Steve Boehmer

February 9, 2021
Part 1
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COHEN: Okay, so today is February 9th, 2021, and I have the honor of interviewing Staff Sergeant Steve Boehmer, who was in Troop G, 2nd Squadron of the 11th Armored Cavalry Division of the U.S. Army. He served in Vietnam from 1968 to 1969, and we're looking forward to hearing your story.

COHEN: So first of all, we'll look at your formative years and see when and where were you born.

BOEHMER: I was born in El Paso, Texas, in 1945.

COHEN: And where did you grow up?

BOEHMER: Well, after traveling from Texas when I was about twelve inches, along with my mom and dad, my father was stationed in the Army in Texas during the Second World War. I grew up- We went back to Wauconda, Wauconda, Illinois, northwest of Chicago, where I spent all of my life there, through my younger years and through high school and so on. And I went on to work with my father and grandfather on family business.

COHEN: What was the family business?

BOEHMER: Well, it was an automobile business. My grandfather started our family business in 1913 and it was a small store front, office business front on Main Street in Wauconda. He repaired- the name was Boehmer Automotive, and he repaired automobiles, and back in those days it was horse and buggies and machinery and things of that nature. And it transitioned over the years into automobiles. Initially it was Brown and Boehmer Automotive and then it went into Boehmer Automotive.

BOEHMER: And my father took it over from him in the early ‘60s. And then when I went to work with them after the service, I continued on and we had a Chevrolet dealership for many years and I finally closed the business in 2013. So that made one hundred years that our family was in business.

COHEN: Wow! Did you enjoy, growing up, did you enjoy working there? Was it interesting to you to learn about automotive parts and repairs?

BOEHMER: It was very interesting and of course, I kind of didn't have much of a choice because my dad was in the business and he said, "If you want a job, come and work with me," and even before I could drive, of course. And I enjoyed it because it was mechanically, mechanically oriented, And I love those kind of things and I really enjoyed it.

COHEN: Do you have any siblings?

BOEHMER: Yes, I have. There were five of us in the family, two sisters and two brothers. I'm the oldest of the five. They all grew up in Wauconda until the point where they went off to school, of course.

COHEN: And what was your mother's occupation?

BOEHMER: Well, back in those days, most women's, mother's occupations were being a home mom. And I think she had her hands full trying to raise five of us with an age span of about nine years. So she did a very good job of taking care of us and keeping us in line and let my dad bring home a paycheck.

COHEN: Sounds like a good arrangement. What do you remember about school? Which were your favorite subjects or activities?

BOEHMER: Well, in high school, I didn't have much interest in school as such, like a lot of young men of my day, of that age at that time. I was more interested in sports and things of that nature. And I was in the band. But I love sports. I participated in football and wrestling and track all four years in high school. And I've just been very interested in the sports world ever since.

COHEN: And did any of your relatives, such as your father or grandfather, serve in the military?

BOEHMER: My grandfather did not, but my father did serve in the Army in the Second World War. He had the obligation, of course, in the ‘40s to- actually being drafted into the Army. And he served in the Army for about three years, almost three and a half years, where he was stationed in the United States the full time. He was a-- and of course, it falls in line with the fact that he worked with my grandfather in our automotive business at that time--but he was very mechanically inclined and very automotive oriented, and he taught young men how to repair trucks and machinery and everything that was involved with the war effort during the Second World War. So he was fortunate that he could stay in the United States. He was in California as well as in Texas.

COHEN: What type of impact do you think it had on you, the fact that your father served during World War Two?

BOEHMER: Well, of course, at the time that I was eventually going to be going into the service, it meant a lot to me to think about what he did and what he went through at that time. Up to that point, of course, I never thought much about it. He never talked about his Army activities, other than the fact that we had a very close friend that used to visit us, with his family, that my father was in the Army with, and they would talk about Army stuff in those days. But thinking about my feelings when I had the opportunity to go into the Army, I never really thought about going into any military branch other than the Army. I just never thought about it. But I felt that it was my duty. My father spoke well of the military service and its obligations, so I felt that, well, why shouldn't I feel the same way?

COHEN: When did you graduate from high school? And what happens after that?

BOEHMER: Graduated high school, Wauconda High School, in 1963 and then immediately went to college. Went to--that's probably your next question--I went to a small college in northern Wisconsin called Stout State University.[1] At that time it was a very small school, and I just transitioned right out of high school into college. I never took a break at all. I went right into college.

COHEN: What did you study in college?

BOEHMER: Well, it might not surprise you to think that I majored in automotive technology [both laugh] because I had, of course, thoughts in the back of my mind that I would go back and work with my father eventually after school. And it was oriented to automotive, but of course, the typical English and electronics and math classes and things like that, that we all felt were worthless, but we still had to take them. But it was the automotive technology, and it gave me a pretty good basic [sic] for actually what I ended up doing in the Army, and when I came back out of the Army to go to work for my dad.

BOEHMER: Did you find that the math courses that at the time you thought were not so worthwhile, for them to be helpful? Like what formed a good basis?

BOEHMER: Well, the math classes I felt turned out to be useless. Calculus- I haven't figured out what calculus is for even yet today. So I don't think that the math class had any [laughs] other than the fact that it gave you a good, well-rounded education in a lot of areas. English and math and the economy, economics, and things like that, in school, are good because it does give you a good overview of what you might be faced with in future life.

[1] Now University of Wisconsin - Stout

COHEN: You mentioned in your presentation at McHenry County College that this was like a relatively--I don't know if the word is stable or peaceful--college. There weren't protests, there wasn't heavy use of drugs. Was this something that you appreciated at the moment?

BOEHMER: Well, coming from a small town in northern Illinois, I was not exposed to hardly any of the things that were developing in the, especially in the bigger colleges. When I got to Stout, it was a small school. We had sixteen hundred students when I started. And you recognized a new person walking down the hall, and if they arrived at school. So there was not much thought of the outside world influences that we think about college life, perhaps drug use and misbehavior and things of that nature. So I just was very thankful later on that I did go to a school that was down-to-earth and we didn't have those problems. They might have been there. I did my share of fooling around in the fraternity world when I was there and had a good time doing it. But the drug aspect of things, I just did not see any influence in that small college at all.

COHEN: Interesting. So you would have been at college, I guess, at the time of the assassination of JFK on November 22, 1963?

BOEHMER: Yes, I was in college. That was my freshman year.

COHEN: And what impression did that make on you?

BOEHMER: Could I step back just a minute...

COHEN: Sure.

BOEHMER: ...Back to what brings me to this interview today to what we're doing right now?

COHEN: [nods]

BOEHMER: And I think you've probably heard me talk about this previously- When I came back from Vietnam and de-enlisted from the service in 1969, came home like every other military person at that time, that era. I didn't know what was going on in the world. I didn't have any idea of what to expect when we got out of the service. And my family, nobody ever talked to me about my experiences in the service, whether it was in that period of time before I went to Vietnam or while I was in Vietnam. No one talked to me- not my family, not my friends. No one ever asked me any questions about my experiences, what I went through, what I did, what I enjoyed, what I didn't enjoy. And I, at that time, it really didn't bother me that much.

But later on, it began to make me wonder about why we were all there, all of the GIs who were there during that period of time. And about six years ago, a friend of mine who was a history teacher at McHenry County College, named Sarah,

found out that I was a Vietnam era veteran. And she asked me if- she taught several different history classes, but she said when she got to the American history, the period of time of the ‘60s, if I would be willing to come to her class and talk about the ‘60s and my military experience. I said, "Well sure, I'd be glad to." And that is the first time that anybody's asked me, had asked me to talk about anything that took place while I was there in Vietnam. And I thought about it really hard. And I wondered, well, maybe I should, maybe I shouldn't. But I decided I would because I was having some issues, some problems, some mental situations that I had to consider. And so when she asked me, I said I would do it. I went and spoke with her class and found it very refreshing. I was talking to college students that were eighteen, twenty, twenty-four years old, and they were very inquisitive and very interested. And it gave me an outlet for my feelings and my thoughts that I had never been able to express before. It was difficult. And I had a hard time, many times, putting things into logical sequence.

But then about two years ago, I was on Facebook. You know, social media is an amazing thing nowadays. And I happened to see a post from the Pritzker Military Museum in Chicago by Paul Grasmehr, and I'm sure you know Paul. And so I answered it. It was a posting about something military- I forget exactly what it was. I posted something on there. He came back to me and I said, "Well, you know, I'm Vietnam military era" and talked about a couple of things. And he got back to me and he said, "Would you be interested in perhaps giving an interview to the Pritzker Museum?" And I said, "Well, let me think about it."

And time went by. And here we are today talking about this, and I had an opportunity to go down to the museum--with my friend Sarah from the college--toured the museum, spoke to a few people there right at the point where the Vietnam era display was being disassembled, just before it was disassembled, about a year ago, a little over a year ago. So Sarah and I went down there. We were both very impressed with it, came back, then the process started to be able to provide this interview. It's been great for me to relive a lot of the things that I had totally forgotten about fifty-some years ago. I had to dig back real deep in my memory to come up with these thoughts and ideas. But that's how I came to be here today to provide this information. But it's been very helpful to me, the point I'm trying to make, to be able to talk about this and be able to give people some insight into what thousands and thousands of GIs went through at that period of time. And many of us have never had an opportunity to talk about it and express our feelings and I hope that they take some interest in what I've got to say.

COHEN: Yes, I think it is very important and maybe unlike World War Two. As we know there was more hostility to people who had served versus praise. And so I'm glad

that you have had the chance to go back and to remember and talk about anything, especially with inquisitive young people. On a personal note, one thing that puzzles me is why your family did not talk about it or ask about it? Or were they may be afraid of like hurting you in some way?

BOEHMER: Well, I thought about that quite a bit, about maybe ten, twelve years ago when I was starting to have these thoughts and, well, trouble sleeping at night. And I thought, "Well, maybe, maybe it's just the fact that they did not want to bring up any uncomfortable feelings on my part." I'm sure in some cases they thought that maybe there might be some severe repercussions if, say, they'd ask some questions, and I might jump down their throat with some comments of some kind. And I think it was just their apprehension about what reaction I might have. And I think that's the case with a lot of people, because when talking to those students at the high school, or at the college, I expressed to them the thought that they need to reach out to their veterans and their families and veteran friends that they may have, and people that they know that are veterans and see if they want to talk about things and if they want to express their feelings. Because there's many different forms of PTSD or emotional problems, even with first responders and hospital people and things like that. And things get pent up inside and they just don't know how to bring them out and talk about them in a safe manner, and in a way that it can help- help themselves and help others, too. So I think that my family and maybe my friends were just- some were probably not interested, but others, I think, were afraid they would cause some problems. More problems for me.

COHEN: Yeah, yeah.

BOEHMER: But is has been just the opposite, because the more that I've been able to talk about these things, the more comfortable it is for me to discuss them. And so that's kind of what I think about that.

COHEN: Did you think that time also allowed you the space, like in other words the fact that it's fifty years later? I mean, I met some gentlemen and for them it was seventy, seventy-five years after World War Two, that they began to wish to share. But do you think that played a part or no, you would have felt better if after, right away, you had been invited to share more?

BOEHMER: Well, I think that I probably would have had much more vivid memory of what those things were that took place and talk about them, right? [laughs] In the last month or so, trying to dig back in my memory fifty-some years ago and come up with the right sequence of things that we're going to talk about today and how things happened. And I just think that probably for a veteran that had to go back sixty or seventy years and talk about, it would be difficult. But it's always difficult

to talk about things that are uncomfortable and that you perhaps in some cases wish had never happened. And I just- whenever I have an opportunity, I talk to my fellow veterans and I very easily can ask them, "Tell me about what you did, what you're doing, how you feel?" It's important.

I interrupted your train of thought back there about 1963, around the JFK?

COHEN: Oh yeah, thank you, because it's an important piece, and so thank you. So I guess I think you had mentioned that you had identified with JFK. So I guess my question is, what was your reaction to the assassination?

BOEHMER: Well, that was my first year in college. 1963 and Kennedy was assassinated on November 22nd. So we're only about two and a half months into the college year. And I can remember very vividly coming into the dormitory, first floor, where we had one television set. I think it probably was black and white, I don't know [laughs]. And people were huddled around this television set and, of course, it was talking about what had happened in Dallas. And it was- it really didn't sink in too much at that time, other than the fact that being a very young president and a very charismatic, charismatic individual in the political world, a lot of us were pretty upset after we thought about what had happened and how difficult it was going to be for the country going forward. So it was it was a very terrible point in my life, really.

COHEN: Yeah. Yeah. Unfortunately, there were a number of assassinations that followed in the following years of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy. Did any of these events influence you at the time? And I believe you did talk a bit about- that you were at Fort Knox when Martin Luther King was assassinated.

BOEHMER: Yes, I was. When I went into the Army, I went to Fort Knox, Kentucky, where I took my basic training and my AIT [Advanced Individual Training] training before I went over to Vietnam. And during the spring- of course, 1963 was President Kennedy. But in '68, Malcolm X, I think was in '68, Malcolm X was assassinated. But Martin Luther King was assassinated in April of '68 and Robert F. Kennedy. And when I was stationed in Fort Knox, we were told we had to perhaps think about going on riot control duty because of course there were lots of uprisings, insurrections in the cities. They were burning buildings and all kinds of civil rights problems. So I was put on alert, along with all of the troops in our area, and we had to get ready to move out via truck from Fort Knox to the airport and Louisville and perhaps go to New Jersey or even Chicago to help with the riots and the problems were taking place. And, of course, very similar to the situations we're confronted with here lately with all of the difficulties we're having in our country.

COHEN: Yeah, yeah, that's true. And going back a little bit to the time you were in college, were you aware of the Cold War or the situation in Vietnam?

BOEHMER: I was only aware of the war situation in Vietnam because, of course, the tremendous ramp up of the need for military personnel at that time. By the time it was '65,'66 along in that area, period of time, I began to think about what was going to happen after I graduated. And a lot of us were talking about it and wondering what was going to be in the future for us. At that time, there were some exemptions, that we were told would not be entered into the draft possibilities- doctors and teachers and essential people like that would not be drafted. But at that time, they became aware of the fact that it might be very likely that I was going to have to go into the service and the draft lottery was put into place, and that was an interesting situation. They put all the names in a big drum with all the numbers of the year in the drum, and they turned it around and pulled them out. And that was the sequence in which the draft was going to take place. There were lots of people talking about whether they were going to stick around and stay in this country and perhaps be pulled into the draft. Some were going to Canada. Lots of war protests on college campuses that we were hearing about, and people were burning their draft cards. And it was a very, very difficult time because most people did not really know what their future was going to be after college. It was just not a typical "Well, get out of college and go get a job." It was military, for most of us anyway.

COHEN: Why did you choose to enlist?

BOEHMER: Well, that was an interesting situation. Being a college graduate, I went to see the recruiter that was there on campus and talked about what I would be faced with being drafted and where I would go and all the questions that a person might have. And he says, "Well, you're a college graduate." So he said, "You would be eligible to go to Officer Candidate School." And of course, I'd never heard of that. But I said, "Well, tell me about Officer Candidate School." Well, it turns out that it would be a three-year enlistment to go into the Army. You'd go to officer candidate school. You'd go to basic training, of course, and your AIT, advanced individual training, and then go on to officer candidate school and you would come out a commissioned officer, a lieutenant. And that to me, that sounded pretty good. Rather than be drafted into the service and being told ahead to do this and do that, I figured, "Well, if I've got a choice of something, I might consider it."

So I enlisted to go into Officer Candidate School. And another interesting point about enlistment versus draftees is the prefix to our military number Is either a US or an RA of the--[Cohen sneezes] Bless you--the US was a draftee and then

your number followed that. An RA was "Regular Army" and that was an enlisted person.

So all throughout my military career of two years, you were always looked at as if you had an RA, you were considered enlistee, and they looked at you a little bit differently if you were an enlistee rather than a draftee, because if you chose to volunteer, to go in, you were an RA. You enlisted, but a US was a draftee. So I decided to enlist in the Army, and when I went in, of course, I went in as an OCS candidate.

COHEN: When you say they looked at you differently if you had RA, do you mean that you were given more respect for having had enlisted?

BOEHMER: Yes.

COHEN: That's good.

BOEHMER: Not necessarily outwardly, where they would make it really obvious, but whenever they would ask you "Recruits, give us your army, your serial number!" "RA 16978022." And of course, the RA alerted them right away that you were enlisted rather than a US so-and-so. So it was it was interesting. And it was about the only advantage we had.

COHEN: You tell us a story about the neighbor of your family in Wauconda who gave you a 50-cent piece. I don't know if this is before you enlisted or before you deployed. Would you like to tell the story?

BOEHMER: I would, because that person that we're going to talk about was a very close friend of our family. And this- I grew up in Wauconda. I had a family across the street, a husband and wife and they didn't have any children, but they adopted our family of five kids as their family. And when I got ready to go to Vietnam, I was home on a two week leave. I got ready to go to Vietnam. And this lady, her name was Laverne. She was a principal at the junior high school at the time. She adored John F. Kennedy. She just thought John F. Kennedy was the nicest, best person she had ever known. Didn't know him personally, of course, but so when they started minting Kennedy half dollars, fifty-cent pieces, I don't know if many people knew that there was such a thing, but Kennedy fifty-cent pieces that they minted and she gave- when somebody was going to be making a trip to go someplace, she would give that person one of those fifty-cent pieces and say, "Now, here, this is good luck and you should take this with you and bring it back to me." "I want it back," she says. And that would be, of course, an indication that you come back here safe and sound. "And I want you to take this and bring it back to me." And I thought, "Well, that's, that's nice." I never thought too much about it at the time, but that was nice. So I did take it and I took that fifty-

cent piece and I put it in my...when I finally got it in the Army, when I left for going to Vietnam. I put it in my fatigues and carried it in my pocket. I had a wallet in there and I carried it there for the whole time I was in Vietnam.

But an incident that brings to mind that coin story is we were in the jungle one day on an operation. And the way that we did our operation at that particular time and many other times is we'd have a tank that would be in front of us. We were going through a Triple Canopy bamboo and the tank would be busting the jungle in front of us, and we would be following up with APCs, armored personnel carriers, off to the flanks and tearing down the jungle as we were going. And we got into a firefight and everybody backed up and got back into a position where we could defend the troops that were behind us, a lot of infantry behind us. And the vehicle to my right got hit by an RPG, rocket propelled grenade, and knocked one of the soldiers nearest me off of his machine gun post onto the ground. And I was close enough to him that I thought, well, I was in the commander's position on the cupola. In the middle of the tank, or our APC. I thought, "Well, I could maybe get off and get this person out of the way," because he was in jeopardy of getting run over by another tank, another APC.

So I stood up on my APC, stepped over the enclosure, and I'm quite sure that my track got hit in the lower part by an RPG and some other rapid fire. And the next thing I know is I'm laying on the ground and right beside the man that I was going to get off to try and help. So I thought, well, kind of took inventory of myself and I seemed to be okay, other than the fact that my leg hurt tremendously, and I was able to help this guy get back behind his vehicle so that we could proceed. And I could hardly move because my leg hurts so bad, but I was able to go around the back of my vehicle and get back up on my track, but I had to get off because of another incident. The firefight continued, ended, and we had to dust off a couple of the soldiers that were hurt. And they wanted me to go to the to the medic also, so they put us all in choppers and took off.

When I got to the hospital there, the medics said, well, they stripped all my clothes off my pants and everything. And he said, “Here's your wallet.” Well, in that wallet was this this coin. [grabs for coin] I don't know if you could see that.

COHEN: Could you lift it a bit higher? [BOEHMER lifts dented coin into view.] Oh yes, yes.

BOEHMER: That's the fifty cent piece coin that my neighbor gave me before I left to go to Vietnam. And as you can probably see there, there is a big old dent in it. And I kind of feel that, well, that saved my leg because if it would not have been there, it tore my wallet all to heck and all the money I had in there was shredded and everything, but that that really kind of saved the day for me.

COHEN: Wow.

BOEHMER: When I'm laying on the gurney in the medical tent at the field hospital, the medic looked at me and said, "Well, you are going to be all right." He says, "You've got one heck of a bruise here on your leg. We're going to keep you overnight." But he says, "That's the good news." But he says- and my back hurt really bad too, there's kind of a spot on my back that hurt really bad. And they rolled me over and he said, "Well, the good news is your leg is going to be okay." "But, he says, "the bad news is that the spot on your back is just a stick that got stuck in your back." And he says, "And you don't qualify for a Purple Heart for that." [both laugh] So he says [both laugh] So I said, "Well, that's okay, because I feel alright about that." So they took me back to the to the defensive position that they had backed up to, and so that was my incident with that coin. That coin saved my leg, I think so.

COHEN: Incredible, like it blocked the RPG, largely.

BOEHMER: Yeah, it was either some shrapnel or bullet or I don't know what it was, but it did knock me right off the vehicle onto the ground. So a lot of chaos took place right there.

COHEN: My goodness. Where was- where did this fight take place?

BOEHMER: Well, our units were deployed mainly in the 11th Armored Cavalry, mainly in the Tainan province of Vietnam, north and west of Saigon, Biên Hòa, up in what they called the Parrot's Beak and An Lộc, [Steve: correct place?]Lộc Ninh area up on Highway 13. That's where we spent a lot of time. We did a lot of road security for convoys that would go up and down the road on Highway 13. And that was between Biên Hòa, up to Phuoc Vinh, over the Song Be Bridge and up into the Lộc Ninh, An Loc area.

COHEN: Let's go back to that, but is it okay for you to sort of go back a little bit to basic training at Fort Knox?

BOEHMER: Sure.

COHEN: So what was it like? And the other thing I meant to ask is have you had any previous leadership experience, either formally or informally, or had you done ROTC at college?

BOEHMER: There was no ROTC program that I was aware of at Stout State University, a very small school, but I was in a fraternity at the school, and I was president of our fraternity for a year. When I got out of college, of course, I never really had any formal leadership training whatsoever other than the fact that when we got the basic training, they were always looking for people to be leaders in the military. And it was kind of a unique way of them picking leaders to start with. I remember on basic training, about the second week we were there, they had us

out in the common areas, and they were marching us around and they were providing different obstacles for us to try and get over and different projects that we would do to try and determine our ability to perform duties. And it was a very common thing for them to give five or six men a project they had to do, and they would stand back and watch these five or six recruits try to figure out how to do this, how to accomplish the objective, so to speak, and they would pick out the one or the two that were the leaders to try and help get the others to follow in line and do what was needed to be done. And they would pick up those people to be platoon leaders, squad leaders and things of that nature. So the military kind of picked its own people. They wouldn't just let somebody volunteer and say, "I want to run things." They had their way of doing it.

And basic training was a real eye opener, of course, for all of the trainees, recruits, because it took you out of your element of security and college or home, and you had to learn to deal with a lot of things that you'd never had to deal with before. And one of the major things that I found to be a problem was the fact that you had to deal with some of those folks that never wanted to do anything. They always wanted to be exempt from responsibility and they didn't want to do this, and they didn't want to do that. And we learned really fast that the attitudes of the ones that did not want to comply and go along and to make things comfortable and workable for others, they were the problems. And so we had to kind of deal with them on our own a lot of the time and get them to understand that, you know, if everybody was going to get along, we had to all participate.

COHEN: For many people, I think joining the military, it was a first opportunity for them to meet people from all walks of life, you know, urban, rural, White, Black, other ethnic groups. I mean, you mentioned a group of people who basically didn't want to pull their weight, but in general, how did people get along or how would you help cultivate an esprit de corps?

BOEHMER: Well, in basic training, our basic training and advanced individual training, it was pretty well scripted and controlled by what the drill sergeants and what the different people in charge wanted us to do. We didn't- there was not much latitude there. But getting over to Vietnam is where things really took a different turn, because there it was, without a doubt, it was life and death. And if you didn't pay attention, if you were not a part of the group, part of your platoon, part of your company, if you didn't follow along and try to be an effective component of your unit, you were a problem. And that, of course, it was difficult to make people follow at times, but there were times too when if they didn't follow, we just shipped them out because they were going to be a problem. And drugs were more of an issue there than they were in college, although in my unit

we did not tolerate drug usage. We told them if they wanted to do drugs and they became a problem, we were going to be more of a problem for their safety and livelihoods than the enemy was going to be, because there were ways to get people out of the units that did not want to be pulling their own and doing the right kind of job. So I won't go into the details on that, but we had our ways. [both laugh]

COHEN: Before you got to Vietnam, do you want to talk about either the AIT or the basic- like what typical days looked like in either, either Basic or AIT, and how you accustomed yourself to the discipline and structure?

BOEHMER: Well, the basic training, of course, is just what it sounds like- it's basic training, and it taught you how to be a soldier. Everybody looked alike after about twenty four hours because they shaved your head, and it was kind of funny to watch all that going on, but you just, you got up at the crack of dawn and they were yelling at you from morning to night about how to do things and where to go and what how to handle things; and you never walked anywhere, you always ran, which was interesting for some of the folks that came in that were not in very good shape. But that was just basically learning how to be a soldier, how to walk, how to comply, how to tie your boots, how to shine your shoes, how to clean the floors in the latrine, because it was just a very basic rudimentary- it dragged you right down to making you feel at times like you were just dirt. But then halfway through basic training, they kind of pick up the pace a little bit and let you feel like you are going to be something someday and started treating you a little bit more like you were going to be a human being. [COHEN laughs] The advanced individual training was a different story because we then went on to the weapons and my particular unit at Fort Knox. We were there for our armor training and I was trained extensively on tanks, M-48 tanks. Now I was, when I went to Vietnam, I was in an armored personnel carrier, A-CAV, armored personnel carrier, but I never saw an A-CAV when I was at Fort Knox. That was all tank training. And so it was quite an eye opener for me when I got to Vietnam that I had never been in one of these APCs. But in AIT training, we learned how to fire the weapons, the tank, how to take certain parts of it apart, the tracks, how to disassemble the tracks, how to clean and maintain things, battle tactics, how to conduct our operations. They had a huge grounds area there in Fort Knox. We'd go out and simulate battles and all with, of course, blank ammunition. We had no live fire except on the actual firing range, but it was very interesting because we got to deal with all the weapons.

A little interesting, quick story about what had had happened to me was, in AIT, that was about the time in late March, early April, when all the riots and all of the insurrections were going on in various cities. And there was just some

terrible stories about people getting weapons that they were using against the police and the local authorities. So then one day we were walking down by the wash rack, where we would take our tanks after we would use them out in the field. We had to wash the tanks off with fire hoses. We'd get the mud off the tracks and the mechanisms with fire hoses. We were walking down there one day, three of us, and we walked by this area and on the ground was one of the 50 caliber machine guns that came off the top of this one of these tanks. And we couldn't believe our eyes. Here was a 50-caliber machine gun laying on the ground there. And so we all debated about what the heck we're going to do. And I said, "You know, if we pick this thing up and start carrying it and if they don't, if somebody sees us, we could be in big trouble." So I sent one of the guys back to the quartermaster who we knew, because he was one that handed out all of our fatigues and equipment and things, to tell him what we had found. And he said, pretty soon this quartermaster comes back with this guy, a friend of mine and he says, "What are you guys going to do with this thing?" I said, "I don't want any part of it." I said, "If we get caught with this," I said, "We're going to go to jail. There's no two ways about it." So he says, "Well, I'll take care of this," this was the quartermaster. He says, "I'll take care of it." He was a sergeant. He said, "I'll take care of it." I said, "What are you going to do with this thing?" He says, "Don't you worry. I'll take care it." Well, he says, "You guys," he said, "I'll give you fifty bucks for right now." I said, "You're going to buy this thing from us?" Well, make a long story short, we didn't take any money. We just walked off and left laying there and he took care of it. But I could just picture this machine gun showing up somewhere at one of these riot locations. So that was a that was a scary thing for me to think about, but just a crazy part of what happened in my AIT.

COHEN: Yeah, the timing in history was very tumultuous.

BOEHMER: Yeah.

COHEN: Yeah. Wow. So when you were doing the AIT, had you already been assigned specifically to the 11th Armored Cavalry or not yet?

BOEHMER: Well, in AIT you were not assigned to any specific unit at all. That was just basic training. In my case, it was basic training and advanced individual training for armor- armor meaning tanks and armored personnel carriers and things of that nature. It wasn't until I was sent over to Vietnam that I was assigned to the 11th Armored Cavalry. Nobody knew what they were going to be assigned to until they arrived in country., At least as far as I know they didn't.

COHEN: Ok, and did you choose your M.O.S. or were you assigned your M.O.S, your military occupation specialty?

BOEHMER: Well, my M.O.S, of course, was Armor, 11D40, and that stood for just exactly what I was being trained on armor, tanks and armored personnel carriers. So I did not have a chance to choose that. They chose it for me by sending me to the Fort Knox, to the [US Army] Armor School. When I was inducted into the Army, because I was in school in northern Wisconsin and I signed up in the army in northern Wisconsin, my dispatch location was out of Minneapolis, St. Paul, Minnesota. And so from there, I think they just chose from there where to send us, meaning me and many others, and they loaded us up on gosh, I think there were about half a dozen busses that they lined up in the parking lot and they just said, "Well, you go over here, you go over there." So they took off, the busses left for different places around the country, some of them to the infantry training facility, some to the armor, things of that nature. So that's the only reason I know that they- and maybe they thought that because I had had prior mechanical experience, automotive, and my earlier, my civilian life as well as college life, they figured, "Well, if you can fix a car, maybe you can fix a tank." So I don't know.

COHEN: Do you do you feel that it helps you, in learning how to deal with the M-48 or other tanks?

BOEHMER: Yes, it did, because when we finally got to Vietnam and out into the field, of course, when they put me in 11th Armored Cavalry, I said, "Oh great, at least I'll be in an armored division with them." When they told me I was not going to be in a tank, that I would be in an armored cavalry vehicle, armored personnel carrier, I thought, "Well, gee whiz, I've never been in one of these things." You know, I was in tanks all the time and I know how to drive one of those and how to work on them. But the armored personnel carriers were not all that much different because they had, you know, diesel engines, they had mechanical things, they had steering mechanisms. They had many of the same concepts the tanks did have. So the APC, the M-113 was my home for eleven and a half months while I was over there.

COHEN: Wow. Would this be a good time to talk about the vehicles or should we go back to that later?

BOEHMER: Sure.

COHEN: Okay, so my colleague Paul Grasmehr, who you had mentioned before, talked about the flammability, that even with diesel fuel because the M-113 armored cavalry assault vehicles was made out of a thin diecast aluminum, it was extremely flammable and susceptible to rocket propelled grenades, RPGs, or heavy machine gun [fire]. So he wrote, "I would have been paranoid riding down Vietnamese roads or operating in rubber plantations of the jungle near Saigon,

on the back of those, quote unquote, 'armored vehicles.'" So I guess I wonder, would you like to comment on this?

BOEHMER: Well, when we think about a tank or an armored personnel carrier, you think about a structure made out of almost impervious material, but the tanks had a lot thicker armor around them than the armored personnel carriers did. And Paul was very correct about the fact that they were vulnerable to our RPGs, rocket propelled grenades. And they were- I've got a picture here. This is this is a picture of a [raises photograph into view], you can see that's a picture of an armored personnel carrier that was hit by an RPG and caught fire and literally burned to the ground. So that is an example of what can happen. This is a picture of [raises different photograph] a vehicle that had been hit by an RPG, you can see the scar and the side of it that got hit by an RPG. And of course, that's a near miss and it probably didn't cause too much damage to the people in there, the personnel, but they did have a real vulnerability too because they move slow. They weren't really agile. The occupants in the tanks or the armored personnel carriers could be down inside the vehicles, but of course, they may not have all the protection that they need.

We would go down these roads, specifically Route 13, Highway 13 in Vietnam between Biên Hòa and Phuoc Vinh. It was a primary road between Biên Hòa and Phuoc Vinh. And we'd do these "thunder runs," they call them, where it sounded like thunder because you'd run these vehicles up to twenty, twenty-five miles an hour, as fast as they'd go, going through these areas where there were possible ambush sites and things of that nature. And in some cases, we were firing in both directions if the terrain required it because you just didn't want to be a sitting target sitting still. You'd be moving as fast as possible. And that speaks to the story of Paul talking about things being so vulnerable when you're running down these roads. We would do security for the fuel tankers that would come to refuel the vehicles. We would do resupply security for different things that we needed at the base camp, so we had to do this quite often. And you just didn't know when you were going to be confronted with, you know, if somebody along the road is going to shoot at you, but you were a big target. A really big target.

COHEN: Well, it's a funny thing to ask, but did you know who the enemy was at the time, if it was PAVN [People's Army of Vietnam] or the Viet Cong or were certain areas hot spots?

BOEHMER: Well, in some cases, it was very difficult to tell who the enemy was because unless it was an NVA, North Vietnamese Army regular- they would, of course, many times be wearing their green uniforms and have equipment that made them look like military people.

But unfortunately, you didn't usually get to see them very often because they were not going to walk out and wave at you and say, "Hi, I'm Charlie." [COHEN laughs] We called all of the Vietnamese enemy, Charlie. The Viet Cong were the local fighters. They were mainly night fighters. During the daytime they would be just typical people around the villages doing their local things that they would normally be doing. And at night, they would be harassing us. They would be at our night defensive positions, ambushing our patrols as we would go out at night. So you didn't really a lot of times know who the enemy was. You can walk right by some of these people in a village or drive by them in the village and they may be the enemy. You never know.

Quick story about that is, we were in a stand down situation one time. We were sitting on the outside of a rubber plantation doing some security, and we had an opportunity where they had some of the village people were going to come out, and they came out, and they were selling stuff to the GIs, rotten beer that they would have. [phone rings] Sorry. Selling us their rotten beer and trying to sell us some things that we really did not want to have, and there was one opportunity we had to get a haircut. This gentleman came out and he had his barber kit and was giving people haircuts. So I got a haircut and here's a picture of me [raises photograph into view]. I was getting a haircut, and it seemed like a very innocent thing to do. Got a haircut that day. And that night we were attacked in our defensive position. And when we went out the next morning to do a body count and see if there was any survivors, we could get some intelligence information from them, guess who we found among the dead? The barber.

COHEN: Hmmm, hmmm.

BOEHMER: So, you know, there's an example of you don't ever know who the enemy is. And it's like today in Afghanistan, Iraq. You hear our soldiers talking about the same thing over there, where you just don't know who the enemy is sometimes. So that was always in the back of your mind. You never really knew who they were going- what you were going to find. So kind of a scary thought.

COHEN: There's no clear front line. No.

BOEHMER: No, no. And of course, they did not understand the war there. They didn't want to be in war. Vietnam and the Vietnamese people did not want to be at war. They- all they wanted was peace and tranquility. And they were- they'd been in war or were in war in Vietnam going back into the early 1900s. The French, the Japanese, the Russians, they all wanted Vietnam because of its rich resources. And they've gone through decades and decades of war. And they were mad at everybody. [both laugh]. They didn't like us being there.

COHEN: No, no. How many people were in an A-CAV and did everybody have a different role?

BOEHMER: Yes, everybody had a different role. Our A-CAVs had a four-person crew, basically, sometimes there might be a fifth person in there, but mainly consisted of a track commander- we called the A-CAVs *tracks* because of the tracks on the side, of course, like a caterpillar, like a track vehicle. They call them tracks. A vehicle commander, a track commander, would sit in the cupola in the top and here's a picture of that vehicle [raises photograph into view], person sitting in the middle at the top. The driver is down in the front, got his head popped out of the upper surface there of the truck. And then are two machine gun people, one on either side in the back. So it'll be a five-person, four-person crew and occasionally there will be a fifth person there. This picture is being taken from my track. I turned around and I'm taking the picture back at this other one. And this one, it's right in the foreground there. He's one of my machine gunners on my track. So that's why that picture looks like that.

COHEN: So were people always exposed, like…?

BOEHMER: Yes.

COHEN: Wow.

BOEHMER: There are shields that are in front of those machine gun locations, but we chose not to use the shields a lot because you couldn't move them where you wanted to. They didn't turn exactly the way that they were supposed to, so many of the guys chose to eliminate them. We wore what we call flak jackets. They were like, they weren't bulletproof by any means, but we wore flak jackets, had helmets on. But the helmets were usually not much effective, or that well effective for anything significant, like a, you know, a larger round of any kind. But yeah, they were pretty exposed. And the vehicle commander in the center, as you can see, he's sitting right up in the air from the shoulders on up. And you just, that's the way it was. You had no choice. The idea was, of course, you were supposed to suppress the fire of the enemy enough that they won't see you. But a lot of times they would see us before we could react, and they had the advantage.

This picture here [raises photograph into view] is a picture of looking into the back of an A-CAV. It's got ammunition boxes sitting outside of it. The ramp is down on the back, the ramp goes down in the back. And we have the whole floor load loaded with two layers of ammunition that would fill up the bottom of the track. That was there for, of course, resupply for the machine guns, but also, if it happened to hit a mine, the mine detonated, it would keep everything from blowing right up through the floor. So that added weight to the vehicles to help protect against a mine blowing up too.

You asked about, Paul commented on the fact that, talked about chain link fences that we would carry to put it in front of the vehicles-.

COHEN: This was for the night defensive positions, the-

BOEHMER: Yes, we'd set up at night in the defensive positions and not know, of course, when we were going to be attacked. We wouldn't know where it's coming from, so we put this chain link fences up about thirty yards out in front of the vehicle so that the enemy couldn't shoot their RPGs, their rocket propelled grenades, and hit the vehicles. They'd hit those fences first and prevent them from hitting. And we could shoot our machine guns through the fences, but they could fire those RPGs. The RPGs would explode at the fences rather than on us.

One more picture and then I'll keep my mouth shut here. One more [laughs].

COHEN: No, no, it's great!

BOEHMER: This is a vehicle [raises photograph into view] that we had equipped with a flame thrower. And that's napalm that's coming out of that side of that picture there, and it's affixed to the front of an A-CAV, just like a machine gun would be. And then this is the [raises photograph into view] that's the effect after the napalm hit what it was aimed at. So this...

COHEN: Wow. Did you did you have to use it a lot?

BOEHMER: We would use quite a bit when we get into the, to the bunkers, and into the areas where they would bury things at base camps underground. I got a couple of pictures of those, but we would use those only as a last resort to burn them out if we had to. And sometimes we would get into a village where there would be a structure that we would be concerned about and did not want to go into, the napalm… And we called that that device there, zippo, like a Zippo lighter. We called it zippo [both laugh]. So we didn't like to have to use that, but we did, so.

COHEN: Did you or any men you were with suffer from Agent Orange or endure other effects?

BOEHMER: I was exposed to it. I don't have any effects from it, or lasting effects, as far as I know. I've been tested twice, early on when I got home, and I have a lung condition that the doctor feels that may have been caused by the Agent Orange, and that's listed on my military disability level, that I have been exposed to Agent Orange and got a lung condition. But I'm fine. I cycle a lot. I'm very active. I'm healthy. So I'm not complaining. But there are some very serious medical conditions that have been documented, and it's some horrible things that some of the GIs have died from, from the Agent Orange. They would fly over, mainly at night, with these big C-130 transports, with the Agent Orange Chemical in it. And

they would they drop it out of these sprayers, kind of like a crop sprayer, you know, that farmers use. They'd drop this, spray the stuff under the vegetation, alongside the roads so that it would kill the vegetation and then we would have a lesser chance of ambush coming from these close proximity jungle and foliage alongside the road. So we would get up in the morning sometimes and we would feel this sticky surface on top of the vehicles or on various things. And I had no idea at the time what it was, but we learned later on that it was probably the Agent Orange that they were spraying. Bad stuff.

COHEN: Oh boy. Just going back to the tracks, I think Paul had talked about the balance between having put in more plates for armor and sandbags, like you showed us before, and at the same time, the need for the vehicles to move through jungle and swampy or boggy terrain. What would your assessment be for, like you say, that balance between protection and mobility?

BOEHMER: Well, the idea, of course, is that you put as much protection as you can to prevent things like that rocket propelled grenade hitting the side of that vehicle. And we never hung anything on the side of our vehicles as additional protection. It just was never provided to us. Some of the tanks, the M-48 tanks, some of the big tanks, they had some stuff that they would hang on the side. But our armored A-CAVs never had any additional armor. Like I said, we would carry those chain link fences that we put up at night. We would load the bottom of the vehicle with as much ammo as we could probably put in there. Sometimes we had two and a half feet of ammunition boxes stacked front to rear inside that would add weight and armor. We were mainly concerned about hitting these roadside bombs that they would put, and those roadside bombs- in a lot of cases roadside bombs and mines, in a lot of cases, were our undetonated bombs that would be dropped that didn't go off from the military, from the airplanes. And these Vietcong would get these bombs and they would at night go up and dig holes underneath, into the roads and then cover them up and then either manually detonate them when we would go by or set them with a pressure detonator. But it was a balance, like Paul said, between maneuverability and practical ability and having too much that you couldn't make it work. You just, those shields on in front of the machine gunners, those are okay for rifle and machine gun rounds, but RPGs, they go right through them.

COHEN: I was reading in a book by Donald Snedeker, that's during the time that you were in Vietnam there were many operations that the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, 2nd Squadron participated in. And I think when I asked you both, you wrote you were commanded like, "Go there, do this. And give them hell." But were you ever given any background or context, like "We're expecting tunnels here or ambushes there?"

BOEHMER: Well, we, being at the lower level of the military chain, so to speak, we were, you know, the front-line fighting individuals, we never really had too much knowledge about the overall concept of where we're going and what we were doing. They just would say "We're going to be securing this road from such and such a place to another." And there was never any detail about where we're going, why we're doing this. And they just always wanted to, of course, proceed with caution, but they never really gave us any mission or operation names, an operation this or operation that. The only operation that I was ever aware of, and I was not in any way involved with it, was the Operation Rolling Thunder, which was when Nixon ordered the bombing of North Vietnam [both laugh].[2] So we were not privy to any managerial, I guess you could say, decisions. We just were told, "Do this and do that." And I would go right along with those comments.

My regimental commander, while I was in Vietnam, was George S. Patton III,[3] and here's a picture [raises photograph into view] of Patton out in the field at one of our landing zones. And he was one of these military people that, if you ever watched the movie *Patton*, he was just- his saying was "Find the bastards and pile on." That's the way he phrased it. So we were never really told too much about why we were doing things. They just said do it, so. And sometimes that was better that you didn't try to question what was going on because it really didn't make any difference. You know, you're only allowed to make decisions at the very basic level.

COHEN: Yeah. Did you have direct contact with Patton?

BOEHMER: No. In that picture is the closest I got to him. And I even kind of feared for the fact that I was that close. But I think he liked to have his picture taken. And of course, I promised that I would get some copies of that picture for some of my friends that were there with me, but I never spoke with him. I never really heard him say anything, other than his persona kind of preceded him. You know, he was- when we heard that we were assigned to the 11th Armored Cavalry, we heard that Patton was our regimental commander. We thought, "Oh boy, now what?" you know! [both laugh]

COHEN: Well, I recently had the pleasure-

BOEHMER: [begins to speak]

COHEN: Oh go on. Sorry, I interrupted you. Excuse me.

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[2] The bombing of North Vietnam in Operation Rolling Thunder was ordered by President Lyndon Johnson.

[3] George S. Patton IV, the son of World War II General George S. Patton Jr.

BOEHMER: He was a good military man, and you know, the fact that they could deal with the conditions that were over there and try to make headway and try to make some common sense out of that war, and what was going on, I guess, was a tribute to whoever was in charge. Of course, our little 11th Armored Cav there in the Tây Ninh province area was only a small part of the 11th Armored Cav that was located throughout much of Vietnam. There was a lot of 11th Armored Cavalry that were in other places. And I never realized that until I did some research, but we were not the only ones from the 11th Cav there, so.

COHEN: I recently interviewed a veteran who was with the radio research detachment attached to 11th Cav and one thing he liked was he felt it was really the most gung-ho, you know, group fighting in Vietnam. And so, was that, did you feel that people had a, you know, a very determined attitude?

BOEHMER: Well, yes, I do feel that we were very determined. Of course, what kind of led our determination was the fact that we knew we were going to be there for a limited period of time, and we hoped that we were going to stay well long enough to fly back home on that Freedom Bird going back to the United States, and the incentive to do the job right and to conduct ourselves in a military manner was to protect each other and to do our jobs. Some, some were a little bit more adventurous than others, and we'd do some crazy things that were above and beyond. But we, most of the time, felt that we were there for a reason, for a purpose, not until the last five or six years did I realized that there was a lot of deceit and a lot of misconception about that war and why we were there. But while we were there, I felt that we were, I wouldn't say ambitious, but we just we knew we had a job, and we did it.

COHEN: Do you want to talk about either, like a specific, the word is, let's say, mission that you did or, if not, a specific one, like a typical, let's say, an ambush or discovery of a tunnel or, you know...

BOEHMER: Sure. I had, going back to my days in Wauconda, there was a family that grew up about a block away from my home. Their last name was Walbrandt. The young man, his name was Donald Walbrandt, and he had two sisters that grew up and spent a lot of time with my two sisters. I was not in school with him. He was a couple of years ahead of me. But one time when we were in Vietnam, we had a defensive position we set up at night to make way for two helicopters coming in with some additional personnel, some new people coming in for our unit. So we set up this defensive position, and evidently we set up in the wrong place because we were hit really hard that night by what we felt were probably North Vietnamese rather than Viet Cong because of the firepower that they had. But when the dust cleared, so to speak, the next morning, and we got word from our commander, and I don't know if the word came from Patton or not because they

were hoping that maybe there would be some intelligence information, some things that we could get from the KIA [Killed in Action], some of the Vietnamese that were killed that would help them in the operation that they were conducting. So they decided to bring in a dog tracker team from the Big Red One [1st Infantry Division US Army], the army unit Big Red One, and they flew in with a helicopter. And before they arrived, I set out four different directions to listening posts, listening posts, which would go out, and I was part of one of them, would go out about one hundred fifty, two hundred yards and sit and just listen for any activity that might be in the area. So when these dog tracker teams would come in and look for wounded or KIAs, they would not be ambushed.

So we went out and we were sitting there in total silence, except for the ambient noise that was in the jungle and the helicopter landed. And shortly thereafter I could hear a noise behind me. And so I suspect that it was one of the tracker teams. And I turned around and looked and I just, well, I couldn't believe my eyes, but it was my neighbor, Don Walbrandt, that grew up a block away from where I lived with his dog [laughs]. And I couldn't believe my eyes. And he looked at me and I kind of whispered, I said, "Don, it's Steve, Steve Boehmer." And he kind of went like this [raises finger to lips]. And he says, "Can't talk." So they went on ahead with his dog team, his dog partner was a black lab, and he was out there for a short period of time, came back and evidently he didn't find anything, he came back and walked past me. And he looked at me. He said, "Steve, I can't stop and talk. We've got to get out of here." So that's the last time I saw him, as he went past me. And a short time later, I heard the chopper fire up and he left.

About a month later, my mom sends me a copy of the newspaper article that was printed in our hometown in Wauconda, the newspaper's called *The Wauconda Leader*, with a story about this, Don Walbrandt seeing me in the jungle in Vietnam. And it just validates my story because I've got that newspaper clipping today.

COHEN: Jeez!

BOEHMER: Here we are halfway around the world and I see a young kid that I grew up and went to high school with. Gives chills even thinking about it now.

COHEN: Yeah, yeah, I know. It does.

BOEHMER: And I've got a couple of pictures here of- we've talked about bunkers and things. This is a picture of a [raises photograph into view] bunker that we came across. He tore it open with the top of a push bar that we had, and this is a picture of [raises photograph into view] my friend Shorty going down into the tunnel. And

Shorty was always short enough that we sent him into the tunnel because...he didn't like the idea, but he was the smallest guy we could get [both laugh].

COHEN: So he would just check out and see who or what was there?

BOEHMER: We'd send, you had to go down with, he usually went down with a flashlight and a .45, a .45 Pistol and that's all there was room for. You couldn't take a long rifle or anything like that. And a lot of times it was just a hole in the ground. Sometimes there would be leading tunnels that would go certain places. But this is a picture of me standing with a bundle of RPG rocket propelled grenades that they would put in those launchers, that would be, they would be firing at us. And I think there were about six bundles like that that we were able to capture that day, so that would be six bundles that they couldn't shoot at us.

COHEN: And these would have been close to the tunnel that Shorty went into?

BOEHMER: They were actually in the tunnel. He brought those out, brought those out. This is a picture of an NVA ID card, North Vietnamese Army ID card, military ID card. He left it behind.

COHEN: Oh!

BOEHMER: You can figure out what that means- he left it behind. [pause] So those are some sort, a couple of experiences, that's for sure. And I think one more, and then I won't bore you with any more pictures, but this is a picture [raises photograph into view] I think I showed you this the other day.

COHEN: Yes, you did. I was just about to ask for it, to see it.

BOEHMER: These are flags that we pulled out of that same tunnel. And it's a hammer and sickle, of course, is a communist symbol. And it was on this red flag background, and if anybody knows anything about flag display, you know that if you display a flag upside down, it represents distress. And we wanted whoever saw this picture to realize that these folks we took these flags from were in distress. So that's my crew there, me on the right-hand side.

COHEN: And did you distribute these pictures in any way?

BOEHMER: I've sent a couple of them to people, but, you know, when I was over there, we'd never really thought too much or had the opportunity to get addresses and names and things like that. It just, things were happening so fast. Sometimes you just never thought about the important things to know about, where people went after they left the service.

BOEHMER: There's one more story I'd like to tell about, if you got, can I tell one more story?

COHEN: Yeah.

BOEHMER: Okay. When I got over to Vietnam, I was in the [Company] G 211, 2nd Platoon, and a good, good friend of my friend, a man that became very good friends of mine, is called Frank Saracino. And he was about my same age. He related a story about the fact that he had one and a half year old daughter that he left at home when he came over to Vietnam. He didn't realize he was going to be going into the 11th Armored Cav, but he came over and ended up 11th Armored Cav and we became very good friends. And he decided he wanted to get away from the armored personnel carrier group and go into the ARP, the [inaudible] platoon deployment. And those folks would be inserted into a very secluded place and they would go in small groups of six or eight people and look for troop movements and things of that nature. Well, in April of '69, he was killed in action. And he was, like I said, a very good friend of mine. He had some connection to my family. He was from Fort Collins, Colorado. He- it ended up he knew my uncle, who had a horse ranch in Colorado. But when he died in Vietnam, I was pretty, pretty upset, pretty disappointed about that.

But we have a newsletter that our 11th Armored Cavalry puts out every quarter called *The Thunder Run*. The name, of course, comes from the Thunder run of "Down the road we go, with everything blazing" and in this newsletter every quarter they have stories from young people who are sons and daughters or even in some cases, grandsons and granddaughters of the 11th Armored Cavalry alumni. And about nine years ago, I was looking through my quarterly newsletter and I came across a story that caught my eye. It was written by a young girl, and the name caught me. Her name was Cheryl Saracino.

COHEN: Oh [my] goodness.

BOEHMER: And the story went on to tell that she was accepted for a scholarship that this 11th Armored Cav was going to give out, but she never knew her father. And she would like to have somebody that maybe knew her father, knew something about him, to get in touch with her.

And whenever I tell this story, I get a little bit emotional. But I did I did write to her and [tearing up] give her a short story about what I knew about her father. And even though I knew him for a very short period of time, but I just thought how ironic that I would see a story about her in a newsletter probably thirty years later...

COHEN: Wow!

BOEHMER: ...after he died. So that one, really, that one really tugs at me.

COHEN: Yeah, yeah.

BOEHMER: Before we get away, here's my favorite picture [raises photograph into view].

COHEN: Oh, welcome home, Steve. Wow! Your parents are with you there?

BOEHMER: Yeah, yeah, that was the best one.

COHEN: Steve, could we continue another time?

BOEHMER: Sure, sure.

COHEN: Do you want to do, is tomorrow a possibility? Or you're with your granddaughter, or...?

BOEHMER: Let me see. Tomorrow is what day? Wednesday? I could, yes, yes. Same time?

COHEN: Sounds good to me, yeah, yeah.

BOEHMER: And I'll kind of look at what we've talked about here and then you can follow with your pattern. I don't have, maybe a couple more pictures is all, so whatever you want to discuss.

COHEN: Ok, that's what- I'm also going to look over the questions and see what we haven't covered yet or, you know, like you're saying, that whole aspect of homecoming as well. But well-.

BOEHMER: Sure.

COHEN: Okay, sounds good.

BOEHMER: Ok, same time, two o'clock tomorrow?

COHEN: Two o'clock would be great.

BOEHMER: Okay.

COHEN: Okay.

BOEHMER: Hopefully we'll have a better connection situation tomorrow.

COHEN: I hope so! [Laughter]

COHEN: Thank you for your suggestion about contacting IT. Thank you.

BOEHMER: Bye.

COHEN: Bye-bye.

[End of Part 1]

Steve Boehmer

February 9, 2021
Part 2
Interviewed by Leah Cohen
Transcribed by Sonix.ai with corrections by Ben Miller
Edited by Ben Miller and Leah Cohen
Web biography by Ben Miller

COHEN: So today is February 10th, 2021. I have the honor of interviewing Staff Sergeant Steve Boehmer of Troop G, 2nd Squadron from the 11th Armored Cavalry Division. This is part two, a continuation of yesterday's interview, and we will revisit some of what we talked about yesterday and then move forward.

BOEHMER: Okay.

COHEN: So going back to Fort Knox, were you training at the time on the M-, I think you said, the M-48 tank series?

BOEHMER: Yes, that's what we were training on, is the M-48. And the M-60 was the follow up tank to that, but we didn't have, we had just a couple of M-60s but many M-48s in Vietnam. That's what I was trained on at Fort Knox, is the M-48. I had no training whatsoever on the armored personnel carrier which I ended up, on in Vietnam. [chuckles]

COHEN: Were you expecting to use either the M-48 or the M-60?

BOEHMER: No, we really didn't know too much about the difference between the two of them. The M-60 was, of course, was a newer version of the M-48, but we just, of course, trained and learned on what they had for us to, to work with and not knowing too much about what might come in the future. We were just working with the M-48.

COHEN: Okay. And in that the cavalry is made up of mixed arms, were you expected to train on many different types of arms, like, you know, or more varied than simply had you been in the tanks, for example?

BOEHMER: Well, when we were training on the tanks, the only armament that we had on there, of course, was the big full size 105-millimeter cannon, and then machine gun in the upper cupola. And that's about all we were trained to use, is those 50 calibers and the big tank weapon that was on the main turret of the cannon- of the tank. We did take small arms training, of course, and the machine gun, M60

machine gun training, every training we could be expected to learn. But we didn't learn anything like the mortars or recoilless rifles or anything like that. It was just mainly what pertained to our particular piece of equipment we were working with.

COHEN: I think you mentioned that because the location was at Fort Knox, you were involved in guarding the gold and the US Bullion Depository. What does that entail? [chuckles]

BOEHMER: Well, yes, that was kind of an interesting situation. I think most everybody at that time and even now has heard that all the gold that the United States government had is in Fort Knox. Well, that was what we were told back then to. And since we were about ten miles, Fort Knox is about ten miles from the 11th Armored Cavalry or the armored training base there in Kentucky, we would quite often get an alert that we were supposed to head down to the gold depository at the Fort Knox Gold Facility and simulate if somebody were to try and break into the Fort Knox area and get the gold. So every once in a while, they would get everybody loaded up and head down there. And of course, we get there and stand around for a while and we turn around and come back again. But we didn't go in the facility. Obviously, it was heavily guarded, and to be honest, I don't know if they ever did or even do have gold in there [Both laugh].

COHEN: The other duty that you mentioned at Fort Knox was that, sadly, you were on funeral duty. Would you like to talk about that?

BOEHMER: Yes, when I was in AIT training, which basically was from, oh, about 1st of January to the middle of April at Fort Knox, I was in AIT training, advanced individual training, and there wasn't an awful lot to do after the initial training with the vehicles and equipment. So we were just kind of, as a unit as two or three different groups of men, platoons and companies just hanging around waiting for an assignment someplace in the world. We never really knew where we're going to go. Rumors were that, of course, most everybody was going to go to Vietnam and some to Germany, some to Japan, but they're trying to find things for us to do. And we would be engaged doing various things, and one of them was that, and they ask for volunteers for this, they'd say, "You know, they need some funeral detachments to go and be present at veterans, soldiers, that they came back from, obviously, Vietnam that were killed in action, to go and stand guard security beside the caskets and at the funerals, caskets at the wakes and at the funerals," and called it funeral detail, many different parts of the funeral procession and the burial processions.

But that's one of the things that I did for about a month and a half, about a month, really about four weeks, about two or three times a week or a month, two times a week, where we set out to various cities or towns. And it was a very, oh, tough order to take, to go and be there for these things, but it meant a lot to the families of the fallen soldiers, of course, and I still do that today, believe it or not. Our 11th Armored Cavalry is a very tight knit organization. We have our newsletters every quarter. We've got a calendar that comes out every year with pictures and things in it, of the past. And I'm on a list with that newsletter, folks that will alert me when one of our troopers, one of our 11th Armored Cavalry troopers in the reasonably close distance, has a funeral or a wake or both, and asks that we go and represent the 11th Armored Cavalry. So I've done that about six times over the last two years. Of course, they're all older veterans and older soldiers now rather than the younger ones that I was in attendance at their funerals and wakes back when we were in the Army in the '68, '69. So I still do attend these funerals and wakes. I don't often wear a uniform, but I go and offer my condolences and there's usually a current active-duty military person almost always there for the family. So I kind of think that I like to carry that tradition of years ago.

COHEN: How would you approach the families at the time, when you were in the act- when you were on active duty?

BOEHMER: Well, that was difficult because we were very young and inexperienced about talking to people, especially those that had suffered a great loss of the family member, and we were mainly just be there. We would not be the ones who had been volunteered to go and come to their home and tell them that their loved one had been killed in action. We wouldn't, we wouldn't be doing that part, but we would be at the funeral or wake. We would mainly just be standing beside the coffin or at the entrance to the funeral home. And there we were in uniform, of course, and they knew that we represented the Army at this particular event. And it was very difficult for we young people to talk to adults about these kind of things. And so, unfortunately, I couldn't be as caring and articulate then as I can possibly be now. I can recognize things that, you know, the older, an older person can about approaching those kinds of events, so.

COHEN: But it sounds like your presence though was important, like you said, that they knew that the US Army was with them.

BOEHMER: Yes. And early on with, in the period of time when we were representing the Army at the funerals back in my particular time, '68, '69, it was different. We were just there. We're standing by and didn't say too much. But now when I attend these things, I try to, I try to find out something about their loved one,

the soldier, family member, and try to relate something specific and particular to them. It's often hard to do, but it's comforting to them to know that someone from way back still r-[audio briefly cuts out] their family member today, and they've usually got a display of their military pictures and maybe a uniform. And it's always, there's always a flag there at the funeral. Some of them have them, only one of them that I had have been to in the last three years has had a military burial where they've actually had military folks come in and fold the flag and so on. But the rest are just very happy, I think, to see somebody remember them after fifty-some years or longer.

COHEN: It's true. So despite the fact that you were on funeral detail, it- I believe you volunteered to Vietnam, like that, that did not discourage you somehow?

BOEHMER: No, it didn't. I guess it was the young and foolish ideas that young people have. And I just mainly, actually got tired of sitting around at Fort Knox with nothing to do other than try and stay out of the way of my superiors, so I didn't get myself in some kind of trouble. But I just got to the point where I and- myself and one other soldier that I've become very good friends with, I just said, "Well, I'm going to volunteer to go, because I just think that maybe I can get some choice about what I'm going to be doing when I get over there." And so I just I went to my CO, my commanding officer, and I said, "Hey, how do I get signed up to leave?" Well, it wasn't like I could pack my bags and leave the next day. They had to cut the orders and put me in line with others. And it was about three and a half weeks before they actually said, "Okay, you're going to go." And then they gave me two weeks leave to go home and say goodbye to my family for a year. So it was, and of course, it was tough telling my mom and dad that I volunteered to go. I didn't tell them right away. I waited till I got over there. I just thought if I told them I had volunteered to go, there might be some repercussions. They might not let me have my last dinner at home or something, I don't know. [Both laugh] But I didn't tell them I volunteered until I got to Vietnam, so.

COHEN: So, sorry, when you came back for the two weeks, they didn't know at that point, it was only when you were in Vietnam that you told them?

BOEHMER: That's correct. They, they just knew that I was going to Vietnam, but I didn't tell them that I had volunteered to go. I didn't know quite how to approach that. And my mom, of course, she was so busy with other things, with the other four kids in our family and household duties and everything. I just said, "Well, they don't need to know any more than what I want to tell them at this point." And she couldn't correct me in the head if I wasn't around when she found out that I had volunteered, so [Both laugh].

COHEN: So do you remember what it was like when, your first impressions of Vietnam? I think you landed at Cam Ranh Bay Airport. Like, what were your, what did you see or hear or smell? What were your first impressions?

BOEHMER: Well, we flew into Vietnam and landed in Cam Ranh Bay and we were on a commercial airliner. And of course, I had only been on a commercial airliner two other times before that, so it was kind of an exciting thing for me to get on an airplane, but came in and what we could see out of the window was palm trees and white sand on the beaches. It looked like Fort Lauderdale, but when we landed and we could see out the windows, we could see that it was not Florida by any means. And when we got to the point where we could smell the outside air, it was very humid and sticky and very warm. But the first thing that hit me was the smell of the country. Just it had a very distinctive odor to it. It's hard to describe, but it was. And the atmosphere there, too, there was lots of military presence. There was, we, I think a lot of us expected we would get off the plane and hear, you know, shooting off in the distance and bombs and things. But that wasn't the case. It was quiet, but just a lot of military activity and went from there to other locations by helicopter and by [DHC-4] Caribou airplane to get, before I got to the base camp. And there's where the surroundings really hit me.

COHEN: The base camp, this was the Blackhorse Base Camp near Quan Luc?

BOEHMER: Xuân Lộc.

COHEN: Xuân Lộc, thank you.

BOEHMER: Yeah, I flew from Cam Rahn Bay to Biên Hòa, which is a large city outside, northeast of Saigon. And from there we took a helicopter from there to Blackhorse, the base camp at Blackhorse, and Biên Hòa is where they split us out into what units we were going to. And I came over to the country with a friend of mine that I had been in AIT and basic training with, and we kind of thought, "Well, what the heck, we're going to be together here through this whole thing." Well, they lined us up and started calling names and he said, "Boehmer, you're going to the 11th Armored Cavalry, G Troop." And my friend Roger, and they said, "Well, you're going to 11th Armored Cavalry G Troop also." And so we both flew out to Blackhorse Base Camp together. He went to the headquarters and I went to a combat unit. So he was a secretary for a while [Both laugh].

COHEN: It's a different experience!

BOEHMER: Yes, it was.

COHEN: Oh boy. So one thing that I was wondering about was like how long was a typical, if anything, was a typical operation? Like you're asked to go to a certain place, do something. Would you stay there for a long time? Would you go back to the Blackhorse base camp? And how would life work?

BOEHMER: Well, we started out, of course, in base camp when I first got there. And the first time that I left the base camp was we went by Caribou airplane up to Lộc Ninh Airport, which is up near, right near the Cambodian border. And that's where they offloaded us off the Cariboo flight airplane, which is a very short take off airplane, very large wings and a very small airport. So that's where they left us off, and we went to our units from there.

And we were out for probably, maybe five weeks at that time. We would go out on different operations of a day and a half into the jungle, looking for troop movements and things like that. We'd come back to the secured location, the defensive position, but then we may go back on that Route 13 that I talked about, that Highway 13, and travel our way back to Blackhorse Base Camp. Then we may go back out again for another three weeks or maybe, maybe not three weeks, maybe two weeks at a time. Sometimes we would go back after a three-week operation out in the field, and we'd have to do some significant mechanical repairs to our vehicles, even though we carried with our unit anything we would need to make some repairs, spare vehicles being towed. We'd have tracks we'd have to replace. We would carry those with us. We actually had a vehicle large enough that it could tow one of these M-13, M-113 armored personnel carriers, which were about twenty-six tons fully loaded. So some pretty heavy equipment we have with us to sustain us for three or four or five weeks in the field. So I think a total of maybe ten times while I was in Vietnam, we would be out on operations, and then back in for resupply and maintenance and things like that.

COHEN: Where would you sleep when you were in the field?

BOEHMER: Well, depending upon what the conditions were at the time, if we were expecting some kind of attack or contact during the night, we would actually sleep inside the vehicle, if at all possible. And I had, we had two hammocks stretched up underneath the top deck of the armored personnel carrier, from front to back. We'd have a hammock connection in the front and one of the back and two people sleeping inside. There was always one on guard duty that had to sit in that top cupola area. So, and then the other guy that was on the track, the fourth personnel member, he'd have to find someplace else to sleep, usually on the floor. Sometimes if the conditions were right, if we were in an area that was very secure, we'd sleep on the ground outside. It just depended upon the

conditions that were there at the time. And if it was raining, we certainly wanted to be inside, and it rained a lot, so [laughs]...

COHEN: And how would you, what type of food or rations did you bring or how did you get hold of fresh water?

BOEHMER: Well, the fresh water was brought in by helicopters when we were in the field. If we were in base camp, of course, we had I guess you could call it running water. We didn't have wells. We had large containers that would be up on stilts outside the buildings, and you just turn the faucets on trying to get water there. No hot water to speak of unless it was in one of these large tanks that was in the sun and the sun could warm it up. When we're out in the field, they would bring in water with these large, well, we called them bladders. They were just like a huge balloon that would be filled with water. And they carry them in on these helicopters and set them down when we could hook tappers into them and get water from there. And we carried water cans on the backs and on the insides of our vehicles, five-gallon water cans that carried the water. And I don't think there was any part of it whatsoever that was sanitary. It would be- it always came out some color besides clear, so [Both laugh]. We took enough medication, malaria pills and things like that I think would kill about anything [Both laugh].

COHEN: What about food?

BOEHMER: Well, most of the food we had when we were in the field would be the C-Rations. So it was pre-canned, prepackaged rations that, they called it the MRE [Meals Ready-to-Eat], that were ready to eat, so to speak. We had to open the cans and the crackers were in the wrappers and so on. We learned that we- and occasionally they would fly out to us with the helicopters, if we got to a fairly secure place, they'd fly out meals in these large thermos containers that we could have and line up in line and get your food. And then the helicopter would put the containers back in the helicopter and fly out again. And that food came from some base camp nearby, maybe not even the Blackhorse base camp.

But we learned real fast that if you wanted some hot food from the C-Rations, the only way you you're going to get it is the heat it yourself. And we would take the C4 explosive- that's an explosive that we used to demolish underground bunkers and detonate mines and things like that. It came in bars about eight inches long and about an inch thick. It was white. And we could take a small portion of that, about the size of your end of your little finger, and lay it on a hard on a metal surface and you could light it with a match. And it would burn really hot for a short period of time and you could warm [COHEN laughs] part of that C-Rations that you wanted to warm up. The only thing you had to be careful

of is that you didn't try to put the fire out by stomping on it, because that is the same thing as a detonator that would [claps to mimic explosion] and you lose your foot. But that's what, how we would warm up some of our meals and they were not the best, but it was better than nothing. Yeah, you didn't gain any weight while we're over there, I'll tell you that [COHEN laughs].

COHEN: They didn't worry about belly fat or anything [Both laugh]. Were most of the missions that you were on like your first one, in other words, close to the Cambodian border?

BOEHMER: Well, that was in Lộc Ninh, An Lộc area, and that was what they called the Parrot's Beak. It was up very near the Cambodian border and within probably 2,000 meters or less from the Ho Chi Minh trail that came down through Cambodia that was the main supply line for the NVA bringing, and the North Vietnamese people, bringing supplies down to the NVA, the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong guerrillas that were operating in the southern part of Vietnam. We were close to the Cambodian border. We would go, they never said that we were actually in Cambodia, but we knew full well that we were many times in Cambodia because that was supposed to be off-limits for military. But we knew that we were in Cambodia. There was no painted line there or anything that told us that that's where we were, but they- we just knew that we were in places sometimes that we were not supposed to be.

A couple of times we especially in that Lộc Ninh, An Lộc area being very close to that Ho Chi Minh trail, we would be warned to quickly turn around and go back the exact same way we came and do it very quickly because they were bringing in B-52 bombing strikes on those Ho Chi Minh Cambodian sections nearest the Vietnam border. And those B-52 bombers, those were the most unbelievable explosive devices that I have ever heard. It was just like having your head in a fifty-five-gallon drum, and somebody beating on it with a hammer if you were within a quarter of a mile of those things. You could- one of A-CAVs could drive right in the crater, one of those B-52 bomb craters and you wouldn't even see the vehicle, it would be under so deep. So it was, that area, Lộc Ninh and An Lộc was a very high contact area, lots of firefights there. Lots of lots of our soldiers were lost in that area. It was a very highly contested area because it was so close to the Cambodian border and the Ho Chi Minh trail.

COHEN: So you would have the sense that you're in Cambodia often by what came later, like being told to return the way you came because there would be B-52 bombs shortly? Is that how you deduced this?

BOEHMER: Yes, that's basically exactly how it worked. The two times that I was sure that we were there- because they didn't run to be B-52 bomb strikes in Vietnam where our American troops were. They could come pretty close. But it was amazing to me that those bombers could fly so high that you, you couldn't hardly see them in the sky. But yet they were so accurate about where they were dropping those bombs that they could tell us. And fortunately, they would tell us far enough in advance that we could get the hell out of there! [Both Laugh]

COHEN: Yeah, yeah!

BOEHMER: But yeah, sometimes we would then turn around after the strikes and go back and see what the damage was, and if there was anything like remnants of the materials they were bringing down on the Ho Chi Minh trail that we could gather some information from, some technical strategic information that they would want to have. So it was, we knew that if we were told to get out of an area, it was for a good reason [Both laugh].

COHEN: Out of curiosity, and I know you showed me the picture of the upside down, you know, symbol of communism, the sickle and hammer, but were you ever asked to, like, distribute like pro-American leaflets or the, I forget the term, the Chung-Hoi [i.e. Chiêu Hồi][4] is what I'm thinking of?

BOEHMER: No, we were never asked to distribute anything. Our government never distributed anything of a nature like what I showed you that, in fact, it was this kind of propaganda here that, that would be left in the villages and in the bunkers, underground bunkers that we would get into, warning the GIs that they shouldn't be in that area and what we were doing was wrong. They did that for our benefit, but we never would do that. The American government would never do that, trying to dissuade them that way, because it just was no sense to do that. You, you're better off going in with some military power and show them that, you know, they shouldn't be doing what they're doing. So it was, we never distributed anything.

COHEN: You know, for the lay person, it sounds very scary, you know, to be in so much combat or ambushes or potential ambushes and, like you said, in such an area where there was a lot of action going on. So it's a little childish question, but like, were you afraid or how did you deal with the fear of the men under your command? Like, how would people cope?

[4] Cohen was thinking of Chiêu Hồi program, roughly translated as Open Arms, aimed at the defection by Viet Cong and their supporters. Leaflets were usually air dropped in areas of South Vietnam.[I].

BOEHMER: Well, there was always a concern that you wanted to be very careful about what you did and where you did it and that you could do it with the best interest of your men that you were in charge of. I, sure we were afraid. We were scared. There wasn't a day that I didn't wake up that I said to myself that, "Boy, if we get into another mess like we did yesterday, you know, this is could be big trouble." And when something happens, of course, you try to remain calm and think about what you were taught and use your experience and hope that the people around you remain calm and did not panic so that they couldn't respond and be productive about what we were doing. But it was always my thought that my men came first. If I didn't have them with me and help me and back me, I couldn't do anything. I couldn't function if I didn't know that I had a platoon, a platoon of fifteen, twenty men. If they weren't there to help me, I was no good. So I had to remain calm and be sure that I directed them the way that I wanted them to go and what I want them to do.

I tried to lay that out ahead of time, way ahead of time, sometimes days ahead of time and repeat it as to how we were going to conduct ourselves, how we were going to do things, what we would do in this case, what we would do in that case. And of course, very seldom did things go according to plan [Both laugh]. A lot of times it was spontaneous, and it was instant chaos, sometimes, when you got ambushed, when we would have a vehicle get hit by a bomb, underground bomb, a mine in the road. You didn't expect that was going to happen, and then all of a sudden it did. So, you know, you just had to remain calm and rely upon your training.

COHEN: Did all the, I don't if the word is like, looking at the different options help so that when a surprise occurred, there was more to go on, like were...?

BOEHMER: Well, if you, if you had Plan A, Plan B, and Plan C when something did happen, usually it didn't occur in that order and you just had no way of knowing what was going to happen, because each day we would be out on operations, we may be confronted with a different situation, an ambush that came from, sometimes an ambush would come from behind. We were traveling down a road and you were expecting contact or problems coming at you from the right front or left front, and all of a sudden it would come from the rear. And of course, everything is, on an armored personnel carrier and tanks, is aimed at the front, towards the front. So what did that dictate? It meant you had, everybody's got to turn around, not everybody. But then sometimes the enemy, the V.C. or NVA, would realize that, "Okay, if we attack them from the front, the rear is not going to be covered. If we attack them from the rear, they're just going to all turn around and then the front is exposed." So you had to say, "Okay." Depending upon what they do, you

never left any one direction exposed to enemy fire. You always left an option there to protect yourself. Most often it worked. Sometimes it didn't work very well. But every day was a different situation. So it was one thing I learned being in the Army, I think I learned more about life in my year in Vietnam than I did and four years in college. And the one thing I learned is be prepared for just about anything that can happen [Both laugh] and have a plan, have a plan to stay calm and get through it.

COHEN: So, like, not to panic, right?

BOEHMER: It's hard not to do! It's hard not to panic! [Both laugh]

COHEN: One thing think you had mentioned that you said that you thought as an officer things might be a bit easier, but then you quickly realized, as you're indicating right now, that, no, there's a responsibility to your men and a kind of mutuality as well.

BOEHMER: Yes, it's, you realize you've got responsibility by having people under you, just like being an employer in civilian life. You've got employees that you have there, and you expect them to do certain things. But if they don't have respect for you, then they're not going to work hard for you. And so I learned that in the Army, too, especially in Vietnam, where they had to respect me, they had to realize that I was going to look out for them, and I treated them as equals, human beings. But they had to take directions from me and understand, hope, that I'm going to have their best interests in mind. And sometimes that was tough to do. Sometimes you had to ask them to do things they weren't happy about doing, were uncomfortable about doing. But I was always there being right up front with them. I was never one to point and say, "Go do this and go do that." I was always there to say, "Come on, let's go, and follow my track and we're going to go this way. I want two with me this way." And I always had the word "me" in there in the directions. I wanted them to know that I was going to be there with them. And that seemed to work pretty well because they respected me as a leader. And I- I took responsibility that way.

COHEN: Okay. [Pauses] Okay, I'm just trying to- there is a lot more. Let me just gather my thoughts for a minute...

BOEHMER: How about how I kept in touch with my family, with the cassette tape?

COHEN: Oh thank you. That was, that's funny because that was what I was thinking of when you talked about the helicopters, and it made me wonder whether the

helicopters picked up cassettes or mail. I guess, how did you keep in touch with your family or anybody else?

BOEHMER: Well, of course, I mailed letters to my family regularly, whenever I could get a chance to write, usually just once a week, sometimes twice. And our mail was free. We got to mail it home free. And I think at that time, air airfare on a letter was three cents. So it wasn't a big expense [COHEN laughs]. But I bought a tape recorder when I was over there, about the third or fourth week I was in country. I bought a tape recorder, because I had heard from other GIs that they had done that, and so I recorded some tapes that, of what I was doing. Usually a tape would be prepared over maybe two or three nights or two or three days, a little bit here and there. And I would send that tape home to my family. And I asked them, I said, "Well, now would you just tape over the one I sent home to you and send me some information about home?" Well, the first one I got from home was a tape that my mom had prepared and set the tape recorder in the middle of the dinner table at night. And it was just, I think I had tears in my eyes, but I could hear my two sisters talking and the plates clanking, and the phone ring would ring, and the dog would bark and, you know, so it was very, very comforting, and somewhat, you know, maybe homesick, too, to hear that. But we kept in touch with those tapes regularly throughout my whole period of time in Vietnam.

And unbeknownst to me, my mother kept every single tape that I sent home. So all of my documentation of what I was doing, where I was, sometimes some pretty exciting events happened during my recordings of my tapes that they also got. She kept all of those tapes. She kept every one of my letters that I sent home, probably thirty, thirty-five different letters that I sent home. So in preparing for this interview, I have relived [chuckles] a lot of my days and I was there through these letters and tapes. And that was a very comforting thing for me to have.

A funny part of that, too, is that my mom thought she was doing me a favor by sending me some batteries in the care packages. She would prepare these care packages of cookies and different things that I'd like to eat. She sent them and she put these batteries in this care package. And one time she wrapped, I think it was eight or ten batteries and some aluminum foil and put them in the package and sent them off to me. And when I got them, the batteries were dead. And then I realized that, you know, aluminum foil will conduct electricity and so [Both laugh] all these batteries had gone dead within about an hour of her putting them in the box. [Laughter]

COHEN: She had good intentions.

BOEHMER: We had to correct that process pretty quick [laughs]. But that was a great way to keep in touch with my family and them to keep in touch with me, too.

COHEN: It is a great way, but I must admit I was surprised that the *exciting* cassettes were never censored.

BOEHMER: Well, you asked me about that in our discussions earlier, before the interview, and, you know, they didn't censor our mail. They didn't censor those cassette tapes. They didn't know we were doing them; I don't think. Maybe they did, but just didn't care. But they didn't censor them at all, or the mail, unlike today, I think maybe our military overseas doing those kind of things, they may be censoring those. I had an opportunity to make one phone call home while I was, while I was in the hospital at that time and when I got hurt, but I made one phone call home and they gave me very strict instructions before I made the phone call that I wasn't supposed to say where I was, wasn't supposed to say my name. I wasn't supposed to say anything. They said they were going to monitor the phone call. So there was that censorship, I think. But other than that, I don't know of any. There's nothing classified about what I was going to say on the telephone that I thought they would be worried about [Both laugh].

COHEN: How did you get hurt and where were you, if you're allowed to talk about it now [laughs]?

BOEHMER: Well, that was the time that I got blown off that tank and that was the coin incident. They kept me a day and a half there to just be sure that I didn't have something more severe with my leg than just a tremendous bruise on my leg. And they- I think actually they didn't have a way to fly me back to my unit, is why there was an extra day and a half delay. Otherwise they'd have kicked me out of there a lot sooner. But so they asked me if I wanted to make a phone call home. And I said, “Oh, sure." I said, "What's it going to cost me?" [Both laugh] They said, "It won't cost you anything." So that was, that was fun to hear voices when I called. Of course, it was daytime for me, but it was the middle of the night for my mom and dad, so I woke them up.

COHEN: I'm sure they were happy to hear from you, too.

BOEHMER: Yep. They thought the worst when the phone rang, so I don't- I'm kind of scared them.

COHEN: Now going back to being in Troop G... I'm not really sure how to put it. Like, were you involved with working with other groups like the howitzer or battery artillery or was it purely Troop G?

BOEHMER: We didn't have any other units or equipment with us. It was just our 11th Armored Cavalry, the tanks, the armored personnel carriers. There were two occasions that we had Australian infantry with us. We wouldn't probably have known that they were Australian other than if they had this funny looking, funny sounding accent when they talked [Both laugh], because they didn't have any patches or anything on their uniforms. They were just totally nondescript. But they were good soldiers. They were infantry. We had helicopters that would work with us, detached to us whenever we would be in areas where we had to have some kind of surveillance up in front of us, if we were in what they call Triple Canopy bamboo jungle. That's so thick that you can't see ten feet in front of you. It's so thick. And they would fly these little, we'd call them loaches, LOH helicopters, little, tiny ones, would fly just over the front of the lead tank, just to be sure we weren't driving into some kind of a trap of some kind. But just a minor helicopter detachment. And then the Australians were the only ones that were with us at any time.

COHEN: Oh, okay, okay.

BOEHMER: We did a lot of our own, what I would call, infantry work. We would go out on night ambush missions. We would take our own 11th Armored Cav. I'd take my platoon, usually. We would go out eight or ten guys at night, out quarter of a mile or so on ambush patrols, looking for things happening. We would do our own infantry type work a lot of the time. So we didn't have any 101st Airborne or Big Red or anybody like that with us. We'd just pretty much do our own, so.

COHEN: Wow. Did you have the recovery vehicle with you most of the time, in case-

BOEHMER: Yes. [COHEN laughs] Unfortunately, we needed it a lot. [Both laugh]. This thing, this is a huge--larger than an M-48 tank--and it had a big crane on it that could lift up and pull these vehicles. And occasionally we would get into the rice paddies and they were, they would be sinking these vehicles into the swampy terrain and we need these recovery vehicles to pull us out. So we needed the recovery vehicles, as well as, even the tank, sometimes had trouble pulling out an A-CAV from the rice paddies. And we'd try to stay away from the rice paddies because they were just...They told us that our A-CAVs would float. I can't believe that they would. They told us they would, but I never, we never got anything deep enough to find out if they would float or not, because...[Both laugh].

COHEN: It sounds like you doubt it.

BOEHMER: I doubt it.

COHEN: Wow. What was the rest of the terrain like, like when you were near rubber plantations or jungle areas?

BOEHMER: Well, it was, Vietnam was a beautiful country. And I say that because, if you discount the war part of it, it was a beautiful country, palm trees and rubber plantations and open terrain that was jungle, but it was beautiful. But it went from arid dry conditions, in fact, I got two pictures here that were kind of the examples of... This is a typical [raises photograph into view] appearance of conditions during the rainy season. There was water and mud everywhere. You just could never get clean no matter what you did. And then we would go two weeks later [raises photograph into view], we'd be in conditions like this, where we would be just nothing but dust and dirt and just a very different condition than the swampy monsoon areas. This is a, this is a picture of a rubber plantation.

COHEN: Oh.

BOEHMER: In the background, there is the mansion. These were Michelin rubber plantations. Michelin tire company had rubber plantations there. The plantation itself was always a safe haven for the Vietcong, the V.C, and even the NVA. We were not allowed to go into the plantation property beyond where you saw with the A-CAV vehicle. We would sometimes surround these plantations and wait for somebody to come in from the Vietnam Army to go in there and see if there were any V.C. But the Michelin rubber company started these plantations back, gosh, back in the twenties, I guess, because there are some-- country is so rich in its ability to plant these rubber plantations. And they are in perfect rows, just absolute perfect rows, mile after mile after mile of rubber trees. And they would dig ditches in between these rubber tree rows so that we couldn't move between these rubber trees effectively to engage contact with the enemy. The trees were, I think, had about two inches on either side where we could fit our vehicle through between to get where we wanted to go. So the tanks had to drive right over these rubber trees and knock them down. Sometimes we would get in a firefight and, of course, we'd just mow these rubber trees down at knee height for a hundred and fifty yards, just absolutely mowed them down. And rubber comes out of these trees like molasses, and so everything was sticky and gooey and a terrible mess.

And then along with our unit, when we would go through these rubber plantations, was a representative from the rubber company, and they would count the trees that we cut down [COHEN scoffs]. And the US government had to pay for the number of trees that we were cutting down [Both laugh]. So they

always told us, you know, "Minimize the number of trees that you're going to-" Well how are you going to do that, you know, when you're involved in a battle?

But, yeah, rubber plantations were there and just the villages, the small villages, the Vietnamese villages, many of them were picturesque and interesting to look at. But you never knew whether it was going to hide some danger of some kind, so you had to be very skeptical about what you were seeing and be careful. There was- little kids were always trying to sell you things, you know, coming out to sell you some beer. And so it was- but that's the terrain was just, and where we were, of course, was III Corps down about sixty percent of the way from the DMZ. As you traveled farther north, up near the DMZ [demilitarized zone, established as a dividing line between North and South Vietnam], it became much, much more heavy, solid trees, deciduous type trees, hardwood trees and things like that up near the north. So the country was extremely varied from north to south.

COHEN: How would the, you know, Northern Vietnamese infiltrate the rubber plantations so that they could dig themselves in, you know?

BOEHMER: Well, they- we often wondered that, too. How in the world? [Laughs] But, you know, the American forces could not be everywhere. And when we were over here doing something for a period of four or five, six weeks, and weren't paying much attention to what's going on over there, a quarter of a mile away or five thousand meters away, they were doing things, planting bombs, underground mines, underground, bunkers, digging underground bunkers that contained munitions storage, bombs, even had underground hospitals. They had underground medical hospitals in these tunnels. So we couldn't be everywhere, and when we were not bothering them, they were doing their thing, digging in bunkers, and building these trenches that gave us all kinds of headaches. And so it was almost like, you've heard the new term, whack a mole. You know, where the mole comes up out of a hole and you hit them or something [COHEN nods] they go down, they pop up somewhere else and you hit them there. And it was kind of the same thing there. You just, if you were in an area for six weeks and you came back a month and a half later, they were right back there where we had kicked them out of before, so.

COHEN: Wow. What was your personal view of the enemy at the time? And has it changed over the years?

BOEHMER: Well, of course, the enemy at the time was the NVA, North Vietnamese Army, or the Viet Cong, and their beliefs about what they think they wanted out of that country. And I- the only way I could look at them while I was there is that, you

know, they were my enemy. If I didn't protect myself against them, they were going to do some harm to me. And I don't know if I could say I respected them at all because I just felt that that, you know, I was living every day for my own health. That was about it. But now today, how I think about the Vietnamese people is that, you know, looking back, all they really wanted was food, safety, their health. They didn't require much in the way of housing and education. I don't think they knew what education was. So I guess I respected their need for these things early on but didn't get it. And now today they are a world, I won't see a world power, but they, we buy things from Vietnam like we- In fact, I just, kind of a more information than you need to know, one of the last few pieces of underwear that I bought said "Made in Vietnam." So there you go [Both laugh].

COHEN: No, no, that's true, like a thriving economy in recent years. It's true. You mentioned before, that, you know, had it not been for the war, Vietnam was very beautiful and varied. But did you ever have any opportunities to go on R&R, like in parts of Vietnam that were considered safe at the time?

BOEHMER: Well, I went on R&R, but I didn't go in Vietnam. There was no R&R that was offered for to stay in Vietnam. I went to Australia for a week, and that of course was quite a departure from what I had been seeing before I went over there. But I went to Australia. Some of the GIs went to, I think, to Singapore, some went to Thailand, I think, on R&R. But I went to Australia and that was- I had a choice of where I want to go but I think the only one I really thought about going to was Australia, because I figured I'd see more people that look like me [laughs].

COHEN: Looking for familiar ground.

BOEHMER: Yeah.

COHEN: Sounds good. You mentioned that you had seen the program offered by the Pritzker Military Museum & Library on Harold or Hal Fritz, who won the Medal of Honor, and you said you could relate to that. It was part of an ambush, as it said, he was seriously wounded. Nonetheless, he climbed atop his burning vehicle and could see his platoon disarray, surrounded by a North Vietnamese force more than five times the size. They were on the verge of being overrun. So, I mean, were you in, like, does this describe some of this similar situations that you were in?

BOEHMER: Well, in some respects it does, and of course, what piqued my interest about Hal Fritz is that I heard about his interview on the Pritzker website, and I watched it. And strangely enough, of course, he was 11th Armored Cavalry, just like me. He graduated college and chose to go to Officer Candidate School, just like I did

when I got out of college. He went to Fort Knox Armor School, just like I did. And he described the event that he had received the Medal of Honor for, which was the reason for his interview with the Pritzker Museum. He described so much of exactly the way things would happen for us from time to time. I didn't have quite as a dramatic experience as he did or is as involved as what he did. I- We were never totally overrun and have the kind of casualties that he had in his incident, thankfully, but very similar reactions to what happened. People were injured badly. You had to sidestep the immediate problems of people getting injured, help them as best you could, but continue on and protect the remainder of your unit, of your...your command, because they were depending upon you and they depended upon him to do his job, to get them out of that mess. And I just had chills down my back as I listened to his interview on the museum site that day, because it brought back many thoughts of similar things that that took place with me.

But, you know, those are things that, I'm sure he feels this way too, you look back at them and you can almost chuckle about some things because you think, "Wow, how in the world did I ever get out of that mess?" You know, so it was, I could relate to him very, very, very strongly. And also, his family grew up about thirty miles from where I live here. He grew up in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. And of course, I didn't know him, and he didn't know me or anything like that, but the old story about, you know, six degrees of separation, you know, it seems like we're all kind of involved in the same thing [Both laugh]. It was a very, very good interview, and I really enjoyed listening to him and his interesting stories about him going through these early military and how he challenged his superiors from time to time and got away with it and he sounded like a very nice man.

COHEN: Well, how would you handle men who were injured? Like, would you radio, I don't know, a medical evacuation of helicopters to go and pick them up? What was the procedure?

BOEHMER: Well, if we were in contact, a firefight, depending upon how it happened and where it happened, we would always think first about setting up a position where we could protect ourselves and prepare for evacuation of the injured. If it was severe enough that we could not really protect ourselves very well, we would have to withdraw from the area to get to a safe place where we could regroup, so to speak, and present a counterattack. But most often, we were able to stand our ground, and if we had injured, minor or serious injuries, once things had calmed down and we could get control of the enemy so that they didn't cause any damage to what we called a dustoff, which is the helicopter coming in to pick up injured, they called those dustoffs. We would put up a defensive

position far enough away from a position. Sometimes we had to knock down jungle and knock down trees in order for a helicopter to come in and pick these people up. And we would have to be sure that it was a safe environment for the helicopter, because they were shooting ducks when they would come in. If there was any enemy left, they were right out in the open.

But they would come in, helicopters would come in, and what we would do is, so that they were sure that they were coming into the right location and to a safe location, we would, what we call, pop smoke. We would say, "Well, we're going to throw in a purple smoke canister." And we would throw this canister out that would bleed out purple, purple smoke, dust or yellow smoke so that they would know, because many times, and this was just a warning would go out via our radio to the helicopter, and many times the enemy could monitor our radio transmissions. So we couldn't just depend upon the helicopter pilot, couldn't depend upon the fact that he would think that that's our area there where these people are. So he would want to identify and sometimes we'd have code words for we're going to pop yellow smoke or purple smoke. Sometimes it would be just the opposite so that the enemy wouldn't know exactly what we were doing. So it was a little trickery there, once in a while to get the helicopter in safely, to pick up the injured, and get them to safety where they could be taken care of. Now we have to fill in the empty spots with the people that were medevacked away to make sure that we had the proper personnel on A-CAVs and on the tanks to proceed on.

COHEN: Was it hard to get to replacements, or did they tend to be people who are well trained or more like beginners?

BOEHMER: Well, if we had a personnel group of maybe forty-five or fifty that were on an operation, and we'd have two or three or four that were injured and had to be taken away, we'd have to fill in with the people we had there. And next time we got to a place, and usually the next day or very soon after, where we could bring in by helicopter some replacements, and they would be well trained. They wouldn't be people that they had just pulled out of the kitchens or something like that to fill in for our guys. They would be well trained and sometimes from another, another troop from 11th Cav that were not in action at the time. They would bring those people in. But it was usually a difficult thing to keep your staff, your personnel, fully manned.

COHEN: Yeah, yeah. Hmm. What was it like being at the base camp like, did it almost feel like a luxury as opposed to being in Parrot's Beak, et cetera?

BOEHMER: Well, back at the base camp, it was a lot less concerning about the immediate danger, so to speak, with, you know, ambushes and firefights, I think, 'cause you were inside of a complex, big berms of dirt piled up around the outside and guards on all the corners of the base camp. But we had to do a lot of things when we were in base camp. We had, if we came back to base camp, we usually came back with our vehicles. So we'd have to get- one picture I showed yesterday with all the stuff piled out of the vehicle and on the ground, we had, sometimes we had to take everything out of that track and clean it and put it back in. So that was a day and a half, two days project. Sometimes we'd have to- some vehicles needed new engines. They'd have to put engines in them. Sometimes we got a little downtime. We got a day or so. We could relax and take a nap or whatever. But if you were, you didn't dare get caught sitting around doing nothing unless everything was spic and span as it could be in that environment, because either your weapons needed cleaning or you need the replacement of some of the weapons, your tracks needed to be replaced or had torsion bars that were broken on the A-CAVs, I mean, it always was something to do. So it was not a vacation, when you came back to base camp. Sometimes we're saying, "Let's get the hell out of base camp and let's go back out in the field," because it was, we had more control over ourselves than we did back in the base camp.

COHEN: Well, how long were you in Vietnam total, and would you like to start talking about going home now, or is there more that you would like to say about...

BOEHMER: Well, I think we've gone through things pretty thoroughly from start to finish here, so maybe getting toward the end here. I was in Vietnam for eleven and a half months, and not all of that, of course, was in the field and in direct combat and things like that. But I was in there, in Vietnam, for eleven and a half months. I transitioned out of Vietnam, back to the United States, in fourteen days. From the time that I left my unit in the field, in the jungle, until I was at home on my parents' front doorstep, where I took that picture, or somebody, I don't know who took the picture, of me standing there with my mom and dad. I think I showed that yesterday. Didn't I?

COHEN: I think so.

BOEHMER: Fourteen days from the time I left Vietnam to standing on my front doorstep. And that was a traumatic change of environment and mind set. Just, it's hard to describe. And it took me, you know, a couple of weeks to really get acclimated. My sleep cycle was way off, but it was, I was glad to be home. I had a great family at home, and I didn't *not* want to go home. Some of the guys said they don't want to go home; they just want to stay in the Army. But I wanted to go home.

COHEN: Yeah, yeah. You were close with your family.

BOEHMER: Yes, very close, very close.

COHEN: When you returned, did you encounter any harassment? You know, the stories of people going through Oakland terminal and being spit upon or suchlike?

BOEHMER: Well, we were not welcomed home like the military people are today. That was the Vietnam War protest era. When I returned, it was 1969. People were thinking of military people as horrible individuals, baby killers. They saw, you know, the Vietnam War was the first war to be broadcast live on your nighttime news [COHEN nods], and they saw things happening on that news that most people didn't want to see, they didn't like seeing, and it was filtered dramatically. They didn't really see what we were doing, but the young folks of the, in fact, even older folks too were very much against the Vietnam War. So when we came back home, I'll never forget landing at Oakland and coming through the discharge area there, the sergeant that was processing us through, he said, "All right, now. Take your uniforms off. Put on civilian clothes. If you don't have any, you'd better borrow some, you'd better buy some. Don't wear uniforms out beyond this military post, if you can at all be able to do that, because the people around here do not like military people. They don't like Army. They don't like Marines because of what we were doing over there in Vietnam." So we were not welcomed home. There were no welcome home parades. There was no local hero recognition whatsoever.

Today, it's a different story, and that's okay! I don't object to that, how they're treated today, which is a different time, a different era. And we- it was what it was, but it was not fun for us coming home. I don't think we really thought all that much about it, to be honest with you. We just wanted to get home. And it was one of those things that, you know, I'll deal with my own situation when I get home. But, and then, of course, when I got home, you know, nobody asked me. I could have been on vacation in Tahoe for all they knew. They didn't ask me about where I was and what I'd been doing. And it's just the only way they knew that I maybe had been overseas in Vietnam is everything that I brought back smelled like mildew and dust and dirt [Both laugh]. So, you know, carrying that just a little bit further, I had very few thoughts about our place in Vietnam and during those times, why we were there, what we were doing, what the purpose was, why all the continuation of the fighting there.

But in the last four years, I've gotten a whole new perspective on that era of the Vietnam War, and especially the time I was over there, because as, if anybody has done any investigation or looking into the history of what took place in the

‘60s and ‘70s about the Vietnam War, it was a total cover up. Our involvement in Vietnam was a total cover up by our federal government. And there have been a couple of movies, a book, movie, *The Post*. I don't know if you saw the movie *The Post*.

COHEN: [shakes head] I-

BOEHMER: It's about the Pentagon. It's about the Pentagon Papers. The Pentagon Papers were a federal government commissioned report on our progress in Vietnam, or lack of progress in Vietnam, by Daniel Ellsworth.[5] And the movie *The Post* exposed that tremendously bad light that our government had, prolonging the war for political purposes. And even the *LBJ,* the movie *LBJ,* about Lyndon Baines Johnson, his era and involvement with the Vietnam War- he didn't know what to do with it. He inherited it, of course, from John Kennedy. Kennedy was involved in it.

COHEN: Yeah.

BOEHMER: And so when you keep on going with exposing our governments, and then a book written by H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*. Dereliction of duty by our government covered up for what was going on in Vietnam, and how many American young men and women died because of our government cover up. So I've got a whole new vision or thoughts about our involvement there. I don't have any disregard for what I did. I went and did what I supposed to do. I did my best. I came back in one piece, which I'm thankful for, but I sure am disappointed at what took place from John F. Kennedy to Johnson to Ford. Just to me, it's a slap in the face, but that's history.

COHEN: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, a few years ago, before I began working at the Pritzker Military Museum & Library, there was an exhibit of DASPO photographs, the Department of the Army Special Photographic Office, and in a funny way, that brought home the same point. In other words, they were trying to get the truth of what was happening there, and this is why this unit existed, but they were not sharing this with, you know, with the public.

BOEHMER: Yeah, the reports that our government got, president and his staff and all these people, from the Department of Defense, the people that created that Pentagon Papers, that was never passed on to the news media. The news and the American people never knew this. I'm sure a lot of them suspected it. But like today, our government can cover things up and not let the American people

[5] Daniel Ellsberg.

know what's going on. And so it's a real black eye for our democracy back in those days. And I just think of all the lives that were lost then and perhaps there are some today that are losing their lives because of things that our government is doing. And I have no real opinion on what our current government is doing, but back in those days, I- to think now, what I know now, if I'd have known then, I don't know if I would have behaved the same way. But of course, lack of knowledge back then was probably the better thing.

COHEN: [Both laugh]. Right, you just focus on the task.

BOEHMER: Yeah, yeah.

COHEN: Would you say there has been a shift in attitudes toward the Vietnam War veterans in the United States in, let's say, the last five or ten years?

BOEHMER: Yes, I think there has, tremendously, because I think for one thing, our military is being much more appreciated and respected for what they have done, what they did back then, what they're doing now, right along with our police and fire and folks like that. But I think the public realizes that the Vietnam era military was not welcomed back the way they should have been, and probably with good reason, because they didn't have the knowledge of what, why we were there and what we were doing. They just hated the fact that people were, their young people and friends and relatives were dying. And I can't blame them for being upset about that. But now we're in a new generation, probably two generations removed from that Vietnam era. And so people are looking at things a lot differently. And we are glad to see it, because there isn't a month goes by that somebody doesn't say to me, "Thank you for your service," because they know that I'm a Vietnam veteran and they know that things were different when I came back than they are today, and some people want to show their respect by telling me that. I appreciate them.

COHEN: On a similar vein, would you like to talk about your participation in the Honor Flight to the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington?

BOEHMER: Yes. I went to, well, the Vietnam War Memorial now is different than the Honor Flight.

COHEN: Oh, I'm sorry. I thought it was-

BOEHMER: Yeah, the Honor- the Vietnam Memorial, of course, was dedicated in 1984 and I did visit that. I've been there twice, visited right after it was dedicated. And it's, it's a great memorial, and I enjoyed going there. But the Honor Flight takes

veterans from way back I suppose maybe at some time, maybe even a World War One veteran may have been able to make a flight. But they're taking World War Two veterans and then, of course, Korea, and now Vietnam. And they are working their way up the ladder from the oldest people to the younger people. And I'm on a list to go, along with a friend of mine. And we're supposed to go last year, of course, because of the Covid that canceled just all of our lives last year, we didn't go. But I am on a list to go, hopefully, maybe next year. But in place of them flying us veterans out from the Chicago area here, they did bring out a large front yard sign for me to put in my front yard. It said, "In this house is a Vietnam veteran," and they, the Honor Flight Chicago, would like to recognize that. So I had that in my front yard for about three months. And that's not quite as nice as being able to fly to Washington, D.C. to see that memorial, but I look forward to that someday.

COHEN: And going back, like once you returned, what happens next? Like do go back into the family business, you decide to search for more education...?

BOEHMER: Well, when I came back from Vietnam, I really had to kind of assimilate myself back into the world and figure out what I wanted to do. And my dad was, of course, running our family business at that time, with my grandfather. And he said, "Are you interested in the car business?" And I said, "Well, yeah, I guess so." "It's been in the family for two generations," I said, "I suppose." So I went to work with him, and worked there for forty-four years until we closed the business. But I, I didn't feel like I wanted to do anything else besides be in the automobile business with my dad. I always had a very good relationship with my family. It's not easy working with relatives, especially your father, but we got along well, and with my grandfather. I got along well with him. So it worked out very well and our business did very well, and our relationship stayed intact.

COHEN: That's nice.

BOEHMER: That's what I did after I got out of the service.

COHEN: And when did you meet your wife?

BOEHMER: I met my wife, actually, this is going to sound funny, but I was dating her sister before I dated her [Both laugh], but I met her, and I knew her for about three or four years, and we ended up going to the same college up in Northern Wisconsin, Stout State University in Northern Wisconsin. And she was a freshman when I was a senior, and when I graduated, of course, I went overseas, I kept correspondence with her. And then when I came back from Vietnam, about a month and a half after I was home, I knew where she worked. And so I

went to, her sister by this time had been gone and gotten married to some other guy, so I didn't have a chance with her [Both laugh] but I knew where my wife Dawn worked, wasn't my wife at the time, but I went down to where she worked, and I put a note on her car. And after that, everything is history. We got married about a year later and we've got a daughter, forty-three years old now and a granddaughter who's fourteen, thirteen, and life was good.

COHEN: Nice. Did your daughter ever consider going into the car, the car business?

BOEHMER: No, she never did. She always enjoyed the fact that I could give her whatever car she wanted to drive, but [Both laughs] I didn't want her to go into the car business because it's a pretty ruthless business, and you really have to have that instinct for being a business head. And she just didn't want to do that. And I don't blame her. So I didn't even begin to try and push her that direction because I knew that the business was going to wind down eventually. And I planned ahead far enough. I was a partner with my brother-in-law, as a matter of fact. He was my partner for forty-some years. And we both said to ourselves, "You know, our kids are of an age where we got to think about their future beyond our business here in this." So, again, there is my planning from the Army, and I always think *way* ahead of what's gonna happen [Both laugh].

COHEN: That's very good!

BOEHMER: So we both decided to keep our kids out of the business and let them do their own thing. And that was a wise choice because my daughter is doing fine, and his two children are doing fine, and we did great in the business. And that's the end of the story for that, so-

COHEN: That's great [laughs]. Have you ever gone back to visit Vietnam in recent years?

BOEHMER: I have not going back. I don't know that I want to. And I think that it's probably changed so much that I really would not recognize anything there, and probably that would be a good thing in some cases, but I've talked to veterans who've gone back to Vietnam, one in particular that I got, that I know very well. He went back quite by accident. He ended up getting stranded on a cruise that ended up docking in Vietnam, and so he took the opportunity to travel around. But he said, "You know, Steve, there's just so much that's changed." He said, "I didn't recognize anything where I-" he was able to travel to where he was stationed. So I, really, I have no interest to go back there. I think it would be so commercialized, not that I would want it to look like a war zone again if I went over there [Both laugh] but there's so many other places that I would be interested in going to see.

COHEN: Yeah. You talked about your involvement with the veterans, the 11th Armored Cavalry Group. But are you involved in other veteran organizations too?

BOEHMER: The only involvement I have with the 11th Armored Cavalry as I'm a lifetime member of the 11th Armored Cav alumni, and that's what gets me those quarterly newsletters and the annual calendars and things like that. They do have reunions every year someplace in the United States. And oddly enough, I have never attended one of those reunions. Maybe I will someday, but I haven't yet. But I'm a lifetime member of the American Legion in Wauconda and the veterans, the VFW in the local area. And I'm not very active with those organizations, I'm sad to say, but I just have been involved in so many other things in the Community, Chamber of Commerce and my business and things. I just never got involved with the veterans' part of it. But I do help out with them on occasion when I can.

COHEN: Yeah. Do you think there's like one experience that you had that characterizes your whole service?

BOEHMER: Well, I guess the only experience that I would say that really sums it all up into a very short statement would be that you just have to be prepared to deal with any situation that comes before you. You have to realize that things are not always going to go your way and that you have to decide to stay calm and try to figure out Plan B. If Plan A doesn't go right, Plan B is there. I've always tried to be sincere and honest with the people I work with. I've tried to be a leader. I felt that I was a good leader when I was in Vietnam. My people respected me. And I think that's, that's the best honor that you can have from your coworkers, from your employees, from your friends, to be a good leader, be dependable. And that's I think what I could pull out of the military service is just be a good leader and be dependable.

COHEN: Yeah. I'm going to ask you another question, and I quite admit that there is a bit of an agenda, but were you, when you were in the service, did you have- how did you have access to news? And did you, for example, get the *Stars and Stripes*, you know, both when you're in Fort Knox or in Vietnam or...?

BOEHMER: Yes, we would get the *Stars and Stripes*, but I didn't have the opportunity to read them that often. And sometimes they would issue one or two fliers or letters per company and we would have to pass them around. Sometimes we would get them first in our area and then other times we'd get them last. They were full of mud and dirt and so on. But I never got a chance to read very thoroughly what was in those. And I, I can't really tell you- I'm sure there was no propaganda. It was just a matter of what was happening at the time, but nothing specific to our

particular unit. It was kind of a general thing that came from, I suppose, maybe some, I don't know specific commanders or places that were different from around the world, different areas, different locales, I guess you could say. So I didn't have much exposure to the *Stars and Stripes*, no.

COHEN: Did you have any exposure to editorial cartoons that were passed around?

BOEHMER: Yeah, there were usually a few that came around. Some of them were comical. Most of them were. Some of them were a little bit political, too. I remember there was some that were a little bit political. And I remember specifically the ones that kind of hammered on Nixon once in a while. And of course, he was the one that was president when they were trying to get the Paris Peace Talks going, and he torpedoed those, so. I just don't remember too much about the overall content of the *Stars and Stripes* or the cartoons, really.

COHEN: So the museum and library is planning an exhibit on Bill Mauldin and recently produced a book on Bill Mauldin. And I guess I was just wondering if, you know, there was a specific Mauldin cartoon that made an impression on you, or not necessarily, that's fine, too.

BOEHMER: Yeah, I can't say that there is that. I don't think I ever read too much of what he had to, what they published in his books. Sorry to disappoint you there [Both laugh].

COHEN: I have sometimes very funny personal stories, like when I did a master's in Jewish history, and you learn things: "Oh, the nature of the studies, the thinking behind the modern yeshiva." You'd ask, well I'd go and ask my great-aunt, “So why was our great uncle sent there [i.e. specifically to the Slobodka Yeshiva]?” And it would be a more prosaic answer. "Well it was close to home, and this way Mother could do the laundry for him." [laughs] So you can't always get what you're imagining, what looking for. Anyhow, sorry. So as you know, the mission of the Pritzker Military Museum & Library is to tell the story of the citizen soldier and collect artifacts relating to his or her service. So what does the term citizen soldier mean to you?

BOEHMER: Well, I thought a lot about that because I tried to think what that meant, first of all. And I think what it means to me is that you served in the military and you, again, conducted yourself in a certain manner. You either enjoyed the service, you tolerated it, or you hated it. It's kind of like life. And when you're out of the military, and not many people today are in the military. Most people in the military today that want to stay there very long are seasoned veterans and they have got certain opinions about being a soldier. But a citizen soldier to me is

after life of being in the military and conducting yourself in the way that the military asked you to. Again, being responsible, being patriotic, promoting the military, honoring their service, and being a good soldier after your military life, and being helpful in your community, trying to do the best that you can for your country. And after all, that's why you're in the military, is you're there to serve your country.

COHEN: Yeah, yeah. Well, on this note, is there anything that you would like to discuss that we did not cover?

BOEHMER: No, I think we covered just about everything. And I want to thank you for this opportunity. This has been really great. And as I said at the very beginning, this is kind of a culmination of me being able to express my feelings and my thoughts and get myself out of a dark place that I was in at one time. And my friend Sarah at the college helped me to get started with this, and I certainly appreciate that start. And I looked forward to doing this when I first heard that I could do this interview. Each one of these that I do, where I talk about my experiences, what I went through, what my fellow soldiers have gone through, and what they're going through, helped me to get my mind calm and feel at ease with myself, because I was in a pretty dark place for a while. But I thank you for giving me this opportunity.

COHEN: And I thank you. And we thank you for sharing your story, obviously not all of it easy, and appreciate this. And on behalf of the Pritzker Military Museum and Library, we will mail you a challenge coin as a token of our thanks.

BOEHMER: Thank you. Thank you very much. I appreciate that. Thank you.