

Roberts Library, Middle Georgia College
Vietnam Veterans Oral History Project
Interview with James (Pete) Booth
April 2, 2012

Note: Col. Booth is the author/editor of *Returning Fire*, published by AuthorHouse in 2011.

Paul Robards: The date is April 2, 2012. My name is Paul Robards, Library Director at Roberts Memorial Library at Middle Georgia College. I will be speaking with Col. James W. (Pete) Booth today about his experiences in the Vietnam War.

Col. Booth,

You joined the military in 1952 and served until you retired in 1981. You served twice in Southeast Asia. The first tour of duty was from 1954 through 1965. The second tour of duty occurred during the Vietnam War, which we will talk about today. If your first tour is relevant to the second, please feel free to share that also.

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

Booth: Army

Robards: Why did you join the military?

Booth: I was an ROTC graduate from the University of GA, and in 1952, they called me to active duty.

Robards: How old were you when you joined the military?

Booth: 21

Robards: Where did you go to receive basic training?

Booth: I didn't take basic training. I was a 2nd Lt. ROTC graduate, so I went to an army school at Ft. Knox for the Company Officer Course.

Robards: What was your occupation code?

Booth: 1203 and 1204. That is a tank unit leader and 1204 is a cavalry unit leader and then it became 61204, which is air cavalry unit commander.

Robards: Did you volunteer to go to Vietnam? If so, why?

Booth: Yes. I'm trying to remember, but I think I did. I knew I was going.

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

Booth: Well, I was a professional soldier, so I was ready to go.

Robards: What dates did you serve in Southeast Asia?

Booth: The first tour was from December of '64 until December of '65. [The second tour was from June 1969-June 70].

Robards: Where did you serve in Southeast Asia?

Booth: 3 Corp.

Robards: What was your rank during the war?

Booth: First tour I was a major. The second tour I was a Lt. Col.

Robards: What awards or citations did you receive?

Booth: Silver Star with one oak leaf cluster, Legion of Merit with 3 oak leaf clusters, Distinguished Flying Cross, Purple Heart with one oak leaf cluster, Bronze Star, Air Medal with 23 oak leaf clusters, Joint Service Commendation Medal, I think that is all for the Vietnam service.

Robards: What were the circumstances, of your first encounter with the enemy?

Booth: [The Battle for Dong Xoai] That's a long story. Do you want to hear that? It is part of my story. I'm going to tell you about my first day in combat. I went to Vietnam in a gaggle of aviators, probably about 25 or 30. I was assigned to a staff position in MACV J-3 Aviation Operations [in Tan Son Nhut]. If I use acronyms and you need me to explain, I'll do that. I hated that job. It could have been done by a corporal. They had three Captains lined up taking requests for a helicopter for the next day. And they had a Lt. Col who arbitrated disputes. Could have done it with a captain and three sergeants, but anyway, that's the way it was. So, I told my boss that I wanted to get out of there. And so he arranged for me to be transferred to J-3, Short Range Plans, which means "I needed it yesterday." That was better than the job of scheduling and answering the phones and putting down how many helicopters somebody wanted, so I stayed in there for about four months, or something like that.

I still had to get my flying time, so on Saturday we could get our morning off and go get our flying time. I had to have four hours a month, 80 hours a year, 20 hours night time and all of that. So one Saturday, I was flying from Saigon to Ban Me Thuot, just wore a hole in the sky, and I flew past War Zone D. I looked out and there were some armed helicopters working out. So, I thought I would land and talk to these guys, so I landed. I was in an L20 [Beaver]; they call it a U6 now, I think. So, I landed and walked over to where the crews were working on the helicopters to talk to the leader and said, "Who's the leader here." They pointed out a captain named Dick Jarrett. So I went over [to see Jarrett]. Jarrett was a ferocious combat officer who didn't tolerate fools and might-be staffers easily. He was properly polite, but gave me what we called an REMF [Rear Echelon #*#*#*#!]. He told a warrant officer to go through with this major [Booth] and show him how an armed helicopter works. Now, I had already done work on helicopters at Ft. Knox, but anyway, after 30 or 45 minutes, he said, "Well, we've got to go back to the station," which was the truth. They cranked up their helicopters and went off. Like always, helicopters blow sand and dirt and blows your hat off and all that, so I'm standing there with the staff guys getting cascaded with sand and dirt, and needless to say, I was pissed off, one because I didn't like being treated like a REMF, and secondly, I didn't like being a REMF.

So, I went back to my office and the general I was working for, [Brigadier] General DePuy, William DePuy. His executive officer was a guy named [Lt. Col.] Y.Y. Phillips. So, I told Y.Y. that "I had to get out of this place." He said nobody had ever escaped J-3 before, the whole time. And I said, "Well, man, I've got to get out of here." So we had a talk, and it turned out that Y.Y. was trying to get out too. So he said he wanted to prepare the way for himself. There was one other major, a guy named [Capt. Robert] Bob Stevenson who wanted to get out. So he said "you guys go find a job, and I'll see what I can do with the General." I wanted to go to this armed helicopter company, because it was the first one in the army; it was the most famous one and they were the bedrock of the armed helicopters in the U.S. Army. I had a friend who I went through flight school with who was in this company [armed helicopter company]. So, I called him up and said "who is commanding this company?" He said his name was Major Jim Jaggers.

Well, I had known Jaggers for about an hour or two previously. At Ft. Knox, myself and another gentleman named Bob Reuter wrote the draft manual and the organization for Air Cavalry. When we wrote it, it was approved for testing and the Third Infantry Division at Ft. Benning was testing it, and Jaggers was the company commander. So I flew down with the Chief of Doctrine [USAARMS, Lt. Col Richard Irvin] to see how it was going. They were in the field so we went out and met Jaggers for an hour or more and then we left and went to lunch. So I went over there and got an appointment to go out and see Jaggers. When I did, I went in and told him that I would like to come to his company as the company commander. He said, "Well, your timing may be pretty good, because the army has sent a major in here to take command of the company. He is now over in US Army Vietnam G3, but he turned it down." He didn't want to take command of the company. I don't know why, probably connected with family. So he said, "You need to go talk to the battalion commander, Lt. Col. Bob Cunningham." So he called Cunningham and said I would like to come up and see him. And he said, "I don't oppose it" He didn't say that he endorsed it, he just said he didn't oppose it. And I understand why he said that; he had only known me a couple of hours at the most. So I went to talk to Cunningham and we talked maybe 30 minutes and the only question I remember him asking me was "What was your rank in the class at Ft. Leavenworth?" So I told him and he said, "That's higher than I was. I'm going to accept you."

At that time I had to reveal a problem: I was qualified in helicopters in H13, H23, H19, but I was not qualified in UH-1B [Hueys], and of course his company flew UH-1Bs, so I told Col. Cunningham that I was not qualified in a UH-1B, and I needed to get qualified. He said, "That's Okay. We'll transfer you about 10 days early. You can train and qualify and then when you get qualified and checked out, and you get signed off, then we'll do the change of command." So, that was great. So they transferred me in on the first of June. Up until the 9th of June, I flew an hour or two hours every day with the company IP [instructor pilot]. On the 9th of June, we started flying about 5 o'clock, shooting rotations, straight in's, 180s, 360s. We probably did 10 or 12, and I didn't break the helicopter and so my IP, who was a chief warrant officer named Bobby Smith said, "Okay, take her back to the ramp. I'm going to sign you off, but don't get in the right seat." On a gunship, the pilot in command flies in the right seat, because the rocket site is in front of the right seat. The co-pilot handles the machine guns. So we went back, and I was feeling pretty good, you know; I was ready to go flying in the left seat. So we went back and had a normal evening, had dinner and had a beer or two and went to bed.

About 4:30 or 5 o'clock in the morning, somebody knocked on my door, banged on it and said, "Get up Major. The shit's hit the fan in Dong Xoai," and I set up on the bed and said, "Where in the hell is Dong Xoai?" So I proceeded to shave and get dressed and went down stairs. There was one vehicle left there. I know this is a long way around the horn, but it is part of what happened. I was able to catch that vehicle and go into town. We were just outside the gate of Tan Son Nhut and I went to our operations and it was raining, low ceilings and all kinds of bad weather. Captain Dave Scott who had been in the company for a while was there. I said, "Dave, tell me what's going on." He said, "We've got a bad situation up at Dong Xoai, and all of our people are gone but me, and as soon as the weather clears, I'm going up to Phuoc Vinh, which is about 15 or 20 miles south of Dong Xoai." There was a special forces B Team there and an airstrip, and so we staged out of that airstrip. We flew up, and I realized then that I was not checked out on the weapon system on the left seat. On the machine gun you've got breakers and switches to turn them on and that kind of thing, and of course a site. I was familiar with machine guns, I just didn't know how to turn the thing on and manipulate it. When we landed, Dave went over to talk to his platoon leader, and I stayed with the crew chief and told him I needed to be checked out on the machine gun. Of course, being on a tanker, I'd fired lots of machine guns, so I knew how to shoot them.

The battle of Dong Xoai was an epic battle. There was Special Forces A Team in there, and they had some South Vietnamese Regional Forces. They also had a CIDG [Civilian Regular Defense Group] which was mostly Cambodians. [There were] Several hundred men, and they were under attack—really fierce attack by the Viet Cong Ninth Division. In the past, they had attacked lots of Special Forces outposts. They would attack at night and do a lot of damage until dawn, and then they withdrew. In this case, they didn't withdraw. They kept on attacking, and our people came back and they were reporting six or seven 50 caliber 12.7 inch anti-aircraft machine guns. At that time, I didn't know what that meant, but now I know what that means. A regiment has a company of three anti-aircraft machine guns, so if there were 6 or 7 guns, it meant that there were at least 2 regiments, which is maybe 5000 men. Also, it was reported [that there was] a 37 millimeter anti-aircraft cannon, that meant that a division was there; probably the whole 9th division was there, and they were intent on overrunning this special forces camp. Most of the CIDG ran away. So it really came down to 10 or 12 American Forces A- Teams, plus there were some Seabees there, probably about 20. They [Seabees] were doing some construction work to build an airstrip on a road just to the west. The Corp Commander and Corp Senior Advisor were not accustomed to a large scale attack like that, and their normal expectation was that they would pull out.

The first assault helicopter company that came in was the 118th; a very fine company. So they decided to commit the 1st Battalion of the 7th ARVN Regiment in there to assault the fort and get it back. There was some discussion about the LZ [landing zone], where to land them. We chose what we called a new rubber field about 2 klicks (kilometers) north of the fort. The trees were 3 to 4 feet high, so you can imagine that you couldn't land, but you could get low enough that the troops could jump out. So *this* is my first day in combat. The 118th landed those troops in there, and after a very few minutes they came under very severe attack.

About the same time, Jaggers told Dave Scott, who I was flying with, to go to Thuan Loi Rubber Plantation and do a recon of the airstrip up there. It was about 10 kilometers north, and they had an asphalt airstrip. So we went up there. This being my first day in combat, I didn't know anything. There was nothing moving there. The rubber plantation was there, the houses, workshops, everything, but there was nobody out working, moving around, and to my knowledge I didn't even see any dogs. That should have tipped me off immediately, but it did not. We reconned it very carefully—made several passes, and the final pass was straight down the runway at about 20 feet [above the ground] at about 35 miles an hour, which is designed to tempt some guy to shoot at you, and nobody shot. So, we went back and reported that to Jaggers. He was suspicious of it, and he sent Dick Jarrett, who was a very experienced and competent platoon leader and operations officer, and Jarrett reported the same thing.

When Dave and I were on the way back, the portion of the 1st battalion 7th ARVN regiment was under severe attack. We were talking to the U.S. Advisor, 1st Lt. Edward Krukowski, on the radio and he reported we were under heavy fire. He said something like, "We're in trouble. We've got a problem here." We told him to mark his position with smoke and we would pick him up and he said, "No, not yet." About 5 or 10 minutes later, he came back on the air and said the battalion commander was down—he had just been killed. Dave said for him [Krukowski] to mark his position with smoke and we'd come and get him. You know when you are flying you have a downwind leg, a base leg and an upwind leg? Well, we were on the base leg to pick him up in the field. As we turned [to land], Dave told the advisor to pop some smoke, but we didn't get a response, so we broke off. What happened was the whole entire unit [1st Battalion 7th ARVN Regiment] was wiped out in about 30 minutes. The advisor was killed.

So then we went on back to where we were stationed and by then more assault helicopter companies had been arriving—3 or 4, I'm not sure. They belonged to the 145th Combat Aviation Battalion which supported all three corps. They organized an assault on to the airstrip at Thuan Loi Rubber Plantation where there had been 3 or 4 recons made by myself, Dick Jagger and a couple of other guys. Don't ever send multiple guys to do that job because that tells the VC [enemy] that you are coming. By then they had the remainder of the 1st of the 7th on board and the ARVN, III Corp Commander and the U.S. Advisor and the 145th Battalion Commander; it was kind of a command group.

By then, Capt. Jack Grasmeder had arrived, because he had heard that there was this major fight going on. This village Dong Xoai was the district headquarters town, and for political reasons they did not want it to be overrun and captured by the VC. They got everybody on board and loaded the 4 assault helicopters, probably around 70 or 80 lift ships, and 25 or 30 gunships. They flew up to 1500 feet, around the east side of Dong Xoai, escorted by the gunships, and got up to Thuan Loi where there was an airstrip that ran east and west. The helicopters turned and started in [to the airstrip]. Of course the VC saw them miles away and as the lead helicopter, the 118th again, got to the airstrip and got to the touch-down point, a group of cows (some people said it was cows and some people said it was water buffalo), wandered out on to the runway. They had to land short of the intended touchdown point. Just as the first group of five or so touched down, mortar started falling on the airstrip and one hit right

on top of a 118th helicopter and blew it up and turned another one over. The ARVN guys jumped out, and they were all cut down within 5 or 10 minutes.

It was a very well laid ambush, set up on that airstrip, positioned in all the right places. They were very disciplined because nobody saw anybody. So they were very disciplined. They planned the ambush the night before and had been in position there for several hours before daylight anyway. In my book, I've got a time on these things. I think it was about 10:30am. The battalion commander was Bob Cunningham and when it became obvious that they [Viet Cong] had ambushed the strip, he called off the assault and all the helicopters turned around and went back to Phuoc Vinh. Everybody who landed, including the advisor, Capt. Bruce Johnson, was killed there.

So I went back to Phuoc Vinh . When Dave and I went up and made the first recon and tried to pick up Lt. Krukowski, we took some hits in our tail boom, and our maintenance officer looked at it when we landed and said "Okay, you guys are grounded because you hit some spars in the tail boom and we can't let you fly because it might break off." I told Dave "Okay, you find us another ship. We are not going to get left out." So, he did. The next operation, [rescue of men still at the Dong Xoai airstrip] I was not part of, because I was still trying to find a helicopter.

About 1 o'clock P.M, [Major Harvey] Stewart was monitoring the radio for the Special Forces Team in Dong Xoai. The call sign there was "5 5 body jab." A very brave guy, [Harold Crowe—SF 'A' Team from inside the DIDG/ District Headquarters at Dong Xoai] stayed on the radio and in communication all day. They were monitoring him, and he said they were under serious assault and down to the last few rounds of ammunition—everyone was saving one for their self. So they had to pull out of this building. Harvey Stewart volunteered for the rescue, but couldn't do it without the command groups approval, and coordination of all the gunships. I walked over to the commander, and I described the situation to him. He said that we could get them out. We could get three ships into the compound next to where they are holed up. Harvey Stewart said that the 118th would do it. Jaggers said he would handle the gunships and the Tac Air.

Those three ships went out to the east and came into the Dong Xoai area from the south east, and they came in at low-level. When they got over the compound, they flopped on the ground and picked up the Special Forces people [14 Americans and 10-12 Vietnamese]. They [helicopters] probably were on the ground less than 30 seconds—probably 10 or 15 [to pick up troops]. Bill Fracker was flying one of the gunships, and took off and broke to the south to get over the jungle as quick as he could. He saw three guys come to the door of the building [after he took off] waving and one of them was an American, so he went back in and picked them up.

I wasn't there, but he was a very truthful guy, and he said that when he landed the Viet Cong were coming over the berm. They were running toward him and he was sitting on the ground waiting for these three guys to get in the helicopter. He said it looked like the opening gun of the New York Marathon with all the VC coming. His co-pilot took a .45 pistol and aimed it out the window, and Bill

was just about to tell him not to fool with that [gun] because it would not be effective, when he [the co-pilot] shot and he [Fracker] saw one VC do a flip and go down. On the top of the berm about 15 or 20 yards from them, there was a VC with a BAR [Browning Automatic machine gun]. He was shooting at Bill, but he was higher than Bill, because he [VC] was on the berm, so he shot over the helicopter all the time. So when the three guys got on board, he [Fracker] flew over the berm and he was losing RPM so he bounced it over the top of the berm, picked up his RPM again and then went off on the south side, bounced it two or three times and got his air speed up and his RPM up and as he went over the berm, the guy [VC] with the BAR machine gun turned and started to shoot at them from about 20 yards away. Bill [Fracker] said he thought he was dead. But then the next instant, the VC's head went past, because the door gunner, a kid named Gene Dixon had killed him with his M-60 machine gun. So they escaped [from Dong Xoai].

Just across the road from the compound was a soccer field. When I got back and landed and walked over to the command group again, the Senior Advisor, a guy named Jack Wilson said "We are going to surprise them. We are going to land in the soccer field." I thought he was nuts and wondered if he knew what the hell was going on up there, but they said "Okay that is what we are going to do." By that time some C123's had brought in the 52nd Ranger Battalion. They had a U.S. Army Captain Advisor; I think his name was Sullivan. The 1st Battalion 7th Regiment ARVN was wiped out, so the 52nd Rangers were going to be landing right in the teeth of where all the firing was coming from. They loaded up and took off and by then I think we had 5 or 6 assault helicopter companies, because MACV had called in other corps. They went up at 1500 feet and turned in to the final approach. The soccer field could only accommodate flights of five, so they [helicopters] were divided up into 5s. They were probably 15 seconds apart. We [Booth and Capt. Dave Scott] got another helicopter, and it really pissed off the crew that was in there because the company commander came and took their helicopter. So when Dave and I got the helicopter we flew up to Phuoc Vinh to join them.

We joined up with a flight of five with around 12 or 13 flights of five. I looked back at the lines of helicopters, and they were in perfect order, in stair-step formation. The first group was led by a Captain Jack Grasmeder, (he flew lead in every one of the 118th's assaults, by the way,) who was just touching down on the soccer field. It looked like what they call JCOC [Joint Civilian Orientation Conference] fire power demonstration at Fort Benning; you know, when they bring the congressman down [to watch]. That's what it looked like. There was artillery, smoke grenades, flares and everything going off down there. I thought I wouldn't survive if I went down there, but you know, that's what we do. That's our job, and that's what we do. So we started down and about half way down I heard a transmission say "27 is going down," and I looked and saw a helicopter with the rotor coming off. The rotor came off and the helicopter went down in the jungle. I never knew if it was the aircraft commander of the 27 who called or someone around him who saw it and called, but he was not panicked; he just said "27 going down." When we went over that point, I looked down and there was a smoking hole in the jungle. That's all there was. Everybody on that helicopter perished.

We went on down, and our group landed in the soccer field and we were probably on the ground three seconds, because the 52nd Rangers started jumping out before they touched down. As the ‘slick’ flight Dave and I were escorting slowed for touchdown in the soccer field, we went past them on the right side between 15-25 feet altitude firing into the jungle edge to our front and right front and north. As we turned to break out to the north after we shot, we called [U.S] advisor for the 52nd Ranger Battalion (he was a Black Panther Five), and told him we had some ammunition we would shoot for him, and he said, “Stand by. We are in hand-to-hand combat.” We said “Oh. Okay.” Some things are funny now, but it wasn’t funny then. So, we flew up to the north four or five miles to kind of get out of the way and stay so that we didn’t have mid-air collisions, and after 15 minutes or so he [52nd Ranger Battalion advisor] came back and said “Okay, I’ve got a target you can shoot now, so he marked it and blew a smoke grenade and we shot at it.

Because we had the additional helicopters, we had enough to lift the entire Ranger Battalion in one lift, so we put them on the ground and the whole battalion on the ground in about 10 minutes. They had enough strength to assault the compound and the fort and take it back. It was a very tough fight, and by the way, there was a quote from the “after action report” by two pilots from the second company in [the flight] line (118th led and the A-501st came second) that said when they [A-501st] landed, four or five guys jumped out on the right side and they were killed immediately. One of them was blown back into the helicopter. Four or five jumped out on the left side and they were cut down within a short period of time, so I think maybe out of that group of 10 maybe 2 or 3 survived the landing. But they got enough people on the ground to retake the fort. We did some shooting for them later in the day—this was 10 June, 1965.

After dark we flew back to Saigon and to our operational base. We went to our club for dinner. I was sitting there almost alone, because I had only been in the company for a few days. All people in the company are suspicious of what we call FNGs. Do you know what FNGs means? ##+**!# New Guy. A FNG can get you killed because he is not seasoned, so they [the company] stand off from them until they proved themselves. While I was sitting there, I recalled that 10 June was my son’s 11th birthday, which is a common thing to happen to a soldier.

There was some more fighting going on that night and the 9th division withdrew, but they left “stay behind people” to impede the pursuit, so the fight went on two or three more days, but nothing of the intensity [of June 9 &10]. Late in the afternoon, General Westmorland flew up to Phuoc Vinh and he had the authority to approve awards. He approved two congressional medals of honor: one for Lt. C. Q. Williams [Charles] who was part of the special forces team, and coincidentally was the oldest 2nd Lt. in the Army, and the other one was for a Seabee named [CM-3} Marvin Shields. Marvin Shields was killed, so his was posthumous. C.Q. was wounded in 3 or 4 places, around the shoulders, arms, and legs. His aid brought a note over to Bill Fraker and the note said “You were beaten out by the oldest 2nd Lt. in the Army.” Bill had been awarded the Distinguished Service Cross—seconded highest. Company commander of the 118th, [Maj.] Harvey Stewart was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross. Three of the Special Forces Team [A Team 342] members, Dallas Johnson, Jim [James T.] Taylor and Michael J.

Hand were awarded the Distinguished Service Cross. There were five distinguished Service Crosses. There were a number of Silver Stars and Distinguished Flying Crosses awarded. I call that "The Day of Heroes," because, let me tell you, that was a nut-cutting fight. That was my first day in combat. You wanted to know what my first contact with the enemy was—that was it.

Robards: From your experience, how would you evaluate the enemy's fighting ability?

Booth: Very good. On this day they were exceptional. They were disciplined, and they had positioned their weapons in the proper places. They were in a very dedicated assault and we were killing a bunch of them with helicopter gunships and Tac air fire support, but they never backed off until that night.

Robards: Do you remember seeing any action that stood out as being particularly brave?

Booth: Bill Fraker's act on that day. There were lots of brave actions that day. Everybody was doing brave actions. A rational person would say, "I'm not going to do that, because I'm going to get killed." But nobody, not one single person ever declined to do his duty or responsibility.

Robards: What do you remember most about combat?

Booth: The courage of the American soldiers. That runs through two tours. I've observed a lot of American soldiers in combat and different ways, so the one thing that stands out most in my mind is how brave these guys were.

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

Booth: In our case we were not infantrymen, so the first tour, we had a villa; the officers did, right outside of the gate of Tan Son Nhut, a very nice place. We had our officer's mess in there and a bar. We had tables with white Formica on them and there were grease pencils there on top of the bar, and it was common practice at the end of the day to critique the battle and use the grease pencils to draw it out. Everybody could comment on the battle. So they could say, "When you decided to do this, that was wrong, you should have done something else." Then the leader needed to justify what he did in a reasonable way. We didn't have any shouting matches; everybody was critiquing to learn how to do the job better. Our food and our billets [living accommodations] and that kind of thing were great.

The second tour, our troops were spread out. One troop was at Phuoc Vinh—1st Cavalry Headquarters was at Phuoc Vinh. It was build up hugely to accommodate the 1st Cav. Our billets were adequate. We occupied an old French fort, so we fixed those up. For example, we had a 55 gallon drum filled with water sitting on top and the sun heated it during the day. When you got back at night, you could pull a lever and take a shower. The weather kept it very comfortable for us.

Robards: What was your daily routine while in Vietnam?

Booth: On days we were having a battalion assault, we got up about 3am or 3:30am in the morning, because usually the assault was somewhere that was 45 minutes or an hour away. So, if we got up and had breakfast, we could get to the airfield by 4:30 or something like that, and had a chance to preflight the helicopter and get a briefing and all. Then we took off at let's say, 6 o'clock. We would fly to the

location of what we called the stage field and get our last minute briefing and top off the fuel tanks. At first light we would have the assault. The assault would go in and the gunships stayed all day long supporting the ground force. They would finish at say 7:30 or 8:00pm then fly back to Tan Son Nhut where our base was. After they got back, they would go in and fill out an operational report where they'd describe the battle, and what they did. We kept those and drew lessons learned from those. The crew chiefs inspected the helicopters for combat damage and did the post-flight, and reloaded with ammunition. If it had combat damage, they arranged to get it repaired so that it would be ready to go the next morning. So, crew chiefs would get to the mess hall around 9pm or 9:30pm. The mess sergeants usually saved steak sandwiches or something like that for them. At least after I got there they did. The first time they served baloney, I went ballistic and said "you guys want to stay a cook or be an infantryman? If you want to stay a cook, get something fit for these guys to eat." Then we got in a great mess sergeant. Depending on how the schedule was done the next day, the crew chiefs would go through the same thing, and the pilots. We had a system called 1st up, 2nd up, and 3rd up. With 1st up, one platoon filled all the missions; 2nd up probably overflowed into the second platoon, and the other people were what we called 5-minute stand-by. So they would be in operations to the air field and when they got called, they went. Third platoon, we tried to give them a day of rest. Sometimes we were successful and sometimes we were not, depending on how intense the fight was.

Robards: What did you do to relax?

Booth: The first tour, I was just outside of Saigon, so about every two or three weeks I would go downtown, and would be out of communication with my unit. I'd tell them I was going. We didn't have cell phones in those days, you know. So, I'd go down to a bar and have a couple of drinks, beers and just relax. I'd talk to people in the bar. For a while, the French had a social club out on the Saigon River they called the Club Nautique. They did some water skiing out there. You could go out and pay a very reasonable price to rent water skis for an hour or two and go water skiing. That was very popular until some sniper started shooting at them. He was shooting at me one time, so I motioned to the guy that was driving the boat to get behind a large barge on the river. So we pulled in behind him and blocked the sniper. Nobody was ever hit out there that I know of, but it made it a little less fun. There was also a club downtown called the Cercle Sportif. We were permitted to join and you could play tennis out there and they had a swimming pool and a bunch of stuff. People could get in touch with you out there, so sometimes at night I'd go out and play some tennis since the courts were lighted at night. That was about it. It was nice and relaxing, but it [going to a club] was not a daily routine.

Robards: Please tell us about any community involvement you participated in such as irrigation or construction projects,

Booth: In the outskirts of Saigon there was an orphanage, Catholic orphanage. A very wonderful person, a lady, called Madame Ngai ran that orphanage. The kids were 2, 3 or 4 years old, and their families had been killed or who knows what happened to them. So in the down town one, they had about 25 or 30 kids, and they had a farm outside of Saigon about 25 or 30 miles where they raised produce and stuff to feed the kids in the orphanage. They had orphans there too. I don't know exactly how many, but more than down town. Our people adopted that orphanage. We supported it with

labor—if they had a leak in the roof our guys got the material and got up there and fixed it. They took supplies and sheets; they used lots of sheets at that orphanage. They took food down there. They helped that orphanage stay alive. The little kids in there were cute as a button, but unless somebody helped them, they didn't have any future at all. When you are three years old and your momma and daddy are gone, unless you have someone taking care of you, you're in trouble. So we took care of that orphanage the whole time the company was there. There is a chapter about it in my book [*Returning Fire*]. One of the lieutenants wanted to adopt a kid, who was three years old. He tried to adopt her. He flew his wife over from the states to see this kid, but he was blocked by the Vietnamese government laws of the time. That was 1963, and the Vietnamese law said that to adopt a kid you had to have been married seven years. This lieutenant and his wife had been married three years. You also had to be the same religion as the kid. Who knew what this kid's religion was. She could have been Catholic, Buddhist. So he couldn't do it.

By the way, thirty-three different people wrote chapters for the book, because when I served in 1965, I knew about that period, but I didn't know much detail about before and after, so I sent out 350 letters to people who had served in the unit and asked if they would write about their time [in Vietnam], and tell us what happened, and what they did. Fifty some odd came back and said they would do it. So I sent another letter that said for them to send me a manuscript and some pictures. Thirty two did that. Then I wrote my own chapter, the introduction and the epilogue. I did the glossary and the index and put all that together.

Robards: Could you tell about the most memorable event that happened to you or your unit while serving in Vietnam?

Booth: Well, the one I remember the most was the first day [of combat], 10 June, 1965. I had a couple of memorable days in the 1st Cav, but 10 June was the most memorable, because it was such a huge battle, and because my first day in combat I was learning a lot.

Robards: What is your evaluation of American military leadership and of other commanders you worked with in the field during the Vietnam War?

Booth: Well, obviously some were better than others. Some were outstanding leaders and commanders. Others were pretty good, not as good as some, but adequate. Then there were a few cases where they were inadequate.

Robards: In hind-sight, what do you believe was the reason for the war?

Booth: Well, it was political. At that time, the communists, spurred on by Russia and China seemed to be intent on taking over all of Asia. The announced purpose of the war was to stop them in Vietnam and protect Thailand and Asia and ultimately Australia from communist domination. So it was politically based.

Robards: Did you ever feel that the American public did not support you as a veteran of the Vietnam War?

Booth: Yes

Robards: Do you believe that Vietnam veterans encountered discrimination when they returned home from the war?

Booth: Yes

Robards: Have your views about the war changed at all over the years?

Booth: No, I still have great admiration for the American soldier; I'm suspicious of the U.S. Congress and government. They will leave you in a heartbeat if it is politically expedient for them; that's what happened in Vietnam. And that's likely to happen in Afghanistan; we don't know yet, but yes, I do not trust the Politicians. I think you asked [on the original questionnaire] did the Vietnamese communists beat South Vietnam, and I said no. They...we beat the bejezus out of the Viet Cong, but when Nixon had his meltdown, the Democrats took over the Congress. They had been out of power for a while, and they decided that they were going to run the show. They not only withdrew all support from South Vietnam, they cut off funds, cut off resupply, cut off any tactical air support—nothing, No supplies, no nothing. Nixon was in such a weakened position that he couldn't do anything about it. When that happened, the North Vietnamese invaded, did a mass invasion supported by Russia and China with tanks and equipment. The South Vietnamese Army was unable to handle that, based on termination of U.S. support, so they got beat. The media ran around with their pants on fire talking about how we failed and got beat in Vietnam, but we didn't fail and we didn't get beat. Congress beat us.

Robards: Would you repeat this experience if you could do it over again?

Booth: Depends on my age. You understand that war takes young men because it takes lots of stamina. Us older guys may be smarter, but we don't have the stamina anymore. You can't lead these troops properly unless you have the stamina to stay with them.

Robards: Is there anything else that you would like the world today and future generations to know about your Vietnam War experience?

Booth: Not so much about my own experience. I've gotten all the recognition that I think I earned. But what I'd like the American people to know is that there were lots of terrible stories that came out of Vietnam about the atrocities and that kind of thing and we did have civilians killed on several occasions. It was very regrettable, but it was not an atrocity. In one case, a higher commander ordered a fire team leader to shoot at a sampan in the river with a bunch of women and kids on it. It was in a free-fire zone, but our fire team leader didn't want to shoot at it, and he reported it. The mission commander got uptight about that and told him [fire team leader], "I ordered you to shoot. You'd better do it." So he did and lots of civilians were killed. Nobody knows what they were doing in a free-fire zone.

In a couple of other cases, we had some civilians killed. This was in the 9th Cav. I was an aircraft squadron commander, and we did all insertions and extractions, and this LRRP [long range reconnaissance patrol] team was attached to my squadron. They were in a "hide" position off of a trail two or three kilometers outside of a village. They were like a covey of quail with their feet all to the inside. They were in some bushes like that. Some people had been working in a rice paddy and got

suspicious and went over and opened the bushes and looked down at the LRRPs and they shot him. It was later determined that he was an innocent civilian. At the time he opened the bushes and looked in there, they didn't know that.

Anyway, none of those were atrocities, and I deplore and despise those guys who did do atrocities. But I will tell you that the commander has to set the policy and the atmosphere and the understanding in all his soldiers that that is not permitted {acts of atrocities}, because if you leave it alone and nobody says anything to the soldiers, and you've got replacements coming in all the time, and [if they don't understand the policy] one of them walks through a village and guns down someone, he's already subject to military justice for shooting somebody. But who's responsible? If you didn't train him and tell him, then you are responsible. You don't want to send someone to Leavenworth because you are a failure. You have to set the right attitude and policies in the unit and make sure it is ingrained.

We didn't do any cutting off of ears, and all that stuff, but when the LRRP team ambushed VC or NVA, our policy was that after the ambush was over, you would go out and strip the body down—everything, uniform, Ho Chi Minh sandals, everything. You leave him where he is. Naked. You took all that material back and turned it in to the G-2. The G-2 folks had folks that could analyze that, for example they carried rice balls, so how many rice balls did they have left. So the guy is left naked. In one case, we had a guy that was new to the LRRPs, so he had his first ambush, and they set it up with claymores and when it was over, a funny thing, one of the LRRP people said that they always got four or five in the ambush when they blew the claymores and they usually got one or two more, because the VC would run back down the trail, and when he got to the first curve in the trail, he would turn around and take a shot. So we waited until he got to the curve in the trail and when he started to turn around, we would kill him. That is just knowing what the enemy's tactics and practices are. Anyway, back to the kid. He went out to strip him down and it turns out, the squad they had ambushed was all girls. The VC had this famous platoon that they called the Communist Women's Leadership, and it happened that they ambushed one squad of this group of girls. This kid was a small town farm-boy and he couldn't handle the fact that he had killed a woman. His mom had always told him not to hit girls. He started crying and fell on the ground and was throwing up and we had to bring him out. It took a lot of counseling by his leaders and chaplain to get him straightened out. But we did not commit atrocities; we didn't cut off ears, we didn't do any of that "BS" and we certainly didn't ever try to kill children. There is a picture in my book inside of a hooch in a village where the ARVN were sweeping the village, and in the picture there is a woman, looks like she is between 25 and 30, and three little kids, two small and she's holding one. In the back ground there is a VC defector working with the ARVN as a scout. I wrote under the picture that the kids were not our enemy and the woman was probably not our enemy, but if she picked up a 347 or a grenade, she was our enemy. I don't want any man of mine killed because of our inattention or because of a woman we think won't hurt us. If a woman is armed, she will kill you. The husband was nowhere to be seen. In the whole village we were in, there were no 20 to 40 year old men. There were some old gray-bearded guys and some little kids, but everybody else was gone. They were obviously VC and hiding in the jungle or they were in tunnels under the ground. The ARVN didn't

turn up anyone, but we do know that they were VC, because there were trenches all the way around the village. That wasn't part of the rice farming, you know.

Robards: Col. Booth, we thank you for your service and dedication to our country and also for participating in this oral history project.

Booth: You are quite welcome.