

John David Cooney Interviewed September 12, 2007  
Sgt. E-5, US Army, September 1981 – September 1987

Before John graduated from Spring-Ford High School in June, 1981, one of John's friends went to visit the Army recruiter and John went along for moral support. The Army was offering a \$5,000 bonus for combat Military Occupation Specialties (MOS) and two recruiters showed up at track practice one Saturday to make the offer. As it turns out, John enlisted, but his friend didn't.



In September, 1981, John was sworn in and headed to Fort Knox, KY. In his first glimpse of the Army way, the trip took three days via train, bus, train and bus again. They arrived and were met by military personnel on September 11 and he was surprised that there wasn't anyone screaming in their faces. The first day was spent in a hotel until all of the recruits arrived. The first step was to get a hair cut and then pay for it. About ten minutes later, the yelling started. Everyone was put in a line and marched to the next building for uniforms, sleeping bags, etc...

In a typical day, it was awake at 4:30 am, outside for Physical Training (PT) by 5 or 5:30 am. PT would last for about two hours, and then there would be a break for breakfast followed by more PT. Bed time would be 7 or 8 pm. This schedule went on for 12 weeks. It was six weeks before they even had one day off. John had lots of second thoughts about his decision to join the Army, but the doubts gradually left and they were kept so busy and were so exhausted that they didn't have time to think about being homesick.

John had chosen to be in the tank corps when he enlisted. His Advanced Individual Training (AIT) also took place at Fort Knox. Things became more relaxed and being in the military was more like a job even though they still did running and other military training. At AIT, they learned every aspect of the tank: driving, being a loader (for the gun), being a tank commander, how to tear down parts of the tank and how to pull the engine. They also learned how to disassemble the main cannon and the .50 caliber machine gun. They had to be able to take the machine gun apart, clean it, put it back together and then fire it, all while blind folded.

At the end of AIT, John was given 30 days off and orders for where to report next. John's assignment was to go to Freeburg, Germany to join the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Division. The chartered Luftansa flight from Fort Dix, NJ left the day after Christmas, 1981 carrying dependents and soldiers to Frankfurt. From there, a bus took them to Freeburg. Upon arrival, John was assigned to an M60A3 medium battle tank. The tank weighed 62 tons fully battle loaded, could go up to 35 mph down hill and got about one mile per gallon from its two caterpillar engines and 350 gallon diesel fuel tank.

Each tank had a crew of four and John fit right in. The crew was short a driver and John took that position. John describes the steering mechanism as like a tricycle's handle bars. To steer, you slid the bar in a semi-circle. To turn to the right the driver would, move the bar to the left. The driver would most often sit with his head and chest out of the tank. This was not the best arrangement in poor

weather. This also allowed snow to get inside the tank. It wasn't uncommon to have three or four inches of snow inside the tank all winter. While tanks do have heaters, it was difficult to get parts which meant the heaters often didn't work and the tank never became warm enough to melt the snow that had made its way inside.

When driving in battle conditions, the driver would sit inside the tank with the hatch over his head closed and locked. He had three periscopes giving him a view of the front and each side from inside the tank. For John, the ride was not very bumpy, but the crew in the back had a more difficult time as the tank bumped along.

### Making Friends

In the winter of '83-'84 John's tank received a new tank commander who brought heater parts with him from the states. The crew had lots of friends that winter as other tank crews would come over to visit and warm up when out on duty. Tanks don't hold that many people so they would let the visitors warm up and then send them on their way.

During John's time in Germany, the Cold War was still in progress and his unit's job was to guard the Fulda Gap between East and West Germany. Named for the nearby town of Fulda, it was one of the main corridors that Soviet armor could take into West Germany. Along the border was a fence with red on one side and white on the other. There was another fence about 50 yards beyond and the rumor was that people who could get between the fences crossing the border couldn't be shot. John rarely saw the soldiers facing him on the other side of the border, but when he did, he recalls it as a chilling experience. American tankers were told that in the event of war, their life expectancy was seven seconds. Whether this was true or not, the men didn't know, but it did serve to point out the danger they were facing.



On a typical day of border duty, they would do some minor training with a lot of map orientation, but they mainly sat there and watched the border. They were ready to go to war 24/7. One of the items they were issued was a pack of cards showing the silhouettes of Russian and East German jets, tanks and vehicles to they could quickly identify them. From his vantage point, he could see the tanks on the other side of the fence. They would be at the border for 45 days straight, concealed in the woods and moving from time to time. While on duty, they would sleep in their tanks and would have food brought up in trucks for their one hot meal of the day. There were not any shower or bathroom facilities there at the border so the men would wash with water from five-gallon containers.

While back at barracks, they would have some free time and could visit the local town, but were always ready to return to base. The town had an alert siren that served as the signal to return to base and prepare for action. The barracks were about an hours drive by tank to the border. The route went through small German towns with narrow, winding streets. When the local townspeople knew the tanks

would be moving up to the border for their 45 day shift, they would park their cars a few feet further from the street curb. Combined with the narrow streets, it was very difficult to maneuver without hitting some of the cars and John admits to hitting his share. The tanks would keep on going after a collision, but an officer would follow up to handle the paperwork so the German citizens could get a new car courtesy of the US Army.

John's first Christmas in Germany was a sad time. He had been overseas for nearly a year and all the sadness built up. He did get to go home one time, in 1983, for his brother's wedding where he was the best man. There were many opportunities to travel and because Europe is relatively small, it was easy to take the train to Paris, Italy, Austria and Switzerland. He and some friends would travel in civilian clothes, but with military hair cuts, they were easy to spot as soldiers. John recalls that the military was not well liked, but France and Italy were particularly bad. While in Germany, however, they would run into older civilians who would didn't speak English, but would come up to American soldiers and give them hugs of gratitude.

The men were able to stay in touch with the outside world in a military way. They could not just turn on a radio or TV, but were limited to stations chosen by the military. One time, the Super Bowl was piped in and they were able to watch the game.

#### An Accident

During training one winter, they were in a line of tanks that were going down a small hill and then up another. The tank in front started to slide back down the hill because of the snow on the ground. John figured they would gain some traction and make it up the hill so he ducked down inside his tank to avoid the falling snow. What John couldn't see was that the tank behind them was sliding down the first hill toward them and John's tank ended up being sandwiched between the front and rear tanks. The next thing John knew, he was being taken to the hospital in a helicopter with a concussion. The tank commander suffered a broken back and concussion and his military career was ended. John was back on duty in two days.

One incident occurred when a tank in another company further down the border accidentally pointed its gun at the border. This was considered an act of war and planes were scrambled and everyone went on alert. The whole situation was sorted out and things returned to normal, but not before all troops at the border received a stern lecture on the importance of watching your moves at the border. Sometimes, they were close enough to the border that they could throw rocks at the East Germans and at night, they would sometimes hear a rock being thrown back.

In the spring of 1984, John received orders to report to Fort Stewart, GA. Glad to be back in the States, the military service had a different feel. In Germany, it was all business and he was on duty all the time. In the States, it was more like a regular job.

At this time, there was a shift in the military's thinking and the tanks were ordered to be painted from dark browns and greens to sand colors. The unit was given two days notice and then sent to the Mahove desert for 75 days of training and war games. The desert was very hot during the day, but on a clear night, it would snow. The men slept outside in sleeping bags because it was more comfortable

than in the tank. They learned to wake up slowly to make sure a snake or scorpion hadn't crawled in with them during the night. There were war games between the red and blue forces and they trained with the infantry and air force so they would have a chance to practice working together.



While at Fort Stewart, John's tank commander was injured playing rugby. John became tank commander and platoon commander which meant he was in charge of three tanks. By this time, John was a Sergeant and said that the responsibility was not a problem because he had good men under him. It was for his service during this time that John received the Army Commendation Medal. Part of the citation reads: "...His professionalism and hard work earned him the respect of all those with whom he worked."

The thing that surprised John the most was that he had always thought that the military was a tight, well-oiled organization, but the motto seemed to be "Hurry Up and Wait." They'd rush you to get somewhere but then when

you got there you'd just have to wait around.

After being discharged, John found that he missed the military lifestyle. He even considered re-enlisting, but eventually made the adjustment to civilian life.