

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Vietnam Conflict 1961-75

Personal Experience

O.H. 1483

ROBERT WATTS

Interviewed

by

Darlene Pavlock

on

December 11, 1991

ROBERT C WATTS

Robert C Watts was born November 1, 1942 in Youngstown, Ohio to Robert and Leona Watts. He was raised on the West side of Youngstown until moving to McDonald, Ohio in 1952, when his sister, Susan was born. The family did minimal traveling when he was a child. Prior to graduating from McDonald High School in 1961, he enlisted in the U S Army.

He was part of the newly formed Steel Valley Platoon that consisted of fifty men from McDonald, Girard, Struthers, Campbell, Youngstown East and Woodrow Wilson High Schools. He left for basic training at Fort Knox, Kentucky on June 15, 1961. After basic training, the Steel Valley Platoon was split. By an error, Bob was sent to Fort Hood, Texas for advanced training in tanks. When the error was discovered, he was given the choice of returning home on leave or another job classification. He chose training in code and conduct (escape and evasion) at Fort Ord, California. Eventually he was assigned to Scofield Barracks, Hawaii, and was assigned to the 25th Infantry Division, Alpha Troop, 3rd Recon, 3/4 Cavalry. Their main mission was to be a strategic strike force for any hot-spot in Southeast Asia.

He was one of fifty men who volunteered for a new unit formed for Vietnam Duty. They were the first trained troops for Vietnam. From May to September 1963, he did his first tour in Vietnam at Qui Nhon. His second tour was from January to April 1964, in Pleiku. He was a door gunner on the Ch "hognose" H21 helicopters. He was discharged June 14, 1964 and received the Vietnam Campbell Medal, the Air Medal, and Expeditionary Medal.

Bob and his wife live in Newton Falls, Ohio. He has been employed by B.O.C. at

Lordstown, Ohio since 1969 He is a member of the Veterans Chapter 135 He is a drummer and singer with T.J Watts & Company band that specialize in music from the 1960's

P This is an interview with Robert Watts for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the Vietnam War, by Darlene Pavlock, on December 11, 1991, at 7.00 p m

Where were you born and raised?

W I was born in Youngstown on November 1, 1942 at Northside Hospital on Gypsy Lane I was raised on the West side of Youngstown

P On the West side?

W Until 1952 Then, my dad was transferred from the Ohio Woods to McDonald Steel, and I was withheld, and graduated in 1961.

P From McDonald High School?

W Yes

P So, you lived on the West side, which is ethnic, small

W Monkey's nest, that is what we called it back then

P Is that where you lived, in Monkey's Nest?

W. Yes It is on the corner of Steel and Mahoning.

P Yes, and then you moved to McDonald, which is also a very small community

W Very small, right

P So, you are really a small town, home town person

W Yes

P Did you travel much when you were a child? Did you go on vacations?

W No My dad was in the service The only time we traveled was when we went to some of the Army bases where he was stationed at. One for instance, was Camp Paxton, North Carolina That was during World War II And we were out at Denver, Colorado when my dad was stationed out there in the mountains Other than that, no, not to my knowledge, we have never traveled anywhere We did travel several times to Texas to see relatives

P Just basically stayed around here?

W Right We waited for my dad to get out of the service But all I knew is my mother was constantly worrying about my dad coming home, and I am, in the mean time, driving my mother nuts

P As kids will do, huh?

W Yes. But then there were not many vacations back then Nobody was going on vacations Kids played with each other, and everybody went to everybody's houses The mothers always fed at least seven or eight kids at one time So, it was the brotherhood of the west side area. You know, we all kind of grew up together and played together Not too many people took vacations the way they do today

P Minimal traveling, but a lot of fun in the neighborhood

W: Oh, yes I went to Washington Grade School on the West side, which is now closed

P Did you?

W. But it was a good thing for me to go to McDonald Once my dad was transferred over there I was going to a much smaller high school If I would have stayed on the west side, I would have went to Youngstown Chaney, which would be much larger I got a chance to participate in a lot of sports activities

P What sports did you play?

W. I played four years of football I was a middle guard on defense and left offensive guard on offense We played both ways back then And, basketball I was not very good at basketball I got cut my senior year when I froze up I could not relax in front of people during my senior year At practice I was okay, but during a game, no. So they had to put the best people in there I just could not quite cut it I handled it I did not do too bad I just wanted to win the game That was the main thing, you know And, I ran track. I ran the mile and the half-mile, and the mile relay and half-mile relay So, I enjoyed all of that

P You had some nice teen years. It sounds like you had a nice childhood

W Oh, it was great, yes We had good people The guys that I hung around with, we all basically were crazy characters, but good clean fun, you know Not a lot of trouble at all. You were never bored, not if you had a basketball underneath

your arm, and you could always get about seven or eight guys to go down and play ball, or baseball or whatever you wanted to do. There was always something to do in that town, you know. So, if anybody got in trouble, it was the ones that were less fortunate or had a problem making friends. They were kind of the loners. So, I mean, you had to belong to something, you know. Of course you have to, when you are growing up, you have to handle the kidding, the ribbing, the razzing. You have to handle it. You just have to handle it and deal with it the best way you can. We had good people there.

P It is a nice community. Real nice community.

W Yes, it was. That was when the mills were going, and, of course, once U.S. Steel pulled out of there, then McDonald realized that they had to stand on their own two feet, which they have done rather well.

P They have. They have survived real well.

W They sure have, with the help of the people and the new people coming in.

P That is the truth. Well, we are doing real good here.

W Good.

P. Why did you enter the service?

W Why? I wanted to go to Hawaii.

P Really?

W There was a sergeant from the Girard office, a recruiting station, that came to our school, and he talked to the senior guys. The first thing he said, that came out of his mouth, is that we have four openings for Hawaii. And telling that to a senior boy, plus knowing what Hawaii is, what it stands for, you know. I mean, you just think about it. Boy, it would really be nice to go over there. So, I thought about that and I went home after school was over, and talked to my dad. I said, "Dad, I want to join the Army." My dad always was a good listener, and he felt that this is what I wanted. Before I made any decision, he said, "Think about it. Weigh your future, things you want to do, which direction you want to go in." And, if this was what I wanted to do, then he would back me up one hundred percent. Not that he had to or I needed his blessing, but I wanted it. My dad and I, we had a good, very good, comraderie together.

P. Did you?

W, He taught me everything I knew. Of course, my mother helped, too. So finally, I decided this is what I wanted to do. He said, "Great."

P. You were a senior?

W I was a senior at McDonald High. At that time, you could go in as soon as you graduated. There was no waiting period or anything like that, or no big college thing where you put in four years, come out and get "X" amount of dollars for college. They did not have that then. So, I graduated in the first week of June, and then that following -- I think it was Friday -- I left for the service.

P So, you were only out a week? Out of high school a week?

W Yes. I did not want a taste of the free life. I just wanted to get in there and get my teeth into it, you know. But what they had at that time was a thing called the Steel Valley Platoon.

P Oh, yes?

W. It was made up of members of McDonald, Girard, Struthers, Campbell, Youngstown East, and Woodrow Wilson.

P Is that right?

W And the Steel Valley Platoon had fifty guys that came from all those schools. We met in Girard, at the American Legion Course in Girard, on Saturday morning, on the 15th, Saturday. The Youngstown Vindicator was there and photographers, and this was supposedly the very first organized platoon from the Youngstown area to go to the service on the "Buddy Plan." Army was really pushing that. They believed in it. This is what we did. So, we all met for the first time. We left that morning and went up to Cleveland.

P Were you the only one from McDonald?

W No, there were three of us from McDonald.

P Really? Three of you that went to school together?

W. Yes. Patterson, Ventulli, and Trump.

P. Oh yeah?

W Yes. And Steven Wacegts from Girard -- I believe that is how he spelled his

last name -- and some of the others that I still stay in contact with today

P. Do you?

W. Yes, from that particular company. We all went to basic together in Fort Knox

P. So you went to Cleveland?

W. We went to Cleveland, swarming, physical, the whole thing. Nobody flunked. All of us, we passed with flying colors! Little Chicago boys

P. That is cute

W. That night, we were going to leave at the train station in Cleveland to go to Kentucky

P. You went by train?

W. Yes. They gave us meal tickets and we all went out to a selected restaurant. They selected it. That is where we got something to eat. A whole bunch of us went down to the Burlesque

P. Park Burlesque?

W. Park Burlesque in Cleveland. Got crazy and everything else. Last night of freedom

P. Who was there?

W. Busty Russel

P. Was she?

W. Of course, absolutely

P. I figured it had to be her

W. I would not spend my money on anybody else but her. She was talented!

P. She was?

W. She really was. She just was not, you know. She had a talent. Plus, we loved the comics, too. The comics were great

P Yes

W But then after that -- I think it was midnight -- we left from the train station that night We got into Louisville and then took a bus to Fort Knox And then, life was over

P The real world goes on

W The real world was a thing of the past!

P Your basic training was how long?

W It was from June, July, August, through September

P Was it?

W Yes And it went well. It was smooth It was tough

P Was it?

W We only had two in the entire base company that decided that they did not like it They went AWOL

P Did they?

W Yes They finally caught one of them from Girard -- Steven Waecghts. I never knew what happened to him afterwards At the next to the last week before the basic cycle was finished, before we would all receive our role fifteen day leaves - - go back home and then go back and do our second eight weeks in advanced training -- the Berlin thing broke out The oil crisis broke out

P Really?

W It shook the Army up pretty good They were all flustered Everybody was running around going crazy So, they decided to hit our company and split it into three parts, all but one-third of us You either went to Fort Gord in Georgia, Fort Dix, New Jersey, or Fort Hood, Texas The remaining people would go as scheduled -- go home and have their leaves and then return back for their second week

P And that was the group you were in?

W, No, I was going to Fort Hood, Texas. I had to call my mother She thought I was

coming home. Of course, I am only eighteen. I am not really sure exactly what is going on, other than what we read and what we heard.

P. Sure, yes.

W. So, I get down to Fort Hood, Texas, and they are going through the roster of all the people -- we went down by train. Of course, the Army does everything in alphabetical order. My last name begins with "W". I am always one of the last ones to get in. When they finally came to me, they found out I was not supposed to be there. I was supposed to have stayed at Fort Knox, went home, and come back for advanced training in tanks because I wanted to be a tank driver. That is what I wanted. You know, I wanted to drive one of the Steel cockmen. I heard so much about them.

P. Geeze.

W. So, being that they already had me in Fort Hood, Texas, they said, "Well, you just stand off to the side until we have finished everybody else up." There was not really that many after me. So, they put me up in the headquarters, the Pink Palace I called it. Hundred degree days in Fort Hood, Texas. You could fry an egg right on the side walk as they say. And, they kept me around for one week, and they gave me a choice. They said, "You can still go back to Fort Knox if you want to, or we can send you somewhere else with a complete new MOS." And MOS is your job title. Well, I was kind of a daring character, and I was ready for the adventure and everything else, you know.

P. Away from home for the first time.

W. Yes. Let us see what old Mom and Dad have done. Let us see how I can handle this. So, I said, "Oh, change it. I do not want to go back to Fort Knox."

P. Did you really?

W. Yes. So, they kept me there, and then that following Saturday, they gave me my orders. They gave me a fifteen day delay en route so I could go home, and then I had to be at Fort Orange, California. I got into escape and evasion code of conduct school.

P. That is a big difference.

W. Yes. Yes, it was. Plus, I was out there with NG Reservists, RFA reservists, and I was the only RA in the entire company.

P Really?

W Yes I was the only RA.

P. That is quite a decision there You did not know, but look at how it panned out

W. No, I did not know. I heard of California. I said, "Wow, fantastic This is great "

P Big culture shock from McDonald, Ohio, to Kentucky, to Texas Now all the way out to the coast, California

W I guess I really did not think of it that way at the time because I took everything with separate times. When I got into the code of conduct thing, and started working in escape and evasion, you start putting things into perspective

P. Did you?

W Yes, oh yes. I started growing up a little bit

P Fast

W Yes. I could feel myself growing up, maturing

P What did you have to do out there? What was your training like?

W Well, our training was to catch people Try to catch them First of all, they took us through exactly how you interrogate a person

P Is that right?

W Ways of getting information, ways of trickery without physical force. Of course, there is the old standard scare tactics They had a tee pee out there made out of a frame of regular wood -- a tee pee without a cover on it You are just looking at the wood, the skeleton of it You can tie a person in there about fifty different ways, and each one of them hurts So, they taught us, and they played the game as much as they could to a certain point without violating any of our own guys But, they were very serious about it

P It is a serious business

W Very, very serious, right. And, I had to go through it as a prisoner to see what it is like, to be able to know my code of conduct, exactly what to say, and that is it, what not to say Then, I went on the other side as interrogator. We would go out

at midnight, and they would have, say a company They would drop them off with trucks, and they had from one check point to get to another check point It was nothing but dark and sand that they had to get through. And, we would wait for them

P Is that right?

W And as many as we could catch And, a lot of times, we got in fights and everything else to get them on that truck, but we got them on

P How many weeks was this training?

W Eight weeks

P Really?

W Yes

P You learned all that in eight weeks?

W Yes Well, it is something that you cannot practice You just about know Your common sense tells you what the Army teaches you about it Of course, my military career, I did not pursue that, as far as me staying with the code of conduct

P That is what I was going to ask you What happened to you after that?

W I went to Hawaii with that MOS.

P Did you?

W Yes

P So, you got your journey to Hawaii after all

W Yes I could not believe it. They gave me a thirty-day leave once I completed my tour out there in California Something I had always wanted to do was to travel on a train

P Is that right?

W So, I caught the Santa Fe of San Francisco into Chicago Chicago, the B & O, into Youngstown. It was fabulous

P You went cross-country by train?

W Yes, yes I met a couple of swabbies and a couple of jarheads We just had a great time We stopped in Reno, Nevada -- on the way, the train had stopped and was going to be there temporarily for about an hour -- so, we asked the conductor if he minded if we went up to this restaurant We had seen all these flashing lights, you know, 'Bar and Grill' We wanted to go get some sandwiches because the dining car was all closed. He said, "Yes, sure. Just do not take too long" So we went up there, and the place was called the Chinese Club We walked in there, and I am telling you, it was not a bar and grill It was a big casino It was the biggest one I have ever seen My eyes lit up like all them slot machines that were going there So, we made plans quick. We took care of business right then We designated one guy. "There is the list You go get it We are going over here We do not have a lot of time, so let's do this right." So we hit the one-armed bandits, the slot machines I have never been on any of that stuff Well, we got so involved that we forgot about the train, and when we decided it was time to leave, the train had already left

P Oh no

W. Fortunately for us, we had pulled him up and got a cabbie Called for one and he came The train had gone down four blocks and stopped

P Did it really?

W Yes, so that cabbie caught it We caught the train We got back on And we would have been in bad shape!

P You sure would

W There were a lot of people We did not have a lot of money As far as purchasing another ticket from Reno, Nevada to wherever our destination was But anyway, I got home and spent time with all the folks and saw all my buddies and everything else Then, I met a girl. She was a fine, fine girl I will not mention any names or anything She was just a big sweetie, you know

P. From this area?

W Yes. Just the sweetheart of my life

P. Oh, yes

W Well, I will get to her

P. Okay, we can do that. So, where did you go after your thirty-day leave? Where did they assign you?

W. I had to go back to Oakland Army terminal in California.

P. Did you?

W. And wait for my boat to come in. They say it was a staging area of disparcagens thing, and you had to wait until your ship came in. So, we hung around for a week. You do duties. KP, security guard, fire guard, stuff like that. Well, about three or four of us. We really did not care for the KP because it was a big gally. You served a lot of people, permanent duty stations that are right there. So, we decided that we were going to all volunteer to give blood. When you give blood, you get the rest of the day off. So, we did and they had to take us all the way over across the golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. We gave the blood, came back and we were half dead. We lay around the bunks. They would not bother us and we did that three days in a row. A lot of blood, I am telling you.

P. Three days?

W. Yes we did, yes, absolutely.

P. Oh, my.

W. Yes. I was trying to think of the guys names, too. I do not know. I cannot remember what their names are now.

P. So, your ship came in?

W. Oh, Joe Stephanic was one of them.

P. Really?

W. Yes. But anyway, yes, our ship came. It was called the *U S S Brecklevich*. It was a big troop carrier.

P. Was it?

W. Something like four or five levels or something like that. They stuck a couple of thousand GI's on that thing. And, that boat was going to Hawaii. It was going to Korea. It was going to Japan, and dropping off troops. Of course, picking the ones up coming back from separation or discharge or whatever. But, that is how I got to wire an American troop carrier.

P So you did not fly You floated

W The only place I flew to was Vietnam That was the only place I ever flew to All the rest of the trips were strictly by boat, whether it was a flat boarding LST or a big troop carrier with a round belly on it that rolls real slow It is an experience

P Now, at this time did you even have any conception of Vietnam? There was not that much said about it back then, was there?

W Oh, heavens no Nothing was said about Vietnam. Nothing about it

P So, it was just basically doing your service time in a different thinking

W Well, when I came into the division I was assigned to Bravo Troop -- no, Alpha Troop, 3rd Recon, 3/4 Cavalry I was in Scofield Barracks, Hawaii and that was part of the 25th Infantry Division Their main mission is to be a strategic strike force for any hot spot in Southeast Asia

P I see

W We all knew that We knew that If there was any outbreak, we knew that we would be one of the first to go We were taught that

P Now, were you a unit that was assigned to that, or did you go in as an individual?

W I went in representing a unit.

P Did you?

W Yes They posted a list They posted this set of orders saying that they were looking for fifty volunteers for Vietnam

P Is that right?

W And at that time we were tired of the rock We needed something new, you know, something to do I mean, there is only so much you can do in Hawaii You run out of places

P That is true

W. You cover all the mountain terrain, Waikiki and all that You are still a GI, and there is only so many things you can do as a GI.

P. Yes

W So, I decided to sign up for it. And my buddy -- I am trying to think of his name now -- Mertz was his last name. He was from Barberton, Ohio, but he does not live there anymore because I have tried to track him down. I cannot find him Dennis Eckles was another one Two really, really close friends of mine that were over there So, all three of us decided we were going to sign up for it

P. Did they offer any extra incentives to volunteer for Vietnam back then?

W Extra incentives?

P. You know The one gentleman had told me there was fifty dollars extra involved That is why he volunteered This was in the later 1960's.

W Well, no Not at the beginning I mean, there was money to be made in that respect, but we never thought of it

P It was just another duty spot.

W Another duty station It was a TDY thing We were still attached to the division We were going over there representing the 25th Division and our own individual units.

P I see

W They took all fifty of us, and we were the very first fifty that we thought of that come out of that division to go work for the Mac D force

P Is that right?

W But they took us all They took us completely out of the area They put us up in our own separate barracks We all stayed together We went to training, firing out of the choppers And all the rest we knew because we were all trained in jungle warfare, camouflage, gorilla and all that kind of warfare Everybody who went to Hawaii, Scofield Barracks, got to put your time out in those jungles, and you know a little bit about it You can relate to Charlie a little bit about that.

P So it was basically the choppers that you had to get used to, and firing and shooting from there?

W Yes That was something new Learning how to lead and shooting at pop-ups,

silhouettes on the ground when you are banking, coming in and using that old 30 caliber, which was a pretty adequate weapon, if I may say so. Because there was no work stoppages. It is a pretty good gun. Then, after thirty days, they took us down to hit them and loaded us up on a big match with no windows and sitting backwards, and off we go into the wild blue yonder. We arrived in the Saigon airport.

P: Did you?

W. Yes

P See, I did not even have to ask you

W Yes, armed salute. And waited around for a big Charlie 1-2-3 to come pick us up. That was the miniature boxcar. The smaller boxcar, it is not like the C-130, the Hercules.

P They were very small

W. Yes. And you wear a parachute on this. No doubt about it, because it shakes you to death.

P Now, when you were going in you could not actually see the country like you could after you got off of the plane and went back onto the boxcar and then flew from there.

W No, you cannot really see. All it is, it just looks like an island. That is all it looks like. A brown and green island with the fog haze. You can see all that. The coast on it.

P So, where did they take you from there?

W They flew up the coast right to Qui Nhon.

P. Qui Nhon.

W And unloaded us. As soon as they dropped the decks, there were people getting on as we got off, and we heard people clapping. The people that were clapping were avionics men, maintenance men who were doing our jobs that we were trained for because they had no other gunners.

P They did not have anybody to do the job.

W No, we were the first trained gunners there We were combat troops that were trained for that

P They were probably thrilled

W A lot of them were A lot of them were, and I think they were really sincere about it, too

P Sure.

W And, it made you feel pretty good in that respect, but we did not know what we were getting into We had no idea because they did not tell us anything They told us absolutely nothing

P there was the welcoming committee, but you did not have any idea what it actually entailed

W Exactly, yes

P What to expect

W Yes. We were not briefed but basically knew we were going to be gunners in the Army We knew that much, but we did not know exactly what to expect from our jobs, what would be curtailed, what we would run into. We had no idea

P You did not perceive it as more like a war zone

W No, no

P It was just protection.

W We thought we were going to help the people in some way I do not think we were serious about it. I think that is what it was We did not take it seriously

P I see, yes

W You know, and we all had to go into the Chaplain's hooch Then that chaplain gave us a briefing of what was expected of us, and what we could look forward to, what we could expect. When he said that, the fact that you would be going into what they call Legal Flights, you were going into med-vac situations, pulling out wounded It got a little serious then.

P It started hitting home.

W Well, it is too late, now We are here If you are going to get scared, you better get scared on the first mission And do not let it happen anymore

P Get it over with

W Exactly, yes

P When you went, did you know you would be there a specific amount of time, or no?

W Yes

P They told you how long?

W Yes So we was introduced to our crew chiefs, and they paired us off. In each hooch you had a gunner, a crew chief gunner, a crew chief, up to ten people in a hooch

P I see

W You were assigned a ship. They gave you your flack jacket, your headsets, you flight suits, or you could wear your fatigues.

P You had a choice?

W Yes My choice -- I did not want the fatigues, I wanted a flight suit. Something that was loose and was cool And, by the way, we came over with 45's on our hips

P Did you?

W Oh, yes

P And, you were allowed to keep those?

W Oh, yes, with our clips, too Yes We had full magazine, one in and one spare They gave us the 30 caliber machine guns with all the ammunition that we could possibly need The following day was all for the orientation because they did not have any flight schedule But then the next morning, they had a large board that has every chopper We had green flight on one side, blue flight on the other And each flight has a series of ship members, and they have a light by it When that light is lit up, if it is by your ship member, then you got a mission They call them sordies. We called them missions back then

P Yes, sordies now

W: We had a mission our second day in Vietnam.

P Really?

W And it was a biggie It was a, I do not know, maybe if you are going to have a bad mission, maybe you should have it and get it over with, get it behind you You know, you need that to mature, whatever you want to call it, to toughen you up. I do not know But, it was a bad one, my very first mission We had a guy that froze on the gun, one of our fifty guys

P Really?

W Yes, he froze on the gun And I do not know what happened to him. I have no idea what happened to him. As far as I knew, they sent him back to the states One month's pay

P That was it

W A carton of cigarettes Well, you shot your first gook

P On your second day?

W Second day, yes. It just, it was a non-thinkable situation You did not have time to think. You knew that I mean, you were brought up like that This was your job, and if you dare even question, then that ship was your responsibility You are in that door to protect that ship and those two pilots You know, and if you are going to sit there and think about it, "So, should I or should I not?"

P you are not doing your job

W. That is right And that whole ship is going to be history and you are going to lose three lives, four including your own. So you had to do it. You just had to do it That is all there is to it. But, there were twenty choppers. We took twenty choppers out of Qui Nhon and we flew to Pleiku, and I think it was the Fifth Arvin Division that we had We loaded up We went into a hot LZ, what they call a hot LZ It is a landing area that there is still a lot of fighting going on And also, your mohawks go in, and they bomb the entire area to keep Charlie away from the edge line of the wooded area So, we come in, take them into these open areas, and unload these troops For the safety of the troops and the safety for us, you better get out quick So, they scraped the entire area

P Get it as ready as they can

W Exactly, right Peppering the LZ, that is another term that they used Well, here was this old fifty-year old helicopter that they should have retired

P Is that how old they were?

W Oh, that was an old Navy transport in World War II It was never meant to be a combat ship It was strictly for transportation and cargo and VIP

P Little modification and there it was

W Little modification and we made it into an assault helicopter And, it was just a big lumbering hunk of metal We were pretty proud of it, though I will tell you, we were pretty proud We made the best out of them Hognoses -- and that is what we called them.

P Is that right?

W Yes, we called them a Hognose because it looked like that It was a big banana, and I will show you a picture of it.

P Okay

W But we came in there We came in two ships at a time That was another experience, too I found out that the Arvin Troop got pretty panicky They got scared They did not want to leave We had to throw them out

P Knowing what he was going into.

W Exactly, yes. But we had to And the more we sit there, the more we are a target for small arms, or even 50 caliber. So, a lot of them we had to kick out

P Did you?

W Yes

P Manually throw them out

W Exactly, exactly We had no choice. And the pilots getting on you telling, "Get them out. Get them out!" And, once we get them out, then we can take off But we made four lifts that day

P Did you really?

W Four lifts, yes. I will never forget that day That was something else And for some reason, that day stands out in my mind more than any other day in Vietnam, the second day. Some men will, you know, you think of so many guys, so many faces Even the Arvin troops, I can still picture three or four of them

P Can you?

W Oh yes Their faces with their helmets down over their eyes And they are getting ready to go in and do battle, you know And you feel for those guys

P What type of troops did they battle at that time? Was it the Gorillas or was it more the North Vietnamese Army, the actual standing Army?

W No, the NVA was not involved at that time This was the Vietcong

P The Cong

W The Vietcong, yes And the Revolutionary Army, volunteer army

P I see

W. Charlie, at that time -- see, briefly in 1961, they were organizing In 1962, they were organizing the women

P Oh, yes?

W The Women's Liberation And the women played a very important part in their army. But on the other hand, in 1962 we were in, 1962 was Operation Strategic Hamlet, that was what they called it. Then they put in so many thousands of camps Have you ever seen the movie Green Beret?

P Yes

W That was a camp And they put over thousands of them in there along with helping, the U S advisors, the Green Berets -- we called them the Sneaky Petes at that time And they built these camps to fight against Charlie. And 1962 was being handled pretty well

P Was it?

W Yes See, they used to go up there They could hear a chopper coming, but

they did not know what direction it was coming in, and when they finally saw the chopper, they did not know how to lead it. They would shoot right at the chopper, you know. Consequently, they would miss it. Fortunately for us, they did. Well, after a while, they started hitting a few of them.

P Figuring out how to do it right

W Exactly, yes. Once they started learning how to hit, then they started using stronger stuff, you know, like a 50 caliber.

P. They knew what was effective and they just kept making their way up

W Exactly, yes, 50 caliber brings some smoke in the chopper. Tear it up bad, you know. But, if you hit a certain period of time doing this, then you know what your job is. Now you know what to do. Now you know basically, there is no more mystery, you know, that Charlie wants to shoot you down every time you go up, and once you hit tree-top level, which we flew a lot, you know, you are flying maybe 200 feet, 250 feet up in the air, you know.

P Which is nothing

W Yes, it is right there

P To them

W Oh, yes and, you know, you go down these rivers and you bank, and you are doing this back and forth, side to side, you know. There is a place called Ann Cave. Ann came out. We used to fly through there many a mission. And Chuck always waited for us in there.

P Did he really?

W All the time, oh yes. That was a good ambush.

P He knew that was where they were coming.

W We fought for a chopper, you know. At this one particular canal, it was like a gorge, you flew right through. And he liked to take box shots at us all the time. And it was hard for us to get him, because we would be humming through there. We just opened up wide open, and by the time you even see him, if you were lucky enough to see him, you know. You were not even going to get a round out of it, so.

P Geez Did you see him?

W In Ann Cave, no.

P: You knew he was there, but it was an illusion of his presence

W: Yes, I knew he was there, yes And I knew he got us, I knew that because when we came back, we would see the bullet holes all over But, at that particular time, no, I could not see him The only time I had seen Charlie was up at Quang Nai Province, which was a hot spot during that time, and Charlie was real big up there He had a lot of troops, you know, and we had squat In fact, here comes the humor There is humor in everything, you know There are units flying down by the Delta, with these guys getting all the missions, you know And we get a mission like once a week, you know Maybe twice a week if we are lucky And we are starting to get a little jealous They are getting all the glory and everything, you know They are cranking it up like crazy, and guys who were jumping on the ships go up and get some fleason I stayed there to learn

I do not believe I am going to lead a disjunt life, I guess You know, I am sure World War II veterans have their memories, too, I would imagine The Marines on Hiroshima, that I have heard about To me, those guys were just the greatest to tackle something like that, you know. But we did our part, our thing So, I put it in a perspective now and I am with my buddies A Vietnam veteran, to me, is a brother, a solid, 100 percent brother And I gave him the utmost respect, because of what he did, where he was at, you know, so long as he was not a want-to-be But, I enjoy the comraderie with my brothers Wednesday nights are our meetings We are trying to get our chapter back on its feet I enjoy that I enjoy wearing my hats I enjoy wearing my shirts. I enjoy fighting for the United POWSU And we still have men over there

P Yes

W. And I will do anything for those guys Just ask me Do it, it is done. Consider it done. So that is where it is. But it really hurts. The first time I ever went to, well, the shrink, you know, they make you a nut This was drawn out Sam Swagger, who had me out on the roof, said, "I know a fellow that I think can help you." You see, a psychologist, his name is Rick Saons And he is a local counselor here who was counselor of the chapter, the Vietnam Veterans of Mahoning County. Rick is a youth counselor, and let me set up an appointment with you so you can go see him I said, "Okay." So I did And he sent me to the first session Sam took me personally to the first rap session And a rap session is two Vietnam Veterans sitting around, and anybody that has anything to say, close your ears, they listen. Everybody listens Anybody jumps, they listen And it was hard for me to talk

P Sure

W. Because these guys were 65, 66, 67, 68, you know

P Yes, big difference

W. There was a big difference, see?

P There sure was

W and here I am, you know. I was a little embarrassed, but I was told no. You do not be embarrassed with a situation like that, you know. I mean, it does not matter what day or what time you were over there, you know

P That is right

W. Charlie did not care what time you were over there, or what day you were over there, you know And so once I learned that, then I was not afraid again And those guys seemed to think it was great. And then, I started looking at it one step beyond, and I was kind of proud to do what I did, you know

P That is right.

W We kicked some butt, we really did We lost a lot of good guys, but we kicked some butt Well, we had too many strings attached to us We were restricted and low in numbers for that many people We could not do what we should have done We could not go here, we could not go here

P. Now, is that how it was when you were there, too, or was it as restricted as the later time?

W Oh, yes.

P It was just as restricted?

W Well, they told us we could not fire at them when they fired at us back I said, "You mean to tell me that if a person who crosses the street pulls a weapon on me and he points that weapon at me, that I am supposed to wait until that bullet hits my nose? Forget it, then, I am not waiting " I will not wait

P. But that is what they wanted you to do?

W. Exactly Well they were not thinking of that, you know

P: Is there anything I did not ask that you would like me to cover? Anything that you thought I would have asked that I did not? No? This is your personal addition

W: My personal addition? Talk about anything?

P: Yes Whatever you would like to add

W: Whatever I would like to add There was this girl down on the beach. (Laughter)

P: That is okay Remember, I told you about that other project?

W: Yes R&R (rest and recovery), to a lot of the guys who were going to Japan, Australia, our R&R was right in our own back yard

P: Really?

W: It was right on the beach of Qui Nhon. And you could surf there

P: Could you?

W: At times, yes, if the tide was coming in and the currents were strong enough Then, we had one, two, three avionics guys, crew chiefs, and so many crew chiefs and some of the gunners I cannot think of all their names

P: Sure

W: But we would sit around and get about four faces of Schlitz beer Sit on that beach and soak up that sun when we was not flying And everybody would always come up to us Americans always caused, you know, created an attraction

P: Yes, they sure do

W: All the time, you know

P: Yes

W: And of course, you were looking over your shoulder all the time.

P: For the most part, were the people friendly to you?

W: Yes

P Were they more accepting then?

W Yes, I think so Well, they were curious I think more of a curiosity than anything I do not think they were afraid of us But, if we said something very loud, they would be very alert They would look up Almost to, in the point of scaring them a little bit So, we enjoyed that There was some good guys There was the Wednesday night movies and Charlie used to like to harass us all the time

P Really?

W Yes They would always bring in a decent movie

P Did you have television then?

W If not, we would get an air raid

P Really?

W No, we had a big screen Well, a projector

P That was that

W And then, there was the powdered milk The powdered milk was in the biggest pot that you could possibly imagine It was almost like a mini jacuzzi full of milk, with about three big chunks of ice in it, because it had to because of the heat And, of course, this is the monsoon season, too It gets so hot and then it rains, rains, rains But, it was not a palace It was not a hotel. It was a GI town, like any other GI town is. It was, you know

Oh, there was one time where -- I got to tell this Da Nang, all these characters, and these Air Force guys down at Da Nang, crop jacket, I called them -- they always kept saying that they had some really crack volleyball teams So, they would challenge anybody in Nam to bring their boys down to play volleyball They would play, and when they just played, they would whoop them out They were proud They were bragging Well, some of our guys heard it So, one Sunday afternoon, they assigned my chopper and my buddy's chopper, Merchant's chopper, 151 and 089, to take these characters down and go play volleyball That was Da Nang

P That was your mission for Sunday?

W That was my Sunday mission Of course, a chopper does not leave without those gunners Those guns go on But this is a peaceful mission, so we were

going to fly the coast all the way down to Da Nang. We should not have any problems. And we were flying 19,000 feet. Or was it 1,900? I think, yes, 1,900 feet. So, we get down to Da Nang and they go do their thing. They go play volleyball. So, me and my buddy Mertz, we got the two crew chiefs, we would go to the E M Club. And we were sitting there, just casually enjoying the cool air conditioning in that E M club, that we did not have. But, they had it. And, enjoying their beer. It was nice atmosphere. It was nice and cool. Well, we drank just a little bit too much beer and ended up passing out. Caused quite a stir. And the next thing we knew, we were in the Air Force guys' quarters way in between their bunks. They had dragged us in there and put us in between their bunks, and that was how we slept all night in there.

P. Oh, no

W. When we woke, our two choppers were gone, with no gunners. Automatic Article 15

P. Oh my god

W. so, we caught a hawk. And we got on to a Charlie 1-2-3. We was up there. And the commander was waiting for us. As soon as that deck lowered down, or that ramp, we got off. He was waiting for us. He come in there, and I will tell you what, he chewed us up one side and down the other. He said if we ever did that again, because how important it was for a gunner to be on that ship, and you just leave your ship, that is a desert. That is a desertion, is what it was.

P. Yes, we were talking serious business.

W. That is right. And that was the only way he looked at it.

P. They gave you that one.

W. Lucky for us, he gave us the benefit of the doubt, and he knew what happened. All we could say is -- there was nothing you could lie about -- we had too much to drink, and we should not have done it. So, that was the last time I fouled up. That was the last time.

P. When you guys went on daily missions, you got frustrated and volunteered for more.

W. Yes, it was kind of the thing that you did.

P. That is really commendable.

W Yes, it was commendable No, it was crazy (Laughter) You do not want to be left out

P Is that how it was?

W So early, I mean Well, you know what is going on now. And you know that the Army man down the street, he is down there getting his butt kicked, so we are going to help him Let's give him a hand and help him out as much as we can And, we were not afraid to do that Let's do it, that is all

P Just do it and get it over with

W Absolutely, plus we got a lot of friends in the Green Berets, too We picked them up, and we would carry them out to their strategic hamlets and drop them off, drop them right on the center And they would thank us by giving us a few weapons that they had picked up here and there.

P I see.

W We had a little bit of everything on those ships. I had a whole big box of grenades with rubber bands and granite for pins that I used on impact.

P Did you really? Improvise

W So, that was handy to have, little toys for their little tots But, yes, it was an experience. I miss the guys that I was with

P Do you?

W I really do

P Have you seen many of them? Have you kept in contact with many of them?

W I have located three of them, so far

P Is that all?

W Three of them so far. I belong to the 145th Aviation -- by the way, the name of the outfit I was in, I forgot to tell you I was with the 8th Transportation Company, Light Helicopter, for one week, and then, the following day, say on a Sunday, the whole thing changed over to the 117th Aviation Company We changed from transportation to aviation, and it was a big difference

P Really?

W You were not transporting them You were transporting, but now, you were transporting troops and you were going in after those troops as well

P So that was why they did change

W Yes After the battle, you had to go in and pull them out Yes, it was a big change But, I belonged to the 145th. The 145th Aviation is an Italian represented, about seventeen helicopter companies over there

P Really?

W They were like the head And, we have our annual reunion every two years

P Do you?

W And, two years ago, we had it in Denver, Colorado and my wife and I went I ran into my buddy David Grainger He was a crew chief on 059 Yes, and we stood next to each other and did not know who we both were. So, my wife said something to his wife, the word Qui Nhon came up And, they called us, "What? Qui Nhon, who? Were you over there?" And she said, "No, I was not, but he was " And she pointed to her husband, and I looked at that man, and I says, "Boy, do you look familiar." I says, "When were you over there?" And of course, he told me what year, and I said, "Oh, yes Yes, I was there about the same time." I says, "Who was your crew chief?" He said, "Jimmy Cane, and then rotated back into Bill Miller," who was mine Bill Miller, who was my second crew chief "And I do remember you " I had a stack of pictures like this that I took out there I got a picture of him with his chopper broke down on a mission, and he is sitting there like this

P Honestly?

W So disappointed, because his chopper broke down He had dreams about flying up: And, boy, we had a great time. Had a big group picture taken. Plus, they flew in a couple of the old assault cobras, a couple of C-model, HUMB's, Triber models. The national guard from Denver flew in They flew in an egg job, too, a little bubble chopper Everybody called it the flying egg They put guns in them things, too

P Did they?

W Yes

P They put guns on everything

W They put guns in anything you want, anything Anything and everything, they put a gun on it Playing crazy war like that, you know

P. Did you have much equipment failure? I mean, with your weapons and things like that?

W No, not with the 30's, no We had hardly any at all I have never had a problem with mine My ammo was always in good shape

P Fine

W Good shape, you know No malfunctions, no hot guns at all

P That is good

W Of course, I was very familiar with that weapon, too I could tear that thing down and put it back together really quick So, if there was any problem, I usually could take care of it Plus, I carried a spare firing pin with me all the time because you never know You could always break a firing pin

P Better to be safe than sorry

W Yes, right

P. So, when you came back from Vietnam, where did they station you?

W I went back to my unit, three-quarter cav

P Did you?

W. Back in Hawaii And at that time, they were over on the big islands

P Were they?

W The island of Hawaii Because we would go over there for a couple of months for maneuvers once a year We would go up there to shoot the tanks, the 105's or the 76 millimeters. And plus, the larger waters, that is where they get their training at It is all volcanic dust and roads and everything else Volcanic rock So, everything was all boarded up when we pulled into the squadron We were a bunch of crazy characters. We were waiting for them

P I bet you were

W. Yes, we were ready We were ready And of course, coming back to the entire squadron, it was all boarded up They gave us a choice We could either take a thirty-day leave or rejoin the outfit on the big island. So, some of the guys took thirty-day leaves and, well, since we were back, we just fell right into the cycle as if it never happened You know, your mind was occupied and all of a sudden, you have got a different mission now, a different thing

P So, you just adapted

W. Yes, I think that really helped me for a good many years

P Yes

W Had to It had to

P Yes, it really does

W So, of course then -- oh, I forgot to tell you -- I was in Thailand in 1962

P Were you really?

W Yes Yes, we went over there, over 1,500 miles of Northeastern Thailand during the height of the monsoon season From Patthalung, Thailand, which is more central Thailand, to Yudorn, which is on the ocean border

P. Okay

W: And we went up there to see whether or not the PC's and the tanks could function during the height of the monsoon season, with bridges out, of main highways, through rice patties, to see if they could do it

P Get through that

W They found out they could not President Kennedy was behind that rule He was the one that told us to go over there We took some supporting elements of the 25th Division with us We were supposedly the first combat troops that the Thai's had ever seen

P Really?

W They had never seen a tank, and you want to talk about causing just an upside

down cake in that country! When we pulled in -- especially, we went over on a ship -- when we got off that ship and rolled in tanks, those people could just not believe it. They were in awe. They had never seen anything like that

P Because back then, they had to be at least three hundred years behind, just strictly very minimal agrarian

W Right

P More hunting and gathering than anything else.

W Yes, exactly. Yes, and very primitive than a lot of -- the central part of town
Right

P Very, sure

W So, like I say, that was an experience. See, Vietnam, to me was another Thailand, I guess, in that way. But, it was a little different, a little different. It was a little more mountainous than what Thailand was. Thailand was pretty flat.

P Was it?

W And the people over there, they give you a Pepsi-Cola instead of giving you a hand grenade. They would follow you everywhere you went. You are in a jungle area and you clear the area out, set your perimeter up and build your hooches and put your motor pull in and you are ready for business. And, before you know it, people are completely surrounding you. They set up like a carnival-type strip

P Did they really?

W Oh, yes. And they sell things because they want your money. Those Marines always say, you adapt. They had all different things to offer. They had beer and everything else while we were allowed, if we were allowed to do that. Of course, we had our own beer club, too. Anyway, it was an experience. That was in 1962. I was from six months over there.

P Really?

W Yes. I think I have seen more Southeast Asian than I did in Hawaii.

P Sounds like it.

W I felt good because of the experiences that I learned. I felt bad about my past.

experiences during the early part of the war, but, at that time, I seemed to be handling them fine. I never thought about it. I did not think about the bad things because I felt that I was doing things the right way, the way I was supposed to. I was a soldier. This was my job. I was called and I went, even though I still volunteered. I still wanted to do my part.

P. You were trained.

W. Oh, yeah.

P. You know, it was not like you left your back yard and went and did that.

W. No, heavens no. I slept with my machete for three years. It was my main tool over there.

P. But you had a lot of training, so it all just sort of went together, the service, the commitment, the training. Going there; doing what you had to do, doing what you were told to do.

W. Yes, the only thing is, like I had said earlier, in Vietnam, I could not do what I was trained for, even though I was trained to shoot. I learned how to shoot. I was trained in jungle warfare. That is where I was trained. And how to survive and function. I wish I could have been able to do that.

P. Instead, they put you up in the air.

W. Well, I volunteered for it. That is where they stuck me, all fifty of us.

P. That is true.

W. That is why I have always stressed to any young fellow coming out of the service -- hopefully we are not at wartime, it is peacetime -- go on into the service if you do not plan on going to college or you do not have your future all mapped out, planned out. If you want some world experiences, go in the service. Give it a shot. But it could be, maybe not quite the same as it was for me. It was kind of a weird time in our time. Running into the Berlin Crisis, almost going on over there, and having all these little things pop up while you are in there. But, it is good to get away. It is good to stand on your own two feet, make your own decisions, so to speak. There is nobody to tell you when you are supposed to wash your clothes, when you are supposed to brush your teeth. All these little things that you used to be yelled at home for the most part -- maintaining your room, picking up after yourself. These are the things that, if you have not learned, you will learn quickly. And, if you cannot adapt to that, Lord help you,

because your life is going to be just miserable

P That is true You went from a little town, small town with certain values, to all over the United States, half way around the world and back And, you came back here

W Yes It was quite a trip Quite a trip

P Went one way and came back an entirely different person

W Yes, I think so I was asked that before, a good many years ago, about that And, I think I can see the difference in myself

P. Could you?

W Compared to a lot of the fellows that I had graduated with, that I used to pal around within a group I see a big difference, and there was nothing said about Vietnam Nothing And I am glad there was not I was so glad that nobody ever said anything about it I did not have to answer anybody

P Yes, that is true

W I noticed an article in the Niles Times after I had been back. It had my name in it. It had "Robert Watts now has come home from Vietnam He has now completed his service time " So, I figured my mother must have put that in there Then it was on to making, attacking adulthood, making your way and settling down and establishing yourself

P You went to Lordstown?

W No, no I did a number of jobs before that I worked for Niles Fabricating for a while

P. Did you?

W And I worked at U S Steel in McDonald I worked for the Street Department in McDonald, the Water Department in McDonald, and that just about covers McDonald I worked at Falcon Foundry in Lowellville as a molder apprentice, which they were paying good money I put in four years, but I was ordered to quit the trade from the doctor because of my lungs They were worried about that black lung

P Yes

W: So, I got out of there Then, I was lucky enough to get into General Motors

P And you are still there today?

W Yes I was hired there in 1969 So, about 8 ½ more years and I should be able to, hopefully, retire. Get out of there

P Very good Well, I thank you You did a great job.

W Thank you

End of Interview