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**Col. Arthur L. Kelly American Veterans Oral History Collection:  
Vietnam War Oral History Project**

**Interview with Donald Parrish, June 3, 1985**

**Interview conducted by Terry L. Birdwhistell**

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This is an unrehearsed interview with Don Parrish for the Vietnam Veterans in Kentucky Oral History Project. The interview was conducted by Terry L. Birdwhistell in Bardstown, Kentucky on June 3, 1985.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Okay. Tape 1. Don, let's start off by finding out a little bit about you, a little bit about your background, your family, your early education, things like that. I take it you are a native of Bardstown.

**PARRISH:** Yes, I was born and raised right here in Bardstown.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** And you were telling me earlier your father was in the construction business, and now you all have gotten involved in the concrete block and brick. . .

**PARRISH:** That's right. My dad started a construction business back in the very early '30's, building distilleries and various other commercial buildings here in the Bardstown area, and in the late '50's, why, he bought a concrete block plant at an auction, oddly enough, and then we've since then been building up, and building up until here we are on a fairly new location.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Mmhmm. Tell me a little bit about your educational background, where you attended school.

**PARRISH:** Okay, well grade school and high school are here in Bardstown, I went to. . . graduated from Saint Joseph preparatory school, and really only had one year of college, that was at the University of Kentucky, and I'm sure you're glad to know that, and then after that, why I came back here and we got into the family's business then, and that's where I've been ever since.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Mmhmm. What year did you go to UK?

**PARRISH:** I was at UK at 1960-61.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** 1960-61. [?] tell me your. . . growing up here in Bardstown and then coming back here and getting involved in the family business, what are your. . . some of your earliest recollections of the Vietnam war, when did you first start hearing about what was going on over there? That it meant something to you?

**PARRISH:** I guess the first recollection I really had would be probably about 1962 or 3 when a friend of mine was, I believe, he was not a draftee, he had joined the army and was involved in advisory capacity at that point, and at that point was really when I really realized that Vietnam was even on the map for the most part.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Mmhmm. Now tell me about your getting involved in the military. How. . . what are the circumstances, you know, about you becoming a member of the guard.

**PARRISH:** Okay. Of course the draft was very much in effect at that time, and in 1964, I joined the National Guard primarily to avoid having to spend 2 years of my life away from the family business and doing something I didn't particularly want to fool with. I had no particular objection to the army, but I felt like I had better things to do with my time. So, consequently I joined the guard, I spent six months in. . . at Fort Knox, and also in Fort Sill, Oklahoma, and after that we merely had monthly and occasionally some night drills, two weeks summer camp each year, and we satisfied the military requirements of the day. Little did I realize I was going to wind up spending those two years anyway, but. . .

**BIRDWHISTELL:** How old were you when you. . . how old were you when you entered the National Guard?

**PARRISH:** I was. . . must have been 22.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** 22. What was your reaction to basic training and, you know, when you went to Fort Knox and then down to Ok-. . . out to Oklahoma. What did you think of basic training and the type of training you were receiving?

**PARRISH:** I was. . . I can't really say I was so fond of it, but at the same time I wasn't really turned off by it. It managed to get my body in a little bit better condition than it has ever been before or since, and I learned, of course I. . . being from a small town, I'd always had been involved with shooting a rifle or a pistol or whatever, but on advice of an uncle of mine, I determined to learn [donueay], as it turns out it really paid off, I was one of, I think three that fired expert for expert out of a battalion of 500 or so, and there was that benefit, and I've been shooting ever since. So, by and large I would say I got the most out of it that I thought that I could.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Now, when you were in basic, were you in training with a group of people who were going into the guard? Or were you mixed in with all types of. . .

**PARRISH:** We were all mixed. There was regular army, there were draftees, there were reserve units, and National Guard units.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Mmhmm. Was there any difference in the treatment that people received in basic? Or was everybody treated the same? Or was there any problems with being a reservist or a guardsman as opposed to regular army or. . .

**PARRISH:** I didn't see really any problem, if anything. I felt like that probably the reservists and the National Guardsmen probably had a little bit easier time. As it turns

out, the majority of the draftees and the regular army, or the 3 year people did not quite have the level of education that the majority of the reservists did.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** They were younger.

**PARRISH:** And they were younger, that's correct. And, so consequently I would say that we had it a little bit easier, not because we were treated any better, but because we probably were able to just cope through the situation a little bit better.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Were you already married and with a family at that point?

**PARRISH:** No. No, I married quite late in life, actually, I married just five years ago.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Is that right?

**PARRISH:** Mmhmm.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Did you hear anything about Vietnam while you were in basic training?

**PARRISH:** There were. . . yes, there were. . . at that time, there were units in Vietnam fighting and advising, as I recall. So, I do recall some conversation at that point.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** But, it didn't mean anything to you because you were. . . as far as you knew, you were going back to a guard unit in Bardstown. ®

**PARRISH:** That's right. I was very highly protected. I would never be in Vietnam because I was in a National Guard unit.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Right.

**PARRISH:** [chuckle]

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Tell me a little bit about what it's like to be in the National Guard unit in Bardstown, when you came back you said you had monthly meetings and then you went to summer camp, I guess.

**PARRISH:** Mmhmm.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What were the types of activities that you all would be involved in?

**PARRISH:** Okay, we were a. . . in fact, the unit still is, a firing battery of 655 millimeter Howitzers, and we would train here in town on the maintenance and the upkeep of the. . . all the various pieces of equipment including the communications equipment, the fire direction center equipment, mess equipment, the whole thing, we would cook all of our own meals. It was basically very similar to any form. . . any other form of an army unit any place else in the world. And then we would have maybe 2 or 3 or 4 weekend drills where we would pack up all of our equipment and go to Fort Knox for what we called a weekend shoot. And, we would shoot day and night and. . . at Fort Knox. And then, of course we had to come back and clean everything up and have it ready for the next meeting. And then the two week summer camps we would have were in various parts of the country. We went to Wisconsin and. . . well really, when I was in the unit, it was Wisconsin and Fort Campbell, Kentucky. And, again, we would do the same sort of thing, only we would be shooting for two weeks, days and nights, and just got a little further. . . or a little bit deeper into our training.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Mmhmm. How did you feel about your level of training? Did you feel, as a unit, that you were well trained? And ready to go if called?

**PARRISH:** Yes I did. I felt like we were quite ready before we actually were called. As it turns out, when we were called to active duty, we wound up not being quite as trained as we needed to be, because a lot of the equipment had changed, and the newer equipment required some additional training.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** And, basically here in Bardstown as a National Guard unit, you couldn't be expected to have the most modern equipment, the latest thing off the . . . off the rack.

**PARRISH:** That's right. Now, a lot of the equipment we were using here, the [?] Howitzers for example, were being used throughout the entire Vietnam war. But, when we went to Vietnam we had the most modern of everything. We had self-propelled units. And, today they're using self-propelled units.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** I suppose, you know, it's sort of ironic in so many ways what happened, in a sense that, you know, a National Guard unit training for artillery fire, being a National Guard unit, it's hard to imagine how that could be put into use, you know, other than something exceptional happening.

**PARRISH:** That's very true. Well, it wasn't such a mystery of myself because I did know of the history of the unit. This unit was an ordinance unit prior to it becoming an artillery unit back in the late '50's, and during World War II this National Guard unit had been activated and they fought in the South Pacific, and it had been involved in the Korean war, so we knew that there was always the potential for this unit being activated

to come to the aid of the country, so to speak. In fact, there actually was a contract, I don't recall really what all was in the contract, but I do recall that we were supposedly being readied for national defense in the event of an emergency. Or, in the event of a national emergency, I believe is the way it was said.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So, was your unit exceptional or different or have a different mission then than other guard units around the state or around the country?

**PARRISH:** It was. . .



**BIRDWHISTELL:** Is that what you're saying?

**PARRISH:** Well, our unit was a very good unit because we did have a . . . we had a real good group of people. And, not just in Bardstown, you have to realize that the battalion, it was headquartered in Louisville, and then there was Bardstown, Elizabethtown, and Carlton that had the three firing batteries. And then wherever they had the headquarters battery and the service battery. And, all these units worked well, very similar to the one here in Bardstown. And, as far as . . . I'm not really sure exactly why this unit was kind . . . was activated over one, for example, in Georgia or any state, there were some others that were activated and sent to Vietnam, but to the best of my knowledge, we had done our work quite well. We had served our purpose as far as we knew. We had received various accommodations which would indicate that we were probably among the better in the nation.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Was there a sense of pride then in the unit?

**PARRISH:** I would say there was, yes. But probably as much as anything, our people all knew each other real well. We had brothers and cousins and uncles and, I don't know what all, and friends that had grown up together and simply worked together very well. ®

And I'm sure in a lot of big cities, for example, you don't have this kind of camaraderie, so we accidentally did things better than some people would on purpose.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Yeah, not only did you know each other when you ended up down at the guard headquarters, but you know each other every day on Main Street or in the town.

**PARRISH:** That's correct.

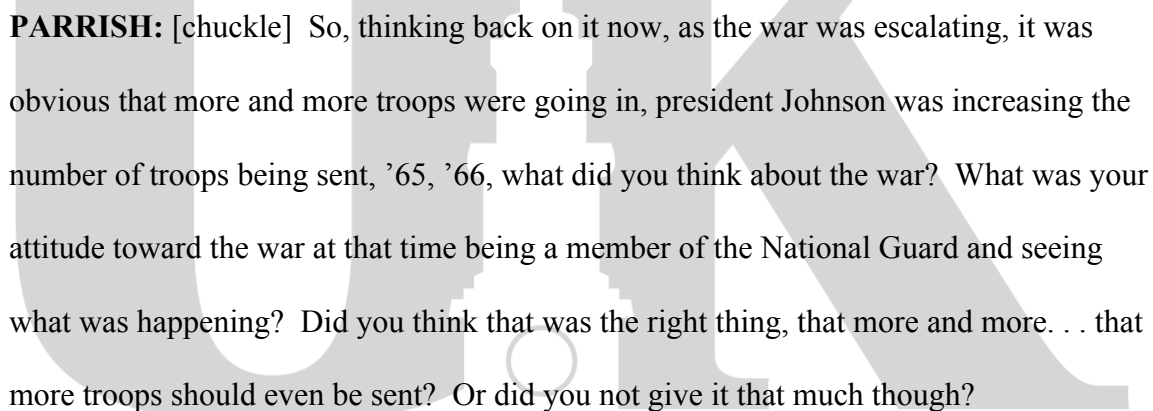
**BIRDWHISTELL:** And that's what I noticed, you know, going back and reading about your unit, that it was family and neighbors, and very. . . very close-knit.

**PARRISH:** Yes indeed. Yes indeed.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Mmhmm.

**PARRISH:** What rank were you in the unit?

**BIRDWHISTELL:** I was a specialist E-5 which was as high as I could go in that particular slot. I was the chief of the fire direction center. We completed the data from the forward observers. They would call in and say they needed some fire on a particular grid square, or whatever, and we would compute the information and then send that information to the guns that would hopefully enable them to hit that target.

**PARRISH:** [chuckle] So, thinking back on it now, as the war was escalating, it was obvious that more and more troops were going in, president Johnson was increasing the number of troops being sent, '65, '66, what did you think about the war? What was your attitude toward the war at that time being a member of the National Guard and seeing what was happening? Did you think that was the right thing, that more and more. . . that more troops should even be sent? Or did you not give it that much though? 

**PARRISH:** Well, I did think about it, not a great deal, but I did think about it, and I think we were probably in the right to take the stand that we had taken. I never really fully agreed with a lot of the tactics, a lot of the detailed information, for example, but by and large I did feel that the initial purpose was correct, and we probably should be there. And I've really not really changed that feeling from here until now.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Mmhmm. Mmhmm. Was Vietnam discussed when, you know, when you all get together? Did you all talk about it any? Or. . .

**PARRISH:** Not a great deal. In fact, I don't recall any conversations, but I'm sure that only in a light sense, or whatever.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Yeah.

**PARRISH:** It would just come up. . .

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Right.

**PARRISH:** . . . occasionally. My biggest recollection on a regular basis would be the casualty count, or the number of Americans dead for a particular week.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Mmhmm.

**PARRISH:** And I know it always amazed me when it got to around 3 or 4 or 500 a week.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Mmhmm.

**PARRISH:** And I got to think good grief, you know, how high can this thing go?

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So, what you're saying, really, is your reaction was kind of like a lot of Americans, you were listening to Walter Cronkite telling you the body count, not only for them, but for us, and then it started to. . .

**PARRISH:** That's right. That's what really struck home, really.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Had to make a person stop and think about. . .

**PARRISH:** No question about it. Mmhmm. In fact, I remember making a comparison of the American body count with airplane crashes, and natural disasters, and it just seemed strange to me that we could continue the methods. . . the methodology was maybe not exactly right, and why didn't we do something to change it? I do recall making that remark.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** You said you knew someone early on who had been in Vietnam.

Of course, Bardstown had others serving in Vietnam besides the guard units, I mean there were people in the regular army, did you know any of those people, people that you may have grown up with?

**PARRISH:** I did know a few of them, yes.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Mmhmm. Did any of those people come back before you went and talk to you about Vietnam at all? Do you remember any. . .

**PARRISH:** Yes, they did, and it's amazing that I really have a hard time recalling those details. I did talk to several people who had been to Vietnam and came back before I went. Before I even knew I was going. [chuckle].

**BIRDWHISTELL:** I think that's probably why it's so hard to remember those conversations, because only in retrospect, you know, when you try to remember it.

**PARRISH:** Right. And, somehow or another you seem to remember your own experiences more so than you would what somebody else had told you prior to that.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** [chuckle]

**PARRISH:** [chuckle]

**BIRDWHISTELL:** That's right.

[tape paused]

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Okay, tape 2. Let's talk about going to Vietnam then. Your unit was activated May 13, 1968, is that. . .

**PARRISH:** I believe that's correct, yes. Actually, we were notified on April 20<sup>th</sup>.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** That you'd be. . . you were. . .

**PARRISH:** That we were to be activated, yes.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Tell me about the reaction of not only yourself, but of other people in your unit. First tell me your reaction and then maybe talk about some of the other reactions.

**PARRISH:** Mmhmm. My initial reaction was one of disbelief, and I haven't really decided for sure whether I really just didn't want to believe it, or whatever. My dad had come back to the office from lunch and had heard on TV news that my National Guard unit had been called to active duty. And, basically that's all he said to me, and I thought to myself, well good grief, we're going to have to go to Cincinnati to quell a race riot. Because there had. . . we had been involved in some race riot control training. And. . . or riot control training, I should say. And, there had been a lot of activity up in the Cincinnati area, we had already been informed that we probably would be called if they didn't quiet down quite soon, so I just automatically assumed that's where we were going to end up going. And, he kept insisting, "no, I don't think that's what they have on their mind." And, so I went out to the National Guard unit and talked to first sergeant [Pat

Sinson], and he confirmed to me, no, we're going to be going to Texas for some additional training, and then we probably are going to be sent to Southeast Asia, and that was, I guess maybe a couple of hours I had word, I knew not only what was going to happen, but I also knew where we were going to wind up going. In fact, the. . . the very location in our core, was pretty much known at that time. But, as far as reaction of other people was concerned, a lot of people really thought, and a lot of our fellow members really thought that we were going to be involved in a huge training exercise, might even

go as far as getting on the plane and all this sort of thing, just to see how well we could be trained and respond to the call. And, little did they realize until after we were well over the Pacific Ocean, that well, maybe this is the real thing. [chuckle] And, some people really, honestly felt that way. They thought that we were going to wind up going to some island or something and turn around and come back home. It was a mixed bag of reactions.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What went through your mind and how did you feel?

**PARRISH:** Well, it's kind of hard to say. I obviously didn't want to go. I feared a bit for my life, for the lives of my friends. I felt like if we did wind up going to Vietnam that probably somebody may not be able to go back home safely. And, that bothered me a great deal, because I knew all these people. They weren't all from right here in Bardstown, but I had gotten to know those who were not from Bardstown, and I felt. . . I felt very endangered by it, and then. . . but after that, I guess it was kind of business as usual. You know, here we are, and you've got to get used to working 12 hours a day, 7 days a week, and. . . for 52 weeks, and you know, we've got things to do, let's get off the one subject and move on over here and start. . . get on back to work. ®

**BIRDWHISTELL:** How did your father know you were going to Vietnam? How did you. . .

**PARRISH:** I'm thinking that. . . as I recall, that there was something said on the news report, that we were probably going to be shipped to Southeast Asia.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Mmhmm. And. . . just like the Vietnam war, did you find out you were going by television report? [chuckle]

**PARRISH:** Sounds very typical, yes. [chuckle] Be the first involved, last to know.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Now I read that some members of the unit actually tried to file suit saying that it was a state militia and it was illegal to send the unit to an undeclared war.

**PARRISH:** Right. Mmhmm.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** How did that come about?

**PARRISH:** Well, the . . . as I stated earlier, there was a contract that we signed as we joined the National Guard, and again, I don't recall the details of that contract, but basically it indicated that this was pretty much the last line of defense for the country, and that we were to be trained and to be ready to go to the aid of the country as . . . in the event of a national emergency. And, I believe that term, "national emergency" was a part of the contract, and the . . . basically the suit was the Vietnam War did not constitute a national emergency and consequently we should not be called to active duty. We . . . as it turns out, the suit didn't really get off the ground real well, and we had been in Vietnam for about six months when we found out that the Supreme Court said they weren't interested in fooling with it, so . . .

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Now was everyone involved in filing the suit? Or were there some who didn't want to file suit?

**PARRISH:** No, the . . . the suit was, I suppose, what you would call a class action suit on the part of the members of the guard, and I don't recall, I guess about half of the members were involved in it to some degree, and the other half just didn't fool with it, or didn't think it was . . . really had a lot of merit.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Which half were you?

**PARRISH:** At the outfit, I didn't want any part of it, didn't have any. . . didn't want anything to do with it at all, and eventually toward the end, right before we left, I was

encouraged to sign the thing, I said, “what can it hurt?” And I thought, well, what can it hurt, so I just went ahead and signed as a . . . on a roster, so I guess you would say that I was one of those who signed against it. But really, I didn’t really feel like it had a lot of merit one way or the other. I had a lot of friends that had joined that particular time.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Tell me about being. . . getting prepared for Vietnam, your unit was activated, you were sent to. . . went to Fort Hood, Texas. Tell me about your training.

**PARRISH:** Okay, we went to Fort Hood which is about 80 or 90 miles south of Dallas, and we wound up drawing all the newest of the equipment, which included the M -109 self-propelled 155mm Howitzers. Also drew the M-16 riles, we drew a . . . since I was in fire direction center, I wound up with what they called a FADAC which is a . . . I forget exactly what the letters stand for now, but Field Artillery Computer which would basically, would compute the information, supposedly a whole lot faster and more accurately than we could by hand. As it turns out, when we got into the country, why we wound up doing most of it by hand anyway, so we found in some cases we were faster, so [chuckle]. But, we wound up training for about six months, I guess, in Texas, and we did a world of shooting, day and night, we were out in the field quite a lot, and we even included some PT and some of the various bits of training necessary to a quality state.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What did they tell you about Vietnam at this point?

**PARRISH:** They didn’t really indicate that we were going to Vietnam, but we were being prepared as if we were going to Vietnam. So, we really were a little bit on a fence, I guess. I mean, I knew only because I had talked to the right people. But, it was kind of strange the way that the information was being handed out.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Why was it done that way?



**PARRISH:** I don't know. I never have really figured that out. I don't know that there was anything to be gained to not say exactly what was on their mind. And maybe it's a . . . it might have been a secret operation of some sort, you know, as far as higher up is concerned.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Hmm.

**PARRISH:** Turns out it didn't make a lot of difference. [chuckle]

**BIRDWHISTELL:** But if you knew, and you [?] other people, and then some of them, as you said earlier, just didn't want to believe it.

**PARRISH:** That's right. But, at the same time, everybody went on and trained, and they learned quite well.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Other people we talked to, you know, in their training, we had people who had been to Vietnam and they were telling them all kinds of things about Vietnam and good and bad, and you know, how to get prepared for it. So, in this case it was a little different that people weren't saying, "look, you learn this or the next time you do it, you're going to be in. . . in Vietnam."

**PARRISH:** Right, now as it turns out we were sent through a training exercise called the Vietnam Village which was. . . it included some of the various booby traps and sniper locations and I don't know what all, but I think that really got a lot of people's attention. They. . . it pretty much determined then that maybe this thing is for real. It was amazing for me how many people held out for so long.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Mmhmm.

**PARRISH:** No, we're not going to war.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** But you yourself, you didn't say, you know, you just went at it straight forward, said, "that's where we're going," and you got yourself mentally and physically prepared.

**PARRISH:** Yes. And ultimately I feel like everybody. . . everybody was physically prepared. I can say that without a question. And mentally, I think pretty much so.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** And the unit came back for 30 days before being shipped out.

**PARRISH:** That's correct.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** And what was that like, being back in Bardstown for 30 days.

Now, at that point, you knew you were going, right?

**PARRISH:** Yes. Yes, it was pretty much cut and dry then.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What did your father and you talk about?

**PARRISH:** Well, not a whole lot. My dad was really upset over it, and I guess he just didn't want to talk about it too much.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What upset him about it? Just the fact that you had to go?

**PARRISH:** Yes, the fact that. . . well I have an older. . . just have one older brother, and he had been in the service 6 or 8 years prior to it, and he didn't like it when, you know, ®

one of the members of the family had to be away from home for a period of time, so that was. . . I guess the homesickness, or loneliness or whatever was the major problem with my dad.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What about your mother?

**PARRISH:** Pretty much so, the same, but she. . . I think she handled it a great deal better than my dad did. My dad just plain wasn't prepared for it, and I guess my mother has had. . . for whatever reason, just did feel a lot more secure. She certainly wasn't. . .

she didn't want me to go any more than my dad or myself or anyone else, but it was just one of those things that had to be.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Is it possible at this time to generalize about the community's reaction to the unit being sent out at this point? I mean, this was getting fairly late. . . not late in the war, but there were some negative reactions to the war at this point in the united states, and protests, you know, were beginning. I guess at this time we'd already had the democratic convention in Chicago and things of that nature.

**PARRISH:** Well, as far as the community at large was concerned, there was no mass anti-war movement here. I don't know that the community necessarily supported the war in Vietnam. Bardstown has always been involved in warfare, when there's a war going on, Bardstown has its share of people involved in it, and we don't really go around and post this on billboards or whatever, but at the same time, it always has happened. And, really the. . . the effect, I guess, on the community was one of support, is the only thing I can remember. I do know that since we were a mobilized artillery unit, and basically we would have a place where we would stay put for a period of time. We did know this prior to going. We. . . and we also had some generators, we found out that it would be nice to have a refrigerator or a washing machine along with us. So, again, someone wrote back to someone here in the community, and low and behold there was a tractor trailer of that sort of thing brought to us. And, the community came alive, and there were several old washing machines that were in good working order, you know, the wringer type washers, and I lost track of the numbers of refrigerators and freezers and this sort of thing. Ice machines. We even had three ice machines sent to us. And, when we got in. . . arrived in

country, here we had all this equipment, and, you know, we were kind of the apple of everybody's eye. [chuckle]

**BIRDWHISTELL:** [chuckle]

**PARRISH:** Because all of the sudden we had something to keep the food cool and our clothes clean, it was quite unique.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** [chuckle] I guess that's the difference in going alone and going over with your family.

**PARRISH:** That's right. [chuckle] Makes a difference. But, the community really got behind us in a big way.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What are some of your recollections of the trip over and some of your first impressions of Vietnam?

**PARRISH:** The trip over is very difficult to get out of my mind. We flew over on a C-141 which has, I think a total of four windows in it about that bit around, and whoever put the seats in, put them in backwards, so we got to fly. . . we got to back up all the way over to Vietnam for 21 hours, and not what I would really call a lovely flight. The. . . I guess the highlight of the entire trip was somewhere over the Pacific ocean, the air force crew announced to us all, there must have been 350 of us all on the plane, but they announced to us that anyone that wants to move forward and spend a few minutes in the cockpit and see how it is to fly a plane like that, help yourself, and I made half a dozen trips like that, I guess just to. . . [chuckle] I mean, it was the only thing to do. That, or eat an apple or talk to somebody that's next to you. And, in front of us was a series of pilots with our duffel bags and rifles on them. And, when we got off the plane in. . . at

Danang air base, we stepped off the plane gun in hand with ammunition handed to us, and we knew then that here we are, we have arrived. [chuckle]

**BIRDWHISTELL:** This is it.

**PARRISH:** No question about it.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What were your impressions of the. . . you know, you stepped off the plane, and. . .

**OTHER VOICE:** Let me change tapes.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** oh, okay. You doing okay Don?

[tape paused]

**PARRISH:** To come home for 30 days, that was already on it's way.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So the unit could take over whatever it wanted, there wasn't any restrictions like the washing machines. . .

**PARRISH:** Evidently there was no restrictions on what we took. I mean, there were a few people that even took small side arms, and I'm sure there were probably restrictions against that sort of thing, but they couldn't search everything.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** [chuckle] Are we going?

**OTHER VOICE:** Mmhmm.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Okay, let's go back to when you stepped off the plane, and then try to recall, you know, what went through your mind, what were your first impressions of this place called Vietnam. You know, when you first stepped out, and. . .

**PARRISH:** Well, as I recall it was about 6 or 6:30 in the morning, it was just getting daylight. I could hear jets taking off, I could hear a few muffled booms in the background, and I thought, “my God, why in the world am I involved in this? I should be home making concrete blocks.” And, here I am with a rifle, they just handed me three magazines of rounds, and they pointed out that as soon as we got off the plane be sure just to disperse and not stay in a large group because it might become a likely target. I guess really, the . . . my initial reaction was, well here I am in a very dangerous situation, but very shortly after I determined, well probably I’m not going to get shot right now, you know, so we’ve got. . . I’ll be able to move on, and get life established here, and pick up and go again. So it’s. . . the initial reaction was one of fear, but it didn’t last very long.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Sounds like you adjust very well to the situation.

**PARRISH:** Well, better than most people. I guess, perhaps, that I feel like you need to. I think that’s very important. That’s a survival instinct I suppose, to adjust to a situation, whatever it may be.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** How long did you stay in Danang there at the base?

**PARRISH:** We were there for the biggest part of the day waiting around for some transportation on up north to. . . flew by in Camp Eagle, which is [?] eventually where to go, and it was about, I don’t know, 75 miles or so north, and I don’t remember exactly how we all managed to get up there. I’m thinking that there was a convoy that some of them went on. Others flew, and I was one of the last to leave there and ended up flying on a C-130.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** And how far did you go from Danang? You said 30 miles?

**PARRISH:** It was. . . no, it was about 60 or 70 miles, something like that, to. . . flew back. Actually, it's up close to Hue, which is not too far from DMC. And, in fact, the airport is known as Hue Phu Bai Airport. Phu Bai is a very small community, about the size of the top of that desk, or a little bit bigger maybe.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** [chuckle]

**PARRISH:** And, we wound up hanging around there for a period of time, waiting for a truck to come over and pick us up and there were just, you know, like a handful of us, half a dozen or so in this particular group.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** How were you treated by the people who had been in country for a while?

**PARRISH:** Very nice. We really couldn't. . . I couldn't ask for it to be any better. I found out that the. . . the people we ran into there were very willing to show us the ropes and where to find this and that and so on, and I just found it to be a. . . not too bad a situation at all.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** I don't hear that a lot. You know, most people talk about the people who had been in country for a while, you know, hassled them a little bit, you know, about being new and, you know the whole thing about initiation and being a rookie, I guess and all that.

**PARRISH:** Yeah, I guess the big difference was though, here we are a National Guard unit, and here I have a lot of friends. I probably brought a lot more friends with me than the majority of the people in country had the entire time they were there. I mean, I had 105 of them. I had 105 friends, and I dare say that any of the people I ran into didn't

really have that many friends. Maybe they felt intimidated, they felt like they needed to be helpful and nice, and polite and so on, and pretty much that's the way it went.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Mmhmm. Tell me about getting set up. . . getting your operation set up for the first time and where you were and what that involved.

**PARRISH:** Okay. We set up our artillery unit, I guess maybe for 3 weeks, the first three weeks or so we were in country, right at the edge of Camp Eagle. And, we sat there and fired for a period of time, and really didn't get involved in a whole lot at all.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Meaning you weren't getting any incoming.

**PARRISH:** Oh, there was no incoming at all, and not that much outgoing, quite frankly, there just was not much activity right there in that particular area. And then we received the message that we were to move south, and to a fire base known as Hill 88. And, Hill 88 is a small knob of land that's 88 meters above sea level, hence the name Hill 88. It was very close to an area called the hook which is where the South China Sea stopped and the Gulf of Tonkin started. And, also it was in an area known as the bowling alley, which was a very long straight stretch of highway 1. And, we were told that's where we were going to wind up going. Well, now the only time. . . I'm not going to say the only time, but the first time I was really scared was the trip down there, because it was a very heavily armored trip, we had a lot of people accompanying us to make sure we arrived safely and so on, and all of the sudden here I am completely away from the. . . some of our support units, and that was very. . . that was rather scary at first. After a few days of that, why I determined this is not so bad after all. And again, we were in a. . . on Hill 88 we were in a very safe position to defend from the point of view of being able to defend



it. Hill 88 was a small hill with a lot of flat land around it. We could see and protect ourselves rather well, and that was not necessarily the case in a lot of air support cases.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What were living conditions like on Hill 88?

**PARRISH:** Well, living conditions were not so bad. E managed to scrounge good eats here and there. Like I say, we had the washing machine, refrigerators, and we managed to find some extra generators so we could have some additional power. We had hot showers, we had an air force wing tank off of an air force fighter and set that up as a water tank and then put an. . . an immersion heater in it, and so all of the sudden we had nice hot showers.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** [chuckle]

**PARRISH:** [chuckle] Well, if you're going to have to be away from home, you don't have to be all the way away from home, you can take a piece of it with you.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** That's right. Make the best of it.

**PARRISH:** So, I guess probably of all the places we wound up going to, that was probably the best living conditions we had.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Now, when had you been there? You went in country in October, and. . .

**PARRISH:** Mmhhh. And we went down there, I believe it was either Thanksgiving day or the Friday following Thanksgiving. And, we wound up staying there until, I guess it must have been April. Early May. Late April, early May is when we left there and went out into what's known as the [Rung Rung] Valley, which is the northern end of the Ashaw Valley.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** And I guess by that time you all were feeling pretty much like veterans, I mean. . .

**PARRISH:** Oh yes. Yes.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** You knew what you were doing. Had you been involved in any combat on Hill 88?

**PARRISH:** Yes, we were involved in a lot of heavy shooting on Hill 88. We never did receive any incoming fire of any sort. But, we were very effective on 88. As a matter of fact, we were determined to be the top shooting battery of all Southeast Asia by the time we left 88, and this was, I don't know exactly how they grade such a thing, but this is based on the speed and the accuracy of delivery of fire onto a given target. And, we took on a lot of targets of opportunity. For example, if we could listen to the radio and determine that we possibly could help this platoon or infantry over here, we could call their leaders, and they. . . and offer assistance, and they really appreciated it, and we'd say, "why yes sir, give us. . ." you know, for example in night in particular, we would fire what they called light bulbs which was the illumination round. And, we would fire as many as 1,000 a night, and maybe support 3 or 4 operations in different areas of our immediate area. And, so we. . . we did very well, and we were able to support the 101<sup>st</sup> airborne, much to their satisfaction, and they let us know it.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Was this the result of some type of leadership in the unit? That it would. . . you know, it would be a positive reaction to being in a situation like this to want to do the best you could while you were there? Volunteer to do more? How do you account for that?

**PARRISH:** The way I account for it is the fact that we all knew each other so well.

Again, we had. . . well, we had seven sets of brothers, for example. Uncles, and brothers in law, and we had one father and son in law arrangement. A lot of people there that went to school together grew up together. We had a lot of camaraderie, it was just simply built in due to that. I know, for example, there were two good sized fellows in our unit in two separate gun sections, and they would race to the guns carrying 98 pounds projectiles with fuses in them and they'd be carrying them by the fuse two at a time. And, they would try to run, see who could get there the quickest. Well, this is the kind of thing that, like I say, accidentally made us a little bit better than the next group. In a regular army unit, you just didn't have that. People were constantly coming in and going out, and a friend was somebody you had known for 6 weeks maybe, or four months or something. In our case, a friend was somebody that I had known for 20 years.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** You all were there, and you were going to be there together until you came out.

**PARRISH:** That's right. And that really made a difference.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Now there were 105 of you, right?

**PARRISH:** 106 of us.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** 106 of you. Were there any other people then on Hill 88 with you?

**PARRISH:** Yes, there was a platoon of infantry of 101<sup>st</sup> airborne infantry on up above us, and it was their purpose to offer some support in defending the hill, and also they marched off the hill at night and went. . . they went into some various operations. You also had a couple fellows from CIA that were up there and they kind of went off the hill and did their thing at night too.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Really? Out roaming around.

**PARRISH:** Yeah, they were. . .

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What were they like? [chuckle]

**PARRISH:** I really don't know. I'm not too sure I would ever want to associate with anybody. . . they enjoyed. . . they enjoyed some terrible things, really.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Did they talk about it? Did they come back and then talk about it?

**PARRISH:** Not really. Not a great deal. You'd have to pry it out of them, but it wasn't all that much trouble to pry it out either [chuckle] I mean, these people, they would go off into villages and kill off some folks that were alleged enemy, or whatever, and I'm sure they were probably right, or at least most of the time they were, but not too sure I'd want to associate with that type of person.

[End of tape 1, side 1]

[Beginning of tape 1, side 2]

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What did this 101<sup>st</sup>. . . or, not the 101<sup>st</sup>, but the infantry group that was with you up on the hill, what did they think about all these Kentuckians down there?

**PARRISH:** Well, they got to like us quite well. They felt that. . . as a matter of fact, we got to know a bunch of them quite well, and we would visit back and forth, and I guess one thing they liked about Kentucky is that we knew good whiskey, so [chuckle] periodically we would. . . somebody would get a bottle of whiskey in the mail, or be able to get off to Danang and get some, or whatever.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** And you had an ice machine.

**PARRISH:** Oh yeah, had an ice machine on top of it all, that's right, good drinking water. [chuckle]

**BIRDWHISTELL:** [chuckle] Sounds like. . . if you had to be there, sounds like a good place to be.

**PARRISH:** Yes indeed.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What about the leadership in your unit. What did you think about the ability of the people who were in command?

**PARRISH:** For the most part I felt very good about it. We went with our own cadre in force, and then once we got into country, that was the first people to be changed were some of the officers, our battery commander was, I guess, among the first of the officers to be rotated around. Hew as moved to. . . Captain Tom McClure was moved onto headquarters and in the S3 slot, and then we had a regular army captain who actually had trained with us in Texas in anticipation of this move.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Mmhmm.

**PARRISH:** And he then became our battery commander. Unfortunately, he was killed some few months later after being shot down in a helicopter. ®

**BIRDWHISTELL:** While you were still at Hill 88?

**PARRISH:** Actually, we were firing from firebase Tomahawk on a one day adventure. We went to Tomahawk only for one day in order to fire into an area that we could not reach from Hill 88, and he flew off in a helicopter as a forward observer in a heavy fog, and apparently stumbled over an antiaircraft facility that shot him down.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Mm. But, overall you thought the leadership. . .

**PARRISH:** We all felt real good about the leadership. It was not perfect, but you know, few things are in life. But, for the most part we felt like their leadership was doing quite well.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** And, I take it from the morale of the unit that at that point you felt like you had a job to do and it was accomplishing something, and. . .

**PARRISH:** Mmhmm.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** . . . things were going okay.

**PARRISH:** That's right. We had. . . like I say, earlier we had 12 hours a day to put in, and 7 days a week, and we all, basically, fell in and got the work done.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Without, you know, getting. . . talking about individuals, you know, making it too personal, but were there members of the unit that didn't react as well, that were having some problems at this point?

**PARRISH:** I don't really recall anybody originally from our unit. There was. . . there was one fellow that was transferred in from another unit that, I guess it was involving drugs and drinking and had been before he ever went to Vietnam, and I think he managed to get checked out before we had been in country too long.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Did you have any blacks in your unit?

**PARRISH:** No, we didn't.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** All white.

**PARRISH:** Our unit was all white, and not necessarily by choice. This is a town that. . . where the races get along quite well, and I think since then there have been some blacks in the National Guard unit, but at that particular time, there happened not to be any.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Mmhmm. So, while you were on Hill 88, basically you all were firing, but you took no incoming. . .

**PARRISH:** Right, we never did have any incoming on 88. However, highway 1 ran between 88 and the mountains. And, a couple of occasions there was a real nice vantage point from which Charlie could get up there and take pot shots at vehicles on Highway 1. Now, two separate occasions we were involved in some direct fire. That was us shooting at him, but I guess that was the closest thing really we could see. You could see where he was shooting and hitting the road in front of a jeep or something driving down Highway

1.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Give me some idea. When you're on Hill 88. . .

[tape paused]

**BIRDWHISTELL:** [chuckle]

**PARRISH:** [chuckle]

**OTHER VOICE:** Any time, gentlemen.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Okay. What tape is this, four?

**OTHER VOICE:** Four, I believe.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So, then you made a one day trip over to Tomahawk. . . what did you call it? Fire. . .

**PARRISH:** Fire support base tomahawk.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Fire support base tomahawk. When did you. . . did you finally move over to that? Or. . .

**PARRISH:** Well, we made the one trip over there one day. Tomahawk had been used as a fire support base for quite some time. It was located right in the edge of the mountains, you could still see the ocean from Tomahawk, it was. . . Tomahawk was a very difficult piece of property to set up a fire support base on. And, consequently a lot of people had been. . . there'd been a lot of people killed and injured, both due to combat, and also due to accident. It seemed like it almost had a little aura about it if. . . I know while I was there, excuse me, while I was in the vicinity, there were at least two occasions where people were killed in accidents. One where a truck ran off the hill and another one where a guard bunker collapsed due to a very heavy rainstorm situation, and, the type of thing you don't really expect to hear of from a war in a country of that sort. And then, it was difficult to protect such a fire support base, because this particular one was not in the high ground. In artillery you always attempt to take on the high ground because it's easier to defend your enemy when he is below you than it is when he's above you. We had mountains there close to us, we were in what's known as a saddle, we had higher grounds on both sides of us. On the one side, we did control that area, however the very high ground that pervaded all around us was where the enemy came from. ®

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So why did you move there?

**PARRISH:** We were told to. [chuckle]

**BIRDWHISTELL:** In. . . thinking back on it, or even at that time, you know, why did you think that. . .

**PARRISH:** Well, the only thing that I can imagine, and almost have to show it to you on a map, really, to explain it very clearly. We were one of three fire support bases along highway 1 in the vicinity known as the bowling alley. We were on 88, we were close to



the center of the bowling alley, and either end of it had another fire support base. So, when we moved to Tomahawk, the only reason that I can imagine that we moved to Tomahawk was because there was an area that we could reach from there that we could not reach from 88, and nor could either of the other two. And, sure enough we did fire into that area a little bit. But, by and large we shot pretty much the same as we did when we were down on 88.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** But now, you knew moving to Tomahawk what had happened there before? You all were aware of that?

**PARRISH:** Oh yes, we were very much aware of it, yes.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So, what were you talking about? I mean, what was the reaction within the unit?

**PARRISH:** Well, nobody really wanted to go. There were those people who were saying, oh, you know, there's a jinx on the hill and this sort of thing, and there were those of us who were saying that's a difficult position to defend, and we also felt a little bit in danger because we were such a good shooting unit. We felt like that, you know, the better you are the bigger target of opportunity you may become for the enemy. So, I think we all had in the back of our mind that we didn't really particularly want to go.

But, unfortunately the choice was not ours.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** The enemy would know who was shooting the best at them.

**PARRISH:** The enemy knew more about what we were doing than we did out there, I guarantee you.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** [chuckle]

**PARRISH:** In a lot of cases.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So you set up on Tomahawk and when did you set up permanently?

**PARRISH:** Okay, the . . . the first time we went to Tomahawk was just for one day, and then we came back. We left Hill 88 and went into the [Rung Rung] Valley which was in an area just in the north end of the Ashaw valley. And, the village of [Rung Rung] was located in an area where we were anticipating a great deal of heavy contact. And we drove out through there, it took us two days to get there through a road that had been built by the French, bombed by the French, the Vietnamese, the Americans and whoever else was involved in that crazy conflict. So, we had to rebuild the road as we went. We had some [CBs] in front of us, and they took dozers and kind of filled in the craters here and there, New Jersey had been working on it a little bit too, so. . . with those 16 inch guns they could really bring some real havoc on it. But, when we got into the [Rung Rung] valley we stayed there for about two. . . two and a half weeks, and we actually found no contact at all, we did very little shooting. Didn't realize how heavy the expected contact was until after we got out of there, and I thought, well good grief, I'm glad we didn't get into anything like this. But then I left again on an advanced party with, I think there was a total of 18 of us, and I was directed to take this group of 18 back to firebase tomahawk and to start building the fortification for. . . so that when the unit revived, we would have the bunkers basically in tact, which we basically did. And, so we came back to Tomahawk and set up, and this must have been, perhaps in mid-May when we got back there.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** And then the rest of the unit. . .

**PARRISH:** The rest of the unit came in right behind us, I guess, I don't know, five or six days. But, ironically enough, while we were there constructing the fire base, there

was the remnants of one bunker still there, and we established that as our sleeping quarters, well it was so cotton picking hot that we decided to sleep on top of the bunker this one particular night, and low and behold I heard a strange noise, and we all got up and got into the bunker just as the last of about 7 or 8 mortars landed on top of the hill up there right there with us. And, what had happened, there was. . . the typical way that Charlie would attempt to get you with mortars was to set up a small mortar, it was a very crude gadget, but they would get it pretty much on line with the target, and then they would aim past you. And they would drop several rounds in and then gradually walk it right to you. And, it turns out they overshot us just a little too far. The last round would have gotten us, but by that time we were all protected.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Mm. So then at that point you knew that this was. . . it upped the ante on you a little bit.

**PARRISH:** Yes. There wasn't any question in my mind. I knew before then that that was not a good place to be.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** And that. . . that must have confirmed it for you.

**PARRISH:** There wasn't any question in my mind after that.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** When did. . . when did the problems begin then?

**PARRISH:** Well, really. . . we didn't really have a problem that I recall on Tomahawk until the night of June 19<sup>th</sup>. And, really I guess what was happening, they were lull-. . . attempting to lull us into some form of security, and they really unloaded with all barrels at one time. On June 19<sup>th</sup> at about a quarter to two, I was in bed in my bunker, my assistant was handling the second shift, and we changed our shifts at 2:00 in the morning and 2:00 in the afternoon. So, at about a quarter till, he had come into the bunker to

awaken us, and as he came in, I heard the first round hit. We could all sleep through six Howitzers firing one at a time or all at one time, and sleep through 1,000 rounds a night, you wouldn't hear it. But if you had a rifle go off clear across highway 1, it would wake us all up, because it's an altogether different sound. Their rifle sounded so much different than ours. So, I think we all pretty much knew immediately what was going on, did not know the . . . near the extent until later on.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** But, when. . . when he came in to wake us up, like I say the first round started going off, and he managed to get back to the fire direction center, and he was on the radio at the time, and contacted my battalion and pointed out that we were under attack, and you know, get us some help. Which. . . I failed to mention one other thing too, I need to back up a little. We'd had. . . we had had a movie the night before, on the 18<sup>th</sup>, and the movie was Bonnie and Clyde, and they were showing this movie and just as the movie was coming to a close, a big storm had been brewing. So, I guess in fact the heaviest rain I had ever seen in Vietnam before or after that was that very night. And, apparently while this rain was at its heaviest was when the enemy was sneaking, creeping up into our perimeter. Majority of them came in totally nude, so they would be able to detect trip wires, we had all kinds of booby traps and [foo] gas and claymore mines and you name it, around, and [?] between the wire, we had two different lines of that, and they managed to get through all of this without anybody being aware of it until it was too late.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Hmm. So, I guess, you know, if you could, just tell me about the events of that night then, what happened.

**PARRISH:** Well, from a quarter 'til two until about, I guess it must have been about 5 or 5:30 in the morning before daylight, we were under attack by a battalion of North Vietnamese regular Army soldiers. Like i say, the majority of them were nude so they could detect all these devices. They were terrorizing the entire hill with rocket propelled grenades, with satchel charges, and gunfire, grenades. They threw the satchel charges into all of the bunkers that they could reach, that they could get to handily. Thank goodness ours was much deeper in the ground. The . . . the physical location of my bunker was right in the edge of the hill, consequently the entire . . . one entire side was totally underground, the other side was almost fully underground, and we were fortunate to not have taken a . . . a satchel charge inside the bunker. The majority of the bunkers were destroyed in that fashion though. We did take a direct hit of two rocket propelled grenades, but we had three layers of sandbags on top which managed to protect us. A 12 by 12 beam was splintered underneath of all this. It didn't fall, it just splintered and came down, I guess six inches or so, but we managed to. . . we managed to have the only bunker that was left in tact.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Now, what were you all able to do to defend yourselves from this type of attack, you know, being an artillery unit, what were you able to do to defend yourself?

**PARRISH:** Well, we had 50 caliber machine guns set up all around the hill. I guess we had 6 or 8 of them, but they were not of much value to us because the enemy was already past this line and already in behind it. And, you don't just pick a 50 up and move it around, the thing weighs 3 or 400 pounds and it's not very effective that way. We had our own rifles, we had grenade launchers, hand grenades, knives, you know, strangling

whatever you can imagine. We also had a defense fire plan for our Howitzers where we were able to shoot a very low charge with. . . around it was known as a [?] round. It basically was an artillery round that the back end of a canister would come out at a predetermined elevation, and out would come, I think 60 small little grenades that would sprout wings, and they would float around into a wide area, and it was an antipersonnel type thing. Our gun sections all went through [?] and attempted to start firing the self defense plan, and it again did not have a lot of effect on us, because again the enemy was already upon us.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** And how close. . . when you realized they were there, how close were they?

**PARRISH:** How close were they? They were between me and my friend. And, on the other side my friend was another one. I mean they were. . . they were. . .

**BIRDWHISTELL:** They were on. . .

**PARRISH:** They were all over us. Everywhere. It was. . . that's what really made it difficult. It really got down to an individual, almost hand to hand situation. The majority of it. . . hand to hand combat, as long as you have a rifle that will shoot is. . . doesn't

happen to often, and we had plenty of rifles that would shoot. And, we killed off a good many of them.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So they were coming up the hill? Or toward. . .

**PARRISH:** They were. . . when we first were aware that the enemy was anywhere around us, they were all through us. They were not just all around us, they were just. . . they were here and there and scattered everywhere.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So, in other words. . .

**PARRISH:** There was not a line. There was no line of any sort.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So, it was up to you individually to identify the enemy right there and eliminate them.

**PARRISH:** That's right. Mmhmm. And we fired. . . the majority. . . well, my particular section, we fired through portals in our bunker, and basically kept them away. Of course, our bunker was the one bunker they really wanted because we had their communications to get help. If they had eliminated my section, no point in fooling with the guns, the guns can't shoot without us. So. . .

**BIRDWHISTELL:** How'd your unit react? How would you. . .

**PARRISH:** I would say we reacted quite well under the circumstances. When life becomes so heavily threatened, I guess you automatically do things you don't. . . you can't really sit out and plan. I had wondered before I ever went to Vietnam how would I react in a situation like that, and today there's no way in the world I could describe how I would have done it. And I guess I did it okay.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What went through your mind? Just survival?

**PARRISH:** Yeah, and there was a. . . I guess there was a mild curiosity as to whether I was going to survive it or not. The majority was. . . oh, let's see, be sure you've got your flak jacket on, be sure you're shooting in the various directions, be sure there's plenty of ammunition at hand. There was a lot to do, consequently not a lot of time to think about, you know, what was going through your mind. There were some comments. One fellow said to me, "my God this is going to really crush Bardstown when they find out how many people have been killed." Because, by that time, a lot of wounded and dead had been brought into my bunker.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Oh.

**PARRISH:** See, there was like 48, I believe, wounded brought into my bunker, because that was the only haven. . . or the only refuge on the entire hill. And they were brought in, and we could tell, even though we. . . at that particular point we did not know anybody in particular had been killed, with so many wounded, and so many wounded so badly, we knew there had to be. The numbers almost had to indicate that.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Did you have a medic, then, in your bunker?

**PARRISH:** We had a medic from Louisville who came to our bunker. He brought some fellows in with him and did an outstanding job. As a matter of fact he did such an outstanding job, he got the highest award that our unit had received the entire time we were in country. Silver Star.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** How long did this go on, and then how did you. . . oh, okay. Okay.

[tape paused]

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Tape 5?

**OTHER VOICE:** 5.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** How long did this go on and how was it resolved? I mean how did you eventually get out of it?

**PARRISH:** Well, this went on until right before daybreak.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Mmhmm.

**PARRISH:** And, all of the sudden they just basically pulled out. And, we had killed a good many of them. Wounded a lot of them. Never did really know exactly how many



there were. We managed to capture one NVA regular, and he was turned over to an interrogation unit, and I never heard from him again, after that. . . although I did find out that apparently something went awry while they were in doing their deeds among us. The. . . apparently they had prearranged a signal flare that would basically tell the unit, their unit what to do. One color flare was to signify withdraw, another one would signify bring in another unit. And from what this. . . from what I got out of the conversation from this captured NVA regular was that they apparently had fired the wrong colored flare. And, whether this was actually an error on their part, or if they determined that maybe it was a little too hot and they had to get out, we'll never know. I'm just glad they didn't fire whatever the other color was.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** You didn't need another unit at that point.

**PARRISH:** I was certain about that. There wasn't any question about that. What we needed was relief, and. . .

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Were you able to get support?

**PARRISH:** Yes, we had a lot of support. Our radio managed to reach headquarters and we had a great deal of support, med evac helicopters were sent out and all they could do

was fire around while all this was going on. We did have some [?] support, and they fired rockets and machine guns and all in various areas, but again, they were not in a position to do a whole lot of shooting, because you know, the good and the bad were mixed together, you know, so. . .

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Was there some accidental killing then?

**PARRISH:** Not that I'm aware of. The potential was certainly there. They did not really shoot into our unit, or at least if they did I was not aware of it. And, I would

imagine that they were probably firing close in around the perimeter where the reserves were maybe posted.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Once the attack then was over and it was daybreak, how did you react?

**PARRISH:** Well, I guess I had a lot of reaction. I took a lot of pictures when I was in Vietnam, and the immediate thing that came to my mind was that, you know, after all the wounded were gathered up and sent out by med evac helicopter it was a cleanup operation. It was a case of pick up, and you had to remove the bodies of the dead

Vietnamese, there were 28 of them that we could count. There were, obviously a lot of drag marks where scores of them, literally, had been dragged off. That was their favorite thing [?] to do. You did not want the Americans to be able to say, "well the body count is such and such." Probably, Americans were maybe relying too heavily on the euphoria of a high body count. So, that. . . perhaps that's a little sideline item that perhaps worked against us very frequently. But, we fired off. . . you know, off the hill a short distance, and so we could find bits and pieces of body and blood and so on just scattered everywhere. So, the clean-up started and the. . . since I took a lot of pictures in general, I thought, "well I think I'll go over there and take some pictures here and there." I had the time. And I thought immediately after that, I thought, "no, I don't believe I want to remember any part of this." That's the only thing that happened in Vietnam where I really backed off taking pictures. And then later on I went ahead and took maybe a dozen or so, and probably should have shot a couple of those. But, it's vivid enough in my memory without it. But, then Captain McClure who was our original battery commander, came from Louisville. . . or came from headquarters by helicopter, and he and I roamed

around, and he wanted to know, you know, what was going on here and there. Our dead were still there at times, and he wanted to know who this was and who that was, which was really a . . . it was a tough thing to do, particularly where, you know, you're talking about somebody you'd known for so long. And, it's a bad situation where one American has to deal with a situation like that with another American, but when it's somebody you went to school with, or you know you. . . in one case, there was a fellow here who had been killed, and his brother was lying on my cot, or had been just a short time before about to bleed to death, and really that's a tough thing to have to deal with. Certainly not as tough as being one of those people. But, anyhow the day just continued to go on and we managed to get everything pretty well cleaned up, and we had, I believe four of our six guns were disabled or destroyed, and we got replacements put in, or at least for two or three of them that same day.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So, how many men. . . how many men lost their lives in that attack then?

**PARRISH:** Okay, a total, eventually after, I guess a week or so, there were a total of 14 Americans killed, and five of them were from our unit.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Mmhmm.

**PARRISH:** And, the balance being from the 101<sup>st</sup>, they had, again up on the higher part of the hill, they had a platoon up there that really was there to help protect the hill, but the prime purpose for their being there was to. . . was a bit of an R&R from being out in the swamps and jungles for. . . they would go out in the jungles maybe for two or three weeks at a time. And then they would come up there for a week and 10 days, or something. And, so they were never there very long, consequently did not really get real

familiar with our particular situation. So, they had a guard bunker on the opposite end of Tomahawk up near the higher part of the mountain, and that was the first. . . they were the first casualties. I think there was 6 or 7 of them in that particular bunker, all killed at one time.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Well this must have changed the unit from that point on, it had to. The morale couldn't have been the same, you know, there must have been tension, do you know what I'm saying? That. . .

**PARRISH:** Yes.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Once you go through something like that, it's never. . . never quite the same. It seems to me it wouldn't be.

**PARRISH:** Right, and I would have to agree with you that yes, you would expect it not to be. As it turns out, however, our unit morale and spirit did come back, it took it a while. IT did come back, and we were back an effective fighting unit again soon afterwards. Something I had failed to mention, we had what they called an infusion program that started 2 or 3 months earlier where a number of the original battery had been removed and sent to various other units throughout the country. And, in their place

we received some regular army personnel. And these people. . . well, the purpose of all this was to lighten the effect that such a disaster would have on a town the size of Bardstown. And, as I look back on it, I'm really proud they did that, because there may be. . . instead of 5 dead from Bardstown, there may be 14 dead or 25 dead, I mean who knows. And. . . but at the same time, as the infusion program started, our effectiveness immediately dropped, because we didn't have the. . . quite the team spirit that we once had had. So, the infusion program helped on one side and hurt on the other. In that

effect, I mean, I'm certainly glad it was there. And, it's hard to tell who else might not have made it.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** You talked about the North Vietnamese as soldiers. What. . . overall what was your opinion of them as soldiers?

**PARRISH:** The North Vietnamese? I felt that the North Vietnamese, in general, the North Vietnamese regular army, was a fairly well trained fighting [inaudible]. But, I suppose the one thing that really made him so devastating was that life had a very low value to him. And, when you're dealing in a situation like this, here I am trying to protect my life, and he's trying to kill me. But at the same time, he doesn't care about his life. So I have a two-fold job, I have to protect my life and kill him. And his. . . all his faculties are going in one direction, all he wants to do is kill and move on, and he could care less whether he lives or dies in the process. And that was difficult to live with, knowing that you're dealing with the type of people that you're just not as. . . you just don't normally associate with.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Now how did you come to that conclusion about the North Vietnamese? That that's the way they were?

**PARRISH:** Well, a great deal of it from talk before we even left this country. After we got over there, it was pretty much the rule of thumb. I know, for example, in the small firefights down that highway 1 where maybe a platoon of American infantry would encounter a platoon of theirs, it seemed to go that very way. They would. . . they would tend to expose themselves a great deal more so than would be necessary.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What about your impressions of the South Vietnamese civilian?

**PARRISH:** Well, the Vietnamese people, in general, when I was in their country, I did not have anything to do with. They. . . they impressed me as. . . some of them impressed me as very good looking, very clean people, on the other hand, a lot of them came across altogether contrary to that. And, when you look back on it, well so is this country. You know, there are those people that you want to associate with, and there are those that you don't. In general I didn't want to deal with them at all because the good and the bad looked exactly the same. On fire support base Tomahawk, one of the dead that turned up was a Vietnamese man who had been cleared by the US department of the army to be a barber, and he had been a barber on our hill, and he was one of those that turned up dead the next morning. So, here's your enemy, maybe, or maybe he's your friend. I mean, you know, so the best way to deal with that, in my opinion was leave them all alone, don't mess with them under any condition.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What. . . now what about the rest of your unit, though, did you have people in your unit that had interaction with the civilians?

**PARRISH:** For the most part no. We did have. . . when we got back to Phu Bai, see, after we left Tomahawk we went to Phu Bai and set up a fire support base there. And, we were living in what was known then as hooches, which is a small plywood and screen building with a tin roof on it. And, a lot of the guys would have. . . would hire one of the local girls to keep the place clean and do the laundry and shine the shoes and stuff of that sort, pay them some [?] sum to do this sort of thing, again, I just didn't want anything to do with that. I just felt like, well I don't know if this person really is my enemy or my friend, so I just don't want anything to do with them. I've got plenty to do on my own.  
[chuckle]

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Did any of the guys in your unit become involved with Vietnamese women while they were there?

**PARRISH:** I'm sure probably some of them did. But I . . . I have to say this, there were very few incidents of that sort as compared to regular army.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** And no instances of where one might. . . one of the people in your unit might want to marry a South Vietnamese woman and bring her back?

**PARRISH:** No. I knew of no situation like that at all. The majority of our fellows were married already, so. . . see, our average age was around 24 or 25.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** You were old men in Vietnam, weren't you?

**PARRISH:** Better believe it.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** [chuckle]

**PARRISH:** The . . . I think the regular army was like 19 or something.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What about your attitude toward the South Vietnamese as soldiers? Did you have any way of. . . did you ever. . . were you around them? Did you have any opportunity to evaluate them?

**PARRISH:** Some. I saw some of the infantry, we set up in the [Rung Rung] valley with a . . . a South Vietnamese artillery unit coming in by helicopter and setting up beside us. I really felt like that as fighting men they were. . . they probably were not as good as the North. I'm determined. . . this is my own determination, that they were. . . had been helped so much by us that they did not really remember how to do for themselves. And, not just by us but by the French before us. And, by the time I was in that country, we were dealing with maybe two generations of people who knew nothing but war, and somebody else is going to help us fight it. And, I really felt like that they probably were

not near as effective as they needed to be. And, whose fault is that? Perhaps ours for maybe not winning [?] or whatever.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Did you feel like you were appreciated for being there by the South Vietnamese?

**PARRISH:** Yes, I think so. I think. . . I did get that feeling. They were friendly, in general. Again, I didn't fool with them, so. . . but at the same time I did get the. . . I got the feeling that they were quite friendly, and consequently I think they were very proud for us to be there.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Let me ask, I guess a question that's kind of political in a sense. After you evaluated how the North Vietnamese fought for what they were fighting for, and how the South Vietnamese fought for what they were fighting for, did it make you start to doubt what the whole thing was about? I mean, what we were, as a country were trying to do?

**PARRISH:** Yes, I had to question what the outcome was going to be. I was hopeful that the outcome would be that the North would lose, the south would win. But really, as it turns out, I didn't have a good feeling that this was ever going to come about, because I felt like there was so much supply and so much being fed to the North that they almost had to win before it was all over with. And, on the other hand, we fought the war basically with one hand tied behind our back. On our battle map in fire direction center, there was constantly a new no-fire zone being determined. You know, they would call coordinates and say, "Draw a line from here to here and there to there," and so on, and you can't shoot into this area. Well, what happens but Charlie gets out here and starts terrorizing close to this area, and when we start shooting at Charlie, Charlie runs right



into this zone and he's protected. If Charlie ever went into a village, be it friendly or unfriendly, he had a sanctuary, because we were never allowed to shoot into a village where we would maybe kill a number of innocent people, so to speak. That was a terrible contrast to World War II. If the Germans were to run into a French village, shame on the French, because they all went down. And really, then the next village would help keep the Germans out. Well this never did happen in Vietnam, to my knowledge.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So you were frustrated.

**PARRISH:** We were terribly frustrated. And it'd be really bad for me to have to sit here on a radio and talking to a forward observer, and he's saying, you know, "you've almost got them, one more round." And I'll say, "I'm sorry, we can't shoot anymore because we're into a no-fire zone." And the guys down at the guns are hauling all this ammo over, you know, and saying, "get 'em" you know, it's kind of like following your favorite basketball team, and the next thing you know I have to announce to them end of mission, you know, they've gone into a no fire zone. Well all I heard back was a bunch of cussing, and you know, that really is frustrating. But at the same time, here we are helping. . . basically helping the enemy. We're giving them a hole to crawl into. And I can assure you that however much secret there was to where these areas were located, Charlie had that information just about as fast as I had it.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Hmm.

**PARRISH:** And, you know, that was their business to. . . to be able to terrorize and. . . and get away with it. So, they certainly were able to determine exactly where these locations were.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So how did you rat-. . . okay, yeah. That's fascinating. . .

[tape paused]

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Yeah.

**OTHER VOICE:** Any time Mr. Birdwhistell.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Tape 6. Was there any kind of combat situations, I don't suppose they were comparable to what you ran into then on Tomahawk until you got out of country then. That was probably the worst situation you found yourself in, I suppose.

**PARRISH:** Yes, that was definitely the worst.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Were you ever under fire after that though? Any casualties from that point on?

**PARRISH:** We did not really suffer any casualties ourselves. There were two other national guardsmen that were killed. They had been involved in an infusion program and consequently were not in our unit at the particular time.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Two other guardsman from Bardstown?

**PARRISH:** Yes. And, as a matter of fact, one was just a week or so before the Tomahawk incident, and the other was perhaps a week or so following the Tomahawk incident. They were all right there close together as far as timing.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Yeah, mostly all during June.

**PARRISH:** That's right. Mmhmm. That's right.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Now, the infusion program then, when you all got ready to leave, were the . . . all of the guys brought back and all of you left at the same time?

**PARRISH:** Yes. Yes.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** When did. . . when did you actually leave?

**PARRISH:** Okay. I left with an advanced party. I forget the exact date, it was the first week of October 1969

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Okay, almost a year after you. . .

**PARRISH:** That's right, a year after we got over there.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** A lot of people talk about being, you know, being short time in country, and what. . . what goes through people's minds, did you experience that, you know, when you started thinking, "hey, I've got three months, two months."

**PARRISH:** Mmhhh.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What went through your mind?

**PARRISH:** Yeah, we started experiencing the same thing, and I don't really remember really getting excited until we got down to like a month or three weeks or so and then we really got very hyper over it. And, when I learned that I was going to be leaving on advanced party, obviously I was super-hyper if you would. [chuckle] We got here, I guess a week or 10 days or so before we. . . the main unit did. And, but it. . . in preparation for leaving, I had to go back and reflect through everything I had gone through there, because there were good times in Vietnam as well.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What would be a good time?

**PARRISH:** Oh, good times in Vietnam, we pitched horseshoes, we played softball, we played. . . when we got back to Phu Bai area we had a volleyball court, and we'd play a lot of volleyball, and drink a little beer, you know, there were some good times. We'd sit around and talk, you know, the campfire type talk, we managed to keep ourselves pretty busy, and that helped speed time along quite a lot.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** And again, you all could talk about Bardstown, you could relive the high school game of 1956 [chuckle]

**PARRISH:** That's exactly right. We really had it over all the guys that were there and not from such a unit. Life was just so much easier, there's no question about it.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** It reminds me, Don, almost of the difference in the way veterans are experiencing their reaction to the war now in the smaller towns where they have groups that they still can talk to about it rather than in Lexington or Louisville where they might be the only veteran that they. . . you know, they don't have any other veterans to talk to on a regular basis. It might be a little different. I wanted to ask you before we get you back in. . . back home, about the correspondence between the unit and home, between you and your father and mother, and perhaps your brother, or whoever else you might write to here, and did you keep in fairly close. . .

**PARRISH:** Yes. We kept in very close contact. Mail from Vietnam to Bardstown and back was very quick. It was. . . as a matter of fact, the US Postal service might want to take a look at it again today. We would get a letter postmarked, for example, on Monday morning and I would have it in my hands on Wednesday morning, and I wish they would. . . maybe with the new postal rates we're heading in that direction now. [chuckle]

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What did. . . when you'd write a letter home, what'd you tell your parents?

**PARRISH:** Oh, I would probably. . . majority of the time I would ask questions, you know, how's everything going in the business and everything at so and so and things are going well over here, I've just gotten over a cold. I never. . . I personally did not get involved in much of what we were doing there.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** You didn't tell them about the night of the. . .

**PARRISH:** Oh, Tomahawk, oh yes, there wasn't any question about that.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Of course they had to know about that because of the. . .

**PARRISH:** They had the news, and knew people were getting killed and what not.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Yes.

**PARRISH:** So, yes I did have to. . . I gave all that information, and I never did. . .

certainly never did lie, but I just didn't pass on everything in great detail because I figured it would be nothing but cause unneeded worry and concern.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What. . .

[End of tape 1, side 2]

[Beginning of tape 2, side 1]

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Were there instances where men would find out that they no longer had girlfriends or wives at home?

**PARRISH:** I don't recall any of that, however there were several changes immediately after we got home. But, I don't recall anything like this happening while we were in country.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Did you receive the Bardstown Newspaper the Courier Journal and those things?

**PARRISH:** We got both, as a matter of fact, the Courier Journal sent us several complimentary copies as well as the Kentucky Standard we very much appreciated it.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What did you think about the news you were reading in the paper here at home versus what you were doing over there?

**PARRISH:** Wish. . . we would have much rather we could have been part of what we were reading about in the paper. [chuckle]

**BIRDWHISTELL:** [chuckle] Were you concerned about the attitude in the country though toward the Vietnam War as reflected in the newspaper at that time?

**PARRISH:** Yes, to some extent, the local paper we didn't really find that much, obviously, because that was dealing primarily in local news. It bothered us to see details of some of the various anti-war activists and the people that were taking off and going to Canada and all this. Of course I read as much in the Stars and Stripes that we received as we did in the Courier. Maybe even perhaps more. But, as it turns out, the Kentucky Standard really held our attention closest because this was news that we were wishing we could really be a part of again, and you know, it got the names that we all knew and related to and so on and related to and so on, so [chuckle] I enjoyed reading my own ads.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** [chuckle] The concrete block business.

**PARRISH:** That's right. [chuckle]

**BIRDWHISTELL:** I always find it interesting when, you know, the Kentucky Veterans talk about sharing their hometown newspapers with other guys, I guess the guys who weren't from Bardstown heard a lot about Bardstown reading. . . you know, and probably even read the papers sometimes.

**PARRISH:** They did. In fact, I specifically recall one fellow that had transferred into my section who was just as anxious to see the Kentucky Standard as he was New York Times from his home, which I always found very fascinating, but he seemed to get fairly

close to us all, and he really enjoyed the camaraderie almost as an outsider, I mean, and here he was in our unit, but then he wasn't a member of the gang.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Have any of these guys ever showed up here in Bardstown since then?

**PARRISH:** To my knowledge, I don't know of a single one of them, which really surprises me.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** You'd think they'd have to come and look at it. [chuckle]

**PARRISH:** You would think so, sure enough. And, it could very well be they'd been in and out of town 100 times, but not to my knowledge.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Now you came home early then.

**PARRISH:** I came home perhaps a week or 10 days early.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** To get things prepared back here?

**PARRISH:** Yes. We were. . . to phase the National Guard unit out, we all had to go through the same. . . all the physicals and all the various pieces of paper work and the hearing tests and so on. And, the advanced party of 18 of us, I believe, went through all this quickly, and then we became part of the testing group, or the. . . we kept it motivated

or whatever, and which evidently worked out quite well to have somebody who knew these people to tell them how to go through.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** From the time you left your last fire base, or, is that the right term? Fire base?

**PARRISH:** Yes. Mmhmm.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** How long did it take you to get back home?

**PARRISH:** I left the fire support base at Phu Bai in. . . let's see, I went to Cam Ranh

Bay, I spent about two days there, and from there to Tokyo where we got fuel on the plane and from there to Seattle, Washington. And then Seattle for about two days, and then a night flight from there to Chicago to Louisville.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** And your parents picked you up?

**PARRISH:** At 4:00 in the morning.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** [chuckle]

**PARRISH:** Along with about 5,000 other people. [chuckle]

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Did you encounter any negative reaction towards you as a veteran upon coming back into the country?

**PARRISH:** None. Not one seconds worth.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** How did you feel when you got back to Louisville and met your parents and headed back towards Bardstown.

**PARRISH:** Well, obviously just the most wonderful feeling you can imagine. You know, glad to be alive, glad to be back home, the . . . I guess it's really hard to really describe a feeling like that. It was . . . there were a lot of tears, a lot of laughter, just . . . in our case, since we were a National Guard unit, there were a lot of lights, a lot of TV cameras, a lot of press, and all I wanted to do was get in the car and head for home.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So that's . . . that's different than a lot of the veterans coming back. You had the TV cameras, and . . . because of what happened with the Bardstown unit and the National Guard.

**PARRISH:** That's right.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So, that's really very different.



**PARRISH:** It is quite different, I'm sure. The majority of the Vietnam Veterans would simply appear home one day, and the euphoria would be in one household, where in our case it was, well in several cities.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Now, when the rest of the unit came back, did they come back together all at once?

**PARRISH:** Yes.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Into Louisville?

**PARRISH:** Into Louisville, yes.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** And so the same thing happened again, I suppose.

**PARRISH:** That's right.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** With the press. And, did you go back down to Louisville then?

**PARRISH:** Yes, we went down and met them also, I think like at midnight or something. And, that was another. . . that was. . . it was reliving it again, you know, like a week later.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So you not only got to do it once, you got to do it. . .

**PARRISH:** I got a second shot at it, that's right.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** And then everybody came back to Bardstown. Was there any kind of a celebration upon that evening? Or did things kind of. . . people kind of go their own separate ways.

**PARRISH:** Oh, everybody went home for a period of time. We went through. . . we went to Fort Knox during the day and back home at night to go through the out-processing procedure, which lasted, I think 3 or 4 days or something. And after that there was a giant welcome here in Bardstown. It's a funny thing, but I'm having a real tough

time recalling details about that, but I do know there was a [?] welcome home party, and with speeches and that.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Some type of ceremony and what not.

**PARRISH:** Mmhhh. The county judge and the mayor of the city of Bardstown both were very much involved in that.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Did the fact that you'd lost, what 7. . .

**PARRISH:** 7 total.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** . . . 7 men, I guess that sort of put a damper a little bit on any kind of celebration.

**PARRISH:** Yes, it did. Well, the celebration went on, but with very due recognition of those seven who were not able to get back. So, I guess we had the best of all of the worlds in those conditions.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Now, in a larger city, if you tried to put on a celebration of a unit returning from Vietnam, there would have been protests somewhere.

**PARRISH:** I'm sure there would have been.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Was there any here?

**PARRISH:** None. No. No, after all, I would say we represented the biggest number of the families of Nelson County, so to some extent, at least.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** And, it probably wouldn't have been received too well anyway.

**PARRISH:** I'm sure it would not have been. I think the numbers were on our side.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What about the families of the men that were killed? Was there any bitterness that lingered after that, that their sons were killed and others came home? Has that been a problem?

**PARRISH:** Well, I can't say that it's necessarily been a problem. It's hard for me to speak for other families, certainly, but for my observation, the . . . the bitterness has been very much under control, I think, by those families. And I think by and large it's been a very friendly situation, if that's the correct word. I know, for example, one of the fellows who was killed was from Washington county, maybe 30 miles from here, Mackville, and his mother and father looked me up after we got back home. After he was killed, or after the Tomahawk incident, I wrote a letter to the editor, and it was published on the front page of the Kentucky Standard and it was describing basically what happened on

Tomahawk. There had been several news reports out, and they all conflicted with one another, and I felt. . . I had written several letters to the paper just to say hi, you know, so to speak, and say how things were going, softball games and training and all this while we were in Texas, and also how things were in Vietnam. And then, when we. . . when we. . . after the Tomahawk incident and the letter was written, I received the letter from this family and they wanted to say thank you for having spelled all this out so they could see, you know, in correct detail just exactly what had happened, because they weren't sure if they could believe the various news accounts. And after we got back in country

we had a dedication on Memorial Day of a monument on the court square. And they looked me up on that very day. They wanted. . . they just wanted to come meet me, and I haven't seen them since then.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Was that hard for you when you met them?

**PARRISH:** Yes, it was. But they helped make it easy for me. And, I guess, you know, we just had a very good conversation probably for 15, 20 minutes or so, but since then I haven't seen them any more.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Now, the unit. . . you were still. . . were you still in the guard then when you got back, is that right?

**PARRISH:** Yes, but my time was due. . . [chuckle] I had a six year obligation and it was due to be up in April of the year that I got back home, or April of 1970, we got home in '69.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Yeah, you got home in October '69.

**PARRISH:** I got out like four months early or something.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Oh, so you didn't have to go. . . didn't have to stay in once you got back.

**PARRISH:** No, see, we had. . . we had basically satisfied the military needs.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Were there others in the unit then that got out at that same time?

**PARRISH:** Oh yes. Almost everybody did.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Oh really?

**PARRISH:** Mhmm. Almost everybody did. Just a handful stayed in and continued with the Guard for a period of time.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** But did you all still get together socially then, as a group?

**PARRISH:** Yes, there have been several reunions. In fact, there's another one coming up on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of this month, and that's. . . that'll be the first in four or five years or so. But we've never really had an all out effort to get every single one back together. I'm sure we can't get them all back together regardless, but. . .

**BIRDWHISTELL:** But you would, you know, of course you were all here in Bar-. . . a lot of you were here in Bardstown, and you would talk, I suppose, about the war, and you

know, from the time you got back in October of '69 into '70, things were starting to really go bad over there.

**PARRISH:** Yes.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** How did you all respond to that? What was your. . .

**PARRISH:** They probably needed the National Guard a little bit more then. [chuckle]  
Well, I guess we all were watching it a whole lot more closely than we would have had we not been there ourselves. And, again, you know, 15-16 years ago, it's hard to remember all the details, but I do recall there being a great deal of concern that things weren't going well, and it looked like everything was going downhill and down the tubes, and it was all for a lost cause. And, as it turns out, obviously, that's the way it went.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Did you want to go back?

**PARRISH:** No. I've had the feeling that at some point in my life I would like to tour Vietnam like some of the World War II veterans have in Europe, and I would like to make such a trip down the road, and I don't have a big desire to do it just yet though. I'm willing to wait for a while.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Nor to go fight.

**PARRISH:** Certainly not to go fight. I'm a peace-loving man. [chuckle]

**OTHER VOICE:** [?] change tapes.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Okay.


[tape paused]

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What tape are we on?

**PARRISH:** 7. Any time.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Okay, tape 7. Don, we've gotten everybody back and had the celebration, and you came back to work for. . . you know, with your family business I suppose, and people got their lives back together. You hear so much about the Vietnam veteran having delayed stress and other problems associated with their experience in Vietnam. Have you ever experienced any problems since coming back?

**PARRISH:** No. Not really. The only problem I ever experienced was really a funny one. I was lying in bed one morning, hadn't been back home more than 2 or 3 weeks or so, and suddenly I heard this machine gun, and it was just daybreak and I was out of the bed looking for my M-16 and couldn't find the damn thing, and suddenly it dawned on me, here I am back in my own bed at home, and what in the world was that racket? I must have dreamed it? And I got back up off the floor and into the bed. And, low and behold, there it was again. As it turns out, it was a woodpecker on a gutter right outside my window. And, of all the weird things in the world to happen [chuckle] I would never have chosen that one. That was the only delayed stress syndrome I was ever involved in.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** But overall you felt like it's something you've been able to deal with. 


**PARRISH:** Yes. I guess since you bring the subject up, I have formulated an opinion on a lot of this. I'm really concerned with listening to so much news, perhaps more this year than last year, of delayed stress syndrome and how there are so many victims of it, and every time you look up here there's a new parade driving down through town, and the back end of it there's a group of guys that are wearing their jungle fatigues and jungle boots and flop hats and that, and these people are supposedly victims of delayed stress

syndrome, well they may well be, and I certainly don't want to take anything from those who are suffering such a thing. But what bothers me is that some of these people, perhaps would be no different whether they had been in Vietnam or not. I wonder if, you know, the . . . the people who have trouble finding work would have had an easier time had they never gone to Vietnam. And, really, a lot of conversation about that, as well, especially among some of the fellows I was. . . I served with.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** How about the guys you served with? Any of them have particular problems?

**PARRISH:** Not that I'm aware of. One or two that were injured have had some physical problems and perhaps they are reminded more routinely of what they have gone through, and. . . but nothing really of any note.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** And, of course you mentioned earlier about some guys who were divorced, I guess guys get divorced in every county and you think it's not related to the . . . anything with the Vietnam experience?

**PARRISH:** I expect that some of that may be related to the Vietnam experience, because immediately before we went to Vietnam, I forget exactly the number, but we had  like 7 or 8 quick weddings, they were going. . . they were going to get married anyhow, or at least they thought, and majority of those have turned out beautifully with children and all, but in the meantime also we've had some divorces and remarried.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Now, you know, when you do talk to people who feel like that because they're a Vietnam Veteran that they'd been discriminated against, they'd been mistreated, and what not, but you don't see that happening here in Bardstown.

**PARRISH:** Not one bit. Whether it's the National Guard unit or otherwise. As a matter of fact, the war very seldom gets talked about in Bardstown.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** So, you don't see it as a . . . something that divided the community to people who may have opposed the war, and here you have a guard unit here in town that. . . this hasn't been something that's lingered, it's just not talked of.

**PARRISH:** Not really. No, I don't see any division whatsoever. If anything, it probably brought us a little bit closer together.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** How do you feel, you know, like when CBS news came here, and you see it in other parts of the country too, where they interview children, young people in high school and what not, but particularly here in Bardstown when they might interview a student, they don't really know what happened in Vietnam. How do you feel about that?

**PARRISH:** Well, I feel very strongly that the . . . our educational system has perhaps let them down a little bit, and the first I was ever even aware of that was when a British reporter from London Times was here. He said he was going to leave my office and go over to the local high school. And, I saw him a day or so later, and he said it was incredible how little these people knew of Vietnam. They didn't know where it was on the map, and that. . . I really got to wondering myself, well why is it not being taught to these folks? Perhaps later on in their. . . in education it is. I really don't know, I've never researched it. It may be that high school is where it's being picked up for all I know, but I think this was like a sixth grader that had been interviewed.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** How do you think Kentuckians who didn't serve in Vietnam have reacted to the Veteran who came home? How has Kentucky treated their Veterans?



**PARRISH:** As far as I know, Kentucky has treated their veterans quite well. I don't really know of any blatant mistreatment of any sort. I know. . . at the same time, I don't really see the Vietnam Vet showing up on the tube too often either, in Kentucky. When you see them show up on the tube, it seems like it's almost someplace. . . always someplace else. Like, well, for example, Washington, New York, the bigger news cities.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** You know, you said here in Bardstown, even with what happened to the people. . . to, you know, to this unit here, that it really hasn't been talked about that much, and I think it hadn't been talked about that much all over the state, but yet, you know, there'd been stereotypes and preconceived notions about the war and the veteran, and what would you want Kentuckians to know about the Vietnam Veteran to understand about the Vietnam Veteran and their experience?

**PARRISH:** Well, I would say that the average Kentuckian who has not been to Vietnam, and certainly the average one has not been in Vietnam, needs to recognize that life under a wartime circumstance is very difficult, at best. And, to be half-way around the world makes it just about as far away from home as you can get. And, I would say that the. . . the typical Vietnam Veteran did not have a good experience. And, as I look back on my experiences in Vietnam, in spite of the terrible times we were involved in, we also had some good times. And, as I see it, my perspective of serving in Vietnam is basically a pretty good perspective. When I look at the average infantryman who was trotting out through the jungle and through the swamps, maybe for five and six, seven days at a time, and then when he comes back up on the hill, the first thing he does is take his clothes off and their buddies start picking leeches off of him. That, to me, is the picture that the average Kentuckian cannot really conceive. And, consequently I do feel

that we really do need to give. . . not necessarily special consideration, but at the same time, let's give some consideration to the fact that these people have not. . . have been through a pretty tough experience.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** How do you feel like the. . . your Vietnam experience has affected your attitude toward American involvement abroad today?

**PARRISH:** Be cautious. I feel if we're going to get involved in any foreign country, I don't care where it may be, we need to be able to get a good definition on the word of commitment. If we're going to be involved in fighting a war, let's fight and get it done.

Let's not get involved in a 10 year war or whatever and just pick and choose at the enemy here and there and leave the no-fire zones, and leave the towns, and leave all these sanctuaries. If you're going to fight a war, war is war, war is hell, and if you're going to fight a war, fight it. Get it done.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Could we have won the Vietnam War?

**PARRISH:** I'm convinced we could have.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Without destroying So-. . . without destroying Vietnam?

**PARRISH:** I don't know that we would be able to say that? I'm convinced that we could have won the Vietnamese war. I'm not exactly sure what it would have taken to do it. I think we could have won it falling very short of nuclear warfare, certainly, but I feel that where we went wrong was to allow the South Vietnamese to rely so heavily upon our involvement.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** How did you feel when president Nixon announced pulling out, or when he started pulling it out, and then when, of course, [inaudible] and when we pulled out?

**PARRISH:** I guess I really felt like it's a shame for us to do this right now, we're in a . . . we've gotten ourselves to a point where we don't have a lot of choice. But, at the same time it's a shame we can't go back in history a few years and redirect ourselves and win this thing. So I felt like it was. . . it was unfortunate that we had gotten into such a situation.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** How do you feel about those that protested the war?

**PARRISH:** I feel like they should have been minding their own business. They should have been out doing whatever they should have been doing. Washing cars, making concrete blocks, whatever it may be [chuckle]. I think their efforts should have been directed a little bit differently. They certainly didn't do anything to help us. They didn't help anybody in my opinion.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What was your reaction to the incident at UK in May of '70, you know, where after the Cambodian at Kent State things, that you know, the riots on campus, and the burning of the ROTC building, and. . .

**PARRISH:** Oh, okay. I'll be honest with you, I had forgotten. [chuckle]

**BIRDWHISTELL:** [chuckle]

**PARRISH:** Well, certainly that's a very negative feeling. As far as I'm concerned, if you're going to be an American citizen, let's support the whole cause and go with it, you know, sink or swim, one or the other, you just. . . I mean you can't just. . . I feel like a lot of people who have to react in such a way are the very people who are trying to just keep themselves out of a bad situation, and I think they're thinking only of themselves. And, really if you're going to think of your own. . . of your whole way of life and your country, you better be thinking of your whole way of life.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What did you think of the . . . all of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary hoopla that we just went through, and do . . . did you think it was a positive thing for the Veterans? And why do you think it took so long for it to happen?

**PARRISH:** Well, the 10<sup>th</sup> year anniversary, I'd say, probably was controlled by the news media than by anybody else. So, that's, I think should answer the question as to why it took so long. As far as the overall effect, I think it was very good. The news coverage I have seen of it has been very good. It basically has painted a picture pretty much the way it was. I haven't seen anything really negative, or that I felt was really negative, and I do feel like that younger people were coming on, you know, the ones that were 10 years old back 10 years ago now are old enough to really get a good handle on exactly what was going on, and this was a good educational instrument if nothing else. So I think it's a very positive step.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** A lot of times people, you know, since they came back from Vietnam haven't made much note of the fact that they were Vietnam Veterans. I notice over in Anderson County at the last campaign the sheriff. . . one of the sheriff candidates listed as one of his credentials Vietnam Veteran, do you find that happening here in Nelson County? Bardstown? That this is something that's begun to look as a positive. . .

**PARRISH:** I'm finding it to show up as a positive, although I have not seen it turn up in any of the political contests. Excuse me. My wife was just mentioning to me recently that, you know, she works in Louisville at the Red Cross, and she has mentioned recently that it looks like it's almost a good thing to have on your record as being a Vietnam Vet now, which I haven't really seen that show up yet, around here yet, but at the same time

it's. . . it's mentioned almost in passing, and you don't really get a lot out of it. Like I say, there's just not that much conversation on the war here.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** What was the reaction to the Korean War, World War II, and World War I Veterans to you guys when you got back. You know, you hear about the. . . you know, the older Veterans saying that the Viet-. . . you know, these Vietnam Veterans lost their war, we didn't lose our war, and that type of thing, did you have any of that?

**PARRISH:** Oh, you hear a little bit of that. I have a real good friend that even makes mention of it, that you know, I won my war, what happened to yours, and I say well it was beyond my control [chuckle], but for the most part, I didn't really see anything of any real true negatives. What I've got now that has been strictly on a one to one friendly basis, very friendly basis.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Are you a member of any veteran organizations or anything?

**PARRISH:** No.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Have the Vietnam Veterans joined the American Legion and the VFW post here?

**PARRISH:** Yes. There has been a move put to get a bunch of us in. The only reason I haven't joined is I've been involved in so many other things.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** You've got plenty going on without it. [chuckle]

**PARRISH:** City Council, and. . .

**BIRDWHISTELL:** But, is this something recent though? That the Veterans organizations are just now trying to get Vietnam Veterans in?

**PARRISH:** I'm going to say probably within the last five years is where a majority of the activity has been.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Of course, as one person told us, if they don't get the Vietnam Veterans in, they're going to have to close up, because they're. . . [chuckle]

**PARRISH:** That's about the truth. Age gets us all. [chuckle]

**BIRDWHISTELL:** Well is there anything we. . . I haven't brought up that you would like to add, that I may have missed? Or any other thoughts you have on the experience?

**PARRISH:** Off the top of my head, I can't really think of anything. I'm sure something will come to mind as you're packing up the last piece of equipment.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** [chuckle] Well, we appreciate you taking time to do this.

**PARRISH:** You're certainly welcome.

**BIRDWHISTELL:** [Greg], do you have anything? Okay. Great. You've been interviewed. . . how many times have you been interviewed?

*[End of interview.]*