Richard Herko
Veteran

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Interviewers

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Orchard Park High School
Orchard Park, New York

Q: What made you want to join the military?
RH: I was in my first year of college after graduating from Hutch Tech in Buffalo. I was just tired of school and thought it would be a good time to see the world. So, without telling my parents or school, I enlisted in the Army. My parents were really upset, but I felt I needed to try something different.

Q: Where were you living at the time?
RH: At home in Buffalo, on the east side—Clinton Street.

Q: What did you think you'd be doing in the Army?
RH: When I went to the recruiter, I said, 'How about armor?' He said, 'We can send you to Europe.' That sounded fun, so I agreed. But first, everyone has to go to basic training, which was in Fort Jackson, South Carolina, for two months. You learn how to handle a rifle, salute—that kind of stuff. During the first week, everybody got the flu, but I made it through.

Q: What happened after basic training?
RH: Then they figure out your next school. For me, it was armor training at Fort Knox, Kentucky, for another two months. That's the U.S. Armored Training Center, where they introduce you to tanks—how they work and how to operate them.

Q: What kind of tanks did you train with?
RH: We trained on the M60 main battle tank. It had a four-man crew: driver, loader, gunner, and tank commander. They actually preferred smaller guys because tanks are cramped—I'm 5'8", so I was the perfect size.

Q: What did you learn to do?
RH: We learned every role—driving, loading, gunnery, using the radios. After that, I was sent to Germany. This was just before Vietnam. At that time, we were focused on

the Cold War and preparing to fight the Russians if it came to that. NATO forces—including Britain, France, the Netherlands, and the U.S.—were expected to hold them off in Europe.

RH: This was just before Vietnam. At that time, everyone thought we were going to fight the Russians—this was the Cold War era. NATO—Britain, France, the Netherlands, the United States—we were all preparing to make a stand in Europe. The idea was to hold off the Russians if war broke out, and most people believed it was inevitable.

I was stationed in Germany for two and a half years, from 1962 to early 1965. Our base was right on the border of Czechoslovakia, which was then a satellite of Russia. We constantly did border duty—watching them, expecting an attack, and preparing to repel it. We often drove along the heavily fortified border. We could see the Russian soldiers. They'd wave at us, sometimes give us the finger—we'd do the same. It was a kind of psychological warfare, meant to annoy and provoke them, but we never actually fought.

I was part of a tank battalion—maybe 50 or 60 tanks—but the larger force was the U.S. 7th Army, with about 30,000 troops, including infantry, tanks, and APCs. We were told if the Russians crossed the line, they had 125 divisions, and we had three. I once asked a major, "How do you expect us to win? We're outnumbered 60 to 1." He said, "We don't expect you to win."

Q: What did he mean?

RH: He said our job was to slow the Russians down so reinforcements from the U.S. could arrive. I asked how long we could hold out. He said maybe three weeks. I asked, "What happens to us?" and he said, "You're expendable." That was tough to hear.

Then they flew us to a secret site in the Black Forest, where we stored nuclear weapons. The implication was that if the Russians crossed the line, we'd use nukes—and they probably would, too. Luckily, it never came to that.

In early 1965, just as my enlistment was ending, Vietnam started heating up. My entire tank battalion—actually, the whole 4th Armored Division—was scheduled to go to Vietnam. Tanks aren't exactly ideal in jungles, but they used them anyway—mostly as fixed gun emplacements around airfields. My company commander knew my time was up and asked if I wanted to re-enlist and go to Vietnam. He said we'd only be there six weeks, "kick some butt," and come home. It was tempting, especially with the extra pay, but I had reapplied to college and been accepted. So I said no—I was going home.

He went to Vietnam without me. The very first day he arrived, he was killed by an IED.

Q: How did you get back home?

RH: They didn't fly us—back then, they put you on a troop ship with 2,500 or 3,000 other guys. We left from New York, crossed the Atlantic, and went to Europe and back that way. On my return trip in January, we hit a massive storm. Even seasoned sailors were throwing up. I walked up to the deck for air, and there were 500 guys hanging over

the rails vomiting. It was terrible. Everything inside rocked side to side—you'd lose your balance. But we made it.
When we arrived in New York, they processed us out at Fort Hamilton. That's where they make you a civilian again. I had served a full three years.

Q: What did you do afterward?
RH: I went back to Buffalo and finished college. I got my teaching degree and ended up here in Orchard Park. Funny enough, I think my Army experience helped me get the job. During my interview, the principal asked my draft status. I said I'd already served three years. He said, "You're hired."
A few weeks later, I got a letter from the Army saying I might be recalled due to the "unpleasantness in Vietnam." Because my specialty was armored warfare, they needed that. I was terrified—they said I was on active duty notice. Thankfully, they never called me, and I wasn't about to call them.
Eventually, they sent me my discharge papers. I had completed three years of active duty and three years in the reserves.

Q: What did you do during your downtime in Germany?
RH: We did a lot to entertain ourselves. Sometimes, just to mess with the Russians, we'd load cans of pork and beans into our tank cannons and fire them across the border. They'd hit the Russian tanks and explode, splattering them with beans. They'd yell insults at us, and we'd yell back. It was just games—meant to irritate each other.
After the Soviet Union collapsed, I was already home. But friends of mine still stationed there said one day they opened the barriers, and suddenly the people who we thought were enemies were saying, "We love America!" That was 1989. But during my three years, our whole focus was getting ready for the Russians.

Q: Were there any moments that felt like the start of a war?
RH: Yes. The day President Kennedy was assassinated, some believed it was a Communist plot. We were placed on full alert, loaded nuclear weapons, and took our tanks into battle positions. Usually, there was someone to tell you it was a drill—but that night, nobody said anything. The MP wasn't there to open the gate. I radioed my tank commander and said, "The gate is locked." He said, "Run it over." So we did. For 30 minutes, we waited for the Russians. But they never came.

Q: Did you stay in touch with people from your unit?
RH: At first, yes. But remember—this was over 40 years ago. When I got back to Buffalo, a couple of friends who were discharged after me visited. One guy from Idaho even stayed with me for a week. But as time passed, everyone moved on—got married, had kids, started jobs. Each year, it got harder to reconnect.

Most of the guys I served with were volunteers like me. Volunteers did three years; draftees did two and were done. The career soldiers—"lifers"—stayed in and probably went to Vietnam. But no one expected Vietnam to get as bad as it did. Same thing with Iraq. People just didn't see it coming.

Q: Did you learn any German while stationed there?
RH: Yes, they offered a German language school. It was a two-week crash course where they never spoke a word of English. Everything was immersion—ten hours a day. Afterward, I could speak passable German.
To test it, they sent us into town to talk with locals. I found a pretty girl and tried to ask her the time in German, but I screwed it up and accidentally said, "I love you." She replied in perfect English, "I don't even know you." I was so embarrassed. The words were close—but not close enough.

Q: Did American soldiers interact much with Germans?
RH: All the time. Every American base had local girls nearby—some of it was just prostitution. But there were genuine relationships too. One guy in my company married a German girl. Since he was a lifer, he went back to the States and learned to speak perfect German from his wife.
He could fool the MPs into thinking he was a local. When you got a pass, you had to be back by 11 p.m., but he'd stay out all night. The MPs would stop him, but he'd talk in German and they couldn't tell the difference. I asked how he knew he was fluent. He said, "When you can think in German, that's when you know."

Q: Are you involved in any veterans' organizations?
RH: No. When my reserve duty ended in 1968, Vietnam was raging. I was angry about the war—I could already see we were going to lose. I could've joined the VFW, but I didn't. I became a war protester. I'm a pragmatist—if there's no chance of winning, do something else.

Q: Did you keep in touch with your family while overseas?
RH: Oh, here's a funny story. I had a girlfriend when I enlisted and promised to write her all the time. But I got lazy and didn't write for two months. She kept writing, asking why I hadn't replied. Eventually, she wrote to my company commander asking if I was okay. He called me in and ordered me to write her—which I did. I apologized. We were doing a lot of field work, always moving around. I could've written—I just didn't.

Q: Were you still together when you returned?
RH: Yes. I married her. I actually met her when I was 15 and she was 14. I stole her in ninth grade.

Q: How did your family react when you returned?
RH: They were fine. My mom had been upset when I enlisted, but in the end, the Army was good for me. I got out of Buffalo, had to take care of myself. There were some ugly moments, though.
One time on the firing range, the tank next to mine had a malfunction—called a "cook off." The gun didn't fire properly and exploded inside. That tank had 57 large shells and thousands of rounds of ammo. It blew up. The fire department arrived but said there was nothing they could do except foam it. The crew burned to death. They asked if I wanted to escort the bodies home and present the flag to the families. I said no. I didn't want to do that.

Q: Was your education supported afterward?
RH: Yes. I used the GI Bill, which covered pretty much all of college. That was a good deal—I didn't even know about it until I got back. Of course, it's different if you're in combat. The risk of injury is higher. But for every guy on the front lines, there are six more supporting in logistics, supply, clerical work. Only about one in six actually fights.

Q: What's your family's heritage?
RH: My grandparents were from Prussia, which became part of Poland. They immigrated to the U.S. in the early 1900s. Both sides of the family spoke Polish and German, but I think they considered themselves Polish. The borders kept changing back then.

Q: Did the military make you more self-reliant?
RH: Definitely. You have to do for yourself. But you also rely heavily on your unit—especially in a tank crew. There are three others you have to trust. Sometimes you serve with the same guys for 18 months. You build that bond.
My tank commander was a good guy. One day, he had an accident while cleaning the .50 caliber machine gun on top of the tank. A spring shot out and hit his nose—bent it 90 degrees. I looked up and he asked, "How's my nose?" I said, "Not good, Sarge." He bled like crazy, but the medics fixed him up.

Q: Did you get any awards?
RH: I did. I can't even remember what it was called—some kind of battalion-level award. I'd have to dig it out.

Q: Any final stories?
RH: One time, we were on a night combat training mission. I was the gunner and fired at a target 1,300 meters away. But just as I fired, a cow walked in front of the target. I blew it to pieces. We paid the German farmer for it, and the tank crew joked, "Guess we're having steak tonight."

Q: Thank you, Mr. Herko.
RH: Thank you.