

## **Vietnam War Oral History Project**

### **Interview with G.W. Crabb**

**March 28, 2012**

**Paul Robards:** The date is March 28, 2012. My name is Paul Robards, Library Director at Roberts Memorial Library. I will be speaking with G.W. Crabb from Warner Robins, GA today about his experiences in the Vietnam War.

**Robards:** What branch of the military did you serve in?

**Crabb:** Army

**Robards:** Why did you join the military?

**Crabb:** I didn't. Drafted.

**Robards:** How old were you when you were drafted?

**Crabb:** About 22 or 23.

**Robards:** What was your hometown when you joined?

**Crabb:** Kind of hard to say. My father was career military, NCO [Non-Commissioned Officer], but I was born in Dublin, and lived in Warner Robins, Macon, all over. It is hard to say a hometown.

**Robards:** Military brat.

**Robards:** Where did you go to receive basic training?

**Crabb:** Fort Benning.

**Robards:** Where did you attend Advanced Training and how long did it last?

**Crabb:** Advanced training was Ft. McClellan AL. Exactly how long it lasted, I don't remember. Seemed like forever. And the thing about it, even though I knew that I was headed to Artillery Officer Candidate school from basic training, I went to Infantry (AIT) rather than Artillery. I think it was a screw up, and I didn't know enough to know it was, but later on I was pretty convinced it was, an administrative screw up.

**Robards:** Did all this training sufficiently prepare you for your duties in Vietnam? If so, which aspects of the training did you use in Vietnam?

**Crabb:** Not up to that point, the tech training didn't, because everything up to AIT, I was going to be a ground-pounder, infantry. Not be responsible for firing heavy artillery.

**Robards:** Did the military training change you in any way?

**Crabb:** Yes, I think so. I think it changed me for the better. I had different stages of training, and OCS [Officers Candidate School] was going to come along, but as far as basic training and AIT, the physical conditioning was absolutely great. I had never been in better shape in my life, so I thought it was fine.

**Robards:** What was your job description or occupation code?

**Crabb:** Up through AIT it was Infantry, but I spent two years as artillery field officer.

**Robards:** How did you feel when you learned you were going to Vietnam?

**Crabb:** : I had expected it from the day I was drafted, and I think I was not alone in thinking that way, so it was not like “Oh, man, here I am going to Vietnam.” I expected it the day I got drafted. The state side assignment with that maintenance battalion was pretty boring, and I actually welcomed a change, although I was not looking forward to Vietnam as a change.

**Robards:** What was your opinion about the Vietnamese people when you first arrived in Vietnam, and did your opinion about them change over time?

**Crabb:** At first I didn't have a whole lot of contact with them, but as I did make more and more contact with them, especially when I was assigned to the Vietnamese infantry battalion, I feel like I gained an insight that some of the troops who were not as close to the South Vietnamese soldiers and some of the South Vietnamese people, might not have gotten.

**Robards:** What dates did you serve in Southeast Asia?

**Crabb:** September '68 to September '69.

**Robards:** What are the names of the units you were assigned to?

**Crabb:** 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion 8<sup>th</sup> Artillery and 54<sup>th</sup> Artillery Support Group. It a long title, but they had various firing batteries, so I was assigned to firing batteries within the battalion.

**Robards:** Describe your living conditions, housing and food in Vietnam.

**Crabb:** I probably had it better than a lot, but worse than some. At firebases, it was pretty good. The food was fine. I was at two fire bases where we really did not have bunkers to sleep in. In those two fire bases, we did get mortar and rocket attacks, mainly rocket attacks at one base near Bien Hoa, because it had such a big perimeter. The other bases, we got everything, small arms and mortar. The base I spent the most time at, Ben Luc, down in the Delta, we slept in bunkers. We had to or I wouldn't be here. Of course you had to work—you couldn't fire a

gun out of a bunker, so you were exposed, walking around and such as that. But I think the conditions there were pretty good. The food was good. No real complaints.

**Robards:** What did you do for entertainment?

**Crabb:** I don't remember much entertainment. Played a little cards. I never took an R&R [rest and recuperation]. Never had a day off, so I didn't go to the in-country R & R places or anything.

**Robards:** Describe the most memorable event that happened when you were in Vietnam.

**Crabb:** There are a lot of things that are just clear as a bell in my mind right now, but when that AK47 round just missed me and ricocheted around my head and dropped between my legs, that was very memorable. Just a few inches more and it would have got me right between the eyes.

**Robards:** Describe the bravest action, either friend or enemy, that you witnessed while serving in Vietnam.

**Crabb:** I think the bravest actions were the Medevac pilots. They came in many times when we were under fire to take out wounded and dead, and everything generally happened at night. Those guys were really great. There were a lot of people that I think were unsung heroes from the standpoint of the dedication they did. The maintenance folks, the artillery maintenance folks, they probably didn't average four hours of sleep a night. It was day in and day out. Civil Engineers, those guys, you know you don't see big specials about decorated combat engineers. But the dedication those people had...I'll give you an example: It was Christmas day, and down in the Delta firebase, and those big artillery pieces had to have platforms, timbers, or they would sink into the mud. The civil engineers had to periodically come in and repair them. I'll never forget, it was one Christmas day and those guys showed up at the crack of dawn and jumped out of those trucks, worked all day long. When they pulled up there I thought, "I wonder if they know it's Christmas day? And even if they do, does it matter to them?" They had a mission to do and they just [did it]. It was impressive. It is that sort of thing that I never see people giving credit to people like that. They worked their butts off; they didn't get medals and recognition. So I'd like somehow to see, well it is too late now to see those folks get recognition.

**Robards:** For many of them, yes.

**Robards:** Could you please tell about your first encounter with the enemy? What happened?

**Crabb:** Mortar attack. Pretty much feeling like it was Russian roulette; you know, the luck of the draw. One of them might hit you, and one might not. Of course, it was at night.

**Robards:** Please evaluate the enemy's overall fighting ability. What were their strengths and weaknesses?

**Crabb:** I think they were dedicated and skillful. I had respect for them as fighters.

**Robards:** What is your evaluation of the South Vietnamese's fighting units and their military and civilian leaders?

**Crabb:** I think they were equally capable as Americans. There's something that to this day, and I see it in Iraq and other places, a lack of understanding of the differences. There is a difference between that South Vietnamese soldier, or that Iraqi soldier, or that Afghanistan soldier.

**Number one:** An American, in Vietnam or any combat situation, is normally there for say a year. They can afford to maybe play John Wayne for a year. They know after that year they are out of there. So they can take more offenses. That foreign troop is there for the duration. They are not going to rotate out. They are not going to get R & R. It is not going to happen, so if they play John Wayne, they are dead. They made it through a year of being gung-ho, maybe the second year. The third year, odds are, bam, you're gone. Something else, the American's family was not over there in harm's way. Their family was in harm's way, plus their family was in danger of the Viet Cong sympathizers, and the soldier had that heavily on his mind. I've seen a farmer come in who was killed by a land mine right outside our concertina wire. They brought him in, because we would evacuate civilians. In 45 minutes they brought a woman in. The farmer's son, a South Vietnamese soldier, killed this woman because he knew she was a Viet Cong sympathizer. So I had two dead people in there from different sides, within 45 minutes. So, to me there is nothing wrong with the foreign troops; it's not that they don't want to fight. Their circumstances were just very, very different. And I don't feel to this day that the American public or military leaders understand that. It is something that you have to deal with. I'm not saying you can do anything about it, but at least understand and don't throw rocks at them because they are not as gung-ho as the U.S. troops whose family is out of harm's way and they are not there for the duration. I'm sorry to get on the soapbox so much about that, but I think that is a key thing that very few folks [understand]. I've not run into anybody that voiced a view on that [the same way] as I see it.

**Robards:** What citations or awards did you receive?

**Crabb:** Bronze star.

**Robards:** As a soldier in Vietnam, why did you think the U.S. was involved in the war?

**Crabb:** Back at that time, to halt the spread of communism.

**Robards:** Does your opinion about the reason for U.S. involvement in the war differ now?

**Crabb:** No, I don't think so.

**Robards:** How did you feel about your military service in Vietnam when you left the country?

**Crabb:** I was glad to have survived. I think it gave me an insight on an aspect of life and death that I would never have gotten otherwise.

**Robards:** What was it like for you when you arrived back in the U.S.?

**Crabb:** Depressing, extremely depressing.

**Robards:** Do you believe that Vietnam veterans were discriminated against when they returned to the U.S.?

**Crabb:** Yes! There were no welcome parties for me. The circumstances for me were a little bit odd, because I went to Vietnam by myself. I came back by myself. I was alone. As soon as I could get out of the uniform, I did, because I felt like there was hostility toward me. But my haircut gave me away. You know, back then, a simple little thing like a hair cut [made me] stand out. I didn't have to have my uniform on for them to know that "Hey, there is a GI." I wanted my hair to grow out so that I would fit it, and they wouldn't know that I was a GI. I just didn't want them to know. And back then, you just didn't see military folks going to ball games or anything in their uniform. That wouldn't be seen. I mean, they would think "what in the hell are they doing here?" Yeah, there were no welcoming parties for the Vietnamese [War] generation. And the thing about it is that each generation, the population, has an opportunity to either support their veterans or not, and they didn't do it, I don't think anyone can say they did it, in the Vietnam era. Now, this generation, which is great; I'm glad the military supports them. They get benefits like free tickets to games and such as that. Their generation is taking care of them. But the generation now, they don't care about me, the fact that I was in Vietnam. I don't get a free pass to a ballgame. I don't get a free pass to anything.

**Robards:** How has the war affected your life most? Have you experienced marriage problems, changes in religious beliefs, health problems, or ability to socialize?

**Crabb:** Well, I think a lot of folks who went to Vietnam screwed up, came back screwed up. I think I went over with a pretty level head, and for the most part, came back with a level head. It probably delayed my getting married to some extent, maybe a lot. While I was there [in Vietnam] I got a Dear John letter from my girlfriend. I'm not just saying she found someone she liked better, but it was "I'm getting married next week." And I thought "Hmph!" I wish I had kept that letter. I don't know what I did with it, just threw it in the trash, I guess. But, when I got back to the states, she sent word that she would like to talk to me. So, I met her in a coffee shop, and apparently her marriage didn't shake out quite the way she wanted it, and she said,

“Why didn’t you do something?” That’s referring to when she wrote me and told me she was getting married. I said, “What in the hell did you expect me to do? I was trying to live through the day. What did you expect me to do?” She didn’t have an answer for that. And that’s the last time I saw her.

**Robards:** If you could change anything about this experience, what would it be?

**Crabb:** I would have tried to go to flight school. They made more money and always had shiny boots. Whereas I was out there in a rice paddy getting mortared, they flew back and went to the Officer’s Club.

**Robards:** Thank you, Mr. Crabb for your service to our country and for participating in this oral history project.