

Interview with Gene Autrey

Interview by: Richard Killblane

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Killblane: Okay, Gene, would you start out and tell me what your rank was, what unit you were assigned to, and when you arrived in Vietnam and where.

Autrey: Second Lieutenant Transportation Corps in the 57th Transportation [Company] Light Trucks. We left the United States in July of 1967. We were assigned to the 54th Trans[portation] Battalion in Shrang Valley, South Vietnam, just outside of Qui Nhon. I was a platoon leader and shortly after we got there they took away our motor maintenance technician. He went to the 124th Trans[portation] Battalion in Pleiku so I assumed or was given the duties of maintenance officer.

Killblane: Okay, so you deployed as a company?

Autrey: Yes. We were activated in January, I believe, 1967 in Fort Devens, Massachusetts. Later our battalion headquarters was activated, the 124th. Then we loaded all our stuff on rails, shipped it to California, and placed it aboard a vessel. My unit went to California and took a ship to Vietnam. Myself and the advanced/rear party left the United States the first few days in July, and we flew directly to Vietnam.

Killblane: You said advanced/rear party. You went ahead of the main body?

Autrey: Yes. We were left behind, myself, I believe the mess sergeant, the supply sergeant, two clerks and another soldier. We cleared post transportation property at Fort Devens, Massachusetts. We flew to Vietnam where we set up the camps and everything for our company when it arrived there. It was July 1967.

Killblane: You said you were part of the 124th when it was activated?

Autrey: I believe it was the 124th that was activated at Fort Devens.

Killblane: And that's a battalion?

Autrey: Yes.

Killblane: They went to a different location?

Autrey: Right.

Killblane: Now they went to Pleiku as soon as they got there?

Autrey: I believe so.

Killblane: When did you arrive?

Autrey: July 1967.

Killblane: Were there any ambushes on the Route 19 prior to September while you were there?

Autrey: Not that I recall.

Killblane: Tell me about the daily routine of drivers, and your duties, from the time you get up in the morning till the time you would come in and go to bed.

Autrey: If it was a convoy day you got up early in the morning and you went down to where the trucks were lined up. They loaded it the night before. They had it fully loaded the night before if there were sufficient personnel and not just the drivers. They would load into different yards in Qui Nhon or along the pier. Sometimes it would be loaded directly from the pier to the trucks. And in the morning time we went down and did the PCI in preparation for...

Killblane: What's PCI?

Autrey: Precombat Inspections: check the radios, check the weapons, make sure everybody had water, food, that sort of thing, everybody knew where they were going, having everybody accounted for, all the trucks that we were supposed to have accounted for. And at the prescribed time we left Qui Nhon enroute to Ah Khe. Oftentimes at Ah Khe five thousand gallon tankers would join us there, and accompany us to Pleiku where our drivers went to different offload places. As Lieutenants, we were responsible for going to all the offload sites to make sure that the Materiel Handling Equipment was there, and there was no breakdown, or difficulty like that. Then at the end, you got as many unloaded as you possibly could, then you went to the assembly area, got all the people that you could account for. You knew who was going to remain overnight, and who was going to go back. Then, you started the journey going back to Qui Nhon. I keep saying Qui Nhon, I mean Shrang Valley. When you got back to the Battalion area, your guys went to the motor pool. They did their after-operations maintenance. Then they went to eat, get cleaned up good, get a little rest while they could, and oftentimes they had to go load, and that's again driving into Qui Nhon to different yards of the port or whatever to reload for the next day. And when that was over they came back.

Killblane: What kind of trucks did you have?

Autrey: Five-tons. Five-ton cargo, we were light truck, five-ton.

Killblane: What was the time schedule on that? About what time was wake up?

Autrey: Three or four o'clock in the morning.

Killblane: What time did you usually assemble to go...

Autrey: To go eat chow? We'd go down to the assembly area. The maintenance people were generally down there in the event we had a truck that didn't start, or maybe inflate a tire if it was low. Sometimes you had to change tires. The guys would get something in the tire overnight while they were loading. The tire would go flat, so we had to do that.

Killblane: How did you get assignments? How did drivers know what cargo they were going to get?

Autrey: It came from operations to our truckmaster. While we were gone, and they finally got loads, they'd assign drivers for the next day. "You and you and you are going to haul this tomorrow." "This is where you're going to go." The convoys weren't always just our company, but battalion convoys. We had trucks from everybody, not always just from our company.

Killblane: So, as soon as you came in, you met with the truckmaster. He told the drivers where to take the truck to get it loaded?

Autrey: He told the platoon sergeants.

Killblane: Okay, the platoon sergeants.

Autrey: The platoon sergeants and their guys came in and said, "Alright this is what you've got to do," or maybe, "Tomorrow you will do transport." Now, if the drivers didn't go out the next day, they did maintenance on the truck, maintenance on their personal items, and got a little rest. Rest was premium. You didn't get that much rest. In addition to the driving, they had perimeter responsibilities. On their day off of convoy, so-to-speak, they had to do PMCS [Preventive Maintenance Checks] on the trucks, wash them, get services that were due, clean the weapons, get a haircut, those types of things. When our unit was activated in Fort Devens, Massachusetts, we acquired all brand new equipment. So when we first got there our trucks were brand new.

Killblane: What were they?

Autrey: The M54A2 cargo truck. They were in magnificent condition. We had a motor maintenance technician who was super. As far you and I are concerned the roads in Vietnam are not like Jefferson Avenue. Hour after hour on sometimes unimproved roads, those trucks would get beat and banged around. The fenders break on them and the air cleaner break even faster with the weight on there. Then the grommets on the cab came off, the frame would wear out and the cab would rock forward. So there were lots of maintenance issues with those things. Some of the multi-fuel engines had head gasket problems, which was a problem up there as well. Guys would have to repair a lot of tires because of road conditions because of a lot of wear on the tires. That's what you did. If you weren't on convoy that day then you would handle the motor pool and you would see two or three guys get their stuff done because the maintenance technician would take the motor sergeants for scheduled services and all that sort of stuff to get those trucks fixed. Those guys would get it fixed.

Killblane: How often did you get time off? Was this a scheduled routine, or was it whenever the truck master told them? Was there a pattern to when the drivers got the days off, when they weren't driving?

Autrey: It depended on what they had to haul. For the most part you were maxed all the time, and if you recall back then, we were not authorized two drivers per truck. I think our total unit strength was something like 179, if I'm not mistaken. So if you have 60 trucks, that could account for 120, right?

Killblane: Uh huh.

Autrey: But you also have maintenance in there, you have supply, you have med[ic]s, you have all of them. In addition, when we first got there they had this thing called rotational hump. And if I'm not mistaken, they took something like one third of our folks and put them in other units then we got one third of their people, so we didn't all turn over at one time. We would keep that company on a rotational hump. So we had some people that we didn't know so much about. They had to assimilate in, and it was a process as well. So, on their days off they didn't have that much time off. But, generally on their days off when they didn't have to work, when their maintenance was done, and their weapons were cleaned up, there was a little snack bar across the road. There was a little helicopter pad over there and they could go over there and get magazines and buy some things. Up and down QL1 [Highway or Route 1] there were these little places. There was a little river that ran along QL1 and they were called wash racks. Oftentimes, the guys would take money out of their own pocket to take their truck down there and pay the Vietnamese kids \$2 to wash their trucks for them.

Killblane: You talked about the road conditions. By that time the roads were paved?

Autrey: No. From downtown Qui Nhon to wherever the yards were down there, and out past Rock Valley where the creek was, which I think was the 27th Battalion Maintenance and our 54th Battalion, and further out past there was an engineer yard. There was a whole lot of stuff out there. The road was paved a few miles past us going toward Ah Khe. I don't mean a lot of miles, but I would say two, three, four, or five, something like that. But, Brown and Root was out there, and they had a rock-crusher-quarry-thing out there paving the road. They didn't have a paving crew. After some miles before we reached Ah Khe, the road had been paved in the past, but it had been so torn up so that bits and pieces paved, but a lot of it was just gravel and dirt and dust. I don't remember anymore pavement except the bits and pieces of pavement until you got right at Pleiku. Going through Mang Yang Pass and all that I don't recall any pavement. What makes me think of that more than anything was the amount of dust that we had. I simply can't remember that amount of pavement except for bits of pieces of it.

Killblane: Was the surrounding countryside defoliated by that time?

Autrey: Yes and no. Some of it was. The engineers had things. I believe they were called roam plows. I think they were big D8 and D9 dozers, and they had begun to clear the jungle away from the roadway where they could. Some places were cleared fifty feet, one hundred feet, one hundred yards. Different places gave you a greater sense of security because you had some

vision. Nobody could get up really close to you. I suppose the engineers or the Seabees or somebody had rebuilt a lot of the bridges because we had a lot of wooden bridges we had to go across. I shouldn't say a lot, several wooden bridges that we had to go across. And, either the Infantry or the Marines guarded it. I remember later on when we were up north that the Marines guarded it, but it seems to me in that area that the Army Infantry was in that area. I could be in error, but it seems to me like it was.

Killblane: They guarded with just Infantry or did they have tanks there, too?

Autrey: No.

Killblane: Just grunts?

Autrey: Just grunts. A whole lot of concertina wire, and whole lot of flares, that sort of stuff. I don't remember seeing a tank by any of the bridges when we were operating in and around Qui Nhon. I don't remember seeing any tanks.

Killblane: What was your normal route with the 5 tons? You just ran [Route] 19 all the way to Qui Nhon and back?

Autrey: No. We went from Qui Nhon to Ah Khe to Peiku, and Dac To. I'll have to look at the map. We also went up Highway 19 toward the Airforce Base that was at Phu Cat and Task Force McDonald. There was a place that I recall was called Duc Pho, something like that. There was a task force there, and I think that was probably the farthest I ever went in that direction.

Killblane: That's north.

Autrey: Yeah. And then, I could be wrong on this, because there was one place where we kind of followed close. I believe it was called Tuy Hoa, but I could be wrong. I'd have to look at the map to be sure, but it seems like it was Tuy Hoa. Those were the only places that we delivered to while I was on convoy, but there could have been other convoys that I never went on.

Killblane: Are these just one-day trips? Dac To is kind of far away.

Autrey: Yes. To me those were always just one-night trips. For some of our drivers it was remain overnight, because there were too many trucks coming in for them to handle in terms of MHE [Materiel Handling Equipment], you know off-loading that sort of stuff. As, I said, you're pushing it. You got as many unloaded as you could, so the more you got unloaded the more you reloaded that night. So, sometimes when you got there the next day at the assembly area, the kids you had left overnight would be at the assembly area waiting for you. Some of them had to remain overnight. I don't recall if I ever had to remain overnight.

Killblane: How long had you been in the Army before you were sent to Vietnam?

Autrey: From December, 1959, till July, 1967.

Killblane: Oh, so you came through rank. How long had you been an officer?

Autrey: From 2 August, 1966, through July of 1967.

Killblane: So, how did you feel about getting to go to Vietnam?

Autrey: We loved it. Couldn't wait.

Killblane: Why's that?

Autrey: I suppose at that time the war had not become the dirty little war that everybody talks about. There was a tremendous amount of patriotism. Most everyone that I know wanted to do their thing, they wanted to participate. It was good for the country. It was good yadah, yadah, yadah. When I got orders to join a unit that was being activated to go to Vietnam, I was ecstatic. I was. I just couldn't wait, couldn't wait. I don't believe I ever experienced a moment of fear thinking I was going. We did a tremendous amount of training while we were at Fort Devens, Massachusetts. Almost all of our young folks really wanted to do it. If you will recall back then, the draft was still in effect. We had RA [Regular Army] and US, RA being the volunteers, and US being the draftees. Sure we had some of those guys who expressed some concern about family yadah, yadah and didn't want to go, but we only had two or three that made any "order, actions filed, not going." We had really good lieutenants; we had a really good warrant officer. We had good NCOs, and a phenomenal amount of good troop mostly young, really, really young kids, aged 18.

Killblane: What was the name of your company commander, do you remember?

Autrey: Edwards, Dennis L. Edwards.

Killblane: How was he?

Autrey: He was Transportation, but he had been detailed Infantry. He came to us, I believe, from... it seems like Germany, to assume command of our company. He was not there for that long. He came a bit later.

Killblane: When you lined up in a convoy what kind of vehicle did you have?

Autrey: One truck, M151.

Killblane: Armed with what?

Autrey: M60 machine gun.

Killblane: What were your duties on the convoy?

Autrey: Starting with the assembly area: make sure that we had everybody there, make sure that we had all the right trucks, make sure all the trucks were ready to go, make sure the kids did

what was expected of them to get them up there, call in the checkpoints that could be called in (oftentimes we were out of radio range), get them to the sites, get them unloaded, arrange for any MHE, chase people down... that sort of stuff... keep them out of villages, ensure that the trucks were ready to go on the way back, that everybody had ammunition, that sort of stuff... and getting them back to base safe.

Killblane: What was your place in the convoy when they were rolling out?

Autrey: I sat on the side watching everybody go out, and then I'd go up and down the convoy.

Killblane: Oh, okay. So, you'd run up and down.

Autrey: And if there were some actions that I had to do. If I ever saw a black puff of smoke, I knew there was a problem. So I'd go up there. If I saw them blowing around a curve, then they bunched up, and I ran up there and made them spread out. I'd park on the side of the road and watch them go by. Later on in life I learned about a whole lot of mines and that I'm lucky to be here.

Killblane: You talked about bunching up. When you rolled out, did you roll out as a company of just 5-tons [trucks] with cargo or was it mixed 5-ton and tractors and trailers?

Autrey: Seldom did we have tractors and trailers. Sometimes. Mostly when we got the tractors and trailers they were 5,000 gallon tankers that would accompany us. Some quartermaster unit would accompany us to Qui Nhon.

Killblane: When you ran, did you just run the 5-ton cargo?

Autrey: Duce-and-a-halves [2 ½-ton] and 5-tons. In our battalion we had duce-and-a-halves. On that website, ATV...

Killblane: Yeah, ATAV [Army Transportation Association Vietnam]?

Autrey: If you look at that... can you pull that up? You can see what our battalion got. I think the 27th Battalion was in Shrang. Rock Valley had others. We had some [duce-and-a-halves] because there was always a big stink about having to take the sideboards off with the fork lifts instead of by hand.

Killblane: You didn't have problems of trucks slowing down to a crawl going out the passes?

Autrey: Yeah we did.

Killblane: Well, how did you keep them from bunching up at that time?

Autrey: You really can't sometimes. Some trucks would just go faster than others based on load. Some old trucks are just worn out. Duce-and-a-halves don't have the power that a 5-ton has. They were all mixed up like that. If you put the duce-and-a-halves in the back you would run off

and leave them. If you put them in the front then they slowed everybody down. Tractor-trailers were slow, so you kind of kept them mixed so everybody stayed about the same. And oftentimes it was one big convoy. It wasn't march units and serials. It was one big convoy. You might have two command and control vehicles, maybe two command and control vehicles, might only have one.

Killblane: Was the convoy commander normally a company commander?

Autrey: Second Lieutenant.

Killblane: You talked about calling in checkpoints. What were checkpoints up and down those roads? Could you explain those to me? Why were you calling in checkpoints?

Autrey: So they know where we are. Let me see if I can remember. One checkpoint was right at the base... what's the name of the pass before you get to the bottom of the hill there? Oftentimes we had to stop at Ah Khe. There was a military police patrol there and we'd call there. It seems like there was another one at the top of Mang Yang Pass. For the most part we were out of radio range with our battalion and in radio range with somebody else. It seems like there were three or four.

Killblane: So, who'd you call in to?

Autrey: To the battalion.

Killblane: But if you were out of range to the battalion how did you call in?

Autrey: We didn't call anybody if we were out of range. It seems to me like later on... I really can't remember if we got radio relay set up.

Killblane: You went over with brand new trucks. Tell me about your OR [Operational Readiness] rate and how that changed.

Autrey: It worked absolutely super. There was always a huge push to get the trucks out, so lots of times the trucks that rolled in at nighttime that had something wrong with them, the mechanics would work at nighttime to get them ready to roll out the next day. So our availability rate or OR rate was always high. It had to be high. When we had trucks that were down for direct support level maintenance, and we had to get direct support level maintenance the next day, there was a high priority to get this stuff out. "Get this stuff out." In terms of the support we got from our battalions, what we got from our direct support maintenance, where we were, as far as I'm concerned, was great.

Killblane: So, when you said a high OR rate, percentage-wise, about how many of your trucks ran?

Autrey: Seventy five percent.

Killblane: Seventy five percent is considered high?

Autrey: Back then that was considered high. I think we only had to have seventy five percent. I think now it's ninety. It may have been higher than that because they were brand new trucks. I would say that toward the end we never got lower than sixty.

Killblane: Tell me about the first ambush.

Autrey: September, 1967. Mang Yang Pass. Convoy returning from Pleiku got the holy be-Jesus shot up. It was a huge mess. That was a huge eye-opener for all of us. Up until that point it was just kind of sporadic rifle fire. From then on it seems like everybody was just much more aware of what could happen. People stayed in uniform. "Better get the steel pot on, flak jacket on and zipped and snapped." It seemed like weapons were cleaned a little bit better. People wouldn't piss by their weapons and yadah, yadah, yadah. I think it caused the unit cohesion to be even tighter. "Look, this could happen to us." Up until that time we got to feeling secure and nothing happened, nothing happened, nothing happened. I think that's where we made a mistake, let our guard down, let our guard down, let our guard down. When I think back now it kinda feels like a Sunday ride because I don't remember the fear. It was an eye-opener. It's a shame that it cost a lot of people life like that, but it was an eye-opener.

Killblane: Were you involved in that ambush?

Autrey: No.

Killblane: So you heard about it?

Autrey: Oh yeah. I think the lieutenant's name at the time was Steele. It seemed like Jim Steele. It was his convoy.

Killblane: When you got in-country, was there any kind of orientation about ambush procedures, and how did it change after that ambush?

Autrey: I don't recall if there was any. I don't recall. We had conducted quite a bit of ambush training while we were at Fort Devens, Massachusetts. Looking back at some of the stuff that we did then, we shouldn't have done, but that at that time it was accepted.

Killblane: Give me an example.

Autrey: Stop when you didn't have to. Stop, shoot back instead of running through it. But when you stop you're a very easy target. Oftentimes our drivers didn't have assistant drivers, that is, one guy in the truck. That is, one guy in the truck that can't drive and shoot back. That's very, very critical. I would never encourage anybody to take a convoy out with only one driver per truck. That's almost suicidal. But, hindsight is 100% accurate.

Killblane: Did you announce, "Contact, contact, contact." When ambushed?

Autrey: That must have happened after I left. I don't remember those words. I heard that out of our mouth, I never heard that out of anybody in the corps.

Killblane: So what kind of ambush procedures did you guys develop, or SOPs [Standard Operating Procedures]?

Autrey: Our guys were always told to shoot if something happened, speed up, get out of the area as quickly as you can. I don't think that the flashing of lights came until later on, and I can't remember when.

Killblane: What does that refer to?

Autrey: Make the guy in front of you speed up because you can't hear. We had used horn signals. Sound the horn on the truck to alert the truck driver to speed up. That's just not doable in that situation. The trucks make too much noise. The engines were rattling the truck, the rattling of the cargo, and that sort of stuff. Also the anxiety level. And, when for the most part you only had one driver in the truck, there's not much that guy can do except just drive real fast. We built gun trucks with sandbags before we left Qui Nhon. That was firepower. We had Gun trucks, usually in the middle of a convoy, sometimes in the back of the convoy depending on how big it was. That was much easier than before we had to turn around and come back. All of the quarter-tons had machine guns on them. It's real easy to go in or to move around in through a convoy with quarter-tons because they have much more acceleration than the 5-tons do. So, the ambush procedures back then, rudimentary as they might have been, were get the gun truck up there where they could shoot the quarter-ton. Not all the quarter-tons had lieutenants on them. Sometimes they had sergeants. That's what we did.

Killblane: How soon was it after that first ambush that you started using gun trucks?

Autrey: It had to be right after; I don't remember gun trucks before that. I only remember gun trucks after that, and they had sand bags. I don't remember 50-calibers until later on. I remember the M60 machine guns. Later on they had the armor plating and then the .50 calibers. Only one time did I ever see the minigun. Remember, I was there pretty early on.

Killblane: When you mentioned M60s you were just talking about the ring mount version?

Autrey: We started putting the pedestal in. I even saw one pedestal mount made out of 2x4s and the base of it was like you nail boards to hold up a Christmas tree. It was like that and a piece of inner tube held the machine gun in position. They'd drill a hole down the middle of it and put that thing down in there, and put an inner tube over it and held it in place with two nails, and it worked. Later on I thought it was pretty clever because the nails tend to pull out, but they put wire around it, and it looked like the wire came from around the C-ration boxes. Necessity was the mother of invention, I guess. There was something else that we had, and I don't know when it came about; I don't know who started it. We had an antidecapitator on some of our trucks. Those were the big metal rods that went up in the trucks. Have you ever seen them? I have some slides of them. It seems to me like they were there before we got there. I don't know.

Killblane: What were they used for?

Autrey: So if wire is across the road, if it gets dark, or rainy, or dusty or something.

Killblane: It's an old trick the Germans used to use. So the VC did that, too?

Autrey: Yes. Another huge error that we made, huge error that we made, we did not cause the drivers to take off the cab canvas and lower the windshields. Drivers often drove with the windshields in place, the cab canvas in place and the windows rolled up in inclement weather. We were very shortsighted on that. If you think about how difficult it is to move around inside the 5-ton truck, and if you have two people inside the 5-ton truck, you cannot maneuver an M16 around into position to fire in a 5-ton truck with the cab canvas in place. One day I'll get a dummy M16 and I'll show you what I'm talking about. Was that [lowering the windshield] the right thing to do? Yes, again in hindsight, because you had goggles and you could protect the drivers. I'm an advocate now. We have the best equipment in the world. You can get over a bad cold, you can get over being wet, but you can't get over being dead. Not the drivers, the leadership. That's why we stress that in class.

Killblane: So what were the problems with using sandbags to armor the vehicles initially?

Autrey: There were awful heavy. Two or three things. One, the command looks at it this way: if you had a 5-ton that's a gun truck that's taking 5 tons of cargo out of it. Two, sandbags are awful heavy and they rot, especially there, and they get wet and they get really, really heavy. You have to build them high enough; if you build them up high enough then it's additional weight. You have to have two interlocking layers of sandbags on the floor of the truck in the back where the guns are, and you have to have that on the floor in the cab of the truck with the driver, and if there's an assistant driver there, too. That was all that we had at first. I have some slides to show you. The other thing is when the sandbags are dry a phenomenal amount of dust will be coming out of them and the grit and grime and stuff would get in the guns, which could cause a malfunction. Grit and grime would get on the ammunition, which could cause a malfunction. Those were the only problems. Later on when they put the steel plating on there, I think that was good, but whoever designed the steel plating put the holes too low; you had to bend over to shoot out the holes. I'll show you sometime.

Is it a doable situation with sandbags on trucks? It very definitely is, but as a gun truck. It is sometimes the only firepower that you have with you other than the individual weapon of each individual soldier. When you have sandbags on the back of a 5-ton truck you have a portable fighting position. You have something that will protect those kids on the back of that truck that you're sending into harm's way. It will protect them from small arms fire. Is it the absolute answer? No, but it's better than nothing. And it does two or three things: one, it protects everybody, makes them think these guys are doing something for them, and you are doing something for them. And at that date and time that's all that we could do for them. So, I am a big advocate, big advocate, for gun trucks in the transportation company.

Again, in hindsight, if I look back now, as I have over the years, I can see a whole lot of other errors that we made where if we were qualified we could have done things as an example.

The headquarters element in the maintenance section that was in the rear with a maintenance truck, a couple of fuel trucks, a wrecker truck, a supply truck, a mess truck and all kinds of trucks sitting around doing nothing that didn't go on the road. If they could have combined those runs they had to make for rations, and for water, and for parts, and for supplies, and all that with one truck, they could have done it. That could have freed up some administrative trucks. Either made them into gun trucks, or if they only had duce-and-a-halves, put them in and hauled two and a half tons, and taken a 5-ton and made that a gun truck. Why did I say make a duce-and-a-half a supply truck to carry cargo and not a 5-ton, and a 5-ton into a gun truck? A 5-ton has power steering and a turbo charged engine. A duce-and-a-half is much more difficult to maneuver than a 5-ton, and because of the weight of the sandbags. The 5-ton can carry it. I love the gun truck; I love the gun truck. Some errors were made back then. Oftentimes the convoy commander, whoever that was, would say, "Send the gun truck into the kill zone." That's the wrong thing. You can stand off from the kill zone and have effective fire on the kill zone if you have line of sight. So you do not have to go in to the kill zone. When you consider the range of the 50 cal[liber machine gun] and the range of the M60 machine gun, and if you look at the history files, some of the synopses of the actions, you can see where they say that they sent the gun truck into the kill zone.

Killblane: So, that's where they got messed up. Do you remember who put the first armored plating on a gun truck.

Autrey: No.

Killblane: Okay. When did your company build a gun truck, and could you tell me about that? What was the name of it, how'd you crew it?

Autrey: We didn't have a name; we just got a lot of sandbags. I can only remember the name of one guy. We had two really good soldiers that came in the Army together. One was Gary McCutchen; the other was William Brandon, and they were from Cicero, Illinois. Brandon loved to be on the gun truck. You'd just about have to make him get off the gun truck. That's where he wanted to be; he wanted to shoot. But, ours was just regular old 5-tons with sandbags and framing to hold them up. I don't recall seeing the names on them until I came to the United States. I don't think I ever saw one. If I did, I just don't recall.

Killblane: While you were at Shrang Valley before you moved north, how many ambushes did you get involved in?

Autrey: I don't think I was involved in any reportable ambushes. I can think of two right now that really stick in my head that were reported when we got in. One was somewhere near a Bailey bridge^{1[1][1]} that had replaced an old Vietnamese bridge that was broke or blown up or something. One day in the vicinity of the bridge, I don't remember if the bridge was before Mang Yang Pass, between Mang Yang Pass and Pleiku, or if it was between Mang Yang Pass and Ah Khe, I just don't remember. We got a tremendous amount of small arms fire for just

^{1[1][1]} a Bailey bridge is an engineer bridge.

thirty or forty seconds it seemed like, just a bunch of it. Some trucks took some hits and that was all. As I recall the beds got shot up. Most of the time we got hit. We got hit on the return trip. And we'd get a round through the tailgate and two or three rounds through the bed, maybe one through the hood, and I think one time we actually had a tire shot out. I think we actually had a tire go flat, and later on we had to stop and change it. Then on a trip to Duc Pho, Task Force McDonald, we came around a hill; we got a tremendous amount of small arms fire. I was far enough back that I didn't hear it, but it was reported to me. Apparently we had two radio vehicles that day, and we were taking fire and taking fire, and they sped up and by the time I got there it was over. So, it could have been a kilometer in front of me, I don't recall. We didn't report it. This wouldn't be construed, I don't think, as an ambush. I think I told you, I don't remember where we were going then.

I used to call the place "Undertaker Alley," and I still call it that. We had a truck that had nothing on it but apples. We were required to put a tarp over it to keep the dirt off it. It seems like we were on [Highway] 19, it seems like we were started up to Phu Cat, and there was a big burst of gun fire. It just shot up the bed of that truck and it smelled like apples for a while. Whoever it was that shot up the truck didn't know what it was. For volume of fire, and I could be mistaken on what it was. It might not even be in that timeframe, but it was not between Ah Khe and Pleiku, the one I told you when we came up that hill. It could have been when we were at Qui Nhon. That's the only real volume of fire that I can remember. The guys used to be shot at a lot at nighttime when they were loading. Sometimes when we left Qui Nhon we had to drive really, really fast, even in the jeep when we were down there checking on your guys, because we got shot at at that time of day.

Killblane: When you said leaving at night at Qui Nhon?

Autrey: Yeah, loading. Nighttime we'd go into Qui Nhon for loading at nighttime.

Killblane: Oh, that's right, where the depots were.

Autrey: On the way back to Shrang Valley we got shot at, but you can't call those ambushes. We did get stopped one night. The military police kids came down and stopped us and said the Infantry had flushed out some people up there and there was a skirmish going on, and we could see the tracer rounds, but it didn't involve us.

Killblane: When did you get instructions to move north to set up operations there, and where did you go?

Autrey: It seems like it was October, 1967. We went to Chu Lai. I think Chu Lai was primarily a Marine base. There was an airstrip up there, and a lot of [F-4] Phantoms took off from there. It had been there for a while. I think hooches were built there. It was a big compound. There was a little port there. I think Roger Staubach was there, and some of our guys got to see Roger Staubach.

Killblane: Was he that big of a celebrity even then in the Navy?

Autrey: Everybody knew he was a Heissman Trophy Winner. Even I knew that. Everybody knew he was going to go to the Dallas Cowboys. It was a big deal. The word spread like wildfire that Roger Staubach was going to be there. Also, while we were at Chu Lai we got to see the guy that comes over to entertain?

Killblane: Bob Hope?

Autrey: Bob Hope. They had a little amphitheater there, and Bob Hope came there so we saw Bob Hope. And, we were there till sometime shortly after Christmas. And, I remember it was really, really raining. But, I can't remember the number of the headquarters that we worked for there. Another lieutenant joined our unit while we were there. His name is Henderson. It might have been Jim Henderson. I just remember that it was Henderson. And there was Don Hall and me. When we left Qui Nhon, we left a platoon behind with Jerry Todd. So, when we got up to Chu Lai we had two platoons and maintenance and mess.

Killblane: So, it was just your company that went north, or did the rest of the battalion go up?

Autrey: No, we were the only ones that I recall.

Killblane: So, what was your mission out of Chu Lai?

Autrey: We hauled everything. We hauled beans, and bullets, and rice.

Killblane: For who? To where?

Autrey: One time we went back to Qui Nhon. I don't remember why we went to Qui Nhon. We went to Duc Pho. That's back down south. We went to a lot of artillery sites.

Killblane: So you were delivering straight to the firebases.

Autrey: No, we didn't do that. But, I think we did more of that when we went up to Camp Evans because of the names I remember, LZ Jane. We went back to that one village where we stopped and we had to go real fast, and the rocket went underneath the 5-ton. That happened when we were at Chu Lai, when we were going north somewhere, but I don't remember.

Killblane: Tell me about the incident again.

Autrey: It was just a little bit up from Chu Lai, some hours from Chu Lai. I remember it had like a little rock, brick, concrete wall around what was a schoolyard. We had our drivers stop at this community of little buildings, palm trees and such and there was a big, long stretch through there. And it seems like it was a couple of miles as I recall of rice patties, just flat. We were always told that there was a lot of gunfire from around there. So what we would do is have our drivers get in the truck, back up a little bit, and get going as fast as they could and zoom through there, alright. And we'd get all of our vehicles through. This particular day the last vehicle was a 5,000-gallon tanker. So we back him down the road so he could get going about as fast as a 5,000-gallon tanker could go. My drivers name was Harrelson or maybe Allen Luke, but I don't

remember who the machine gunner was that day. I think it might have been Homesley. When this 5,000-gallon tanker got to going I got to look at it. We were the last ones, so I told my driver to tuck up behind that 5,000-gallon tanker. He was going pretty good, and then you could see the rocket fire. It went underneath the 5,000-gallon tanker out in the field and exploded. It sprayed mud all over us. It was not funny right then but we laughed because it covered up our high anxiety and all.

Killblane: Well, how did you guys feel when you saw that rocket flying across because it's not that fast?

Autrey: You can see it; you can actually see it. I tell people that I saw a rocket; they say, "um hum." You can see it. My heart stopped; I think I held my breath. It's like the whole world stopped except that rocket. It's like that was the only thing moving. I don't know if there was any sound or anything. It's just that I could see it and I just watched. Then when it exploded, when we got all that little spurry stuff over us, that was funny because we lived through it.

Killblane: What did your driver do after that?

Autrey: He was acting crazy.

Killblane: Didn't they also get very excited?

Autrey: Oh yeah, they got real excited. When you get over to the other side there it's just an adrenaline rush. But, they're kind of used to that because we get shot at a lot, and I don't mean to say that you ever get used to getting shot at, it's just you get tired of getting shot at. I wish I could tell you the name of the town. Maybe if I could find a map, a military map, with the detail I could look at it and tell you.

Killblane: Where were you at when Tet broke out?

Autrey: We were with the 1st Cav[alry] Air Mobile at Camp Evans, north of the Hue Phu Bai line, south Quang Tri.

Killblane: Do you remember when you moved up there?

Autrey: Sometime after Christmas because we had Christmas dinner at Chu Lai because I volunteered my platoon to drive over Christmas Day. We had to move something for somebody and I volunteered to go out, and I remember the mess sergeant kept us. We actually had turkey; I had a big drumstick. So, it was after Christmas, and we moved with the Cav.

Killblane: Do you remember why they moved you guys north? What was going on?

Autrey: If I recall insufficient truck transportation in 1st Cav, and we were to be supporting them.

Killblane: Okay, the 1st Cav has just moved north then, because that's Navy and Marine Corps territory up there and that's I-core area up there.

Autrey: When we got to Camp Evans, there were a lot of folks there. There was artillery there; the [Montan]Yards were already there. As I recall, this could be in error, there had been some Marines there and when they left the Cav moved in behind them because it was pretty sprawling contact. I remember some of the things we had to do. At nighttime we used our trucks as revetments around their helicopters. So when we weren't moving we would park around helicopters. We did some missions all into different sites up there and then the bridges got cut, and the rain started. So for a while we didn't go anywhere. The roads were blown up. So we sat for awhile and that's disconcerting. Then they got it open again and I remember the C130s used to drop stuff. Maybe not all C130s, maybe some C123s. But, across the highway there was a big open area and they'd go out and secure it and then when the fog and clouds would lift the C130s would come in and drop supplies, mostly gasoline.

Then sometime after that, I didn't see it, but I remember they had a Major named Weeks that was in the helicopters. He told me about some of this stuff that went on there. The assault of Hue Phu Bai by the Air Cav of all the troops, I guess. They had guys that had been caught, and he told me about it. I saw Hue Phu Bai way before that when we were taking him across the Perfume River (it was called the Perfume River because of the Water Hydrangeas, you know, the smell). It [Hue Phu Bai] was a pretty picturesque city, it was nice. Then I saw Hue Phu Bai later and it was just rubble and burned. It was pretty ugly. Then sometime later we moved to Dong Ha and that's when the 57th Battalion came up and they were our headquarters at Dong Ha.

Killblane: Who did you bring with you?

Autrey: There was another company up there but I'm not able to remember, but I think there were only two of us there.

Killblane: 5-tons or tractor/trailers?

Autrey: Let me think. I don't remember tractor/trailers, 5-ton and duce-and-a-half. I simply don't know. I can picture their living area because they got a rocket round in it. Dong Ha had a lot of Marines. It had a river there. It had a big Class V port. That's where we hauled ammo, from a little water port area on Qua Viet River. I guess that was the name of it. We called it Qua Viet River.

We hauled a lot of places. We hauled to some places at Quang Tri and, I guess, LZ Jane. I don't know why I remember that, that name sticks in my head more than anything. I think I told you there were several occasions where we unloaded 105-ammunition directly off the back of the truck right where the ammunition tarp was. My guys would help them open boxes, take the rounds out of them things and lay them on the tarps while the 105 Howitzers were firing. I think that must be why I think that was LZ Jane.

There was another LZ that we hauled to close to Quang Tri. I don't remember the name of it but a friend of mine was there. We had been enlisted guys together and he was a warrant

officer; I didn't even know he was in country. We had been enlisted in Germany. We were in a mining incident, and I heard someone yell, "Gene Autrey, you son of a bitch." The only name I can remember is Bowen. I don't remember, I seems like it was Kenneth Bowen. I could be in error there, but he was a warrant officer. I turned around because I've been called a lot of names, but I wouldn't let the drivers talk to me like that. I turned around and there was that big ol' smiley face. He said, "You're going to have to come over and visit me sometime," and I said, "Where are you?" He told me, "You've been over there before," I just didn't know he was there. So we went back over there a couple of times. I did get to see him. I even spent the night over there just to chit-chat.

When we were at Camp Evans, several times we had to remain overnight. Sometimes when we were at Chu Lai we had to remain overnight, but I don't remember. There was a period of time when we were at Chu Lai that I didn't go out on the convoy; I was at the hospital. I got a bit of dysentery, and I was in the hospital for quite a while. I can't remember the dates much. But it was just a long time because I lost a tremendous amount of weight. Then when I came back out I was careful for a couple of days before I could go out again. So that was some of the time that I missed on the convoy, which made it even more difficult on the other guy. He had to go all the time. His name was Donald Hall and he was from Ohio.

Anyway, when we went up to Dong Ha we hauled to the 1st Cav, and I guess the furthest west that I even went was where the bridge was blown out just before Khe Sahn. I don't remember the name of the place, but we delivered a lot of stuff to an area called Ca Lu. A lot of Cav was there. Another name that sticks in my head is Camp Carol and another one that sticks in my head is the Rock Pile. And, it seems like those are more of the places that we delivered supplies. Mostly what we delivered was ammunition, just about all the unit's ammunition, food, sometimes barrier materials, and whatever. Not us, but somebody that we were with hauled 175mm gun barrels so there had to be tractor and trailers. I do know at one time, because 175mm gun barrels didn't have a lot of life. They were used in some of the built bunkers, liked I talked about, but I can't tell you what it was. I thought that was anything that you couldn't send back to the United States. So that's what they were using them for. So there were tractor and trailers up there.

Anyway, while we were at Dong Ha the ammunition dump got hit. There was a big war going on over there in a place called Khe Sahn, which you know about. There were a lot of birds coming in all the time, a lot of activity. If I'm not mistaken that's when our battalion commander got hit. He was the 57th Battalion Commander. His name escapes me right now. He was on his way out to the Cav site, and apparently as they were going, a mortar round, grenade or something struck close by and he got quite a bit of shrapnel in his leg and his back.

Then, it seems to me like around April, we moved from Dong Ha with our battalion to Wunder Beach. I think it was called Wunder Beach because the Colonel who set up this beach was named Wunder, and I remember a sign there that said, "Sunder's Wonders." So, maybe it was Colonel Sunder instead of Colonel Wunder, but anyway it was called Wonder Beach. It seems like it was way off the road out to this little village and they had graded a road out there and they put soil binder on there. I think the name of the soil binder was Peniprime, to help keep

down the dust. Remember I told you the dust and dirt was a problem all the time. There was also a tremendous amount of gunfire through there all the time.

Killblane: Around the beach?

Autrey: No. Back out in the sand dunes and village. Anytime we left the beach and went out and got on the road, there was gunfire. I think the little city there where we came out through was called Hai Laing. I have to look it up. It's been too long, but it was south of Quang Tri. When we went toward Quang Tri we saw the railroad and the highway, and that part of it was paved. There was an area right through there that was really good. There was a river, and the railroad headed north was on the right hand side, the highway bridge on the left hand side. It was a few miles to Quang Tri from Wunder Beach. It seems to me like it was about an hour maybe an hour and a half by convoy. The biggest thing that I remember about that area was once we got out in the sand dunes, once we got on the highway, we got shot at all the time, sporadic rifle fire mostly. But, after we passed the little bit of jetty cliff, Hai Laing or whatever the name of that was, out to the beach, that was quite a way through the sand dunes. There were lots and lots and lots of mines. The mine sweeping team was out there all the time. You had to cross these two little creeks out there that had little bitty pontoon bridges.

When the Cav was called south and the 101st Airborne came up there, we received a lot of gunfire, a lot of gunfire, and encountered lots and lots of mines. There was a cemetery there that some of the guys told me the 101st had found where they were storing ammunition and stuff inside of the cemetery vault. But, we got a lot of gunfire out there, and that was the last big time that I was shot at while I was there. That was not very many days before I came home.

We were coming back in and there were two more deaths. It was getting pretty late I don't know how late it was. We saw what looked like a Marine helicopter. He was flying over. He was coming from south to north, and I thought it awful strange that he had the doors shut on it. I don't think I had ever seen a helicopter with the doors shut on it. From the left, the north side of the road, you could see the tail of flame. It was a rocket, and there was a huge explosion. Then a tremendous amount of gunfire started over there on the left hand side. We were in a place where they couldn't shoot us. We were below the sand dunes, so we stopped, because we could see gunfire across the road over there. And, if I'm not mistaken, that day we only had about five or six trucks. I still don't remember it being a big deal. We received a tremendous amount of gunfire so I called in, that's what I told you they took that kid and took him in. Anyway, we called in and reported, but somebody else had reported it. Then here came the helicopters from Cav. Maybe it was the 101st Airborne, I don't know, but here came the helicopters. Man, there was a tremendous war going on. When those helicopters arrived, there was other gunfire. It could have been Naval gunfire, I don't know, but a tremendous amount of explosions out there. I don't know what it was. We loaded our guys and hauled it to the compound.

Killblane: Which compound?

Autrey: Wunder Beach. When we were at Dong Ha, and when we were at Camp Evans, and when we were at Wunder Beach we received lots and lots of rocket fire at nighttime and mortar fire at nighttime, and that was an all-the-time occurrence. It was something you just had to live

with. The number of ambushes I remember our company being involved in was six. I don't know why I remember that number. It seems to me that Jerry Todd got involved with two. It's been so long ago, but what they defined as an ambush, I now think that sometimes we really didn't recognize that it was an ambush because the road wasn't blocked off. When the gunfire started our guys just sped up and shot back the best they could. I've even seen kids to where they carried their weapon across like this.

Killblane: Across their elbow.

Autrey: And it was just, “Bang, bang, bang, bang” and just go as fast as they could. One of the lessons learned is if you ever look at the 5-ton trucks, look behind to see the little things that the M16s fit into. What you won't see written in the lessons learned about that day in September when that big ambush happened is a lot of those weapons were still in there where those kids had been killed. He can't take his hands off the steering wheel. What he'll do to get his weapon is take his foot off the accelerator hold it over the steering wheel so he goes straight away, and try to get it out but it won't come out because it's spring loaded. I think some of those kids died before the truck ever stopped. That's my opinion. As I say, lessons learned is not always lessons learned. They're the lessons that are sanitized and published. Yeah, but they help some men. True, I'm an old guy now and a lot of my memory has faded, but some of that stuff is vivid. And, some of the stuff that I read about that happened over there is not how I remember it. We operated on some roads that were just barely tracks, just barely, barely, barely. They looked like cow tracks almost.

Killblane: That's where, up north?

Autrey: Yeah, Qui Nhon, Pleiku. There was something when it rained that you had to be very careful because you'd slide off of it. You know, the engineers would just heap up the gravel and the rocks and stuff and that red clay-like stuff; it's nasty. And, when it rained it got slippery. When we were up north a lot of the road was just patchwork asphalt. It had been paved before, but it had had no maintenance on it in a long time. You know how the asphalt roads were.

There were bridges that were blown. There was one up north where we came off of what had been the paved road. They had piled the gravel up between the road bed and the railroad bed then put boards down on the railroads so we could cross the railroad trestle. They put more gravel back over to the other side, so we drove the railroad trestle across the river. If I'm not mistaken it was just north of Camp Evans, and I think the bridge was there before the Tet Offensive. After the Tet Offensive it was gone. That's one reason we couldn't go anywhere because all the bridges were blown. There was one concrete bridge south of Evans between us and Hue Phu Bai that was a substantial concrete bridge. It was blown. There was one other place, and I don't remember where, the bridge was blown. We had to get down off the road and go through the creek and back up on the other side. The times we had to cross that, it seems like there was something there to help the guys out. I think one time I remember seeing the wrecker there, and another time I think I remember seeing the track there like an APC.

Now you asked me if I ever saw a tank at a bridge. Yes. I think maybe three times. That one there, where we had to do the fording, it wasn't very deep. It came up to the cabin. You couldn't get out until the end of the dock. It didn't get into the air filter.

I have to say it was somewhere between Hue, Phu Bai and Camp Evans where we were stopped. Someone told us there was some stuff going on up the road that we didn't need to be involved in. Alright. So we waited awhile and we could hear it. There were quite a few trees there, so we really couldn't see what was going on or hear what was going on. Then in a little while there was an arch we could pass down, and we left. As we approached the bridge there was a tank there. We could see other tracked vehicles. There seems to me like they had a small 2-barrel. I don't remember a big long barrel. No, it wasn't what we'd call a tank, what was it called a Duster, two 40-Millimeters. That's the only time I can ever remember seeing tanks by the bridge.

Killblane: Going back to Chu Lai. I know at Qui Nhon it was a port; it had a long pier and the LST beach. Dong Ha was a drop off point at the end of the river. What was at Chu Lai?

Autrey: An LST beach.

Killblane: Tell me about how the stress level changed for drivers and for yourself throughout the war.

Autrey: When you leave your compound, you actually feel your stomach tighten up; you feel the muscles in your neck tighten up. It feels like the muscles around your eyeballs tighten up.

Killblane: That's when you first got there?

Autrey: When you first start going out on the convoy. You can hear it in the speech of your kids, the nervousness; you can feel it in your speech. You can taste it in your dry mouth; you know, the nervousness, the sweaty palms. But after awhile it becomes a part of you. You're not even aware of it anymore until you come in at nighttime. When you get back to your compound, not somebody else's compound, but when you come back to your compound it's like somebody got out of your lap. It's like a weight gets off of you.

There's something about your compound that is safe, that you know your compound better than you know the other ones. So you feel safer in your own compound. I'm talking about like when we were at the 54th Battalion out in Shrang Valley, when we were at Chu Lai, those places. When you stay overnight in somebody else's like we had to stay at that forward base. They had an 8-inch artillery unit there, and, "Boom, boom, boom," all night. You couldn't sleep; you do not sleep. You lay under the covers thinking about that, right.

I have to use the word, giddiness. Every morning when you're getting up, everybody's a little bit nervous, and they're chit-chatty, and they're walking around, you know they are going through the stages that you are, but they got to be doing something. Seldom do you ever see them sit in the truck and do nothing. If there is then something's wrong with it. They probably need some help. When something happens you can't let your kids sit around and think about it,

you've got to keep them busy. It's similar to riding a bicycle, or riding a horse. You get thrown off a horse; you've got to get right back up. You fall off a bicycle; you get back up. You got to get them past the hurt and hurting. Some manifest stress in different ways. Some guys don't want to lie down and go to sleep at nighttime because they dream. Some guys chit-chat, some guys sit around and talk about home. They all talk about their moms, they all talk about their girlfriends; "Here, let me help with this. Here, let me help you with that. I'll do that." And a lot of them almost work themselves into a frenzy, so when they do lie down they just die.

When the stress levels get high, real high, some of them just explode. It's not directed toward you, it's just they're venting. That sounds kind of strange, that truck drivers are like that because what do they do? All they do, they just drive a truck. But they drive a truck out there where there are not a lot of other people. They know that nobody's coming to help them; there's just not enough time. So, there's a phenomenal amount of stress that builds up. You hear it sometimes when you ask them to do something and they explode, "I'm sick of doing this, yada, yada, yada." You can imagine that. And it comes out, if you leave them alone four or five minutes. They'll come back and then they say, "I didn't mean to say that, I'm just sick of this. You know, I have a wife and kid waiting for me." You know, that sort of stuff. Somebody will get some beer, and they get to drink a beer. They get to take a bath with fresh water instead of having to go down to the ocean and wash off with salt water.

Besides that Bob Hope Show, one day we brought in some Red Cross girls, I think they were called Donut Dollies. They came down and played cards with the guys. They would break out party favors, and they were good. It's good for the guys. It makes them think that somebody cares. When we were at Wunder Beach we got a little dance troop of Korean girls. They came in on a helicopter. They were there for only an hour or so. They'd sign things, you know, and my name is whatever, and they got to chit-chat. At that particular time we had some alcohol, so the guys got to sit down that night. The Navy used to fire the perimeter, so the Navy had already fired the perimeter before the helicopter came in so we felt it was safer that night. So the guys sat around having a beer between their bunkers, and they got their butts loaded. Korean girls, that's stress relief. Some of the guys went to church services: stress relief. They are closer with their God than others are. Some guys acted real tough, masculine. The thing that I found out that helped me more than anything was: stay busy, stay busy, stay busy. If you sit down reality catches up to you. If you don't stay busy then you think about other things going on or you get to thinking, "What's going to happen next?" And, there comes the time when you think, "Maybe I'll be dead." That too passes. As you get close then you're really anxious and the days get really, really long and just drag.

Killblane: About how far out do you get short-timers attitude?

Autrey: I can't tell you if any of my guys did. Because you really don't know when you're going.

Killblane: They didn't give you calendar date ahead of time?

Autrey: Yeah they did, but it was never accurate.

Killblane: Okay.

Autrey: This guy, "I'm going home on the 13th of July;" they ship him out on the 2nd of July. This guy, he's going to go home on the 23rd of June. You know, remember when I told you rotational hump? Then we had kids get hurt, killed, they'd go back to other places. So we weren't there long until our guys started leaving on rotation. The guys who go, almost all those guys got short-timers talk. You can't afford to have them all leave at one time. You might have two or three guys leave today and ten guys tomorrow.

They had a clipboard that had a short-timer's calendar marked off with squares. That's a big thing just to mark off another day. The huge thing, more than even a day off, letters from home. Another thing that helped me was to talk to my guys. The kids need somebody to talk to; they really need somebody to talk to. I used to cut my guys' hair, and they cut my hair. Boy was that payback. We helped to do maintenance. I used to help do scheduled services and things. I learned a lot. I had some CAT IIs, absolutely fantastic, and to motivate them sometimes I'd get them to show me. That makes you feel good when you can go, "Come here, let me show you what they did." It creates a team; it creates a family. Then we had one kid who couldn't take it anymore, a driver. So we had to take him off the road.

Killblane: You guys are coming back, you're not getting any sleep, so you don't have time to use drugs; you're too stressed out, and you don't have time to have problems, you're too busy. The depots were where most of the problems were.

Autrey: We weren't around that crap.

Killblane: Everybody had to pull their weight. Let me ask you this: when did you leave? Do you remember when you left?

Autrey: The end of July, 1968.

Killblane: Okay, and how did you feel? You completed your year in Vietnam.

Autrey: My next-to-the-last-day in the battalion, my executive officer said to me, "Would you mind taking a convoy with you when you go to Quang Tri tomorrow?" I said, "No." And he said, "Alright, you go to Dang and get your orders, you go home. But if you'll take the convoy to Quang Tri, you can leave your flak vest and your flak stuff with the convoy sergeant." So, I said, "Okay." So we went up to Quang Tri. We went to Quang Tri to the airport there where we had to deliver some stuff. Then from there we went over to the airstrip. I gave him my stuff and I had him cut my travel orders and I went to Da Nang from there.

You asked me the other day where I left from, and I want to say Ton Son Nhut. That name sticks in my head. It might not have been, but I think it was called the 19th "REPO Depot" there, replacement depot. I think that was the name of the place that I left from. I got down there, and the next morning they woke me up and said, "Here you go. You're on your way out." I had drank too much the night before because I had ran into another buddy, and man, I had a

terrible headache. I got up and took a shower, and they said I needed to go somewhere to change my paisters into greenbacks. I got on a Braniff International jet.

I hadn't seen any air conditioning in a long time. That Braniff International jet was air-conditioned and I damn near froze. We stopped somewhere on the way back, Guam, Wake Islands, I don't know. It was just a little, bitty, tiny place, and they had a little, bitty snack bar about like our snack bar down there. They said, "We're going to be here only to refuel, so if you want to run in there..." It was like two or three o'clock in the morning. I went in there and got back on the aircraft and we flew to McChord Air Force Base, then I went over to the Seattle terminal and got a flight and we stopped in Tulsa. The next flight was in Houston, and I had called my dad, and he picked me up at the airport.

How did I feel? Good. All of my original guys were gone, I was the last one to leave, the last one to leave! Everybody left before me. So, all my original guys were gone. But, when you get so attached to people, even though you feel good about leaving, you feel guilty about leaving. And, you don't know how the other people are going to treat the new people. It's part of you.

I think I told you the best year of my life, the best year of my life was in Vietnam. The worst year of life was in Vietnam. People don't understand that. Let me explain it to you a little bit. War and all the little bits and pieces of war that you get involved in, or caught in, or participate in, get ugly. But, that it lends itself to the development of young soldiers in the military of the United States and the teamwork, and the squad work, and the platoon work, and the unit cohesion, and the love that you develop for your fellow man. What they are willing to give for their country is something that you can't put (I can't put) a word to, how much you care for those kids. You absolutely loved them on their good days, on their bad days, when they yell and scream; you just loved them. When you spend that many days of your life and that closeness with those kids, and you feel what they feel. You hear this expression, "I feel your pain?"^{2[2][2]} I don't think people really understand that, but it has real merit there. The family separation, the agony of seeing your guys get shot at or killed, or whatever, and Americans get shot up and killed and bodies laying on the side of the road, shooting at somebody and all that sort of stuff. It wasn't any company; it was my company. We had fantastic soldiers, good, good, good, kids. And even our refills that came in (our replacements that came in) were good kids. That is why I say it was the best year of my life. You really appreciate your fellow man when you participate in something like that. The worst year of my life because of all the death and destruction that is part of the stuff that you see.

I didn't see hate. My guys really didn't hate the Vietnamese or the Viet Cong or the NVA [North Vietnamese Army]. I think oftentimes they respected them both because they were damn good little soldiers. What they hated was what war stands for. I think a lot of them felt the same way I felt later on in life that as a soldier you are just a political piece. If someone's moving you around on a chess board then you're going off doing, if you want to call it that, the good and the evil for the people. So, the bad part is all the killing and all the hurt that takes place. The good

^{2[2][2]} President William Clinton's catch phrase.

part of it is that cohesion that you develop with your kids or with your peers or your subordinates. But I'd do it all over again if I were young.

I don't know what caused it. I think it developed a long time ago when I was an enlisted kid. I had a sergeant named James E. Thurman, when I was enlisted, then I had sergeant named Tommy D. Brown while I was enlisted. They taught me lots and lots and lots of stuff. One thing, after four years of federal service I had paved a way.

Yeah, it felt good to come home, but you still feel guilty. Then later on you had real bad guilt trip, and you come back and you know a whole lot of other people that you know didn't make it. You begin to question, "Why me? Why was I so lucky?" And, you feel guilty. The then the Vietnam Memorial was built, and that really ripped me for a while. I couldn't go there for a while. Then when I went up there it really made me cry, it really did. I went up there the second time, and it wasn't better. And I haven't been back since. I can't go back there. It did feel good to come home, it really did. But when you come home it's not the same, and it'll never be the same after that. It'll never be the same. Reds are redder, children's laughter is much more intense. Blue is bluer, cold is colder, warm is warmer. It's just life is so much better after that. It sounds crazy, but it was a fantastic experience. I would not recommend it for anybody.

Killblane: That's about all the questions I have. Is there anything you'd like to add?

Autrey: I hope that helps you out.

Killblane: Yes, it does.

Autrey: As I told you before we started this, it's as factual as I can remember. That's a long time, thirty-odd years ago. But, I probably wouldn't even have talked to you about it ten years ago. It's just not something I talked about. I told you I got started in teaching, and I never talked to anybody about anything. If I can help you anymore, let me know. If you could look up that ATAV or whatever that is you can see what was in 54th Trans Battalion when we were there. The name is wrong there where it says where we were located unless it happened to be the name of the little village that was close by, but I don't remember a village being close.

Killblane: Okay.

3[1][1] a Bailey bridge is an engineer bridge.

4[2][2] President William Clinton's catch phrase.
