

This interview is being conducted on Friday, January 30, 2026 at the home of Michael A. Giovannetti. My name is Fran Prokop and I am speaking with Michael who served in the United States Army during the Vietnam War. Mike learned of the Veterans' History Project through me, and he has kindly consented to participate in the National Archives Veterans' History Project. Here is his story:

Mike, when and where were you born?

Chicago, Illinois; June 11, 1950.

What were your parents' occupations?

My Mother worked for a company called WLS, which was Prairie Farmer, back then. My Father was a truck driver; and he was also in the National Guard – Marine Corps.

Did you have sisters and brothers?

I had one brother, served in the Marines; he's passed now. I have two sisters.

Other family members serving – your brother served in the Marines?

Yes.

And your Dad was in the National Guard?

No, Marine Corps – and then when he come out he went into the National Guard after.

Okay. What did you do before entering the service?

I was a mechanic.

Did you complete high school?

Yes.

And then you worked as a mechanic?

Yes.

And what made you go into the service?

All my buddies got drafted and I went and joined.

So you enlisted in the Army?

Yes.

And where did you go to enlist?

Berwyn, Illinois.

How old were you when you enlisted?

18. I came out when I was 21.

Okay, so you were in three years?

Well, no, no, I was actually in two years because when you enlisted back then, you were – they called it upping the draft ? – so you got a two-year hitch.

Okay. Why did you choose that specific branch of service?

Well, at that time, you didn't have a choice. When you got drafted it was Marine Corps, Army, Navy, Air Force. But I went in the Army because all my buddies were in the Army.

So you went to be with them.

Yeah.

Did you end up being with them?

For basic training.

So how was your departure for training camp and where did you go?

How did you get there?

Okay, we went downtown Chicago to the Induction Center and they shipped us out by bus.

To Where?

Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri.

And you and your buddies all went together?

Yes.

How many guys were there?

All together there was eight of us.

Wow! That's the most I've ever heard.

There was more than that on the bus but –

How was your basic training and how long did it last?

Well, my basic training was 8 and a half weeks, I believe. I had a Drill Sergeant, Ray Ernest and Charles McDaniels.

Who was he?

He was a Drill Sergeant also.

Wow – you’ve got a good memory – for that stuff.

How did you adapt to military life – the physical regimen, the barracks, the food, the social life – just in general?

Okay. So we landed in Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. I got up in the bus and said, “Well, guys, we’re in for two years; you might as well make the best of it.” Well, that didn’t go over too well; I got everything thrown at me. So when we got up the next morning, when we got to get sworn in and get our haircuts, we all got split up. We were in the same Battalion but different Companies. And I was in Charlie Company.

What did basic training consist of? Like what time did you get up in the morning, and what did you have to do –

We were up every morning at 4:30 –

Just roughly, what happened during the day?

You had to take a shower and jump in your field gear; march, exercise –

When did you eat breakfast?

Come back from our hike, which was a couple of miles, and you had to take another shower and then go to the mess hall. And you ate whatever they had.

How was the food?

It was different; it was different. The only thing I liked in the mess hall was – in the morning they had bacon – the rest of it was all powdered stuff.

Oh, powdered eggs?

Yes.

So what did you have to do after that?

We'd go to the mess hall, you had so many minutes to eat; if you get caught whispering you had to shout out, "I'm sorry Mr. Eagle for not talking in your mess hall." And you had to shell out along with a lot of duties, extra duties.

So they wanted you to eat, not talk, get the food down – probably in 20 minutes and be done.

If that; it was a real short time.

So what did you do after mess hall?

And then after mess hall we went through basic training. They taught you how to use a rifle; and they taught you hand-to-hand combat; and bivouac – they taught you how to camp. A lot of low crawling –

Crawling on your belly?

Yes, through barbed wire, mud; they got you ready for Vietnam.

Did you have any classroom training there?

I'll get to that. And then we had grenades – learn how to throw a grenade; then we had classes. The classes consisted of – mainly, if you were by yourself out in a jungle, you would know your sense of direction. They would teach you north, east, south and west; they taught you how to survive in the jungle –

Jungle warfare?

Yes. We had gas chamber training – when we went through the gas chambers it was a whole – it was serious business, 'cuz if you didn't listen to what they told you, you'd probably end up in the dispensary, which was –

So they had the real thing?

No phony toy gear; they had the real things. A lot of exercising; they keep you physically fit – and that's something that's lacking in our society today. When they call it training, that's exactly what it is -- Training – they get you ready for combat. And they teach you how to survive; and they teach you how to love your fellow man next to you because he may be the person that saves your life.

Right, right. I'm sure they pound that into your head.

Yes, every day. Lot of KP duty – and then I became a Squad Leader.

When I became a Squad Leader I was informed of the different goals you get in basic training. And our Company never got – they give you flags – so I got hold of my friends from Chicago and said, “Listen, we gotta win these flags.” What are you talking about? So I explained it to them. Well, being that I was mechanically inclined before the military, my Drill Sergeants Ray and Charles McDaniels, they had cars, and they couldn’t keep ‘em running. So I made a little deal and I worked on their cars for a little freedom on the weekends and no duty.

Cars for freedom – right.

Yes. And the Entertainment of the weekend was – there was a little town right outside the gate of Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri; it was called Wayne – and that’s where the girls would come and entertain --

Okay, no need to say more. So you were able to go there.

I had a choice to go there.

Were the other guys able to go?

Oh, Yeah, I made the deal for everybody.

Ordinarily when you’re in basic training you don’t get to go off the base.

You don’t get no passes, no.

But you did get passes for you and your buddies?

Because of the favors – Chicago dealing, you know. Ha, ha

Right, of course, ha, ha.

I had a guy in basic training I’ll never forget; his name was Hoss – and he was epileptic and he was a little on the heavy side. So he had an epileptic fit on the second floor and I talked him down from jumping. I shoved a wallet in his mouth – and calmed him down and we got him through training and he graduated with us.

Wow! That’s unusual, you know! That he would actually go through it. Were your superiors not aware of his condition?

Oh, yeah, Ray Ernest was, yeah. So our reward for me doing that was – and the barracks had no music – none. So we went to the PX and we bought a little stereo and we put it in the vents of the barracks and we had music. Ray Ernest lived in the barracks. We had to play hillbilly music once in a while for him.

But you had it made, pretty good.

So now we go to gun training – and Drill Sergeant McDaniels was a little bit of a smart aleck, so we go – and he goes, “all you guys from Chicago, c’mon down here.” So we all walk down there and he hands me the M-14 rifle. He says, “I want you to put that on your lip and fire it.” I looked at him – he said, “What’re you lookin’ at?” I said, “After you do it and show me how it’s done, I’ll do it.” Right now, I ain’t doin’ it.” Sit down. So my buddy Tom Kelly – in the service everybody is called “dick” – and he just looked at him and he didn’t say nothin’ – then he says, “What’s your name?” And he ain’t sayin’ nothin’. And I holler out – “His nickname in the hood was Machine| Gun Kelly.” So I had to drop down and do 100 push-ups. But, to make a long story short, we got all the flags - we got all four of them. It was the first time in their history that our company ever had them.

Very good. That was Charlie Company, you said.

Yes.

So you had a very colorful first eight weeks.

My one buddy, Jimmy Bickenbecker -- he’s gone to rest now – but all through basic training – you guys are crazy – when we went through our physical in Chicago, he goes this is where I say goodbye to you guys – he was Elvis Presley – always watching his hair and everything – so he had a heart murmur, since he was born. So they give him the physical and said okay, you passed. He says wait a minute, I’ve got all these doctor papers here. They checked again, they said, no, you passed. In basic training he kept going to the dispensary; they found he had an ingrown collar bone touching his heart – they kept him in the service but they fixed him.

No kidding!! Strange story.

So now we get separated – after basic training we all get split up. Tom ended up going to Fort Polk, Louisiana and Fort Carson, Colorado. And I went to Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Jimmy ends up going to Radio School – I don’t remember where that was, but they trained him for that.

That was specialized training.

Yes.

Did you have specialized training?

Oh, yeah.

What did you have?

I was Armored.

You went to school for that at Fort Bragg?

Fort Bragg. We were attached to the 82nd Airborne Division.

And what was your job there?

They wanted us definitely Jump School. You heard of the 82nd Airborne – they jump out of planes, right?

Right, right.

I jumped once. And I told them – it was extra money a month – okay, and after the first jump I told them take your extra money and put it where the sun don't shine.

Ha, ha,

And I became an Armored.

I don't blame you; I wouldn't jump either.

When you say armored –

I was in charge of cleaning all the weapons – inspect them. So we had a – they call it a CMI inspection and a GI Inspection. I got a 90 on the GI Inspection and a 97 on the CMI Inspection – never in the history of Fort Bragg did they ever have that high of an inspection.

You did very well.

Yes. So, with that, seeing that I had that done, I met some guys from Skokie, Illinois who were in the Orderly Room, from Skokie, and one guy, Angelo, from New York City -- I bought a car down in Fort Bragg and we went to New York City for the weekend –

You drove – it's not that far.

Yeah, so we had a good time; got stopped on the way, got a ticket. After that Inspection Battalion calls me into the office, say five weeks later – and asked if I would like to go to Germany or stay stateside right here in North Carolina? I had

orders at the time for Vietnam. And I said, “Wow, that would be great.” It was right around Easter time. I called home and told my parents that I wasn’t coming home for Easter because I was staying stateside. My Dad was very happy.

That was during Vietnam, right?

Oh, Yeah, so after I got my Orders, I got everything changed around, everything’s going good – the Battalion got shipped out – got broken up. A week after that I got Orders for Vietnam.

No kidding!!

So I went to Oakland, Ca – Fort Ord, and my MOS at that time for the Armored was on hold; so they kept me in Oakland for about a month – about a month - and they changed my MOS to 64B30 – truck driver. And I went to Vietnam. We landed in a place called Saigon. And all of a sudden I’m sitting there in this old – with thousands of military guys – and they called my name out and said, “Da Nang”.

Go out there and catch that chopper. It’s going to Da Nang. Okay. So I went out there and we went to another transit company, 516 Transit Company –

Transportation Company –

This is a place where everyone goes and then they get sent out to different places. So I’m sitting and waiting and waiting and waiting – and all of a sudden they call my name – Specialist Giovannetti – Quan Tree – and everyone’s looking at me, that’s been there already – so I asked the Sergeant where’s Quan Tree. He said see that little dot by the DMZ, that’s where you’re going. So, again I go catch the chopper – I catch the chopper – got a couple fire fights along the way –

Fire fights – you were shot at?

Yeah, probably from Vietnamese. Finally made it to Quan Tree and then he says – okay –

Was that an outpost somewhere? Far from the center?

It was a camp – Camp Quan Tree. It was like Romeoville is to Plainfield.

Oh, okay.

So I landed there – and go report to the conix ? so I report to the conix and get my first shirt there; he says “Okay, you’re in Third Platoon. Bring your bunk over

there” – so I met the guys – and we were there for a couple of months. We were hauling JP4, which is fuel for the choppers and the planes – to the different camps that didn’t have no place for them to land. We’d bring them in blivets and we would fill ‘em up and we’d bring projos to different camps.

What’s projos?

It’s gunfire – 150 gunfire – they call it projos. They’re bullets –

Oh, bullets, I never heard that before.

So we went to different camps and we got in plenty of fire fights.

Did you ever get injured?

No, fortunately no. So –

So you were shot at many times?

Oh, many, many, many, many times, many times. So I rigged up a thing on my truck, ‘cuz I was hauling fuel, and I’d fill the tanker up all the way and I put a hole through the cab with a chain so if the tanker got hit and started to blow flames, I wouldn’t stop the convoy behind me, I would pull the chain and pull the tanker over the side, so it wouldn’t stop the convoy. So I went on a lot of missions like that and then – put there they call it monsoon – it’s six months of rain, every day, and we had to go up hills and stuff and in mud like you wouldn’t believe. We used to push each other up the hills; anyway we get into a fire attack and I was driving – my buddy Wagner was in the other seat, and I went over the side and I jumped. I thought he was dead, and thank God for the mud because he fell into a mudhole and he survived. So we spent a week up in this camp, in Phu Bai – it was Barber Mountain, they call it.

Was it a hospital? Like a field hospital?

Oh, no, no, no; this is – we’re being fired upon every day

Oh, wow!

Barber Mountain. We were up there for a few weeks; lost a lot of men –

How did you feel about that? Were they friends of yours? Guys that you knew?

Nobody I knew, but it was guys that I – every day –

You didn't personally know them.

Oh, yeah, didn't know them personally. But being with them in the camp, it's the military, everybody is your friend.

Oh, yeah, sure. So you knew them.

Yeah. So we finally get back to camp and they gave us a CPC and a V-100 truck. A V-100 truck is like a tank with wheels. So the night before – we're having a few drinks – a few beers and we get called to go out, which is our normal thing, you know, my buddy gets up in front of the Company at 5 o'clock in the morning, and he asked us not to go out that day – he had a dream; he's gonna get killed in a CPC. And the Captain says you get in that CPC truck.

So the Captain ordered him to go.

Well, we left; 45 minutes later we were attacked.

Who was he? What was his name?

He got hit with a direct mortar and he's on the wall. John Kennedy – was his name.

Wow!

No relation. Well, we didn't like our Captain after that. So time went on, you know; you're just waiting for your ETS time to come to get out of Vietnam. Now we get called, and we go into an enemy's compound. And it looked like Sherwood Forest – and I said wow – it was pretty country. We get in there and – it's Christmas – peace time -- we spotted the enemy – inaudible -- everything in Vietnam you had to get permission from the Pentagon before you fire a gun. As we're waiting for word from the Pentagon, they spotted us –

You're in a war; you have to get permission to fire a gun?

Yep.

Not here in this country you don't have to get permission, right?

No. So, they fired on us; we lost 35 men that day. I was all by myself.

You were the only one left?

Yep.

Oh my God!!

Any my buddy Kelly heard about it – here today to talk about it.

Does he still live in the Chicago area?

No, he's in – inaudible --

Do you think he would want to do an interview in the future?

No, he wouldn't.

Oh, he doesn't want to talk about it, okay.

The Lord was with me – I went to Australia for my R & R after that. I met Olivia Newton John; she took me all over. It quieted down in Vietnam and I got orders to come home. So I got a little bit of an early out –

How long did you spend in Vietnam? How many months?

14 months.

And during that time you were always driving the truck and going from place to place –

The gun truck ?

Yeah, delivering guns, oil, or whatever.

We were a support unit – whatever was needed, we went and did. The gun truck was called “Justifier” – the gun truck we had.

So you did see a lot of action – and it did affect you, I'm sure and still affects you today.

Yes.

Did you go see any doctors when you came back?

Yeah.

But you made it home okay.

Made it home.

So you were there 14 – that's a long time. I didn't think they kept guys there more than one year.

Well, here was the thing. If you had time, like say it was a 12-month tour. And if you did the 12 months and still had like 5 or 6 months left to go in the States, they

would ask you if you want to extend yourself so you don't have to serve no time when you get back to the United States. So you always extend it, you know, and then you come home. Because when the guys came back from Vietnam and they were doing stateside duty, they were treated like a stepchild. They took more crap. And I said I don't want to go through this.

Right, right.

Not while you were in the Army, don't get me wrong. This was from the citizens.

Right, I understand what you're saying. I remember those days.

They got all the "shit" duty – excuse the expression -- like they weren't honored soldiers; and I didn't want to go through that.

So then you came home – so you actually witnessed casualties of your friends.

I was on –I was on – I got to be on body bag duty – gotta put bodies together to put in the bag and take home. I was seeing that too.

What was the highest rank that you achieved?

Like I told you -- Spec 4 – when I was being discharged they told me I made Spec 5 but I never got to see the stripe.

Now the buddies that you met there, not the ones you went in with while you were serving, do you ever still see them? Friendships formed while you were there?

No.

You never went to any reunions or anything?

No.

How did you stay in touch with family and friends back home when you were in Vietnam?

Letters, just letters.

No phone calls ever, or anything like that?

I made one phone call from Sydney, Australia for my 21st birthday.

Oh, really.

And that was the only call I ever made home.

(showing photos) -- whose dog was that?

That was our mascot. They took that dog from us to the Vietnamese; killed him and cooked him right in front of us!

Oh, my God!

And we couldn't do nothin' about it.

Uh! Why – why couldn't you?

Because that was the rule from the Pentagon.

Were these our guys or the --

The Vietnamese – Viet Cong – VCs. Here's me with my gun truck, machine gun

Yeah, but there's no picture of your face there.

There's me taking a break.

Why don't you email this to me to include with your interview.

While you were in Vietnam you had no time for recreational or off-duty pursuits, other than when you went on your R & R?

No.

And were you ever involved in any regular sports activities or were you too busy for regular sports like baseball or basketball?

No, no. When we were off duty we were always repairing the gun truck. I should say – my buddy Jimmy Bickenbecker -- married a Vietnamese girl in Vung Tao – and me and Kelly went down to witness his marriage.

Did she eventually come back to the States.

Yes, Lynn came back. They had a kid together.

Where were you when your service ended?

I got discharged in Fort Lewis, Washington.

You flew back to Fort Lewis.

Yes.

How was your reception by family and friends when you returned?

Well, my family greeted me with open arms, but we were spit on when we got off the airplane.

I remember those times – if they saw you with the uniform on. A lot of guys didn't want to wear their uniform.

Yes.

How was your readjustment to civilian life?

It was rough.

Did you go back to your job? What did you do?

No, actually I could have, but I ended up driving a truck. My Dad said you wanna what? All the years you're a mechanic. I said, Dad, you raised four kids on it; I want to do the same thing. And I became a truck driver two days after I got discharged.

Wow! Did you ever use the G.I. Bill for anything – to go to school or anything else?

No, my mistake – I made.

Yeah, so you never used it?

No.

Did you have any college at all before you went in?

As time went on – as I got older I went to work for the union and I did some college training with the union.

But you didn't use the G.I. Bill?

No.

So, you have not had contact with fellow veterans over the years?

No.

How about the guys that you went in with?

Oh, I talk to them every once in a while –

So you do see those guys?

Yes.

But those are people you knew before you went in.

Yes.

But people you met when you were in – you don't see them?

No. I don't see Wagner; Kennedy's dead; Meyers – I don't know where he went.

Are you a member of any Veterans organizations today?

Yes.

The Carillon one?

Well, I was, until it dissolved itself.

Well, yeah, but there's still the Carillon Family VFW –

I belonged to it but when Jim Singler died, it seemed like nobody wanted to take it over and – inaudible –

Well, Debbie Leinweber's taken it over; she's a veteran. And they have these monthly breakfasts – do you ever go to those breakfasts at Bee Brothers?

No. Because I didn't think that anything was – when Jim quit and then – nobody informed me about anything else, so –

Do you know Bill Cooper?

I know Billie.

Well, he's sort of handling that too, along with Debbie.

I didn't know that was a veterans thing. I thought it was just a thing here from Frankfort and they weren't recognized by any other clubs.

You may be right. I'm not sure about that. I just know that they have it at our own little Carillon –

What was the other Jim's name – he was in the Air Force –

Jim Shohut; he's still here.

He used to do the flag raising. And then I ran into the guy that did the bugler – and they had a falling out – and they brought us to another VFW to join – lifetime member.

You're a lifetime member of the VFW (Mike showing me his card).

Yes.

But you don't go to meetings –

I could go to anyone I want.

You could – in Frankfort, yeah, Post #1493. Do you use VA benefits?

Yes.

You currently use VA benefits, go to the hospital –

Yes. Yes, I do. In fact I got a doctor that I see all the time – Dr. Dixson for my PTSD; I take medicines.

How do you feel today about the war – looking back on it from a distance?

Fran, I'll tell you something – between you, me and the fence post – my daughter is in the Navy, she's in Bahrain right now.

Really?!

Your daughter was one of only 13 Americans –

There were more foreign people in her graduating class than there were Americans.

Wow!! You were shocked by that.

Yeah.

How long ago was this?

Was it eight years ago that she went in Babe? (speaking to wife Denise)

Yes. Wow! Is she still in?

Yeah. She made a Career out of it. Chelsea Giovannetti.

Oh, a career – that's nice. You do go out and see the world. She does like it.

She loves the Navy.

That's good. So, finally, looking back now and reflecting, how do you think your military experience affected your life?

Well, the best way I could tell you. There comes a time in your life when you don't know what road to take. And that two years in the military, the draft, or

whatever they want to call it, makes either a bad man a good man or a good man a better man. It'll lead you on the road taken in life and I think every boy and girl should go through it because the way our country's going now – there's no leadership – it's all – not what you done for me, it's what can you do for me – okay – don't get me wrong - I gave up my life for my country. It's given back something that you appreciate all your life – (turn tape) –

I'm 76 years old now and I see what's going on in the country. It saddens me like – for my father, my grandfathers, for everyone that served our country, and switching like you said at one time the best – when he came here as a foreigner, (grandfather) he was glad to come here and he wanted to give back what he got. And now everybody's taking, taking, taking, nobody wants to give no more. And our country's deteriorating because of it.

And I'm gonna tell you – this is nothing to do with the military – but in 1980 I made a delivery as a truck driver in a bookstore on Lawrence and Kimball to a Palestinian person – bookstore 11 cartons of books – and I delivered the cartons – he was on the phone - I delivered it ; I just needed him to sign the bill; it was a prepaid shipment. He tells me, "I no sign bill; you call get rates changed." I said |Buddy it's a prepaid shipment out of New York City." And he says no, you call your boss. So I called my boss – he talks to the guy, ba, ba, ba, -- gives me back the phone. He said, "Mike, write on the bill 'rates to be checked' – and he'll sign the bill." I said okay. So as I'm writing it on the bill, he tells me, it's 1980, "You American people stupid; we come here take over country and we will." And I'm listening to this as I'm writing and I'm getting more mad, so as he's signing the bill I told him I didn't hear, he should repeat it.

There was a coatrack in this place – I picked him up and I hung him on the coatrack and told him I hope all the stupid American people come here and steal every book out of here, you s.o.b. Well, he wanted me fired; but it didn't happen because my boss at the time was a retired Marine Corps guy – and he almost kicked him down the stairs when he came into our office. But that's 1980. Here it is 2026, it's happening –

Yeah, yeah.

So they knew what their agenda was in 1980 and we just let it fly by.

We let it happen, right. Didn't do anything about it.

So what life lessons have you learned from the military?

Well, now that I'm old, I still got the fight in me but – how could I say it, the best way – your brain's making checks that your body can't keep – but I never give up. I am tiring; I have my good days and bad days like everyone else, but when I see our country deteriorating, it weakens my heart every day.

I know. Well, unless there's anything else you might want to add later on, I believe that we are finished. I want to thank you for your service to our country and thank you for this interview.

I just want to say God Bless America!

Thank you for taking the time to share your recollections about your military service and thanks for letting me do this interview today.

Thank you.

Any message you would like to leave for future generations who may read or hear this interview?

Stand up for your country.

Spoken like a true veteran; thank you.

Be thankful for everything you have – for every veteran who gave their life for us.

Thank you, Mike, I appreciate it.

Okay. – end of tape

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