

Richard (Rich) Harry Brucker interviewed October 16, 2007

E-5, US Army, July 1966 – May 1968

After graduating from Abington High School in 1964, Richard worked as a surveyor for two years before



receiving his draft notice. After being sworn in, Rich boarded an overnight troop train for Fort Bragg, NC. In the morning, he got up, ate a breakfast of cold eggs on the train and thought “I’m in the army now.”

Basic training was very rigorous. The men did marching, pushups, calisthenics and running. Lots of running, before and after meals. They ran everywhere. All the while, they were thinking that they could be sent to Vietnam. On the bright side was the thought that not everyone was sent to Vietnam and they might end up in Germany or elsewhere.

The men were given aptitude tests and asked what their interests were. Rich requested engineering because of his surveying background. At the end of boot camp, they were given their assignments for advanced training. Rich was assigned to Fort Leonard Wood, MO for Corps of Engineers training. There, he continued to train with the rifle, but also learned how to build temporary bridges and airfields, set up concertina wire, lay and dig up land mines and work with explosives. Some of the training was in the classroom, but most was hands on. After the two months of training, Rich ended up as a holdover meaning he had graduated, but was not yet assigned a place to go. For about the next month, he filled sandbags, did construction, cleanup, etc... anything to keep busy. Finally, the orders for Vietnam arrived.

A Fortunate Change of Assignment...

Rich received two weeks of leave before he had to report to Oakland, CA for the flight overseas. On the way to California, Rich and some friends from the Army Engineering Training Center stopped at the home of another friend in Rhome, TX where they spent a day or two. A commercial carrier took them from Oakland to Vietnam and he arrived to see lush, green fields after leaving winter in the US. He had arrived on February 25, 1967, his 20th birthday. Trucks took them through the local villages and over the winding roads. Their destination was a holding area where the men waited for their next assignment. While waiting, Rich had guard duty in the interior of the camp. Originally, Rich was slated to be assigned to the northern part of South Vietnam, but suddenly, he was re-assigned to US Army Engineers Headquarters Command at the military installation and airbase at Bien Hoa. Rich jokes that his ability to type may have saved his life.

Rich was assigned to be manager of classified control. In this job, he was responsible for logging in and maintaining confidential and secret documents for copies of communications between engineering and Headquarters. Rich would log in and file secret and confidential documents. These records were kept in locked file cabinets in an office in a large “hooch” (mostly tin, rounded roof building). Before he could begin this job of working with secret documents, he needed to get a secret security clearance.

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While waiting for the clearance, Rich was a courier. He would drive jeeps or ¾ ton trucks to pick up and deliver documents. His trips often took him into Saigon which was about 10 miles away on Highway 1. Saigon had both modern and poor sections. Rich remembers lots of markets and old French cars and rickshaws.

When leaving the base, the couriers would recruit a guard to go along. During the day, it was fairly safe, but once it got dark, it was best to be off the road. Rich did get caught out a few times after dark and experienced sniper fire. Sometimes, when they got back, they would find bullet holes in the canvas canopy of the jeep. One day, they stopped to look at a road side religious shrine when they were fired at by a sniper. They quickly moved on.

Once his security clearance was received, Rich began his job with the classified and secret documents. Documents had to be logged in and filed for quick retrieval. When documents were destroyed, Rich had to burn them and certify that they were destroyed. If the base were overrun, it would be Rich's job to destroy the documents by setting off some incendiary grenades on top of the filing cabinets and letting them burn through and into the documents. There were a number of occasions when Rich was told to prepare the grenades, but he never had to use them.



Rich Brucker in his office at Long Binh. The wooden boxes on the file cabinets hold incendiary grenades for destroying documents in an emergency.

Living conditions on base included a hooch for barracks. The food was fair although steaks were flown in once or twice. There was limited fresh food and the milk was awful. At Bien Hoa, There was artillery set up on the base that would often fire in support of troops in the field. The airfield was also located on the base and planes would take off and land around the clock. Despite the constant noise, Rich said they got use to it and were able sleep. There were also a number of times that the base was under mortar attack and the men had to scramble into sandbag bunkers. Rich carried his M-14 nearly everywhere he went.

Interesting Dinners...

Sometimes, Rich and his friends would go into the city of Bien Hoa for dinner. During these meals, Rich was able to eat water buffalo, monkey, dog and rat. They would go into the city as a group and make sure they were back on base by nightfall. There were movies shown on base and Rich even saw a USO show featuring Bob Hope.

In late October, the office transferred about four miles away to Long Binh. This is where US Army HQ in Vietnam was located and Rich was able to meet General William Westmoreland and other high ranking

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Generals. The military had built new office buildings and Rich eventually even had air conditioning in his office. For the three months prior to the move, the staff would be bussed to Long Binh from Bien Hoa with armed escorts. They would leave at 6:30 in the morning and return at 7:30 at night. The schedule was twelve hours a day with every other Sunday off.

Softball...

Rich and a friend decided to organize a softball league for their Sundays off. There was enough interest to field four teams. Because the field they used was outside the perimeter, there were a few precautions they had to take. The first was to sweep the field for booby-traps and mines. Since they were trained as engineers, this wasn't a problem. The other precaution was to have the team that was up to bat stand guard duty around the field. When it was someone's turn to bat, they would come in off the field perimeter to take their swings. The league proved to be quite popular and there was almost as much enjoyment gained from looking forward to the games as there was in playing them.



Rich Brucker at Long Binh, February 18, 1968. He is holding a shell that landed on the base from a friendly fire incident.

At Long Binh, Rich would pull guard duty some nights. The guards would show up at a designated area with their M14 rifles and 200 rounds of ammunition and be trucked out to a berm on the perimeter. On the berm would be a sandbagged knoll where they would stand. About 20 – 40 yards out would be concertina wire and they would set up flares, booby traps and claymore mines each night. Beyond the wire was the jungle. They would spend the night with four hours on guard duty and four hours off. During the off time, they could try to sleep in a small tent that was set up behind the berm for this purpose. There were a number of times Rich was involved in fire fights with the enemy and in one incident in May of 1967, the enemy breached the perimeter and were on the airstrip with explosives before being repulsed.

The enemy was most active at night and men had heard of occasions when the enemy had snuck inside the perimeter and turned the claymore mines around so that when they were detonated, they would fire toward the defenders. To combat this possibility, the guards would put reflective tape on the back of the claymore mine to make sure it was facing the correct way. They would also sometimes put a flare on the mine so if someone tried to move it, the flare would go off. At first, the guards were authorized to fire at anything that moved out in front of them, however, after a near miss friendly-fire incident, the guards had to hold their fire and seek confirmation before firing. During heavy enemy activity at night, a flare system was used to signal to the perimeter guards when they could fire and when they should stop. A red flare meant "turkey shoot" and everyone was to shoot a low ground covering fire. A green flare meant stop.

The Tet Offensive...

In early 1968, there was very little warning about the impending Tet offensive. Rich saw documents

indicating the possibility of an attack, but the size and scope of the attack was a surprise. In late January, the North Vietnamese struck at 80 different cities in the south. By now, Rich had been promoted to E-5 and one of his duties was to be in charge of the guards on a section of the perimeter at Long Binh. He would take 12 men, load them up with hand grenades and spread them out between four bunkers. During Tet, Rich was pulling guard duty every other night. There were skirmishes at Long Binh, but his former base at Bien Hoa was hit hard and he could see the smoke rising from the city of Bien Hoa. In a letter home on February 4, 1968, Rich wrote to his parents "Part of Bien Hoa City no longer exists. Many homes have been burned... only four out of twenty of the Vietnamese employees have come to work so far...The others will not come back to work because they have been threatened by the V.C. [Viet Cong]." The airfield was shut down and air support had to be called in from Saigon. Rich witnessed a US helicopter being shot down and also felt the heat from napalm being dropped outside the perimeter.

Even after pulling guard duty, Rich still had to keep working his day job in the confidential and secret records room. He was aware of the massive scale of the attacks as communication flow increased during this time: reports on casualties, troop displacement, movement of troops, etc... Rich did have to read parts of the communications so he could log in the titles of the documents and their content so they could be quickly retrieved. The Tet activity lasted about a month and a half. Rich would normally have been sent back to the states at the end of February, however, a few months earlier he had taken advantage of a program that allowed soldiers who were exiting Vietnam with 90 days or less left on their enlistment to then be discharged upon return to the United States. Rich extended his tour by two months to get him inside the 90 day period not realizing that he would then be there for the full length of the Tet Offensive.

For his work in managing the classified control center where the confidential and secret documents were kept, Rich earned the Army Commendation Medal which is given for meritorious service to the US Army. The Army would make un-announced reviews of the records and Rich did well at these reviews. General Duke, Head of Corps of Engineers, gave Rich the Commendation Medal in a ceremony. Rich was also promoted to E-5 based on his appearance before a review board and testing. He had scored in the top 10%.

Rich was fortunate during his time in Vietnam to have two R&R trips. Most only receive one, but Rich had a friend who worked in the scheduling area who noticed a cancellation for someone to go on an R&R and he put Rich's name on the list instead. The two trips were to Hong Kong and Sydney, Australia.



Rich Brucker, Long Binh, February 18, 1968.

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Winding Down...

As Rich's time in Vietnam wound down, the last 30 days really dragged. He became extra cautious as he didn't want anything to happen to him so close to going home. At the end, he had to turn in almost all of the items he had been issued. He took his combat boots and dress greens home with him. They were able to also ship a box of belongings home. One of the more interesting souvenirs he sent home was an elephant skin brief case.

Once Rich saw the airplane he was to take home, he couldn't wait to get on it. The plane flew to Oakland, CA via Clark Field in the Philippines and Honolulu, HI. It was a great feeling arriving back in the States. He was discharged in Oakland after debriefings and a physical. During the physical, he had a fever. He quickly shook the temperature back down to normal before the nurse came back to check because he was afraid they would keep him in Army quarantine until he was better. It was here in Oakland, however, that he saw his first sign that all was not well in the US. He saw a sign saying "GI's and dogs, stay off the grass." In San Francisco, he saw his first hippie. Rich said it was hard to stay in touch with what was going on in the world when he was in Vietnam. They didn't have TV and the only paper was the *Stars and Stripes* published by the Army.

Rich didn't have trouble adjusting to civilian life although his mother would wake him up with a clothes pole since he tended to be a little jumpy when waking up. He took advantage of the GI bill and went to college. While attending Montgomery County Community College and the University of Denver, he met and made friends with other veterans. Rich never regretted being drafted, which wasn't the case with some of the people he knew. He feels that his Army experience made him a better, more mature person.