

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Vietnam War Experiences

Personal Experience

O. H. 1264

THOMAS J. CRAIG

Interviewed

by

Douglas C. Senseman

on

June 27, 1989

TOM CRAIG

Tom Craig was born on March 23, 1947 in Youngstown, Ohio. He attended the Youngstown City Schools. Tom idolized his older brother, a Marine, and quit school in tenth grade so that he could join the military. Tom joined the Marines in March of 1964 and served in Vietnam. Ironically, Tom was wounded in Vietnam by an enemy soldier using an American made weapon. Tom was in Vietnam in the middle 1960's after having been trained in anti-tank combat. He received a Purple Heart as well as five other medals.

After his discharge from the service Tom went from job to job and really had no strong commitments to any employer. He was hired by the U.S. Postal Service in February of 1988 and is still employed by them. Tom is married and has one fifteen year old daughter named Christina. Tom is a member of Amvets Post 112. He is proud to be the person designated to carry the POW flag in parades in which the Amvets participate.

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INTERVIEWEE: THOMAS J. CRAIG

INTERVIEWER: Douglas C. Senseman

SUBJECT: Experiences as a soldier in Vietnam; villages;
friends; anti-tank operator

DATE: June 27, 1989

S: This is an interview with Thomas J. Craig for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on Vietnam War Experiences, by Douglas Senseman, on June 27, 1989.

Tom, could you tell me what you were doing prior to the war in Vietnam?

C: Well, I joined the Marine Corps right out of school. I quit tenth grade of high school, at seventeen, and joined the Marines in 1964 which was before the Vietnam War really broke out, so I never even thought about going to Vietnam then. It wasn't until after I was already in the service.

S: What made you decide to quit school and join the Marines?

C: Well, I had an older brother who did exactly the same thing and I idolized him. If you went to the school I did, which was South High School, here in Youngstown, you didn't learn anything anyhow, going to that school, except street survival, so it wasn't much of a school, and I wasn't much of a student at the time. I could have cared less. So I just went the same footsteps as my older brother.

S: This is in 1964?

C: I quit in 1963 and then I turned seventeen in March of 1964 and I went in two days after my birthday.

S: How did you parents and your family feel about you joining at the young age?

C: Well, they told me... I didn't know if they'd let me quit, but since I was doing so bad in school, I was just a street punk anyhow, at the time. My dad said, "If I let you quit, that doesn't mean you're going to hang around the street or this house. You better have some plans." So I said, "Yes, I'll plan on joining the service." So that's the only way he let me do it was to go ahead and join the service. They were a little bit shaky about it, but they went along with it. They figured well maybe it would help me grow up or something, which it did.

S: Did you have any conceptions or ideas of what you'd be doing in the service?

C: Yes. From my older brother. Now as a kid, what you think you're going to be getting into and what you think you were going to be doing, in reality, is altogether different. When you get there it's a big shock. But it's too late, you can't turn around and go back home.

S: What do you remember about the day that you left to go into the service?

C: I was proud and I was nervous and scared all at the same time. Going, with the reputation especially that the Marine Corps boot camp has, Paris Island, it's true, the reputation. So one of the main things that kept me going all through it all was that I couldn't quit. There was my older brother, he went through and I wasn't about to go home as a failure. I was going to make it one way or the other. I'm glad I did. I'm glad for the experience, because I learned more in the first year or so in the Marine Corps than I would have if I would have stayed in school.

S: Had you heard anything about Vietnam before you went into the service?

C: Very little. There was just bits and pieces at the time on the news. We had some advisors over there and it was more of a political thing. Like you hear now with Nicaragua, that's all you heard was little political stuff. Nothing about any invasion or that we were going to fight there big time. So I really didn't plan

- on it. I never even gave Vietnam a thought when I first went in. That was a little over a year after that is when, in 1965, when they sent that battalion of Marines in from Okanawa and landed them in De-Nang. Then we all gave it a lot of thought.
- S: What do you remember about basic training? What stands out?
- C: The Marine Corps basic training is like nothing else in the world. It's hard to explain. I could go on for hours on the basic training I had at Paris Island. From what I understand, it has changed a hell of a lot now. It was brutal when I was there. Their idea, and it works too, and it did then, is that they break you down, they break you down until you feel like a worthless piece of shit, and that's the way they treat you. Then from there, they build you up, the way they want to build you up. When they're done with you and you graduate, you feel like superman. That's just what they want. It's a hell of an experience, it's really hard to put into words. I don't know exactly what you want to know about it. Some of the things that go on?
- S: No that's basically what I wanted to know, although, what were they training you for? Strictly combat?
- C: Yes. To kill. That's their main thing is to make you a killer, the best killer there is in the world. You were going to kill him before he gets a chance to kill you. You're going to be the "best", the elite. When they're done with you, you figure yourself to be the elite. Now when all that changes, you got all this John Wayne in you, the movies, the Marine Corps and the boot camp, when you get into a combat situation or you get to Vietnam or wherever it was you happened to be, the reality is something else, again. Then you find out what fear is really all about. Anybody that tells you, anybody you've ever talked to that's ever been in combat and tells you that they weren't afraid, they're liars. I mean that's a fact. You're so damn scared, you don't know whether to shit or go blind. But your training and your own guts, I don't know, whatever you could muster up at the time, gets you through, hopefully.
- S: How long was your basic training?
- C: Well, it was pretty long, when I went in. It was supposed to be ten weeks, then we had to end up pulling a couple weeks of mess duty, so mine was like fourteen weeks altogether.
- S: At the end of basic training, did they tell you what

you were going to do next?

C: Yes. They stick you in a regular outfit then. I went into an anti-tank outfit and went up to Camp Lejune, North Carolina, you join the regular Marine Corps then, you are in a regular outfit and it's a regular job after that. You train in whatever you're in. If it's tanks, artillery, infantry, it's a continuous training situation all the time. You are on the ready. That's where it was. I got to go overseas a couple times on Mediterranean cruises, before, this was before Vietnam.

S: What year would you have been overseas then? Do you remember?

C: I left...The first time we went over, I think it was September of 1964, just a couple months after I got out of boot camp. We went on a special operation over to Spain, the whole 2nd Marine Division went over and we pulled a landing in Spain for training purposes. It was the biggest peace time landing since D-Day, is what they told us. There was ships as far as the eye could see, there's 25,000 guys that went over there, but it was a war game. We hit the beach, we played war games against the Spaniards. It was a lot of fun. After that, we came back stateside and there wasn't maybe but six months after that I went over to the Mediterranean again. This time it was a six month cruise. You have an active battalion on a six month cruise through the Mediterranean. You stop in all the countries, you'll play war games maybe for a week against whoever, the Spaniards, the Italians, the French, Turks, then you'll pull a week of war games with them, then you'll pull a week of liberty in their cities and you'll do that you a six month period. While we were on that cruise was when they sent that battalion of Marines over from Okanawa to Vietnam. That's when it started. So we were preparing ourselves then, that we knew when we got back stateside that our next orders would be cut for Vietnam and they were.

S: So when did you officially find out that you were going to Vietnam?

C: When I got back off that Mediterranean cruise. I think that was around August of 1965.

S: Once they told you that, did they give you any advance training for Vietnam?

C: Yes. I went to California for a month of guerrilla operations. It was counter insurgency, it was operations against guerrilla forces, booby trap training and just all the stuff they thought we'd run into when we got over there. We pulled that in Camp Pendleton,

California for a month and then they shipped us over on a troop transport out of San Diego to Vietnam in October.

S: What was that like, the trip over?

C: We were all excited because our job was combat anyhow, that's the way we felt. We couldn't wait to get in there, we're going to be bad and we're going to be John Wayne's and stuff, everybody's all excited. They had an old merchant Marine ship that they converted over for a troop transport. They had 900 Marines and 1,100 Army guys on the ship so they split the ship up in half, the Marines had one half, the Army had the other, the Army pulled mess duty on the ship and we pulled security on the ship on the way over. It was seventeen days over. We had some times. We were picking on those Army guys the whole time going over there. Just for playing around. That's the way it was, inter-service rivalries amongst each other. But it wasn't bad. It was alright.

S: What kinds of things did you do to get their goat, so to speak?

C: Ambush and beat the shit out of them. What happened was we were doing things like this and they'd talk about us, especially since we were security on the ship and they would run us down and we'd run them down and we'd steal some of their stuff and they'd steal some of ours. We stole their colors though. I think it was an engineering battalion or something. You don't do that, that's bad business. We did it though. We really wanted to get these guys. So we had a major in charge of us and they had a colonel in charge of them. Well he was the senior officer on the ship so he was in charge of all of us, that included us Marines too. He was really bent out of shape about it. He was pissed bad. So the one stop we made just before we got to Vietnam was Okanawa. We put in for a day and a night, the ship had to take on fuel or whatever so we're all contemplating a night's liberty before we go to Vietnam, one time in town and have a good time, well this colonel was so pissed off at us, he gave his boys liberty and he made us stay on the ship. We almost went crazy over this. Here we are and we got back at them really really bad over that. When them guys came back off liberty, we was waiting for them. We beat the shit out of almost the whole goddamn battalion before we got to Vietnam and there wasn't a whole lot this guy could do about it, this colonel. Because we're going to Vietnam. What's he going to do? Arrest us? You know, make us go to war? What's he going to do? That's the way the trip ended. We never did get to go on liberty in Okanawa. Dirty son of a bitch, I'll

never forget that, boy.

S: What was the mood of the people on the ship?

C: Crazy. You're at sea for a couple weeks, you get a little crazy. You're crowded, everybody's jammed together, you know.

S: Were they talking about Vietnam?

C: Oh, yes. Everybody's... What they're going to do and what's it going to be and I can't wait to shoot me a gook and all this shit. Like I said, this was before the reality sinks in and before somebody actually tries to kill you, that's a different story.

S: Tell us about your first day in Vietnam?

C: Okay, let me see if I can remember. Well, we really didn't know what to expect. He took us over, we anchored out in this harbor in De-Nang. They put us on a landing craft and took us in from the landing craft to the beach area. It wasn't making a beach landing. It was already a secured area. There were snipers maybe and stuff like that, but for us going in, it was nothing. We didn't even have weapons. So we hit the beach and they'd take us up to this area and put us on trucks, ship us over to another little area, group you all together, had some general Walt come down, give us a big speech about what we're expected to do and all this and all that, get us all fired up and ready to go. Then they break you up in your units, you've got your orders where you're going to go and they send us to different trucks that are waiting for us to take us to our units. So I went with about six other guys, we went out to ours. It was out on some hill outside of De-Nang. I can't remember what it is now.

So we were supposed to get out there and right away get issued our weapons and ammunition and stuff. We were in a combat zone then. We get out there, there isn't any weapons for us. This hill is pretty wild country where we're at, it's all bunkered in and everything. So somebody screwed up somewhere, no weapons. So they told us, "Tonight if anything happens, all they've been getting is sniper fire, a little bit of probing on the line. But if anything happens, the shooting starts, just jump in the trench over there, keep your head down and wait until it's over," because we didn't have no weapon. So, sure as shit, that night they got some sniper fire. Bang, we're in the trenches, we're waiting, no weapon, what the hell are we going to do. We don't know if it's just sniper fire, if you're getting probed, if you're getting attacked, if you're getting overrun, or what. So ding around with each other for

about an hour, nobody even gets hit. It's over, we go back in the bunker. The next morning, we get our weapons, they issued us our rifle, our ammunition. This was actually a transit stop, because I was going south. I was going to down Chu Lai from De-Nang, which was south of De-Nang. That was going to be my area. So the next day, they took me into De-Nang and put me on a C-130 Transport and the flight wasn't even an hour down to Chu Lai and I went down there and joined up with my outfit down there.

S: What was the outfit?

C: At the time, it was 3rd Marines down in Chu Lai, so at the time it was 3rd A.T. Battalion, which is anti-tanks, which was a tank in itself, it was an ontose, they called it. It was a real strange vehicle. A lot of people never seen one of these. But for everybody that might be listening to this if they know what a recoallesce rifle is, this thing had six of them on it and it had four 50 caliber machine guns on top of that and a 30 caliber machine gun in the middle. It was a tank destroyer is what it was, a hit and run vehicle, a fast little assault vehicle, a lot of weapons. So since we didn't run into any tanks over there, we used it on the gooks. If they were bunkered, we'd blow their ass out of the bunkers, or we'd shoot them with whatever we had, it didn't matter.

S: So your first encounter with the enemy was relatively quickly.

C: Yes. That same night I got there and it wasn't even... We never seen anything. All we heard was some shooting, some yelling and shit like that, you never got to see. We had our head down in the trench and nothing to shoot back with. That was it, our first night.

S: A lot of people talk about being treated differently as a newcomer or as someone who is just into the country.

C: Yes. You're a "greenhorn".

S: How did they treat you differently?

C: You're like the new guy on he block. You don't mean shit. They don't know you, you don't count, they don't know whether to trust you in a situation, they have to feel you out first to see what kind of guy you are. So it takes you a week or so to get in, get to know them and see what you're going to do depending on what happens. In my case, Chu Lai at the time in 1965, they were just getting this area put together, they were just putting in the air strip, they were just expanding the perimeter around the air strip for security, so we

got into some shit down there, pretty often. Small, a lot of times, it was small probing, VC probing the lines, nothing real major but it was continuous, either sniper fire or maybe some ambushes going on something like that. We were getting into it.

S: What would have been your rank now, when you were first into the country?

C: When I first got there, I was a PFC, Private First Class. It's an E-2 rate.

S: How about relations with the officers, when you were in Vietnam, how did most of the enlisted men get along with the officers?

C: We had a couple officers that we got along with pretty good. We had some that we hated their guts, bad. It's funny that they didn't get bumped off by their own people, these bastards. Now I've heard that happened quite a bit over there, especially later on, not when I was there, but in the early 1970's part of the war. Not that we didn't think about it to a couple of these guys, but nobody ever did. We had a couple lieutenants that we got along with pretty good. I sort of lucked out too. When I joined up with my outfit down there in Chu Lai and I walked into camp the first day, I ran into a guy from my home town that I knew that was a friend of my older brother's that I hadn't seen for years. He was the platoon sergeant of my platoon. I walk in there and there he was. I hadn't seen this guy in about seven or eight years and he's already a staff sergeant in the Marine Corps. He had been in the Corps then seven years already I think. So there was my home town boy. He seen me and he couldn't believe it. "What the hell are you doing here?" I was like ten years old the last time he seen me and here I was in Vietnam joining up with his outfit. So that was sort of a pretty good in for me in this outfit.

S: What kind of friendships did you form when you were over there?

C: Real tight, the tightest friendships you ever have in your life. These guys, you eat with them, you sleep with, you do everything with, you're living and you're almost dying with these guys. You know what I mean? You're so tight, you're tighter than you are with your own family. You know? It's really something. These guys, you'll never forget your whole life.

S: Have you kept in touch with any of them?

C: No. Everybody goes their own way, later. One guy,

yes. One guy, he was my driver, I became a tank commander, an ontose commander later on. While I was the driver, he was the loader. You got a loader, a driver and then an ontose commander. I started out as a loader, then I became a driver, he came on as my loader, and we got to be real tight. He was Mexican dude from California. Armando Hernandez was the name. Then I became ontose commander later on and he became my driver. We were real tight. We were like brothers. So when I left Vietnam in 1966, we wrote a couple times and that was it. Then in 1980, a lot of my family live out in Arizona now, so I went out to Arizona to see him and I took a chance. I called out to California and I got a hold of him after fourteen years. I jumped on a bus and I went out to L.A. where he was living and I spent a week with him out there in L.A. We had a hell of a time then, I tell you. So that's the one guy I got to see again after all them years.

S: When you were there in the mid 1960's what were the relations there like between blacks and whites in Vietnam?

C: It was strained in some cases, but it wasn't anything from what I understand it got to be like later on. I guess it got to be bad later on. I had a lot of black buddies over there but we were friends. We had a few, depending on what part of the country they were from that were really prejudiced against white guys, just like we had a lot of white guys that depending on what part of the country they came from, they were niggers to them, especially the southern boys, the red necks and shit like that. That's the way they were brought up though. But it depended like if you were from our area like around here in Ohio, we weren't so prejudiced around here as the rest of the country was, regional, here and there. So I got along good with everybody over there. I had black buddies, like I said, my Mexican bro, you know, and it didn't matter to me. If we were all in the same damn situation together I didn't care if you were black or white or what you were, but there were a lot of guys who did. There was, there was a lot of prejudice. So you had a lot of the black guys that tended to hang together, the white guys tended to hang together and the Chicanos tended to hang together, but when push come to shove, we all worked together.

S: Was there a lot of drug use at that time in Vietnam?

C: No. There was drug use, in fact, that was the first time I ever tried any drugs, myself. I tried opium, I smoked some in a pipe and oh, man, I'll never do that shit again. But yes. There was some guys, there was a small percentage. I'd say maybe ten percent of the

guys over there would be smoking dope. That's about all there was. There was a lot of smoke around and I guess later on it got to be pretty close to one hundred percent of the guys were smoking dope. I drank. I was a stone alcoholic. I stayed drunk as much as I could and I drank as much as I could. You had to do something to relieve the pressure or you'd go crazy. The place would drive you crazy. So if you didn't smoke dope, you drank, but you had to do something.

S: Where did you drink at?

C: Everywhere. All the time, whenever I could. Gook beer was just terrible shit, but you'd get used to it. There ain't nothing else. They had this 33 beer tiger piss, there was a couple other ones, too and they had their own whiskey and shit. I was a beer drinker. I used to these gooks all the time and I'd get cases of quart beer, it was warm. If it was ninety-five degrees, the beer was ninety-five degrees because there was no refrigeration, no electricity no nothing where I was at. But you get used to it. So no matter where I was, I had a couple cases of beer in that tank. If I was a driver driving down the road in a convoy, I had a bottle of beer between my legs sipping on it. If we were in combat, I was drinking beer. It didn't matter. There was other guys, they were sucking on a fifth. There was other guys, they were smoking dope. You had to do something.

S: This wasn't a problem as far as the officers were concerned?

C: No, shit they were doing the same thing. You'd go nuts, the place would drive you crazy, the caustic pressure and just the misery. There were times where you would go a week or two weeks, there wouldn't even be a shot fired. But just the misery of the goddamn place, the heat and the bugs and the gooks and the... It gets to you real bad. So you had to do something. So the officers, they wouldn't say a damn thing about you boozing it up, at least none of ours did. Now other outfits, maybe it was different. But if you were in the rear area, especially, if you were in a battalion area, something like that, them boys were watched pretty close. They had slop shoots and stuff back there were they could go drink cold American beer. We were out in the bush all the time. We didn't have all that shit. So you just did whatever you could do to keep it together.

S: Going into Vietnam, there's obviously a huge difference in culture. What were some of your observations about the Vietnamese culture?

- C: Where we were, it was peasant villages and farming villages and these people, all the poor bastards wanted to be was to be left alone. They didn't give a shit about communism, they didn't care about democracy, they didn't care about Americans, they didn't care about Viet Cong, they just wanted to be left alone, let them farm their rice fields, raise their families but we were there and it was all over. The poor bastards would get caught in the middle of all these fire fights. They'd get bombed on by accident, they'd get blown away, their kids would get blown up in damn booby traps. If they tried to help us out, Viet Cong would come in and butcher their ass. If they didn't help us out, then we'd make them out to be Viet Cong suspects and we'd screw with them so those poor people got caught in the middle. Like I say, all they were was a simple peasant people, they didn't give a shit about any politics and about who was running the country because it didn't matter to them about money or anything else anyhow. They lived completely off their little hamlets, their little villages. Now around the bigger cities, like Sai Gon, south, and De-Nang, north, it was a little different with the economy and all that, and money and shit like that. That's where it was all booze joints, and whores and anything for a buck. Where we were and that was ninety percent of the country, was rural farming people, they just wanted to be left alone. They didn't want to be bothered by anybody.
- S: You mentioned getting beer from the Vietnamese? They became very capitalistic wanting to make money off of the Americans.
- C: They wanted what we had. Just like wherever we were, you'd be set up like a battalion area. You had a PX. We had simple things like soap, shaving cream, any of that stuff. To them, that was great. They'd bargain with us, whatever they had, which in most of these hamlets wasn't much; it was this piss warm beer, it was Coca-Cola, candles--because we always bought candles off them--mattresses, these hand-sewn mattresses. They didn't have much else to offer us. That was about it. So we'd deal with them that way. They'd ask us for things, we'd try to give them something and you had to use...At the time we were issued this MPC this military script money. You weren't supposed to use green backs because green backs spend the world over. If any American money got into the hands of the Viet Cong they could use it to buy weapons or whatever off of anybody in the world. Now this military script, they couldn't. It was only good as far as we were concerned. That was another dealing point. The gooks were always trying to deal for your green backs which we all did. We black

marketed, everybody did. Then you'd get a few slickers. Say, if you had a little bigger hamlet, maybe you had a little farming community. Instead of 200 people it was 500 people. You're going to have a couple shopkeepers and people like that in this village. They were the ones that were your wheelers and dealers. That's who you went to for whatever you wanted. They always knew what was going on. They knew where we were going before we knew where we were going. If they got us up in the morning and said, "Okay, pack up, we're going to go up the road twenty-five miles to this hill" for some reason, they'd be there already. Your merchants on the goddamn highway waiting for us, this is a hot area, we would go up one, we'd jump off one, go up this hill to clear this hill, get in a shitbird fire fight or whatever, the gooks are waiting for us down on one, they're waiting for the action to be over with then you come back and you want a beer or a coke, you needed to buy some candles or something, there they were waiting for you.

S: Did you ever hear of them sabotaging anything of the stuff they gave to the G.I.'s?

C: Oh, yes. I heard about it but it never happened to us. I heard about them putting ground glass in a Coca-Cola and in the beer, you know, all kinds of stories, like razor blades in this, you name it, all kinds, but I never saw it happen when I was there. I heard the stories but never seen it.

S: Did you make any friendships with any of the South Vietnamese adults?

C: No. No, because you weren't around them that much really. We had one. This one little hamlet, On Ton, this woman had a restaurant if you want to call it that. She sort of turned her house into a restaurant when we moved into the area. She put up a couple tables and she cooked this shit up in the back and there was stuff that you didn't even recognize but you'd eat it anyhow. She had some beer there and some whiskey. So we got to know her just by going in her joint a couple times. She had three daughters. One of them was a hooker, she hooked for a few bucks. The broads, anything for your money. You're talking about if you stayed in the area any length of time, half the girls in the town are going to hook for you. Everybody's horny, man, shit, you're away from home.

S: A lot of people from Vietnam, soldiers, remember the kids, especially, the South Vietnamese children. Any comment about any of them?

C: Oh, yes. They were something else. We ruined them. When we went into an area, when we left they were shot because we showed them our ways. When you first get there the kids were quiet. If you threw them some gum or something like that, it was really something big time. They were fearful of you, and once you spent any time there and they watched you and they watched the way we were, the rowdy crazy bastards we were, they took on a lot of these qualities. So after you were there for a month or so, some kid would yell to you for a cigarette or something like that and you'd say, "No, get out of here." They'd tell you to go fuck yourself. When you first got there like I said, they wouldn't say boo to you. Now they would get just like us, because we were rowdy all the time. So they took on our ways. And they were trying to hustle a buck or they'd be out there robbing your trash pits and shit where we threw all of our C-ration cans and stuff like that. They'd be out there scraping out the damn cans. It's really something. They were cute. I liked the kids, the majority of them.

S: If there was such a thing as a typical day for you in Vietnam, what would it have been like?

C: Typical day; well typical days were boring as hell. Maybe you just got off watch, you were on a machine gun bunker or something for your four hours that night. You got relieved, you went in and grabbed a couple hours in the tent, you'd get up, if there were no operations going on, no patrols, which a lot of times, there wasn't. There wasn't nothing going on. You go out, you clean your weapons, you clean the tank, you just kill time. You were bored to death again, there you were, you know, waiting for something to happen. Then that night would come, you'd do your watch again and the same thing over and over. Boring as hell.

S: What would a typical operation have consisted of?

C: That's when you mobilize. On a good sized operation, a battalion sized operation, you mobilize a battalion. Somebody somewhere spotted VC in large numbers. I'm not talking about these patrols where you go out and hunt down other patrols or something like that, usually recon or somebody was out and they spotted maybe a battalion sized VC in a certain area. They'd mount us up and we'd move out to this area to try to engage them. A lot of times you ended up chasing the bastards. If they get the word that your coming, and your battalion size, they'll run. That's the majority operation is that your huffing at trying to catch these bastards. You'll get sporadic contact here and there, maybe you'll run into a company size over here and you get a pretty good scrap here, maybe another outfit down

there, company size, pretty good scrap. Then you hold up for the night wherever you're at. That's the scary part. They're regrouping out there, they know where you're at now. That's when they like to screw with you, see. Your outfit is spread out all over the goddamn place. You might have a company here, a company over there, a platoon down there, a goddamn squad stuck out over there somewhere with sixteen guys in it and they start at night is when they like to probe you. Then they'll hit you here and they'll hit you there and that's when the shit gets really scary, man. When somebody is trying to kill you, somebody's shooting at you, a serious fire fight, man, it's undescrivable, the fear you have. What happens though, here's the funny thing. If you get into any prolonged fight, prolonged fire fight, you have this fear, especially after you see guys around you getting it, all kinds of noise and bullshit going on and you know, and this fear comes over you, you still function, though, that's the thing. You still have to be able to function through this fear. If you don't then you're a coward, or whatever. You have to function through this. Different people it happens to at different times. After so long, maybe an hour an hour and a half of this constant goddamn fear, something snaps in you and you don't completely lose this fear, you almost do, you almost lose it, something happens, you get crazy, I don't know how to explain it, where you don't give a shit. It's real hard to explain where you'll do things you wouldn't normally do. You'll stick your neck out where you wouldn't normally stick your neck out and you'll fight like a goddamn mad man, you know. That's usually what turned the tide on any fight we were ever in. I was never in, and I was in a lot of them, I was never in a fire fight with the gooks that we had to back off or they got the best of us. We always kicked their ass, every one we were ever in.

S: Tom, you were talking about fear, being in the fire fights. One Marine that I interviewed last year told me that in order to survive, that you had to form a primitive state of mind. What does that statement mean to you?

C: I don't know. Because I didn't see it that way. Maybe the state of mind that we ended up in, when I was telling you about, maybe that was reverting to the primitive, the madness, you almost get like a crazy person. It's like your mind is tired of being scared and so, "fuck this scared shit, I'm going to kick this bastard's ass." Maybe that is a primitive instinct we had in us, I don't know, but it's something that takes you over. When it does, look out man, it's ass-kicking time. Because everybody, it seems like if you are in the same group that's getting hit real hard, it happens

to everybody almost around the same time. Say you almost look like your losing this, like the night I got hit, we were surrounded, they were kicking our ass pretty good. Things weren't looking too damn good for us. You talk about scared, when I got shot, I thought I was going to die of fright I was so damn scared. That thing happened. Just the constant firing at us, they were after us constantly, on top of us constantly, then all of the sudden, everybody sort of just got into this mood then we turned the whole thing around and stomped the living shit out of them. What was left of them ran off and the rest of them were dead. That was it. The tide and everything just turned.

S: But you were shot?

C: I still fought for two and a half hours after that. I got shot in the leg. It wasn't mortal or anything. As bad as we were surrounded and they were coming up the hill at us and we were getting hit with mortars and machine guns and everything else, I got hit with a machine gun. What am I going to do, lay there until they finish my ass off? So I kept on fighting two and a half hours after that, and everything, like I said, the tide turned and all of a sudden, as fast as it started, it stopped. It was over, boom, it was done.

S: What happened when it was over, how were you medically treated?

C: I got shot through the calf, so it missed my bone. It was all meat. It shot a chunk of meat out of my leg. During the fight, the fight was so heavy, the fire was so heavy around us that my buddy wanted to yell for the corpsman to come down and I said, "No, he'd never make it." He was busy anyhow running around to other guys. But for him to get from where he was to where we were, he would have been shot to pieces. So I told him to forget it. I said, "I'm just shot in the leg here anyhow," and I got hit with a tracer, the point has got a phosphorus tip on it that glows, well when it went threw my leg, it cauterized it so I only bled a little bit. I had two big charcoal holes in my leg where it went in and came out. But very little blood. So I said, "Throw a damn rag on it." So he wrapped it up with a rag. I was alright then. My mind was sort of off of the wound because of all the shit that was going on.

Here's another thing, it was me and my buddy Hernandez, we're outside the tank, we're behind it with rifles, our ontose commander is in the hatch up on top behind the machine gun. So we're shooting, we got a radio on the fender of the tank playing rock and roll music, we got a couple quarts of beer there we're

sipping on every once in awhile because especially with explosions, the mortar shells going off around you get a cloud of this cordite smoke in the air and it will suck the moisture right out of you and it will dry you out real fast. So if it ain't water or something, you had to be drinking on something, so we were drinking on this beer and Hernandez, a couple days earlier, got a box from home from his mother and it had cookies and all kinds of shit in it, we're eating cookies, drinking beer, listening to the radio and we're fighting this goddamn fight, see. This was after the click I told you about, this thing that happens to you. We're laughing and shit, you know and all of the sudden the radio got shot off the fender. This ain't no bullshit, bing, "shuuuuu," off the fender. It's on the ground, it's all smashed to shit, we're laughing like hell over this. It's probably like a nervous reaction inside you instead of saying, "Holy shit, I shot the radio right next to you," you start laughing like hell. It was pure craziness. Then like I said, boom, it's over. Then you have this real relief, you just fall into exhaustion. All the adrenaline that had been flying through you from all the craziness, you just become so exhausted, we were all just laying on the ground, laying there, so happy it was all over and you're still alive and shit. Then the corpsman come down and he dressed it a little bit, then they got helicopters in there and they flew off to the dead and wounded and they took us to the field hospital. I got treated at the field hospital then they didn't want to keep me there because infection was bad in Vietnam because of the weather and everything, everything gets infected. You scratch yourself, it gets infected. So they flew me out to that hospital ship the Repose, I spent a month and a half out there on a hospital ship and when I healed up pretty good, they sent me right back in. I thought I was going home, I thought I hit the million dollar. I said, "Shit, I'm out of here." I was in country at the time about six months when I got hit. I thought I had the big one and I said, "Good, I'm going stateside, I'm getting the hell out of this place." They said, "No way, you got too much time left." So a month and a half on board ship, really nice, man. Nurses and bedding and air conditioning and good chow and shit. Doctor says, "You look alright to me, buddy, you're going back." And he sent me right back to my outfit. I was gun shy then, boy. You know, because I had already been hit once, I was thinking, "Shit man, next time, I might not be so lucky." But that's the way it goes, you know.

S: When you went there, how long did they tell you you were going to be in Vietnam?

C: Thirteen months. Everybody was going for a thirteen

month tour. That was your tour.

S: Was the month and a half on the ship....

C: It counts. So that was at least a month and a half I got out of it. I had to get shot to do it.

S: Because as you get closer, I know the so called short timers...

C: Now see maybe if I would have had two months left and I got hit, they would have probably shipped me home, but I had six months to go so that wasn't enough time.

S: How did you feel about the medical treatment?

C: Oh, good. Field now, was rough because they ain't got a lot of time to treat you, like with kid gloves. In fact, they threw me up on the table and in the field tender there was a guy, that splattered next to me, he was dead. Hernandez my buddy was next to me, but he had just little bits of shrapnel fragments so he wasn't too bad and I wasn't that bad either, especially when you see the other ones around you. You see some pretty tore up cats. You don't feel so bad, in fact, you feel that you shouldn't even be there with a lousy gunshot wound. So this dude come up to me, he's a corpsman. Corpsman are not doctors, they are like nurses, I guess. He said, "We got to clean that thing out." So no pain killer, no nothing, man, they took this thing that looked like a baster, that you baste a ham with and they filled it up with this soapy solution, stuck it in one hole and it squirted out the other hole. I almost went through the tent. I called him every name I could think of. "Shut up," he said. He said, "That didn't hurt." They don't give a shit. These guys see so much, my wound wasn't nothing to him. They squirted that stuff through the hole a few times and took scissors and cut all the burned skin off around the holes and no pain killers, I'm hanging on to this goddamn cot for dear life while he's doing all this shit. When they put me out on the ship that was a regular hospital and they really take care of you good.

S: Then you came back and joined up with the same company?

C: Yes, same outfit. Same tank and everything.

S: If somebody asked you what the most memorable thing that happened to you in Vietnam, what would that be?

C: Getting shot, that was it. That was the most memorable thing, man. Well, that and getting out of there when you come home. That was really something too.

- S: When people are out in the field, some things they talk about are like the insects, animals...What was that like?
- C: Every kind of bug, snake, rodent in the world lives in Vietnam. The biggest, ugliest, hairiest, nastiest goddamn critters you've ever seen in your life, was over there. They got them all. They got everything. They got huge spiders and I hate spiders, snakes everywhere and I heard somewhere that like out of all the snakes, they've got I don't know how many varieties. There is only like a couple varieties that aren't poisonous. All the rest of them are. They had cobras there, they had pit vipers, they had bamboo snakes, everything. All the insects, if they wouldn't kill you, they'd leave a hell of a lump on you when they bit you. At night you'd be sleeping and spiders would be biting you. Mosquitoes would bite the shit out of you. Your lips would swell up, your nose would get fat, your eyes would swell up, wherever they hit you, boy, they hit you good.
- S: When you are sleeping out in the field, where are you sleeping?
- C: It depends, if you got a hole, you're in the hole. If not, you're on the ground. If you've been in an area for awhile and maybe you've got a tent or a sandbag bunker you know, one of the two.
- S: What was the weather like?
- C: Terrible. It was hotter than hell. In the hot season, it might be 110, 120 degrees and it just zaps all the strength out of you. You feel like you don't have any strength. In the monsoon season, everything is wet all the time. You can't get dried out. Your boots rot off of you, your clothes rot off of you, everything just rots away because of the moisture and the air and the continuous rain and moisture all the time. There is one period right between the hot season and the monsoon season where it isn't too bad. It's a little cooler and it's not as wet, but that doesn't last too long. The place is beautiful though, the country itself, it's really beautiful. Tropical and all the trees, the palm trees and the beaches are beautiful, everything is beautiful. The place is really beautiful. The weather sucks, but the place is beautiful.
- S: What kind of food did they feed you when you were out there?
- C: Well, being as though I was where I was, in the field most of the time, out of the year I was there, nine months of it I ate C-rations. Canned C-rations. And I

- got to where I really liked them. I liked them better than a lot of the mess tent food we got. Whenever we were around an area that had a mess tent, usually that chow was lousy. The C-rations, you can fix them up the way you like them. We were eating C-rats from World War II, 1944 issue stuff, but it was still good. It was still good, there was nothing wrong with it. That's what I ended up eating most of the time.
- S: Did a lot of the people there wonder why they were there?
- C: When I was there, it was right at the beginning, so we still had a mission. This was supposed to be "the thing to do," the right thing to do, you didn't have all the protesting yet at home. So yes, we thought we were there for a reason. It wasn't until later on with all the protesting and all the horseshit that went on that everybody had doubts, the final outcome is what really pissed most of us off. If our government and our politicians would have left us alone, we could have ended that war in six months. We would have been in Hanoi, the flag would have been flying, we would have kicked their ass and it would have been over, but they played a game with us for ten years. They cost 58,000 guys' lives, the fucked around with us, played silly little games with us and then...I'll never forget them, that has got me so pissed, I'll tell you. We got sold down the river in that war.
- S: Now you mentioned the silly little games. What were the games you thought they played with you?
- C: I'm talking about over the ten years, keeping us there. If we weren't going to fight to win the war, just keeping us there playing around, getting killed. Go out and fight a little bit, pull back, stupid shit like that and just getting guys killed everyday for no goddamn reason because they weren't planning on winning this fucking war, which we could have done easily. We could have won that war.
- S: Again, going back for a minute, you mentioned a mission, the reason you were there. What did they tell you was the mission?
- C: The people in the south were being invaded by the communists from the north and the people in the south wanted democracy and freedom and we were there to guarantee them they'd have it, that the communists from the north weren't going to take them over and turn them into a communist state. That was the fools that we were, that we believed that bullshit. Then, like I said if you remember earlier, here, the majority, ninety percent of the people over there are poor

farmers anyhow and they didn't give a shit if they were communists or if they were republican or democrat. They didn't care what the hell they were as long as they were left alone. That's all they wanted so they could have their little life, their little hamlet, their family, their farm. They didn't give a shit what they were. They weren't going to vote anyhow. You know.

S: Do you remember anytime when any of the men tried to go AWOL to get out of the war?

C: Well you couldn't go AWOL because there was nowhere to go. We had a couple incidents where guys shot themselves, those assholes were stupid and they got caught and they got court marshaled. One idiot, for example, he was a wuss-ass anyhow, you know. He shot himself in the hand with a .45. A .45 is a big weapon. He just wanted to wound himself so he could get out of country for a while. Well he shot himself in the hand and he blew all the bones out of the back of his hand and he crippled his hand up for the rest of his life and they caught him at it, he got court marshaled, kicked out of the service, got a bad record, that means that he didn't get any of his medical paid for, he had to take care of that himself. Stupid shit like that. But desperation, guys tried things. Some guys just went goofy too. They actually did go crazy and they had to get them out of there. Whatever happened to them after that, I don't know.

S: When you said they went goofy, what would that mean?

C: Well, one night, we were on a perimeter watch, everybody was pretty tense, we had been getting some fire and the kids that were outside of this one town, these kids were coming out raiding our garbage dumps, you see any movement out in front of you, it puts you on edge. Well we were chasing them out, "Get the hell out of there." Running them out, we'd run them out and fifteen minutes later they're coming back. Well this one guy right down the line from us a little bit, I guess he was on the edge and this one kid kept coming out in front of his hole. He'd run him off, the kid would come back, I guess it happened about three times, a ten or eleven year old kid. He came back and he shot him, he just blew the kid away. Well, of course they grabbed him, that's plain out murder no matter what so he flipped to shoot that kid like that. Different things like that. We had one guy that was mean to begin with. A lot of the times, we would take VC suspects prisoners, we'd take them back for interrogation. All we would do was take them back. Whatever the interrogators did after that was their business. But we would sometimes have them for a day or two,

getting them back to the rear area. This guy liked to kick them, punch them out, torture them. Finally, this old man... I didn't like this shit. This used to bother me bad. I was in the area, I wasn't there watching because I would have probably done something about it, but he was a squad leader, I think they had ten or twelve of them up there, suspects, and we'd always tie them up and make them squat down and stay there until we were going to move them. He kicked this one old man to death. He kicked him to death. He was an old man, too, had his hands tied behind his back and he kicked the poor old bastard until he died. He got away with this shit, this son of a... He got killed later on himself, which is as far as I'm concerned was good riddance to a mean son of a bitch. That kind of guy, he didn't care about anybody. If he killed a kid, he wouldn't give shit. But that's a rarity, believe me. You've heard a lot of stories about that stuff over there. The majority of us guys, even as crazy as we were an as much pressure and shit we were under, we wouldn't cold bloodedly kill anybody, innocent people, that is. A lot of them got killed, but they got caught in the middle of something.

S: What did you think of the VC as an enemy?

C: I fought both of them. I fought the VC and the North regulars. As an enemy, I never was asked that before, I guess they were pretty tough little bastards. I have to admit, when we went after them, we had the best weapons, we had planes, we had tanks, we had artillery and all they had was their rifles. They put up a pretty good damn fight for what they had. Sometimes you'd run into regular outfits the north Vietnamese regulars, they'd have rockets, usually they didn't have many of those, they had a few rocket. A lot of mortars they had. But compared to what we had, 155's, 105's bombing them with B-52's and everything you could think of and the bastards would still fight you. See, their cause was stronger, in their mind. That's what kept them going for as long as it did. The odds they were against. We still could have kicked their... If they would have cut us lose, we were always fighting a defensive war. We weren't supposed to be aggressive. We were supposed to be defensive all the time. If they would have cut us lose and let us be an offensive force that we were supposed to be and get out there and fight this war and hunt the bastards down and kill them and get it over with, there would have been no problem. We had to keep going out, fight them a little bit, go back, go out again in a week or so, fight them again a little bit, pull back. Johnson at the time bombed the North for a week and then he would stop it, Okay we won't bomb you now for a month, let them rebuild everything back up, let them ship everything down south,

okay lets bomb them agan. They'd bomb them some more, they'd quit it again. What kind of stupid shit is that? You know? What kind of a way to fight a war? You're question, yes. I guess they were pretty tough little bastards. They were ruthless against their own.

Like I said, here is an incident, this was a bad incident. We were forming up on the road, we were going to take this convoy north. We were forming up... We were like convoy guard on these trucks with our tanks, it was about 8:00 in the morning or so, everybody's getting their shit together and getting packed up ready to go and up the road a little bit you see this little girl walking toward us, right. At first nobody was paying any attention. We look and she's coming up, we can see her, she's crying and she's shaking all over. She's got her hands out like this. She's got a hand grenade in each hand with the pin pulled and she's squeezing them and she's about ten or eleven years old, crying, just crying like crazy and she's walking right at us with these damn hand grenades. So we're all like, "What are we going to do, we don't want to shoot this kid." We know what happened, the VC put her up to this they probably told her to go down there, throw these hand grenades at us. So she comes walking right up to us and in the meantime, somebody ran down and got an interpreter, brought him up. She's maybe fifty feet away from our tank, standing in the road shaking and crying with these hand grenades. So here comes an interpreter up real quick and he starts rattleing some shit off to her in Vietnamese. It took a few minutes for her to calm down enough to answer him. So she started talking back to him. So here was the story that she came out of a little hamlet right up the road, a real small one, maybe twenty huts, the Viet Cong come in there and they're holding the whole hamlet hostage and they sent her down there and wanted her to throw these grenades at us and they told her if she didn't do it then they were going to kill her family and everybody in the vilage. So she got that over to us and so we told her, "Don't worry, we'll take care of your family, just stand there and don't move." This is through the interpreter. So she stood there. A couple guys ran up, grabbed her hand, took the hand grenades away from her and then through the interpreter, we asked where's the village and all that stuff. So we mounted up real quick, a bunch of us that were ready and ran up there to the village. All this took place maybe for her to walk down there and through the whole bullshit with the interpreter, maybe an hour went by, we got to that village, everybody was dead, massacured, they just chopped their ass up, shot them and chopped them up, the whole hamlet; kids, women, everybody. That's the kind of people they were. These were their own people, even though they were North Vietnamese, not

even that, a lot of your Viet Cong are right there from that region that you were in. But they were communists. They killed everybody. Life to them...They don't see life the way we do, but they massacred that whole goddamn village.

S: Did you ever work in conjunction with the South Vietnamese?

C: They, as far as I'm concerned are worthless, as far as soldiers were. In fact, we didn't trust the bastards. You didn't want them behind you because you didn't know if they were going shoot you in the back. If you got into any kind of rough situation, they were liable to throw their weapons down and run. If they lived anywhere close they would throw their weapons down and run home. They had the PF's, the popular forces, they were the most worthless pieces of shits, then they had the Vietnamese Army, they sucked. I never seen anything come out of them that was any good. They had some Vietnamese Marines I heard that weren't too bad, but I never operated with them, so I don't know. In general, I'd say they weren't worth a shit. And it proved out, as soon as we pulled out of Vietnam, as soon as we left, the North rolled in, they dropped their weapons and they ran for the South as fast as they could. So it proves it that they weren't worth a shit.

S: When did you find out you were coming home from Vietnam?

C: I knew my rotation date. So I just was counting the days down.

S: Do you remember now what that date was? Or the month?

C: Oh, I remember... I got back home, you got to cross the date line so I got home on Halloween day, so I spent two Halloweens. I left Vietnam actually two days before that because you go, at that time, anyhow, the way they did it was you go to Vietnam to Okanawa for two days debriefing, they called it. You go there, you get your gear squared away, you cleaned up, you get examined by the doctor, you make sure you ain't carrying no diseases, they talk to you a little bit and shit like that. That's two days work there and they put you on a plane and they send you back home. Actually I got back in the States on Halloween day of 1966.

S: What was your trip like home?

C: It was great. Unbelievable, the feeling you have just leaving, that you're going back to the world. You know. It was great. My parents didn't expect me for two more weeks so I was going to make this a surprise.

So I did. A bunch of us got off the plane at El Toro, in California, they were supposed to have buses for us to take us down to L.A. International to catch a plane to home, but the buses were late. We were in such a hurry, three of us got together and got a cab. We paid the goddamn cab driver between the three of us, to ride us down there and we all grabbed planes. I flew home here to Vienna Airport out there, nobody knew I was coming yet. I got off the plane there and I shared a limousine with a bunch of other people, I had my uniform on then, and the guy, the driver, didn't charge me. Took me home from the airport, he said, "It's on me, man." "Thanks a lot, buddy." I got out of the limousine, I was living in Youngstown then, went up and knocked on the door, mom answered the door and almost died of a heart attack. My dad was working, she called him, he left work, called my brother, he left work, the whole family started coming over the house. I had a seabag full of shit and I dumped it out on the floor. I had a little souvenirs for my younger brother and my sister and it was great. It was really something. It was great.

S: How many days had it been since you had been in Vietnam from that moment?

C: From that moment, three days.

S: That's quite a drastic change.

C: Oh, real drastic, extremely drastic. In fact it takes you a while to get used to it. One of the first things I wanted to do was to go back down to Glenwood Avenue where all my old buddies would hang out on the street, drinking and shit like that. So that night I didn't but the next night I did. I walked in the bar and sat down and got a beer and they started coming in. Some of them came up and said, "Hey Tom, where you been, we hadn't seen you in awhile." They didn't even know I was over there, they didn't know where I had been. It was like I was gone for a week or something. They didn't know where I was. It was something. Then there were other guys that I ran into that got all kinds of bullshit things that I had gotten my legs blown off and... Because there was a little piece in the paper when I got shot, but.... You know how rumors get, rumors flying around.

S: Tom, how would you say that the war, your experiences there changed you?

C: I don't know, but really it did though. It made me mean for a long time. I guess I still am to an extent, but not like I was. I was real short tempered, I can get real extremely mean. Frustrated, you name it, it

did something to you that you can't shake.

S: Do you believe that the 58,000 Americans who died, died in vain in Vietnam?

C: Yes. We got sold out, man, by our own country. One thing that I want people to know that bugs the living shit out of me is we as fighting men over there, we didn't lose that war. We never lost shit over there. We kicked their ass every time we fought them. Our government is the one that lost that goddamn war. They didn't lose it, they gave it up. That's what people have got to understand. As fighting men, we were some of the best there ever was. We fought under some of the most miserable, rotten conditions you could imagine and we did good. So I don't want the tag hung on me as a loser. You know what I mean, because we weren't losers. We couldn't help what our goddamn government did at the time about the way they handled the situation, the way they sold us out in the end, there was nothing we could do about it personally. But as fighting men, we were fighting men. We were good at what we did.

S: Okay. Well I want to thank you for doing the interview. I appreciate it.

C: Okay.

S: Thanks.

END OF INTERVIEW