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Oral History for Greg Hocking - Engineer during Vietnam War

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Student Interviewer's Name: Allison Melton

Interviewee Name: Greg Hocking

Time and Location of Interview: This interview took place on October 19, 2016 at Greg Hocking's house in Ooltewah, TN. Only the interviewer and interviewee were present.

About Greg Hocking: He was born in Pontiac, Michigan on March 22, 1947, so he is now 69 years old. He graduated from high school and started working for General Motors. He got married about a year or so after he served his time as an engineer in the Vietnam Conflict. Greg and his wife have been married for over forty years and have two children. They lived in Michigan until after his children moved down to Tennessee, and then they decided to move down so that they could be with their kids and grandkids.

Interviewer: Allison Melton (AM)

Interviewee: Greg Hocking (GH)

AM: How old were you when you went to Vietnam?

GH: I should tell you I was 19 when I went over there and I lived in Michigan, and I had never left Michigan before. I mean, we were kind of poor, so we didn't travel, so all of our vacations were in Michigan.

AM: How did it come about that you went to Vietnam, were you drafted or did you enlist?

GH: I graduated from high school, and I was living at home when I got this letter from Uncle Sam, and I didn't even know who he was. He said he requested me to come into the Army...he wanted me to come into the Army. And I said, "Oh nuts", because I really didn't want to go there. I knew what was going on, the war was going on. I was thinking, "Oh shoot", because I had just bought a brand new car right off the lot. I had a good job at general motors and I lived at home and didn't pay any rent or anything. I had me a girlfriend and a brand new car, a good job, and life was good. I knew that if I got that draft notice, I knew I was probably going to be dead. So I said goodbye to everyone and it was kind of sad. A lot of my friends that went there didn't make it. Usually you were drafted and it lasted two years; the first year was in Vietnam and if you made it out alive, the rest of the time you would still be in the Army, but just not over there.

AM: What was basic training like?

GH: Well, I went to basic training and a part of it was school. They sent me to school in Saigon, which is now Ho Chi Minh City. The day we left Vietnam, the Viet Cong came up out of their holes and took over the city and renamed it to that. So they flew me there and then flew me back. I was in basic training for three days and they took everyone one at a time and just interviewed each person one at a time and he says, "Now, there's a Vietnam War going on and I got a way you can get out of that." And I said, "Really?" and I'm thinking wow, this nice. So he says, "Well instead of being in for two years, you sign up and be in for three." And I asked him what that would do for me and he told me that it

guarantees you don't go to Vietnam and you'll go to Germany or someplace like that. And I was thinking that that was a lot better, because it's not World War II or anything. So I said, "Where do I sign up for that?" You know, because I'm just a kid. And it would keep me out of infantry, which I wanted nothing to do with that.

AM: What happened after you decided to do that?

GH: So I went there to my basic training and I became a refrigeration mechanic and plumber. So I did my basic training and it was three months, and then I went to school for three months and took a couple of mechanic classes. And the last couple days of school, they came around and told everybody where they were going to go next and the guy said, "Greg Hocking, you're going to Vietnam." And I told him that that can't be, because I already signed up so that I wouldn't have to go. He said "Well they can't tell you that." So that's where I lost my faith in humanity. So many people lied to me along the way that, even after I came back, my mother would tell me something and I wouldn't believe her...I was starting not to believe nobody, and that was kind of bad. Anyways...This was right happened right at Christmas time, because I got drafted on July 7. So 6 months later I was done with school and everything, which was in 1966. I said "Well shoot, you gave me the death notice! I've been avoiding this like the plague. At least you were going to let me go home for my final Christmas, right?" And he told me that they weren't planning on it, but I talked him into letting me to go home, and I ended up going home for ten days.

AM: How did you talk him into that?

GH: Yeah, I don't know (laughs). I had my final Christmas with my family, well I thought it was my final Christmas. After that, I came back...when I came back, uh to the military, I jumped on an airplane heading for Vietnam. But it was kind of nice at first because I went to Hawaii for a layover.

AM: What was it like when you first got to Vietnam?

GH: Well, yeah...I think I went to the Philippines first...anyways...I got to Vietnam and it was kind of interesting, um, when I got there, when I landed...this was back when you got out the plane and you're out on the runway, and you would just walk out to the terminal. It was at night, like two or three in the morning. And they said, "Okay now, here's the deal," and we're about to get into these school-like buses and they're going to be parked over there. "I want you guys to get off the plane and get as low as you can, and run to the bus" And so, I don't know how low I got, but it was pretty low. And I got in that bus, and we all made it. But as I was running to the bus I could see—do you know what a tracer is?

AM: No, I don't think I've ever heard of that.

GH: Every fifth bullet, it lights up at night, helps them tell where they're shooting, because it's at night and it just lights up like fireworks. So they were shooting tracers back and forth. And I was thinking, oh, this isn't good...I might not make it a year, maybe not even to the bus, what was what I was thinking. But I made it to the bus and when I got in the

bus, I noticed it had chicken wire all around the windows. And I asked why they had chicken wires around the windows—and do you know why?

AM: No, I have no clue why.

GH: Hand grenades. So when you were driving through the tunnels and the fields, the Viet Cong would throw hand grenades at the bus. Tried to get them into the windows, because they would go right through the windows and when they would throw them at the bus, and blow the bus up, and everyone in it would die. But I think when they put the wire on the windows, the Viet Cong quit throwing them because they couldn't get through. But I'm glad I wasn't in Vietnam in the first days (laughs). I'm sure a lot of people died before they figured that out. So, and then we finally got to our place... A lot of it's kind of blanked out.

AM: How did you get all of the supplies?

GH: We started building – when I first got there, in Qui Nhon Bay...do you know what an Amphibian is? It's a boat and when it gets on land, it becomes a car. This one brought troop in and dropped them off. Except this one was at a port and it brought all of the supplies. Big ships would come in, and the amphibian would load up and drive in and would come up out of the water and then they would start driving on land and then we would unload it.

AM: What did being an engineer entail?

GH: When we first got there, there was no refrigeration or anything, so they didn't get a lot of refrigerated stuff. So our first job was to build a refrigeration building. So we built it, including digging the ditches for the footing and then we got the building finally done. And when we got the building done, they brought in the food and stuff. That was the first time I got chocolate milk because now they had a place to refrigerate it, so that was kind of nice. So they brought it in and we drank a lot of the milk right then.

AM: How long did it take to build it?

GH: Hmmm...probably a couple of months. And after that, I only had ten months to go. Everything we did, we did with a cement mixer, by hand. You just put the sand, and the gravel, and the water in it. We had to shovel everything, pour it in there, and carry the bags there. The bags weighted 110 lbs. each. So we were all very very strong, and if we weren't when we went, we became strong...so pretty much everyone was in good shape because of that and three months of basic training. So I got that done, and then we went into town and built – they didn't have any streets, just dirt – and we got curbing from the base and loaded them up, and brought them into town. We did all that by hand. So now they had curbing and then we paved the roads. It was pretty funny because they had this little mountain and it was about half the size it was when we got there, and when we left it was almost gone because we kept taking dirt from it...you know, making our concrete and stuff.

AM: What else did you build?

GH: Our next project was a warehouse. We built this warehouse and it was 400 by 200 ft., so it was a pretty good sized warehouse. The concrete was six inches thick for the floor, and we did it all by hand. It was a lot of concrete, and it took us just a couple of weeks just to pour the concrete. And we did two buildings like that. And then we started putting up the steel around it, and then when you got to the gable, the peak, it had to be molded together. But there was no way up there, so we discovered we had a crane that would pick them up and put them up there. And then we had another crane, and we took a 55 lb. barrel and cut it in half, and burned three holes in it, put some chains on it, and then a hook. Then we got in it; if you held onto the chains you were ok, but if you let go, you would fall out. So you'd be 30 ft. in the air putting this gable, going up there with a bunch of bolts and big wrenches and you had to put it together. Putting up the gables took a long time and then building the rest of the buildings took another month or two.

AM: I read that many engineers built bridges, did you do that too and what was it like?

GH: So we built bridges. We found out that when you build the bridge, we did all this hard labor. And we found out that the part that holds down the bridge can't be stopped and started the next day; it has to be a continuous pouring and there was no way we could do that by hand. And lo and behold the Air Force showed up and they had a cement mixer. They just brought one after another after another. I was thinking, "Where was this before?" So when we were building the bridge at night, it was an all day and all night thing because it took us so long to pour everything. But during the night, we were building a bridge right next to the rice fields and – we always had guns with us so we could always be armed. We had guards around us, so there were people who would guard and then people who would build. It was kind of crazy, but that was what we had to do. You don't want to get too busy and then have someone sneak up on you. So this guy started shooting at like 3 am and we were diving under trucks and everything. And then it all got quiet and somebody yelled that it was all clear, so we went back to work. The next day I asked the guy, "What the heck happened? What did you see out there?" He said, "I didn't see anything, I was just bored!" But we thought we were all under attack, but of course he didn't tell that to the commanders. (Laughs).

AM: Did the Air Force help you with anything else?

GH: And also, we found out that, it was kind of funny- that they had unbelievable food! We had been eating junk food and we go over there and see that they're having steaks and everything...they were living it good over there. We were just wondering where they got all of those. So one day couple of guys snuck over there and stole a bunch of steaks and so every Sunday afternoon, they would always have a barbeque and we usually had hot dogs. But one day they had steaks and they claimed they didn't know where they came from. So that was kind of funny.

AM: Did you ever get time off?

GH: We got one half a day off each month, which isn't very many days. And we also got one week off every six months.

AM: What did you do?

GH: One time I thought I'd go walking on the beach – because we lived right by the beach—so I was walking out there and noticed some poop. But you never saw a dog, so I was wondering where all this poop came from. But it was from all the people because they didn't have bathrooms or running water, so they'd just walk out of their huts and just used the bathroom right on the beach. And I was thinking that this was not like the beaches back home. So that was kind of funny and I never went back to the beach. So Qui Nhon Bay was in a narrow strip and then there was the north. And you have Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand. Everyone got one week off every six months to go wherever they wanted to go except for America, they'd fly you there. 90% of the people went to Thailand, but I didn't go anywhere. I was angry all the time while I was over there and just so stressed, so I turned it down. I told them I didn't want to go anywhere because I was afraid that if I like it, I wouldn't come back and you'd have to come find me. So I didn't go because I hated it that much. So I just kept on working because I didn't think that it would help at all.

AM: How did you get to your job sites, did you just walk, or how far away were they?

GH: When we got out of our truck—they transferred guys to their jobsites—we were in a big truck that was about five tons. And when you would stand in the back of it, I would hold on to the sides. I noticed everyone else was just standing there and they asked me if I was new. Which I was, so I asked them how they knew. They said that when you get used to it, you don't hold on anymore. So after about a week or so of driving, I started getting my balance, so it was kind of fun. When we were riding down the roads, there would be people on mopeds. The truck would just barrel through and wouldn't get out of the way, and neither would the people, and the driver would just say, "If we hit 'em we hit 'em!" He didn't care. So you'd see them dive off into the ditch and when you'd drive pass they'd be saying something in Vietnamese that probably wasn't good because they were in the ditch. The reason the drivers did this was because – you didn't know who the Viet Cong were, could be men, women, children – and you didn't want to run into any of them. I never personally ran into them that I know of.

AM: Were you in the same place the whole time, building bridges and buildings?

GH: When I only had two months to go, they transferred me a little bit up north, but not in the north. And the fighting was heavier there, so I asked them if they were really sure they wanted to transfer me with only two months to go, and of course they still transferred me. It was kind of closer to the DMZ. So when I got up there, they showed me the latrine, which was just a pile of wood and tin. They said to me, "Well, that's where the latrine was last week." One of the houseboys – what they do is befriend you and someone gets a hold of them and says that they have to take a bomb in the camp and kill everyone there including themselves or else they'd kill their family – blew the latrine up. I was thinking that I couldn't even go to the bathroom there and be safe. I had a houseboy there and he was the nicest guy, and he'd polish my shoes every morning and every night after a day's work. He'd make my bed and straighten everything up. And he did a bunch of them, I think he

did our whole barracks, just one boy. He got 50 cents a month from each guy, or something like that. There were probably 25-30 guys there, so he'd get about \$15 a month. But the biggest money maker was prostitution, and they were making the most money of everyone in the country except for the rich people. See, there were rich people and then everyone else, there was no one in between...they were either rich or dirt poor. Their houses, some of them would be...so when they make beer or pop cans, they come in big sheets and they go through this cutter and it cuts them into the little thing and then they go through the roller to roll and can and then it seals it. Well somehow or another, they to a whole truckload of those sheets, so you'd be driving along and you see a Budweiser house or a Coca-Cola house.

AM: What was it like living over there?

GH: In a monsoon it rains for six months straight, or it could just be cloudy. So in 6 months' time, we didn't see the sun one time, not even one little peak. But it was still very hot though. For the next 6 months it didn't rain a drop, and the sun was out all the time. We didn't have a thermometer, but people were saying it was over 100 degrees, and we were out working in that! Pouring all the concrete and stuff, so we were sweating like dogs. The side of the roads was supposed to be dirt and kind of muddy, but it was so dry that you could just take a small step and it would puff up like a powder puff, that's how dry it was. You could just step on it and it went all over, there was no moisture in the dirt at all.

AM: How did you feel when your time was coming to leave?

GH: When you have two months to go, we got a stick – well not a stick, but it was made out of wood like a small cane. I would get it from downstairs right now, but I can't make it down there. Anyways, on the top it had a dragon head, so everyone got one of those. So on the bottom, we could cut the end off, and we would take the powder out of it and put an M-16 bullet on the bottom so it would come to a point, and that was kind of neat. We'd call that our short timer stick. So if you saw someone walking around the base with one of the sticks, you know they only had less than two months left to go. I'd make a mark on the calendar every day. I got up in the morning and made half an 'X', and when I'd make it home that night, I made the other half of the 'X', so that would be one day down. But they kept us really tired, they got us up really early and worked us until past dark. They got us up right when the sun was coming up, and we had to have breakfast and everything really quick.

AM: Did you ever run into anyone in the Viet Cong and know it?

GH: The Viet Cong had caves all over the place. They lived under ground when they came to the south. They would dig holes so deep that they had their headquarters under there and everything. They had big holes you could climb down in to and then had ladders going down and you could walk around. So when we were bombing them, it didn't hurt them at all. The guys would hide in the weeds and stuff, so they came up with something called Agent Orange. They would fly over the fields and sprayed it and it killed everything, the crops and the vegetation. The idea was to starve them out so we could see them, because

they couldn't hide in the vegetation anymore. Trouble was, was that Agent Orange was killing our guys too. If the Viet Cong didn't get you, you were likely to be killed by Agent Orange.

AM: So you didn't necessarily do any fighting, did you do anything else other than build things?

GH: I was on guard duty and there was an ammo dump, and this was at night. I was walking around with an M-16 and a flashlight; that was all I had to protect me. You would never be able to see or hear if anyone was coming, so the Viet Cong could easily shoot ya. So every time you think you hear something, you just shine your light. One night, I hear a commotion and I looked up and I saw an American soldier and a Korean soldier with a Cong, and they were dragging him because they had shot him in the leg. And they were bringing him back in to the ammo dump camp. The American wanted him to start talking, and he would talk, so they threw him on the ground and jumped on his leg where he was shot. The guy was just screaming, and I really remembered that. But, we were in war, and war is war. And so that happened, and then I had to sleep outside. What you'd do was patrol for two hours and sleep for four, and you'd have to patrol again. But you're sleeping outside in a sleeping bag, so you don't know what's gonna get you, there were snakes and spiders. So I didn't sleep good, and it was hard to fall asleep because you didn't know what was going to be crawling on you and I was afraid of both snakes and spiders. And I was thinking that if the Viet Cong didn't get me, the spiders and snakes would bite me. But neither one of them got me, as you can tell because I'm here. (Starts talking randomly) When I had my day off I'd go to the market. And in America every package is protected, but over there it's different. Everything is outside, so what people do – meats especially – would knock the flies off of it and would throw it in a bag. So I never bought any food. There was a building the was a safe zone for American soldiers, so I'd go there and sit and just watch people go by, so I'd just people watch on most of my days off. The enemy was not defined, kind of like the war we are in with ISIS, you don't know who they are because it could just be anyone walking down the street. And that's how Vietnam was; it could be children, women, anyone. It was just crazy. People would commit suicide on suicide missions. They'd go into bars because they knew a lot of GI's would be in there. So they'd blow up the bar and they would be blown-up too. They'd just have hand grenades in their pockets or bras, and they'd pull it out and everyone would be dead. That's why we didn't get a parade or anything when we came back. Because the soldiers were killing kids, women, and maybe even innocent bystanders because we just didn't know. It was a sad deal. Kind of like today, it just reminds me of the same war. There were no uniforms, and every war before that, we knew who was who because they all had uniforms. We knew who was who then, and in Vietnam we just didn't. It was crazy.

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Original Questions

1. What was it like when you first got there?
2. What did being an engineer in Vietnam entail?
3. How did it come about that you went to Vietnam, were you drafted or did you enlist?
4. Did you do most of the work by hand, or were there any machines that helped you out?
5. Was there a specific time that you were most afraid?
6. What was basic training like?
7. Did you ever get “time off”? And what did you do?
8. How long were you over there for?
9. So I read that many engineers built bridges, did you do that too and what was it like?
10. Did you ever get caught in the middle of fighting while building things?
11. What exactly was a refrigeration mechanic?
12. Did you ever have to do any fighting?
13. What was the most difficult thing to build?
14. What did you have to do for basic training?
15. How did you get all of the supplies?
16. Did you ever run into someone in the Viet Cong?
17. What was the weather like over there?