

Interview by phone September 12, 2023 by Judy Allen

Richard Cooper of Hartshorne, Oklahoma, served in the Army National Guard, 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. He enlisted and served from 1962-1980. He was determined to join a branch of the US Military after high school. "I tried to get in the Air Force, Navy and all the rest, but I had a slight heart murmur and they would not let me in," said Cooper. After more visits to a doctor, he was told that the heart murmur should not bother him on anything he wanted to do. Cleared by a doctor, the National Guard let him enlist. He reached a rank of E-5.

He had six months of basic training in Fort Jackson, South Carolina. "There were a lot of little deals that helped me grow into a man during that six months." He has a vivid memory of training when they were all rushing out of the barracks. "There was a three-step platform, and it took two steps across and three down to get from the door to the ground. I felt a nudge in my back and I was shoved forward. I felt my right ankle hit pavement. I was sent to the clinic and was told to 'just walk around a while and it will be ok.' Come to find out, it did mess up my ankle. I wallowed through pain and made the six months of training. After I got out the phone company sent me on regular checkups. I was a lineman and stood on my right leg a lot. After a retired, I went to the doctor and he said my ankle was the worst case of arthritis he has ever seen. I have no idea who shoved me going across the steps, don't think it was on purpose. When they blew the whistle for formation, everybody came out in a run."

He said, "We had six months to train, and came back to Hartshorne and every year I did a two-week training at Fort Chaffe, AR. I volunteered one day to go get ammunition because we were going to a firing range. I thought that would be an easy assignment – but it wasn't. I had to get ammunition from the Depot in McAlester. The Depot said I didn't have a big enough clearance to go in there. I returned to my post and got a Top Secret clearance. At the firing range in McAlester, I stayed on the firing line. That is where my hearing problem started. I had to pass out ammo and pick up hulls. They all had to be counted."

A tidbit of information Cooper remembered that he was in the same platoon as Elvis Presley's body guard.

His highest rank achieved was an E-5.

"I could not find employment at my home area, so I went to Indianapolis (where he had family). When I got there, I started working and making a living. I went to the National Guard there and checked in. The fellow that was writing down numbers copied my numbers wrong. I stayed up there about a year and got a letter from the National Guard saying I hadn't been to any meetings and I am about to go to active duty. The letter said I must check in at Hartshorne by a certain date. I had married and we were living in Indianapolis. We packed and came back to Hartshorne."

Cooper served during the Vietnam War, but did not have to go overseas. "The only problem we had (while I was in) was the Cuban Crisis. We were called to spend four days at the National

Guard Armory. WE were packed and ready to go. The crisis was dissolved, and I just had to serve in Hartshorne, Indianapolis and McAlester.

He said, "I remember the Cuban Crisis. At the time, they were telling us if we went to Cuba to fight, most likely 80 percent of us would not come home. That imprinted on everybody's brain and made us have a different outlook on the way we enjoy life. It didn't happen, but during that four days we thought we were going – and they kept a tight rein on us because they didn't want anybody slipping out! Most people in the service have different attitudes toward life. I went to the priest and asked about killing. I told him it is plain stated that killing is a mortal sin and I don't want to die with a mortal sin on my soul. The priest said, 'When in the service all that is different and the good Lord won't hold it against you.'"

Cooper said he went to work for the telephone company in 1979. His hours at work interfered with the National Guard because he did not initially have a two-week vacation saved up to go to Fort Chaffee in summer. It was difficult and time-consuming to get a released from the National Guard, with a lot of paperwork, but he left the Guard in order to work full-time at the phone company.

A message Cooper wants to share is, "The way military did it back then straightened up back talkers and all that. We learned to keep our mouth shut and pay attention. We did what we were supposed to do at the time we were supposed to do it or there were consequences."

He feels he received good training a different areas. "Service helped me grow into a decent man. Along with the Catholic Church!

Asked if there were any "Good Luck" rituals or objects he and his team had, Cooper said, "NO, if anything was going to happen, it was going to happen to me. When I was a kid, I came walking into the house with a snake wrapped around my arm. My dad said very calmly, 'let's go outside and mess with that snake. I had hold of its head, and it was a pretty good size snake. My father told me to look inside the mount, showed me the fangs and told me it was poisonous. I was about five."

Laughing, Cooper said, "I can cross a pasture and if there was a snake around, I will step close to it. I have never been bitten. I look down where I am stepping and glance upward. That was my training for hunting. My dad taught me to hunt. I still go hunting for deer.

He advises everyone that having mutual respect for people is the key to good relationships – and a good marriage.