

Richard Crabtree
Dartmouth College Oral History Program
Dartmouth Vietnam Project
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Transcribed by Karen Navarro

LIBRE: My name is Matthew Libre ('21) and I am joined here today with Richard Crabtree. The date is May 10th, 2020, and this interview is being conducted over the phone with the Dartmouth Vietnam Project. I am calling from Cabin John, Maryland, and Mr. Crabtree is speaking with me today from Grand Junction, Colorado. I would like to start today by expressing my thanks to you, Mr. Crabtree, for speaking with us today. It is a pleasure to be here and thank you so much for being here.

CRABTREE: Yes, likewise.

LIBRE: And just to begin, where and when were you born?

CRABTREE: I was born November 12th, 1946, in the beautiful campus of Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire, Mary Hitchcock [Memorial] Hospital, and Dr. Boardman was the doctor.

LIBRE: And how exactly did you end up in Hanover? Can you tell me a little about your family?

CRABTREE: Yes. My dad was a student at Dartmouth before the war. He was from Chicago, Illinois, and so World War II progressed to where he became a fighter pilot, Army Air Force P-47 fighter pilot for the duration, and he was, actually the last eight months of the war he was a POW [prisoner of war], and all he could think about when being a POW was being able to get back to Dartmouth College. And, so meanwhile when he returned from Europe, he got together with my mother who was his high school sweetheart, and she promptly became pregnant, and they went back, they moved to Dartmouth College in Hanover together as man and wife, and I popped out November 12th. [laughter]

LIBRE: Can you describe at all your initial experience at Dartmouth? Where did you live? How long were you there for?

CRABTREE: Yeah. Our first home was Middle Fayerweather Hall. It was designated as the married students dorm. I guess maybe

there were a couple of them. But, I was there until... Oh, you know, I only have one very vague memory being a two-year-old, a three-year-old. We moved back to Chicago when I was going on three years old, or my folks moved back to Chicago, and of course, took me with them. [laughter] So meanwhile, that's my initial experience at Dartmouth. I just have a vague memory of when my mom was—I was in a stroller, basinet-type thing, and just have vague memories of being a kid, a little baby, feeling snowflakes landing on my face, and I was having a good time catching snowflakes in my mouth. [laughter] It's like one of my earliest recollections. Yeah.

LIBRE: It's still snowing at school, I'll tell you. And so, did you have any siblings growing up?

CRABTREE: Yes. My brother Blair was born four years later in Chicago, and then I had another brother Scott and my brother David.

LIBRE: Several of you. And can you describe what it was like to grow up in Chicago? Were you mostly there, or do you have any recollections? Were you moving at all?

CRABTREE: Now let's see, we lived in Chicago until I was four or five. Then my folks moved to Battle Creek, Michigan, from Chicago. And my dad was involved with a small company called the Michigan Dock Company, and sold and installed docks, boat docks, on the Great Lakes. Yeah, that was in Battle Creek, Michigan. And yeah, I was in kindergarten. I remember going through as a kid, a school project going through the Kellogg cereal factory, which was quite something, a very memorable event. And, so let's see... From Battle Creek, Michigan, we moved to St. Louis, Missouri, and my father started work with McGraw-Hill Publishing Company then. I believe it was the F.W. Dodge section of McGraw-Hill. And he sold advertising. He was called—he called himself a space salesman, [laughter] selling advertising space for *Architectural Record*.

LIBRE: Yeah, how was that? It seemed like you guys were moving around a little bit. [both talk at the same time]

CRABTREE: Yeah, St. Louis was very hot and humid. I was there from first grade through third grade, and then in the third grade we moved to Spring Lake, New Jersey—no, excuse me, North Plainfield, New Jersey. My grandparents lived in, they retired

in Spring Lake. Well, anyway, from St. Louis to North Plainfield, New Jersey, for just a few months my father was working in New York. He was progressing through the corporation, and so we were only in Plainfield, New Jersey, for I don't know, it was like six months, and I was in the third grade. Then we moved to a beautiful little town, Rowayton, Connecticut, yeah, in 1956. And that was memorable because there was a, right after we moved there, there was a big hurricane, hurricane of 1956, and it was Rowayton, Connecticut, right out of Long Island Sound, just a beautiful town. So, yeah.

LIBRE: Yeah, I actually have family who live in Norwalk, so I spent some time around Rowayton.

CRABTREE: Oh, wow, yeah. Bayley Beach and Roton Point and all of that, yeah.

LIBRE: Yeah, it's a wonderful area. And, so you obviously, moving around I understand that you were young at this time, but did you notice any large social or cultural difference moving around between these major different areas of the country? Obviously, you were in the Midwest for a portion, you know, you were in the Northeast. Did you feel like there was tangible differences socially and culturally going between these kind of places?

CRABTREE: Well, in St. Louis I was not totally aware of it at the time, but there was segregation, ongoing segregation, and when we moved to New Jersey, it was a very mixed school, and so that's where I learned to accept being in school with Negroes. Back then they were called, well, Negroes. That was the proper term, and now I guess it's called black folks, you know, which... Meanwhile, that was not a problem, but a part of my education from—that was in New Jersey. When we moved to Connecticut, there were fewer black folks, a few, but meanwhile, that was the beginning of the civil rights era as I remember it, yeah.

LIBRE: Can you talk a little bit about that, your memories?

CRABTREE: Let's see. I remember there was a big riot in Newark years ago, and people... There were really mixed feelings about... you know, I grew up in a middle class white family, and so it was kind of a learning experience as to what was going on culturally, you know, the differences in different parts of the

country. I moved to Westport, Connecticut, from Rowayton. No, back up. Okay, so, from New Jersey, where I was introduced to a little bit of black culture, had a few little black buddy friends, you know, and moved from New Jersey to Rowayton. No, there were no black folks there to speak of, but then, you know, of course, civil rights was kind of on the front burner at that point in time.

And from Rowayton—let's see, in Rowayton from third grade through seventh grade middle school, we moved to Westport, Connecticut, Fairfield County, and another town on Long Island Sound, and that's where from middle school through high school we lived there. Graduated from Staples High School in Westport in 1965.

LIBRE: What exactly were you involved with in middle school and high school? What were kind of some things... Just sort of paint a picture of what your life was like in high school.

CRABTREE: Yeah. From Rowayton to Westport, I was very involved with sailing. I was on the water a lot. In the summer I loved boating, you know, sailing. I learned to dive, a skin diver and basics and forefront of scuba diving Long Island Sound. So I grew up on the water, under the water. And when I was in middle school I was always, I was trying to make money. Throughout my middle school and high school, I was more concerned with getting jobs and trying to make some money, and I didn't really apply myself to my studies that much, [laughter] unfortunately. But, I had bicycles, I had little boats, a little sailboat and my dive gear and... but I was working cutting lawns and shoveling snow and whatever, wherever I could make a buck as a kid, I was interested in trying to make money.

My folks didn't have a lot of money at that point in time. My dad was climbing the corporate ladder, so to speak. And if I wanted anything, my dad says, "Well, you can go earn some money and buy what you want to buy." [laughter] So, yeah, subsequently I wasn't involved—you know, I was just an average student. I didn't apply myself, unfortunately. In high school I worked at a place called the Big Top Shoppe, which was a really net setup. It was a short order cook restaurant, and I was a cook and sales, you know, counter person, all through high school. And so that was really quite a, it was a fairly rigorous job actually. I was cooking and waiting after school, all through school. And yeah, if I wanted... yeah, I

bought my own clothes, I bought my own bicycle, motorcycle, car, what have you. If I wanted something, I had to earn the money for it.

LIBRE: Yeah, you said you graduated in 1965.

CRABTREE: Correct.

LIBRE: Can you describe, I guess, outside of, you said the civil rights movement was occurring, what else was the political atmosphere at the time? What else was notable and stuff that you have remembered? [both talk at the same time]

CRABTREE: Well, one of the jobs that I had, I liked working with kids, neighborhood kids. I was a pretty responsible guy, and I got all sorts of jobs, babysitting jobs for neighbors, friends and neighbors. And, you know, I was seen as a pretty responsible young man. I worked. I was working all the time, and like I say, unfortunately I wasn't the best student. I was just a plain average "C" type student. And during the course of babysitting, I got a job with one family that the father was a major in the Special Forces, and he had been the CO [commanding officer] of a Nike missile site, which was just right up the road from Staples High School where I went to high school.

So, while I was a senior—well, actually, a junior and senior at Staples in Westport, I periodically babysat for the kids. There were two kids, a boy and a girl, young boy and a girl, and the wife of a Special Forces major. And at that point in time I became a little bit aware of what was going on in Vietnam. And I had a pass to get into the Nike missile site. I guess I had cleared a certain security—I had a certain security clearance to get on this Nike missile site, and it was actually an Alpha site. I didn't know what Alpha meant. But, the Nike missiles actually had, my understanding later on, had atomic warheads on them. And this was part of the missile defense for the surrounding area where, like Bridgeport, Connecticut, and Norwalk, there were various Department of Defense contract companies.

And, so with the combination of babysitting for this family, I read some letters. I saw pictures of Vietnam and read some commentary of this Special Forces major who was up in the Highlands area as a... There was a little bit of combat going on. So I had a vague—well, actually more than a vague

understanding of what was happening in Vietnam. At that point in time I decided *gee, I don't really want to get involved. I don't really want to go to Vietnam.* But then it was, you know, the Cold War and Communism, and of course, really when we were—I remember when I was up in Rowayton, Connecticut, in elementary school, we had the “duck and cover.” We did the Lord’s prayer, the Pledge of Allegiance, and then practiced “duck and cover” underneath our desks.

LIBRE: [inaudible]

CRABTREE: So yeah, as kids we were wondering, *Wow, is there going to be a nuclear bomb? And what's going on here, you know?* In current events we'd read, you know, we'd get the current events magazine, you know, a little newspaper, and we were talking about as much as we could understand so-called worldly events, things that were taking place outside of the United States. So, I was interested in history at that point in time, you know, *What the heck is going on?* And when I started learning about Vietnam, I said, *Man, that's a dangerous place.* And at the time I... [both talk at the same time] Yeah.

LIBRE: At the time did it feel, you know, was it anything, and maybe you were [inaudible], was it anything more than just a far off dangerous place? Did it seem in 1963 to '64, you know, early on that this was something that you might actually be brought into?

CRABTREE: Well, of course, in '63, yeah, it was a big deal. Everybody remembers where they were when President [John F.] Kennedy was killed. And then, prior to that there was the Cuban Missile Crisis and, you know, all sorts of stuff going on, between the civil rights going on and the Cuban Missile Crisis, and then Vietnam came to the forefront with President Kennedy making news; you know, he was in the news about Vietnam, etc. And then when he was killed, boy, that was a big shock to everybody. And so, yeah, Vietnam at that point... [both talk at the same time] Excuse me?

LIBRE: Can you take me through it all sort of when Kennedy was killed? Where were you? What were your thoughts or emotions on that day?

CRABTREE: Well, I was in high school. I was going to Staples High School at the time. And I remember when I heard that he was killed, I was actually out pheasant hunting. I was quite the duck and pheasant hunter. I actually raised pheasants and would let them go. And at that point in time, Westport was still a lot of countryside, still had quite a bit of agriculture, and my buddies of mine and I were actually pheasant hunting when I heard. I had a transistor radio. Back then it was a big deal. Everybody had a transistor radio. And I remember hearing about it over the transistor radio while I was pheasant hunting. And, you know, I became actually fairly emotional. And it's... yeah, periodically, one of my—I don't know if it's a problem, but I do get emotional.

LIBRE: No problem whatsoever.

CRABTREE: Yeah. Okay, so that was ongoing, you know. It was like a big vegetable soup of things swirling around between civil rights, Vietnam, politics, world events, things going on outside of the United States. Yeah, it was a pretty intense time back then. And of course, once again I was mainly involved with working. Yeah, I worked at the Big Top Shoppe. And I was actually making pretty good money as a kid, you know? So, yeah, between that and I'm out on the water on the boat, under the water, and hunting and fishing, I was pretty much of an outdoor kind of guy.

So, when we were living in Connecticut is when we started going back up to Dartmouth, Hanover, and actually we had friends that owned a beautiful 200-acre farm up in Woodstock, Vermont, up above Dunham Hill, up above the Woodstock Inn. And so, wonderful memories of... actually it started up when I was seventh grade junior high school going up there skiing. Prior to that, back and forth, my dad was involved with the alumni association, and so I grew up with the understanding that I was supposed to go to Dartmouth, being the eldest son. So, wonderful memories of going up to that area, Mount Washington, the Cog Railway, and all of that. So, back and forth through of course from middle school all through high school, we'd go up and stay at Brook Hollow Farm in Woodstock, Vermont, and from there venture forth to Dartmouth and Hanover and all that.

LIBRE: Yeah, that must have been wonderful.

CRABTREE: Yeah, it was beautiful times.

LIBRE: Yeah, and I guess sort of that as sort of a background to your experience with Dartmouth, and maybe you can sort of [inaudible] to that, I'm not sure. But, can you take me back to graduation day from Westport High School, no, from Staples High School in 1965? Yeah, but I guess the point of it is you knew at this point that you weren't going to Dartmouth.

CRABTREE: At that point in time, I knew when I graduated from high school, I was not exactly Dartmouth material. [laughter] [both talk at the same time] Yes?

LIBRE: Yeah, so I guess... [both talk at the same time]

CRABTREE: Well, I was involved... My aspiration... Okay, after—before I graduated from high school I thought—this was when they started the community college, junior college type program, and I thought, *Well, I'm going to go to Norwalk Community College to get my grades up and use that as a springboard, figure out what the heck I'm going to do with my life or where I'm going to go from after high school.* And I was well aware that I had to get my grades up to be able to go on to any type of a more advanced college situation, college or university, get my grades up. So, yeah, I was scheduled, I was planning on going to Norwalk Community College.

But, within two weeks of my graduation, my dad got transferred to California. He was working for McGraw-Hill Publishing Company in the Sweets catalog division, which is construction files, etc. And, so he got a transfer to Los Angeles. McGraw-Hill acquired a newspaper called the *Valley Green Sheet*, which was a construction service newspaper in California. And so, he was moved out there to become the publisher of that and integrate the *Valley Green Sheet* into the Sweets catalog and McGraw-Hill construction file type publications. And so, yeah, all of a sudden they said, "Well, Rick, we're moving to California" and I said, "Wow, oh, man, I've gotta go. Hey, I've gotta go with you," because I grew up listening to Beach Boys and California, everything in California was just really cool. So, man, I had to be involved with that.

LIBRE: Of course, yeah.

CRABTREE: Yeah. Oh yeah, that was exciting. So, within a couple of weeks of graduating from high school, yeah, I backed off from working at the Big Top. And I was also working. Oh man, I was working my butt off. I was doing landscaping. I had contracts to cut yards. I was a house painter and working at the Big Top. I was actually working my butt off and actually making pretty good money as a teenager. So, *California, here I come*. So, oh yeah, back up.

Draft board. The Selective Service. When you're 18 you had to register for Selective Service. Of course, when I was 16 I got a fake ID card. I got a fake draft card. [laughter] Because when you're in Connecticut you could get your driver's license when you're 16. And drinking age in New York State was 18. And so, all the kids, you know, high school kids, it was the big deal then to get a fake draft card. There was no picture ID back then. So when I was 16 I got a fake draft card so I could go to New York State and drink beer. [laughter] And then, of course, when I turned 18, *boy, I'm legal now. I have a real draft card*. And so, I had a real genuine draft card from Bridgeport, Connecticut. I moved to...

LIBRE: How did it feel to hold one up?

CRABTREE: Excuse me?

LIBRE: How did it feel when you actually got the real one for yourself? Were you proud of it or was it something...

CRABTREE: Well, once again, it was a mixed feeling, because here I was 18, graduating from high school, and I thought, *Okay, well, I'm legal to go to drink beer in New York, but still the draft...* Vietnam was starting to cook a little bit then. And I realized, *Gee, no, I don't want to get drafted. And here I have this draft card*. The original meaning for me was just to be able to drink beer in New York. [laughter] But then the realization is like *okay, I can actually get drafted unless I get into school. I need to get a 2-S deferment*. In fact, that was called a 2-S student deferment.

So we moved to Chatsworth and I got into Pierce Junior College in Woodland Hills, California. So, I was a freshman. That was what, 1965, '66—1965, yeah. So, I was a matriculated student. Well, my first semester I got a notice to go for a physical. And I said, "Yeah, okay." So I figured, you

know, filling out all the student papers, etc., and I had a student ID, I thought, *Well, I have a 2-S deferment.* And, so I went for my physical and I properly got my induction notice after that. I passed the physical with flying colors.

And so I got my induction notice. I went down to the Selective Service place in L.A. and I said, “No, hey, I’m a student. I have my papers with me.” And they said, “Son, let me see your draft card. We want to take a look at your draft card.” And they said, “That’s Bridgeport, Connecticut. Do you realize you’re living in California?” I hadn’t technically—I thought I’d technically checked in just being a student, but I hadn’t physically gone to register, re-register, transfer from Connecticut Selective Service to California Selective Service. And they said, “Well, you have six weeks to get your stuff together before you’re getting inducted in the Army.” Yeah, well, that was a rude awakening. I thought, *Well, gee whiz, okay. Maybe I can use this to my advantage.* I grew up on boats and I was a good sailor and so I thought, *Well, I’m gonna go and join the Coast Guard so I can guard a yacht club or something.* [laughter]

And, so I had a short period of time to get my stuff together before I had to go into the Army, and I said, “No, I’m not gonna go to Vietnam. I don’t want to go in the Army. I don’t want to get drafted.” So I looked around, and I couldn’t get into the Coast Guard unless I signed up for like six years or something. And I thought, *Well, I’ll get the military obligation out of the way and then be able to go back to school on the GI Bill,* etc. North Hollywood Naval Reserve Training Center was, I drove by there a few times. So, I just, my car automatically pulled into the parking lot there. And I went in and said, “Hey, what’s it like joining the Naval Reserve? What do I have to do? And I don’t want to go to Vietnam. I don’t want to get drafted in the Army. But, you know, I’m looking around and I’d really like to join the Coast Guard, but what do you guys have to offer? What can I do?” And they said, “Well, what do you want to do?” I said, “Well, it’s kind of what I don’t want to do. I don’t want to go to Vietnam. If I join the Naval Reserve for two years, do I have to go to Vietnam?” So, I’ll never forget, he was a yeoman first class, Ventnor, said, “Well, son, now we’re not sending two-year reservists to Vietnam.”

And I had a friend who was a corpsman, a Navy hospital corpsman, on aircraft carrier, the [USS] *Wasp* [CV-7]. It was

based out of Naples, Italy. And this guy was having a great time traveling all around Europe, and boy, what an education that was. He graduated from high school a couple of years prior to me. So anyway, and then I'd had lifesaving Red Cross stuff, and my grandfather was a doctor and my grandmother was his nurse anesthetist, so I had a vague understanding of various medical things, First Aid and what have you. So I thought, *Well, yeah, I'll be a corpsman.* "If I become a Corpsman, can I do my military obligation in a hospital or maybe on a ship, Navy hospital?" And they said, "Yeah, great, good idea. We need corpsmen."

So I tested out, went through the various batteries of tests and did well on it, and they said, "Yeah, well, okay, raise your right hand." They swore me in. And I was a two-year Naval recruit and I said, "Well, if I, yeah, I'll go to boot camp and all that." And so, I let me folks know. I said, "Well, I'm in the Navy now." But I grew up with the notion of duty, honor, country. My dad was an illustrious World War II, P-47 Army Air Corps fighter pilot. And so I grew up with all his stories and various situations. And so...

LIBRE: And I guess, you felt that sort of, yeah, your duty, honor and country. Did you feel that that was reason enough to go and serve over in Vietnam, or did you have any views about the war itself? Or did you feel like, you know, regardless, that *it's my job, my duty, to serve for my country?* Do you have any sort of [inaudible] support for the war?

CRABTREE: I had a specific obligation, my inner conversation and feeling of duty, honor and country, and that yeah, I should do the honorable thing. I should fulfill my military obligation without going to Vietnam. And, so thinking, *well, I can work in the hospital or be helping people rather than hurting them, and avoid getting hurt or killed.* So, that was my...

LIBRE: So, I guess to sort of contextualize this within our conversation here, when you took this oath to be a two-year Navy reserve corpsman, is this like the fall of 1965? Or is it...

CRABTREE: '66. It was '66, yes. And so wait a minute, no. Actually, yeah, I did join—heck, it was '65, '66. I can't remember the specific date that I actually joined. But I said... well, of course, I went down to San Diego Naval Recruit Training Center, and I was in the Class of 669, 1966, yeah. Class 669 at the San Diego

Naval Recruit Training Center. So yeah, I went down there and just ate it up. I had a great time. I really actually enjoyed... I had a certain amount of self-discipline and feeling of obligation of doing my duty. So yeah, I became a master-at-arms of the company and, you know, Class 669, and I just ate it up. I loved the training. Yes?

LIBRE: Yeah, can you take me through maybe a given day of what training would look like for you? I guess sort of, you know, when you get out of bed in the morning until that night, what did it look like?

CRABTREE: Yeah, rise and shine at about 5:00 in the morning, all the typical recruit stuff going on, you know, with a DI screaming at you, and so I just sucked it up. And my dad gave me a few pointers. You know, there's the right way, the wrong way, and the military way, and you'd better say, "Yes, sir. No, sir. No excuse, sir." [laughter] So, meanwhile, I prided myself on being somewhat squared away so to speak, and so when I graduated was actually the meritorious recruit of that company, and I received an award at a captain's mast for being the meritorious recruit of my company. And it was a great honor. Yeah, I felt *boy, I'm really accomplishing something here.*

LIBRE: And for your company that you were with, how many other corpsmen were there? Were you surrounded by several others?

CRABTREE: Well, this was basic training, so there was one or two other guys that thought about wanting to be a corpsman, but at that point in time you weren't really accepted to go to the "A" school until you completed the basic training. And so, I graduated being the so-called meritorious recruit for Company 669, and so after graduation went back to Chatsworth to stay with my folks, because I was slated to go to "A" school at Balboa Naval Hospital [San Diego, CA], but a month later and, you know, as a rotating class, what have you. So, went back, stayed with my folks a little bit for a little while before I had to report to Balboa Naval Hospital, which was the class "A" school for the beginning of Navy hospital corpsman training. And of course, at that point in time I was a two-year reservist. So, I thought the clock started ticking when I was in basic training. That's where it's the two year program obligation.

Well, anyway, so I went through Balboa corpsman class “A” school, Navy Hospital corpsman training at Balboa Naval Hospital, and I loved it. Once again, I ate it up. I did really, really well. I was a 4 0 sailor, and really enjoyed the training, and I felt like *man, you know, here I am learning all sorts of neat stuff and I’m fulfilling my military obligation and I’ll be able to go on and work at a hospital someplace wherever, maybe on board ship, I don’t know*. See, I was along for the ride, and I felt as though I was doing fairly well at that point in time. So, after I went through the class “A” training at Balboa, I did really well, and so they sent me up to Oakland Naval Hospital.

LIBRE: And what kind of patient—sorry to interject there—what type of patients were you seeing, and who were you working alongside when you were doing this training at Balboa?

CRABTREE: Well, at Balboa we had, it was a whole mixture of things, a lot of basic First Aid, advanced First Aid, stabilization of wounds. We more or less learned—it was actually parallel to what a licensed practical nurse has to go through. And, so all the training of a—it was pretty much all the training that a licensed practical nurse has to go through: anatomy, physiology, there’s biology and pharmacology. It was very intense. So, and learning basic—you know, we’d visit the ER, emergency room, operating room procedures, just everything. It was a smattering of everything that went on in a Naval hospital.

LIBRE: Do you have any specific memories of patients or something that had lasting impacts on you? A memory from that?

CRABTREE: At Balboa there was no real any one outstanding situation. It was very intense training. So, let’s see... I remember, well, there was a lieutenant commander nurse and a chief petty officer corpsman, and when we graduated... The chief corpsman had been through Korea. I don’t know, he didn’t say if he had been involved with Vietnam or not. But I remember that when we graduated from corps school, the nurse and the chief became very emotional. And word got around that, well, the guys that were, excluding me being a Navy reservist, a lot of these guys were going to go on to Vietnam, and then go on to train with the Marine Corps. Well, and it was understood that, you know, some would make it and some would not. Vietnam was a dangerous

place. At that point in time I didn't think, *Well, gee, I'm a lucky guy. I don't have to go to Vietnam.*

And, so I remember the nurse being very emotional and the chief being very emotional, and respective. They didn't come right out and say, "Well, you know, some of you aren't gonna make it back home." But there was kind of that feeling, kind of an atmosphere whereby, you know, some of these guys are going to go over, right, and start training with the Marine Corps. So, I got lucky. I was transferred to Oakland Naval Hospital, working on a neurosurgery ward, under a Captain Clark was the commanding officer of the neuro—he was the head neurosurgeon there at Oakland Naval Hospital. And so, I really had to be squared away working on a neurosurgery ward, you know. Everything had to be 4 0.

LIBRE: Yeah, no, so I guess just getting back to where we were. Yeah, as I was saying that, you know, I'm sure the neurosurgery ward would have been an incredibly delicate operation there, and I'm sure everything had to be exact, as you were saying, and I guess, yeah, you can continue from there.

CRABTREE: Well, working on the neurosurgery ward became very depressing, because it was working with quadriplegics, paraplegics, you know, working pre-op, post-op and all. And these were guys coming back from Vietnam, mainly Marines, all sorts of neurological, you know, head wounds, spinal wounds, you know, neurosurgery type wounds. And, boy was that a shocker to see, just really incredibly vicious wounds on these guys. And then, hearing their stories about combat, Marine Corps combat, and these guys were hard core Marine Corps combat troopers. And ah, I mean, it was breathtaking to hear some of the stories of what happened and what was going on. And, of course, then liberty, I got to go off to San Francisco and, you know, clear the air and try to maintain a sense of, I don't know, get away from... man, it became, it was just very, very depressing working on a neurosurgery ward. And a few people, you know, a few of the patients died.

LIBRE: [break in tape] Sort of a part two here, too. We unfortunately broke up a little bit, but picking up from where we were. We were talking about your work in Oakland treating, you know, on the neurosurgery ward, treating Marine Corps veterans who were returning from Vietnam who had some pretty

serious injuries and some trauma. So yeah, just picking up from there.

CRABTREE: So yeah, working on the neurosurgery ward was very, very educational. I was working under a Captain Clark, who was the commanding officer, and then various nurses, a number of them. Lieutenant Commander Heath was the charge nurse. And, so it was pre-op and post-op patient care, working with Stryker frames and IVs and catheterizations and Bird respirators and medications. Yes?

LIBRE: It seems like you had, yeah, sort of a baptism by fire. I mean, was this sort of a much different world and picture than you had seen previously at Balboa?

CRABTREE: Very much so. Very much so. We didn't have—at Balboa I didn't have direct contact with seriously wounded veterans coming back from Vietnam at that point in time. It was more—as a matter of fact, we weren't—we didn't have any experience working with gravely, seriously wounded Vietnam veterans coming back. It was just a smattering of overall Naval hospital routine, etc. But up at Oakland, man, it was up close and personal, and listening to, a lot of it was of talking things out, learning what happened to the individuals, what was actually going... [both talk at the same time]

LIBRE: Do you have any stories?

CRABTREE: Not that I want to talk about. No, once again, it gets too emotional.

LIBRE: Yeah, I understand.

CRABTREE: And these are seriously wounded, and a lot of them weren't gonna make it. Yeah. Whew. So...

LIBRE: If you need a moment, yeah, let me know.

CRABTREE: No, I'm okay. Like I said, it just became very depressing. And working next to the neuropsychiatric ward, at that point in time they were talking about what they called about combat trauma neuroses, which I guess was the forerunner of PTSD [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder]. But, I realized that they were treating career NCOs [non-commissioned officers], career officers, who were actually having psychological problems as a result of their traumatic

experiences in Vietnam. And, of course, the guys that were on the neurosurgery ward, they were having their own issues of course, and there was kind of a, there was a little bit of a transference went on there with me, absorbing... Yeah, what you call a transference thing going on. And... Yes, what?

LIBRE: Well, and sort of, you know, when you were seeing all these people, did this change, you know, sort of seeing their outlook on what Vietnam was to them at the time, did that sort of, you know, even develop your perspective of what was going on over there, and the work that was being done and the conflict itself?

CRABTREE: Well, at that point in time I actually developed kind of a hatred towards the enemy, to see what these guys went through. And not that I wanted to become involved with Vietnam, but without realizing it I was at that point in time, and listening to them about being in combat in incredibly intense situations, it couldn't help but put myself in their shoes, so to speak, not that any of them could even walk again. Talk about putting—I couldn't put myself in their shoes because a lot of them couldn't even wear shoes. A lot of them were bilateral amputees, you know, a combination, just not neurological, but amputations and everything. And, so along with feelings of depression, I developed a feeling of anger as to what happened to these guys, and I started developing a certain emotional feeling of anger towards the enemy, towards the Viet Cong, specifically the North Vietnamese. At that point in time, I, yeah, I developed a feeling of anger towards the North Vietnamese, not that I wanted to go over there and jump into it myself. So... Yes, what?

LIBRE: The North Vietnamese even more so than [inaudible] who were South Vietnamese?

CRABTREE: Well, my understanding, awareness at that point in time was that the North Vietnamese guys were just really hard core compared to the South Viet Cong. The hard core North Vietnamese were diehard. My understanding at that point in time was they were diehard Communists, and yeah, I had the notion that they were, yeah, it was a civil war going on there and the North were really, really aggressive.

And, so meanwhile, I made the mistake of fraternizing with a Lieutenant JG [Junior Grade], and I started dating a Navy

nurse, which was a big no-no. I was enlisted. I was an enlisted person and Lieutenant JG was an officer, so that the charge nurse didn't appreciate that, and she let me know whether or not they were going to transfer me to the Marine Corps or something. You know, they don't really tell you exactly what's going on, what you're going to go through, other than, you know, working there now, here and now, and at the moment as to what's going on. I didn't know what the military had in—what they really wanted to do with me, but I think I was actually being trained to go with the Marine Corps at that point in time, but I didn't realize it at that point in time. So, but yeah, when I was discovered I was dating the Lieutenant JG, the charge nurse said, "Well, Crabtree, you're being transferred to the Marine Corps," as a fleet...

LIBRE: What was that?

CRABTREE: "You're being transferred to the fleet Marine Corps."

LIBRE: Oh, my gosh. And when was this?

CRABTREE: That was in '67, the specific month I don't know. I can't remember the specific month.

LIBRE: Yeah, no, no worries. And so, where did you go from there? What did that mean for you?

CRABTREE: From Oakland Naval Hospital I was transferred down to Camp Del Mar. It was part of the Camp Pendleton Marine Corps training called Field Medical Service School at Camp Del Mar, which was actually part of Camp Pendleton Marine Corps training. So, went through Field Medical Service School, which was training for combat as to what you have to do as a front line combat Navy corpsman, and I still didn't think I would necessarily have to go to Vietnam.

LIBRE: Right, because it wasn't on your mind necessarily. You didn't think it was a guarantee.

CRABTREE: I was still kind of naive as to how everything works with the military, and at that point in time Field Medical Service School was once again fantastic training. It was actually a relief to get away from working on the neurosurgery unit, because now I'm down working with Marines, you know, being trained by Marines, and it was next to the recon Marine, recon training area.

LIBRE: And what did training there look like? Were you seeing—was it more, you know, tending towards First Aid, and so...

CRABTREE: Yeah, all of the above.

LIBRE: So it was more like you were getting ready for war rather than just to treat patients that were [inaudible]?

CRABTREE: Yeah, at that point in time not working with any casualties coming back from Vietnam, and no hands on working with casualties at that point in time. It was like a crash course, Marine boot camp crash course with all the discipline that went along with it: physical, you know, all the PT, physical therapy, and the marching, the calisthenics. It was very, very physical, very demanding physically, and while learning more as to hands on as to actual equipment that was used in the field over in Vietnam in a combat scenario. And it entailed going through, you know, they had mockup villages and different exercises and things. And once again it became very intense physically and psychologically picking up the—you know, we had to carry weapons with us all the time, go through the [inaudible]. We had to learn—of course, the basic training, Navy basic training, we learned how to use small arms. But here it was very intense use of all sorts of pistols, rifles, shotguns, including 30 caliber, 50 caliber machine guns, just the basics... [both talk at the same time]

LIBRE: And this was no different for you as a corpsman than it was, then, for any other discipline there, was it?

CRABTREE: Say again?

LIBRE: Was this any different for you, this weapons training and sort of... I'm sure that must have been an interesting process for you being trained how to use weapons of offensive assault kind of things when all of your previous training had been mostly just medical and treatment-wise. Was that a strange feeling for you?

CRABTREE: Well, once again, but it was mainly in a defensive posture. Theoretically, we were considered non-combatants, and but when you're with the Marines, you had to be versatile. And, so I grew up with hunting and fishing. I had rifles and shotguns and different things, .22 shotguns and different things. I learned the basics of handling a pistol when I was a

teenager. So I had a familiarity with small arms and weapons, and I knew basic fieldcraft because we did a lot of camping and I learned orienteering and how to use a map and compass and all that. So, I was, once again I went to it, I got to it, and once again I was a 4.0 kind of guy. I just immersed myself into it. But, it was very physical, but, and I enjoyed the training. I enjoyed working with the weapons and enjoyed learning all about how to operate in a field in a combat situation.

And at that point in time, even though I didn't really want to go to Vietnam, I was psychologically, like I say, I had a little hatred towards the—anger towards the North Vietnamese and what they had done to guys that I had worked with over in the neurosurgery units. And, so slowly but surely I guess I was being aimed towards going to Vietnam. And, but I still, well, when I finished Field Medical Service School, I theoretically only had eight months left towards my two-year obligation active duty, but then the realization of *no, I don't have eight months left. I was extended. My military, active duty military obligation was extended.* And they stated that, well, initial boot camp Naval reserve training, you know, my boot camp didn't count towards active duty.

LIBRE: Really? Did you feel like, you know, was this sort of a slap in the face? Was this a surprise to you?

CRABTREE: I can't say it was—at that point in time I can't say it was a slap in the face. Now I look at it as that, but at that point in time I just kind of rolled with it. I thought, *Gee whiz, you know, gee, that's the way it works,* you know? Like I say, I was still a little bit naive as to exactly how the military, all the ins and outs and the technicalities and all that, and so, yeah, I got the, all of a sudden the rude awakening, *Oh, I don't have eight months left. I've got a year-and-a-half left, something like that.* And so, there was a point in time when I had that rude awakening. Within five days, I was in Vietnam.

LIBRE: Really? So it was that soon? I mean, they said, "Okay, you're done, and now you're ready to go"? Or was there any time in between Field Medical Service School...

CRABTREE: Yeah, I finished the Field Medical Service School, and then I was attached to a, just briefly attached to a Marine Corps company at Camp Pendleton.

LIBRE: Do you remember the name of the company?

CRABTREE: Well, it was actually a service—like H&S service company. It was—no, it's written down some place. I can't remember specifically the specific designation. But it was all corpsmen, and we were in a dispensary. It was at, yeah, Las Pulgas area in Camp Pendleton, and it was just all corpsmen, field medical service, yeah, guys that had all gone through the recent training. And that's when I realized that I didn't have just eight months left, and I was just there for a brief period of time when I got my orders on, what is it? Oh, my folks were living in L.A. I went home for the weekend, and Monday I had to report to Travis—well, what was it? Before Travis Air Force Base it was a Navy...

LIBRE: Do you remember when this was?

CRABTREE: It was March of '67.

LIBRE: And did you fly over or were they still taking ships over at this point?

CRABTREE: Yeah, I reported to this bus up to Travis Air Force Base. We flew from Travis, actually on Continental Airlines. Yeah, a contract, civilian. And it was a whole combination. It wasn't just corpsmen. It was Marine Corps, Navy, you know, it was a whole combination. I guess there were some Army guys, what have you. Just a 707 plane full of guys that... We stopped in Hawaii briefly, and then transported to Okinawa, and I was in Okinawa for just a day, a couple of days. And then from Okinawa flew to, once again flew commercial, I believe, yeah, it was Continental Airlines flew us to Da Nang Air Field. And so, within five days of getting my orders to 'Nam, I was out in the jungle, I was out in the bush.

And they sent me to, from Da Nang I was assigned to Cuba Company, 3rd Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division, and they flew me down to a place called Duc Pho on Operation Desoto. And that was in March of '67. And wow. Talk about a rude awakening. We got down there, and I was issued an M14 rifle and what's called a Unit One, just basic corpsman First Aid. They call a Unit One First Aid bag.

But, luckily I smuggled over with me a Browning Hi-Power 9mm pistol with a bunch of magazines. When I found out I was going to have to go to Vietnam, I learned all about

weapons and different things, what worked, what didn't work. And one of the troopers, one of the Marine Corps sergeants said, "Doc, you've gotta go get yourself a Browning Hi-Power pistol, 9mm," and it carried 13 rounds. And he said, "It's a very reliable weapon, very accurate, much better than a .45 [pistol]," because all the corpsmen were issued .45s, but because I had my own pistol, I was issued an M14 at that point in time when we got down to Duc Pho. And I had all my gear with me.

And talk about a rude awakening, you know? A brand new guy, you know, new guy and they call it FNGs [Fucking New Guys]. And I was an FNG and standing in a chow line with all my stuff. I'd put my sea bag—you know, they assigned me a bunker, actually a bunk in a bunker, so I stashed all my stuff in the bunker. And I was standing in a chow line, and there was fighting ongoing. You could hear gunfire and fighting going on in the distance. And I said, *Boy, man, here I am. This is for real. This is actually happening. I'm really in Vietnam.* And it was the first time I heard gunfire and planes and helicopters and machine guns and artillery and all that. And talk about an awakening realization. *This is happening. I'm here and this is for real.*

And I'm standing in a chow line and a couple of guys that are called short-timers, crusty Marines, they were showing off, and I think they had had a little too much of Carling Black Label, whatever. They're there showing off, these two salty Marines who were ready to rotate back. They were showing off and playing quick draw for these new guys standing in line. And a guy forgot to clear his .45. And standing there about 10 feet away from me, I saw a Marine blow another Marine away with a .45. And it went through, killed the first Marine, the guy he shot. The Marine died right away. Bang. Bullet went through him and paralyzed the guy behind him. And I said, *My God.* This is like the first half hour—first hour I was there. And I couldn't believe it. And talk about a shock. They were just playing quick draw, and one guy blew another guy away, his buddy, killed him right there. .45 went through him, the one guy, killed the guy and then hit another guy and paralyzed him behind him. And I said, *Oh, unbelievable.* So I couldn't do anything for the guy that was dead, and did what I could for, you know, stabilize the guy that got hit. And so, and then I...

LIBRE: Was that your first experience, really truly with, you know, you were the guy there right at—the corpsman, probably one of the first people to treat.

CRABTREE: Yeah, it happened right there in front of me. I couldn't believe it. And so, then I tossed my cookies, I puked, I got nauseated, I threw up, I couldn't believe it. And here I'm sitting on the side, you know, I'm still kind of on the sideline in the chow line. There was a field kitchen there. And I'm sitting there, you know, after I puked, and trying to figure out *man, what is going on here?* And then all of a sudden there was a huge explosion about 25, 30 feet away, a bunker. It was a hot, hot day. And then, three Marines inside a bunker, a LAWS rocket went off [Light Anti-Armor Weapon], for whatever reason this thing went off and it killed three guys. I went running up, they said, "Corpsman up! Corpsman up!" I went running up and it was just three guys all blown to pieces. That was in the first hour I was there. And I thought, *My God, how am I gonna live through this?* Here there were four guys dead right away, just without even being in combat, within the first hour I was there. And what a mess. What a mess.

LIBRE: You know, I know you said before that you had such strong feelings against the North Vietnamese as an enemy.

CRABTREE: Yeah.

LIBRE: Did this change your perspective? Did this make you just hate the war more broadly, in general?

CRABTREE: No. I just had, at that point in time I got the shakes, I was so scared. It was just total fear of what I was gonna be in—what was gonna happen, you know? *Where do I go from here?* Of course, I was gonna have to go out in the bush. So it was like okay, I had a five day indoctrination as to what was going on in Duc Pho Operation Desoto. And I literally, I just had to screw up my guts, and, you know, being really so many emotions going through my head at that point in time, it just it literally made my head swim. You know what I'm saying?

LIBRE: Yeah.

CRABTREE: My head was swimming on top of a whole bunch of fear. I was just scared shitless. And whew...

LIBRE: Was there anything sort of grounding or, you know, something that helped you to get through those first few days that helped, you know steal yourself...

CRABTREE: I had a few mementos. I smoked a pipe at that point in time and I brought a few tobacco pipes with me, and I had a cross, Christian cross, and I had a silver—for whatever reason I put a sterling silver four-leaf clover in my right boot, in the sole of my boot. And so, I just concentrated on smoking my pipe. Ah, excuse me. Smoked my pipe, felt the Christian cross, and I kept my pistol really close to me, and thought, *Here I go, man. This is for real. And I don't know if I'm gonna make it out of here.* So, I kept saying the Lord's Prayer over and over again, and I prepared myself to die, as best I could, just being scared shitless. And, so then five days later I had to go out on a patrol, and it was a bad place, and there were bunkers around, spider holes. These guys were all dug in, from Viet Cong, North Vietnamese. This place was swarming, that whole area was just swarming with North Vietnamese and Viet Cong, and they were dug in tunnels and spider holes and all that stuff.

So we had to go out and patrol. And we'd start out with the M14s, which worked well for the Marines, and they were heavier. It was like two weeks before we got our first M16s. But, went out on patrol, and off in the distance we'd hear a bell ringing, *gong gong, gong gong*, and it was like "for whom the bell tolled." And what it was was there was, way off in the distance there was an old French church, and we called him "the bell ringer." As soon as a patrol left the compound, there was a signal from the bell ringer, and the guys there said, "Yep, within a certain amount of time we're gonna have contact. Something's gonna happen."

LIBRE: This is a warning bell that the Vietnamese troops were signaling they knew that you were out, is that what it was usually?

CRABTREE: Yeah, yeah. Signaling that there was a patrol headed towards wherever going out, leaving the compound. And so, within a short period of time there was an inevitable, you know, guys that pop up out of the spider holes and, you know, it was man, nah, that was a very strange situation. And I realized *man, these people really want to kill us.* And it's like *okay, how am I gonna survive this?* So, I thought, I

just, I did what I could just to keep my courage and to screw up my guts and just think, *Well, okay, if it happens, I hope it happens quick, and I'm not gonna end up like any of these guys on the neurosurgery ward. If I got a slight wound, you know, okay, that's one thing. But, to be seriously wounded, I would have just rather I'd been killed right away.* And so, I prepared myself to either, you know, get either a—I didn't know what kind of a slight wound I'd get to be medevaced out of there, or just outright get killed. And I wasn't suicidal, but I got to the point where I became very fatalistic, and I thought, *Well, if it happens, it happens.* But, I was saying my own prayers at that point in time. And... What?

LIBRE: Were you able to form any friendships? Or how was the social dynamic between you and the fellow people in your unit that you were going out on these, you know, sharing this experience with?

CRABTREE: Well, I was kind of, well, trained and informed not to make real close friendships, and so I had to maintain a certain emotional insulation, insulate myself emotionally, which I find now, thinking about it, I'm starting to, now I'm starting to insulate myself emotionally again.

But, so we'd go out daytime patrol, nighttime ambush, and then a couple of weeks after being there they took the M14s away, which were functional, and they gave us the first piece of crap M16s. And there were really bad problems with that thing jamming. And the Marines were trained, you know, you ate, slept, drank, that your rifle is your best friend. The rifle is gonna keep you alive. And then all of a sudden, when we got the first M16s, we couldn't trust those things because they'd jam up. There were a whole bunch of problems with them. The wrong kind of powder in the ammunition. It's like anybody that's served in Vietnam combat knows the story behind the dysfunctional, the first dysfunctional M16s. And that ended up getting a lot of people killed and wounded, because you'd be in the middle of a firefight and you'd shoot off one magazine, and as soon as the barrel heated up it would literally cement the glass cartridge to the chamber wall. And even if you had a cleaning kit, you just knocked the back of the brass after, rendered completely dysfunctional. And then, talk about building up a hatred. Oh, we couldn't trust our weapons. And I tried...

LIBRE: Was there ill will towards those who were distributing them? Was there a feeling that somehow the [audio skips] who were distributing these weapons weren't looking out for you guys?

CRABTREE: Yeah, we were wondering what the hell was going on. Of course, the Marines heard that we got the low end of the grab bag. But, I tell you what, at that point in time there was one gunnery sergeant who was a World War II and Korea veteran, Gunny Miller. He was our platoon commander. And he said, "We've lost the war already. We're outgunned." He said, "We're outgunned." The AK-47s, the SKSs and their B40 rockets and their RPG rockets. We were outgunned. Our weapons didn't work. And the Viet Cong, the bad guys, knew it, and boy did they try to take advantage of it. I hate those things to today. You talk about black guns, black weapons, so-called. Well, I'm not an anti-gunner by any means. I grew up hunting and fishing. I'm a sportsman and still hunt and fish, whatever. But, I developed a hatred for that M16. I hate it to today.

LIBRE: Yeah, thank you for sharing. Obviously, you've been up to this what is an incredibly powerful experience.

CRABTREE: Well, I was not there to hurt people. I was there to help them. And I was told that, you know, okay, "you have to treat"—after you treat your own troops, if there's wounded enemy, I was obligated to treat everybody that was wounded or what have you.

LIBRE: Did that ever occur?

CRABTREE: Oh, I had to treat, yeah, I treated VC later, you know, afterwards, keep them alive so they can get some information out of them. But anyway, I'm not an anti-gunner and I'm not, you know, I'm not into... I was there to help people, not hurt them, and there's a fine line between defense and offense. But, if I didn't have that Browning Hi-Power pistol with me, I wouldn't be talking to you now. And it saved, yeah, it saved my butt a few times. Because all these guys, the weapons were jamming, and they called corpsmen up. I had to go if somebody was wounded in the middle of combat, whatever.

And yeah, one introductory—when I was there, a couple of days later when I went out on my first patrol, there was a

sergeant—I won't mention his name, an E-5 sergeant—he said, “Doc, listen, we have a three strike rule here. If we call ‘corpsman up’, you better get your ass up here. You better perform. If you screw up three times, if the VC don't kill you, I will.” [laughter] How about that for an introduction? This E-5 sergeant said, “Doc, we've got the three strike rule. If we call you and you screw up three times, if the VC don't kill you, I will.” I said, “Well, you know, that could be a two-way street, Sergeant.” I said, “What goes around...” I said, “What goes around, does it come around, too?” [laughter] At that point in time... Yes, what?

LIBRE: Well, yeah, it's very interesting to hear that, you know, you hear sometimes these stories, you know, medical professionals and those who are treating people, as if, you know, you never caused the injury or the illness or whatever is occurring to them, but obviously there comes with the treatment a certain onus of, you know, “Is it something to do with me if it doesn't go well?” But obviously that's not fair to you. And that must have been incredibly difficult to have this, because all you were doing was trying to help. So, I'm sure that was very difficult.

CRABTREE: Yeah. I knew I had a very responsible job to do. I was scared shitless, but then I got to the point where I got tired of being scared, and I overcome the fear with anger.

LIBRE: Was there a moment when this happened? Or was this over time?

CRABTREE: Well, actually it was kind of a staccato experience. You know, there are times when wounded guys... There's different scenarios: daytime patrol, nighttime ambush, stuff happened at night, too. A lot of stuff happened at night. And my anger, well, helped me survive. It wasn't like I had this—I just had, at that point in time I had anger against the war. I had anger against the enemy. But I had anger—I can't say that I had anger against the United States of America, but I had, I developed an anger over the immediate situation as to where I was, time and place and what was going on. I just, man, I thought, to overcome my fear and anxiety, I just got angry. And not to the point where I was like kill crazy or anything like that. That happened to some of the Marines. Some of them literally got kill crazy. But, I just thought, okay, like playing a contact sport, if you're gonna get hit, the best defense is a good offense. And, you know, before you get

hit, hit them hard, hit as hard as you can, and then, you know, just do what you can to get through it. And... What?

LIBRE: No, carry on. Sorry.

CRABTREE: So, when you get to that point where life and death and you're going out and you think you can get it at any time, anything can happen at any time, you just, I don't know. I can't totally explain it, but you just have to screw up your guts and get angry.

LIBRE: Do you have any particularly—not like a good memory, but, you know, a memory in which you really felt that the work you were doing was validated and that you were able to really help fix something or have a really positive impact on someone? I don't know if there's a story, because you obviously day in day out, that's the work that you were doing, you know, on the larger extent.

CRABTREE: Well, if we're out on the boondocks, so to speak, in the bush, whatever, it was like anything could happen at any time. But if we got into an actual village, there was a certain sense of okay, if there are civilians around and villagers around, there's less likely to be a firefight in the middle of a village. And so, part of my job, I learned... I like kids, you know. When I was back as a civilian in Westport, I had jobs babysitting for kids. I was really good with kids. And so, I turned into a kind of a candy man. I carried hard candies with me and soap and... I'd go to these villages, and part of the indoctrination is, oh, we were there to so-called win the hearts and minds.

Now, mind you, these are VC villages. There were no friendlies living there. But, kids are kids, and I'd go in and there'd be swarms of kids. And I'd help the kids. And then word got around that I was good with kids, that I would take care of swarms of kids, give them hard candies and soaps and toothbrushes, toothpaste, and clean up their infections. And I carried a lot of PhisoHex with me. I went through gallons of PhisoHex. And I figured *okay, one of my survival techniques is I want these people to like me, not hate me.* And so, part of my survival technique is to make friends with hundreds of kids, and from village to village I'd take care of swarms of kids. And so, that made me feel good taking care of kids. And at the same time, I started thinking, *These people don't want to see me get killed.*

Now, this was mainly after we left Duc Pho. Duc Pho was just a plain ass bad, bad place, and nobody there liked us. After Operation Desoto about, what was it, a month or six weeks after getting there, we got transferred back up to the Dai Loc area, Quang Nam Province. It was 35, 40 miles southwest of Da Nang. And that's when they had, they decided they, whoever "they" is, that we would also coordinate with Special Forces guys. And, so I turned into a candy man, and we'd go from village to village, and I'd carry hard candies with me and soap and clean up. We'd go in these villages and get swarms of kids from village to village. They knew I was coming. So I took care of lots and lots of kids. And they didn't—and I got the feeling, you know, even the old man and the little old lady, there were no men of military age in these villages. We were out in what was called Indian Country, and these were all...

LIBRE: What's that?

CRABTREE: Indian Country means we're out in the badlands, you know? It's all VC territory. VC territory, VC villages. There were all these villages...

LIBRE: Was there a marked change in your experience? Sorry. Also, for how long were you in Duc Pho?

CRABTREE: How long was what?

LIBRE: How long were you in Duc Pho, correct, that you were in initially?

CRABTREE: Duc Pho, yeah, we were only there I think it was not quite two months.

LIBRE: Okay. And then, was that a big, was it a marked change in your feeling, of your experience when you went to Dai Loc?

CRABTREE: This is the same area that Lieutenant William Smoyer, Dartmouth graduate, got killed.

LIBRE: In Dai Loc?

CRABTREE: In Dai Loc area, yeah, in Quang Nam Province, 35, 40 miles southwest of Da Nang. And, of course, Smoyer was killed after I left, but this is the area that... okay, and that's to be

talked about later. But, no, I'd go from village to village taking care of these kids. And, now kids are kids and all the kids have secrets, and these kids would tell me where the booby traps were, where not to go. You know, we weren't there to get their brothers and their fathers. We realized, or I realized, and sometimes I'd work with a Special Forces guy to get information, and we realized these kids did not like the North Vietnamese. And the North Vietnamese hard core would come in, push them around and take their food, you know. They were hard core Communists.

Now these villagers were mainly Buddhists, and they were spiritual people. And I'm not supposed to talk about some of it but, you know, whereby I'd go and kids have secrets, and periodically a guy who was a linguist was with me and he was acting like my assistant, but he understood everything that they were saying, and this guy dressed as a lance corporal. He was really a Special Forces guy. Now, I was sworn to not talk about this, but the statute of limit, or what is it, letter of nondisclosure or what have you, that's long passed. This is ancient history now. But at the time I was told that "if these locals figure out that we're really getting information, we're dead ducks." And anyway, that was another part of survival whereby these kids didn't want to see me get hit or get hurt. And I'd go from village to village, and then get information from them, take care of swarms of them. Took care of them, cleaned them up. Meanwhile the little old ladies watching us, they're all carrying these big cane knives watching every move I made, and there'd always be at least two of them chewing their betel nut and have the big cane knives ready to descend on me like Benihana if I got out of line. [laughter]

LIBRE: Were they protective of their kids, is that what it was?

CRABTREE: Well, of course. Of course they were protective. But, I'd help out the little old ladies, too, you know, and try to make friends with them. But, of course, they... yeah, just most of the time just seeing—you know, you can tell if somebody's looking at you and they really don't like you? They don't have to say anything, just their demeanor. You can read it in their eyes.

LIBRE: And you said that the kids, at least, weren't necessarily fond of the North Vietnamese either. Do you feel like it's the adults, you know, they had a similar feeling where they didn't

like North Vietnamese, but they also didn't like your presence, as well, but they were somehow stuck with...

CRABTREE: The kids were caught in a squeeze play. They were all caught in a squeeze play. So, nobody liked killing. Nobody really liked fighting. The kids certainly, you know, they didn't want to be involved with fighting or the killing or booby traps. The kids knew where the booby traps were, which was the main thing I was really trying to figure out, and they'd tell me, "Oh, you don't go here, you don't go there," whatever. So, that was really, I think that's one reason why I made it through, too, is because swarms of little kids didn't want to see me get hurt or killed. And then, periodically we could see that I didn't really leave anything that the enemy could use. Toothbrushes. Toothpaste, toothbrushes, bars of soap, like motel bars of soap, hard candy. But, their fathers and older brothers I think appreciated what I did. And there were times if Marines, if guys got really belligerent or if they were pushing people around or got a little too rough or out of hand or did something, the Vietnamese could get very selective, you know. They'd keep an eye. They were keeping an eye on us all the time. And if they didn't like somebody, if they didn't like somebody, that person wouldn't last long. You know what I mean? It got a little bit... [both talk at the same time]

LIBRE: Would they target certain people if they felt that they weren't treating the Vietnamese correct, as well?

CRABTREE: Yeah, if they got—it didn't happen all the time, but luckily the unit I was with, we didn't get involved with any kind of an atrocity situation, but there were times when some civilians got... you know, a lot happened at night. Most of this stuff happened at night. And we'd be out at daytime patrol and nighttime ambush. We'd figure out—when we were walking around during the day, we'd figure out where we were going to set up at night, and certain situations where we would set up in what was called literally free fire zones. So anybody walking around at night out in wherever we'd set up, those people knew that they weren't—it was controversial, but here it is. Part of free fire zones, anything moving at night was fair game, and I guess we were fair game for them also. It was a two-way street in that regard.

And, so there were times when we'd be out and at night in certain areas where we wanted to just kind of take it easy.

We didn't want to get into conflict at night, because it was just really nasty, nasty to be in a firefight at night. You know, it's nasty during the day, but it's even more nasty at night. So there were times when we didn't want to—obviously, we—let me put it this way. We'd go into—there are Buddhist cemeteries all over the place, and so, if we didn't... It was kind of an unwritten rule, I think. We'd go and spend a night inside a Buddhist cemetery, and keep the place clean. If we were on their sacred territory, inside a Buddhist cemetery, we didn't have to worry about getting shot at and didn't have to worry about grenades or being shot at much. It was just like a little oasis, so to speak, at night. And we could kind of sort of relax if we were inside a Buddhist cemetery.

And I spent a few nights, more than a few nights, curled up on Buddhist graves that are symbolic of a woman's womb, and circular with a round hump in the middle of it and with the uterus pointing east. So, they figured that, okay, after life... the Buddhists believed in an afterlife. And believe it or not, there were, I don't know, the spirit world was active in those cemeteries. And, so I made peace. I tried to make peace with the spirits in those cemeteries, and I let the spirits know that I was not there to hurt people, unless, you know, I'll admit, I don't know, if I was being shot at or in the middle of whatever—they talk about the fog, not necessarily the fog of war, but there's a chaos at war, and in the middle of that chaos, sometimes I had to defend myself, you know, if somebody was trying to shoot me. My Browning Hi-Power helped out. I didn't carry a long gun with me most of the time.

But, and it's controversial, you know, who knows? Who believes in the spirit world? I made friends with the spirits as best I could, and these were the ancestors of the people that were living in these villages. So, it might sound a little wacky, but between trying to make friends with all these little kids and we always showed respect in the Buddhist cemeteries. We would keep the place clean, leave some offerings, and just be kind. But there were a lot of Marines that picked up on that also. And so, that was one of my survival techniques, and a certain sense of, I can't say peace, well, a little sense of peace, and feeling as though I was trying to do something worthwhile.

LIBRE:

Yeah. So, you were going around the villages and I guess still doing your normal corpsman duties, and also distributing

candy. You know, just from outside conversations we've had, I think that you were injured at a certain point. Can you talk a little bit about that?

CRABTREE: It wasn't, you know, the candy was just for openers. Oh, the kids, oh, they all wanted the candy, and they all wanted the soap and toothbrushes and, you know, I was a walking drugstore, so to speak. [laughter] And I carried a 60 to 75 pound pack with me all the time. So, I was a pretty strong individual. And one thing that had me worried, I was 6'5", so I made a pretty good target, but I didn't wear any kind of an armband or Red Cross or anything like that. I just tried to fit in and not seem, have an aggressive demeanor about me. You know, you can tell. People can tell just through body language and demeanor, overall demeanor, if somebody is aggressive or if they're benign, so to speak. I tried to be, to put forth as much of a benign type aura, so to speak, and not seem as though I was there to be aggressive. And I think that helped.

But, then, yeah, being wounded. In the end of August '67, I had an R&R to Tokyo, and so I had a great time. It was the first time I cleaned up. I was able to clean up. I was out all that time prior I'd been out in the bush, I never had a real bath or shower. It was just always washing in the stream, and just grimy, cruddy looking. As a matter of fact, I'd cover myself with mud a lot of times just to be out of—that's part of the camouflage. And I looked a little weird a lot of times. [laughter] Anyway, so yeah, I went to Tokyo and stayed in a new Fujiya Hotel in Atami, Japan, outside of Tokyo, and I was able to clean up. Aw, hot baths, you know, a nice bed, sleep in a bed, good food, nice people, nice ladies.

LIBRE: Yeah. Can you describe a little bit of the experience there on this R&R trip? I've heard other times, you know, people discuss it, I mean, it's oftentimes something you just go and then you end up coming back from. But, I'm actually, I'm interested to hear what was that like being there and... [both talk at the same time]

CRABTREE: It was like waking up from a bad dream. It was like waking up from a nightmare. And yeah. So I was...

LIBRE: Was there a sense of safety?

CRABTREE: Oh, for sure. Ah, it was such a relief, because I didn't feel like—you know, there was no sense of danger there. You know, there were times when... you can literally feel certain atmospheres just exude danger, and there was no atmosphere of danger there. Beautiful ladies, really good food, sights to see. And once again, there were Buddhists... I was really starting to become interested in the Buddhist culture and Buddhist temples, and visited. And like I say, I was trying to make friends with the spirit world. And so it was a wonderful experience in Tokyo.

And so, it was the beginning of the first week of September '67 and there was a monsoon going on. And I remember, of course, I liked the sake quite a bit, the rice sake. [laughter] I was a little bit loaded the whole time I was there. I had a flask of—you know, I indulged in sake quite a bit. And I remember there was one time a monsoon was going on and I was on top in the Tokyo Tower with a beautiful Japanese girl with me, and the top of the tower was swaying. We're holding onto the railing. And there's a monsoon going on all around us, and the tower is swaying, and I loved it. It was just a real feeling of being alive.

LIBRE: Yeah. I'm sure that that must have been wonderful.

CRABTREE: Yeah. So, yeah, shortly thereafter, well, as soon as the monsoon cleared, I was like three days late in getting back. I had to check in all the time and figure out when the flight back to Da Nang, and there was a military desk there at the hotel. I had to check in with the military, that "all right, what's going on? When's the flight day? What flight?" whatever. And, so September 7th, 1967, I flew from Tokyo back to Da Nang. Once again, it was a nice Continental Boeing 707. I was in clean civilian clothes. And had a wonderful time, with 10 days in the Tokyo area.

And, so I got back to Da Nang, and looking down outside of the plane, there at the base of the steps was a Jeep with a Marine staff sergeant and a Special Forces staff sergeant in a Jeep with an M16 machine gun. And I recognized them, and so I got down and walked down and went to the Jeep and I said, "Hey, guys, boy, this is great service." [laughter] "Here you are, you know, you're giving me an armed escort back to my wonderful, you know, this wonderful area." And I said, and they had all my gear with them. And they said, "Doc,"—they called the corpsmen "Doc"—they said, "Doc, I

hope you had a good time in Tokyo. Yeah, you know, you're a little late." I said, "Hey, guys, you know there was a friggin' monsoon. Not my fault. No, I wasn't malingering or lollygagging or anything. I said, "You guys are here. You know what the program is more than I do. Here you are." And they said, "Well, I hope you had a good time, Doc, because you're going out tonight with a team into an area that you know. And there's an NVA [North Vietnamese Army] rocket company out there somewhere, and you guys, along with several others, you're gonna be going out and try to locate them." And I said, "Oh, wonderful."

So, luckily they had all my gear with them, and most of it anyway. But I got back to the base camp and I loaded up with more stuff, and I thought, *Here we go*. And I kind of had a premonition. When I was in Tokyo I had a dream. I had a premonition that I was gonna get hit. And, so then I realized, *Here we go*. So I went out with a seven man team as a corpsman, loaded up with as much, you know, with a lot of morphine and Dexamyls and whatever. We all took—it was another controversial thing—if we were going out on an ambush or at night, I'd issue each trooper a Dexamyl, half Dexedrine, half Miltown, half speed, half tranquilizer. And I didn't do it to get high, but it would help keep us awake, cut our fear, cut the hunger, and I hate to say it, but Dexamyls actually helped me get through it. I didn't do them to get high and I didn't take Dexamyls all the time, but most of the time if, you know, if you're going out on night on an ambush or some stuff, we knew we were going to get into some stuff, everybody got a Dexamyl so you didn't fall asleep.

And so, I knew we were gonna get it, so I popped a Dexamyl and had a bunch of morphine with me, luckily. I gave each trooper a Dexamyl and gave them a syrette of morphine and said, well, we figured that something's gonna happen for sure because we knew we were going into a bad area. And as a matter of fact, it's the area that later on Lieutenant Smoyer got killed, along with 16 other guys. So, meanwhile, yeah, we went out looking for these guys and they hit us before we saw them, got to them. It was almost, I think it might have almost been a set-up deal because I think one teenage kid who was kind of a snitch—you know, I hate to use that term, but there was one kid that ratted out where the North Vietnamese were. Well, I never saw that kid again, but I think he was...

Anyway, we got information as to where to go and look for these guys, and then, so we'd bring some artillery on them or airstrikes or what have you. Well, sure enough, we walked into a world of shit, and that's where I got hit by a grenade, and so, it was like being hit by a bolt of lightning and a freight train at the same time. Unfortunately, the radioman took—I thought I got hit worse than I was. I had pieces of radioman all over and, you know, smell and feel of burning flesh in my face. Luckily I had a flak jacket on, and it just picked me up and threw me back, slammed me down into a rice paddy. Fortunately, I was right next to a dike, a rice paddy dike, which protected me from gunfire and explosions and whatever. And, so I got slammed down, had the breath knocked out of me. I couldn't breathe. I'm gasping for breath. Had pieces of burning flesh in my face, the wind knocked out of me, and it felt like my whole body was on fire. You know, I could feel my feet, but they felt like they were on fire. And I didn't have control. I couldn't control moving them, and I thought, *Shit, here I am, huh? If I live through this, I'm gonna end up on a friggin' neurosurgery ward.*

And, so luckily I was able to... the only thing I could really control was my left arm. And I felt blood pumping out of my neck. A piece of shrapnel went in and it nicked, luckily it nicked the carotid artery, it didn't sever it, but I was pumping, just squirting blood out of my neck. And *here we go.* Wounded in my right arm, my elbow is pumping blood out of that one. But I was able to—I always carried a bunch of surgical rubber tubing with me for tourniquets. So I was able to wrap my, when I collected myself, I was able to wrap a tourniquet around my right arm, and then the only way I could stem the bleeding, the hemorrhaging out of my neck was stick my fingers in the hole in my neck. And I thought, *Oh, here I go. I'm gonna bleed out.* I didn't know—I thought the carotid artery was severed, but I was able to staunch the blood flow from just my fingers in the hole on my neck, and I could feel the blood pumping out of the carotid and I just kind of squeezed it off that way.

And I must admit, beforehand I knew we were gonna get hit, so I'd shot myself up with a syrette of morphine, too. I figured *okay, if I get hit, I'm not gonna go into deep shock because I already have some morphine in me,* and I popped the Dexamyl which picked me up, leveled me off, gave me energy, controlled fear a little bit. And once again, I didn't do it to get high, but I shot myself up with a morphine syrette

thinking that okay, if I do get hit, which I did get hit, it's one reason why I don't think I went into deep shock.

And so, radioman hit, no radio communication. We were about almost a mile away from, oh, a couple of clicks away from our base camp. So, one guy luckily was able to run back to the base camp, one guy who wasn't hit too bad was able to run back to our base camp and let them know where we were, what was going on. And I just lay there watching it, it was like Fourth of July watching all this crap go off, and trying to keep myself from bleeding out, and guys yelling and screaming, you know, "Corpsman Rick..." They're calling my name, Rick. And I couldn't talk. All I could do is like gurgle, you know. It's like all the breath was knocked out of me. Luckily there was one guy, Sergeant Walsh, Bob Walsh. His father was a doctor, and Sergeant Walsh was, he was a Marine sergeant but he was also a, he was probably as good a medic as I was. Well, anyway, he grabbed my kit, and he knew I couldn't function, and so Bob Walsh grabbed my Unit One and all my gear and tended to the wounded guys the best he could.

Meanwhile, crap going on, explosions and shit, you know, we're—I thought, *Now, here it is. This is it. This is how I end up.* But, once again, I tried to make my peace with the spirit world, yeah, and pray to God. And lo and behold, a couple hours later, a medevac chopper came in and got to us. And so I got loaded on, and I was like pretty—and I figured *if I pass out, if I go into deep shock, I'm dead.* So I just hung on as conscious as I could, and actually started hallucinating. I saw my grandmother and grandfather's spirit, the doctor. And they loaded me on a chopper with the dead and wounded as quickly as they could. So I flew back from where I'd gotten hit, about the same area that Lieutenant Smoyer got killed later on, into Da Nang, and kind of in and out of a, what you call an in and out of a body experience, you know. And I kind of was in contact, I guess it was the doctor saying, "Oh, you're hallucinating." I said, well, I had the choice of joining my grandparents who had been deceased or live, and you had a choice. I thought, I was so scared, I thought, *Wow, I want to live.*

So when I got back to Da Nang, I was just about out of it. I had almost bled out. And, so they gave me an IV, but a whole blood. I could see them administering—they had a bag of blood and I felt the blood, literally the life reentering

my body. And at that point in time I realized *wow, I guess I'm gonna live*. But, I didn't have control of my legs or my feet. I thought, *Well, shit, at least I'm alive, but here I go. I wonder if I'll be on the same ward at Oakland*. So, they stabilized me that night, and then the next morning they choppered me out to the *Repose* [USS *Repose* (AH-16)]. And I could feel the sensation coming back into my legs and my feet. What I had was actually spinal shock, you know. It's just a piece of shrapnel is still stuck in the C-5, cervical vertebrae 5. But I came real close to...

LIBRE: What was that like? Sorry to interrupt you here, but what was that like, the feeling, all of a sudden realizing that you were both going to live and that you were regaining feeling in your arms and legs?

CRABTREE: Well, man, it was like a—talk about a sense of relief, but I still didn't know if I was going to make it. I thought, I don't know shit, if I could still be paralyzed, I don't know, infections, of whatever. There was a whole myriad of situations. I didn't think I was totally out of the woods at that point in time. But when I got to... well, the next day when I was on the *Repose*...

LIBRE: Where was this?

CRABTREE: On the hospital ship *Repose*, and it was in Da Nang Harbor, and they choppered me out, and I was on a litter type thing, a basket. And, so they cleaned me up, and IV and everything. At that point it was Normal saline and with antibiotics, real strong antibiotics. Well, they closed the wound in my right arm and they debrided it, cleaned it all out and sutured that up, and put a drain in my neck, cleaned that out best they could and put a drain in my neck. And it hurt like hell, but they gave me shots of whatever it was, Demerol, morphine, I don't know. They gave me some painkillers.

So I was kind of flying high a little bit, you know, and I thought, *Wow, hey, thank God I made it. Oh wow. Thank you, sir. Thank you, Lord. And where do I go from here?* I couldn't totally control my—I was wobbly, talk about... I could sit up and have wobbly legs, wobbly legs and feet. So, a couple of days later I got pretty much full use and strength and coordination. At that point in time in my life, I was a very strong individual. I had really good muscle tone and I was

strong. And I thought, *Well, I'm gonna direct my energy, all the strength and energy I have, into healing up.* And, so a couple of days later I was able to drag myself up. I made inquiry as to how I could radio patch call home and let them know that I was still alive.

And, so I was able to drag myself up to the radio room a couple of days later, and called home. Was able to radio patch back. My dad was working in the Mercantile [Exchange] Building. His office was in the Mercantile Building in Chicago. While I was over there, they had moved from Chatsworth, California, to Northbrook, Illinois. My dad was working in the Mercantile Building. So, I don't know how I did it, but I was able to radio patch. I just told the shortwave guy what I was trying to do, and sure enough he got a hold of my dad in his office. Yeah. And my dad was kind of shocked, and he said, "Wow, this is incredible. This is—I mean, wow, Rick, this is a little miracle. I mean, this is wonderful." I mean he was almost—he was a little bit speechless, too, because simultaneously that same night his boss' son, Eric Muller of Class of '66, Dartmouth Class of '66. Eric Muller was killed, not in the same place, but the same time that night, September 7th, '67. So my dad was kind of overwhelmed with emotion. We were both overwhelmed with emotion. And then he told me that "yeah, Eric Muller died, was killed at the same time you were wounded." And, so we were both... I was still in a state of shock. And I think my father was in a state of psychological shock, too. But, at least they let him know that I was alive and okay, I was going to make it.

And so, from there we were on our way to Subic Bay, Olongapo in the Philippines. So, the *Repose* made it to Subic Bay, and so bit by bit I felt my strength coming back to me. They had the drain in my neck, and pumping me full of antibiotics, and luckily it didn't get badly infected. And they acknowledged, they said "wow." They went in and did something to the carotid artery. I said, "Man," I said, "I can't believe that it just nicked it, it didn't sever it." And so, they cleaned me up, stabilized me. I had sutures and stuff in my right arm. I still couldn't use my right arm, my right hand. I was in a sling. Stainless steel sutures. But, I was determined to get up and about, get going again. And, so even with an IV in, you know, I was carrying the IV around just trying to get my sea legs under me again. And bit by bit, I gained

strength. But, I made the mistake of recovering too quickly.
[laughter]

So, on board the *Repose* in Subic Bay. We got there, I don't know, what was it like five days after I was medevaced on board? I think it was five days later. It's all kind of, man, it was blurry at the time, you know. I was in a fog, talk about being in a fog. And, so I got up and about on the *Repose*, and actually was able to get out and go out on liberty into Olongapo, with a drain coming out of my neck. I mean, I had a drain coming out of my neck and my right arm in a sling, yeah. [laughter] And, so once again I made friends with a Navy nurse, [laughter] another lieutenant JG, so I invited her out. "Well, let's go to dinner," you know, "hey, I'm alive!" And somehow I got a hold of some money. I can't remember how the hell I got a hold of some money. But, I said, "Hey, where do we go? Let's go out and have dinner and have some drinks and enjoy ourselves. I'm alive. I gotta celebrate."

And, so we went to, what was the place called, Papa Guyo's in Olongapo, and had a good meal, and had a big drink out of what they called a "Big Bamboo" or something. So, between the painkillers and the Big Bamboo, I was feeling no pain. So we get in a jitney, and, what was her name, Carol Burton, or is her name Lieutenant JG Carol Burton? Beautiful gal. Her brother was a chopper pilot, and so, meanwhile we had a nice conversation and all that. And nothing totally physically, if you know what I'm talking about, materialized, but the desire was there and I told her, "Ma, I'm falling in love for sure here," you know? [laughter] Anyway, feeling no pain. And, but she was very correct and proper.

Anyway, so in a jitney we were ready to go back to the *Repose*, and I feel my arm, my left arm, shaking. [laughter] And I had a—and I look over and there's a little kid popped off—I had a Seiko dive watch, you know, waterproof Seiko dive watch. And this little kid popped my watch off. I look over, my left arm is shaking and I look over, and there's this little kid grabbing on my watch and he popped it off. Said, "Son of a gun, man." And I just went flying. He went running down an alleyway, a back alleyway, and I was determined to get my watch back, so I go running down there with a drain in my neck and my right arm in a sling. And all of a sudden, a swarm of these little kids came out with their butterfly knives.

LIBRE: Oh my gosh.

CRABTREE: Yeah, and they were like little piranha fish or something. And the driver was yelling and screaming, the nurse was yelling and screaming, "No, no, no." I wanted to get my watch back, yeah. So okay, so all of a sudden I realize, there's about a half a dozen kids come out with these butterfly knives. And they were not big kids. All I could do is reach down and grab some gravel, some sand gravel, and throw it at them and try to kick at them and get away. You know, they cut my shirt open a little bit, flicked a button off, cut it off. They just about cut me and I thought, *Oh, my God, here I am... Am I gonna get... No, I can't get killed here.* I thought, *Oh, man, what have I done?* And, so I just turned around and beat feet with these kids yelling, but luckily they didn't finish me off. They could have finished me off, if they wanted, you know, the kids like piranha fish with butterfly knives.

So I got my adrenaline going back. I went right up [inaudible]. And my shirt was cut and the buttons and I said, "Get me out of here. Let's get out of here. Get out of here." So I never went back into town after that. That was my experience in Olongapo. And just stayed onboard the *Repose*, and I thought maybe I could get sent home, you know? I thought, *Gees, I don't know if I can function too well back...* But sure enough, they needed corpsmen, so I was on the *Repose* after being hit, six weeks later they steamed back to Da Nang and sent me back with my unit.

LIBRE: How much time did you have left in your service?

CRABTREE: That was in October and I had until March. And so, I got back to my unit and went out and back to the routine again. And then I turned 21 November 12th. I was out in a friggin' mud hole somewhere. No, actually, I spent my 21st birthday, I thought, *No, I'm not gonna spend it in a mudhole. I'm gonna spend it in a Buddhist cemetery.* So, I spent the bulk of my 21st birthday at night in a Buddhist cemetery, saying my prayers.

LIBRE: Wow. Spiritual. And how was it, you know, was that almost a turning point for you? Did anything change, you know, having returned after such a traumatic experience? Did you feel any differently for the remaining time that you had there between October to March?

CRABTREE: Oh, I went back to the feeling of *here it goes*, you know, the fear and anger. But, I overcame the anger with feeling as though I was very thankful. I was fearful, but I didn't want the anger to take control, and so I became very humble, and just prayed to God I'd get out of there. So yeah, once again, in and out of villages and helping take care of kids and this and that. And in between, different firefights and take care of wounded Marines. And it was like *okay, I'm back in hell again*. So I finished, you know, from when I went to Tokyo, it was like waking up from a nightmare, and then when I got onboard the *Repose*, it was glad to be alive, but it wasn't like total out of a nightmare. But, being sent back was getting sent back to the nightmare again. What?

LIBRE: I guess, yeah, with that in mind, what was it like near the end when you were approaching March, when you were March of '68, correct?... when you were able to...

CRABTREE: Yeah. You get what's called, you've probably heard of short-timer's syndrome, a short-timer's experience?

LIBRE: Tell me about it.

CRABTREE: And so, February, March, so the first part of March... You know, the Tet Offensive. Oh yeah, well, okay.

LIBRE: Obviously, yeah, if you could talk about that a little. I'm interested to hear about stuff that actually affected you?

CRABTREE: Well, yeah, after my 21st birthday, and then, of course, you know, and then the Tet Offensive comes in January of '68. And so, I thought *okay*. And I'd been up on an observation thing on a trail coming right off of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and we saw these guys coming down like ants. And we figured... this was the forerunner of the Tet Offensive. And the VC, North Vietnamese, everybody coming down off this trail. I was with what, five other guys were up on a big pile of rocks, watching these guys come down. And then, we had a radio with us, but we had to maintain radio silence because it was just a hundred feet away these guys were coming down like ants. And no noise control or anything. They were just streaming down. And I thought, *Oh, shit, man. Here it comes. Yeah, it's gonna be Chinese New Year. And they're getting ready. And there's gonna be something happening for sure.*

And so, we were supposed to be looking for—and it's probably something I shouldn't talk about altogether, but it's a long time ago—so we were supposed to watch out for Chinese guys, Russian guys, Cuban guys, what have you. And one of the deals was we coordinated with snipers, and one thing I didn't mention, which I do need to mention is Carlos Hathcock, he was a famous Marine Corps sniper, he actually saved our butts when we were in Duc Pho, because he had a match grade "Ma Deuce" 55 caliber machine gun with an 8 power Unertl scope on it. And when those M16s were dysfunctional, he would cover us. We'd go out and he'd cover us with that "Ma Deuce".

And then, meanwhile when we got transferred back up to Dai Loc area, the snipers were based off of Hill 55, and our base camp, my base camp, Kilo Company, was Hill 10, about five miles west of Hill 55, and so, but we would interact with the snipers. You know, we'd go out and find out where the bad guys were, and then take snipers out. They'd play a shell game, drop them off different places. Okay, so one of the things we were doing watching these guys come down was to relay to snipers down below if there were any officers they could pick off. It's just the way it worked.

But, anyway... I was up there several days watching this stuff go on, and when we got back down to my base area, it was a place called, what was it? An Hoa, there was an old French airstrip there. And I told a gunnery sergeant, I said, "Gunny, put me in the friggin' brig, man. I mean, the shit's gonna hit the fan. These guys, man." I said, "Yeah, the gooks are gearing up. There's gonna be a bad deal come up. This Chinese New Year thing is gonna be a bad deal." And our base camp, they were getting ready. They were withdrawing from a couple of base camps. And I said, "Man, I'm not even supposed to be on active duty anymore. Put me in the friggin' brig. I won't live through this. You're not gonna send me out there again, uh-huh, no way." I said, "I'm not gonna defect. I'm not gonna desert. I'm just gonna sit my butt down and go in a bunker and get prepared to whatever's gonna happen. But, either that or... I'm not going out. I'm just not going out, on any kind of a patrol, ambush, nothing. I'm staying. I'm gonna get in a bunker, or put me in the brig."

And he said, the guy said, "Doc, there's an Air America C-47 DC-3, blue and white, on the airstrip," and he said, "Doc..." He went and talked to some people, and I thought, *Well, he's*

gonna make, either make provisions to take me to the brig or something. He came back and he said, “Doc, get on that plane. It’s going to Thailand. It’s going to Bangkok.”

LIBRE: Really?

CRABTREE: Yeah.

LIBRE: And what does that mean, going to...

CRABTREE: Well, I got on the plane and there were a bunch of spooks, you know? CIA spooks. They were getting out of there, too. They were on their way. So I went to Bangkok, Thailand on an Air America C-47 with a bunch of spooks, and stayed with them. And they told me, you know, “Hey, don’t be a flight risk here. We don’t want to have to... Yeah, you’re not gonna want to take off. You’re not gonna want to leave, okay?”

LIBRE: Oh my gosh. Yeah, so how long were you in Thailand for?

CRABTREE: Once again, it was about five days, it was a blur. [laughter] I was pretty much loaded the whole time. And had a couple of girls, different girls and whatever. I was staying in what they called a, I guess what they called a safe house. It was a hotel, but these spooks were there. They were into having a good time, too, going out and celebrating, so we all went out and celebrated and whatever. I was pretty loaded, and determined to have a good time, which I did, you know?

LIBRE: And is this like late January of 1968?

CRABTREE: No, this is the end of... Now, wait a minute. It was the first part of January, the second week of January, whatever. Okay, timewise...

LIBRE: So this is prior to the Tet Offensive... [both talk at the same time]

CRABTREE: No, the Tet Offensive, it kicks off—the Tet Offensive kicked off while I was in Bangkok.

LIBRE: Okay, so like January 28th around?

CRABTREE: Just prior to that, yeah. Yeah, around that time. And so, meanwhile, had to get back, you know. It was like, what was

it, a week, five days, seven days there. Man, I tell you, I was pretty well loaded the whole time.

LIBRE: Right. I guess January 30th rather than... Yeah.

CRABTREE: Okay. And so, then I got back to my unit, and they said... Okay, well, I got back to a base camp, and so they didn't send me out in the boondocks anymore at that point in time, and so I thought, "Okay, February. Gotta make it through February..." Yeah, okay, so what happened was... Oh, here we're flying back in on a C-47 and we're flying around over Da Nang, and they're watching the rockets and stuff come in. We're looking down, and the pilot was circling around. And one dude got up and yelled at the pilot, "Get us the F out of here," because there were some tracers started coming up at the plane we were in. Why, you know, sitting there when there's fighting going on down below? And, so then I had to go down. It was rough duty. We had to fly down to Cam Ranh Bay for another few days. Are you there? I'm getting some kind of notification.

LIBRE: Yeah, it's all good. Yeah.

CRABTREE: So, that was my Tet Offensive experience. But then I had to go back to my unit where... Okay, and then the end of February, the first part of March, I was luckily, well, I just had to go out on rogue opening patrols, and yeah, rogue sweeps at that point in time. I didn't have to go out on daytime patrol and nighttime ambush. I just went out on rogue sweeps as a corpsman, and then had to go along with some convoys and different things. It was considered pretty much light duty at that point.

But then, then I got volunteered two weeks before I come back to the States. I got volunteered to go out and I had to take back Mike Company, well, which Mike 3/7 had been, they withdrew from there and there was a lot of ordnance still there on the hill and NVC [NVA or VC] all over the place. Oh, naturally for a short time they wanted to make sure that I had a full experience of my tour in Vietnam. So, two weeks before I flew out of there I got assigned, volunteered to go back and help take back Mike Hill. But luckily, what saved my butt and it saved a lot of guys', was some of these villagers, these kids, realized—word got around somehow the candy man is coming down. And believe it or not, some kids came back, come flying up the road and came up to me

and said, “Doc, you no go down. No, no you go down. Beaucoup VC, beaucoup North Vietnamese.” They told me, “Stop, you walk into an ambush.” These kids told us, told me that there was a big ambush waiting for us.

LIBRE: Wow.

CRABTREE: Yeah. Ah. If these kids didn’t come flying up and tell me, these kids that liked me... word got around, you know, that Doc, Bac si, they called me. “Bac si, Bac si, candy man. You no go there.” And then, bingo. There was a whole bunch of them waiting for us, and a big firefight again. And man, if it wasn’t for those kids, and I told the lieutenant there, I said, “Lieutenant, hey, these kids tell me that there’s a big ambush waiting for us.” So, here we’re walking down the middle of the friggin’ road, and luckily there were a couple of tanks behind us and all that, so after these kids told me, bingo, bang, you know, they opened up on us.

And I flopped down on a big tire rut, you know, truck tire rut in the side of the road, and these kids took off. They were okay. They made it all right. But, man, they started shooting the crap out of us. And I was in a big tire rut and I’m thinking *oh, here we go again*. Yeah, here we go. I got two weeks left. And I started saying my prayers like crazy again. And luckily, the M-48 or M-60 tank come flying up the road, and the gooks were shooting at this tank, bullets flying off the tank. I thought, *Oh, shit, man, he’s coming right up. He’s gonna come up. If he straddles me, the bullets are gonna deflect right down into me*. And, but the guy stopped. The tank had stopped, but the 90mm muzzle was right overhead. And he cranked off a beehive round and just, man, knocked me silly. I mean, it rung my bell, bounced. I mean, the muzzle blast from that 90mm right over my—right on top, right over me, and rang my bell and it blew up, ruptured my right ear drum. I still have ringing in the ears, severe tinnitus from that ever since. But, luckily that tank took care of business, and between the Marines, the tank, and then the air artillery came in. And I still think if it wasn’t for those kids, it could have been a slaughter. But that was two weeks before I came home. And so, yeah, two weeks later I was able to get my ass out of there.

[Break in tape]

LIBRE: Right. Yeah, I just wanted to confirm we are recording again, once again here. I guess we're discussing your last experience in Vietnam, and the feeling of coming home. And if you can describe for me what that was like. I know you had mentioned going on your R&R trip to Tokyo was sort of like waking up from a nightmare.

CRABTREE: Right.

LIBRE: What exactly would you, how would you describe this experience, finally going home?

CRABTREE: Well, yeah. Made it to Da Nang. And one thing, I made provisions to be able to take that Browning Hi-Power, my pistol, back with me as a—I declared as a war souvenir. I stated, you know, I filled out papers that I'd actually captured it. And, but I'd captured a whole bunch with our unit. We had captured all sorts of weapons from the time we were there. And, you know, I captured different kinds of guns. We made claim, so to speak, to all sorts of VC weapons, and in the process I was able to get some paperwork made out that I'd captured this Browning pistol. And so, I had paperwork with me, I had the pistol in my things. Well, when I left Vietnam I didn't have much stuff. All my gear had been blown up during the Tet Offensive and afterwards. My sea bag and most all my gear got blown up, so I didn't have much stuff with me, but I had that pistol when I was back in Da Nang.

And the next morning I was going to catch my flight date. Well, naturally, I went out and got a little bit loaded. We were all celebrating, you know, and I got pretty well inebriated. And I had that pistol under my pillow at the Da Nang Naval support facility, and somebody, somehow they knew—I couldn't believe it—while I was sound asleep, of course, I was a little bit inebriated, lo and behold somebody slipped that pistol from right underneath my pillow. [laughter] I couldn't believe it. I woke up and the gun belt was gone and all my—I had a gun belt with a Ka-Bar knife and canteen and different things, whatever, on my gun belt. And everything was gone. And oh, did I get pissed off. I looked around and started yelling, "Who the hell took my pistol?" And I only had like, I don't know, a couple of hours to go before I got on the plane and got the hell out of there.

But I went and complained to an officer who's, you know, duty officer and all that, and I had the paperwork claiming it

was a souvenir and I was able to take it back with me. So, all of a sudden I was totally pissed off and angry and all. You know, here this thing had helped me through, saved my life literally. It saved my ass because the M16s didn't. I didn't trust those M16s at all. I didn't want to carry a long gun to begin with anyway. But that pistol had made it through all of—including when I had gotten wounded and they relieved me of that, and then gave it back to me when I got back. Well, anyway, that pistol meant a lot to me. And here I'm, oh, raged, just total rage and anger. And I said, *Well, Doc, look, forget it. You're flying out of here today. You're going back to the world. You know, what does that thing really mean to you?* And then I started thinking, *Shoot, you know, if I—I can't let my head get carried away too much here. You know, forget the anger, forget material stuff.*

But, so, when I got on board that plane, Continental 707 again, I was still raging mad about the whole deal. But then when I got on that plane and sat down in the seat and looked at beautiful flight attendants, stewardess they called back then, and they handed us a beverage, and I looked around and I said, *What the hell am I angry about? I'm getting the hell out of here. You know, I'm on a friggin' civilian plane gonna take me back to the States, and there's a couple of beautiful women. And I've actually made it. I said, I don't care if I don't have anything material with me. Take it all. Just leave everything there. Forget it.* Which I did.

I just had the clothes I was wearing, that was it. I just left everything behind. But I didn't have that much to begin with really. But, I was just wearing the friggin' dirty, dusty utilities that I was wearing, you know, all mud caked and everything, and greasy, grimy, you know, with the jungle boots that I was just wearing like I was, definitely I was right out of the bush right there on that, sitting on a plane looking around, and I thought, all I could think about was being able to take a shower because I smelled really bad. [laughter] And so, and my head was, you know, I had a little bit of a hangover and I started thinking, *Damn. Just leave it all behind. Leave all material, anything material, just leave it behind. Thank God I'm out of here.*

You know, and then once the plane—oh, we were still—all I could think about is like when I come back from Thailand, watching the place... And Da Nang had been mortared and rocketed and all that stuff. *Man, I'm not safe until... you*

know, they could start rocketing this place again. Because the last time I'd been in Da Nang seeing the airfield, it was getting mortared and rocketed. And so, once we got airborne and everybody started cheering, and it wasn't until we got out over the ocean and looking down and all I saw was ocean, then I thought, *Wow, I actually made it out of there.* And so, what a relief, you know? But I was still... I had so many emotions flying through me. But then, all of a sudden a feeling of numbness came over me. I just... Ah, there was a feeling of relaxation and, but then all of a sudden I felt numb.

LIBRE: Do you want to talk about... [both talk at the same time]

CRABTREE: Sorry?

LIBRE: Do you want to explain that a little, like how, what do you...

CRABTREE: Well, it was just such a... I think it was, I was overwhelmed with so much emotion, I think my nervous system shut down for a little bit, you know, on that plane. I just fell sound asleep. I just felt this numbness come over me. And so, and then I just got tired. I had to go to sleep. And then, so I slept I guess for a couple of hours. I was just sound asleep. But I woke up and it was just this, still a feeling of numbness. I don't know, it was such a mixture. It was elation. How do you explain numb elation? [laughter]

LIBRE: Yes, it's difficult.

CRABTREE: Yeah, and it was very... What?

LIBRE: Sorry. What I was going to say, do you feel like this is something that everyone sitting next to you in the plane, everyone returning home shared? That this was sort of a collective experience? Or was this something that you felt was sort of more unique to you?

CRABTREE: I didn't compare notes with anybody. It was pretty much unique to me. I was just... You know, it was before people were high fiving, but in effect, you know, we were all waving, and there was a lot of jubilation going on and all that. But, I didn't compare notes with anybody. We were just glad to get the hell out of there. I didn't know anybody on the plane. I got out of there by myself. I didn't know anybody else. And so, yeah, it's hard to explain, the combination, so many different emotions and but a feeling of numb elation, if

that's... It's hard to describe that, but I just all of a sudden became very, very tired. I had to go to sleep.

And I slept most all the way on the flight to Okinawa. And then I woke up and I got off the plane, but then I had the shakes real bad. And then I couldn't stop shaking. And I thought, *Oh, shoot*. And I was sweating and shaking and I thought, *Oh, man, I'm coming down with malaria*. And I thought that's what it was. But, part of it was I was going through withdrawals from Dexamyls, because like I say, I didn't take them to get high, but I was used to taking Dexamyls several nights a week while I was there, just out in the bush, you know, going out. And so I got addicted to them. And I didn't realize I was addicted to them, or dependent on them. And, so I literally went through cold turkey, the shakes and sweats and all that.

So, when I got to Okinawa, luckily I was able to meet a—he wasn't a blood uncle, but he was just like a really, really super close friend of the family. He was a full bird colonel, Pete Speer. He was an Air Force missileer colonel. And, so luckily when I got to Okinawa, I was able to give him a phone call. So, Colonel Speer came and picked me up, with his wife and daughter Angie, and I mean, just super nice people. And so I was able to actually stay with Colonel Speer and his family for, oh, a day, a couple of days while I was going through processing. And I didn't know—I thought, *Well, maybe it's a combination of malaria and...* but I had the craving for a Dexamyl, and I realized, *Oh, oh, I've got addicted to these damned things*. And, so I didn't—you know, I'm just being truthful, I didn't say anything to anybody for years afterward about it. I thought, well, I explained it off.

I was obviously sweating and shaking and different things going through withdrawals. But I actually thought, *Well, maybe I'm coming down with malaria*. So I checked with a medical officer and I said, "You know, I'm thinking I've gotten some malaria coming on board here." And they said, "Okay, well, when you get back to the States, we'll check you out." So that was my excuse for sweating. It turns out I didn't have malaria, but that was because I had been strung out on Dexamyls. Like I said, I didn't do it to get high, but it helped get me through. And a lot of guys... I can't say all the Marines that I've talked to since I come back and through the years... there was only certain units that were issued these. No, I had to sign for everything. It wasn't like I was doing

illicit medications or anything. I had to sign for this stuff, and keep track of it and all that.

LIBRE: And was this something that, you know, coming back was there anyone who could help, they could either sympathize with you or help in this process? Or was this something that truly you and I guess so many others had to deal with on their own and just let time pass until this went away? Was there any treatment offered to you, or it's not something that was spoken of or...

CRABTREE: No. When I got back, well, let's see, landed in El Toro Marine Air Base [CA], and then we got transferred up to Long Beach, where I got separated. But I checked into Long Beach and I said, "I gotta talk to a medical officer." I thought I was coming down, well, it was a combination of malaria and what have you. And they said, "Well, yeah, we'll have to check you out" and this and that, whatever. But, as it turns out, I realized that *I'm just gonna have to deal with this myself*. And when I went, I guess they tested me and it wasn't malaria, and I just realized that *oh, I just gotta deal with this, just tough it up, screw up your guts, toughen up*. I had made it through so much crap, I said, *I'm not gonna let this get to me*. No, I was a very strong, I was pretty tough back then, you know. I was a very strong individual physically. I don't know about mentally or emotionally. But, I just had to rely on my inner strength to get through. And it was just, you know, it was just a week or so later that I mellowed out.

But, I went up to California first, you know, to Chatsworth, saw an old girlfriend and some friends, but then I didn't have anything going on there. My folks had moved to Northbrook, Illinois. And so I just wanted to go and see them. And by the time I got to Northbrook, I stopped the shakes pretty much and, you know, the withdrawals. And, so I got to staying with my folks in Illinois, and it was good to see folks, my family and brothers and this and that, but I didn't have much going on in Illinois. I wanted to get back to Connecticut where I had most of my friends. You know, I grew up in Connecticut and all that. So I didn't spend it... What?

LIBRE: You know, you had mentioned that your father was a P-47 pilot. He was, you know, he had been a prisoner of war and he had served. Was there any sense of, you know, that

you guys had some shared experience here? Or was this something... [both talk at the same time]

CRABTREE:

Well, my father had his own form of PTSD, which I didn't totally understand until later on. But, my father and I did not have the best relationship. Like I say, when my dad got back from Europe and got together with my mom, his high school sweetheart, she got pregnant right away. And I don't think he was ready to have a kid right away. You know, it was like, all right, lived in Middle Fayerweather Hall, and a bunch of screaming kids crapping their diapers and whatever. And he spent most of his time in the library.

And let me put it this way. I never lacked for anything really. Well, if I wanted something, I earned it myself. But, I can't say that he didn't love me, but there was not a real—he just wasn't ready to have a kid right away. And my dad, I felt a certain amount of animosity toward me when I was growing up. And so, that carried on. We didn't have the best communication. All through junior high and high school, I lived in a cabin out behind the house in Westbrook. You know, teenage adolescent rebelliousness and all this, and I just clashed with my dad, and he was a hard core Type A personality climbing the corporate ladder. And I didn't want to go along with his program of being a big time New York executive. And I had gone into New York many times visiting his place, his work, and I knew New York City inside and out and this and that, but I realized at that point in time I didn't want to become part of the corporate world because I grew up listening to his corporate war stories and all that. And he didn't sense that I really respected his position as a big time McGraw-Hill executive.

So when I got back to Northbrook and all that, you know, everything was cordial, this and that, but—people were glad to see me, but I didn't feel like hanging around the family too much. I just wanted to go back to Connecticut and maybe get back into school, you know, get a job, just kind of come down from all of this and... but I had more going on in Connecticut area than I did in California or Illinois. So, I didn't stay in Illinois very long. I got back to Connecticut. And so, yeah, I told my dad, "Yeah, I'm going back to school, Dad, try and get my grades up, yeah." I said, "Dad, I don't know if I'll ever make it to Dartmouth. I love the place and all that. Wonderful, good memories. But," I told him, "You know, Dad, I really don't think I'm Dartmouth material." [laughter]

You know, it was like, well, it stuck in his craw when I told him, "I don't know if I'm Dartmouth material."

LIBRE: That's funny.

CRABTREE: So, anyway, I got back to Connecticut, and there was protests stuff going on and this and that, and I thought I checked in—I was going to check with the University of Bridgeport—I had to check in with Bridgeport Naval facility. There he was, you know, that was my draft card Selective Service was based out of Bridgeport, Connecticut. And of course, I had to check in with the Naval facility in Bridgeport. So I was looking around and I ran into a situation where protestors and this and that, and I didn't take too kindly of a guy spitting on me and calling me a baby killer. So I ended up putting the guy in the hospital. Just the way it was.

LIBRE: And how was that experience—did you, was that sort of a not universal, but was this something you felt in a lot of ways that you were not welcomed for your...

CRABTREE: I did not feel welcomed one little bit. I did not feel welcomed back one little bit in Connecticut. Well, with a couple of friends. But, as far as the school situation or what have you, it was hard to not—you know, it was obvious I was like—I guess I wore the military appearance all over, you know, and it's like one of those situations whereby I just felt like *screw this place. I'm gonna get out of here*. So I had the opportunity, I was given opportunity, a choice of either go to Africa or South America.

LIBRE: And where did that take you?

CRABTREE: So I ended up down a couple weeks later in the jungles of South America. And I was, well, just a, not a combat or a military mercenary killer kind of guy, but I was a contract kind of a, what do they call it, contract, because I was a survivor. I knew what it was like to live in the jungle. I thought I wanted to be a, maybe a—they offered me a job to learn how to be a bush pilot, and I'd learned the basics through my dad years ago. I was not a licensed pilot, but I could fly a small single engine fixed wing. And, so I thought okay, well...

Get down and I was a base camp corpsman, a foreman back in the jungle. And once again, it was—well, at this point in time I wanted still—ah, I can't talk about it too much, but I

was, let me put it this way, I was not a hired killer or anything like that, but I ended up being like a divemaster foreman of, a base camp foreman and a divemaster and whatever. So, I had to sign a letter of nondisclosure which I still better honor. And as it turns out, I got into a—I'll just say this much, I got from the frying pan into a fire. Didn't realize exactly what I was getting into. And, so I think I'm the only one alive out of that whole thing that went on down there. So, I'll leave it at that.

And I got back—I got out of South America and went back to University of Bridgeport, tried going back to school at the University of Bridgeport, Connecticut. And once again, I was a matriculated student, accepted at the University of Bridgeport in the business program, and I was going to... You know, my dad said, "Well, you gotta—you're not going to any junior college. You're not going to community... Go full time, you know. Be a full-time student. And you're gonna take business courses or I'm not gonna help you."

And the VA [Veterans Administration], at that point in time the VA was worse than useless. And I was not too happy about a few things, and so, meanwhile, I got sick. Down in the jungles I got dysentery, amoebic dysentery, and some infections and different things. My wisdom teeth. All of a sudden I had impacted wisdom teeth. One reason why I had to get out of—and it saved my life because I had to get some medical attention and get back to the States, which I tried at Bridgeport through the VA, and the VA was worse than useless. And, then Bridgeport was right near, the Sikorsky helicopter plant is right nearby. And I went to class for, ah, a couple of months, but I couldn't... You know, helicopters flying all over the place day and night, and I was literally—I couldn't concentrate on studies.

And, so once again, then, I was defecating bloody worm stools, I had impacted wisdom teeth, and an infection in my scalp. And I had to get some medical attention. The VA would not help me, and so I had to go to private practice doctors and dentists. And so, it was just impossible for me to be a full-time student, go through all of that, listening to these helicopters, and having the medical problems I was having. I just dropped out of school. I had to take care of my health. And it took me a couple of months to get back together again.

And then I realized, well, yeah, no more military. The military offered me a situation and I said, "Forget it. No. You're not gonna send me back to Vietnam. I'm not going back any place where anybody's trying to kill me." And, so I thought, well, I had a friend, they were living in Aspen, Colorado, so I decided I was going to be a ski bum in Aspen, which I did. I moved out to Aspen, Colorado.

LIBRE: Wow. Yeah, wow, thank you so much for sharing so much about your experience there, and obviously you can go forward and talk about other ways that this has affected you going forward, and just how things are specific from your life. But I think...

CRABTREE: Well, I would like to talk, well, just to wrap it up, to dish it up, Matthew, that okay, so, in Aspen, I mean, we talked about it before, I became a police officer. They needed somebody to do mountain rescue. I worked with search and rescue, and I was obviously a paramedic—well, I was pretty much what you'd call a paramedic. I could handle weapons, I could handle aircraft, choppers coming in. And so, that was my main—until I became an Aspen police officer. But then I ran into some political problems. I learned what corruption is all about in Aspen, and so then I had to leave there a couple of years later. And I was an Aspen cop from '69 through '71, and I had to get out of there, and moved back East.

I moved up to Woodstock, Vermont, and stayed at Brook Hollow Farm where I learned, you know, when I was a kid. And I thought, *Well, what the hell am I going to do with my life now, you know?* So I thought *maybe I'll go on to be an advanced paramedic*. And at Dartmouth there was a thing called the medics program. So I went. At that point in time I was an advanced EMT going on to be a paramedic and all of that. And I thought, *Well, maybe I'll become a physician's aide, assistant, you know?* But, working in the emergency room at Mary Hitchcock, and it was just, you know, there's no war casualties coming in there, but accident cases. This was in 1971, '72, '72-'73, that era. And Vietnam was still going on. It was winding down, but...

Then I learned what PTSD is all about, and I ended up with severe nightmares and, you know, I just couldn't handle emergency room stuff, and I just fell apart. And what they call PTSD, back then I knew it as combat trauma neuroses. So I went to the VA for help, and all they wanted to do was

turn me into a friggin' vegetable, shoot me up with Thorazine. And that was not gonna work. So, at that point in time I developed a hatred towards the VA. And there were a lot of Vietnam vets coming back and we got treated like crap. And, you know, everything I did I tried with the notion of duty, honor, country, and I was getting treated like crap. And that's when what they call, now they call PTSD, I told them, "Hey, I knew I was experiencing clinical depression," because when I was working neurosurgery next to neuropsychiatric, I knew the basics of what was going on.

But, back then the VA, all they wanted to do was deal on a Freudian basis. They didn't want to talk, acknowledge when I went through a program at West Haven, Connecticut, that was called a T group, T group therapy group. And there was a guy, Dr. Ben Burstein, he was the head shrink for Yale New Haven, Yale Medical School. And couldn't talk about Vietnam, couldn't talk about the military. You'd talk about your childhood, your sex life, your family relations, and nothing about Vietnam. That was verboten. Oh, why? *Oh, because oh, it's too upsetting.* And all they wanted to do is turn—and, you know, and we were all combat veterans on this ward. Didn't have to be—had to be there overnight, weekends take off, during the day take off. I'd go over to Yale Medical School and study what I could about what was going on.

And, you know, the DSM [Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders]? Then I learned what the origins of the DSM is. And then I confronted this doctor about it, and I said, "Hey, you know, this Freudian crap isn't going anywhere. And let's talk about the origins of the DSM." Well, he didn't want to do that. Of course, it was started out by General William Menninger and Colonel John W. Lapel. They were the ones that started the DSM with World War II, studying combat psychiatric, psychological combat casualties. So, I'll leave it at that. I had to educate and—not educate, but I had to pull a few doctors up for it and say, "Hey..." you know. They wanted to classify me as a schizophrenic or something. I said, "You know, this is not getting it." I had to tell them what was going on. I said, "I've obviously got clinical depression. I have reactive clinical depression, and you can take your schizoid diagnoses and shove it where the light doesn't shine." So, I still kind of have that attitude a little bit.

LIBRE: Do you feel like in the years since that there's been a marked change? Or you still feel that, you know, the...

CRABTREE: Well, the VA has turned around a lot now. After I left Woodstock, I went down to take care of my grandparents in New Jersey. I was married to the gal I moved out—I moved out of Aspen with a gal I met in Aspen, and we got married. We were together, lived together about five years. But, in '76 the marriage kind of fell apart and that's when I realized that *yeah, I'm not going to be a PA [physician's assistant]. I can't deal with the medical thing anymore.* And, so I decided to become a—well, I was a horseshoer. I liked horses, working with horses. And, so when I was at Woodstock, I drove a bus, a school bus, I was a horseshoer and an arborist working the trees. I was like a monkey in the trees. [laughter] And shoeing horses. I had to work outside. And part of it was hard physical work was also a stress reliever. And, so that's what I determined that I'm just gonna have to work outside and do hard physical, you know, hard physical labor as much as I could, because I enjoyed it back then and at that point in time I was still a very strong individual.

And so, when I left Woodstock and went back to New Jersey, took care of my grandparents, and my grandfather, father's father, was dying of cancer; my grandmother had had a stroke. So I did what I could being like a house orderly, like an LPN [licensed practical nurse] for my grandparents while I was there. And took care of them for a year, and then I moved back to Aspen when I realized that the sheriff who I'd had to handcuff to a radiator while I was a cop, he was gone. He got run out of town. He was a security guy at a casino in Reno. And the Chief of Police there, when I was there, took a job as the Chief of Police in some Mafia town in Illinois. So I said, you know, before I learned how corruption works when I was in Aspen.

But I moved back to Aspen and I became a ski bum photographer. Went back, so I got a degree in photography from Colorado Mountain College [Glenwood Springs, CO], so I drove a bus and I drove trucks, and I did security work. They wanted me to be a deputy again. A buddy of mine had become the Sheriff. And I said, "No, I'm not gonna do anything where I get shot at, or hazardous." So, but I did security work.

LIBRE: Yeah. And I guess, yeah, going through all these different positions and stuff, and obviously... What do you think has been just a sort of, yeah, I guess to sum up the talk and experience we've had here, to not make it too—you know, so that I guess just to, I would ask what do you think has been what you've carried forward from your experience to today? Like as a sum, if you have any words about your experience that you'd like to convey, including statements?

CRABTREE: Well, here I'm 73 years old now, and time flies, it's like man, you know. I kind of sort of feel like I'm still 40 or 50, but... Old war wounds have caught up with me. I've still got the shrapnel in C-5, and I've got a bum knee that I busted the patella in a chopper crash in 'Nam, and that started it off. So I've got physical things going on. And the psychological stuff. I'm a member of a group, you know, support veterans, combat veterans support group out here in Grand Junction. They have a... Now, now the VA here is really good. Up until '99, you know, oh, the first Gulf War in '90, the VA was forced to get its stuff together with the recent, you know, since Desert Storm, Desert Shield and all that. They're just, they were forced to get their shit together. Now they have quite a bit.

And yeah, back in '99, 2000, I was, I call it being cashed out, designated 100% disabled and unemployability because I'm unable to do what I was educated, well, educated for or also job experience. And I can't and I don't want to do law enforcement anymore. I can't physically drive big rigs. Up until last year I still had a license to drive any size truck, including HAZMAT, on the road. But it got to a point in '99, 2000, I couldn't do that anymore. That's when they decided that okay, they gave me temporary 100%, the VA did, and through unemployability. And I can't ski anymore. I was a ski photographer in Aspen, Snowmass, drove truck, did security. They don't want me doing that anymore. And part of it is an attitude situation, but more of a physical situation. But at the same time, yeah, I'm part of a VA combat veterans support group, and a Ph.D psychologist monitors the situation. So I've been, ever since '99, 2000, I participate in combat veterans support group.

So, without getting into current events and all of that, you know, Iraq, Afghanistan, that's another whole ball of wax. I have friends that are veterans from both. And that's a whole different subject. And here it is, they made a lot of the same

mistakes as they did in Vietnam with Afghanistan and Iraq, and what can I say? I mean, I'm not... I'm pro veteran. I'm pro any kind of a combat veteran that's gone through combat. They're modern day heroes, you know. Of course, there's a lot of good and bad, a lot of bad. But, yeah, so, it's a controversial situation, and now here we are, you know? We've got to extricate ourselves. What?

LIBRE: Would you serve again? Would you do it again?

CRABTREE: Yes, under different... I would, yes, under different... I would not go in... Knowing what went on in Vietnam, I would not allow myself to go through that again. The good thing I see about now Vietnam, they realized that hard core Communism doesn't work. Here the Chinese, they don't trust the Chinese, and they don't trust the Russians either. You know, we've got, the free world has more commerce going on with Vietnam now. They realized that, maybe it's not true capitalism, which is, you know, pure capitalism has its own evils, but pure Communism is even worse. But, yeah, look at all the stuff, the commerce that's conducted in Vietnam now. And I'm not saying that it was a good thing the way it happened and all that, but I think they realized that our way of life is better than a hard core Communist way of life. So, just kind of leave it at that.

LIBRE: Well, thank you.

CRABTREE: I have a few friends, Vietnam friends. And I know, actually know one guy that was a VC. You know, after, when we left, the Americans left and the North Vietnamese took over, a lot of people don't realize, a lot of the boat people were actually South Viet Cong families, because the hard core North Vietnamese when they moved into South Vietnam, they either killed or re-educated all the intellectuals in South Vietnam. Now, a lot of people don't realize that. And a lot of people bailed out of there. There's one guy here in town, but he's ethnic Chinese really, and I won't go into detail, but he's the kind of guy that worked both sides, if you know what I'm saying. Then he realized the hard core Communists—he was forced into stuff, but he realized hard core Communism just doesn't work.

LIBRE: Well, thank you so much for sharing everything today and communicating your story and your experience and everything. So much of it's so powerful and I truly appreciate

it and we really appreciate it here at the DVP in general. Yeah, if you, unless do you have any, if you have any concluding remarks or anything you really want to get across, you know, I think this has been great so far, and I think if you want...

CRABTREE: Well, I appreciate the opportunity to talk about my experience in Vietnam, but I would like to wrap it up with one thing, that we mentioned 2nd Lieutenant William Smoyer, who was a graduate of, a Dartmouth graduate. He was a 2nd lieutenant with the same outfit that I was attached to. Well, Kilo Company, 3rd Battalion, 7th Marines. And he got there a couple of months after I left, along with another, a corpsman, Wayne Caron, who was kind of a replacement, filled my—they were always short of corpsmen. So, two weeks after Wayne Caron, HM3 Wayne Caron, corpsman, and Lieutenant William Smoyer, they arrived together. They were with my same unit, the same area that I was in and out of, and all the stuff going on with the villages, being wounded and all that. Two weeks later, 16 of them were killed in the same area that I was wounded. And, you know, 2nd Lieutenant William Smoyer was a great athlete at Dartmouth, great guy, killed two weeks after he got to Vietnam, along with Wayne Caron, were subsequently posthumously awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, trying to save Lieutenant Smoyer and 15 other Marines. They were slaughtered.

LIBRE: And these are, Dartmouth has obviously certainly circled back to what this project is all about, and we've had other interviews and conversations with family members and people who knew him well at Dartmouth, and I think that really understanding your experience in your words, really... [inaudible] understand what he went through.

CRABTREE: Yeah, I didn't know Eric Muller, and he was Class of '66, but he was the son of my father's boss at the time. They were close. And I've read about Lieutenant Smoyer. He was a great guy. And, you know, it's just one of those things. I was born at Dartmouth. I just have that connection. Learned to ski up there and just loved the area, loved the place, lived up to Woodstock. So the whole ambiance is just wonderful up there.

But, now we have another controversy on with the pandemic going on. And I really feel, whether or not people realize it,

we're entering, and it might be a little far-fetched, but it's almost a World War III thing going on with this Chinese virus deal, because the whole world is impacted now. And Dartmouth was particularly impacted recently, as I understand. But luckily, I live in a place, yeah, Mesa County where I live in Grand Junction, there's a 170... what is it? 153,000 people here. There's only 40 people who have contracted the virus, and nobody's died here.

LIBRE: Right. Yeah, that's definitely a good thing to hear. I think yeah, we're all hoping to get back to school and to normal life up in Hanover and the Upper Valley.

CRABTREE: Yeah, so we're all going to—a lot of people are going to experience their own form of PTSD over this whatever you want to call it, the Wuhan virus. And the Chinese did a number on us, and here we go. Along with the Middle East problem and the Chinese problem. Well, once again, I'll wrap it up by saying the Vietnamese do not care for the Chinese program, and they don't care for the Russian program either. I think the Vietnamese identify with us more than they do the Chinese or the Russians. I'll just kind of leave it at that.

LIBRE: Well, thank you so much for everything you've given, spoken and shared today, and I truly do appreciate it. Yeah, if we can close here, if you're comfortable. I want to say thank you again.

CRABTREE: Yeah.

LIBRE: And I can stop the recording here.

[End of Interview.]