches to paint them. I did this by spraying them using the air system from my truck. That was a trip in itself. We didn't have any thinner for the paint so the LT told me to use mogas. Oh, the stink! I was literally green for days. This LT, we hated with a passion. The platoon NCOs were OK and well liked.

**9. What was the daily routine? What time did you get up, eat breakfast, pick up your truck, line up, depart, reach your destination, unload the vehicle, return, clean the vehicle, eat, clean up and go to bed?**

Typical day started about 5:30 to 6:00 am, sometimes 5:00. It depended on where you were going. Breakfast, morning formation and to the trucks. We drove mostly alone or with buddies following close by. If you were to go south to Da Nang, you were told the day before to pick up a load somewhere around Phu Bai or Camp Eagle the afternoon before. You would go back to the motor pool and check out your truck and then park it across the road from the motor pool in the staging area. We didn't have to go to reveille in the morning of the convoy because we had to get to the highway, QL1 [Highway 1], near the railhead to stage the convoy.

The good part is that we went to the same places as the S&P guys except we had to go to fire bases too. That was a trip in itself. Driving 50 to 60 mph on dirt roads through mine craters and staggered about ten feet apart so we could see through the dust. Thanks to Army Driver Training at Fort Dix, we did very well, no wrecks. The trick was to get there and out before Charlie could get a bead on you, so to speak. Once in a while a stray shot came at us. They most usually shot at the air cleaners on the fender thinking it would kill the motor. I had a couple patches welded on the air cleaner on my truck.

Going south was a trip. It took about two hours to get moving but once we got up to speed, it was always high balling. The Hai Van Pass was always fun. When we got to the Hai Van Pass, things started to slow down because of some trucks with heavy loads. So the ones that were severely heavy had a 5-ton cargo [truck] behind push the truck in front up faster as not to slow convoy down. Things got faster on the way down though. Most guys would kick the stick and coast down. That was lots of fun but you had to be careful of traffic coming up. I remember one time a guy a few trucks in front of me ran over a whole family on a motor bike. I feel sorry for him and the family too. They were killed. They were also wide on the corner passing a bus full of people. He just came around the corner and there they were in his side of the road.

Convoys to Da Nang were another excursion. During the monsoon season, we did convoys because a lot of things could not be airlifted. Any way convoys to Da Nang were great because you got unloaded where ever your load went and then went to the supply yard for the load north. After getting loaded we were supposed to go to the staging area and get ready to go north but most of the time we went to the Da Nang PX for stuff you couldn't get in Camp Eagle, including real hamburgers. At the PX in Camp

Eagle, hamburgers were a slice of ham on a hamburger roll. I never understood that one. The staging area going north was across the road from a huge cemetery just before a village. We would line up and wait till everybody would get there and who ever was going with us. Sometimes a truck would come to us with some cherries going north or people coming back from R&R looking for a ride, so sometimes I had someone to talk to going back. Rarely did people ride shotgun. Then the trip back was usually uneventful. Once in a while we would get hit but not often.

One time I was behind a guy in a 5-ton tractor towing a Sealand trailer. He got hit in the middle of trailer with an RPG [rocket propelled grenade] and blew a whole in it. Well inside, the trailer was filled with hard liquor. We had a ball that day. I leave the rest of that to you.

Going north was another trip. We would make a pickup at Tan My Island Navy Ramp, usually ammo and beer and sodas. Going north to Camp Evans or to Quang Tri or Dong Ha, you had to get there by at least noon to get unloaded in time to get out before curfew. It took three hours driving time to get to Camp Eagle. Many a time, I just got there by dusk. Once or twice after and I got a ration from the MPs, then get to motor pool and get chewed by motor sergeant for being out after dark, then the mess hall was closed so it's hit the EM Club for hydraulic dinner, then a shower in a shower stall we build behind the hooch. Most of the hooches had one with hot and cold. We scrounged immersion heaters and set them in barrels. There was a water truck that came by everyday to fill the barrels for us. It was a beautiful thing and easy to clean too. The hooch maid did it including laundry and the hooch and beds for three MPC [military pay script] a month. This included stealing our underwear and towels.

Another thing we did in Da Nang was scrounge for the platoon or ourselves. The platoon sergeants would give us stuff to trade for things we needed and could not get. I was sent down with a compressor head to trade for a load of corrugated steel for the theatre roof. This was an arranged thing between sergeants and it was known I was coming for that particular item. One time I traded an AK47 to a Seabee for a case of hard liquor. I used that case of booze to get the stuff we needed to build a shower behind my hooch. Lots of good deals to be made.

On days we were to go to Tan My Island Navy Ramp, we had a mermite can strapped to the grill in the truck. There was a place on the way where we could get ice for sodas and beer, cost was 50 cents MPC for a full cooler. When I got to Tan My, I would split it up with the guys and cool down our drinks. There was a reason for this. Whatever load you got there was always a wait to get unloaded, especially ammo dumps. Part of the OVM on my truck was a hammock that we would tie between the trucks to nap on or under trailers to get out of the sun. That's where the sodas and beer came in. It usually took a couple hours to get unloaded. If there were short runs to Phu Bai, you had to make another trip to the Navy Ramp.

Going through Hue was a trip too. If you were going north, you had to go over this railroad bridge to get there. We could not use the other one in Hue City, it was off limits.

This was a one-way bridge, so you had to wait for traffic. One time I was following a guy going to Camp Evans. He was towing a Sealand trailer. He must have been a "cherry" because he didn't put a lock on the doors on it. The gooks pulled up behind him in one of those 3-wheeled Vespas and cleaned him out of about 20 cases of oranges in two seconds flat. He finally realized the door was open when he crossed the bridge and the door banged on the supports of the bridge. He got in lots of trouble from that one.

So back at the company at the end of the day, you would do the paperwork and turn in log book, check out the truck and fix flats if you had one or more. Yes, we had to fix our own flats. I personally liked to replace bad tires with used ones. For some unknown reason older tires did not pick up nails and such as often as new ones. When that was done, off to the club for beers and mess for dinner. The food was not bad and not that good. When we could scrounge up some steaks, we had a BBQ that lasted late into the night.

During the rainy season there was nothing but mud every where you went. QL1 was asphalt all the way from Da Nang to the DMZ [Demilitarized Zone] thanks to the Seabees. During the dry season, it was dust. The road from Phu Bai to Camp Eagle would get to about a foot deep with dust and you had to crawl down it. If you went more than 5 mph there would be a cloud like Mount St Helen's blowing that bad. One time I was speeding and got a ticket from the MPs. Poor guys, I didn't even see them for the dust and I buried them. I had to wait for five minutes so the dust settled. They were pissed. When the Seabees put peta prime on it to keep the dust down, it was like ice or worse. You don't want to be behind that truck when they are spraying. I've seen trucks slide right off the road. The mud would get pretty deep too. For some unknown reason the ammo dump in Phu Bai had a mud pit at the gate office area. This had to be handled with great finesse. You had to go as fast as you can go to try and get through it. If you got stuck then you had to get out of the truck and get the cable from a truck that was anchored on the other side and drag it back and hook up and get towed out. The rest of the place was fine, slick but driveable

Washing the trucks was a great thing. We just drove into a stream or river and wash it. This was good for cleaning the underside of the truck that got caked with mud. Take a helmet and wash the top and the river did the rest. It was important to clean the underside so that the truck could get serviced. Motor sergeants liked to grease the trucks at least once a week. Our master builder, Sergeant Washington, built a lube rack behind the shop in the motor pool for greasing and oil changes. This thing was a work of art to be envied by Speedy Oil Change shops. The best part was that you pulled up on to it and just took out the plug in the pan and let it drain into a funnel hook to a tank underneath. No fuss, no muss. Even the oil came from above and was gravity fed with a metered nozzle. This man was a true master of Afro-American engineering.

#### **10. What policy changes took place during your tour?**

The policy changes that I remember the most was that we got an order from the

battalion commander that we wear flack jackets and shirts while driving. Talk about uncomfortable and hot. During the summer months, it was brutal in the trucks. Just the heat alone from the engines cooked your feet and the added heat from clothing was unbearable. I for one tried this and got away with it till I got caught. I took an old discarded flack jacket and cut the back off behind the neck and just hung it on my shoulders. This helped. This worked well around Phu Bai because the chances of getting caught by our officers was great. They seldom ventured past Tam My Navy Ramp. We never saw them north of Hue. But like I said I got caught. Platoon sergeant was helping me fix the lights on the truck one day and was in the cab working the switch and he pulled it out from under the seat and said, "What's this?" I had to tell him. Luckily he didn't turn me in but just took it away. Other than that nothing was worth mentioning.

### **11. What did you do for recreation, when you had the time?**

What we did for fun was all day everyday. One game we used to play on the road was tag. This was done in convoys and two or three trucks running together. When on an open road we would usually run about 50 to 60 mph and we would speed up to the truck in front and touch his back end ever so gently. After doing it a few times you get real good. This came from the training I got in Fort Dix on how to read what the guy in front of you is doing. All you have to do is watch the exhaust pipe and lights, speedometer too. By doing this, it made it easier to push trucks in the mountains. Some training. But no dents, if you had dents in your bumper the motor sergeant would be very upset say we were wrecking his "veeeeeeeeeehicles."

After driving all day we had the EM Club and movies almost every night. I remember when they showed "M.A.S.H." for the first time and all the officers were sitting on the rail of the bridge next to the theatre, which in fact was part of the theatre, and the movie came to the part where Hawkeye and Trapper were in Japan and they were at the golf course. The driver of the jeep, a sergeant (Bobby Troupe) is saying, "God damn f\*\*\*\*n' army" and we started cheering and they disappeared thinking we were going to start a riot. Well we got the projectionist to start the movie over and when that part came again we started cheering louder this time and the commanding officer came over and shut it down. Another good movie was "Easy Rider." That one played 4 nights straight to a full house. The word got out that we had it and everybody from the whole camp showed up. The EM Club ran out of beer and that's hard for a Trans [Transportation] unit.

Other nights we played cards. I remember playing hearts or spades and one hand took an hour because of the conversation or we were just too loaded. Usually we had Sundays off. For some reason the Navy guys didn't want to work on Sundays but that was fine with us. Sundays I you wanted to go work on the truck and do a road test to the PX get a haircut or go visiting.

One day I was painting my truck next to the main road and low and behold my cousin showed up. This guy was my mother's brother's son. Of all places to see him. We talked for a few minutes and he told me where he was in Camp Eagle and I promised to

go see him one day off. Did I mention that he was a warrant officer flying “shithooks” [Chinook CH47 Helicopter]. I did get to visit and he had to fly that day so I went for a chopper ride to the A Shau Valley to pick up some grunts. Thankfully nothing happened as I wasn’t carrying a firearm. What I liked about it was that it was cooler up there. The first time in months that I was really comfortable and cool. I come from New England and me and heat like that don’t get along to well. I was acclimated but to this day don’t like the hot humid weather.

R&R was fun but I don’t think I can write about what I did there other than say what a beautiful country, awesome people and I want to go back some day.

## **12. What was the most memorable thing you remember about Vietnam?**

Memorable things good and bad. The whole tour was full of them. Isn’t this story all about it. Some good things were being on guard duty and watching the sun come up and seeing B52's flying north. Sunrises on a good day were beautiful. The false dawn coming and seeing the Southern Cross. The smell of napalm and burning feces are thing you never forget. Seeing dead bodies lined up beside the road with women and children mourning their dead. The body of a VC [Vietcong] lying beside the rail crossing at the bottom of the Hai Van Pass with all extremities cut off by the ROK Marines and more, but I'm not going there. I'm glad that we are a civilized nation that doesn't maim the dead. The best memory was the day I got back from R&R and reported in and received my orders to go home.

Sometime during the summer of 70 the 101st was going to be part of the push into Cambodia and were sending materials down south. Well, one day after my local trip was done, I was to pick up a load to go to Da Nang the next day. When I got to the unit that was shipping, they gave me two CONEX boxes to put on the truck. Well, with these chained down and on my way back to my motor pool, I stopped at the PX in Camp Eagle to get some smokes. When leaving I had to stop for a one way bridge to let a fuel tanker trailer truck by. When I stopped, I was pretty close to the bridge and the tanker didn’t have enough room to get by so I started backing up after looking in the mirrors to see if anyone was behind me. Seeing no one I started backing and the next thing I hear is a horn blasting and the back of the truck rising. I stopped and got out and there was a jeep with an officer and two NCOs white as sheep sitting there with a 5-ton backed up on to their hood. Needless to say, the jeep was ruined, radiator shot and the motor was cracked. It would still roll, so I hooked up a chain and towed them back to their motor pool. Oops, almost forgot. The jeep was towing a trailer full of beer they had just got at the PX. Anyway when I got them to their company, the motor sergeant came out and started screaming at what had happened to his jeep, so I told him my story and they told theirs and he had me fill out the forms on the group then he sent me on my way. So what happened was they were so close to me I could not see them. That was reasonable to the sergeant and he started chewing them out. I could barely see them when I was towing them. I got back to my motor pool and reported the accident and filled out more papers and that was the end of it. The look on those three guys -- priceless. I wish I had a camera that day.

**13. What phases of stress did you go through driving in Vietnam and how did you deal with it?**

Stress while driving was not too bad other than lousy seats in the trucks. They were hard on the back and tailbone. Lots of guys would go to the retrograde yards and find floater seats from ten-ton tractors. I could not find one but I did find a seat from an RT [rough terrain] forklift. This was better than the floater. The floater was too bouncy driving off road. The one I had installed had better padding and was a wraparound bucket seat. It was sort of a recaro bucket these days. It held you firm in place and was easy on the back off road. This had another advantage too. The passenger seat in the truck was bolted to the driver's seat when I took out the driver's seat, the passenger's was now useless so back to the retrograde yard for another driver's seat for the passenger's side. Now here is the advantage. The mermite can tied to the front of the truck now fit perfectly between both seats. This was great, now I had access to the cooler without stopping and risking theft on the road. Another way we ate on the road was to cook C-Rats [Rations] in the cab. We got hold of some heat tablets and made a small stove out of some old cans and dropped in a heat tab and put can of rats on top and cook away. This was only done on long straight roads going north or south, never off road or in the ammo dumps, too risky.

**14. When did you get short and what precautions did you take?**

I went on R&R for the last week in November during Thanksgiving at home. When I got back I reported in to the commanding officer and when I was walking out the clerk handed me my orders to go home. YAHOO! going home. So I went to the motor pool to find my platoon sergeant and handed him my license and he said, "What's this?" And I handed him my orders. I was to leave in 11 days. I told him I didn't care if I had to do KP [kitchen police] for the rest of the time left but I wasn't driving. He said, "OK," and I was assigned the task of fixing flat tires. This was a true art form to get these fixed. When I left the Nam, I could fix a flat 10x20 tire in about 20 minutes un-inflated, 30 pumped up. I left Vietnam on 2 December 1970, happy as a clam to get out alive and in one piece.

**15. How many pounds did you lose?**

I didn't lose weight. I stayed about the same 180-190 lbs. I drank lots of fluids coffee, sodas, and beer. I always had food whether it be C-Rats or mess hall's. I don't think it was a problem for me.

**16. When did you depart Vietnam and how did you feel about it?**

When I left Vietnam, I was ecstatic but wanted to come back for another tour but they would not let me because I got a lot of speeding tickets. They gave me Article 15's [company punishment] for them and took me off the road a couple times. One month, they put me on guard duty for a month. The other time I was assigned to the gun jeep as gunner and radio operator. I didn't mind that at all, not having to drive was great, just

sit there and ride. When all is said and done it wasn't as bad for me or my brothers in the company. In the whole year in Vietnam, we only lost one guy and he ran off the road on the Hai Van Pass. I have a picture of his wrecked truck.

When I left Cam Ranh Bay Airport, I got on a Pan Am 727 with American women on it in miniskirts and great legs. When we took off. I took a picture of the last thing I saw of the Nam before we got into the clouds. We landed in Seattle and went to Fort Lewis to be processed. They gave us steak and eggs for breakfast, hot showers from real faucets and toilets that flushed. The only ones I saw for a year were in Australia. What a novelty to be able to sit and not get splinters, new clean uniforms and off to the airport to go home, and of course orders for Germany.