

Interview with **Ellis Nichols**
Interview by: Richard Killblane
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Killblane: Would you tell me about how you entered the Army and went to Vietnam?

Nichols: I received a Draft Notice in the mail in December of 1967, telling me to report for a Physical Examination in St. Louis City, Missouri the following month. By January 28, 1968, I had received my first set of fatigues and a unique haircut at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri.

Killblane: Then you were a truck driver?

Nichols: No, I went from Fort Leonard Wood to Fort Bragg, North Carolina for Basic Training. The Army was slow getting me Orders (for AIT) and when they came, I was sent out to Fort Huachuca, Arizona. I was trained on the ¼ Ton Jeep, ¾-Ton pickup-type truck, 1 and 1/4 Ton pickup-type truck, and 2½-Ton Cargo Truck. I was there for 8 to 10 weeks, in May, June and through the middle of July of '68. In July of '68, I received my orders to Viet NAM. I went home to Ferguson, Missouri (where I started taking my Army supplied Malaria Pills) on Leave. In August of '68, I went to San Francisco heading for Viet NAM.

Killblane: How did you feel about getting drafted for Vietnam?

Nichols: It put a hold on "my agenda for life". My top priority was to finish college the Draft just put a hold on my college degree for two years. That's basically the way I looked at it.

Killblane: You were already in college?

Nichols: Yes, I had a year and a half of college in but ran out of money. So, I stayed out one semester and went back to work. By January 1968, I had earned enough money for another year (2 semesters), but lost my Student Deferment. The day before I was supposed to report to college on January 28th, 1968, I was at Fort Leonard Wood for the welcome to the U.S. Army orientation class. That hell lasted for three or four days.

Killblane: What school were you going to?

Nichols: Southeast Missouri State College in Cape Girardeau, Missouri.

Killblane: So you got to Vietnam in August of '68. What unit were you assigned to?

Nichols: I landed at Tan Son Nhut Air Force Base in South Viet NAM about the middle of August of '68. I was there for 2 or 3 days and eventually got orders to go up north someplace. The Air Force flew a bunch of us by C-130 up to Da Nang. I spent about a

week there. My orders were changed, again, and the Air Force flew a small group of us on a C-123, farther north to someplace called Dong Ha. Two of us got off the airplane at Dong Ha. The other guy's name was Kethcher and we were going to the same unit. We found out, our unit was down on Wonder Beach or Utah Beach. We started hitchhiking down Highway 1, when a couple of American Marines, I think, in a Jeep took us down to Hai Lang. When we got to Hai Lang, the Marines told us to stand there until a big truck came by and flag it down; it would take us out to Wonder Beach.

Killblane: What Company was it that you were assigned to?

Nichols: 572nd Transportation Company (The Gypsy Bandits).

Killblane: What is what you refer to the Hai Lang, what is that?

Nichols: Hai Lang is a village at the intersection of Highway 1, and "The Beach Road". Wonder Beach was east of Hai Lang village on South China Sea. "The Beach" was three or four miles, maybe five miles east of Hai Lang. Some of The Beach Road was once paved; part of it had been blown up. There were lots of holes, sections of it was dirt and there was a big sandpit.

Killblane: Where was that, the sandpit?

Nichols: "The Sand Pit" was about halfway between Hai Lang and the water. This section of The Beach Road, I think had been blown up and poorly repaired or just filled full of soft sand. This unbelievable sandpit was approximately 50 to 100 yards long and soft, plus the surrounding terrain was just as sandy. We would convoy out in the mornings, after the road had been mine-swept, the first truck approaching The Sand Pit would stop 50 yards before the end of the hard surface/paved section. The driver would shift his Transfer Case into Low Range, so the front wheels would pull along with the back wheels and attack The Sand Pit as fast as he could. Once he entered The Sand Pit he would have to start down shifting to keep the engine's rpms up. At the same time the vehicles' speed was decreasing. By time he got to the other side of The Sand Pit the Tractor was in 2nd or 1st Low Range Gear and trying to crawl out of The Sand Pit up on the other section of the hard surface road. The next waiting trucker was setting about 50 yards back and took his run at The Sand Pit. (I was taught how to split shift at Fort Huachuca in a duce-and-a-half). Most of us were driving 5-Ton Tractors, pulling a trailer about 30-feet long, hauling 10 to 15-Tons over rough roads and neighboring territory. Four or six of the drivers operated BIG KW's and they had no trouble in this area. It would take the convoys anywhere from half an hour to one hour to travel the first 5 miles out to Highway 1, (everyday, every week, every month), unless the Mine Sweepers missed a "plastic mine" or something else went wrong. That's where a sniper shot at me one afternoon going back to The Beach. The next day he shot my front driver's tire and it went flat in The Sand Pit. When you were empty you could drive through The Sand Pit without getting in the Transfer Case Lower gears. At Hai Lang, the convoy might split up with some trucks going south and the others going north. Our Gun Truck would always lead off The Beach. I believe we had a second Gun Truck,

which would have brought up the tail end of the convoy. Besides hauling ammo, building materials and other nonperishable supplies, we had single-axle trailers that were Refers [Refrigerated Containers] that hauled frozen foods, steaks, milk, and ice cream, as examples.

Killblane: Tell me about arriving at Wonder Beach and your reception.

Nichols: When we arrived at Wonder Beach, Kethcher and I were assigned a platoon and kept in a 20 ft. long troop tent, that had wooden (2 in. thick x 10 or 12 in. wide x 12 ft. or 14 ft. long) planks for the floor laying on the sand. There were a dozen and a half, new guys being held in the tent. For some reason they called us "CHERRY BOYS." We were told what platoon we were going to be driving for and set up house. We each had a cot and wooden footlocker, nightmares of Basic Training. Our troop tent had sandbags stacked about waist high around it for some protection. Our company had our own cooks. We had a hard stripe E6, Supervisor of Cooks, and a Spec. 6 Cook (who said, the rumor was, he didn't want to do paperwork or supervise, he just wanted to cook). He was the only Spec. 6 I've even seen outside of Medics. We had Spec. 5s and 4s, plus E3s Cooks, and they were great Cooks. At the Mess Hall everyone we saw greeted us and wanted to know who we were and where we were from. They would ask, "How was the World" and what was going on back in there? It seems like we were there for two or three days or four days and everything was going good. Maybe six days, it might have been 1st of September, close to my 21st birthday, when this unannounced rainstorm hit (or I might have been sleeping in Formation). Because it rained and the wind blew, the rain got worse and the wind got worse. The rain was blowing like I had never felt before. By the time this was over, I learned what it was like to live through a hurricane or typhoon. During Hurricane '68, we took sandbags off our protection walls and put them on the outside base of our canvas tent to keep it from blowing away. One night after it had been raining for 24 hours, 48 hours straight, I heard guys, who were laying in their cots after they woke up saying, "Oh no, I can't believe this" and other things. Someone had turned on our electric light and we were in knee-deep water. The bottom of the heavier guys canvas cots were soak and wet, plus their underwear. Luckily, I was thin enough that I was dry. Our footlockers were afloat, our boots were bobbing on the water and what could not float was in the salt water. We were moved out of the tent and the South China Sea, in with the permanent party (the Senior Drivers and other senior personnel), who were living inside of well-fortified bunkers. So the dry senior guys move over and let us CHERRY BOYS put our wet cots, wet footlockers, wet boots, wet bodies in with their dry stuff. The water had to be... well, it was knee to waist deep all over this part of The Beach, where we were surviving. We were considered inland; our area was part of the West Perimeter.

Killblane: To inside the dune or outside the dune?

Nichols: We were between the dunes and what should have been the ocean. The ocean came in to us and pinned us against the dunes. Our part of the Perimeter was the Dunes and part of the Perimeter was under 1 ft. to 20 ft. of water.

Killblane: The bunkers you lived in there were they sandbagged bunkers? Conexes and sand floors? What kind of flooring did you have?

Nichols: The bunkers were made of sandbags with wooden planks for the floors, same as we had in the troop tent, lying on the sand. I estimate the sandbag walls were three sandbags thick, the roofs were made of PSP, SPS, that steel... PSP, interlocking steel pipes.

Killblane: Right, which they used for...

Nichols: Making runways.

Killblane: Runways. That's right.

Nichols: Bridges, billets, so, PSP was used for the bunkers ceilings that held two or three layers of sandbags. If, we had a rocket attack or anything else bad happen, we would just run into the bunkers. The original occupants took enough sandbags off their roofs to barricade the doors waist high closed. To enter or leave the bunkers, during this time of high water, you would climb over the sandbags. All the bunkers were completely dry inside from the rain and ocean water. When it was chow time or time to go to the latrine, before it floated off, we would climb over the sandbags and waded out. By the time you went to sleep to the time you woke up in the morning, your clothes had dried. When it was breakfast time you climbed over the sandbags into about knee to waist-deep water and waded over to the Mess Tent.

Killblane: And it's still raining the whole time.

Nichols: It must have stopped after a couple of days or three.

Killblane: Tell me about eating in the Mess Hall with everything floating around.

Nichols: The Mess Hall was a wood framed, screened side, tent and from an aerial view, shaped like a capital "T". You would walk in at the bottom of the T, through the screen door, pick up your paper plate, plastic utensils, a paper cup, be served the great food, get your drink, turn around to your right, walk out towards the head of the T, step down 6in. or 8in. After you stepped down, if you were a NCO or Officer you would turn left to go eat, or if you were a Spec. 5 or below you would turn to the right and go eat. We had normal wooden one piece picnic tables to eat on. On our side, there were 6 or 8 of them pushed together, end to end, in a row. The ocean was in the Mess Tent; it was touching the underneath of the sitting benches connected to the picnic tables. Some guys would forget about the step down or misjudge it and the next thing you saw was their paper plate, paper cup, plastic eating utensils, plus their food flying up or coming down through the air. Some of them would only land on their butts in the 2-ft. deep murky salt water, while others would go totally under. For those of us who made it successfully down "The Step of Horror", this would brighten up our mealtime. Floating by on the tide you would see eating tools, green peas, yellow corn, orange carrots,

green beans, and freshly baked biscuits or rolls. Never any fried eggs or mashed potatoes; I guess they went straight to the bottom. Of course, "The Floating Menu" would change per meal. About two or three people per meal would go down and flounder like a drowning cockroach. It looked like a scene from the movie "Animal House". The water was GROSS! Some how the Cooks cleaned out/up the MESS Tent after every meal. We would be sitting on the bench an inch or two above the ocean with the screen walls surrounding us and laughing at the others' mishaps, when a truck would drive approximately 50 ft. away, through our Motor Pool. Even at a very slow speed, this would set off a little wake of water heading towards the Mess Tent. The movement of the water would come through the screen walls and be at a level of ¼ inch higher than the top of the bench we were sitting on. Everybody would take their turn standing up as the wave went across their part of the seat and then sit back down.

Killblane: So, it was like the literal wave, the guys are doing the wave.

Nichols: Yes, at least a ¼ inch of water would surge cross the top of the seating area, and everybody took their turn, standing up and then sitting back down. If you had dry underwear on before you started to eat, it wasn't dry anymore. This routine went on three times a day for four, five, six, seven days. Once it stopped raining we still had the water with us for another couple of days or four, plus the rashes.

Killblane: When you got there did they immediately put you on a truck or what?

Nichols: No, they did not. I think the hurricane/typhoon pre-empted all their plans. To me the war was called off totally in that area of NAM. They sent us CHERRY BOYS out on Perimeter Guard Duty at night with the senior guys. We maybe had a dozen bunkers on the Perimeter that we were responsible for. They would put each one of us new guys in a different bunker, or they tried to, with senior guys. We spent probably a week or two doing that. I'm terrible at trying to sleep during the day and staying awake at night. That was my first real major job on The Beach, Night Perimeter Guard Duty.

Killblane: When did you finally get to drive?

Nichols: Going back to guard duty, half of our Perimeter wire was underwater, so we couldn't see if anybody was standing outside the wire or swimming across the top of it. We had frogs jumping on the wire setting off the trip flares, which was exciting.

Killblane: Especially your first time in Vietnam, right?

Nichols: Yes, first time in Viet NAM, first time in real war. After about three, four, or five nights on the Perimeter, I got off of guard duty one morning and on my way to the Mess Tent I saw a bunch of trucks lined up in convoy fashion. Something called a Gun Truck was in front of the lead Escort Jeep, which had an M-60 Machine Gun mounted on it and then came a bunch of tractors with trailers. I may have had breakfast or not, but I went to my E6 Sergeant and told him I wanted to get on a truck as a Shotgun and get that experience. The real reason was I wanted off of guard duty! He said no, I said yes,

he said no, I said yes. Anyway, I think because I whined enough, he put me on as a Shotgun. I was put on a 5-Ton Tactical Tractor with Spec. 5 Furnace. I had my Flack Jacket, Helmet, M-16, extra ammo and canteen. All I had to do was refill the canteen with water and I was ready. We pulled out after the Mine Sweepers came in and were together for three to four days and nights or five. He let me drive several times. When we made it back home and he tried to trade me off for a...

Killblane: Why was that?

Nichols: Because I did everything wrong. Furnace was a "Short Timer" ready to go home. He almost had his time in, in Viet NAM; he had pulled up off The Beach to Khe Sanh. He saw more than what he wanted and he didn't want me to be the cause of him...

Killblane: Having an accident.

Nichols: Having a major accident. That first day Furnace and I convoyed off The Beach. We maybe went to Camp Evans and unloaded, then later heard that The Beach Road had been washed out. Furnace showed me how to go from one compound or camp; Camp Evans, for example, to Camp Nancy with a new load, drop it, pick up another load that they needed shuttled to the Quang Tri Compound, drop it and pick up another load and run to some other place. We did that for three, four, or five days, eating in between loads. He knew where Mess Halls were located at the different destinations. He taught me how to go out and survive. I know I'm not an Infantry guy. I also didn't sit behind a typewriter and have my meals brought to me or anything like that.

Killblane: You mentioned a part of the road that had been mortared out or whatever. They had to put stakes for you guys to drive around?

Nichols: Evidently we were getting into... the water went down; we got back in [to Wonder Beach]. We got out and back several times, evidently the Monsoon Rains just started moving in on us.

Killblane: That's right, in September.

Nichols: There was a section of The Beach Road they couldn't get or keep repaired. It might have been a little bridge, a culvert or something where a hole had developed in this rough road. The Beach Road was laid over sand, so I guess it would wash out easily. I don't think it had anything to do with The Sand Pit.

Killblane: So, this is still leading out of...

Nichols: Yes, pulling off of The Beach driving towards Hai Lang, we came to this one area, where the water was at least axle-deep to our 5-Ton Tractors and Trailers and only up to the rims of the BIG KWs. The Engineers or somebody had gone out and put

six-ft., eight-ft. green Engineering Stakes into the ground and left four to six feet of them sticking out of the water. As long as you kept your Jeep, your Gun Truck or your tractor-trailer in between these stakes, you should not had any problem(s). In the mornings The "Trail of Stakes" would take you to an almost a ninety degree right for twenty - thirty yards, then left ninety degrees for thirty - forty yards, then left, twenty - thirty yards and finally right ninety degrees back on the hard surface again, which was under water. Well after, three or four late afternoon's mishaps the Convoy Commander(s) had to rotate their Jeep Drivers for the next day. Those Drivers had not been trained to drive a Jeep or Duce-and-a-Half. Some of the new guys were trained to drive DUKHs or LARCS and ended up in our trucking company. I was and still glad! This was due to the continuous shortage of truck drivers in NAM. The only way out of truck driving was to go Infantry or Door Gunners on Choppers. So the DUKHs or LARCS drivers didn't know what a Jeep was or a tractor-trailer was, but they could drive those big things. One late afternoon on way the way back...The Convoy Commanders normally should have been the last ones in, by 5:00 p.m. One Jeep Driver was heading back home at 10 or 20-mph with the Convoy Commander and Machine Gunner, NOT paying attention to The Trail of Stakes. He did NOT make the first turn and drove off into the water hole. I saw part of the Jeep and the windshield sticking out of the water, along with the 3 surveyors who were standing in waist deep water. A day or two later, a different Jeep Driver tried to make an emergency stop on The Beach Road and the Convoy Commander's helmet flew forward, hit the windshield and then flew back just as fast. The Officer may have received a broken nose, but he did have 2 of the biggest black eyes I have ever seen. NO one laugh about them around him. Another day the third nervous Jeep Driver was coming back home on The Beach Road and was determined not to dump the new Jeep into the water hole or stop hastily! But he did quickly swerve to miss a big dry hole and bounced the Convoy Commander out of the Jeep on to his Officer's Ass. Jeeps are very tricky to operate.

Killblane: So, how long had you been on Wonder Beach before you finally closed it down?

Nichols: The unit or myself?

Killblane: Everything. Yourself and the unit, what do you remember about the closedown?

Nichols: I had been in country with the unit for about 5 to 6 weeks. The 572nd TC came up from Long Binh about 8 or 9 months before I showed up, and spent some time farther up north in Dong Ha, before moving down on to The Beach. I think the 572nd had been on The Beach for about 6 months, according to my estimate from listening to the Senior Drivers. By now Spec. 5 Furnace had trained me real good and I have my first truck Old # 2. We are told again, we have to move off The Beach up to Quang Tri. Maybe during the last week in September the Senior Drivers ran a couple of days while us CHERRY BOYS and Admin. People started cutting the sandbags open and pouring the sand out, then burning the bags. (Leave NOTHING for the enemy/civilians.) I put my cot, duffel bag and footlocker in the Old #2 and moved up to Quang Tri along with

everyone else. The Seabees had made us nice Hooches. The Hooches were two feet off the ground, with plywood floors and 4 feet high plywood outside walls and screened the rest of the way up to the ceiling height nailed to the A-frame rafters. A canvas tent covered the top. So when the Monsoon Rains started we could flip the sides of the tent down across the screens and stay dry. We had no doors.

Killblane: What kind of trucks did you have?

Nichols: I think they're called M52A2.

Killblane: A2s, the multi-fueled?

Nichols: Multi-fueled, turbocharged. Evidently the turbocharged engines were starting to come in over there in early '68. We had a couple of pure diesel vehicles, one was given to me and I didn't like it, because it had a different shifting pattern and shifted at different rpms, plus I did not like the sound of the engine. I didn't like it; so, I gave it back and got Old # 2 back, which had seen a lot of miles. Because of the road conditions, 5-Ton Tractors only lasted 20,000 to 25,000 miles, and then were sent to the Junk Yard.

Killblane: So, you moved from Wonder Beach to where? Where did you set up?

Nichols: We moved about 10 or 12 miles north of Hai Lang to the Quang Tri Compound, which was outside of Quang Tri City on Highway 1. We drove up Highway 1, across a portable steel TANK bridge and through the compound's South Gate. Highway 1 ran through the compound. Some civilian traffic was allowed to drive through compound, but they were not allowed to get off the road! Once inside the compound at the first road on the left, we turned on it and drove along the southern Perimeter of the compound for about a half of mile, pass the Marines' sections to our area on the Perimeter. Again, we pulled Night Perimeter Guard Duty.

Killblane: Your whole company moved up there by this time?

Nichols: The whole company had moved up there by the beginning of October.

Killblane: So, what's your normal run from out of there?

Nichols: Out of there? The beginning of the day was like that on Wonder Beach. We would get up about 6:00 a.m. and go to breakfast, to Formation, Police Call the company area, get our Flack Jacket, Helmet, M-16 (I carried extra ammo) and Canteen (make sure it was full of water) and be in the Motor Pool by 8:00 a.m. We would inspect our trucks, make repairs and change flat tires NOW. Sgt. would hand out our "paperwork"; we would go pick up our trailers if they weren't already hooked up. We would then roll over to the South Gate and get in line. Again, inspect the trucks, trailers, loads and change flat tires NOW. We would then wait until the Mine Sweepers enter the compound and give us the all clear. We would pull out about 10:00/10:30 a.m.

Killblane: What's your normal run? What's your destination?

Nichols: We would run south to 5 or 6 different camps. The first was across the river, Camp Sharon, then Camp Nancy. There were 2 or 3 other destinations before Camp Evans. Camp Evans was 30 to 35 miles down the road. I drove south of Camp Evans one time to Hue or Phu Bai. Some times the Senior Drivers would have to haul a load down to Hue, Phu Bai or Da Nang. I don't think the Company Commander like those runs because he lost the use of a truck for 3 or 4 days or longer.

Killblane: That's a short run.

Nichols: Short run? Our longest run was to Camp Evans. If everything went all right, we would be down at Camp Evans by noontime. We did not have to drive through The Sand Pit, but we still waited for the Mine Sweepers to come into Quang Tri Compound and give the all clear. When we left Quang Tri we drove over the portable single lane TANK Bridge, one truck at a time, through 2 or 3 villages, then through Hai Lang. Then we passed over a couple more single lane bridges, one truck at a time, through a couple more villages, another single lane bridge one truck at a time arriving at Camp Evans at noontime. It was only 30 or 35 miles away.

(We had a 5 or 10-mph restriction going through the villages and the American MPs watched you, because the Vietnamese children played a game (A Game of Chicken) by running out in front of us. While we were watching-out-for-the little BRATS, other kids would jump on the driver's side running board and open our toolbox door below the driver's door and steal everything in it. At the same time other kids would jump on the rider's side running board, reach through your right side open truck window, and steal everything out of your glove compartment, the little THIEVES. This could happen in every village.)

If we could drop the loaded trailer at Camp Evans' destination, pick up an empty trailer and go eat, you could be ready to run back up to Quang Tri by 1:30/2:00 p.m. If you had to wait to be unloaded and you were last in line behind 5 or 10 loaded trailers, then you would go eat, then go back and get unloaded. You might start back to Quang Tri by 3:30/4:30 p.m. Most of the time two of us could run back together and the earlier guys would get back to Quang Tri about 3:00 p.m. (in time to be put on Night Perimeter Guard Duty). The last ones rolled in by 5:00 p.m., if the MPs were not ticketing truckers for going too fast through the 5 or 6 villages and/or you did not have to wait to cross each of the 5 or 6 one lane bridges. The Camp Evans run was a 60 to 70 miles round trip and took maybe five to six hours on a good day. Highway 1, was rough but you could drive up to 31-mph on one or two of the good, but short sections.

Killblane: Quang Tri is being supplied by trailer? LCUs up the river? How?

Nichols: I don't know. The Air Force was coming in at the runway/airport with perishable foods. I ran shuttle for them one or two days and stayed on the compound. I ran empty a couple of times up to Dong Ha where there was a river, and they loaded us

with ammo off of small barges. I didn't like that because supposedly on the other side of the 30/40 yards wide river was North Viet NAM, or the beginning of the DMZ [Demilitarized Zone]. I'm not sure which it was; I can't tell with my map at home.

Killblane: That's DMZ.

Nichols: That river then was the beginning of the DMZ? I didn't like that; that was stupid for us being that close to North Viet NAM.

Killblane: It was real close. Dong Ha was on Route 9.

Nichols: From Quang Tri you would go up Highway 1, for 10 to 15 miles and then make a left and drive west for maybe a mile or one hundred yards through Dong Ha to the "rocked/bricked" river bank. I believe that's also the route that went to Khe Sanh.

Killblane: It is.

Nichols: The Senior Drivers would talk about them driving from Dong Ha to the Rock Pile to Alpha 1 to Khe Sanh and back. I never did want to go westward from Dong Ha and never had to. I don't know how we were receiving other supplies at Quang Tri because we were pulling all the time, out of Quang Tri. That little river on our South Perimeter was not big enough to bring anything on. There was an Army 5-Ton Cargo Truck unit and 5-Ton Tractor Fuel Tanker unit at Quang Tri. The Marines had there own 5-Ton Cargo Truck unit(s) there, they might have been supplying Quang Tri Compound.

Killblane: If it's just a thirty-mile run, how many runs did you make in a day?

Nichols: One.

Killblane: Just one?

Nichols: Just one.

Killblane: You're getting in at about what time?

Nichols: We would leave at about 10:00 a.m., cross the single lane Portable TANK Bridge one truck at a time, drive through about 5 or 6 villages and cross about 4 or 5 single lane bridges one truck at a time. One was a "narrow gage", Frenchie RXR tracks bridge. Someone paved almost over most of the rails. To cross it we would work our way up around a couple of curves at 10-mph to the top of a ridge/river bank, drive across the 50 yard long old RXR tracks bridge at 5-mph. Then roll back down the other side around a couple of curves through a village. This was a good part of the road and maybe took the convoy only a half-hour to travel this 2 miles section of Highway 1. We would brag about the speed we travel on the way back empty, through the BEST 2 sections of the road at 30/31-mph. You're a liar if you told anyone you drove over 31-mph, because the good paved parts of Highway 1, had unfilled mine holes every twenty

feet in the pavement and the trucks could not stay on the road, swerving them (there might be mines in the holes). When we got to Camp Evans and, if they had the equipment to unload us, we were unloaded fast, and then we found a place to feed us lunch. After lunch we would go back out to the gate at Highway 1, and wait for another truck. 2 or more of us would run north (with the Convoy Commander's permission!). The last trucks could leave about 3:00 p.m. You could not leave any compound in that area after 5:00 p.m.

Killblane: Oh, really. So, what time are you getting in?

Nichols: We would start arriving back at Quang Tri between 3:00 p.m. and 4:00 p.m., most of the time before 5:00 p.m. You had to get off the road early; the MPs shut the gates to ALL out bound traffic at 5:00 p.m.

Killblane: Then once you get in, what's your normal routine?

Nichols: If you got in by 5:00 p.m., you would go park the empty trailer in the trailer park and refuel. END OF SIDE A, TAPE 1

Killblane: So, you'd park the empty trailers.

Nichols: We would park the empty trailers in the trailer park, so they would receive maintenance and get the FLAT TIRES changed, refuel our tractors and park them in the Motor Pool. Then we would go to the Hooch, put your personal equipment away and clean your weapon. I think they started serving Chow at 5:00 p.m. We had another Formation before 6:00 p.m. and then back to the Motor Pool and pull maintenance on your tractor from 6:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. (I bet, The US Army pulls Preventive Maintenance from 6:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. at least 6 days a week, WORLDWIDE.) After 7:00 p.m. we would take showers, if there was water, listen to the radio, write home and talk about our experiences that day. If it had been raining on you all day, we would just go to the Hooch and get a towel. One night I was all cleaned up and in the cot by 9:00 p.m. when Platoon SSgt. came into the Hooch. He walked pass 8 other still dressed drivers to me and told me to get up and go out to a Perimeter Bunker, because there might be some action tonight. There was! The bunker I went into later that night or early in the morning was shot at by Machine Gun fire! There was returned shooting, but nothing came of it!

Killblane: You guys actually were getting probably more sleep than the drivers down out at Qui Nhon. What were the average hours you were getting in at night?

Nichols: I can only compare myself up in Quang Tri to what I did in Long Binh. We were getting more continuous hours of sleep in Quang Tri than in Long Binh. (We were rocketed several times and had a ground attack on our Perimeter in Long Binh.) We couldn't move off the compound in the mornings until the Mine Sweepers came in and gave us the all clear. We would eat at 6:00 a.m.; by 7:00 a.m. be in Formation and then do the standard Police Call of the company area. Then, go to the get your equipment;

make sure your Canteen(s) was full of water and go to the Motor Pool. Pull PM and change Flat Tires on your tractor until 8:00 a.m. Then go get your trailer and hook up and roll over to the gate and spend an hour there doing additional maintenance/checking your load & BS. It was a slower pace and easier in Quang Tri, while I was there compared to Long Binh.

Killblane: Where did you move after Quang Tri? How long were you at Quang Tri?

Nichols: We were at Quang Tri either the day after Thanksgiving of 1968, or the week after Thanksgiving '68. We were told we were moving to Long Binh and when we were leaving. We packed and got ready to convoy south to Da Nang. It seems that we ate Thanksgiving Supper and the next morning after breakfast, put our cots, duffel bags and footlockers into our trucks, lined up at the gate and waited for the Mine Sweepers to come in and give us the all clear. We rolled south to Da Nang, which took us the whole day. It was mainly mines and snipers in that area of NAM, that were our problems on the road. Once we got south of Camp Evans and through Hue and Phu Bai, I think that is where we started climbing up the mountain range. I think Camp Eagle was at the top of the mountains. The road in the mountains was only wide enough for one way traffic, so, I'm going to make this up: Every Monday, Wednesday, Friday they flowed north, Tuesdays, Thursdays, Saturdays they flowed south, and Sundays someone repaired the road.

Killblane: The traffic?

Nichols: The traffic, excuse me. Our MPs controlled the flow of traffic on Highway 1, through the mountains. When we left Quang Tri, we were flowing with the traffic through the mountains towards Da Nang. We climbed up on the mountain on the narrow road with countless switchback/hairpin turns, with the cliffs on the driver's side. I've never seen anything like it. We got up to the top, and drove by or through Camp Eagle and then went down. We pulled on to a beach in the Da Nang area by suppertime. They probably gave us top priority over everybody moving on Highway 1, that day. I don't know if we had fifty trucks or one hundred trucks. A day or two later we collected our pay on that beach ("China Beach"); it was for November 1968. The day we had that money in our hands, in another Formation the CO told us in military fashion, "Men, don't go to that whorehouse two blocks down the road, because you'll get arrested." That was the first time I've ever heard of twenty guys and their "truck" being arrested. They probably just took a wrong turn (MP Report #1).

Killblane: Was that the first time you got paid over there?

Nichols: It should have been the third time, August, September, October then November, the fourth time.

Killblane: What did you do out of Da Nang?

Nichols: The Army's agenda was, we should be there for five to seven days, but after a couple more episodes with the MPs, the Army found us an empty LST [Landing Ship Tank] and gave us top priority to be load and shipped south.

Killblane: Oh, instead of rolling out you loaded up...

Nichols: Yeah, they kept us out of the central Highlands. Evidently, I may be wrong on this, but from Da Nang south to Cam Rahn Bay, Highway 1, was not passable. The LST had giant doors for the front end. The Senior Drivers loaded the trailers and other stuff inside/under the deck and the tractors went on deck. We got on the boat at Da Nang beach or dock. The boat was rented by a South Korean civilian company from the United States Navy. The South Koreans shut the giant front doors and then we backed away and headed south. We spent about three days off the coast of Viet NAM. We could just barely see Viet NAM on the right side sailing south. We didn't have anything to do for three days.

Killblane: Then you pulled into where?

Nichols: Before we started up the Saigon River, most of us were locked downstairs and a few of the guys were put on guard duty. While I was downstairs, I found out I had claustrophobia. So I tried to go upstairs to become a guard. We docked at Newport Harbor, at Newport Docks on Newport Landing close to Newport Bridge. Senior men in their tenth and eleventh months in Viet NAM had left Long Beach from Newport earlier in their...

Killblane: Long Binh?

Nichols: Long Binh, thank you. So, the Senior men were telling us less experienced guys, we were going in at Newport Dock, they said, "Hey, the harbor looks better," "The bridge is new," it looked like an US Interstate bridge. When we got to Long Binh the Senior men said we're going to TC Hill (Transportation Companies Hill), it was just a little hill about 100 feet high compared to highway outside the perimeter, but it was the highest point on the Long Binh Compound. Senior men said they started on TC Hill ten and eleven months earlier. They moved us into some temporary, nice wooden military style Hooches that were better than we had up north. After Christmas 1968, we moved into the same all aluminum, screen windows and concrete floors, Hooches; the Senior men had left months earlier. We did not have to pull Perimeter Guard Duty there. Most of the Senior Drivers left Long Binh, possibly moved up to Dong Ha (they hauled to Khe Sanh early in 1968), then moved down to Wonder Beach, then moved up to Quang Tri and now return to Long Binh. Now you know about half of the reason why the 572nd TC calls itself "The Gypsy Bandits".

Killblane: What was your normal run and routine there?

Nichols: They had us to work on the trucks and do some shuttling in the Long Binh and Saigon areas at the beginning. About the first of January, we were sent out on convoys.

It seemed we would run 30 days straight towards Cambodia (Tay Nihn, An Loc, Quan Loi, and maybe Loc Nihn), and these were 9 to 12 hours round trip convoys. We would leave the convoy Staging Area at 8:00 a.m. or 8:30 a.m.; get back after 6:00 p.m. A few times the sun was setting. So there was no reason hurrying back because Major BASTARD of the US Army in charge of the Mess Hall closed it at 6:00 p.m. and went to the Officers Club to brag about how many potatoes he made someone peel for him that day.

(Those roads were the worst I've ever seen, even today, let alone driving a 5-Ton Tactical Tractor and dragging a trailer over them. You could not run more than 30-mph over them. I always thought I ran twice as fast when leaving the KILL ZONE, but for some reason I never took time to look at my speedometer when running for my life. Some times I was a Machine Gunner on 5-Ton Tactical Tractor and learned very early, if an ambushes broke on us and the driver starts to run out of the KILL ZONE, get that damn gun unloaded and down on the floor broad. So it won't bounce off the truck or back on your head and shoot the driver.)

The next 2, 3, or 4 weeks we would head southeast towards the ocean (Vinh Long, Phu Vinh and 1 or 2 other destinations. Those convoy round trips would run us through Saigon twice in a day (what a MESS) and take 5 to 6 hours to complete. We would leave at 8:30/9:00 a.m. and get back before suppertime and get to eat. Those routes were smooth, clean and safer.

Killblane: Did you tell you the destination before you rolled out?

Nichols: Sometimes yes, sometimes no. It really didn't matter if you were not the first truck. Just follow the truck in front of you.

Up on Wonder Beach, I was the first truck ONE time, and the Convoy Commander told me when we get to Quang Tri go over to the Ammo Dump. I was a CHERRY BOY, I know nothing. As soon as the Convoy Commander turned his back, I jumped out of my truck and ran to the second truck and said, "Pass me before the gate. I don't know where I'm suppose to go." He did and the convoy got there in perfect condition, because somebody else was leading.

The worst convoys were the ones toward Cambodia, the paved road ended halfway there.

Killblane: Why?

Nichols: After the pavement ended, both convoy routes roads were bad, rough, the ambush areas were big, big; they'd set up a quarter of a mile long ambush areas. That's where we lost two of our men... **on May 1st**. The large/long convoys would run in March Units, with maybe 5 March Units to a convoy, up to twenty trucks per March Unit, with the Fuel Tanker's in March Unit #4 in front of us AMMO HAULERS March Unit #5. Each March Unit was separated by 5 or 10 minutes. The bad guys hit us in the mornings

when we were loaded, they'd hit us in the afternoon when we were empty and not expecting it, they'd hit us at different locations, and some times on good paved roads. Those little BASTARDS had no rules. At least when I ran Night Convoys, I could see the TRACERS, missing me. I guess that was good?

Killblane: Where were you dropping off at? Were you dropping off at a fixed camp or was the unit moving forward?

Nichols: Most of the time we were dropping off at major compound's Ammo Dumps: Tay Nihn, An Loc, Quang Loi, Phu Vinh and other Ammo Dumps. Two or three times we dropped at unique places; one was a newly constructed BIG Landing Zone. We convoyed 2 or 3 hours from Long Binh on paved roads into a small village. They had built a BIG LZ, so 1 or 2 of us tractors and trailers drove up on top of the LZ at the same time, where "running" Hueys, Chinooks, and Flying Cranes were waiting. They unloaded us straight into cargo nets, hooked the nets on the bottom of the hovering helicopters and I watched them fly off in the same general direction. There might have been 10 truckloads of ammo fly off in about hour and we convoyed there with 20 plus loads.

Killblane: What do you mean run thirty days one way and thirty days the other?

Nichols: They would just run us thirty days as hard as they could, taking 10 to 20 truck loads of different type of ammunition up 2 different convoy routes towards Cambodia - Tay Nihn, An Loc, Quang Loi or (maybe) Loc Nihn areas. Then they would turn around and send us 2 or 3 weeks or thirty days in the opposite direction; where there were good highways, less dirt and ambush areas. (By this time in NAM, I only knew when a week went by, because the "little blue" pill" showed up at breakfast time.)

Killblane: Okay, to keep from burning you guys out?

Nichols: Yes. One day we were moving along fine on the way to Tay Nihn or Quang Loi when in the middle of a village an MP stepped out in front of me. I'm in the middle of a March Unit, he stepped out in front of me and gave me the hand signal to stop. What the heck? You don't stop a Convoy/March Unit; you will get it ambushed or a grenade tossed in a truck window. He stood in front of me and an Army Lieutenant ran over to my truck and jumped on my rider side running board. There's a Jeep almost right in front me at an intersection; this Lieutenant jumps up and says, "We've got a tank battle going on down the road and I want your ammunition." (The night before, in the evening Formation in the Motor Pool, everyone got their ass CHEWED-OFF, by our CO, because someone did not get the paperwork signed by the Receiver showing the load had been accepted.) I told the LT. nobody gets my ammunition unless they signed for it, while I am telling him this; I'm getting the "paperwork" out of the glove compartment and an ink pen. And he asked, "Where do I sign?" I showed him where to sign and he became the owner a trailer load of ammunition, plus I gave him a copy of the paperwork for his "property files". I said, "they won't do you any good because I don't have the

fuses." I said, "The guy behind me has the fuses and black powder." I've always wanted to know who was carrying what in front and back of me.

Killblane: Why's that?

Nichols: Who had the most explosive things? Them or me. I had "projos" (projectiles) that day and black powder and fuses for my projos were behind me. I said, "The guy behind me has got the fuses and powder," (he was from a different TC unit). The Lieutenant said, "Pull over there" and he pointed at a small dirt road off to the right, so I drove over there. The MP came over and said, "Now we're running down the road. You guys got yourself a war going on down there." The driver with the powder and fuses did the same thing and said, "Nobody gets my fuses..." The Lieutenant signed for them. The Jeep(s) took off down the rough dirt road and we followed for two to four miles. We came to an open field and there were five or six 5-Ton Cargo Trucks waiting, but no equipment to unload these damn projos. Each one, I think, is about ninety pounds. I've got a tractor...

Killblane: What kind of round?

Nichols: Projectile, I think they were 105's [millimeter]. If they were 155 [mm] they should have been too big for one man to carry. We pulled off in the middle of a cow pasture, off a rough deep dirt road, which didn't make any sense because there was no equipment to unload the projos. A First Sergeant jumps up and says, "We're going to take the ammunition off here." I think he was a first sergeant; he had a bunch of stripes. They backed a couple cargo trucks up to my trailer and the other driver and me climbed up on my trailer's headboard. We sat there waiting for them to unload me. 6 or 8 guys jumped on my trailer, broke the pallets of 105s apart and everyone picked up projos and dumped them over the 5-Ton Cargo Trucks tailgate. When they loaded a truck, it took off down the road and another one backs up against my trailer. They unloaded my trailer and the other trailer a little faster, and within an hour or 2. What I think was going on was OUR 105s [Howitzers] and TANKS were fighting with North Vietnamese tanks, and 105s should have been firing over OUR TANKS at the bad guys.

Killblane: In fact there was cargo trucks right up to the...

Nichols: Right up there against my trailer. They put the projectiles on the tailgate of the cargo truck and push them off into it, CLUNK; they would go rolling down towards the cab, crashing into it. After they emptied us we took off.

Killblane: So, you went back home to Long Binh after that?

Nichols: Yeah, we went back to Thunder Road, hung a left and headed back to Long Binh. We didn't know where our convoy or our March Unit was, we didn't know what time it was, so we just went home, and speed limits didn't matter because we were on our own. Besides the conditions of Thunder Road prevented us from running over 30-mph, but when we past Big Red 1 compound (at Lai Khe?), and got on pavement our

speed increased to the max. We made it in before the convoys. I dropped my empty trailer at the TTP, refueled the tractor and went back to the Motor Pool. Then told everyone what had happen and turned in my SIGNED paperwork and walked up TC Hill, plus cleaned my M-16 and turned in all my ammo. I had supper that evening and maybe a shower.

Killblane: What's your normal run as far as when you're coming in at night there, and when you're going out?

Nichols: If we were headed towards Tay Nihn, An Loc or Quan Loi (they were the longest - roughest – worse - most dangerous, convoy routes we had). NORMALLY we would get up by 5:00/5:30 a.m. get dressed, put our equipment on, get our M-16s, (I always carried extra ammo) go eat and fill MY canteen with WATER. Then go to a duce and a half, which would take us to our trucks at the Ammo Dump or Convoy Staging Area. If the truck was at the Ammo Dump get in it and move over to the Staging Area.

The Staging Area was level red dirt field were the 100 (or MORE) tractors and trailers full of ammunition, fuel and other supplies came together, before the convoys started to roll out, below the MACV [Military Assistance Command, Vietnam] headquarters.

We would get to the Staging Area by 6:30 a.m., walk around the rig inspecting it and the load - make sure it is secured for the ride of your life, kick tires, if you have a flat change it NOW and then pull Preventive Maintenance. If you don't have a flat tire to change, go help a buddy who does. Then about 8:00 a.m. the MPs would open the gate. All the roads had been mine swept around that area, all the helicopters that were assigned to protect the convoys were in the air, the Escort MPs are ready to roll, our APCs & TANKS are sitting someplace twenty to thirty miles away ready to go, and we start running convoys. The first convoy out would be to Cu Chi; it was the closest destination. If your March Unit went pass Cu Chi, then you were on your way to Tay Nihn. The good/hard paved surface road ended a few miles after Cu Chi. The other major route would take you pass Big Red 1 compound (at Lai Khe?) to An Loc or Quan Loi. Big Red 1 was the end of the good/hard paved surface road. Thunder Road started: all gravel, except for the dirt portions which were miles long and 2 to 3 inches deep fine powder dust (everybody returned to the Hooches a different COLOR than they left that morning. If the BASTARDS at Battalion got us water for our showers, we would get to shower that night. We got to shower about 3 or 4 times a week, about as often as you got to eat supper) and holes, I can't forget the ripples. When it rained, the dust would turn to 2 or 3 inches of mud that cause ALL the vehicles to perform as if they were on ICE. ONE EXTREME TO ANOTHER! One time, when I was at the front of a March Unit we had to stop at beginning of Thunder Road, because the Mine Sweepers were coming in. I don't know if we were early or if the Mine Sweepers had a problem up the road. They were walking and sweeping and had this TANK following them so close that the end of its MAIN GUN barrel was above their heads. I guess if somebody shot at them, they would lie down on the road and the TANK would drive over the top of them and stop to hide them. We would get to Tay Nihn or An Loc or Quan Loi and the Army BASTARDS there would not have food for us (we are bring them food, fuel and ammo) and the Battalion

BASTARDS at long Binh would not allow us to have "C" Rations. Half the time at the destinations, we did not have time to take a PEE because we were turning around so FAST to get back before the sun went down. There were guys who would get sick, like me, who didn't have food in their stomachs, while running on those roads. Then the other guys could not eat, before a rough convoy. As soon as you got unloaded or picked up an empty trailer at the destination, we would go back to the gate and start moving back out. We would get back in at 6:00 or 7:00 at night. (Many evenings we were coming in with the sun going down.) drop the trailer at the TTP, go fuel up and park the truck in the Motor Pool, by 8:00 p.m. Pull PM (I am lucky tonight, no flat(s), some times I would have 2 flats; we changed ALL flats by hand there were NO power tools. The rims-tires/wheels had to be 100 lbs. and I was about 150 lbs.) The Night Loading Driver is waiting for your truck, so he can get your load for tomorrow's convoy, which is the same damn place you got back from. Walk up TC Hill, which got higher and longer on nights like this. NO water go to bed dirty and without supper again. We drove to one place a few hours or a day after B-52s BOMBED the HELL out of the area. We drove around a lot of BIG HOLES! I ran night convoys too, out of Long Binh and Saigon.

Killblane: Oh, yeah? I didn't know they did that. What was your destination for a night convoy?

Nichols: Newport Dock/Bridge, I think.

Killblane: So, it would be a short run then?

Nichols: Yeah. I think we did only one a night from Long Binh to Newport and back. One night we were coming back, Bill Baker from Missouri (I'm from Missouri) was in front of me and we were pulling beer and soda and other things. Bill had soda or beer on his trailer and somebody in front of him had beer or soda and I was hauling beer or soda.

(You would drive without your headlights on at 30 or 40 miles per hour. On a moonlit night, you could see the truck's silhouettes in front of you. With your headlights on, snipers only had to shoot between them, just start shooting. That night tracers were flying all over the place. They had a Machine Gun(s) sitting on the right side someplace. We went through this one area and just, tracers, God. No driver got hit. Tracers flew between Bill's trailer and my windshield. I was trying to lay down on the rider's seat, looking above the dash with only my left eye, and driving a 5-Ton Tactical Tractor pulling a loaded 30 ft. long trailer with no headlights on, as fast as I could. We all got back to the Motor Pool safely, where we were told to leave the loads for the next day Convoy Drivers. The funny thing, Bill Baker got out of his truck in front of me and seemed to be excited, telling the driver in front of him, "Man, you should have seen the tracers coming close to your truck." When I went up to Bill and pointed at his load, which had been shot up; orange soda was still dripping off the trailer in our Motor Pool. My truck and load did not get hit.

Killblane: When were they making night runs, running soda at night?

Nichols: Sometimes it was ammunition, just bringing in supplies and unloading.

Killblane: What was at the bridge? What was at your destination that you were supplying?

Nichols: Newport Docks at the bridge. I don't know what the final destination was. The loads would be pulled out the next day. It could have been Tay Ninh.

Killblane: That was a trailer transfer point that you were dropping that stuff off at?

Nichols: No. That night we pulled it into our Motor Pool with the beer or soda loads leaving them hooked up to the Day Drivers' trucks so they could pick up their rigs. Then they would move over to the Convoy Staging Area and take off from there. We only left NON-explosive loaded trailers in the Motor Pool hooked up to the day drivers' tractors. If we hauled ammo off Newport Docks (or from anywhere), it went straight to the Long Binh Ammo Dump. The Night Drivers would show up at the Motor Pool by 7:00 p.m. and be told which Day Driver's truck to get and where to go for the assigned load for the Day Driver. The majority of the time, we would go to the TTP and pick up a trailer, then maybe convoy the Newport Docks area, get the assigned load and bring it back to our Motor Pool (if it was NOT EXPLOSIVE) for the Day Convoy Driver to deliver. If the Day Convoy Driver was going to haul ammo the next day, the Night Driver left the Motor Pool about 7:00 p.m. and would go to the TTP, then pick up a trailer and go to the Ammo Dump for the assigned load. After the trailer was loaded, the Night Driver would take the rig over to a designated area in the Ammo Dump and park it for the night. Some one would drive by in a duce & half or Bobtail, pick us up and take us back to the Motor Pool. There we might get another Day Driver's truck and repeat the ammo loading tasks.

Somewhere in the spring of '69 they were putting Senior Drivers on Night Convoys and Loading and I was just starting to get that seniority because men were going home, their tours were over with. You didn't drive with your headlights on because that was dangerous. Bad guys would shoot between the headlights, empty a clip at you, and ruin your night. On foggy nights, you would have to use your headlights momentarily: Turn them on trying to find the guy in front of you turn them off. We ran without trailer lights on. We may have hooked up our trailer lights power cord, but did not turn on our trailer lights. They would light up the end of the tractor and trailer and give the Bad Guys a clear target; let them know where to shoot. In those days all "tactical military vehicles" had a master lights switch on the left side of the steering column on the dash. We could turn on different lights, in different sequences, at different times for OUR safety.

Some nights we'd catch a sniper or two or a machine gunner (maybe it was only an automatic rifle)... I ran night convoys and shuttles for about a month.

Killblane: Every night?

Nichols: Every night.

Bill was in front of me and he got his load shot up, soda, whatever.

That same trip somebody in front of him got his load shot up.

We also ran out of Long Binh to a place called Cogido Dock. We would go out of our gate, make a left, go down the road about a half a mile, make a right, and go through Cogido, a little village. It must have been a fishing village, because it was right on a river. Barges of ammunition were brought up the river, unloaded on the dock, and then we would be loaded and run back through Cogido to the Long Binh Ammo Dump. You might do two loads, maybe three in a night. (Run from 7:00 p.m. to Midnight Breakfast to 5:00 a.m.). I didn't like Cogido at night; even if it was supposed to have been a secured area. It was brightly lit at nighttime; it made a big aerial target. It was just too spooky. It had too much open area, because of the river and things could crawl out of the water and shoot you. Didn't like it. We had one of the biggest Ammo Dumps, I bet you, in the world there at Long Binh. It was unbelievable. The roads were named: Alpha through Zebra and the crossroads were numbered 1 through (maybe) 25.

One night I did nothing but shuttle trailers in the Ammo Dump. Hook up to an empty trailer and pull it over to a loading location, get loaded, then take the trailer to a parking location and drop it, go back to the gate and get other empty trailer, etc. Did nothing but shuttle empty and loaded trailers. I put over 25 miles on the truck that night and never left the Ammo Dump. I think they had a Mess Hall there.

One night I was driving through the Ammo Dump, with my headlights on, (there were THINGS in that place) it was a rough place to drive at night; it was very dark. I saw SOMETHING in front of my dimmed headlights just outside the main beam of light crawling across the road. I stopped! I don't know if the light caused the silhouette/shadow of THE THING to become gigantic or if this was some prehistoric "SOMETHING", but to me it looked like a SLOTH: five, seven feet long since the road was about 20/25 feet wide, so trucks could pass each other. I just sat there; I just watched the creatures outline crawl slowly across the road. (I had my Flack Jacket and Helmet on and M-16 always locked & loaded in my hands with extra ammo near by.) I gave "it" a minute to cross and it slowly disappeared into the ditch, then I moved on.

One night I was in the Ammo Dump, finished loading and parked, waiting for someone to drive by and pick me up, when I heard something moving around my truck. One night something was on my loaded trailer, I heard faint moving around sounds. It was rumored there were big cats in there. There was rumor; there were VC [Viet Cong] in there. There was a rumor there were ghosts in there. I was scared; I always kept my loaded gun with me and extra ammo. If the Dispatcher said to me, you are running shuttle in the Ammo Dump; I went and got my rifle and extra ammunition. I kept it loaded. I kept ready. Other nights I'd go down there and see other drivers being loaded or waiting to be picked up and they'd be white as a ghost. They would say, "Something's been on my truck, while I was in it! (They would climb up in my truck) and yell, "let's run! Let's go let's get the out of here" There were things that lived in that Ammo Dump. There were creatures.

When we would drive the Ammo Dump Perimeter Road, we would drive with no headlights on. Those damn American guards with their guard dogs, they'd sic 'em on you. You'd be driving five miles an hour with the windows down; those son-of-a-bitches would sic their dogs on you.

Killblane: Why, just to be malicious?

Nichols: NO. Those bastards, they thought it was funny. Their dogs would hit your running board, 4 ft. below your elbow and before you know it, all you'd see were fangs and them going, "ARRRGH! - BARKING!" Americans playing games with Americans.

Killblane: Yeah, had to keep your moral up.

Nichols: Enough to give you a heart attack.

Killblane: Yeah, because you guys are already scared.

Nichols: Uh, huh, scared to death, driving around knowing everything on the outside of that wire on the right would kill you, the dogs always come from the left.

Killblane: What happens after that?

Nichols: They put me on a trailer pick-up for a month. That' was a great job: go pick up empty trailers and take them back to the trailer park at night time.

Killblane: Pick them up where?

Nichols: Any place on Long Binh Compound.

Killblane: Okay, so you're still at the... How short are you by this time?

Nichols: This is going on about April, so I've got May, June, July, August, and I'm just becoming one of the Senior Drivers.

Because we had a lot go home, alive and unhurt.

Killblane: So, are they by pattern here tending to put the more Senior Drivers on just local roads?

Nichols: What they did on Wonder Beach and up at Quang Tri, was, for example, Quang Tri, the Mess Hall: the guy who was the Head Counter, telling you to come in and eat or not, was the next guy going home. That's the job you worked for. But then when we went to Long Binh they destroyed that so they were trying to give, I believe the Senior Drivers the safer nights. The nighttime jobs, when bad guys started shelling, you were awake and ready. Night driving was the best job to have if you were a senior. So, they gave me a nighttime job for a month to collect trailers, that's punishment. I was

trying to keep that job. Some nights we had two trailers and other nights we had twenty-four trailers.

Killblane: So, you're doing the night run hauling trailers, you finish that, then what do you do?

Nichols: I did that for a month or so and they put me back on the day road, and I started running convoys again. Our 1969 Tet at Long Binh was rough on one of the units over in Bien Hoa area. They emptied out a lot of our buildings like the pay office, the Finance Office, Personnel and they'd use them for hospitals.

We were watching Green Beret with John Wayne one night. We had an outdoor movie screen; it was three or four pieces of plywood high and six or eight pieces of plywood long, and three or four sets of wooden bleachers in front of the white painted screen. And you'd hear a bang; an explosion and war happening in the background, at Ben Hoa, We'd throw our beer cans at the Green Beret movie.

Killblane: Why's that?

Nichols: Frustration.

Killblane: John Wayne, he's a hero, an icon.

Nichols: We were taught in Basic Training NEVER do what John Wayne did in a movie, It would get you killed and everyone around you (today I there is no one in Hollywood that comes close to John Wayne's make believe action movies). So, we're back on the road again, I think we're running in April now. The advantage of the Machine Gunner on a truck is you can stand on the seat and look down on everything, while holding onto the M-60 Machine Gun. The disadvantage is you're a more important target. I didn't like being the Machine Gunner, didn't like having Machine Gunners on my truck, either. One convoy I was a Machine Gunner, I always carried extra ammo and we came over a hill and stopped. Part of our ammo March Unit had been hit. The lead truck, three or four trucks, had got through the AMBUSH KILL ZONE, we stopped before the KILL ZONE (DON'T enter a KILL ZONE and be prepare to get out to FIGHT, incase there are "spider holes filled with snipers" along side YOUR truck.) I carried extra ammo. We could see one truck did not get out of the KILL ZONE and was on the right edge of the road, not blocking the road. The ambush broke open on the right and the Machine Gun Jeeps, APCs and TANKS were all on the right firing into area in front of them, looking for "spider holes" and shooting into the tree line where smoke was coming from. Helicopters were coming in on our right side, a little above the height of the trucks and as soon as they cleared the first stopped truck; they would open up firing into the tree line. When we got the haul-ass-signal, we started running through the KILL ZONE, behind our wall of protection. The best thing for the truck Machine Gunner to do was sit down, hold on to their helmet with the left hand and hold on to the LOADED M-60 Machine Gun with the right hand. As we were passing the stationary truck on my right side, I knew it was from our unit and stood up to look in the cab. I did not see the driver

lying on the seat. There was nobody, so he had to be down on the floorboard. Good thing I was not John Wayne. Williams, the driver had been shot in the back and already removed from the truck, plus miles up the road heading towards help, in our Machine Gun Jeep. Williams was leaving the KILL ZONE (WEARING his FLACK JACKET) when an AK-47 bullet, which was fired from a long distance away, came through the canvas top of the truck inches above the steel back wall and tumbled backwards into his flak jacket. The bullet went in backward and you could just barely see that that damn piece of lead was still in the copper casing, sticking out of the Flack Jacket. He was patched up and we got him back at noon in time for the return convoy. The next day he was showing us his wound, for some dumb reason, we wanted to see the wound; it looked like somebody took a branding iron and just burned him down to the bone about an inch long.

Killblane: It went through the flak jacket?

Nichols: No. The bullet tried to exit the Flak Jacket, but was stopped. You could see the back of the bullet just barley sticking out of the inside of Flak Jacket, besides the burn mark he had a bruise the size of softball. They gave him the job as a Dispatcher after that; they took him off the road. Good, good, good, got him off the road. Didn't want to get yourself a sucky job that way.

Killblane: What kind of work are you doing after that?

Nichols: I'm driving a truck again, running convoys, pulling stuff, running back towards Tay Nihn and Quang Loi, going East down towards the coast and on the coast to one or two places. Then once in a while, in May, for some reason I got shuttles to Saigon. They pulled me off the convoys and told me they needed a couple of drivers and I was one of them.

Killblane: Jeep drivers?

Nichols: No. Tractor-Trailer Drivers to someplace(s) and pick up loads and bring them back, something unusual. I had gone to three or four or five places that I had never been.

Killblane: Newport?

Nichols: Newport and Saigon, I went to a Navy location. I went someplace and picked up trailer full of old (OUT-DATED) ammunition from the Navy. It was a nice job. Normally we would eat a late breakfast (7:00 a.m.), get our assignments after the convoys had left, get back, refueled, drop the trailer before the convoys started returning, plus have an early supper. All hard/paved roads hardly any dust. Wear the same uniform the next day.

Killblane: So, all this time you're still getting plenty of sleep, all the sleep you need?

Nichols: No. We're getting up... Some convoys you still got up at 4:30/5:00 a.m. pulling out at 8:00 a.m., maybe not getting back from Tay Nihn until the sun was setting or spending the night at Tay Nihn or Quan Loi (I considered that as a 12 hours in country R&R).

Killblane: The Tay Nihn run is the long run?

Nichols: That's the longest one.

Killblane: But the others are fairly short, you can get in...

Nichols: About ten miles shorter. Most of the time you can get back in and never have supper.

Killblane: How do you know what trailer you're going to pick up? How are you getting your taskings every day?

Nichols: If they've got it hooked to your tractor, they just tell you. Somebody would walk through the Hooch and say, "You've got your tractor." They try to assign you a tractor so you can take pride in it. One time I had three tractors assigned to me in my name, two were almost brand new; they were used for Battalion/Group Inspections, only. We could have used them out on the convoys, but maybe we did not have enough drivers. I tinkered with the bolt underneath the fuel pedal; tighten it down a couple of turns, which gave me more speed in the top gear. We did other things to them.

Killblane: Was there always a shortage of drivers compared to trucks?

Nichols: Yes. I wanted off the road a couple of times. Told them I had it. They wouldn't let me off. We were told, the only way you could get out of truck driving was to become a helicopter door gunner or join the Infantry. We had one guy that did that. We were told there was always a shortage of truck drivers and trucks. I got back on the road. They gave me one good truck that was almost brand new, and man, I loved that one. Then they gave me second and third brand new truck.

Killblane: What kind of truck was it, an M52A2?

Nichols: M52A2. They left the two new ones in the Motor Pool; I could work on them. I kept them running perfect. They'd pull me off the road once every couple of weeks or once a month, saying, "We've got a battalion inspection. Drive that one on a convoy and bring it back." Put some mileage on it, and give me a day to work on it, so that was my day off.

Killblane: When did you get that house trailer?

Nichols: In May, shortly after the bad day. I believe a week after the big ambush when we lost our two men and one or two other units lost men. My bunk partner, Cook, he

slept on the bottom bunk, won the Bronze Star with "V", one of the three guys who got the Bronze Star (because of that ambush). I think there were three MEN.

Killblane: Was he on a gun truck?

Nichols: No. They took the gun trucks away from us in Long Binh. The March Unit had been stopped and they were out of their trucks lying in a ditch fighting. They were in the ditch fighting for their lives. Two of the trucks had been hit by RPGs and then blew up; they blocked the road (Thunder Road) to Quang Loi. The day before that ambush, I ran to Bear Cat with Black a new man (I think he was from Missouri). The day of that ambush, I ran to Saigon and Black ran THAT CONVOY. Then next day I ran the same convoy route. The third day I ran to Saigon and a convoy on that route got hit. The fourth day I the same convoy route. The fifth day I ran Saigon, again, and a convoy on that route got hit.

Killblane: You kept getting hit every time you're going down to Saigon? So, you got this house trailer?

Nichols: Yes, we went through hell week. Somewhere around the middle of May, I get this 35, 48 to 53 ft long white and blue/turquoise house trailer to pull. Cook (my Machine Gunner) and I are just flabbergasted. We had never seen anything like this. It was hooked on to my tractor's "swivel hook" and waiting for us next to the Motor Pool. We rolled over to the staging area and put at the tail end of the convoy. It was a mess to pull. I could not run more that 20/25-mph on the good straight road, because it would wonder outside of my lane. I was holding up the last Escort Machine Gun Jeep and APC. As we got to Big Red 1, Lai Khe at the beginning of Thunder Road the last Jeep pulled up alongside us told me to pull over. They said we were moving too slow and holding up the convoy. We were told to stay the night at Lai Khe and the next day's convoy would take us on up to Quan Loi. We pulled into the Lai Khe Compound about noontime and parked that house trailer under some shade trees close to the PX. We went to the PX and bought some beer, put them (cans) in the kitchen sink, went over to the "icehouse" and begged to the SSgt. for ice. Went back to our kitchen and laid the ice on top of the beer, pulled the couch out, pulled out our magazines we saved, like "Good Housekeeping" and sat there in the shade with a cold one looking at the arty pictures. The inside of the trailer stunk! This 19 year-old, I'll bet money on it, he was 19 years old, Warrant Officer, Chopper Pilot came walking by, eating his cup of ice cream. He stopped looked at us and asked, "Who does this belong to?" I said, "It's mine, Sir." He asked, "Can I look inside? I gave him permission. He climbed up inside and walked around in it. He told me how bad it stunk. I guess he didn't think very highly of my house keeping. It reeked. Other military people walked around the trailer and some just looked in the door and some went inside. The next day we went down to the exit gate of the compound and as the convoy came in view I walked out on the road and flagged down the Convoy Commander and told him who I was and pointed at the trailer. He knew about us and told me to get in at the end. We pulled in front of the last Machine Gun Jeep and got almost to Quang Loi, and it broke.

Killblane: What broke?

Nichols: The trailer's hitch was welded to an "A-Frame" and it was welded to the house trailer frame. The A-Frame weld broke. The front end of the house trailer was dragging on the gravel road. We were just clearing Ambush Alley (which was 5/10 miles long), just getting out of it (nasty, nasty place). The rear Escort Machine Gun Jeep left the last Escort APC with us and said they would send back help. We had been out there for about ten minutes walking around the rig trying to decide to drop this baby and run for Quang Loi, because it doesn't belong to me, or wait. When I saw a bunch of Army TANKS up on a hill/ridge, I assumed they were Army, way off in the distance turn their Main Guns on us. Knowing the TANKS knew we were there made me feel a little bit more secure. Later a "Bird Dog" airplane started circling us, then flew over the tree lines very slowly and after a while he flew off. Then a little OH-58 helicopter buzzed us and flew the tree lines for a while and later flew off. Last of all a squad or two of Army Infantry guys appeared out of the tree line and walked over and visited with us. They walked around the rig and asked if they could look inside our house trailer. We gave them permission. After some of them walked through it, they decided to hold that night's ambush in it. One guy picked the kitchen, another picked a bedroom and one picked the bathroom, etc. Their Top Sergeant said NO, they had work to do, rather than hoping Charlie would come by that night. They were gung-ho; they wanted the trailer. I thought I had a "Buyer". They finished crossing the road and walked on, disappearing into the opposite tree line. Our convoy, that dropped us off on the way to Quang Loi, was now approaching us empty on its way back to Long Binh, with an Army tow truck from Quang Loi Compound. The wrecker driver and his helper hooked on to the trailer and wrenched it up off the road. They towed it to Quang Loi while Cook and I followed. The sun was going down when we entered the gate. (During all this time of waiting for help, the local civilians were walking past us, some stopped and talked, some had motorized vehicles and never stopped, to me everything seemed normal for that part of NAM, to me, plus I had my loaded M-16 in hand all the time.) We found food that night and the next morning. Later, the next day we found the Major, who ordered the trailer, and told him his trailer was there and needed him to sign the "paperwork". The Major had requisitioned it for his Colonel's birthday, that full-bird Colonel was an Infantryman. The Colonel did not accept the trailer and yelled to the Major, he said, "I live with my men; I eat with them; I sleep with them; I fight with them." The Colonel's attitude towards the Major was what the hell is your problem? I really respected that Colonel.

Killblane: So, what did you do with that trailer?

Nichols: It is going on about noontime and that day's convoy from Long Binh started rolling in. By luck, one of my platoon Sergeants showed up, I think he was an E-5, hard stripe. I told him about the situation and whined at him that we'd been two days getting there and now nobody would sign the paperwork. He took the bait and said he'd take care of everything. He told Cook and me to stand by at (MY) Bobtail and he'd be back with the signed document. He turned his back and went inside the white "Southern" style Plantation house that was being used by the Colonel as his Headquarters. I said to Cook, "Get in the truck and let's go. "We left his Sgt. Ass" there, like I thought he

deserved. What were they going to do with me, send me to VIET NAM? We ran to and through the gate chasing the convoy. We caught it and headed home. When we got back to Long Binh, Cook and I only had to refuel the truck (no trailer to drop off). Unfortunately for my moral, Sgt. got the paperwork signed, found a helicopter ride back to Long Binh, and the son of a gun was standing in OUR Motor Pool, clean and LAUGHING AT US. We were dirty, stinky and our backs were killing us from the Bobtail.

Killblane: What happened after that, you're talking May now?

Nichols: I drove trucks through May. The first week of June, Tom and I went to Australia for R&R. The second day after we got back, I was a Machine Gunner on a truck and we were ambushed again, no one got hurt. Somewhere around the middle of June I quit driving a truck. I had had it with trucks, plus I was not satisfied with the drivers of our Platoon's Machine Gun Jeep. They were the least experienced drivers and I was tired of pushing a frigging rig. The trucks were just killing me, beating me up. I had thought about driving the Jeep for a couple of weeks. Our Platoon Sergeant was walking through the Hooch one evening and I stopped him and told him I quit driving trucks, I wanted the Platoon's Machine Gun Jeep. The next evening I told him I quit driving trucks and asked where was my Jeep? He said I was the Platoon's Jeep Driver and ran Quang Loi, Tay Nihn, and all the other convoy routes.

Killblane: You're driving a gun Jeep now?

Nichols: I'm driving a Gun Jeep. The back seat had been pulled out, an M-60 mount had been fastened to the floor to sit the Machine Gun on and the Machine Gunner sat on the spare tire. I went through two, three, or four Machine Gunners. None of them were any good.

Killblane: Why, what was the problem with the Machine Gunners?

Nichols: They weren't alert. They weren't reading the roads. They weren't reading the tree lines. One son of a bitch was smoking marijuana on the way back from Tay Nihn or Quang Loi. I could smell him smoking it. I was driving 20/25-mph and I could smell marijuana smoke coming from his direction. I guess he was blowing the smoke 30 miles an hour towards me. I saw him smoking it. I couldn't believe that redhead guy. I didn't know anybody in our unit was using it. I didn't like that. I looked up behind me and he was standing up and smoking away and counting the clouds, plus we were going through the worst part of the convoy route. (The roads were graveled, except for the portions that were under 1 to 3 inches of dirt, with large holes every 20 feet and small holes between them or maybe ruts. Then there were the rough parts of roads. The roads were also bumpy. We couldn't get over 20/25-mph. The trucks and Drivers were being beaten up.) We were returning to Long Binh and that son of a bitch was standing up holding onto the M-60 mount counting the clouds. He didn't have any idea where he was. We passed two kids out in the middle of nowhere. All I remember they were two 5 or 8 year-old children on the side of the road, out in the middle of nowhere; that is not a good sign. I heard a hard metal sounding thump right after we passed them. They threw

a grenade in the jeep! I screamed at the BASTARD, "What was that noise?" and, I'm getting ready to stop the Jeep and de-ass it. My Jeep Sergeant at that moment was turning around trying to figure out what was going on, and I turn around. That SON-OF-A-BITCH was higher than a kite and the whole fucking butt, the stock of the M-60 Machine Gun had fell off. It had hit the side of the Jeep and fell out on to the road. The buffer and spring were sticking out. The buffer spring?

Killblane: I know what you're talking about.

Nichols: ...was sticking out. I had to stop the convoy and I'm looking at him and he's hanging onto the mount, the gun mount, going "uh, uh". One of the two kids brought the black gunstock up to me and handed it to me. I reached into my pocket and whatever amount of MPC [Military Pay Certificate] I had in my pocket (a dollar, a twenty) I threw it at the kid, jumped into the back of the Jeep, grabbed the gun, and snapped it together. The stopped truck driver behind me, who had been watching this, was having a shit-fit.

Killblane: Because he had to stop?

Nichols: Yes, because he saw what had happened. Man, did I have a discussion with redhead BASTARD at home. I went back home and I notified the redhead guy and his buddy, I'd kill them, physically. I went to the First Sergeant and reported it and told others what had happen. I didn't want them to put him in jail. His buddy got arrested the last week I was there. I didn't know they started watching them.

One evening in the Motor Pool, one of the Gypsy Bandits got out of his truck with a bulldozer seat in his arms, along with his personal equipment. I must have bought it for a six pack, because I got it mounted on the backside of the Jeep, behind me, for the Machine Gunner. I then got a guy who was on his second tour in NAM and ex-Infantry. He said wanted to join a Transportation unit, because they rode around in a lot of neat trucks.

Killblane: Didn't want to walk?

Nichols: He didn't want to walk and didn't want to drive. He read the road, read the people, he read the conditions and he was good. We had a good time. He took care of me. He took care of the trucks.

Killblane: What are some of the ambush areas? The signs you'd be looking for an ambush?

Nichols: No civilians at all. They would disappear before and after the ambushes. They knew where the ambushes were. You would come around a curve or over a little hill and the civilians were all parked on the side of the road a mile or less before the ambush area, waiting for us to set it off and clear out the bad guys. I broke down 3 or 4 times over there and some civilians would show up to sell me sunglasses or beer. I've learned that was a good sign because if they didn't show up with their junk, then they knew

there was something wrong. Of course you have to watch them, because one of them would be trying to steal everything out of your truck.

Movement of South Vietnamese troops in the wrong way (before 1968 the North Viet NAM soldiers put on South Viet NAM soldier's uniforms and KILLED an America convoy!). SOME South Vietnamese troops in the field, sometimes, wore bright colored armbands (blue, red, and yellow) on certain days. One village would be one color and the next village would be a different color. I never did understand which color went with which village on what day and the U.S. ARMY never explained it to us. Depending upon what job I was doing that day, I just got ready to run or shoot! If the South Vietnamese looking troops walking on the roads lifted their rifles and other guns up toward me, SHOOT THEM. NO body pointed their weapons at each other unless they were gong to SHOOT to KILL!

In Afghanistan, last week, we (U.S.A. pilots) shot a bunch of innocent people at a wedding. In NAM we were convoying home one afternoon and off in the distance to my left (75/100 yards) was a group of Vietnamese, a dozen or so, and either I didn't see them or I didn't pay them any attention (I was getting Short). They started shooting. I got the Jeep to the left side of the road, so the trucks could run BEHIND me and my Machine Gunner had cocked and was ready. I had stopped, when the Truck Driver behind us started honking his horns (you don't use your horns in big trucks, because they are for WARNING!), plus he's waving his arm out the window. The Vietnamese were celebrating a funeral. We almost killed them. Whoa, have a heart attack, shit in your pants again. They were firing in the air and there were some black pajamas among them. That black pajama stuff wasn't true. I got back on the road, took off wondering "Were the other Machine Gunners behind me on the trucks going to shoot?" We almost killed a bunch of people. Sorry Afghanistan, shit happens in war. The Convoy Commander called/radioed back to the last Jeep and told them what was going on, "Don't shoot those people, they're doing a funeral or something over there." A funeral is what I assumed it was because it was out in the middle of nowhere. They need to have somebody on the road with a sign saying funeral, telling us don't shoot. (But today, I think that would be a great way to set up an ambush.) I drove the Jeep past the middle of August. By the first part of August, I signed my extension so I could get out of the Army early.

Killblane: Explain that again.

Nichols: They came up with a new program, the military did. I'm assuming this was military-wide, at least the Army. If you went home with less than five months active duty remaining, you had the option of taking an Early Out or stay in. So, I calculated my time left in the Army and NAM and I gave the Army, I think, no more than three weeks for 5 months EARLY-OUT. I got my 3 weeks extension and all the other Senior Drivers got to go home two weeks early than they planned. We came in off a convoy and the Senior Drivers were told to clean up, pack and go over to Camp Alpha, they were going home. By the middle of August all my long-time buddies from The Beach were gone.

Killblane: How do you feel being that last one there then?

Nichols: It was lonely. I was with men that were good.

Killblane: But you still made friends with the new guys coming in?

Nichols: Slowly, slowly, but no, no, and what I understand, that's the problem with Viet NAM Vets. Weird. I've done a little reading on that.

Killblane: The same thing in World War II, they didn't really warm up to the replacements coming in either. It's a common phenomenon that happens. When did you start feeling short?

Nichols: I told the Captain...

My Platoon Lieutenant was going home about a week before me, sharp guy, but he started showing up late for convoys, couldn't keep appointments at the end. He probably was a Sociology major. I had to go up to his Hooch a couple of times and wake him up or tell him, Sir, your convoy is ready to pull out and you're not down there. He would reply "Just a moment Specialist 5 Nichols, they can't leave without me." He acted like he had the key to the gate.

We had this Australian Captain, I think he was a Captain, as my Machine Gunner, one time.

Killblane: On your Jeep?

Nichols: Yes! I asked the Captain, whoever he was...

He had all these things on his shoulders, at the morning convoy briefing; he's taking copious notes, getting everything down in writing at our briefing. For example, my call name over the radio was Zulu, the Lieutenant's was Oscar and I have forgotten what the Machine Gunner's code name was.

So, he's taking all kinds of notes and we're convoying east through Saigon, towards the ocean (it should be a simple and safe run). The officer in charge of the briefing (we were standing in the middle of the Staging Area with 100's of loaded Fuel and Ammo Trucks all around us (not that day, but 2 or 3 other times we heard enemy rockets fly over us) is still talking. I finally turned to the Aussie I ask, "What are you doing, Sir?" He said, "Learning how your convoys run. You run the best convoys in the world." I thought to myself, "Well, kiss my ass." I had him as a Machine Gunner and the LT. was teaching him how to run a convoy. I checked the Aussie out on the M-60; he loaded and unloaded it, then showed me how to operate the Machine Gun. He told me he had fired M-60's before. We looked at the radio and Checked it out. He was very, very energetic, and spent a lot of time listening to us. He was going to become a Convoy Commander, or be the head of the Aussie convoys in NAM. We picked up a couple of Americans

Officers at different times to train. This was really interesting; I got to tell Officers they were wrong.

We got this new American Army Captain, I didn't know who he was and I was on my last convoy run (I had decided days earlier that day was my last day out). I told him that morning after the briefing, "Sir, glad to meet you and this is my last convoy". He was real nice. He asked me how I knew this was my last convoy. I said, "I'm going home in two weeks, I got to go to the dentist, because of a toothache. I got to get my shots updated and I had 1 or 2 other small medical items I had to have done, plus I've got five days of ROS [Return of Service] time to sign out of NAM. While all this small talk was going on, I was checking him out on the M-60 and radio. That evening in the Motor Pool the Captain was introduced as our new CO (talking about giving away my SECRET plans).

The next day I went on Sick Call and later Top [First Sergeant or Top Sergeant] came to me and said, they need help (I knew they did), but I was done. I quit! He asked me to answer the phone at night, I said, "Yes, Sir. I'll do the Night Phone Detail." I got to stay awake at night for the next two weeks and go Sick Call, plus sleep during the day (that was the job I had been looking for in NAM).

Killblane: Is there a time when you're driving that you begin to realize you have good chance of getting home and you start becoming a little more nervous about it?

Nichols: Yes. In the Jeep I did that.

Killblane: How far out?

Nichols: Getting close to the last two weeks, I was getting...

Killblane: So, you're month out, you're month from going home.

Nichols: When that situation on the side of the road, where the people were probably celebrating the funeral. I was sleeping through that. I'm afraid I didn't mentally comprehend what going over there and did not see them. I made a couple of other mistakes, I was not doing my job 110%, and it scared me later. I could have gotten myself killed. Once I decided, "That's my day, I'll be Army all the way up to that day; and then I'm stopping it." I had to have made up my mind, the week of MY last convoy.

Killblane: Did you do anything different from that time on like sitting... ? Oh, ok, drinking.

Nichols: I probably started keeping my mouth shut! They could not send me to NAM, but they sure in the hell could keep me THERE. I also had a few beers at night while on duty. That red headed guy's buddy was arrested the last week I was there, during a surprise Inspection. I had to drive an officer up to the MP Jail and get the guy out, after

he was Charged. Later, First Sergeant offered me a set of E-5 Stripes, and I told him "No, thanks I was going home."

Killblane: How did you feel when you finally got your orders to go home and went back?

Nichols: Rebellious. I let my mustache grow below corners of my mouth. I did not have the little hair I was growing trimmed. I was supposed to have gone to Camp Alpha and spent three or four days waiting for an airplane. I knew when I was supposed to be going home, so I just stayed in my Company area for two extra days with my buddies. I spent less than 24 hours at Camp Alpha. I probably would have gone crazy over there waiting. At Camp Alpha, the last thing they did to you was run you down a cattle-shoot and inspected the length of your hair. They wanted to see if you needed a haircut right before you got on the airplane! They had this guy... you ever see a Texas bar with chicken wire in front of the singers?

Killblane: I've seen it in pictures.

Nichols: They had this guy sitting on a bar stool with chicken wire nailed to poles 8 feet from him and surrounding him. He was sitting on a barstool. The wire had to be thicker than chicken wire; he was totally fenced in. He was too far away from a person to grab him by the throat through the fencing. His job was to tell you, "you needed a haircut and can't go home. Next Please". Some of the guys had been out of the jungle for 2 or 3 days or a week or 2 and are now are going to be told "you need a haircut, you can't go home. Next Please". When it was my turn, I stood there talking to myself, "Please don't tell me I need a haircut." I've been two weeks without a haircut. Please let me go through the turnstile and get on the Freedom Bird and go back to the WORLD.

Killblane: How did you feel when you finally got home?

Nichols: Lost.

Killblane: Lost? Why?

Nichols: for examples: I had no clothes that fit me, I did not understand what Expansion Teams were, Rock-n-Roll was dying, America was being lied to about Viet NAM, by the television people.

Killblane: All the weight you lost?

Nichols: Yes.

Killblane: How much weight did you lose while you were over there?

Nichols: I'm assuming I was down below 150 pounds.

Killblane: What was your normal weight?

Nichols: Probably about this size here, about 185 pounds. I wore my uniform over to a big St. Louis County shopping mall and went into a nice men store. There I bought, I think a suit, shirt, tie, everything. It was off the rack a size larger than I was. Maybe what it was I bought a blazer and some slacks and everything. I left it on and walked over and paid for it. I took my Class As Army Uniform and carefully rolled it up, stuck it in the bag. I told the man, "I just got home from NAM. I'm not AWOL." Less than a month later my older brother was on his way to Viet NAM. He was drafted, also and came home safe.

Killblane: Those are my questions. Is there anything that you can think of that you would like to add?

Nichols: No. I'm putting a story together that I can email to you if you want me to.

Killblane: I'd love to have that.

Nichols: A lot more detail. (P.S. This Draftee was in the U.S. Army for 19 months and hours and made Spec 5 in 15 months. Go Army!)

Killblane: Thank you.

From: Ellis Edward Nichols, March 31, 2003