

THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE
KNOXVILLE

AN INTERVIEW WITH FRED HART

FOR THE
VETERANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF WAR AND SOCIETY
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

INTERVIEW BY
G. KURT PIEHLER
AND
MARK BOULTON

KNOXVILLE, TENNESSEE
APRIL 21, 2001

TRANSCRIPT BY
MARK BOULTON

REVIEWED BY
PATRICK LEVERTON
GREGORY KUPSKY

KURT PIEHLER: This begins an interview with Fred L. Hart on April 21, 2001 in Knoxville, Tennessee with Kurt Piehler and ...

MARK BOULTON: Mark Boulton.

PIEHLER: And I guess I'd like to begin by asking you a little bit about your parents, and maybe with one of the basic questions about your parents. How did they meet?

FRED L. HART: Mother told me that Daddy was standing on the street corner behind a Army truck, and she saw him, and she said, "I didn't know they made American soldiers look so cute." (Laughter) This is how they met. And Dad said, "I looked up and I seen this beautiful blonde-haired woman staring down at me, and I didn't know they made German women look so cute." And that's how they met.

PIEHLER: Do you know what month and year this was, that the two laid eyes—it sounds like they literally laid eyes on each other.

HART: From what I can understand, the war was just about over. It was over in the sector they were in. There was still some fighting going on, so this would have to be very, very early spring, or right at the end of winter.

PIEHLER: What part of Germany was your mother from?

HART: A little town called Essau. It was a very small town, but now, she wasn't in Essau when she met Dad. She was in Nuremberg. That's where I was born, in Nuremberg.

PIEHLER: So that's where they met, in Nuremberg?

HART: Right.

PIEHLER: Did your father have any problems getting permission to marry?

HART: No.

PIEHLER: There's no story of ...

HART: None. None. None. Because they got married after the war was over. I think the problems were before the war was over. That's where the problems began.

PIEHLER: So they were trying to see each other ...

HART: He was a master sergeant in the Army, and he could pull strings, where the regular G.I. couldn't.

PIEHLER: Your father was obviously a veteran of the war against Germany. What did he ever tell you a about the war itself, growing up?

HART: He told me about training in the United States. How difficult it could be. He told me about going overseas to England, and how rotten it was, and that he was a cook at one time, and then he was a supply sergeant. He told me ... that they would take the food out of the mess hall and cram it in their gas masks, and go out to the streets of London, and find a row of houses and knock on anybody's door and say, "I've got some food here. Could you all use it, and could you cook us a good meal?" And the people were thrilled to death, because there was a food shortage in England, and the Army food tasted so bad that, even him being a cook, he said it was a break for him. They did it all the time. He said it's a wonder how the English could take cheese and corned beef and make such [an] elaborate meal out of it. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: ... Your parents were married in December of 1945.... Do you know when your father was able to return to the States, and when your mother was able to return?

HART: He stayed as long as he could. I was born in June of '46, and he was still there, because I've got some pictures of him with me when I was small. He stayed as long as he could, and then they had to be separated. The reason he got out of the Army was because he was going to make a career out of the Army, but they were going to send him to Japan and he couldn't take his family with him, and he said, "we've been separated too long."

PIEHLER: So that really changed his ... life plan.

HART: Yeah. He did very well. He had [an] eighth grade education. Didn't have enough money at that time to buy a suit of clothes to go to high school. A very poor family. Went into the Civilian Conservation Corps, CCC camps, went from there into the Army, and come out with the highest rank in the Army that you could [achieve] at that time, during World War II. Did very well.

PIEHLER: Is your father still alive?

HART: Yes, he is.

PIEHLER: Oh, do you think he'd like to be interviewed?

HART: He may. He talks about it sometimes to me, and then sometimes he don't. He may. I can ask him, but I'm not promising.

PIEHLER: No, we understand. You were actually born June 10, 1946, in Nuremberg.

HART: Right. Right.

PIEHLER: When did you and your mother make it to the States?

HART: Two years later.

PIEHLER: Two years later, so not until nineteen forty ...

HART: Eight.

PIEHLER: Eight.

HART: Forty-eight. I don't remember anything in Germany. I do remember being on a ship, and a Coke bottle rolling around. I know it's hard to believe, but I do remember that. And ... Mom being so sick, 'cause she could not stand the ocean. She was seasick.

PIEHLER: I'm curious: growing up, did you speak any German?

HART: No. My mother's lost most of—I think she can still read it, but she never—there really isn't no German community here that I know of. Maybe just single people—I'm not saying single people, but just one or two war brides here, and that's about it. No German community here in Knoxville that I know of.

PIEHLER: Growing up, ... how much did your family stay in touch with your mother's family in Germany?

HART: Mother wrote her letters all the time. They stayed in touch, but now the only family she had left in Germany after the war was her mother. Nobody else. Nobody else made it.

PIEHLER: What had happened to them?

HART: They were all killed.

PIEHLER: Were they killed in service, or ...

HART: They were killed in service. They were killed by the Russians. The little place they lived—the area that they lived—was in Eastern Germany. If your relatives had ties to the German Army, even from World War I, the Russians just killed them all. Their idea of—whatever you want to call it—their idea of control, they killed everybody.

PIEHLER: You mentioned your father was thinking of making a career out of the Army, but did not want to go to Japan. What did he do after he left the Army?

HART: He come back to work here, and drew—whatever they call it—rocking chair money for a year, trying to find a job. There were no jobs here. There never was any jobs here. Until Knoxville got a little more industrialized, and a got little bit bigger, there wasn't any good paying jobs here. He just did menial jobs. I mean, there were so many people who served form East Tennessee [that] when they all come back, there was a flood of good workers out there, and not many jobs to go around.

PIEHLER: But he did eventually become a truck driver.

HART: Right. He knew how to drive a truck, from the Army.

PIEHLER: You mentioned on the pre-interview survey that he did get a job and worked there for thirty years.

HART: Yes.

PIEHLER: When did he finally get that job? You said it took him a while.

HART: He got that job, a ... better job than he could find. I think it was like in the early '50s, very early '50s.

PIEHLER: But it took him several years to find it.

HART: Several years to find work.

PIEHLER: And you mentioned he used the whole Fifteen-and-Twenty, basically the year of unemployment, partly because he couldn't get a good job.

HART: Right. There wasn't any jobs at that time.

PIEHLER: Your mother also worked outside of the home when you were growing up.

HART: Right.

PIEHLER: She worked for a laundry, you've listed in the pre-interview [survey].

HART: Right.

PIEHLER: How old were you when she started working outside of the home? Do you remember?

HART: Five years old, something like that.

PIEHLER: She worked forty hours, full-time?

HART: Right. Very bad job. Seventeen bucks a week. I remember.

PIEHLER: That's not a lot of money any ...

HART: No, not even back in the '50s. But she thought that because she was a German, and she couldn't speak English very well, that nobody wanted to hire her. So she got that type of job. It's a job nobody wanted.

PIEHLER: She did eventually work in a textile mill.

HART: Right, the old Standard Eddy Mill. I worked at it. I think everybody in Knoxville ... worked at it at one time or another.... It didn't pay that well, but it paid better than a laundry worker. It was very steady work. They had contracts with the government, so they never run out of work. They always had work to do.

PIEHLER: ... I'm so new to Knoxville. Where was the mill?

HART: If you go by I-40 and go east out of here [the University of Tennessee campus], and you get up around the Fifth Avenue exit, and go past it—don't get on the exit; go past the exit—and you look over to your right, you'll see the remains of it. There's a big wide space, and then there's an old warehouse there that was the original part of the mill, and that's all that's left of it.

PIEHLER: When your mother was working there, and when you were working there, how many people did it ...

HART: Oh, it employed up to—close to 4,000 at one time. It was one of the major employers in Knoxville.

PIEHLER: When did it finally go totally out of business?

HART: I'd say in the middle '80s, when mother retired.

PIEHLER: So she ended up staying there her entire ...

HART: Yeah. She stayed there the whole time.

PIEHLER: You were very young when your mother went off to work. Who took care of you?

HART: My aunts. We had some aunts that stayed at home with Daddy's mother, and that's who I stayed with.

BOULTON: Did your mother have any problems as a German citizen when she came over to the United States?

HART: I think so. They never would talk about it, but I think so. I heard comments made. "Why would an American G.I. marry a Nazi?" Well, not all Germans were Nazis. A lot of them were just working people that got caught up in a situation that they had no control over.

PIEHLER: You went to Sunnyview elementary school.... Where did you grow up? What community?

HART: Really, there wasn't a name for the community I was in. I guess you would call it a mixture of two communities, Sunnyview and Ramsey, but all my friends went to Sunnyview School. I didn't go to Ramsey School. I was right in the middle, on the dividing line. If I'd went around the curb, I'd have went to Ramsey School, and that's where I went to school.

PIEHLER: Did you grow up in Knoxville?

HART: Right. In the county, not in the city.

PIEHLER: Not in the city, you were in the county?

HART: In the county.

PIEHLER: And Sunnyview is which—I guess, which part? Is it east? West?

HART: East Knoxville.

PIEHLER: East Knoxville?

HART: In the county. East Knox County. The old school's still there, but it's not been used for school in many an age.

PIEHLER: How big was your elementary school when you were going there?

HART: I would say 150, maybe less.

PIEHLER: So it was a small ...

HART: A very small school.

PIEHLER: And where you lived, what did most people do for a living? What did parents do for a living?

HART: Well, I had a guy across the street from us, he was [an] engineer on the railroad. I had another guy up the street from us, he was [an] electrician. I had a retired military officer that lived next door to us. We lived in rental property, and I had—a friend of mine, his dad was in the auto parts business. No. He wasn't in auto parts. He was a body man for a automobile place. Had another guy I knew, he worked as a utility man in a large grocery store, that kind of job. That was it. It wasn't a poor neighborhood; it wasn't a middle-class neighborhood. I guess it was a mixture. Some had a lot of money, and some didn't. But we all got along. It wasn't like it is now in some of these neighborhoods. There wasn't any fighting all the time, or crime down the street. You could leave your lawn mower out in the backyard, and if you left it there for three months, it'd still be there. Nobody'd take it. The guy that was the engineer had a very beautiful daughter, and she didn't shy away from me, and I didn't shy away from her. I mean, we didn't have no ... romantic interest in each other, but we all played together as kids. It wasn't like, "Well, I'm the poor little boy, my parents didn't have much money, and you're very rich, and you can't have nothing to do with me." We had a good time together. Everybody played together.

PIEHLER: Sounds like you have fond memories of growing up.

HART: We had a pretty good time.

PIEHLER: What games would you play? What would you do for fun growing up?

HART: Oh, we always played Army. We would play like we was in the Army. We played marbles, that was big. Baseball, football games, stuff like that. And we'd just go off, and we had a large section of woods next to us. We'd just go off in the woods and enjoyed that, just walking, exploring. Had an old quarry that we weren't supposed to go to, but we always went to it. (Laughter) Stuff like that. Had caves in the quarry that we made, that we could play in. It was a good time.

PIEHLER: When did your family get television? Do you remember, or did you always have it?

HART: Let me see. I'm thinking. I remember. '56, or was it '57? It was about the time that Knoxville got its first TV station, '56, or '57, right around in there. 'Cause at one time, Knoxville didn't have one. The closest one, I think, was Chattanooga, and you couldn't pick it up. No way.

PIEHLER: So it's a very distinct memory getting TV, growing up?

HART: Oh, very, very distinct. I remember seeing Dwight D. Eisenhower. Daddy said, "I never thought I'd see that SOB again," he said, "And there he is!" (Laughter)

PIEHLER: Why did your father call him an SOB, do you know?

HART: It was out of fondness.

PIEHLER: Oh, he was fond of him?

HART: He was fond of Eisenhower. Daddy was always a Democrat. He said, "He's a hell of a general, and the worst politician we've ever had." (Laughter) I remember it.

PIEHLER: The only reason I ask is that most ... vets really speak very fondly of Eisenhower.

HART: Yeah.

PIEHLER: Those who even had a glimmer of contact, or even those who never met him really speak very highly of him.

HART: Dad's respect was from the Army. When he called him an SOB, he means ...

PIEHLER: That was a term of affection?

HART: Very affectionate for him. It was.

PIEHLER: Because I've heard others refer to their commanders as SOBs, but it was a more serious ...

HART: Well, this was out of respect. It really was.

PIEHLER: Growing up, how often would you go to movies?

HART: Oh, once or twice a month. We used to come up here—well, they used to bring me on Saturday morning to the Bijou. We'd would see these serial movies. I think it cost a quarter to get in. I remember those. And then when you graduated from those movies, you got a little older. You got to see [movies] at the Tennessee, and the Riviera. That was the only ones we ever went to. All kinds of good movies, they'd had. I remember seeing Ben Hur when it first came out. Oh, it was the best movie I ever seen in my life! Those kinds of movies.

BOULTON: Did you ever watch any of the old World War II movies?

HART: Every one I could get my hands on.

BOULTON: Yeah?

HART: Yeah, every one I get my hands on. I just—every time there was one on TV—it interests me. It still interests me now. I'm not a veteran that shies away from watching those movies. I like them.

PIEHLER: It sounds like you watched a lot of them, growing up.

HART: A lot of them. Yes, I did. John Wayne was my hero. Randolph Scott was my hero. Audie Murphy was my hero. I watched that movie with Audie Murphy, about his life. I bet I watched it—I know I've seen it ten times. If it comes on, I'll watch it again.

PIEHLER: And you saw it when it first ...

HART: Right, when it first come on in the Tennessee Theater. It's something else.

PIEHLER: Growing up, what did you think you'd like to do?

HART: Drive a racecar!

PIEHLER: Really? That was ...

HART: Be a airplane pilot, be a fighter pilot. That kind of—that was it for me.

PIEHLER: What about being an astronaut?

HART: No.

PIEHLER: No? That had not ...

HART: No. Being a trooper, a state trooper. I thought about that.

PIEHLER: What are your memories of your elementary school, and any teachers? [Does] anything stick in your mind?

HART: I loved to read. I hated math. (Laughter) I loved history. I hated math. Oh, I hated math. It just was not for me. But I could do all the multiplication tables, and divide, and add, and subtract. Fractions drove me up the wall. I just had no comprehension for it. But history, and learning to read. I loved to read. I read Moby Dick, original version, and it's like this. (Gestures). You ever seen it?

PIEHLER: Oh yes. It's a huge ...

HART: The original version, not the ones that you see now. And what was the other one? Oh, I should never forget it. Robinson Crusoe, the original version. Big, thick thing, looked like it was three foot. I read it every—those were my—then The Red Badge of Courage. I remember it. Oh, I loved it. It was so, so good. All Quiet on the Western Front. I read books like that. Never got into War and Peace, but I've watched the movie so many times I could tell you how it goes. But it was good.

PIEHLER: You went to Carter High School. How far—since I'm so new to Knoxville ... and Knox County, how far was that from ... your home?

HART: Oh, five miles, maybe six, something like that.

PIEHLER: How big was the high school when you were there?

HART: Our graduating class was 200 when I graduated. It was a pretty good—'cause it was the only school in east Knox County at the time. The closest one was Holston, which is not a high school anymore. It's a middle school, I believe. A pretty big school. Drastic culture shock, from the very small grammar school to a large school like that.

PIEHLER: What was such a shock? What was the big ...

HART: All of those people. You just couldn't find the rooms, that kind of deal.

PIEHLER: What year did you graduate high school?

HART: 1964.

PIEHLER: I'm curious. Well, before leaving high school, ... did you think you were going to be going to college? Was that a goal?

HART: No.

PIEHLER: No?

HART: No. It was not a goal. I was too small. I don't look it now, but I was too small to play any sports at that time. I only weighed about 130 pounds, and was—I was a late bloomer, I guess is what you call it. About five-foot-five, something like that, maybe a little less. I'd become a football manager, and I'm not bragging, but I become a very good one. I took care of the equipment. I learned how to tape people's ankles. I was told by my coach in high school, he said, "You need to go to college to do this. You're good. You're a natural." He wrote the University of Indiana my senior year, and they told me to come up there to go to school, and I thought the University of Indiana was too far away. And God bless Mom and Dad. They didn't give me any encouragement to go. They were going to pay me the unheard-of salary of five dollars an hour to be a football manager, and put me on a full scholarship, if I could have. If I was as good as my coach said I was, they was going to give me a full athletic scholarship to go, and I did not go.

PIEHLER: Why not?

HART: I didn't want to go. I just didn't want to go.... Well, I didn't have any encouragement from home. I guess I would have gone if they had set me down, but Mom and Dad felt that high school was enough.

PIEHLER: Really? They didn't think you necessarily needed college?

HART: No.

PIEHLER: Any regrets, looking back, that you didn't take that Indiana offer up?

HART: I do sometimes. I think about it. I should have. I should have tried it.

PIEHLER: Yeah. Yeah.

HART: If I couldn't have made it, so what? You know.

PIEHLER: I'm curious: growing up, what music did you listen to, as a kid?

HART: Rock and roll. It's called "old time" rock and roll now.

PIEHLER: So you grew up listening to ...

HART: Elvis was my hero. The Temptations were my hero, Otis Redding, James Brown. I liked everybody but the Beatles. Didn't really care for the Beatles. No reflection on the part of the world that you [come from]! (Laughter) Now, the early Beatles, fine, but after they did the Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band, that's—it killed it for me. But old time rock and roll, I loved it. Still do. I have a lot of music I listen to. That's all I listen to now.

BOULTON: Do you remember the Kennedy assassination?

HART: Yes. I remember where I was at when it happened. We were home from school that day, when that happened, for some reason. I can't put my finger on it, why we were home. I was listening to the radio in the car, 'cause Dad was in the house sleeping. It was at night, and it was a warm day for some reason. It was warm that time of year, and it come over the radio: "President Kennedy's been shot," and less than an hour later, said, "President Kennedy's dead." I remember it. I remember seeing Ruby shoot Oswald. I remember it. I still remember it. I remember all of it. It really changed. It really, really changed.

PIEHLER: You mentioned your father was a Democrat. How long did he remain a Democrat through the '50s and '60s?

HART: God bless the man, he's still a Democrat.

PIEHLER: Oh, he is?

HART: He is. He says he's an independent. (Laughter) I think that the last fiasco we've had for the past eight years [the Clinton presidency] changed his mind. I said, "Dad, you've just got to look at what's going on." And I think it changed his mind. But Dad was the "old" Democrat, from the FDR days, and they're completely different. I don't know what your all's party affiliations are, but I don't want to upset anybody. But the Democrat now is not the same as the Democrat that was back then. There's a huge difference. Same with the Republicans. I'm a conservative. I'm not a Republican, but I happen to vote Republican every time, because it's more of the way I think. But I'm not a down-and-out Republican. Now, some Democratic ideas are good.

PIEHLER: Growing up, were you a Democrat like your dad?

HART: I was a Democrat. I was a dyed-in-the-wool John F. Kennedy man. I remember when he run. We had a mock election at Carter High School, and I said, "These people are so stupid. What did they vote for Nixon for?" (Laughter) Because most of the people's parents voted for Nixon. They were all Republicans, and East Knox County is still a bastion of Republicanism. I don't think a Democrat could run for any office up there, and even have a chance of being elected.

BOULTON: What was the appeal of Kennedy for you?

HART: I liked the way he presented himself. He was young. He wasn't that much older than my dad. He was from that generation. He was a war hero. I listened to some of the speeches, and I thought he was—I thought he was the man. And I looked at Richard Nixon, and I said, "That ain't nothing but a crook." (Laughter) And guess what? He turned out to be nothing but a crook! I'm not psychic, but that's ...

PIEHLER: You really did think that in 1960?

HART: I did.... I said, "That cat's nothing but a crook." That was my humble ...

PIEHLER: That was your initial—even as a high school student?

HART: Right, right.

PIEHLER: ... What else have we forgotten to ask you about growing up in Knox County in the late '50s and early '60s? Is there any memories you have?

HART: Oh, yes. I have wonderful memories of high school. I didn't like high school, going to school, but everything that went on about it, I enjoyed.

PIEHLER: What were some of the things you enjoyed?

HART: Oh, going to the stock car races every Saturday night. I hitchhiked to them, and hitchhiked back. I loved it. I couldn't get enough of it. Then I got a little older, and we had drag racing in this area. I went to those all the time. I grew up with a wrench in my hand, because we were poor, and if you couldn't repair your own automobile, you were out. And I enjoyed doing it. I still enjoy doing it.

PIEHLER: So your family did have a car, but it sounded like it was ...

HART: We—uh, Daddy, the last car—he bought a car in 1958, and we got in some financial difficulty, I think. I don't really remember. They were good at hiding things, but we had to drive that car for a long, long time, and we had to repair it ourselves, so ...

PIEHLER: So your dad bought his first car in 1958? Or did he have ...

HART: No. Before that, he had bought a '55 or '56 Ford. A new one, because for \$55 down \$55 a month, Lee Iacocca put you in a new Ford. This is how Lee Iacocca got his start. He increased Ford Motor Company's sales, not by the thousands, but by the millions, on that deal, 55 and 55. \$55 down and \$55 a month, and out you go in a brand new Ford. And it made history. It really did. It shook up the car business. It did. Because they didn't sell cars like that before then. You either had to have the money, or a huge down payment. He said, "Well, let's just go after the working people! There's more of them than there are the ones that's got the money to buy.... Put it on time." That's how Ford Motor Company Credit got started. And it worked.

PIEHLER: It sounds like it's a very distinct memory of this new car.

HART: Oh, it is. The smells. I'm a car nut. I mean, I am. I remember.

BOULTON: When did you get your first car?

HART: When I come back out of the Army, '68.

PIEHLER: But it sounds like you got to know the family car pretty well?

HART: Real well, real well. And I helped a lot of people on their racecars. I enjoyed that. Still do. Nothing I know better. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: ... You mentioned the race, and going to the races, and working on the cars was a lot of—took up a lot of your time, and you were involved in the football team as a manager ...

HART: Right.

PIEHLER: Any other activities [in high school]?

HART: I got a job with my football coach in the summertime at an old Knoxville municipal swimming pool. I enjoyed that greatly. Worked in the basket room, learned how to be a lifeguard. Enjoyed it. I really enjoyed it. Beautiful girls. More beautiful girls than I'd ever seen in my life. (Laughter) They weren't from the same school that I went [to]; they were from all over Knoxville. I enjoyed that. I was growing up then, and that was a wonderful summertime experience. I bought an old motorcycle and fixed it up. I still ride motorcycles. I still do. I'm not a biker; I'm a motorcycle rider. There's a huge difference. (Laughter) I enjoyed that, really did. I enjoyed going to the mountains. We used to go to the mountains a lot. The traffic wasn't so bad back then. And go to the lake. A gang of us boys would go to the lake and stay all weekend, especially this time of year, if it's going to be an eight-five, ninety-degree day during the early spring. We'd all get sunburned and have a good time. There was a little drinking going on, but nothing out of hand. No drugs. There were no drugs here then. It was just guys having a good time. Go out cruising at night, ride around in somebody's car, yelling at people, stuff like that. It was fun. Good time growing up.

PIEHLER: Did you go to your school dances?

HART: Yes. I enjoyed them.

PIEHLER: So it sounds like you had—when we often think of the ... '50s and '60s—television, automobiles, school dances, sports—you were involved in a lot of those.

HART: I was involved in a lot of—yes. I enjoyed them. I enjoyed the social parts of high school more than the academic parts. Except for history!

PIEHLER: Really? So you ...

HART: I'm adamant about history! I can—gee, I wish I could have taught it. I love it!

PIEHLER: What about—why didn't you enjoy your other subjects? Was it ...

HART: I don't know. I guess it's a mental block I had about math.

PIEHLER: So you probably ...

HART: English, I could stumble through. But now, anything else, I didn't do very well in. Did all okay in [other subjects].

PIEHLER: Do you have any memories of the Cuban Missile Crisis?

HART: Yes, I do.

PIEHLER: How did that affect—I mean, I guess, were you concerned?

HART: Yes. My dad come in, and he said, “We should have took what was left of the German Army at the end of World War II, combined them with the American Army, reequipped them, and—” are we allowed to curse in here?

PIEHLER: You can do whatever. Yeah.

HART: Well, I don't want to ...

PIEHLER: Yeah, you may not want to have it on the record, but ... (Laughs)

HART: He—well, you can put it on the record. He said, “And whooped them goddamn bastards right then.” He said, “Because we're gonna have trouble out of them from now on.” He said, “No politician signing a piece of paper is going to make them abide by any rules.... They're the next ones we're gonna have to fight.” And when that crisis happened, he was very, very distraught. He said “I think we're gonna have another world war.” I remember.

BOULTON: So he was strongly anti-communist in his attitude?

HART: Oh yes. Oh yes. Very anti-communist. Very.

PIEHLER: Now you graduated in 1964, and you didn't go to Indiana University. What happened next after you graduated?

HART: I worked at the swimming pool until the pool closed. I had some relatives in California, and I said, “I'm going to California to live.” I had a aunt, my mother's sister, and I went out there, and I was going to live in California and enjoy the beach. The surfing craze was really big then. I thought the Beach Boys walked on water, and I went out there and found that those were absolutely—not my family, now—but those people out there were the fruitcakes of the world. (Laughter) And I couldn't get along with them. They didn't like my accent. I didn't like theirs. They thought I was from Oklahoma. They didn't know where Tennessee was. I didn't like it. I stayed about six months and come back home.

PIEHLER: Which part of California were you in?

HART: I was in San Francisco, Berkeley, Antioch, Oakland area, Sacramento, that area. Didn't know much about California, and seeing this huge Pacific Ocean—well, I didn't know the

temperature never got much over 60 degrees in the San Francisco area where the beaches were. Nobody went swimming. You couldn't. The water was too cold with the wind blowing all the time. It just was not—the dream didn't materialize. It just didn't work out.

PIEHLER: Where did you work when you were in California?

HART: I worked in a large paper mill for Crown Sellerbach corporation. I think they're still in business. Made paper. It paid very well. I bought a brand new motorcycle over there, and rode it home. But didn't like it.

PIEHLER: Growing up, how much had you traveled before ... uprooting and going to California?

HART: I went to Florida one time. I went to California one time to visit my aunt. We went by car. It was enjoyable. I liked it.

PIEHLER: In your neighborhood growing up, were there any black families?

HART: No. All white.

PIEHLER: All white? So after coming back from California, and realizing the California experience wasn't for you, ... you came back to East Tennessee.

HART: Right.

PIEHLER: And then what happened next?

HART: I got a job at the old knitting mill, Standard, and worked there for a while. Didn't like it. I couldn't stand being inside. Saved up some money, and decided to come to school here [the University of Tennessee], when I'd already been out of high school over a year. I come to school here, and I just didn't like it. It was not for me. Some people fit in, some people don't. I just didn't fit in. It didn't interest me whatsoever. I went back to work for the knitting mill, and worked there until I got drafted.

PIEHLER: Had you thought of enlisting?

HART: No. No, I didn't. I didn't. It wasn't because—I tried to join the National Guard, and this is very peculiar to me.... I went over to the National Guard, and this was for a slot—I think there was an infantry unit here—as a ... rifleman in the National Guard. And they tell me I couldn't pass their test. I don't say that I've got a very, very high IQ, but when I went into the Army and took the same test, "Son, what do you want to do? Anything you want to do! You want to go to Officers' School?" (Laughter) I said, "No sir. I just want to serve my time and get out." "What do you want to be? Do you want to be a helicopter pilot? We'll send you in to be a warrant officer." I said, "No. I just want to drive a truck." "Yes sir. You can have it." And they gave it to me.

PIEHLER: That was your specialty? That was your requested ...

HART: I drove a truck because of the influence of what my father said. He said, "If you are not going to make a career out of the military, get a job as a truck driver, because you're on your own quite a bit, and they'll leave you alone. And you'll never stay in one place long enough to get into any trouble." (Laughter) I mean, he knew it. He was a military man. He knew it.

PIEHLER: It's interesting advice.... And it makes a lot of sense.

BOULTON: So how aware were you of the situation in Vietnam growing up? When did it first start to become an issue?

HART: '64.

BOULTON: '64?

HART: I remember they showed on TV—they showed a unit. I can't remember. It was 82nd Airborne, I guess, had got ambushed, and they'd lost 119 men.... I remember that. I still remember it. They showed the ambush site. Played the recording of the calls for help. "We're being overrun! We're being overrun!" I remember that, and then there was nothing else. Just dead silence. I remember that.

BOULTON: Did you have any opinion on the American involvement then?

HART: My opinion was that we should have won. We had the resources. We had the finest men, we had the worst men, but we had the resources. We didn't have the resolve, or we didn't have any leadership. And I'm not talking about General Westmoreland. I'm talking about—LBJ and McNamara were absolutely the two worst military leaders ... that there ever was, I guess.

PIEHLER: Did you think that at the time, when you went in?

HART: When I went in, I knew something was dreadfully wrong.

PIEHLER: Why did you think that at the time?

HART: Because they had no resolve to win. I wondered why, when I went to Fort Benning as a basic trainee, and didn't know anything about the Army except what my daddy had told me, there were signs all over the place: "Win in Vietnam." And I thought to myself, "Why are these signs up? We're supposed to win. Do we have to be encouraged to win? We're the U.S. of A.! We're the best!" You know. That's ...

BOULTON: Did your father have any opinions about the war?

HART: "Get the goddamn hell out. If we're ... going to get people killed, get out. If we're not going to win, get out." I remember he ...

PIEHLER: He said that in '64?

HART: I remember, yeah. He pounded the table. He said, "They're not trying to win this war!"

PIEHLER: I'm curious. Your father, given his reasoning about why to become a truck driver in the Army, what other advice or things did he tell you about the Army, to take when you were going in?

HART: Never trust anybody with any personal things. CYA. Cover Your Ass. If you lose a piece of equipment, steal it off somebody else. (Laughter) Take care of yourself. You're the one that's got to come back. That was his advice. Very good advice. Very, very, good advice.

PIEHLER: Very practical. It sounds also [as if] he was very practical.

HART: He was a very practical man.

BOULTON: You've already brought up the basic training at Fort Benning. What kind of experience was that?

HART: It wasn't—oh, I'm trying to find the words here. I didn't like it, but it wasn't distasteful. And they were good. I didn't think they were good at the time, but they were very good. They were all seasoned veterans that had fought in the Korean War. Some of them still from World War II. We had a sergeant who said, "I'm the meanest man in the United States Army." And I wrote home a letter and told my dad. I said, "Dad, Sergeant Brown—" and that was his name, now. It's not a made-up deal. "Sergeant Brown said he was the meanest man in the United States Army." And my dad said, "No." He said, "I was! He just took my place!" (Laughter)

PIEHLER: ... In terms of basic training, what, at the time, really irked you? What didn't you like, that really ...

HART: I guess serving with people [who were] not from the South, that had a bad attitude. We're going to get into race now. Most of the blacks out of the Northeast were horrible.

PIEHLER: It sounds like they didn't want to be there.

HART: No, they didn't want to be there. They thought they were too good to be there.... They, in a few weeks, corrupted the blacks out of the South in the same way. They didn't want to be there, fighting for "the beast." That started back in 1966. The white person was called "the beast." You know, fighting for "the beast."

PIEHLER: So there were a number of black soldiers, and I assume these were draftees?

HART: Draftees from Pittsburgh and Philadelphia.

PIEHLER: Who else made up the unit? Your initial training ...

HART: Most boys were from Tennessee, Georgia, South Carolina. From the South. A lot of midwestern guys from Ohio, Indiana.

PIEHLER: Did everyone have a high school degree, from what you could tell?

HART: At that time they did. But I think towards the middle part, after '68, they started drafting people with just grammar school.

PIEHLER: Did any of them in your initial training unit ... have college? Anyone with some college ...

HART: Yes. Several, several of them.

PIEHLER: I assume everyone could read and write, from what you could tell?

HART: Yes.

PIEHLER: You mentioned ... Sergeant Brown being the meanest man in the Army, by his declaration ...

-----END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE-----

PIEHLER: You mentioned Sergeant Brown. Is there any other individual, either new trainees like you, or other people ... at Fort Benning, that stick out in the mind? Any memories, or any friendships that developed at Fort Benning?

HART: Some boys that I went to high school with—I won't mention their names—and a boy that I worked with over at the swimming pool, we all were drafted at the same time. And these were athletes. I was never an athlete. Believe you me, I was never an athlete. And after about six weeks of basic training, poor old incompatible me, that couldn't run a hundred yards, could run with these guys, could stay right with them. Didn't have any problem keeping up with them. I could actually outrun some of them. I could physically do things that some of them couldn't do, and I said, "What happened to me?" I couldn't believe it. So it worked.

PIEHLER: So the physical part of training, you actually took to?

HART: I didn't like it. Now, I'm not going to say I took to it ...

PIEHLER: But you did well. I mean ...

HART: But I did well at it.

PIEHLER: In other words, you weren't a straggler behind the pack.

HART: No, no.

PIEHLER: You could keep up with ...

HART: No, because I wasn't going to get recycled. I said, "Absolutely not." I was not going to get recycled.

PIEHLER: What was recycling, for those ...

HART: You had to go through the crap again, but I would not do it again. I said, "I'm not going to be recycled."

PIEHLER: How many would get recycled?

HART: Out of our bunch, maybe four.... We called them "duds" in the Army. They were either that, or they ... should have never have been drafted. They had trouble with their feet, they had trouble with their knees. They should have never been drafted. They couldn't do it.

PIEHLER: Quite literally? Not even ...

HART: Could not do it. Or they just was the type of person—and I know they're here in the university. They're everywhere. They just, like—what am I trying to say—a person that should have never have been given a drivers license and got one. These people were that way.

BOULTON: What was the reaction of your family and friends when you were drafted, particularly your father?

HART: He said, "I know they was gonna get you. You're the right age."

PIEHLER: So he wasn't surprised?

HART: He didn't like it.... He said, "They're not trying to win this war."

PIEHLER: So he really, in some ways, would have preferred you not to go. Is that ...

HART: Right. But what alternative did I have? This is the way, in East Tennessee, you got out of the Vietnam War. You either had a doctor slip you something that would make your blood pressure very high while you was ... taking a physical. You either come over here to school and kept your grades up, and stayed in school. You either had a government job, which was impossible to get. That made you exempt. An eighteen, nineteen-year-old, that would be an impossibility, just about. I guess maybe a few got on over here at Oak Ridge at the nuclear plants at that time. But that, or you joined the National Guard, and they never called any units up from here to go to Vietnam. Or you got married and got a girl pregnant right off the bat, and have a baby, and you were exempt. Or you went to the Army or the Marines or to the Navy.

PIEHLER: Sounds like you knew people who took a lot of these options. Is that a fair—did you know people personally?

HART: Yes.

PIEHLER: Without naming names, but ...

HART: No. I knew people ...

PIEHLER: So this isn't just a ...

HART: Wonderful football stars: "Oh my god! My knee's blown out, and I can't march!" People like that. Somebody'd have high blood pressure. It can happen, but at nineteen years old, no, it don't happen. It's made to happen. Stuff like that. And ... lots of guys just got married. Got married right off there, married some gal right off the way and had a baby right off the way, then three years later they got into a divorce, but he's never called again. Got that exemption. It stays that way.

PIEHLER: Which sounds somewhat cynical, to get married, literally, and have a baby ...

HART: They did.

PIEHLER: Yeah.

HART: It was done. Not anybody that I knew here run off to Canada. But when I was in the service, we had several that did. When we got orders to go to Vietnam, we lost—oh, I'd say up to four.

PIEHLER: And this was in 1966.

HART: It was around the end of '66, into '67.

PIEHLER: End of '66, early '67?

HART: Right. That area. Like January '67.

PIEHLER: In terms of Fort Benning, what else about training? I mean, were there parts of training that you liked at the time? You later appreciated it ...

HART: Shooting a rifle, throwing a hand grenade.

PIEHLER: Those were the parts ...

HART: ... I loved. Marching didn't bother me. Trying to keep all that stuff clean, and yourself clean. I mean, I do keep myself clean, but trying to do that out in the field. I said, "Infantry is not for me." Not that. Didn't like it.

PIEHLER: How much, or how often, would you get pulled in for KP?

HART: At least once a week. Hated it.

PIEHLER: And it sounds like you also hated locker inspection, and ...

HART: Sure did. Never could do it right.

PIEHLER: What about making your cot, your bedroll?

HART: I did very well.

PIEHLER: That part, you ...

HART: Yeah. I made up the damn bed and slept on the floor! (Laughter)

PIEHLER: You're not the first to have told that.

HART: No.

PIEHLER: But that's your case. You did sleep on the floor.

HART: Right.

BOULTON: What did they tell you about Vietnam in training, and what kinds of preparations did they give you?

HART: That they were a savvy enemy. That they had a resolve to win, and they'd win at every cost, and they were very good at what they did. You know, they were right ...

PIEHLER: They did tell you that ...

HART: Yeah. Right. Sergeant Brown told us right at the front. I want to say this in defense of the U.S. forces. They might have been a savvy enemy, and had resolve to win, and were very savvy and very good at what they did, but they weren't superhuman. They were not. I don't know how that ever got started in the news media, but it did. But they weren't. The—I don't know. Like I said, superhuman people that they were made out to be, they were not.

BOULTON: Did you have a girlfriend when you went into the service?

HART: Yes.

BOULTON: Did you stay together through the war?

HART: Yes we did. Been married since 1968. Got married when I come home.

PIEHLER: So you corresponded?

HART: All the time.

PIEHLER: All the time? Did you save your letters?

HART: Yes. Got a big bundle of them somewhere in our house, but we've got a bundle of letters. I didn't save any of hers. I couldn't. They deteriorated bad, but she saved all of mine.

PIEHLER: ... What did you think of Army food? Your father, I'm sure, had stories about it growing up.

HART: It'd depended who prepared it. It could be good or it could be horrible.

PIEHLER: How about at Benning? How was the food?

HART: Pretty good. Not too bad. Some of the food in the engineering battalions I was in wasn't very good.

PIEHLER: You said at the time you really hated Benning, going through basic. Is there anything about the experience that you—while you hated it, but then ... the follow up question is, you later appreciated basic training, and realized ... it was more helpful than you realized at the time. Could you maybe talk a little bit more about that?

HART: I didn't have problems with the discipline. That didn't bother me. I didn't have problems with the people yelling at me. That didn't bother me. But the stupidity of some of the people that was in charge bothered me greatly. It still does today, on the jobs that I have. Maybe that's my intellect showing through. I could see things that could have been done better.

PIEHLER: What could have been done better, that—it sounds like you really didn't like at the time?

HART: I think they could have straightened some of the soldiers out better. But their idea was to run everybody through, treat everybody the same, and what come out later was either good or bad or indifferent. They didn't discipline people properly that should've been disciplined. They knew they had a problem. They knew—they had a racial problem back then. I'm not a racist, now. I'm just trying to tell you like it is. They had a racial problem back then.

PIEHLER: And it sounds like—I get the impression from your interview, that those in charge wanted to duck this issue.

HART: They wanted to duck it, because it wasn't good for them to get involved in any kind of problems like that. I guess you've all heard the term "social engineering?"

PIEHLER: Mm hmm.

HART: I guess what happened in Vietnam was one failure of “social engineering.” The big problem that I saw was that the universities become a hotbed for activism against the war, okay?

PIEHLER: Mm hmm.

HART: You want to protest the war, fine. I’ll go fight, to let you protest the war. But please don’t call me names under a situation I have no control over. I was just caught up in a chain of events that I had no control of. That’s the way I feel about it. But some of our equipment was very, very, wore out. We were staying in barracks that were built for the Korean War, and before.

PIEHLER: So World War II. Ones that your dad could have gone through.

HART: Our uniforms and stuff, that kind of equipment, was okay. I mean, it wasn’t shoddy or nothing. But we had a lot of people in charge, besides Sergeant Brown, that were marking time in the military just to get out. They were close to retirement age, and they were burnt out. And they didn’t really—weren’t up to par to do what they needed to do.

PIEHLER: ... Thinking back, particularly if they were World War II people, it’s been twenty years. 1964, ‘65.

HART: Right, right. They were right at the edge of going out, and they ...

PIEHLER: And even Korean War people were starting to ...

HART: Right. They were tired of it. They didn’t like it.

PIEHLER: So it sounds like, while Sergeant Brown was very good, a lot of the others were just going through the motions with you.

HART: Right. They were just going by the book. They didn’t really try. But this man really tried. I wonder if he’s still alive. I really do.

PIEHLER: ... Where was Sergeant Brown originally from? Did you have any sense [of that]? Was he from the South?

HART: From Georgia.

PIEHLER: What was the meanest thing he did to you? Do you remember any particular incident in training?

HART: I dropped my rifle one time, and he said, “You gotta take care of it. You’re gonna sleep with it, you’re gonna take a shower with it, you’re going to carry it around with you from now on.” And I did for two solid weeks. “You’re gonna take it to the barracks with you, you’re gonna go to bed with it, you’re gonna eat lunch with it.”

PIEHLER: And you literally did?

HART: Yeah, sure did.

PIEHLER: What was the meanest thing he could do to another recruit? Do you remember any particular ...

HART: He never slapped a person or touched them. But he knew how to make you feel like you were dirt. He did walk a platoon over a certain person who gave him trouble all the time. But you didn't step on the guy. He just marched the platoon of people over him. He told him, he said, "You're nothing but dirt, and you're gonna be treated like dirt." He said, "You don't take a bath, you don't change your uniform until I tell you to." This went on for about two weeks, and after a while, this guy got to smelling pretty rotten. So, that was the way. He intimidated more than—no physical [punishment]. Now, when I got to Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri—and I was out of basic; I was learning how to drive a truck—I watched those basic trainees. We watched them, and at Fort Leonard Wood them guys slapped recruits, knocked them around.

PIEHLER: But at Fort Benning, that just wasn't done?

HART: At Fort Benning, it wasn't done. No. They were a better class of cadre at Fort Benning than there was at Fort Leonard Wood, but every Army post is that way. They're different as night and day. I mean, they may say that they're U.S. Army, but there are differences. Yeah.

PIEHLER: Even if they were doing the same basic function, of training recruits ...

HART: Right.

PIEHLER: Benning had a reputation in World War II as one of the best facilities. It sounds like it lived up to it.

HART: Right. Dad went through down there. He went to Fort Dix, New Jersey, [but] he was at Benning, too.

PIEHLER: So he started out at Fort Dix?

HART: Right.

PIEHLER: Where did you report when you were drafted?

HART: Over here on—oh, what's it called? Henley Street, in an old house that's gone now. It's where the Federal courthouse is now. The old Federal courthouse, the office buildings right next to there, there was an old house there.

PIEHLER: Oh, Okay. Where the post office is still.

HART: No, down from there. There was just a old house there, and the examination station took it over.

PIEHLER: And how did you get to—did you initially go to Benning?

HART: We rode a bus to McGhee-Tyson Airport, and they put us on a DC-3. We flew to Columbus, Georgia, and—first time I ever been on a airplane, and we got out there in Columbus, and we got on a Army bus, and we were in the United States Army.

PIEHLER: After you'd finished at Benning, did you get to go home, or did you go straight to ...

HART: I stayed two weeks here, I come home. Dated my wife every night. Every hour and every solid minute I could be with her, I was with her, for two weeks. I got on a Greyhound bus and rode to Fort Leonard Wood. I spent all my money on a diamond ring to get engaged to her. We did, and I went to Fort Leonard Wood on a bus. What an experience! (Laughs)

PIEHLER: Just the trip out? What was so memorable?

HART: Oh, some drunk on the bus, some old guy pulled a knife on the driver who wanted off the bus. There was a lot of Army personnel on that bus, because the airlines, I think, were on strike at that time, or something happened where ... you couldn't get a flight on a plane. I remember this sergeant, he grabbed that guy and said, "Oh, man just sit down and shut up." The guy was drunk. Another couple on the back seat, both of them was soused. I don't know where they were from. There were trying to make love in the back seat. Everybody was whooping and hollering. It was just all night long.

PIEHLER: So this was not a quiet bus ride?

HART: No, it wasn't a quiet bus ride. MPs come on the bus. We stopped at Fort Campbell. This was just a Greyhound bus. It wasn't a Army bus, just a Greyhound bus.

PIEHLER: Yeah.

HART: We stopped at Fort Campbell, Kentucky.

PIEHLER: And what were the MPs looking [for]?

HART: They were looking for orders. They wanted to know what you were doing on there, where you were going. You had to show them your travel orders and stuff. One guy didn't have one. Off the bus he went. I don't know where he went to. I guess he went and stayed in the stockade until they found out where he was supposed to go. And that's the way it went. It was the bus ride from hell, I guess is what you'd—never got no sleep. Somebody's always yelling and screaming. Not a cheery time to go to Fort Leonard Wood. I got to Fort Leonard Wood, I got out of the bus, the driver left, and he forgot to unload our duffel bags. There we were. No clothes, no nothing. I guess the driver had had it too.

PIEHLER: So he literally drove off?

HART: He drove off. Yeah.

PIEHLER: Not like he just went in to get a cup of coffee?

HART: Yeah. He had drove off. And the next day another bus came with our clothes. I said, “Thank goodness.” We finally got our clothes together. What a time. They called Fort Leonard Wood “Little Korea.” Hot as the Dickens in the summertime, and as cold as Korea in the wintertime.

PIEHLER: And that was the nickname people ...

HART: Little Korea. Very bad things happened. People got killed there, at that post, by other soldiers. There was a park you had to walk through to get to the enlisted man’s club, and they had a lot of knifings, stabbings, soldiers preying on other soldiers. Never happened at Fort Benning, ‘cause Fort Benning was ruled with a iron fist.... Fort Leonard Wood didn’t have any ...

PIEHLER: It sounds like you had a real breakdown in command ...

HART: We did.

PIEHLER: ...and discipline.

HART: I’ll say it again. I don’t want to keep repeating myself. This was a time—in the United States Army, you had a lot of people right at the age of retirement, who were going to retire, and they just didn’t care. They had done their time; they had done their thing. “God! LBJ’s got us in a war here! I want to go home! I got two years to go. Maybe I could ride it out.” And I seen this through my whole service time, even overseas.

PIEHLER: Even in Vietnam.

HART: Right.

PIEHLER: What about your training at Leonard Wood? How did that go, and what was that like? Your training in how to be a truck driver?

HART: The training was very good. I can’t say I had bad [training]. I ... had good training. They graduated us up from—uh, they started us off with jeeps, then to a three-quarter ton truck, then to a two-and-a-half ton truck, up to a five-ton truck. It was very good. I enjoyed it. Didn’t mind it at all. Had a old parade we had to go to every Wednesday. I hated that. I don’t know why we had to go to a parade. On Wednesday morning, get up at four o’clock in the morning. You’re tired anyway, then you have to get all dressed up, put on your khakis and boots and everything and march in a parade. Then be critiqued after the parade. And if you didn’t look sharp—if your unit, your school class, didn’t look sharp—you were criticized, maybe told you

were going to have to work all weekend instead of having the weekend off. A funny thing happened though. I was there, and one evening, these C-130s started landing. C-130s landed and took off all night long, and we didn't know what was going on. And one guy I knew, he said, "Let's go in the airport and see what's going on." 'Cause the airport was real close to where we were, and you'd see them things land and take off. They had sent a whole combat engineer battalion by plane to Vietnam. They all flew over, and it's all done by military aircraft, and they done this in about two, three days. The planes [were] non-stop. I mean, from the time—it just went on and on for about like forty-eight hours. One of them things landed every fifteen minutes, then take off. Land and take off, land and take off, land and take off. We saw all them troops out there, all lined up with their duffel bags, weapons, and stuff. The boy looked at me, and said, "We're next." Well, my "next" didn't come until about—oh, six or seven months later.

PIEHLER: How long were you at Fort Leonard Wood?

HART: A little over a month. It didn't take too long to learn how to drive a truck. If you were good at it, you just sailed right on through. If you weren't good at it, they made you into a cook, or a carpenter, or some kind of deal like that.

PIEHLER: So it sounds like you were a good—you learned pretty quickly.

HART: I liked it. I liked driving. It was fun.

PIEHLER: And so where did you go after Leonard Wood?

HART: We got on another bus. This was an Army bus, took us to Fort Hood, Texas. We went to the 69th Engineer Construction Battalion, that hadn't even been started. We got there. They put us in a barracks. We checked in at the first sergeant's desk, the orderly room, first. He signed us to a barracks that hadn't been used since the Korean War. (Laughter) What a mess!

PIEHLER: Literally?

HART: Yeah! Hadn't been used since the Korean War. And we started—we didn't have any equipment. We didn't have the first piece of construction equipment. We cleaned our barracks up and painted them. They painted outside, we had to paint the inside. Well, we painted the inside red, 'cause we were engineers. Engineer colors are red. We painted them all red. Well, we didn't use approved paint. It was flammable paint. Had to scrape all the paint off, and paint them with a paint that wouldn't burn. And then—I think this was a make-work deal—it wasn't the right shade of red, so we had to re-paint it all over again. (Laughter) They didn't have nothing for us to do. Then our equipment come in, when we started training. Oh, I prayed for a dump truck. I wanted a dump truck so bad, because I seen what them other guys had to do, and I wasn't fit to be a carpenter or a concrete spreader, but I could drive a truck. I knew to do that. So the equipment ... come pouring in. We got equipment out of National Guard units. They robbed National Guard units. We stayed there—when did I get there? September, I guess. We stayed September, October, November, December, January, February. March, we started loading up, and we knew we were going to Vietnam. We didn't have any orders to go to

Vietnam, but we were putting equipment on railroad cars. And lo and behold, a month later, we were on a ship going to Vietnam.

PIEHLER: So you took a ship to Vietnam.

HART: Sure did.

PIEHLER: Because a lot of people flew. In fact, that was more usual, to fly.

HART: ... Forty-five days.

PIEHLER: So you had an experience much like your dad's.

HART: Right. Left Corpus Christi, Texas. Went through the [Panama] Canal. Went to Hawaii. Went from Hawaii to—where did we go to? Philippines. Stayed a day in the Philippines, then we got to Vietnam the next day.

PIEHLER: What was that voyage like?

HART: I loved it. Should've been a sailor.

PIEHLER: Really?

HART: I enjoyed it. But it was weird. We were on the water forty-five days, never had no bad weather ...

PIEHLER: No seasickness then?

HART: Yeah, I got seasick, but I got over it in a day. Never had—no bad weather. Sunshine. Beautiful. We stayed around the equator a lot. Never got into any cold climate. And I was a warm-weather person. Oh, I enjoyed it. I did.

PIEHLER: Did you do the ceremony of crossing the equator?

HART: No, no, I didn't. What happened that I didn't get to do that? I had been up all night cleaning latrines. But we cleaned one latrine and closed the others off, so we only had to clean one, and it was my turn to clean it. And I cleaned it up real good. I had everything all shined and brassoed up. Oh, it looked like a diamond in there. I just went to bed and forgot about it. I was tired. They left me alone. I didn't do it. They had it done, [but] I didn't get to ...

PIEHLER: Oh, so there was a ceremony on board?

HART: Oh, they did. Yes, they did. I know a lot of them had got the document that says they crossed the equator. It was hilarious. They told me what happened, but I was dead tired.

PIEHLER: You, in a sense, were going over to Vietnam, also, with a unit.

HART: We went over as a unit. We had—all of us knew each other.

PIEHLER: What was your unit like, and where were people from? Because you also were together for forty-five days, besides being in Vietnam. You trained with them.

HART: We had people from Kentucky, from Virginia, from the Midwest. I had some pretty good friends from Ohio [and] Indiana. Farm boys. Farm people are the same all over. There's no difference. I don't care if you're a farmer in Northeast New York or you're a farmer in East Tennessee, you're all got the same—it's the same deal. People from the cities were a little harder to get along with.

PIEHLER: Really?

HART: Right. Even—I'm not talking about a racial thing now. I'm just talking about regular people.

PIEHLER: It didn't matter?

HART: Boys from South Chicago weren't much. People from Pittsburgh weren't much. People from New York City—and I'm talking about white people now—weren't much. But then the best friend I had in the service [was from] Portsmouth, Rhode Island.

PIEHLER: Really?

HART: Yeah. You can't say they're all bad, 'cause they're not.

PIEHLER: When did you meet your best friend from Portsmouth at the time?

HART: I met him in Texas. A ladies' man. He said, "I'll fix you up with any woman you want," 'cause I did some stuff for him. I said, "I'm going to get married. I don't need a woman. I got a woman." "Oh, Haht." My name is Hart, but he called me "Haht." He had a Rhode Island accent. He said, "Don't be that way." He said, "Women are there to give their charms away." I said, "I don't want another woman. I've got one!" And he said, "You don't know what you're missing." And he come from a wealthy family. His family owned [an] American Motors dealership in Portsmouth. And I said to him one time, I said, "Raymond, what are you doing in the military? Why don't you go to school? Why do you do anything? What are you doing here?" He said, "I was having too much fun." (Laughter)

PIEHLER: He also sounds pretty honest.

HART: He was. He was having too much fun. He set up a bar in our hooch in Vietnam. A real bar! Disco lights—they weren't called disco lights—neon lights all over. He was ... a character.

PIEHLER: Where did he get the stuff from?

HART: He rounded it up. They would go to some of the Vietnamese towns, and pick stuff up like that, and make them a bar.

PIEHLER: I'm curious. You talked earlier about ... racial tensions in Benning, and at Leonard Wood. What about ... in your permanent unit?

HART: Not so bad in the 69th, but when I got shipped to the 93rd, we had a real problem with a cook. He was a sergeant.... He was under the chief cook. He was a black guy from Memphis, and everybody had run-ins with him, and it was all racial. He had a very bad attitude. A very bad attitude. We had one platoon sergeant in the same outfit. Why, I don't know. He wasn't worth the powder to blow his brains out with. And then, my squad leader, I'd have followed into hell.

PIEHLER: Let's take break for just a second.

(Tape paused)

PIEHLER: We just took a little break, but you were saying you really respected your squad leader quite a bit.

HART: A very good man. Ex-paratrooper. Got his leg broke. The wind shifted at Fort Benning, of all places, and he landed on a barracks and broke his leg, and he couldn't jump any more.

PIEHLER: And how long had he been in the service?

HART: About four years, and he had reenlisted.

PIEHLER: And where was he from?

HART: Norfolk, Virginia. Black as you could get a black guy. Very nice guy. He was a mechanic like me. He liked to fool with cars. He stayed in the service, 'cause he said there was no place around there [where] he could get a job. Well, I can understand that. I was in a town that you couldn't get a good paying job, that paid much. I really respected this guy. He knew how to treat men. He knew how to treat men. He knew how to handle people. He didn't have to browbeat them. He'd do anything for them. Had a platoon leader, a sergeant, who happened to be black, too. He was just—I don't know, the most obnoxious person. Nobody liked him. Got his rank by time. Didn't get his rank by being good at what he did. He just got it by—it was given to him.

PIEHLER: He'd just sort of been in long enough to ...

HART: Right. He'd been in long enough. If you're in you're gonna get E-5. You're in longer, you get E-6. God help you when they make him E-7. And there was a lot of people—I'm not just talking about black people.... There was a lot of white guys that was the same. They were sorry. They were sorry. They were in the Army not to fight a war, but as a career. They wanted

to stay in there twenty years and come out with a pension. And they didn't need to be in the service. They did not need to be in the service.

PIEHLER: It sounds like—and I don't want to put words in your mouth, but your impression of the Army, even in '66, '67, was that there was just basically a lot of dead wood.

HART: There was a lot of dead wood. There was! And it come out later. The Army got in bad shape in the '70s, then it turned better after Ronald Reagan straightened it out. But there was a lot of dead wood there. Just like in a factory, or even a university. A lot of dead wood there. But people were getting killed, because of bad management.

BOULTON: Where did you land in Vietnam, when you first arrived there?

HART: ... at an in-country R-and-R center. Vung Tau. And we landed on a landing ship, just like they did in Normandy. The front of the barge laid down. And here stood a whole line of Vietnamese trying to sell drugs, alcohol, women, whatever. [My] first impressions of Vietnam. Smell of burning waste, human waste. The heat never bothered me. I'm a Southern person. I like the heat. The heat didn't bother me, but the smells were horrible. Burning diesel fuel, 'cause you used the diesel fuel to burn the human waste. You couldn't put it in the ground. It'd come right back up out of the ground. It was more sanitary just to burn it.

PIEHLER: But it sounds like it's a really horrible smell.

HART: A horrible smell, and you never get it out of your system. I can smell diesel fuel now, and it's the first thing I can think of. And me, driving a truck for all these years.

BOULTON: And how were those first few weeks settling in there?

HART: We had to build our own base camp. Which was [an] experience, but we did it.

PIEHLER: ... Could you say a bit more about building your base camp?

HART: We had to build it from the ground up. We had to pour the concrete, we had to build forms to build temporary barracks. That's all we ever lived in, was temporary barracks, 'cause they had wooden sides [and] canvas tops, [and] they could be [taken] down very fast. They just had the concrete floors in them. The concrete floors were poured mainly because of the insects, rodents, stuff like that. You didn't want to build a wooden floor, 'cause the termites would eat it up. Snakes like to come in on you, bees, all that stuff like that. We built bunkers for the higher-ranking NCOs. They stayed in bunkers. They'd take a Conex box. That's what you shipped materials in. A big steel box. They'd take the door off it, put sand bags all over it and that's where they'd stay.

PIEHLER: So you were in these barracks and you NCOs were in ...

HART: In a Conex box. Right.

PIEHLER: That doesn't strike me as ...

HART: Well, rank has its privileges. Rank has its privileges. It did.

PIEHLER: It doesn't sound like it was good for morale.

HART: It wasn't.... The units I were in in Vietnam—I just have to tell you. We're all men here. It was FTA. It was "Fuck The Army." I know this is going out for posterity, but I'm telling it like it is.

PIEHLER: That was really the common attitude.

HART: That was a common attitude, because if you didn't, it would fuck you. And nobody wanted that. But this time was a bad time, I think. Well, I know you're more learned than I am about the social changes that happened in the '60s, and this was a trying time to be in the military. This was a trying time just to be a citizen. It wasn't so bad around here, from what I gather, 'cause I wasn't here for two years. But in some of the places it got to be a little horrendous. Social change. And if you look around, things really haven't changed. It's still the same. I don't know what they were looking for. Can you tell me? Was it a utopia? What was it they were looking for? Do you know? I mean, I don't understand it.

BOULTON: How aware were you of those kinds of protests while you were stationed out there?

HART: I become real good friends with Huey Brown, my squad leader. Very good friends. And we got Life, magazine and it showed National Guard troops firing a .50 caliber machine gun in the city of Detroit. He looked at me, and I looked at him. I said, "What the hell's going on?" We couldn't figure it out.

PIEHLER: He was as perplexed as you were.

HART: Right. He said, "Why?" We couldn't figure it out. We could not figure it out. Still can't figure it out. I don't understand it.

PIEHLER: ... I guess you were in two units in Vietnam. How long did you stay with your first unit?

HART: I stayed with my first unit three or four months. And Huey Brown said, "Hart, you're going to be made E-4." I said, "Whoopee! \$249 a month! I can save! I'm gonna buy us a car and a house when I get back to the U.S. of A." And he said, "Yeah, and you're going to go to Bearcat, 'cause anybody that's made E-4 in this outfit's going to Bearcat!" And I said, "Okay." I went to the 93rd. But guess what? Huey Brown come with me, 'cause they got him too! (Laughs) He didn't know it. He was making fun of me, and it wasn't a day later he got orders he was going, too.

PIEHLER: You were able to stay friends?

HART: We stayed friends, right up until we left.

PIEHLER: (Laughs) With a bit of irony that he also got [transferred].

HART: He got it. And Raymond, same thing happened to Raymond. I told Raymond, I said, “Raymond, what you going to do with all that money, buy more whiskey with it?” He said, “No,” he said, “they’re shipping me off to Bearcat. I’ve got to build another bar.” I said, “You are?” I said, “What outfit you going with?” I said, “I’ll be right there with you.” And that’s what happened. We went right to Bearcat together. A little old C-117. Got to be the noisiest aircraft that was ever designed. No insulation in it. Two jet engines on it for assisted take off with. Had two props. Oh man, noisy. That helicopter that just flew over. (Points up)

PIEHLER: Noisier than that?

HART: Oh, heavens! You couldn’t hear yourself think. We wondered why the pilots that always flew these planes wore these big helmets on and stuff. We knew why. You couldn’t hear yourself think inside that plane.

BOULTON: How did you pass your time while you were there, other than when you were doing your Army duties?

HART: I didn’t have any time to pass.

PIEHLER: So I guess your first unit, what ...

HART: Our construction—oh, excuse me. Go ahead.

PIEHLER: Yeah, your first unit after the first three or four months, what did ... you build after your base camp?

HART: We were in a rock quarry. And we run it day and night. Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. We crushed up rock and put it on a barge and floated it to Saigon. They were redoing Tan Son Nahut, they were redoing Bien Hoa and Long Binh air force bases. And they were making the runways longer for the F-4 Phantoms. We didn’t know why, but that’s what was in the works. They also were redoing some of the bases, and they had to have concrete pads. And that’s what we done. We worked in a rock quarry, and I got very good at using explosives. I got very good at driving a dump truck. I got very good at driving a tractor trailer, a lowboy, hauling construction machinery. I was young. I was nineteen years old, and I got good. I got—and I’m not bragging now, but I got good at what I could do. I didn’t have any problems with hauling heavy equipment through small villages. We had incidents happen where kids’d run out in front of the truck, kids got killed. I knocked two kids over. I told the sergeant who was with me, I said, “I’ve hit them two kids with the back part of—” I was carrying long conveyors, almost sixty foot long. I said, “These two kids have gotten run over.” He said, “Keep at it. Don’t stop.” He said, “If you stop, your military career is over with, and you’re going to jail.” He said, “Just keep on going.” I don’t think I killed them two girls, ‘cause I seen one of them get up and brush herself off. And he told me, he said, “Never stop.” He said,

“These people are after one thing. That is money.... If one of these pieces of equipment hit them, you’re into it for the rest of your life.” So I—experiences like that. But ... I never had no direct contact with Vietnamese people.

PIEHLER: So the quarry operation was strictly an American operation?

HART: Strictly an American operation.

PIEHLER: No civilians hired?

HART: No civilians around. Sometimes they used civilian dump truck drivers that drove their own dump trucks. But it was wore out junk that the French had, wore out junk that we had given Vietnam back years and years ago, stuff from World War II. It wasn’t fit to be on the road, but they kept it patched together and used it. And they quit doing that with the Vietnamese. I don’t have much regard for Vietnamese civilians. Either side. They’d get a load of rock [and] instead of taking it to our place [where] it was supposed to go, they’d take it up somewhere and sell it. They’d take it to their house and dump it behind their house and sell rock. Anything like that. You drive a truck ...

-----END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO-----

PIEHLER: This continues an interview with Fred L. Hart on April 21, 2001 in Knoxville, Tennessee with Kurt Piehler and ...

BOULTON: Mark Boulton.

PIEHLER: And you were saying you had problems driving through villages, in terms of South Vietnamese civilians.

HART: Right.... It was the kids mainly. They taught the kids to do it, jump up on the side of a truck and try to steal stuff off of it. Anything, they would do it. I’d hauled some construction equipment that had these big long hoses, air hoses, with a air compressor that runs some of the equipment we had, run the rock-drills and stuff. I looked out the mirror, and there goes a big long roll of hose that two little old kids had stole. I don’t know what they would do with that stuff, but you had to have it strapped and tied down, or they would steal it.

BOULTON: How did that make you feel, in terms of why America was fighting there, then?

HART: I got a very bad distaste for South Vietnamese people. I could tell right away they didn’t care who won the war. All they wanted was a piece of the money, the action, whatever. I don’t think they had any resolve to fight. And we were doing the fighting force. You could buy M-16s over there, twenty-five, thirty bucks, just been dropped one time. Vietnamese Army’d drop them. Kids would pick them up and sell them. “G.I., You want a extra M-16?” French-made weapons were over there by the thousands. Old World War II guns by the millions, I guess, and had been over there since World War II. There was no problem. Vietnamese would sell you anything. Anything. I mean anything. Anything you wanted you could get. You want

a young girl, not even at the age of puberty, they'd sell her to you. Not a very good class of people. I got to where I absolutely hated them, hated to look at them.

PIEHLER: Did you ever have any contact with the South Vietnamese Army?

HART: Very little. Some of their troops on bridges—they guarded bridges all the time—we went across. Sometimes you'd see them.

PIEHLER: But your unit never was under any sort of joint operation [or] joint task?

HART: Not with the Vietnamese. Now we were with Thailand troops. There were Thailand troops there. We built their base camp for them before they got there. And they were a complete different animal. They were highly respected. They were feared by the Viet Cong. Because, one, they didn't take any prisoners, and two, they didn't play by any rules. They were feared.

PIEHLER: Any contact with South Korean or Australian [troops]?

HART: Australian troops, a lot. They were good troops. Fed you very well, had good equipment. They were good. They liked to fight all the time. If they wasn't fighting the Vietnamese, they were fighting each other. (Laughter) They were rowdy, but they were good guys. Enjoyed being around them. I mean, I wasn't a bar-hopper or anything, but they were. They had their sergeants flying C-130s. You didn't have to be an officer to fly a C-130. They had flying sergeants. They put a kangaroo on everything. (Laughter) I don't know where they got them kangaroo stencils. But it didn't matter. If you were around them, you'd end up with a kangaroo stenciled on your truck some place. (Laughter) I just left them on mine. I thought it looked alright. They put a kangaroo on everything, and you knew it was Australian troops.

PIEHLER: ... You mentioned being transferred out because of your promotion.

HART: Right.

PIEHLER: You indicated earlier in your interview that this is an entirely different experience with your different unit. Was it different in terms of operations?

HART: Different in terms of operations. We mainly built airfields, cleared landing zones, built concrete gun pads. The modern United States Army at that time was still using a 175 millimeter gun that had been designed in World War I. And it was not a tracked gun, and it was not a gun that could be pulled behind a deuce-and-a-half and set up. It was a gun that had to be set in a layer of concrete, and it stayed there long-term. This was the modern United States Army. Now, the gun did a lot of damage. It was a eight-inch shell. It was a big shell. I think it weighed around 150, 170 pounds. But the gun was stationary, and it couldn't be moved. It took about eight hours to set up. It took about eight hours to take it apart. This was some of the equipment we used. So not everything was modern over there.

PIEHLER: So it sounds like you were used—in both units you were in, in really larger facilities, larger bases.

HART: We worked out of larger bases. The one I was in, in Vung Tau, we didn't go but on one operation out into the country. All we did—I drove a lowboy out and picked up a large piece of construction equipment and brought it back. Went out in the middle of nowhere, and there was a Ninth Infantry Division unit out there. I worked closely with the Ninth Division, both units, 'cause the Ninth Division stayed in the southern part of the country. When I got to the 93rd, things changed drastically, very drastically. We were on convoys every other day, and it got to where we were staying out two and three weeks at a time. We went all over South Vietnam. It was mainly—instead of being used as a construction engineer outfit, ... we hauled steel tarmac to build airfields with. We hauled rock to certain base camps. We went out on the boonies. We went out where things were happening, and we weren't a combat outfit. We were not. And we found out one night what combat was all about.... It was a big change, but at least it come gradually. My next door neighbor's son went from basic training to advanced infantry training, got on a plane, flew to Vietnam, dead three weeks later. Didn't have a damn chance. (Pause) Go ahead. I'm ready.

PIEHLER: Yeah. When you say you were convoying, it sounds like, in some ways, you became a transport unit.

HART: We become a transport unit, but we were engineers. We were A Company, 93rd Engineer Battalion. A company had about—how many trucks did we have? Twenty-five. Twenty-five dump trucks, and four or five lowboys. I drove both. And we had a asphalt division. We laid asphalt. We had a asphalt spreader, we had asphalt equipment. We could build a road out there. We had the materials to do it with. Build a airfield. God, we built airfields. I never want to see another airfield! And I love planes! We built airfields and then tore 'em up, so the enemy couldn't use 'em. We did that. And when the Tet Offensive started, things changed drastically again. I went from a construction engineer to a combat engineer. I learned how to clean the road of land mines. I learned a lot in a very, very short time.

PIEHLER: It sounds like you hadn't been trained to do mine [clearing] ...

HART: I was not a combat person. I was not.

PIEHLER: Yeah, and you hadn't gotten any training.

HART: No. Yeah, I got the training. It was on the job training. It happened just like that.

BOULTON: What was your experience in the Tet Offensive?

HART: We were out on a work day. And I would say that it was probably—I know it wasn't Sunday, 'cause Sunday was the day we maintained our trucks [and] tried to repair trucks. So it was a work day.... We went out to a large pit called a laterite pit. We were hauling red Tennessee clay. That's exactly what it looked like. The red clay here in Tennessee is what the stuff looked like. We went out there, but there wasn't no front-end loader there to load us. And we were standing around, "What's going on?" All at once, we started receiving fire out of the tree line. And nobody had told us that the Tet Offensive had started, and they sent us out. Well,

they didn't know, either. I mean, this was a communication breakdown. Some Viet Cong troops said, "Gee! There's twelve dump trucks! They'd make a nice bonfire!" And they started firing at us, and we started firing at them. I always carried about 200, 250 rounds of ammo for a sorry M-16 rifle they give us, and I run out of ammunition, I guess, in five minutes. Everybody else did, too. We kept getting fire out of the tree lines, and it kept getting closer. And it started hitting the trucks. We didn't leave, because it was all around us. I said, "What do we do?" I didn't have a bayonet. I was not a combat trooper. I was not. We weren't combat troopers. We just drove dump trucks. And here come one of them beautiful Hueys from the Ninth, and they shot that tree line up, and we got out of there.

PIEHLER: But if that hadn't come, that would have ...

HART: That would've been it.

PIEHLER: That would've been it. Was that your closest call?

HART: No. No, the Tet Offensive was a education for me.

PIEHLER: So after this incident, you got out? You got into your trucks?

HART: We got back to our base camp. Oh, base camp was all to hell. Those people went bananas. They had cooks on the firing lines. I mean, Command Post said we were going to be overrun that afternoon. There was a large Viet Cong regiment that was coming, and there wasn't enough aircraft in the area to stop them. Now, I don't care what anybody says about the Vietnam War. I know you talk to people that went out there and hunted the enemy, and I didn't do that, but if it hadn't been for the aircraft, we'd have been in dire straits. And there wasn't enough aircraft. And then we found out that we were expendable, that we were on our own.

PIEHLER: So you were attacked ...

HART: We were attacked. We were attacked.

PIEHLER: How many were in base camp? How big was this?

HART: We didn't have all of our units there. Not all of our companies were there. I'd say between 500 to 600 people at the most. And we're not combat soldiers!

PIEHLER: Yeah. So you don't have ...

HART: We had basic training. We had combat basic training, but ...

PIEHLER: So you have no combat units organically with you?

HART: No. No. None close!

PIEHLER: Just ...

HART: Just us. Just us. Now, we had—the Ninth Infantry Division was at Bearcat, but they were having problems, too. We were on our own.

PIEHLER: And what kind of weaponry did you have at base camp?

HART: We had M-60 machine guns, we had M-79 grenade launchers, we had a few mines, Claymores, we had sorry M-16 rifles. The rifle was a good rifle, but when they went to ball ammunition on it—and nobody knowed what the dampness in Vietnam would do with ball ammunition—it caused the guns to jam up. It was more of the ammunition than it was the rifle. The rifle was okay. I keep saying “Sorry M-16,” but it was the sorry people that went to ball ammunition. We didn’t have any problems with the M-60 machine guns, because they didn’t jam up. They could shoot ball ammunition all day long. It didn’t bother them. But the M-16 was more finicky.

PIEHLER: Did you have enough ammunition at base camp?

HART: Yes.

PIEHLER: So that wasn’t a ...

HART: That wasn’t a problem. We had enough ammo. We didn’t run out low on ammo. I run out low on ammo. But you know, I drive a truck, and you’d think 250 rounds—that’s about what I had with me—would be enough, and it didn’t last five minutes. And I’m thinking I’m ... sparingly using what I’m using, and I wasn’t. It gets gone very fast.

PIEHLER: You mentioned cooks on the line.

HART: Right.

PIEHLER: And you know an enemy attack is coming. What were your commanders doing, and what were you doing to prepare? Do you remember?

HART: Commanders. Some were very good. They was going up and down the line, shoutin’ encouragement to us. If you ever watched some of the Civil War things, they were doing that. Some of them were hiding in their damn bunkers [and] wouldn’t come out.

PIEHLER: When did the attack actually come?

HART: At dusk, and at two or three o’clock in the morning. Two or three o’clock in the morning was their favorite time [to attack]. But ... they hit us at dusk.

PIEHLER: Did they break through the perimeter at all?

HART: (Nods)

PIEHLER: So your fire was effective enough to ...

HART: We did it.

PIEHLER: What about—how many casualties did you take?

HART: We had a few wounded. A couple of guys shot themselves, which always happens. Lost three or four to friendly fire. Some had got too far out on the defensive berm, and got shot up by our own helicopters. That always happened. I talked to guys in the infantry [who] said that happened. That was normal.

PIEHLER: Did you—because you said, initially, you were expecting no air support. You eventually did get some air ...

HART: Later that night.

PIEHLER: Later that night. So ...

HART: But nothing with any sustenance to it, like the Phantoms, or 105s, or A-1Es. A-1E was a godsend. Six or four twenty millimeter cannons. It could stay up there all day long, take hits. Pilot [would] fly by—they'd fly so damn low to the ground and fly right by the tree line, where the Vietnamese were firing at them and throw them the finger, and turn around and fire right back at them again. Nerves of steel. Yes sir, good guys. Stay up there for hours. Never run out of ammo. Turn the plane up on its side, short bursts in that tree line. You wouldn't hear nothing out of there for an hour. That sucker'd just keep flying around in circles. Get a little fire out of the tree line, [and] they'd call it in. Bang! They'd do it again.

PIEHLER: In terms of—your unit really hadn't had casualties before ...

HART: No. We weren't a combat unit. That's the thing about it, is we didn't have combat—we didn't know how to—we learned.

PIEHLER: Did you have any corpsmen internally in the unit?

HART: We had medics. They weren't corpsmen.

PIEHLER: Yeah.

HART: They weren't combat ...

PIEHLER: Medics.

HART: ... They didn't know how to treat combat wounds, except what they learned in ...

PIEHLER: In the beginning.

HART: In the beginning, in the school they went to down there in San Antonio. I think that was the med school. But they learned very fast.

PIEHLER: What about that first night? What about evacuation of wounded? Were you able to get that ...

HART: They didn't evacuate nobody 'til the next day. They couldn't.

PIEHLER: So it was not until the next [day]?

HART: They didn't have—they couldn't fly medevacs in. They did the next day for the ones that made it through the night, but ...it was all so confusing. This wasn't supposed to have happened, see. The top brass made some bad mistakes. They underestimated the strength of the Viet Cong, or their resolve, or the kind of weapons they used. They wasn't using any old bolt-action rifles on us. They were all AK-47s, or some kind of semi-automatic weapon. They were well equipped. Their sappers were well equipped. They all had a little sack full of charges with them. They'd sneak through the wire. They were ready.

BOU TLON: And how long did that offensive go on?

HART: All night long. All night long. More at certain times than sporadic. But when the daylight come, they found out the power of the Marine Corps, Navy, and U.S. Air Force. Wiped that regiment out. There was no more V.C. regular. It was gone, and they never were a effective fighting force [again]. You know, it burns me up [when] they talk about the Tet Offensive and stuff. After the Tet Offensive, we didn't have any more problems with the Viet Cong, 'cause there wasn't no Viet Cong to have no problems with. They were all sacrificed. The North Vietnamese were smart. They sacrificed the Viet Cong troops, 'cause they knew that when they finally took over the country, which they finally did in '75, that they were then going to have to end up fighting the Viet Cong, because the North Vietnamese plans were much different from what the Viet Cong plans were. The Viet Cong was going to turn the thing over to the people, and the North Vietnamese was going to make it into a Chinese communist—exact thing what the communists have got now. To be completely government controlled. And they knew they were going to have to [fight the Viet Cong], so they sacrificed them. So when the North Vietnamese finally did come in, nobody to fight. They were all gone.

PIEHLER: After this attack, what happened? You were able to evacuate the wounded out. How long did you stay at this base camp?

HART: We were on alert there for, I would say, two solid weeks.

PIEHLER: But you didn't have any ... more attacks after that?

HART: Sporadic.

PIEHLER: Sporadic?

HART: But not, not a ...

PIEHLER: Not a sustained ...

HART: Not like the big one.

PIEHLER: And then what happened?

HART: It slacked off, real fast. Now, some of the cities they kept fighting in, like at Hue, and some parts of Saigon, but it slacked off on us. Well, when that regiment was gone, that was it. They wiped them out. And there wasn't no North Vietnamese in that area at that time. When the Viet Cong were gone, they were gone. There wasn't that many of them. Seemed like there was at one time, but after that happened, it was over with. It got real quiet.

PIEHLER: Now you mentioned you learned to do combat engineering on the job.

HART: Right.

PIEHLER: When did you have to do mine removal?

HART: During that time.

PIEHLER: During the two week ...

HART: Well, it—yeah. During that time.

PIEHLER: Which mines were you removing? Was it ...

HART: They were mostly ... 250 pound command-detonated mines that—ordnance that had fell off our aircraft. They were very good. The stuff that didn't explode, they'd bury it in the ground and command detonate. A guy would sit over there behind a bush, behind a rock, or in the ground somewhere, and wait until a big vehicle would come by, and boom. He'd set it off, you know. They weren't pressure mines. And we had to hunt for them things. The first thing you had to find was the wire, then you had to get somebody—several of you'd be armed—to trace the wire down. And this is where it got hairy. That wire might go, shucks, quarter of a mile, sometimes.... Mostly, around me, it was rubber tree plantations. You ever been in a maze?

PIEHLER: Yeah, I ...

HART: That's what a rubber plantation is. 'Cause you get inside that thing, and get turned around a few times and everything, you can't tell which end's up. You don't know where you're at. You've lost direction. That's what you got into.

PIEHLER: How would you get out?

HART: You hoped somebody'd make some noise, where you could follow the noise, or you just tried to use your sense of direction. I was in the woods a lot. I didn't hunt much, but I did hunt with my dad a lot, and it was hard to get me lost. But I've been, like Daniel Boone said, "bewildered" a few times. You'd very easily get turned around.

PIEHLER: You didn't try to use a compass?

HART: Couldn't.

PIEHLER: Couldn't? That won't work?

HART: Didn't have one to use.

PIEHLER: Oh, okay.

HART: That was the farthest thing beyond our mind. I mean, you know. We're not [usually] out in the field, but we're out in the field now.

PIEHLER: When did the convoing start? You said—was that after these two [weeks]?

HART: That was before and after. And it was more after then it was before. It was mainly hauling materials to infantry base camps. We hauled ammunition, weapons, cooking utensils, anything to keep an Army going. Trash cans, anything, to the base camps. And to the camps that were out in the field, we hauled tons of soft drinks, beer, rations, anything like that. Anything that them guys needed. Uniforms, just anything. Aircraft engines, anything.

PIEHLER: So how long would you be on the road? I mean, how many hours would you drive? How many miles?

HART: Daylight to dark.

PIEHLER: Daylight to dark.

HART: And you may not cover fifty miles.

PIEHLER: ... Because ...

HART: The roads were so bad, the logistics were so bad. The bridges would be out. One truck would cross a bridge at a time. You get a hundred-truck convoy, look how long that would take. Screw ups on where the place was. Get in a town, you're supposed to turn right, well, some idiot turned the sign around as a joke. You'd go left and be out in the middle of nowhere. And some of those roads just go out, and no more road!

PIEHLER: It just ends.

HART: Just out. That'd happen all the time.

PIEHLER: How many times did you have a close call on these convoying runs?

HART: (Picks up a piece of shrapnel on the end of a necklace) Here's one.

PIEHLER: And how did that ...

HART: I dug that out of the side of my truck. That's the nosepiece off a rocket-propelled grenade. It exploded—I heard something. I didn't hear the explosion, but I heard something hit the truck. And I didn't think nothing of it, you know. You hear sounds all the time, and you're half asleep and tired, you're wore out. You've been out twelve hours, you may have had guard duty that night, and you'd never get no sleep. I know combat veterans say [they would] never sleep. Well, we didn't sleep, either. Just in snatches, you know. It got to where you'd fall asleep over the steering wheel if the truck stopped. I found that piece of shrapnel stuck in the side of the door in the truck. So glad it didn't come out higher, come through the window, and hit me. I've not carried it around. I've had it all these years, just as something to remind me of what it is. But that's what it is, and that's not American. That's Russian, I guess. The Russians had the best equipment to give the Chinese.

PIEHLER: What—you had a pretty harrowing experience, being cut off and running out of ammunition. Did you ever have that type of attack again?

HART: Yes.

PIEHLER: Another close call like that?

HART: Yes, yes. A very close call.

PIEHLER: ... At what point of the war?

HART: During the Tet Offensive. We were on the perimeter on guard duty. I couldn't stand to be in the bunker. God! I'm not claustrophobic or nothing, but you can't breathe in there, you can't see nothing. And I was outside the bunker, and I got proficient in using the M-60 machine gun, and had the M-60 on top of the bunker with me. Where our perimeter was, there was a small village down the street from us that had been abandoned. We wondered—everybody told us that, yes, all the Vietnamese go home, they go back to where they were born, during Tet. The whole village was gone. That should've give us a clue. There wasn't a soul in that village. There wasn't nobody. And it was dusk, and sitting there half asleep, tired. I was looking down the road, and all at once, these big doors on this entrance to the village exploded, and here they come, screaming. It was so noisy, and dusty. You couldn't see. Deafened by the noise. I don't know what they'd used. They must have used a 500 pound bomb to blow them doors apart. And nobody gave the word to fire. We just started firing. It was over with [in] a couple of minutes, maybe less. And I had 1500 rounds of ammo, plus about 500 more. And the guy next to me was feeding the M-60, and it was a hell of a weapon. He told me, "Hart, Hart!" They always called me Hart, they would call me by my last name. He said, "It's over." I was still trying to fire. I had run out of ammo. He said, "It's over." I had no recollection of what happened. I knew what

happened.... I just hosed that entrance down, 'cause they were coming, they were coming over the walls, and I hosed it down. I was still trying to fire a weapon that had run out of ammunition. And I know you see these movies where they never run out of ammunition, but you run out of ammunition. You do run out of ammo. There is a never-ending supply of ammunition in the movies, but there's not a never-ending supply of ammunition in the real world. And I had run out. It was so dusty and so smoky and so deafening, and I think that when that bomb went off, it hurt my ears, and I couldn't really hear very well, and couldn't for the next two or three days. And then it was over. We didn't have any more that night. We went and got some more ammo for that M-60, and we stayed up all night, expecting another attack. We never did get it.

The next morning, it started getting daylight, and there was little black lumps out on the ground. And a guy from Oklahoma was next to me, and said, "What's them pigs doing out there?" I said, "Pigs?" He said, "Yeah, look at 'em, they look like pigs to me." And they did look like pigs. When it got good and daylight, they weren't pigs. They were thirteen, fourteen-year-old kids. They were all naked. They had all been covered in grease. They were all carrying a little satchel full with a charge, a little block of C-4, some of them had TNT, and a detonator. And their jobs was to slip in on us and find the bunkers, or whatever. Find where the officers' quarters were, whatever damage they could do. They were greased-up so they could slip through the wire if there were any wire fortifications, and we had some. They were naked so their clothes wouldn't get caught on the wire. And they were all rolled up like little lumps. They did look like pigs. About the size of your satchel there. (Gestures) They were all [in] I guess what you'd call a fetal position. All shot to hell.

I have no qualms about what I done. Just a war. I wouldn't be sitting here today. I just thank God they designed a weapon that didn't jam. That was made over here in South Carolina. I remember the name of that weapon, Saco Lowell. And the reason I remember it [is] because the knitting company I worked for, the old Standard knitting mill, used Saco Lowell knitters. And this company in South Carolina also had a government contract and made M-60 machine guns for the Army. What a weapon. Fire it all day long, you couldn't jam it. You could melt the barrel off of it, but as far as jamming, it would not jam up. Saved a lot of good soldiers' lives. Saved my life, 'cause they were coming after us. But after that, didn't have any more. We were all gun shy. Guys wasn't running into town anymore to be with a Vietnamese cutie. Didn't trust nobody. Just didn't. Then, after the Tet Offensive—that was in February—a couple of months later I got to come home. I got out of it.

PIEHLER: Did you ever get R and R when you were in Vietnam?

HART: Didn't have the money. I saved my money. We had plans. My to-be wife [and I]. We were going to have enough money for a down payment and buy us car, a down payment on a house, and buy us a car. And I saved enough money in the Army to do that with. I lived very frugally. Very, very frugally. In Vietnam ... I bet I didn't spend twenty-five dollars a month. Sent the rest of it home.

BOULTON: Now, you were quite close to Saigon. So you never went there?

HART: I've been in Saigon more times than—(Laughs) I guess—I don't know, probably the top brass in Vietnam. Me, E-4 Fred, knew Saigon like the back of—'cause I drove through there all the time.

PIEHLER: So you were just constantly driving through?

HART: Constantly driving through. 'Cause we went deep into South of the Delta. I stayed in the Mekong Delta. Tan Am, ... Dong Tam, all them little towns. Xuan Loc, all those little towns of South Vietnam, we went through. Saigon was the main route through them. There's no bypass. You go right through the center of town. I saw the Embassy building several times, and where the Presidential Palace was. A lot of rich people lived in Saigon. One street we went through, gosh, there's Jaguars, Corvettes sitting in the houses. You could see them. Then when that Tet Offensive started, all that stuff got shot up. Went by one place one time, here sat a beautiful early '60 model Corvette. It had about nine million bullet holes in it. We couldn't believe it. All of us young guys wanted a car like that, there's one shot all to pieces.

PIEHLER: You were living very frugally. Was there any gambling going on?

HART: Lots of gambling.

PIEHLER: It sounds like you stayed out of the gambling.

HART: I didn't have the money. I guess ... it never appealed to me. My friend Raymond, God, what a street Hustler! (Laughter) He told me, he said, "Hart, could you send me some money home and make it look like it's your money?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "You won't screw me now will you?" I said, "I never have, have I?" He said, "I've won \$1,500 dollars." Him being an E-4, you don't get \$1500, and he got \$1500. I said, "Yeah." I think the most you could send home at any time was \$500. So Huey Brown got \$500, I got \$500 and Ray sent home \$500. And we all sent it to our homes, and then they took the money order and sent it to Ray's home. That's the way we got the money home. (Laughter) Now, he wheeled and dealt with the sergeants and some officers gambled. This cat bought a 450 Honda motorcycle in Saigon, and paid cash for it. I said, "What are you going to do with a motorcycle? You can't ride it nowhere!" "Well, I can ride it when nobody's looking." He was quite a character. And he did. He bought a 450 Honda, and paid cash for it. Expensive cameras, watches, Rolex watches. I've got a Rolex. I don't have it with me, 'cause it quit working, he give me a Rolex watch.

PIEHLER: Which—those really weren't cheap.

HART: They were expensive back then!

PIEHLER: Yeah. No, I mean, they're still expensive!

HART: Three or four hundred bucks back then for one! And he give me one of them. But he come from a very wealthy family. He was a character.

PIEHLER: Do you stay in touch with any of the people that you knew in Vietnam?

HART: I lost my book. It's in my house somewhere, and I do not know where I put that book. I had their phone numbers, and I never kept in touch with any of them. I should have. I wonder why. I got home, I wasn't one of these vets that had a lot of problems. I didn't. I got home, and wanted to get married and forget about Vietnam. And really, that's what I did. I hadn't had a uniform on since 1968, and I fixed me up a uniform last summer for the celebration at Pigeon Forge. And that's the first uniform, or Army clothes, I had on since 1968.

PIEHLER: How did you come home?

HART: TIN [Trans-International] Airways. I've never heard of them. I didn't hear of them then. They were some kind of charter service the military used. TIN Airways. They had nice stewardesses. They were all blonde and pretty. They smelled good, and treated us well. And nobody tried to get a free feel in. We were just in shock. We didn't know how to act. We didn't. I was—that's the first white woman, besides the ... nurses, that I had seen, and they were all in uniform. Now, these stewardesses were all in uniform, too, but oh, did they look good.

PIEHLER: Where did—you flew out of Saigon?

HART: Left Tan Son Nahut.

PIEHLER: And what was your route? Did you stop anywhere?

HART: Stopped in Japan.

PIEHLER: And then ...

HART: Straight to Alaska. Stopped at Alaska for a few minutes, refueled, flew straight to Oakland.

PIEHLER: And then from Oakland?

HART: Oakland, I was out, and I caught a flight from San Francisco to Chicago, Chicago to Lexington, Kentucky, and I was home.

PIEHLER: So you were discharged at Oakland ...

HART: Right, I was no longer—I got out a month early. Because when I come back—we were lucky, because the forty-five days that we spent on the water counted as overseas time, and we were lucky. We were part of the first big build up. We were the ones that went over by ship. The rest of us went over by airplane, and come back by airplane.

PIEHLER: In many ways, your experience of going over by ship was unique for Vietnam veterans. Most ...

HART: I loved it. I did. I know people make fun out of the military. I guess I still got that mindset, but I did. I enjoyed that. I should have been a sailor.

PIEHLER: Would you have liked to come back by ship, or did you just want to get home?

HART: No. I wanted to get home. I wanted to get home.

PIEHLER: What did people say to you when you got to Alaska or Oakland? Did you wear your uniform all the way back to Knoxville?

HART: I wore my uniform all the way back.

PIEHLER: Did anyone say anything to you? Strangers?

HART: Yes, they did. I flew first class on American Airlines. I wanted to get home. I was not going to fly military standby. I spent the money. I had the money. I said, "Yes, I'm going home." And I bought me a first class ticket, and got on American Airlines and passed out. I'd been up three days solid.

-----END OF TAPE TWO, SIDE ONE-----

PIEHLER: You said it was a long flight. You flew first class.

HART: A long flight. I passed out. I put some headphones on. They was playing some kind of Herb Alpert music, or something like that. I just passed out. I woke up, and we were pretty close to Chicago. I was sitting next to a guy, and I said, "Oh my God, did I snore?" He said, "No." 'Cause I got a bad habit of snoring. I said, "I keep people up." "No," he said, "no." I was worried about offending everybody in there, thinking some drunken G.I. [was] in the plane. We landed in Chicago, and my flight was right there. It was not like it is now. I didn't have to wait very long. I got on the plane, and it wasn't that big of a flight from Chicago to Kentucky. I was sitting there, and this stewardess come up to me, and she said, "Would you like anything to eat?" I said, "Yes." She was a older stewardess. She was head of the stewardesses. And I said, "Yes, I'll just take a sandwich." And she said, "You want a steak?" I said, "Well," I said, "yeah. Could I have one?" She said, "All my military men get steaks. You're just back from Vietnam, aren't you?" I said, "Yes, I am." She said, "All my military flyers get steaks." It was a first class flight, but nobody else got a steak except me. She took care of me. I never got that woman's name, [but] I appreciated that. She was a older woman. She wasn't like the other stewardesses [who] would be in their twenties. She was pushing forty, I guess. She still had her looks and stuff. But she was the head woman. And I appreciated that.

PIEHLER: So that was really about the only reaction you got to being in uniform ... from Alaska to Oakland, and from Oakland, you're on your own?

HART: At that time, in airports, we were covered. I never got sneered at. I just wasn't paid any attention to. There were so many of us. I know some guys had some problems.

PIEHLER: But you never experienced any?

HART: Not here, no. East Tennessee was not a hotbed for the people that caused problems.

PIEHLER: And then you landed. Where did you finally meet your family? How did you arrive?

HART: I called Mom and Dad when I got to the airport, and they come and picked me up. I went home, and everything seemed strange. I didn't feel like I should be there. I didn't know what to do. I know the feeling—some people had some bad, bad problems coming back from Vietnam. I didn't have those problems, thank God, but I can understand why they did have them.

PIEHLER: So you never had any problems going to sleep at night?

HART: No. But I have problems waking up. Anything wakes me up now. I didn't have the problems a lot of the combat veterans had. I wasn't in it every day.

PIEHLER: So you didn't have nightmares about ...

HART: Yes, I had nightmares. Dreamed I got killed in the truck several times. Even after I come back, dreamed that.

PIEHLER: You also said that when you came home and took off your uniform, you never put it back on again.

HART: No I didn't.

PIEHLER: And it sounds like you didn't want to—is it correct [that] you didn't talk about it? Or did you talk about it, and who did you talk about it with?

HART: I didn't have nobody to talk about it with. The friends I had when I come back, they were all gone. They went their separate ways, or we had nothing in common. It wasn't the same thing. When I come back on leave before I went to Vietnam, that was ... '66, I guess it was, end of '66, I come back on leave.... There were no drugs in Knoxville, Tennessee. Boys drank beer, and if they could get whiskey, they drank whiskey. There was no drug problem in Knoxville, Tennessee. I went to Vietnam, and come back, and this town was full of drugs. In one year of time. Now, I run around with the in-crowd, I run around with people that did everything. I knew them all, and nobody did marijuana in 1966. That was something some juvenile delinquent in New York City done. It wasn't here. One year later, you could buy a joint anywhere. You could walk up and down Cumberland Avenue, and there was a drug dealer on every corner. Now, this happened in a year's time. I don't know if anybody's ever told you that, but what a culture shock it was for me. But it was a culture shock.

PIEHLER: Is there anything else that had changed? I just interviewed a vet who said he left in '68, and got back in '69, and he said that ... he was just shocked to see the miniskirt. Was there anything else?

HART: Well, yeah. When I got back, the hippie dress was really coming into vogue. It was doing it a little bit ... before I left, but when I come back—there was some weird people running around. Now, I don't want to run the university down, but they all seemed to congregate—whether they went to the university or not, they hung around here. This is a good school, a good place to get a education. God knows I've spent enough money here in the past six years on two of my daughters. (Laughter) I know how expensive it is, but it's a good place to get a education. You get a degree from the University of Tennessee, everybody knows where the University of Tennessee is. You get a degree from Murfreesboro or East Tennessee State or Cookeville, "Where?" "What?" You know what I'm talking about. They know this school. Yeah. They know this school.

PIEHLER: No. It's a fine school. I'm a little prejudiced, too.

BOULTON: What did you do in those first few weeks back?

HART: I bought me a car. My wife and I went house hunting. We hadn't got married yet. We got married in June. I saw her every minute. I went to look up some old friends, and realized I didn't have any old friends. We lost out. Still, to this day, I don't really have friends. I've got acquaintances. We had a couple we saw, that I knew from high school, and she did, too.... Days turn into weeks, weeks turn into months, months turn in to years. It just all slipped away. I don't know if that was just me, or the experiences I went through, but I lost some respect for people that I knew, especially when I come back. Had one guy tell me, said, "Well, you ... didn't do nothing but was on vacation for two years." What a vacation.

PIEHLER: He really ...

HART: He really meant it.

PIEHLER: He really meant it? He wasn't just kidding you?

HART: No. No, he really meant it.

PIEHLER: And this is before—you've talked to him, or ...

HART: Yeah.

PIEHLER: Did you tell him what had happened?

HART: I couldn't. I've opened up to you guys, but I'm not a very outgoing person with people. I'm not anti-social, like some of us have become. And there are some vets that's out there with some bad problems, very bad problems. I didn't know what to say. I really didn't. I had one tell me I was stupid for going.

PIEHLER: And these had been your friends?

HART: These had been my friends. “Why didn’t you do this? Why didn’t you do that?” I mean, it wasn’t a good time for a person to be in the military in the United States. And I have one thing to say to all the war protesters. They wondered why the war dragged on so long. I want them to go to that wall, in Washington, D.C., and look at all them names that’s on that wall. And I now want them to say, “Yes, I helped put one of these names up there, because I protested the war, and I give the enemy the resolve to keep going on” —and that’s what they done—“and we caused a disruption here in the United States, and it filled the enemy ... to keep going on.” And they didn’t care what the costs were, or how many people they lost. They could decimate a regiment, and it would come back. That’s the way I feel about it. I’ll defend your right to protest the war, but what they done wasn’t right. It was wrong. Let LBJ stew in hell. And I hope Robert McNamara’s down there with him, for making such stupid decisions. Learned men that got a lot of boys killed for absolutely nothing. Absolutely nothing.

PIEHLER: What did you think of Nixon in ‘68? You were suspicious of him in ‘60. How did you feel in ‘68, now having come back from Vietnam?

HART: I liked him better than I did Humphrey. I didn’t care for Hubert Humphrey. I didn’t vote for a long time. I think the first ...

PIEHLER: So you didn’t vote in ‘68?

HART: No. The first president I voted for was Jimmy Carter. I liked Jimmy Carter. He was a Democrat, but I thought him being from the South, he would be a good deal, and he wasn’t. I didn’t vote for Ronald Reagan, but I didn’t vote against him. I just didn’t vote. When Mondale run against him, I wouldn’t vote for Mondale. I thought he was too left wing. And when George Bush run, and they put Dukakis up—I’ve voted conservative ever since.

BOULTON: You’ve already mentioned the Vietnam Wall. Have you been up there yourself?

HART: No, but I’ve seen the one that goes around the country several times. Every time it comes around I go to it. I’ve got some people I know that’s on it.

PIEHLER: Were you ever asked to join a veterans’ organization?

HART: No.

PIEHLER: Never personally? No ...

HART: Not personally. They sent a letter, but never personally.

PIEHLER: Was your dad ever in the Legion, or the VFW, or any ...

HART: No. No. I don't know why, because they've got a strong cadre of World War II veterans. I don't know if it was our age, [or] if it was the time it was. I don't know why. I never had no desire to join. But a strange thing happened to me when I went to that celebration [Celebrate Freedom at Pigeon Forge, November 2000]. I felt, then, that it was for something. (Pause) I'm okay. Just go on.

PIEHLER: You had talked a lot about the war movies you had seen growing up as a kid, and you still like to watch them.

HART: Yes, I do.

PIEHLER: Were you able to watch war movies when you first got back, say, in '68, '69, '70?

HART: Yes.

PIEHLER: What'd you think of them then, ... particularly the older movies? Did you look at them differently, or did you just think, "They're movies?"

HART: I thought they made a statement. I know I've had people tell me, "If you've been in combat, you never want to see it again." Maybe for them, [but] not for me. They made fun of The Green Beret[s], the John Wayne movie. The last good war movie John Wayne made. I liked it. Sure, it was patriotic, and it was made more like a World War II movie, but I liked it. And some of it was factual. Those movies Oliver Stone made are horrible. Some factual [information] in them, but he's twisted things around. I was not in an infantry outfit. But the portrayal that he [gives], I don't believe it. I was around infantry people, and they were a little wacko. Things do happen, things do get out of hand, but not what he portrayed. Not day-to-day-to-day, no. I may be chastised by other veterans for saying that, but the ones that went out there and hunted the enemy, their job was to kill the enemy. Mine was to give the infantry the resources to kill the enemy. Or to build them places where they could do their job. That [Apocalypse] Now, horrible movie.

PIEHLER: What's the best Vietnam movie, in your eyes, that—both in general, but also any that touch, particularly, on your experiences?

HART: A couple. Full Metal Jacket, Hamburger Hill. Pretty factual.

PIEHLER: Why Full Metal Jacket? What do you find that's accurate, or speaks to your memories?

HART: The scenes where they were getting fire from the one Vietnamese woman, and they were burning up thousands of rounds of ammunition. The boot camp training things, and the guy that went wacko and killed himself, and killed the DI, some of that was factual.

PIEHLER: Did you know of a case like that?

HART: I know of a case where a guy went nuts.

PIEHLER: At Benning or at Leonard Wood?

HART: At Benning.

PIEHLER: At Benning?

HART: Benning.

PIEHLER: He literally did ...

HART: He went nuts. He didn't kill anybody, but he would have if he could have. He went nuts.... They drafted anybody, okay. Some people are not suited to the military. Should have never been put in the military. Not everybody can be made into a soldier. I survived. I didn't want to be a soldier, but I become one, and I was a survivor. I knew how—I guess there are so many times you've heard—I knew how to play the game, I knew how to survive. And I'm not talking about fighting. I mean just literally, day-to-day surviving, how to get by.

I knew a boy from Oklahoma. Garrison was his last name. He should have never been drafted. He stayed in trouble from the time I knew him, and I knew him for a long time, for almost a year. He never got over private E-1. He just stayed in trouble all the time. Mostly being absent without leave. He never really ever refused to do anything. He'd just get tired of working, and he'd just walk off. They tried to assign him to a truck, and [have] me train him to drive. He said, "I don't want no damn truck." He said, "All I want's a M-16, and a canteen of water, and a backpack. I can take care of that. I don't want a truck...." If he decided to go the village, to visit some cutie in the village, he'd go. And if he wanted to stay gone two days, he would. Three days, he got going. Things change drastically during wartime.

We were in a bunker one night, and we started receiving fire, and I was in a bunker. I couldn't see a damn thing, I couldn't get my weapon to operate right. And he was in there with me, and he was using the M-60 machine gun. He said, "I can't see a—" I'll not use the F-word here. And I said, "Well, what are we going to do? I can't get my gun to fire." I could not get the damn thing to fire. I don't know what I done. It was dark. Like I said, I was not a combat trooper. You know, you've got to use these weapons every day. And I got the thing jammed up. I couldn't get it to fire. He gets up on top of the bunker and starts firing. The enemy, the gooks out there in the tree line, starts firing back at him. He says, "Hell, this is just like shooting fish in a barrel!" I called him, "Garrison, get your ass down!" Wouldn't do it. Stood up! Dark. Stood up! Shot it out with the Vietnamese. Killed twenty-three of them, never got wounded. Now, I'm talking about the royalest dud that was ever in the Army was this guy. He said, "This is just like shooting ducks in a barrel!" He said, "This is more fun than an arcade at home." He said, "Just watch the twinkle of the weapon. Watch it go off." He'd put a few rounds over there, and no more twinkle. Next morning, they got up over there. He killed twenty-three of them guys.

PIEHLER: Yet he was the biggest screw up ...

HART: He was the biggest screw up in the Army. He stopped an attack, is what he done. Well, the lieutenant in charge of us seen it happen, and kept hollering at him, "Get down! Get down!" I mean, we were receiving a pretty good volume. He never got a bullet, never took a round, never took a hit. The lieutenant said to me, he said, "I'm gonna recommend this guy for a medal. Will you sign the paper?" I said, "Yes, I will." And he wrote out a big long paper. I signed it, and two or three others signed it. He put him up for a Silver Star, and that guy won it. The biggest screw up in the Army! I mean, I'm talking about a guy that was not situated for the military. The General come down from the engineer brigade to pin a medal on this guy. They had a big write-up in Stars and Stripes about it. [The General] said, "This guy's a E-1. He's been in the service for sixteen months! How could he be a E-1?" And they, you know, had to tell him. He said, "I'm not pinning a medal on a E-1." Said, "He's a E-4 now." I told Garrison, I said, "They're making you a E-4." I said, "You're going to be just what I am." [He said,] "I don't wanna be no E-4!" I said, "Garrison, you got to do this. You can lose your stripes after this is over with," I said. Now, we're talking about a guy that wouldn't clean his uniform up or nothing. I mean, he was not suited to be in. He was not. So we shined him up. We had ...

PIEHLER: Literally.

HART: We had him looking tall, buddy. And we give him a good haircut and a shave, and he was squalling, and didn't want to do this. I said, "Just go through the motions and take it like a man." I said, "You are a man, aren't you?" He said, "Yes, I am a man." One of them said they'd buy him a case of liquor if he'd go through with it and everything, so he thought this was okay. And he got his medal. I never knew what happened to him. He went AWOL again, and they sent him to camp LBJ. That's the stockade. And that's the last I ever heard of him. Silver Star. He won a Silver Star, almost a Medal on Honor. Was not afraid. He was not afraid! He was not—he ... kept in yelling at me. He said, "It's just like shooting ducks in a barrel! Wait 'til one of 'em fires, and fire back...." Hell, he was a master with that gun. He could do anything with it. He could write his initials in the damn barn door with it, if he wanted to. There was a barn door over on the right of me, and he was very good at what he did.

PIEHLER: It sounds like he should have been in infantry.

HART: He should have been, but ... he was just not suited. He was a half Indian boy. Didn't look like it. I've got his picture here. I'll show it to you after while. Looked like a half Indian boy. But things do happen. People don't realize.... I could not tell anybody except another combat veteran about things. People don't—they just don't understand. They just don't understand. I hope the guy come home, I do. I really do. 'Cause at that time, any time you spent in the stockade was bad time. And when you got out of the stockade, you had to start serving all over again. Your tour never—if you spent three months in the stockade, that didn't count as three months off your time in Vietnam. You had to serve three months in the stockade, then you'd go and start all over again. I'd say some of them ... probably thought they never would get home.

PIEHLER: How much drinking was there in your unit?

HART: Every night.

PIEHLER: Every night?

HART: Every night. Every day, to get by during the day. Not only for enlisted men, but for NCOs too. Quite a bit of marijuana use. Lots of marijuana use. Hashish, [and] some kind of little white pill some of them got, that they stole ... from the medics, or the medics sold it to them, or the medics give it to them. Took Bennies by the damn handful. I wouldn't do it. I didn't. I said, "I got to keep a clear head."

PIEHLER: But a lot of people did?

HART: A lot of people couldn't stand it. They did.

PIEHLER: Anyone ever punished for drug use?

HART: Yes. Yes. I'm trying to think here. Yes. Several got some bad time out of it. Mainly for selling. Not using, selling. Selling drugs.

PIEHLER: What about military discipline ...

HART: Broke down.

PIEHLER: It did break down?

HART: It broke down.

PIEHLER: In what ways did it ...

HART: Troops just refused to do orders.

PIEHLER: How often did that [happen] in a given week?

HART: It broke down—not every day, maybe not once a week, but every once in a while, you'd get something stupid to do, and say, "I ain't gonna do it."

PIEHLER: So what would be some of the things that people would say, "No?" And did you ever have a case where you just said, "I'm not going to do it?"

HART: Not personally, but as a unit, we started doing it. We'd clear a road of mines, and then they'd want us to do it again. Well, you might lose somebody doing that. Then we'd do it again. Then we'd do it again. Then they didn't even use the road! Just stupid stuff. Guys telling us to clear a landing zone for a helicopter. We'd clear it, and they never used it. Do it again, they'd never use it. Well, we had sergeants call, told the lieutenants, said, "Make up your mind what you want us to do! You're killing these guys out here!" Put a gun pad in one area, and it wasn't even where they wanted it. Stupid decisions that get people killed. People with no knowledge of engineering got people killed.

We had a ninety-day wonder out of the engineering school at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, a second lieutenant, who happened to be a lawyer. He shouldn't have been in the military either. I don't see how he got through law school. And he asked the first sergeant—and the reason I know about it is because I know the company clerk—he asked the first sergeant, said, “How much does a one-pound stick of dynamite weigh?” Now what did I just say? How much does a one-pound stick of dynamite weigh? (Laughter) And the first sergeant ... wasn't thinking. He said it weighed two pounds! Well, what this guy was trying to figure out, there was a huge rock up in the rock quarry, and they wanted to know how much dynamite to put in it, to drill holes in it and bust it apart, and then they could pick it up with a crane and put it in a popper and crush it up. He put two where he was only supposed to put one, or a half. And we drilled holes, and we drilled holes, and we kept putting dynamite in it. And the boy that I was helping said, “This is going to be something,” because we weren't using construction grade dynamite. We were using military grade. It's about 65, 70% TNT, and it is powerful. I mean, it's not the demolition grade. It's the kind that really does some bad, bad damage. And we were putting that stuff in. This lieutenant didn't know the difference between what the construction company used and what the military used. He thought it was all the same stuff. Well, he went to school to learn this stuff, and he must not have learned too well.

So anyway, we drilled them holes, we filled that rock up. It was a big rock. I told that boy I was with, I said, “We'd better get under a truck.” We got under a truck, and that thing went off. It blew the maintenance shed down, it turned over a ten ton Army crane. It blew all the windows out of all the trucks. It put a hole in the ground that you could have buried a dump truck in, and a five-ton dump truck is a big vehicle. There's a village ... quite a ways from there, at least a quarter of a mile. It threw rocks through houses. It hit people. It killed pigs, it killed chickens. It turned cars. Any glass in the area was busted, it was gone. It was such a blast. We cleaned each other off, and we looked, and I said, “Well [did] that idiot kill himself this time?” That explosion, I watched it. It was little at first—I guess that was the initial blast—and then it just kept getting bigger. It was like a mushroom. It grew and grew. Stuff like that happened. This caused the breakdown, because you had—like I said a long time ago, we had people that didn't care. They were just there marking time. And you had some people that ... shouldn't have been there.

PIEHLER: What happened to this lieutenant after that?

HART: He was reprimanded. I know he got a reprimand, 'cause it cost the Army a bunch of money to repair that village that got tore up. The equipment didn't matter. We were getting new equipment all the time. But it damaged—I know he got a severe reprimand. Rank come pretty quick to officers over there. And when I left, he was still second lieutenant, so I guess it finished his career as being an officer.

BOULTON: How do you think your wartime experience changed your life? In what ways?

HART: I probably got a sour outlook on a lot of people. I don't make friends very well. I ... have problems on the job. Not doing the job, but dealing with people that are stupid. I have a problem with that, people that are in charge that shouldn't be. I guess it all goes back to seeing

so many people hurt. Bad decisions can really hurt someone. I didn't have no religious experiences over there. I wasn't a Christian when I went over. I become one when I come back. I'm not a bible thumper or a Holy Joe. I do believe in God. I believe there is a heaven; I believe there is a hell. I don't do well around—I guess, social things to do with the church. I don't go to church, but I do believe. I do believe. I know one minister, was in the 101st Airborne, and he won't talk about Vietnam. When he found out I was a Vietnam veteran, he run the other way.

PIEHLER: Really? Quite literally?

HART: Run. Run the other way. I know one guy that was in the infantry, and he won't talk about anything. And I don't start telling war stories. I just ask people where they served. Maybe I was close too them, you know. Maybe I was in the same place. Maybe a conversation, but no, he run the other way. Wanted nothing to do with me.

PIEHLER: ... People you work with, do they know you're a Vietnam veteran?

HART: Some do.

PIEHLER: Some do? But not—if I walked into your workplace and said to the people around you, "Could you name me all the Vietnam veterans that work here," not everyone would pick you?

HART: No.

PIEHLER: No?

HART: No.... Now, there are some of us—I had one live up from me. He had a horrible problem. He was paranoid. He was the type of guy that still slept with his weapon. He had problems. He was in the U.S. Marine Corps. He was in Marine Corps recon, and he had bad problems.

BOULTON: How do you feel about the way veterans were treated by American society?

HART: The ones that were despised, I have no—I can't forgive them. I won't never forgive them. I won't. There's no way. I don't care. If ever a person that protested the war would write me a letter of apology, I wouldn't forgive them. I just don't. Too many people died to say, "I'm sorry." The average—at that time, you see, it wasn't that far after World War II, and those guys come home, the war was over, they got married and had babies, got a job, and that's it. We didn't have nothing to come home to. We had a country to come home to, but there wasn't no cheering bands, or nothing. And we were much younger. With an average age of nineteen, come back, twenty, twenty-one. I think the average age of Korean [and] World War II veterans [was] twenty-five, twenty-six, something like that. It's a big difference. Between nineteen and twenty-five years old, that's a big difference. You're trying to be lovey-dovey with a cheerleader one week, and you're in basic training the next. It's a big shock, a big culture shock. It didn't happen that way in World War II. Now, later on in the war, it did, and they had some problems. They sure did. Remember the movie about Private Slovak? He was one that should

have never been drafted, but they were scraping the bottom of the barrel at the time, because they had run out of fresh people. And that's what happened here. They run out of people. And they didn't go into universities to get them out. Well, they did after the lottery started, but then the war was nearly over with.

PIEHLER: ... Have you ever used the VA for anything?

HART: Yes. Got a home loan with it. I went to school on the VA. Good thing.

PIEHLER: Where did you go to school?

HART: I went to Knoxville Business College here, and got a course in business management. It kinda helped. It wasn't no great money-making deal, but it helped. I use it, yes. Yes I did.

PIEHLER: You never used the medical ...

HART: I haven't had—I was around areas where Agent Orange was sprayed, but I never ... had it sprayed on me, or come in direct contact with it.

PIEHLER: And your hearing, any problems with your hearing?

HART: Yes, I've had problems with my hearing.

PIEHLER: Have you ever thought of having it ... checked out as service-related?

HART: I don't think it has been. I think it's more of the job line I've had. I've worked in some noisy situations. I've got a little bit of hearing loss, but nothing terribly bad. Nothing bad. I've been around a lot of race engines, and that'll eat your hearing up. And back then, you never thought to cover up your ears.

BOULTON: What jobs have you had, since you came back?

HART: I went to work back at the old knitting mill when I come back, and I'd seen that there was no future there. I worked for Chevron Oil Company as a station attendant. It paid real well. It paid better than—but then they cut all that out. I worked at some manufacturing plants here when they started that up in the late '60s here in Knoxville. Different places. Didn't like working inside. Knew how to drive a truck. Got to driving a truck. Drove a truck over the road some, but I didn't stay gone weeks at a time. I didn't like that. I was out two or three days and back in. I did jobs like that. I finally got a real good job here, eleven, twelve years ago, that paid real well. I finally did better. But I didn't bounce from job to job. I stayed at some jobs I shouldn't have stayed at as long as I did. I just wanted to raise my family, and have a house. American dream type thing.... I guess I'm boring as I can be. I've not been a woman chaser. I've got a good woman, and raised two wonderful children. One's graduating in May, the other one graduates in the Fall.

PIEHLER: How much do your daughters know about your experiences in Vietnam?

HART: I've not tried to hide it from them. I've talked to them about it.

PIEHLER: So when they read this transcript, how much of this will be new to them? How much will they have heard?

HART: Some of it will be new, about some of the battle experiences. Some of it. Some of it they know about. I would say they'd rather enjoy it.

PIEHLER: What about your wife? How much did ...

HART: I talked to her about everything.

PIEHLER: So you weren't ...

HART: I've opened up to her. I've told her everything. I don't hold nothing back.

PIEHLER: Because I've interviewed a lot of veterans.... I'm mainly at this point interviewing World War II veterans, and there are veterans who have told me—and some of these are the ones that really don't talk about it. They haven't even told their wives what had happened.

HART: I know. I know they've done that. But I've talked to her. She's the best. Really is. She's really the best. She's stuck with me through thick and thin. We've had financial problems, couldn't have good jobs, medical problems. We've not ever really had no marital problems. No. No. No, we haven't. We've done well on that. We've always got along. We've always talked.

PIEHLER: It sounds like getting her letters, also, when you were in Vietnam, meant a lot.

HART: Yes. I tried to write her every day, if I could. She said sometimes she'd get fourteen letters in one day, from where they'd backed up, you know. I'd try to write her every day. She'd write me—she wrote me enough. It was great to get those letters from home.

PIEHLER: What about a USO show? Did you ever get to see a USO show when you were in Vietnam?

HART: Bob Hope.

PIEHLER: You did see Bob Hope?

HART: Got to see Bob Hope. He's good. A great American. A great American patriot. What a man. Give up every holiday there ever was to go out and entertain the troops. Got to see Martha Raye. What a woman. What a woman. Lost her career over Vietnam. They couldn't do Bob Hope in, 'cause he was too big of a star, but they did Martha Raye in. She was good, though. She was the dolly of the Green Berets, God bless her. Connie Francis, I think—did I get to see her? I got to hear her. I couldn't see her, 'cause there's so many people there, but I got to

hear her. She was good. She was good. Got to see John Denver. Not John Denver, I'm sorry. Got to see Denver Pile [Bob Denver]. He was Gilligan on Gilligan's Island. He was a supporter of the Vietnam War. He was. He was a good man.

PIEHLER: You mentioned reading Life magazine in Vietnam. What else did you read in Vietnam? What else were you ever able to get to read?

HART: Oh, Playboy come in all the time.

PIEHLER: So that was a pretty regular ...

HART: Pretty regular. Well, we was hot-blooded young men, you know. We were going to look at women. There was no—you know. Eighteen, nineteen-year-old boys at the height of their masculinity, I guess is what y'all would call it. But Life, [and] there was one, what's it called? Look. Look magazine come in, those type of magazines. They had Hot Rod. Oh, God, we had Hot Rod magazines.... Guys, you know, we were into cars.

PIEHLER: What about Stars and Stripes?

HART: We read it, made fun of it, 'cause you know, made fun of the military. But it was something to read. It was better than nothing at all. I mean, it was all pro-military. Of course it would be.

PIEHLER: A mundane question I always ask the World War II people and Korea, how often would you get a hot shower?

HART: Gee. I'm thinking. Oh, maybe once a week. It'd depend where you was at, and if you could use the other camps that you went to's showers, if they had showers. But it rained so much, a lot of times I just took all my clothes off and stood out in the rain, and take a bath that way.

PIEHLER: What about clean uniforms?

HART: Not very often. I wore mine until it fell apart, and then I'd go and get retreads ...

PIEHLER: Was that a difficult thing to get?

HART: No.... We had plenty of uniforms. It would just ...

-----END OF TAPE TWO, SIDE TWO-----

PIEHLER: This continues an interview with Fred L. Hart on April 21, 2001 at Knoxville, Tennessee with Kurt Piehler and Mark Boulton. And you were saying that uniforms ... were not hard to come by, that once your uniform wore out ...

HART: No.... If it wore out, if you get back to your base camp, there was a never-ending supply.

PIEHLER: What about food? I mean ...

HART: Base camp food was horrible.

PIEHLER: Really?

HART: Except if you could catch somebody that got a load of steaks from somewhere, that was okay. Some of the EM clubs had pretty good food, but generally the food wasn't that hot.

PIEHLER: So in some ways, that was very similar to your father's war.

HART: Right. Same deal. I guess the chow was the worst. It wasn't too good.

PIEHLER: ... Did you smoke at the time?

HART: No. I never smoked. I never could ... stand the smell of it. I just couldn't stand the smell of tobacco on my clothes. It just irritated me to no end. Couldn't do it.

PIEHLER: Would you have any interest in going back to Vietnam, to see where you had been?

HART: I thought I never would, and—maybe. I'd have to think about it. I don't think I would want to go to the north part of the country, and I think that's where those tours are. I would like to go back to where I was at. And I'm not looking for anybody that I knew. I'd just like to see what happened to the place. I would almost say, under the regime they got, that it probably hasn't changed one bit.

PIEHLER: What about the whole POW—I mean, I think a lot of ... Americans, when they think about Vietnam, they also think, right now, about POW/MIA. What do you think of the whole POW/MIA issue, as a veteran?

HART: I think that the Vietnamese murdered them all. I don't think there's any left. I hope to God there ain't none of them left, 'cause if they are, it would be the biggest disgrace on this government that there ever was. I don't think they were fully accounted for, myself. I really don't. I had a friend of mine, he was in the Navy, in the Rivermine force. He rode one of those little fiberglass gunships that rode around on the water, then they moved to one of those hovercrafts. I don't know if you've ever interviewed anybody that was on one of those.

PIEHLER: You're only the third Vietnam veteran. I've interviewed World War II veterans who became Vietnam veterans, but you're one of the ... first Vietnam veterans, so, no, I haven't.

HART: Okay. He got captured. They had tied the ship up, and [he] got captured. The Vietnamese climbed up on their ship and captured them in the night. They were all taken prisoner. The Navy, at that time, they didn't have any insignia. They didn't know who was the

captain and who was the enlisted person. Well, the Viet Cong's idea of a enlisted person, you were dead meat. You were expendable. So this boy conned them into thinking that he was an officer, and he was put into a prison camp, and moved all the time. This was in South Vietnam, not anywhere near the DMZ. He was down in the Delta, like with me. And he was with the Viet Cong that moved around. And they moved him every two or three days, so there was no way to track where he was at. He told me that he was interrogated every day, and he was beaten every day. He wasn't fed nothing but that sorry old pumpkin mash that they fed the prisoners. And I knew him in high school real well. I wasn't a real friend of his, but I knew him. He was a pretty athletic boy. He didn't play on any teams or stuff, but he was wiry and skinny and strong. He told me that they had one Vietnamese soldier that beat him every day. He said, "I watched this cat like a hawk. I learned every move he made." And said, "I got me a rock that I found where I used the bathroom at everyday," because they wouldn't let him out of his hut. He said he was there for a while, and he used the bathroom there in that mess, and he found him a rock. Said, "I watched this guy every day.... I watched every move he made, and he beat me every day." He said, "He walked thought the door one day, and I hit him between the eyes with this rock, and killed him." He said, "I run out of the hut, and run towards the tree line, and never looked back."

He was found about four or five days later by American troops, and he's never been the same since. He couldn't stay married to a woman a year. He couldn't hold a job down three months. He was in total shambles. I ate breakfast with him about a year ago. I saw him at a restaurant, and sat down with him to eat breakfast. He told me, he had tears in his eyes. I've got emotional here, but this guy never had a tear in his eye over nothing. He said, "I'm telling you.... I've got to tell somebody." So I listened to him for about an hour. It does affect people. It really, really affects people. You don't know how—there's thousands of us out here. We work every day, we pay our taxes. Then there's lots of us over here at this homeless shelter that can't cope with it. And some of them chose to do that, [and] some of them just can't cope with it. They just can't.

PIEHLER: Well, I really want to thank you for coming in and sharing so much with us, particularly on a beautiful Saturday.

HART: It's fine. It needed to be said. We don't need to lose this. It never needs to happen again. It probably will, but ... it doesn't need to happen again.

PIEHLER: ... I guess one concluding question. How would you feel if your children wanted to join the military?

HART: If they wanted to join, they could. I don't have an animosity against the military. Not now. It's been understaffed, but I think a lot of the dead wood's out of it. It has to be. I mean, all these guys are my age now. I mean, we were young, you know.... But all the bad ones that were in charge of us, they're all gone. Time marches on. Time marches on. Catching up with me. Even catching up with you two young guys! (Laughter)

PIEHLER: Yeah, I was just saying that to Mark. I was thirteen in 1973.... I always think of Vietnam veterans as being very young. Well, again, thank you very much. We hope you'll come to Celebrate Freedom this year, and we'll definitely be inviting you to some special events.

HART: We'll be there, no problem. Do you want to see this? (Indicating his photo album)

PIEHLER: Yeah!

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

Edited by Patrick Leverton 2/12/04

Edited by Gregory Kupsy 2/27/04

Reviewed by Kurt Piehler 3/14/04