

Bruce Boedtke  
Dartmouth College Oral History Program  
The Dartmouth Vietnam Project  
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Transcribed by Sophia Kocher '21

SOPHIA KOCHER: Okay. So this is Sophia Kocher interviewing Bruce Boedtke. Is that how you say your name?

BRUCE  
BOEDTKER: Perfect.

KOCHER: For the Dartmouth Vietnam project. And today is February 11th, 2020 and we're in the Carson Building on Dartmouth campus in Hanover, New Hampshire. So I want to thank you for doing this interview, and taking your time to do this with me and contribute to this project.

BOEDTKER: Thanks.

KOCHER: So to start the interview, I want to ask you just some general questions about your background. So can you tell me where and when you were born?

BOEDTKER: Oh, I was born in 1950 and actually I was born in New York, in Glen Cove, Long Island.

KOCHER: And can you tell me about your parents, their names, and what they did?

BOEDTKER: Yeah. My dad's name was Herbert Boedtke ['45]. My mom's was Marilyn Boedtke and my dad was an electrical engineer who worked for many, many, many years for Westinghouse [Electric Corporation]. We moved around a lot, did a lot of traveling. He sort of, he went where the opportunities were. So we, like I said, we'd bounced around quite a bit. My mother primarily was a stay at home mom at that time.

KOCHER: And you just mentioned that you bounced around a lot. What kind of effect did that have on you?

BOEDTKER: I think the effect that it had on me was I didn't really establish any roots or any real long lasting friendships. I sort of sometimes would enter into a school in the middle of the school year and I was kind of, the cliques had already been established and I was kind of the

outsider. So that was probably the biggest effect it had on me was, it just felt like I was never really settled in any one place.

KOCHER: So was there a place that you considered home more than any of these others?

BOEDTKER: Well, yeah, further on, in my life actually, my dad finally took an opportunity that took us to Caracas, Venezuela and South America. And that was kinda the beginning of the end of their marriage. I think my mother had had, had enough of, of traveling and they ended up getting divorced. And there was also some extra marital affairs going on because they were unhappy. So myself and two sisters went with my mother to Florida and she had odd jobs there that she worked. She developed a pretty heavy drinking habit which really began to cause some issues. So I kind of went back and forth, the three of us, between living with her and then going up and living with, with my father and his wife whom he had met actually in South America.

And it was interesting that they were two entirely different lifestyles for me. Before I grew up, became 18 or whatever and an adult, my mother, there was no, like I said, she was basically an alcoholic and there was no supervision. I could come and go do whatever I wanted to. I could skip school and she'd write me a note. And then in my father's lifestyle was 180 degrees. Very stringent, a lot of rules. Not much freedom. The weekends consisted of helping them around the yard. There wasn't a lot of quote unquote free play time. So it was kind of odd for those two extremes, it was tough to get used to. There wasn't really a middle ground. And you ask where is there a place I finally called home?

I became very close to my grandparents and they, my grandfather had retired from New York and he had bought a farm in Vermont and I spent as much time there as I could. That's where I wanted to be. I spent my summers there and then finally came to the point where I lived there full time and it was probably the best thing that happened to me. My grandfather was a great man. He taught me about working. There was no free rides. I had to help around the farm and earn my keep. There was no free load, but he was a real father image to me that I really never had. So that's, I guess that's what I would call home would be in Springfield, Vermont and in his farm. And I would say I was a young, young teenager at that point. I can't remember exactly my age, but when I finally settled there more or less full time.

KOCHER: Ok so what were the names of your grandparents?

BOEDTKER: Well, Alford and Irgard, but, um, I had nicknames for them and I called my grandfather Baga. The reason for that was when I was a little toddler, they were trying to teach me grandpa and somehow that's what came out was Baga so that, that stuck and that, that's what I called them 'till the day he died. And my grandmother was Mutti, which is the German name for mother. And that's because that's what we heard her being called. And um, that stuck too. So it was Mutti and Baga. That's who it was. [laughter].

KOCHER: And so you said you were in Vermont as a teenager, young teenager. Did you go to school there at all?

BOEDTKER: I did. And you know, that's a whole 'nother story. I went to Springfield High School for a while and then my father, who by the way always wanted me to go to Dartmouth 'cause he went to Dartmouth. So that was his big dream for me to go to Dartmouth. And he realized that I needed to have a little better education to do that. So he decided it would be good for me to go to a private school and there, which was Vermont Academy, which was in Saxton's River, Vermont. And I didn't go as a day student. I went as a boarder and it was a lifestyle and an environment that didn't fit me well. Back then it was, first of all, it was all male. You had to wear coat and ties all the time. Very strict rules and I kind of became a little bit of a rebel.

I'd sneak out and I had a friend that I'd developed who lived right there in Saxons River, and he had a Jeep, or his dad had a Jeep he had access to. So I would sneak out all the time and go, you know, into town, go to parties and, you know, raise a little heck, I guess. So, you know, I already had gotten into that rebellious part of my teenage life, if you will. And then finally, I decided I was a senior and I decided that I had had enough and I just took off one day. And I went down to Florida. I think I must have been 18. I was all excited about starting a life on my own. Now I'm going to be an adult and I can do what I want. So I ended up with this friend of mine. We went down together and we got an apartment and I got a job in a warehouse as a forklift operator. And that was the extent of, besides partying, that was the extent of my existence.

And then what happened was of course the Vietnam War. And they were drafting people through the lottery. And I watched that on TV that night and I drew a very low number, so I knew that I was probably going to get drafted. And someone had told me, look, you're better off if you know you're gonna get drafted, you're better off going in and volunteering for the draft and then you can kind of pick and choose where you want to go. Not really, not so, but that's

what I believed. So I didn't want to go to Vietnam and I was figuring that would be a good way for me to find a way not to go. I was going to get drafted anyway. My choices were to do that or take off to Canada. So I volunteered for the draft. And they decided that, God knows why, that I would be suited to be an MP. And I knew where that was gonna lead me.

KOCHER: Would you mind just explaining what an MP is?

BOEDTKER: Military police.

KOCHER: Ok.

BOEDTKER: Yeah, military police. And their duties were, would be in Vietnam, would be in like a Hanoi and in the cities to make sure that the combat veterans didn't get in trouble, stayed in line. And so I said, nah, I'm not going to do that. So then they said, okay, well this is what we're going to do. And, I became an 11 Bravo, which is, the slang word is a ground pounder, but basically infantryman. It's the guy who is in the trenches. And I took my basic training at Fort Dix, New Jersey, and then they sent me to Fort Polk, Louisiana. And that was basically to train yourself for jungle warfare in Vietnam. And that was a pretty scary event. They had all of these mock villages. They had all these booby traps. And I probably tripped more booby traps than I want to remember. So I was already thinking that this isn't gonna look good. And I was not looking forward to going to Vietnam. It's the last thing I want to do. And here I was gonna go.

So after I got completed with that, I had leave time and I had orders to ship out to Vietnam. And so during that leave time, I came back up to Vermont and stayed with my grandparents. And I gotta be honest with you as a thought of the Canadian border not being too far away, it was pretty appealing because I didn't want to go for my own personal safety. I didn't, philosophically, I didn't believe in it. And so I didn't feel like I wanted to risk myself over this conflict.

KOCHER: You mentioned that you didn't believe in it. Can you explain that?

BOEDTKER: I thought it was, I thought it was a war that we had no business being in. I thought it was a meddling with internal politics of another country. And, [pause] they're stories you hear. But the thing that really concerned me the most was unlike my father who was in World War II, let's say that it's a whole different environment. First of all, there's an enemy who you really believe is an enemy. And

the enemy always has a uniform designating him as the enemy. So it's very clear what the rules of engagement are.

And there's a purpose. There's a feeling that there's an element who's trying to take over the world and do and a philosophy was one that it was something that we in this country couldn't condone. So there was kind of a, I'm gonna call it an emotional mission, involved in that. And in Vietnam, not so much.

Um, and the stories of harm to women and children who. That really bothered me, the fact that women and children were being killed there. And, and also on the flip side, women and children were also inflicting casualties on us. So you never really knew who the enemy was. And the stories I heard, it was pretty scary out there. I mean, everybody was vigilant and uptight. And there was a lot of things that happened there 'cause people were so nervous where some innocent people got hurt and got killed. And to me it was nothing I wanted to get involved in. I just, I didn't want to be so paranoid that I was worried about everybody I saw could be an enemy. I couldn't imagine hurting women and children that just didn't even—I don't think I could have done it. It could have been my demise for all I know. So those were the main reasons.

And you know, I really believe that that was a place that we should have never gone to. We should have stayed out of. And it proved itself to be true because I'm not sure what we really accomplished there with all the casualties we had on both sides. [pause] Did I answer your question?

KOCHER: Yes. Thank you.

BOEDTKER: Yeah. So um, want me to continue on with my story?

KOCHER: Yeah so you're at your training, what year is this that you're there?

BOEDTKER: I went in. I wrote that down and didn't bring it with me. I went down in '70 [1970] and came out in '72 [1972].

KOCHER: Okay.

BOEDTKER: I don't have those exact dates, but I think I gave them to you.

KOCHER: Yeah, I think you gave them, I think it was something

BOEDTKER: I'd looked at my DD-214 [Certificate of Discharge from Active Duty] and written down, cause I didn't know the exact dates, but that's [pause]<sup>1</sup>.

So by the grace of God, I had orders to go to Vietnam and while I was with my grandparents, I got notified that those had been canceled and I needed to await—stay put and wait for further orders.

And this was just at the time the war had gotten extremely unpopular. And there were a lot of demonstrations. A lot of people really upset about and pushing the fact that we shouldn't be there. And it finally had enough political impact that the powers to be decided this is something we better back off of if we want to survive politically. So they started to reduce troops and luckily this was kind of happening at the same time that I had gone through my training. And so obviously what they decided was we're not going to send any more new people there. We're going to start seeing if we can pull people out slowly and safely. So that's what happened to me. I got caught in that window and just luck. That's all it was. And my orders were to go to Germany, which was a lot better tour of duty than Vietnam [laughter]. And that's where I ended up in a little outpost called Wildflecken, Germany in the Third Infantry Division. And it was quite an experience for me. Yeah.

KOCHER: You mentioned that when you were training, you were training to go to Vietnam, so did you feel that that prepared you to go to Germany? Was there any sort of transition, in regard to that.

BOEDTKER: No, no. You know in Germany, I didn't need to, I'll be honest with you, I didn't need too many skills to go to Germany. Now I mean we were there as kind of a [pause] I guess the first line of defense for the Czech border is what we were there for, And we had training, we had maneuvers. But it was more or less in a peacetime environment. And we played war games where they'd rattle their saber and they'd go up to the border with their forces. And then we'd get call out and alert in the middle of the night and they'd want to see how quickly we could respond to get our forces out there. It was a game. And there really wasn't much to do in between that. To me that was the most exciting part of being there was at least it was something to do.

The rest of it for me, it was pretty darn boring. And that was not a good place for me to be. [pause] I ended up drifting again. I had

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<sup>1</sup> Dates of Service from DD-214: September 14, 1970- April 18, 1972

nothing to do and I ended up, you know, going to the EM [Enlisted Men's] Club and doing a lot of drinking of their beer. There was plenty of hashish there. And so I ended up, um, doing a lot of, whatever you want to call it, chemically impaired stuff that kind of took me out of where I was. 'Cause I was just, I didn't like it. I was bored. I couldn't wait to get out. And I ended up in a couple of scrapes, that if I would've kept going in that direction, I would have, I'm pretty sure I would end up with a less than honorable discharge the way I was headed.

And [pause] again, I think I have an angel that follows me around, but I can't quite figure this out either. The CO [Commanding Officer] at the time called me into his office. And he said, you seem like a pretty intelligent guy. He said, you'd be interested in being my driver? My driver's tour's up and he's leaving. And I'm thinking, holy crap, how come me? I'm not a model infantryman at all. I was just blown away. I really didn't know what to say except what lured me into accepting it was the fact that if you're the CO's driver you're exempt from KP [Kitchen Patrol] guard duty, all those mundane things. And I was thinking, oh great, I don't have to do those. Yeah, I'll be his driver.

What happened was, first of all, I ended up spending a lot of time with a different, in a different environment with different people who actually had duties to do, who had responsibilities and wanted to do them well. And so I was kind of folded into that, those people. And it didn't take me long to figure out that this felt pretty good. Now I had something to do. I had something that I could feel good about it at the end of the day, instead of just waiting to go have a beer or smoke a joint or whatever. And over time, it changed, it changed me a lot. I grew up. That's what happened. You know, I basically grew up because of that man and today I'm forever grateful and thankful and I still can't figure out what inspired him to call me in the office. But I'm glad he did. I ended up during that time getting my GED 'cause I still didn't have a high school education. And I got out of the service and with the GI Bill, I put myself through junior college in Florida.

I went there under my mother's residency. So I got out and went to Florida 'cause I can go to school for free. I just had to pay for my books and then had the GI Bill. Then I took a part time job at night and I saved up money. And I ended up eventually getting accepted to UVM, University of Vermont, for the last two years, for my junior and senior year. And I graduated with a bachelor's degree in civil engineering. So it was, to me, the transition was amazing. That I went from someone who probably wouldn't have led a very

productive life to someone who graduated with an engineering degree.

And that's what the service did for me. It—I watched it do a lot of different things to a lot of different people. Some people grew up, other people [pause] who probably never had much freedom, didn't know how to handle being away from any sort of boundaries or too many boundaries. And it actually ended up going the other way. And who knows where they ended up. But I watched that happen while I was in the service. People you could tell that came from very strict upbringing and they were just totally unprepared to deal with themselves. And in any sort of discipline, they just kinda went, went wild. And I was on the other end. I, I had been kind of a hellion, and I still was until that point. But the army taught me to grow up and I'll never forget that. The Vietnam War did a lot of things to a lot of different people and not all of it too good. But for me, because of the Vietnam War and the fact that I got drafted, I would have never joined the army ever. And the fact that that happened and the turn of events, I ended up being a better person. So, so that's kind of an oddity, I think probably, for what this war did to people [laughs]. It treated me well [laughs].

KOCHER: I just want to back up. Thank you for that. But I want to back up to when you're arriving in Germany. So you're getting there, I think you said, you said 1970.

BOEDTKER: Yup.

KOCHER: And you also mentioned that you were in the Third Infantry Division. That's correct?

BOEDTKER: Yes.

KOCHER: So you're in sort of the middle of this Cold War context. Did you feel that politically at all while you were there?

BOEDTKER: Um, no, not really. I, I don't think I, I really felt, I didn't feel threatened. It was a cold war and compared to the stories I heard from people coming from Vietnam, it was, it was as close to peacetime as I could imagine. Even though there was a quote unquote Cold War and we were playing games with the Cold War, trying to test each other out. Did I ever think I was really at risk? No. I, I think I was just grateful. I never ended up in Vietnam.

The one thing that I was a little, had nothing to do with the Cold War, but taken, taken aback by was there was a lot of [pause] a lot



of prejudice. There, there was a lot, especially with black African-Americans. It got very, very divisive. They all stayed together and the Caucasians all stayed together and many times there was a lot of friction going on between the two, which I could never, I never understood that.

And that part of it, to be honest with you, that part probably was the scariest part for me. Because I was threatened a couple of times, just walking back from late at night, happening back from the EM Club where I was threatened by other people. And that, that part did scare me, to be honest with you, more than the Cold War did. And you know for me, I wasn't a very aggressive person. I didn't, I didn't get into fights. I'm just not that kind of person. And growing up in, even in Florida, I had a lot of friends who were African American that I grew up with. And I just never thought the starkness of that divisiveness came as a little bit of a shock to me. I actually was starting to or had developing a friendship with someone who was black and I was actually, I can remember, I was beaten up over it. Saying that, I won't use the words they used, but that I shouldn't associate with, with African American people.

So that's the part, if I remember anything, that disturbed me and I had fear for that was probably it. It was, it was a weird— I never felt comfortable, you know. I just wanted to be myself. I wanted to be friends with whomever I wanted to be friends with. And there was this, always this tension going on.

KOCHER: And you mentioned that you didn't experience that at home. Do you think there was something about the military that created that environment?

BOEDTKER: Yeah, that's a good, very good question and a very good question. And I don't know what created that environment. I don't. I was surprised by it. It could have been the military. I don't know. There, there were a lot of, [pause] I gotta make sure I use the right term here but. There are a lot of [fingers drumming]. There were a lot of white people from the South and I don't know if that had an impact on it or not. But certainly when I got beat up over it you could feel that sort of don't associate with those people. Those, you know, I won't say the word. And, and some of the times I felt like on the other side it was almost like, it was almost like a gang. They would have these Afros and they would stuff them in their caps and hide 'em. And then when they were done. We had to get in our uniforms for so many hours a day and then like we'll say at five o'clock you were done. So you could take your hat off. And these guys had big Afros and then then they'd go around and, and they would always

be kinda cliquey and you could always tell there was like a gang leader or a, I don't know how to call it, a gang. But whatever, you felt like they were. They always went in numbers which was intimidating. That's why walking alone was very intimidating to me. And that they felt, I don't know if threatened, but certainly they were probably threatened. But their, their enemy was, was the white person. And that wasn't throughout the whole base, but it was, it, it was enough there for me to be tense over it. Versus knowing there was a Cold War out there and we'd go up to the Czech border and we'd stare each other down for a couple of days and then somebody would blink and leave. And it was a game. And that's, I kind of felt there was, nothing was really going to happen. This was just a test.

KOCHER: So did you think that that type of war effort, you didn't think that was necessarily effective?

BOEDTKER: In terms of the the readying? you mean going to back in what we did at the border, the Czech border, or what do you—

KOCHER: Or just in terms of the US's political strategy during the war?

BOEDTKER: No I don't think it was, I don't think it was threatening or, or effective. I think it was a Cold War and we were there worried about quote unquote communists and somehow they got labeled as that. And we were there to prevent them from spreading their communism. So, you know, that was a little game we played at the border. You don't cross here and we won't cross there. And was it effective? [pause] Well, I dunno what would have happened if the US hadn't been there and showing a little strength to say that we're here so be careful. Had we not been there, very likely they could have spread, acquired more countries and communities. It's possible.

KOCHER: And did you believe in sort of Domino Theory where if one country fell it? How did that relate to what you were doing?

BOEDTKER: Mmm. Well, to be honest with you, you know, I, [pause] I had been fed the idea that communism was bad and so—

And that's what they, that's what all the hype was about. And that's, that's what everyone wanted us to believe was that the communists were bad and they had bad intentions to spread their communism all over the Europe. So, yeah, I felt like while we were doing a good thing there to keep them in check. So yeah, in that, in that respect I did. Whether, whether it was really true or not, I don't know. But

that's what, that's what they wanted us to believe. And that's what I believed. That if we weren't there it could have been worse.

KOCHER: And so while you were there, what was your relationship with the other men in your unit like?

BOEDTKER: That, that changed a lot. As I said earlier in the beginning of where I was kind of not in a very good place and I was getting into trouble and everything else. I, I hung out with those kinds of people who were very rebellious, very resistant, didn't care much for the discipline of the military. I did some things that I'm not proud of today. An example is we broke into the, to the motor pool. We stole a Jeep. We took the Jeep into town and got thoroughly drunk. And then we needed to bring the Jeep back. I was driving and I shouldn't have been. And ended up rolling the Jeep and I had some bruises and cuts. And we all scrambled back to base in time to get there for the morning, get my uniform on, and get there for the morning Reveley. But that's the kind of stuff I did. Which you know is, like I said, I'm not proud of it, but that's where I was at that time.

Now I forgot your question. [laughter]. Because I think I drifted.

KOCHER: Yeah, no worries. And then you talked about your Commanding Officer kind of giving you that job. Can you walk me through what you were thinking when that happened?

I was shocked and at that point I would, I was—He gave me some time to think about it. I didn't do it on the spot. But I, I was very conflicted. And if it wasn't for the fact that I would be exempt from some of those duties, I probably would have said no, you know. Because now all of a sudden I'm becoming one of them. And you know, the group I hung out with was very kind of anti-establishment, anti-military and I had to think hard about it. And what was I getting myself into? And again, I finally decided I'd give it a try.

I think deep down inside I wasn't really happy with where I was going or what I was doing. I would never admit that to the people I was with cause, you know, you don't do that. But I think inside I realized that I had to do something different. And so I took a chance. And I took a chance and, and it, it paid off.

KOCHER: Were you met with any sort of resistance from the people you were with when you took up that position?

BOEDTKER: Oh yeah. Oh absolutely. Yeah. I couldn't associate with them anymore. It was pretty obvious that I had to develop a whole new friendship with other people, which is good. I got in very, some very uncomfortable situations with those people and traitor, calling me names and all kinds of things. It did hurt deep down a little, I won't lie to you. Because to me that was kind of, I bonded with this group, almost like a family, you know. And there's someone you could, you could feel close to and so that had to be separated. So for awhile there, and before I got to really know the people that I spent a lot of time in the motor pool, for example, maintaining the Jeep that I drove. And I've gradually, it took a while because the people in the motor pool were unsure of me either.

But I got through. There was one staff Sergeant who took me in right away and showed me the ropes and then sooner or later everybody else kinda came around and, and I became part of that crew. But for the transition in the middle, it was a pretty lonely time. I spent a lot of time by myself cause I, I was like a man without a country. I was kind of caught in the middle.

KOCHER: What were you doing during that time you were by yourself?

BOEDTKER: Just kind of, a lot of reflections, I think a, a lot of reflections mostly.

KOCHER: Reflecting on?

BOEDTKER: Well, what else I was going to do with my life? You know, all of a sudden I had given up this, this part of it that, that I—

KOCHER: Given up your more rebellious life or?

BOEDTKER: Yeah. I had to give that up and that, that was really kinda my life. And then I was wondering, what, what am I going to do? And that's when I decided that, and that's when I got my GED. I decided, well I get outta here, I have an opportunity with the GI bill to go to college. I can't go to college unless I have a college, uh, high school diploma. So I went to classes and eventually took the test and passed the GED.

KOCHER: And did you pass the GED while you were in Germany?

BOEDTKER: Yeah. Yeah.

KOCHER: Okay.

KOCHER: And so I guess another part of what you talked about a little bit in the bio you sent is sort of your contact with these Vietnam veterans. Other than that, how aware of the political situation in Southeast Asia and then again domestically in the U.S. were you, while you were in Germany?

BOEDTKER: Well, I was certainly aware of both. I mean, I was aware that there was a lot of pushback gaining a lot of momentum back in the States. And it was having results. The people that were coming from Vietnam still had tours time left, but they decided because they were starting to withdraw the troops that they would send them to Germany to finish out their, their overseas tour rather than having them finished in Vietnam. And, you know, some of the stuff I heard was, was horrific really.

The thing I found most amazing besides what I talked about, which was kind of the unknown enemy and the fear of nobody knew where the enemy was. That they would, that they would send these G.I.s out on patrol, no clue if there was an ambush there. But that's what they had to do. They had to go out and patrol this perimeter and a lot of, a lot of them ended up getting hurt. And a lot of them if their platoon leader was hip with it, a lot of them wouldn't go very far. They would just go far enough and they would just wait until they were supposed to come back. And they said, screw this. We're not, we're not gonna go around and risk ourselves getting shot here over what. Then there were the other leaders who insisted that they go out and, and do this kind of very risky duty. And a lot of the, a lot of the troops rebelled against that. Threatened the officers. So there was, there wasn't much discipline there. It was, which I found amazing. It was rule by committee I guess. I mean, you just didn't do what your commanding officer told you to do. And these people didn't believe in the war. They didn't believe in getting hurt over it. And they were in, a lot of them say, we're not going to do it. We're not going out there. And it'd be a threat of court martial everything else. And a lot of times they, like I said, they would actually threaten the officer. And of course there are more of them than him. And a lot of times, they acquiesced or they left. And they, they had no control over the troops. That's kind of what I heard.

There wasn't much discipline at all. There was strength in numbers and the numbers were the infantry men who didn't want to fight. There were very few people who thought this was the place to be, to go gung ho. And most of them could not wait for the tour to be over. And all they did was see their friends get killed over something that they really didn't have any heart in doing.

- KOCHER: Did they sort of experience or do they sort of feel any— How was their adjustment to coming to Europe from that environment?
- BOEDTKER: They, their, their adjustment was, they were very, [pause] I guess. I'm trying to find the right word, battle weary or— They were there to finish their time out and they made it be known that that's what they were there for. They had no interest in kind of jumping in and being part of, of the, what was going on. They were doing as little as possible and they were waiting to get discharged. They felt like we've done what we need to do. We're not doing anymore. We're waiting for our discharge and we're out of here. I can't say I blame 'em. Well, I would have a hard time after experiencing what they did coming in and playing soldier. You know, they weren't playing soldier there. They were risking their lives and we were kind of playing, I won't call it a game, but we, we, it was a whole different level of the service than what they had been through.
- KOCHER: And did you find their attitudes kind of changed the culture of your group and what you were doing?
- BOEDTKER: Um, no, not not really. Most of the ones that came from Vietnam weren't influenced by peer pressure, which sometimes happened to the young adults who came in there. It happened to me. They were their own people. They were [pause] been through a lot. They were confident in who they were and they kind of almost stayed in their own little group and, and didn't get involved in any politics, didn't get involved in anything. They were just hanging out, waiting to go home.
- KOCHER: Makes sense.
- KOCHER: While you were in Europe, how much contact did you have with people from home?
- BOEDTKER: None. Very little. You know, like I said, my, my parents were divorced. It was, it wasn't a good one. I had already kind of, I guess you'd call it disassociated myself with the family at that point. And you know, I can remember it was Christmas and it's like one of those, it's just another day, you know. I didn't get any cards and get any letters. So I had very, very little contact with anybody at home at that time.
- KOCHER: And were your grandparents still alive at the time?
- BOEDTKER: They were. I probably had the most contact with them. My grandmother would on occasion send me a little care gift. So they,

they were the ones that I had the most contact with. Not, not a lot, but enough to stay connected. They were just worried. They were anxious for me to come back.

KOCHER: And what sort of knowledge did they have of what you were doing?

BOEDTKER: Not much. I don't think anybody really did. I think they were just happy I wasn't in Vietnam. So they figured that where I was was a lot better than that and they were grateful for it.

KOCHER: Another thing I wanted to touch on that you were talking about was, um, just sort of like the drug use while you were there. How widespread was that?

BOEDTKER: Pretty widespread.

KOCHER: Okay, so before we broke, I was asking you a little bit about the drug use that you experienced.

BOEDTKER: Yeah, yeah, it was very prevalent there. For sure. You know, hashish was very readily available, very inexpensive. When I was, when I first got there with [pause] doing that sort of thing, we used to go into, you know, Frankfurt [Germany] and I mean, you could, you could score tons of it for next to nothing. So because it was readily available and cheap, a lot of people indulged in it and they're, as I said it, there wasn't— I think the drug culture was already there and because there was readily available and there wasn't that much to do. I think people, a lot of people who didn't do it much ended up doing it quite a bit. But it was very prominent.

KOCHER: Do you think this drug culture that you were describing, was that related to sort of the counterculture movement or what do you think is most responsible for that?

BOEDTKER: Some of it was counterculture, which like I said, the group I hung out initially, it was definitely counter establishment. So there was that, that kind of an attitude. And, you know, people believed that it was no worse than drinking and there's no reason why they shouldn't be able to do that. And they shouldn't have to suffer any more consequences than someone who goes to a bar and drinks. And so, yeah, I think there was some of that. It was, I think a lot of it too was an escape. People, a lot of people didn't want to be there, even in Germany. A lot of them got drafted like I did and they just wanted not to deal with it. And so I think a lot of people, they, as soon as they could, in the evening, some people even really had bad habits would just do it all during the day.

Now what I'm saying's interesting. And you know, it's funny 'cause there was that culture that I was associated with in the beginning and then, then there was the culture that I was associated with in the end. And it's very interesting. Those, the people I hung out with there, it was more alcohol. They really, hardly any of them did drugs. They didn't believe in the drugs. But they would have no problem going to the EM Club and, and enjoying quite a few beverages. So that was a different, you know, now you bring it up. There was a stark difference between the two.

KOCHER: Just in terms of what was being used?

BOEDTKER: Yeah. Yeah. One, you know, how do you say, the people that I associated with in the end were more [pause] blue collar, I'll call them type. That's how they were brought up. Kind of working families. Their values were a little different than, quite a bit different than people I hung out with initially. They believed in the establishment. They were part of it. They believed in playing by the rules and doing a good job and getting things done. So they believed in laws and if the drugs were illegal then they were not going to do them. So yeah, it was a totally different environment for me. Yeah. And it was good.

KOCHER: And did you feel like you kind of moved between the two?

BOEDTKER: No, I mean, you couldn't. They, I, I think, you know, there were so, the cliques were just so well established. You were either in with this group or this group. And you know, like I said, I was in the middle for a while and then kind of a loner. But there was very little association between, between the two or three if you, if you count the African Americans and non-white people. There was another whole group.

Yeah, it was, yeah, it was an eye opener for me because I don't, whether I was naive or not, but I never experienced such a stark separation of cultures that didn't really move, didn't really have much of an open mind. They really stuck to themselves and they got their strength with each other and believed in what each other believed in and didn't want to crossover and thinking that, you know, maybe these people who are doing drugs are okay too. They were, they were people who were doing illegal things.

KOCHER: So I guess that's an interesting environment because on the one hand you have sort of like these very tight knit groups, but on the other hand, you have all of these just such disparate identities.



BOEDTKER: Yup

KOCHER: That's interesting. Do you think that impacted what you were doing at all?

BOEDTKER: Well, yeah. I mean I think it impacted. I would, I associated with the people, the blue collar people in the end and we all stuck together. We all did our non-work stuff together. We'd go to the EM Club together. I played a lot of foosball and pool and that kind of stuff. So, you know, like I said, it really became a, it really became a, almost like a clan and we'd be there in the EM Club and then all of, sometimes a lot of fights broke out. And then a whole group of African-Americans would come in and you could feel the tension in the room. It was just waiting for something to happen. It's like someone'd ignite this thing. And that, that was a part that I always found disturbing because in a lot of times they were some pretty good brawls that broke out.

But there wasn't much mingling. It was you stuck with your clan and that's, that's where you were. And then the other people who really enjoyed drugs more, they just stayed to themselves in their barracks and they did their thing. Had music turned up and a lot of lights going on, but they didn't venture out much [laughter].

KOCHER: So it seems like it was more of like a social dynamic than actually impacting what you guys were doing.

BOEDTKER: Yes, yeah absolutely. Correct. Yeah.

KOCHER: And so you were in Germany, but did you go anywhere else in Europe during your time?

BOEDTKER: No. I, I never went there [elsewhere in Europe] with the military. I did do a little bit of traveling, I wish I'd have done more. I went to Amsterdam. I went to France. I went to a few different countries just to see what they were like. We'd go for a weekend. We could hop on a train and get somewhere pretty quick. The public transportation there in Europe's of course, a lot better than here. You can get around without a car without any problem at all.

KOCHER: And so you had downtime where you could do this traveling?

BOEDTKER: Yeah. Yeah, we had downtime. Yeah. Weekends. It was almost like a job. I mean basically you work during the week. You would do your thing. And that would vary for me. In the latter part, I had my job to do and that's what I did. They would keep the infantry people

busy sometimes doing really mundane things like scrubbing the floors, tile floors with a little brush, just something to keep them busy. But basically it was like a five day work thing and then the weekend came and we could have the weekends off. I mean, it wasn't every weekend 'cause there always had to be someone on base to cover, but so we'd alternate it. And then sometimes we'd get longer stints. At one time where we had a whole week and two weekends, we had 10 days and that's when we did a little bit of traveling.

KOCHER: Did you have a favorite place that you visited?

BOEDTKER: I thought Amsterdam was pretty cool. It was [pause]. You know, the people there were really friendly. It was a very kind of liberal country where people were peaceful. But they kind of, I remember people smoking joints out in the street, prostitution was legal. It was, but the people were really friendly and nice. And the thing I enjoyed, I got to Amsterdam and you could rent a bicycle and you could go everywhere on a bike. A really bike friendly country. I mean they're very respectful of people on bicycles and that was a lot of fun. We kind of toured around and on bikes. And a beautiful country. I thought that was kind of a whole different culture than I had ever been accustomed to.

KOCHER: Different from like your experience growing up?

BOEDTKER: Oh yeah, definitely different than my experience growing up. I mean, it was, from where I was at base where we had all those different clans and separate cultures, to you go to Amsterdam, and even though there's different races and people, everyone got along. There was no, I didn't feel in anyway, there was no kind of disassociation between people. They were, they almost felt like they were just one group. Which is totally different from the environment that I spent with it in Germany, in the barracks. I really, I liked it. I really liked it a lot. No one judged you at all. You were just allowed to be who you were and nobody judged you.

KOCHER: And did you find that was kind of like a release from what you were doing before?

BOEDTKER: Oh yeah, it was. It was, yeah. I mean, that's a place I felt really relaxed and no tension at all. Just very much, very comfortable there just going around and doing what I wanted to do.

KOCHER: So aside from traveling, what else did you guys like to do in your downtime?

BOEDTKER: Not much. A little bit of hiking. Once in a while we'd hike, we hiked one time up to a monastery on top of a mountain.

KOCHER: And where was that hike?

BOEDTKER: Yeah, yeah. I'm trying to remember where it was. It was in Germany. And it was quite a hike to get up there. [laughter] And we got to the top and there's these monks and, really great people. And believe it or not, one of the things they did was they brewed beer. And whatever they brewed was pretty powerful. We, cause we had a few beers and I, and I remember having a hard time getting back down the mountain. It was some pretty potent stuff. So I'll never forget that. I always figured these monks, you know, were [laughter] sort of, didn't do that kind of stuff, but.

And then we'd go, we'd go into town, we go to the restaurants and we go to the taverns and that kind of stuff. And we were welcomed. I mean, they enjoyed the G.I.s for what they were doing for the country, for what they were doing for the economy. It was, it was a lot different than the attitude that was prevalent back here at the time with some people. They looked down on the G.I.s coming back, especially from Vietnam. For some reason, they blame them for the war and they weren't treated like the vets are treated today at all. Which was, which was really terrible because a lot of them were there because they had to be, and they did what they had to do because they had to. But then they were kind of looked down upon and you became part of this war. You shouldn't have gone. Well, it's easy to say.

KOCHER: So you found that your experience with the people in Germany was mostly positive?

BOEDTKER: Oh, yeah. They welcomed G.I.s. They loved G.I.s. Yeah. Yeah. Very positive.

KOCHER: And then you talked about sort of this reaction to the veterans coming home. What was your experience like coming home and arriving back from the war?

BOEDTKER: To be honest with you, I never, I don't think it was very positive and I never made it be known that I was a vet coming back. I grew my hair out as quick as I could.

KOCHER: Even though you were serving in Germany and not Vietnam, you still felt that?

BOEDTKER: Oh yeah. I still felt that there was this disdain about the military, disdain about the politics involved in. And I think it was a way for some people to vent their displeasure. They could see someone and associated with something that they were angry about. And so, there was that— Otherwise there was some political leader way up in Washington, but here's the one that they could see and, and get upset with. And I did see that. Yeah. I mean, there were still military people who came back who still had time left, who served on base. And they, they ended up in uniform or obviously had the military haircut and I don't think a lot of them are treated very well.

KOCHER: And they were serving in the States at that point?

BOEDTKER: Yeah. Yeah. And like I said, I grew my hair out as quick as I could. So I didn't want anyone to know that I'd been in the service, which is [pause] silly.

KOCHER: So you kind of felt that the military became sort of this concrete target for people to focus their anger at.

BOEDTKER: Oh yeah. It definitely did. Not everyone, but enough, enough where you could notice it. Compared to today I think where veterans are really respected and honored for their commitment. That that wasn't there at all.

KOCHER: And do you think attitudes towards veterans from Vietnam have changed at all today?

BOEDTKER: Oh yes. I do think it's changed enormously. Yep. Yeah. No, I think it was just a, there was a lot of pushback about the war. There was a, there was a lot of movement, there was a lot of people who were passionate about it. And so there, there was all this energy, anti-war energy, and I think that's kind of what the focus was on, the, some of the vets that came back. It's different today even if people didn't believe in, for whatever reason didn't believe in going into Iraq. The vets that came back were still honored and respected much more so than the ones from Vietnam.

KOCHER: And do you know anything that could have caused this change or do you have any ideas on that?

BOEDTKER: That's a good question. Good question.

I really enjoyed growing up in that time, kind of the Sixties, Seventies. It was kind of a really cool time. There was a lot more unity amongst young people that there was a cause they all

gathered around and which to produce energy and they. And today not so much. I think today people become much more individualized. And so, and probably a little more, less emotional, maybe, and more practical. Like the war in Iraq, a lot of people said, we shouldn't be there. We shouldn't go. But they didn't take it out on the veterans at all. As a matter of fact, they, they, most of the people in the United States had a lot of respect and and empathy for veterans who were over in Iraq in a war that, again, didn't amount to anything. Yeah. Politics. Yup.

BOEDTKER: And there may be a good thing that's coming out of this. There seems to be a resistance to doing that. It seems like we do the same thing over and over again. But, I sense slowly, there's a resistance to jumping into everyone else's problems in the world. You know we're not the keeper for the world and need take care of ourselves.

KOCHER: And you arrived back in '72 [1972], so you were in the U.S. when the Vietnam War ended.

BOEDTKER: Correct.

KOCHER: What was that experience like?

BOEDTKER: Oh, by that time there was a lot of jubilation over the fact that the war was finally coming to an end. I mean in that part of it, you could, you could feel that less tension about the war because it felt like that finally the tides were beginning to turn and people were coming out of the war and trying to figure out a way how to get the hell out of there as safe as possible.

I think there was still a lot of mistrust too, to the establishment and the government, but the feeling was, I think, among the younger people was, wow we had an impact, we, help change the course of this. And that, you know like I said, that was unified. A lot of young people back then. A lot. You don't see that today. You don't see a cause that makes that many people come together.

KOCHER: And would you include yourself in this sort of group of young people?

BOEDTKER: Yes. I don't think I was as demonstrative about it, but I didn't believe in the war at all. Like I said, I had my doubts with our— I seriously thought about crossing the border into Canada, which a lot of people did. So yeah, I did. I felt the same way. But I wasn't out in the street demonstrating. It was just, just the way I felt.

KOCHER: You mentioned that you went to UVM [University of Vermont] after coming back. What was that transition like for you? Going from this servicemen to a college student?

BOEDTKER: No, it was different. I went to junior college at first and I kept so busy. I basically was going to classes and I then worked a night job. I worked in an operation center for a big bank and then I'd get a little bit of sleep and then go to class again. And then on the weekends I'd have to catch up on my studies. So, you know, for a few years there I was too busy really to do much else. You know, I had this motivation that I was going to do it. I was going to get my college education. And junior college, the environment there, there are all a lot of different people. They were people who were working like me. They were people, they weren't just young people. They were adults who went to junior college, just trying to get a better education or improve on whatever. So it was a whole different, the classes were a whole different culture. There was a real cross section of people there.

Now when I went to UVM, that was a little bit of a [pause] Yeah, a little bit strange. By that time I was quite a bit older than most of the students there. Quite a bit older.

KOCHER: So what year would you have gone to college?

BOEDTKER: I went to UVM. I graduated in '77 [1977], so I went from '75 [1975] to '77 [1977].

KOCHER: So you had about three years between when you left the service and?

BOEDTKER: It took me three years, to get through junior college because I was working.

And what I found was that I had a hard time associating with the students. I was older. I was paying my own way too and I wanted to get an education. I was serious about it. There were a lot of younger people that were there because, because that's what their parents told them to do it. The parents were paying their way. They were, had some freedom. There was a lot of partying going on. Not so much, not everybody, don't get me wrong, but not the intense focus on the education so much as some of it had to do with just having a good time. And I was there to get an education. So I went to class, kept my nose to the grindstone, and did my studies. And so I was a little more isolated I think at UVM than I was in junior college.

I ended up, I was in the dorm for one semester and that was, I couldn't handle that anymore. And so I got an apartment quite a ways away. It was probably 30, 35 minutes away from UVM. But I got an apartment at a farm. Upstairs apartment. And that was really cool cause on the weekends I got to help the farmer. And I remember he woke me up when, middle of the night one night, and they had a cow that had trouble giving birth to a calf. And I went there and helped them give birth to that calf. That was pretty cool. I'll never forget that. And I enjoyed that cause I had been, from my grandparents, I'd been kind of associated with a farm and to me that felt like the place to be. So I'd go there and help them out and then do my studies. And I had a dog then he was my best friend, so I hung out with him. [laughter]

KOCHER: And then after college it seems like you stayed in Vermont, right?

BOEDTKER: Well I wanted to. I got a job with a construction company, Pizzagalli Construction in Burlington [Vermont], and they said they had a job for me in York, Pennsylvania. And I said, yeah, I'll go to New York. But I said, I want to get back to New England. I'll go do that because, you know, I'm the new kid on the block and I've got to get training. So I was there for about nine or ten months. My job was to lay everything out, survey everything in, make sure that all the pipes and everything were lined up. And so we did that. And then my part of the job came to an end. It was mostly vertical construction at that point. All the layout had been done and then they wanted to send me to somewhere in Alabama and I said, no, I'm not going.

So we had a parting of the ways and I came back to Vermont. Stayed with my grandparents, kept looking for a job. And there was an opening that came up right in the Springfield office, and that's where my grandpa's farm was in Springfield, for the state of Vermont as a state engineer. And I went for an interview, got the job, and that started a whole new life for me too. I learned a lot about the regulations for developing in Vermont and after a couple of years I became kind of a valuable asset. I got hired by Dufresne-Henry [Consulting Engineers Inc.], which was a larger engineering corporation. Worked there for a year. It was a lot of [inaudible]. It was okay.

But then I had someone I've been working with and he offered me a partnership in his business. I had to think about that for awhile cause it was a little bit of an unknown. How to get a secure job, whether there's a lot of internal politics. It was a big company, but I took it. I said, okay, I'll do it. I ended up doing that for 35 years,

grew that company and did really well. Um, you know, we, we caught, caught the boom before the recession and did quite well.

It was a good decision I made. That was another one of those things that someone was watching out for me. [laughter].

KOCHER: And so you still live in Vermont. Do you have any family here?

BOEDTKER Um, no, I don't have any, any family here anymore. You know, the closest family I have is my wife's family. They're from across the river here in New Hampshire. And they're divorced and remarried. Both of them. Now one's in Charlestown or one's in, well I think they both in Charlestown. I take that back. He's not in Claremont. He's technically in Charlestown. So they both live quite a bit apart, but they both live in Charlestown.

BOEDTKER And they're, they're family now. You know, I love them and they welcomed me as part of the family. And so that's the family. Both my parents have since passed away.

KOCHER: And then aside from your father going to Dartmouth, do you have any other connections to the College?

BOEDTKER: No. Well, I have a cousin who went here. I can't remember when she graduated. Um, but she, she came here for awhile. Yeah.

KOCHER: But just living in the Upper Valley?

BOEDTKER: Yeah. Yeah.

KOCHER: So I know you have to leave soon. Obviously you said the war had a positive impact on your life. What do you think the greatest thing you got from it was?

BOEDTKER: [pause] You know, I think the greatest thing it taught me was [pause]. It eventually gave me some self worth, some identity. I finally felt like, um, I wasn't just part of a group following whatever this group wanted to do. I just felt like I'd grown up. I had some responsibilities. I really enjoyed having responsibilities, I enjoyed the satisfaction of getting them done and doing a good job. And those things I hadn't really experienced much before. And I started to feel good about myself. And that for me that was the benefit of, like I said, the war. I would have never gone into the military and it's what I needed. As it turned out, it's exactly what I needed to be where I am now. I shudder to think about if I would have kept going in the direction I was where I'd be.



KOCHER: So knowing what you do now, do you think you'd serve again?

BOEDTKER: Absolutely. I would serve again. I believe in serving my country. In terms of going to war, no I wouldn't. I don't want to go to war. But I would do it to defend this country if that's what it came down to and earnestly rather than getting involved in politics overseas. So, sure. I think there's a lot of countries that you're required to do that. And I believe it's a good thing. I really do. I believe in the service and what it stands for.

KOCHER: Great. Thank you. And before we leave, is there anything else that maybe I forgot to ask you that you'd like to add or anything like that?

BOEDTKER: No. No. I'm glad I could participate in this. I don't know how much my information will be helpful, but I'm glad I could help out. And sort of if it gives any insight into the war. It might be different than a lot of what you hear from other people. So maybe in that respect, it's a little refreshing 'cause for me it ended up being a very positive thing. I didn't believe in the war, but the outcome of the consequences of that war were good for me.

KOCHER: Okay. Well thank you so much for doing this.

BOEDTKER: Well thank you. You've been great.

KOCHER: To what you were saying. This is definitely very helpful. And I'm so glad you shared your experience with me and I'm sure that we can take away a lot from what you told me. At least I did. So thank you so much.

BOEDTKER: You're welcome.

[End of interview.]