

Southern Adventist University
KnowledgeExchange@Southern

Vietnam

Oral History

2016

The Life of a Physician in the Vietnam War

Amanda K. Reed

Southern Adventist University, amandareed@southern.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://knowledge.e.southern.edu/vietnam>



Part of the [Oral History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Reed, Amanda K., "The Life of a Physician in the Vietnam War" (2016). *Vietnam*. 16.
<https://knowledge.e.southern.edu/vietnam/16>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Oral History at KnowledgeExchange@Southern. It has been accepted for inclusion in Vietnam by an authorized administrator of KnowledgeExchange@Southern. For more information, please contact jspears@southern.edu.

Student Interviewer's Name: Amanda Reed

Interviewee Name: David Cromwell

Time and Location of Interview

This interview was conducted over the phone on Monday, October 17, 2016 at exactly 6:00 pm Eastern. The interviewer was in Collegedale, Tennessee and interviewee was in Inverness, Florida. The total time that the interview required was precisely 75 minutes and 10 seconds.

About the Interviewee

David Cromwell is currently 74 years of age and was born in Middletown, New York. He had his own medical practice in New York before retiring in Florida. His relation to Amanda Reed is that he is her great uncle on her father's side. David Cromwell served for a year in the Vietnam as a physician working at a clinic in a relatively safe part of Vietnam before being shipped off to the Ashah Valley where he encountered very difficult circumstances.

Interviewer: Amanda Reed (AR)

Interviewee: David Cromwell (DC)

DC: Hi honey!

AR: Hi Uncle David, how are you?

DC: Good, right on time!

AR: Yes, is this a good time for you to talk?

DC: Any time is a good time to talk to you.

AR: (Laughs) Aw, thank you. The floor is yours. Um, we can begin...hold on I just have a few questions. I'm just going to kind of let you share whatever you feel comfortable talking about. So first off, you were a physician, not a medic in the Vietnam War correct?

DC: I was a physician. The medics worked for me. The medics get six weeks of training in nursing and first aid. I had medics that worked for me.

AR: Oh okay. How many other physicians were there with you?

DC: Well, this is where I need to ask you what you would like. I will give you a little background. I went into the war, the U.S. Army, in September 1968.

AR: Did you volunteer?

DC: No, well I had a choice. If I volunteered, I went in as a private and I could have become a medic, and the pay was \$70 a month. I went in as a physician, an officer, and the pay was \$1,000 a month. And I thought about it for about one tenth of one second.

AR: Oh wow. So explain that, do you regret it now?

DC: No, of course not. I wanted to go in as a physician.

AR: Well, yeah, the pay was much higher and everything of course.

DC: Yeah, so in other words I got to use my profession. I had finished med school, finished my internship, I was a doctor with a license in Maryland, and I did not want to go into grunt-the lowest paid private in the army. No.

AR: Exactly, so you went in September you said?

DC: Yes, September 1968 as a captain which is an officer. And everybody, when you see them in Fort Sam Huston, every time you see them in training and you pass someone you have to salute them. I was not enlisted, which was captain, but these privates called E1s, 2s, 3s, etc. have to salute all of the officers. So if you're on your way walking down to church or anywhere and you're in uniform, you have to salute.

AR: Wow that's interesting.

DC: So as an officer, I had to salute everyone above me which were colonels and generals, they have to salute everybody.

AR: Wow, well that's pretty cool actually.

DC: For me.

AR: Yeah for you. (Laughs) Okay so what were your conditions like there? Were you in a tent?

DC: Well I went to Fort Sam Houston to see how the army does things. I was there for six weeks. I saw my buddy from med school that I interned with, and I said "Hey, you're going to be here too so let's just rent an apartment." So we rented an apartment for six weeks and both of our wives came down to Fort Sam Houston. Then we were shipped off to Vietnam for a year. I was in Vietnam, and doctors get put in a place for six months that is safe and away and then they put you for six months in a place that really sucks.

AR: Right, right.

DC: I got the first place that was a safe place in Saigon.

AR: And I believe I read that used to be called Ho Chi Minh City right?

DC: No, um, I had a little dispensary in Saigon where every ship that came into Saigon unloaded. It had to be protected because the enemy would try to come and take stuff off of it-steal everything.

AR: Right.

DC: So we had a base, I don't know, maybe 150 army personnel. There were cooks, medics, auto mechanics, anything you would need for tiny town, it had it. I had a dispensary and I ran at the clinic every morning the sick clinic. So if you had gotten sick in the night during the days of the week, in the afternoons one of my medics would drive me in a jeep across town which would probably take 25 minutes to a third field hospital which would probably be like Glendale or Washington Adventist Hospital. I mean it was about a 300 bed, anything you wanted to do, in America you could do at this hospital. It was fully equipped.

AR: Oh okay I had no idea you worked a clinic there!

DC: Yep.

AR: Okay so you had a lot of good materials, like everything that would be available in America you pretty much had there, was it a clean environment for you to work in?

DC: Well, the very main roads to get there were paved but as soon as you got out of the clinic there were dirt roads. I mean the Adventists had a mission there in Saigon. It was about a quarter of a mile from the hospital with high walls and where I would go a couple times a month for Sabbath school and church. And I looked up the very first time, and here was Marilyn Bennett who had graduated with me from Loma Linda who had graduated with me about a year and three or four months before and she was running the nursing program there.

AR: No way!

DC: Yep, and about a quarter of a mile the other way there was a building that did the printing for all of Vietnam, in Vietnamese, of all of our books. And there was a 53 bed hospital.

AR: Okay.

DC: When does this report have to be in? Cuz I have pictures of all of this. I can download photos and send them to you in the next day or two because otherwise it will be really hard for you to picture what I'm talking about.

AR: It is due in a few weeks. Well all of that was very helpful, but to clarify I meant were the conditions in the clinic clean for you to work in for the patients and everything.

DC: Oh where I worked? Yes, there were three Vietnamese people in the back. Two of them cleaned, you know the little rooms, and the one guy, Papasan, he knew how to give shots. But it was about-if you can picture your apartment at home in Chicago...

AR: Uh huh?

DC: It was about the size of the living room by the road to your bedroom by your parents wall. It would be not quite that wide, and that long. It was in a semi-moon convex building.

AR: Wow so that's pretty small.

DC: Yes, very small. My office was about four feet by five feet.

AR: Wow.

DC: Probably half the size of your bedroom.

AR: And do you know about how many people per day you saw on average?

DC: Hmm, probably between twenty and thirty.

AR: Okay.

DC: This is kind of funny, the number one thing we saw day in and day out was Denaros disease.

AR: What disease?

DC: Denaros disease. STDs. Syphilis, gonorrhea, chlamydia...

AR: No way!

DC: Especially the first week or 10 days of the month because we get paid the first week of the month and these guys, I mean these guys are 18 or 19-year-old boys who are free from home and can do whatever they want to and they can get one prostitute after another and get drunk at the same time!

AR: Oh, my word...

DC: And these girls often would roll 'em. "Here have another beer," and they knew that these guys were loaded, you know at that time they got maybe \$100.

AR: Well that's so interesting, I never would have expected that to be your most common form of disease that you had to treat.

DC: Yeah, I mean gonorrhea was rampant. We have these prostitutes who are turning twenty or thirty tricks a night.

AR: Twenty or thirty men a night?

DC: Well yeah, what does it take maybe 15 minutes? Maybe? If you're slow?

AR: Oh, my word.

DC: "Next! Next!"

AR: Okay, okay, okay. (laughs) Okay, so you told me a story last time about a lot of medics that were killed in one day?

DC: Oh yeah but that doesn't happen for months and months later. The one story that does connect with this to put things in perspective, but I will get to that, is the one day that I went in to the Saigon third field hospital and we opened the doors to the ambulance and they wheeled out a German Shepard on a stretcher. Do you remember that?

AR: Yes, I do, I wrote that one down.

DC: I'll tell you another one too, are you able to use stories for this report?

AR: Oh, yes I am!

DC: Okay, it's Sabbath morning and I'm reporting for eight hours of work, and my Jeep guy is waiting to take me to work, and we got there and what had happened was one of our GIs that was hit with an RPG, which-it was an unexploded bomb. There was a bomb in his abdomen that didn't go off.

AR: Oh, my word!

DC: So he's got this thing in his abdomen and they do an X-ray and it might go off and kill everybody. So the head of surgery and everybody else is out in an area about half the size of a football field where people come and do the categorizing of "this guy is almost dead, we're not going to work on him" and choose the ones that we can salvage. In this area out here, the head surgeon said, "We're going to operate but if we do it in the operating room we might blow up half of our hospital. So they put a stretcher out there and they built up sand bags all around so that the layers of sand bags so that the anesthesiologist could work through his hole at the end of the bed, a surgeon could work on his abdomen through a little hole, and the nurse that was helping him on the other side of the table worked on him through a little hole so that she could help him. The commander was a surgeon and he said, "I'm volunteering for this. I'm not giving an order for anybody to help. If anybody does want to help or wants to volunteer, I'll take volunteers." Well, everybody was willing to help. I mean, hey, that's the name of the game. I mean so they started an IV, brought

out the guy on a stretcher, IVs are running, they put him in the middle of these sand bags and put him on two horses. You know what I mean by horses?

AR: Um, no.

DC: It's like a stretcher-you can't put it on the ground-it's two-by-fours...It's like chairs only it supports the stretcher.

AR: So it's like legs?

DC: Yeah, it has legs and a table cloth and more legs so that you can just drop a stretcher down on top of it. So everyone was being so careful because at any second it could go off and kill everybody. So they had to put extenders on the knives, clamps, and everything when everybody's dressed in gowns and masks and they did the operation. The idea was, we're just going to cut in, carefully remove it, and the bomb squad was there with these big mesh-it looked like a lunch box but four times as big. So as soon as it was taken out, they carefully put it in the explosives box and then they drove away. It was successful. Then they were able to take the man to surgery in the operating room, sew it up, and wow his life was saved. I mean, wow, what a miracle.

AR: Wow, that is a miracle! Do you know what they did with that bomb?

DC: Oh, they'll take it way out into the middle of a field and they'll shoot it with guns and make it blow up.

AR: Oh okay that makes sense.

DC: So it doesn't hurt anybody.

AR: Right. That's incredible. What a miracle.

DC: I mean most of the time you sit and wait there for enemies to hit but most of the time they're on the out skirts of Saigon and you might get. Go two weeks and other than the cold you might not get anybody. But then all of a sudden you might get a hundred people in fifteen minutes.

AR: Yeah I've heard that, I think the saying is something like, "War is eighty percent boredom and twenty percent Hell or the worst part of your entire life."

DC: Yep. Well if you can imagine if you were the only hospital, you've probably heard about the Orlando shooter who went into a theater and killed forty-nine and wounded a hundred.

AR: Yes, I think it was a gay night club. That one?

DR: Yeah, a night club. If you can imagine that there's only one hospital or ER within two hundred miles and you're a mile away from that night club and you get all the people...that's what war is like. One minute there's nothing and then the next minute there is absolute chaos.

AR: How insane. So just to recap, your one phrase that you mentioned last time that you want people to remember is that, "Anyone that is in combat will never be the same for the rest of their life."

DC: Yeah, I mean only 10 percent of Army people ever see combat because there are the telephone people, the secretary people, the drivers; we had a pool in our base area. There are the life guards, the cooks, the people that clean up, we had a little theater on our base.

AR: Really?

DC: And they were first editions! If they were in theaters, we had it. That's the key to keeping troops' morale up and all that. We had people that made roads, we had a dentist, but only 10 percent only see actual combat. I mean if you're a dentist-you're a dentist in any city. Nothing changes. But it's the 1 in 10 that gets messed up.

AR: So do you have any stories to go along with that that you would like to tell first?

DC: What I found today, my therapist, well I've been in therapy most of my life because I've been so messed up and I didn't even know it. But anyway, I wrote down that-according to my therapist in Darby Montana-she wanted me to write down the most emotional event that happened to me in Vietnam. So I wrote it down. I will email it to you. It's a page in a half.

AR: Okay well I'm recording our conversation right now so would you rather tell it to me now?

DC: Well, it would take me ten or fifteen minutes to read it so I think I'll just email it and if you don't want to use it that's fine, but this was without a doubt the worst day of my life. Ever.

AR: Perfect, I will include that.

DC: Okay good. So during my six months of good time I never got shot at and I never saw anybody get shot. I worked in the ER so people came in and died in front of me but nothing was happening. I walked around Saigon and about nine months before they had the TETs offensive when they caught Americans totally by surprise and killed thousands and thousands of south Vietnamese and American soldiers and everyone...

AR: Hello? Uncle David? I can't hear you so I'm going to call you right back.
(Hangs up and redials)

DC: Sorry I don't know why the call dropped.

AR: No problem.

DC: So the TET happened about eight or nine months before we got there, and it was the whole country of Vietnamese attack underway everywhere simultaneously and we got our butts kicked. Thousands of GIs died. About 60,000 Americans died in Vietnam.

AR: Yes, that *is* a lot!

DC: So that was the worst day of the war for Americans. Everybody was panicked thinking that if they could pull that off once then they could surely pull that off again. They just all wanted to stay alive. So the very first day I took a piece of card board and every day I started counting the days until I was going to back home. 360, cross that off. The next day, 359, cross that off. It's kind of funny when you look at it. Every day, that was my big thing in the morning. I would get up and cross one more day off. Is that funny or what?

AR: Well that was your incentive. It makes sense.

DC: Yeah, so I did go down to Saigon. My driver drove me down to go to a couple of stores and otherwise I never...everything is booby-trapped. The sanitation on the streets, you know, if you're a taxi cab driver you just pull off to the side, go to the nearest wall, pee and poop, you know, and get back in the taxi and go. I have pictures of these people-women, men, it's unbelievable.

AR: Really?

DC: And they don't have red lights! So if you can imagine downtown Chicago where every time you go through a major intersection there would be no red lights.

AR: No and I cannot imagine people just pulling over and defecating.

DC: And urinating. Men, women, and children...everywhere! I have photos of all of this and that just says a hundred more words.

AR: Yes, those can be very helpful in my report.

DC: The other things is, right outside of our little camp, Camp Davies, of course it's all reamed with barbed wire and there are machine gun people every 50 or 100 feet all around the camp in case of an invasion. Right outside was the Saigon River and these people are living in huts. Sometimes they are cardboard and sometimes they are scraps of tin and of course in Vietnam which you would know, there are 6 months of rainy season where it rains every day and then there are 6 months of dry season where it never rains. So you build these little huts right next door to each other right outside of our camp and they're on stilts! In the rainy season you just step out and pee into the river and then you use a bucket to dip down and get the water. There was no running anything. So you drink out of it and you pee and poop into it.

AR: Oh, my word!

DC: Thank you! So then in the dry season when the water level goes down every day, every day, every day, then right outside of the little hut there is this mountain of garbage-10,12, or 15 feet high right outside of every hut.

AR: Oh, how disgusting!

DC: Thank you! And you wonder why something like four or five kids don't make it to the age of five? I mean there's disease and they have no refrigeration. When you go outside there is always people selling meat. Well you can't tell what kind of meat it is because there are 10,000 flies on every piece of meat-chicken, beef...

AR: How disgusting!

DC: Well that's how they live and somehow the symbiotic relationships allow them to keep living or they die. Our little Vietnamese worker who helped clean up the dispensary got pregnant. She was probably 4 months pregnant when I came so then about the time that I left, she didn't speak English but her friend did, and she said, "She wants you to deliver her baby." Well this was going to be her 21st or 22nd baby. I know from medical school that the odds of her uterus rupturing, making her bleed to death is extremely high, and I said to myself, "There ain't no way she is going to die on my watch." So I told her no I wouldn't do it, with that many babies with just one push it is going to be out. And she was very nice, she had her baby, she was out for a couple months but then she invited me and a couple of my medics to her home and they gave us a map. My driver took me there with a couple of my medics and of course everything is open there are no front doors so you just walk in. And it was probably 12 by 12 at most. Dirt floors, I think she still had eight children living there. She had a little altar because they worshiped Buddha. This lady makes nothing and she knew that we wouldn't drink anything that she made, so she went out in the black market and bought 3 Coca-Cola bottles for us to drink.

AR: Oh, how sweet!

DC: And I thought, you know how hospitable that was? I mean that was probably a week's worth of income for her to do that for us.

AR: So I take it that the people were very kind to you over there?

DC: Oh! There is one other thing I'll tell you. I did go around and see the Saigon Zoo while I was there which had been one of the epicenters for the TET offensive. Anyway so I got orders that I was going to a bad place. Boy did I go to a bad place.

AR: Okay, yes and where did you go?

DC: The 101st Airborne in the Ashah Valley. So it takes several days to get up there, you have to get all new patches on your arm because I mean your patches show the current unit

that you're working with and the previous unit you worked with. Well now I have a new unit. So it took maybe a week to get up to this new place and we first landed by Hue, the old capital of the imperial-when Vietnam was the big deal about 100 or 200 years ago where there is an imperial palace. We walked through and of course all of the guys, they were picking us up from the airport and taking us back to a huge base. Tons of acres. One guy said, "You see that house there? That's the house of ill-repute" and I said "You guys already know that don't you? Right?" Everybody knows. I mean you could have girls on demand. I mean any time you wanted. Just go downtown and pick out which one you want. "I want that one, no I changed my mind I want that one next to her." They don't understand English so they just know to go in and get undressed.

AR: And you said you were married at the time?

DC: Oh yes to Shari, we had been married a year and a half. So anyway I get to my big base and I was there probably a couple of weeks getting acclimated and all that stuff. This was a big unit so our dispensary was way way bigger then. Two or three times as big then. About a dozen medics. And this one medic had been out to the center lands and had two more weeks to go before he went back to the states. And after we finished our clinic that morning he said "I need to talk to you captain" so I said "okay." So we went back to my office and I said "What's up?" and he said "I'm supposed to go in a helicopter out to the Ashah Valley for a couple of more weeks and I'm not going to go." I said, "You've got to go. You can't leave your company without a medic." There was only one medic to thirty guys! But he said "I'm not gonna go."

AR: Why did he say he would not go?

DC: He was afraid he was going to-he had made it for eleven and a half months and he had this idea that he was going to die in the last week or eight days that he was there so he told us that he couldn't go and that he didn't want to go. But I said, "You have to go. Don't make me give you a direct order because if you don't go they'll put you in jail." He said, "Doc, I'm not going." I said, "Well go back to your quarters." They all had their own private tents. I had a tent with sand bags all around so if a mortar hit, the scatter from the metal wouldn't hit me. A minute later I hear this gun fire. I thought, "Oh man we're being invaded." So everybody grabbed their weapons and we didn't know who was coming around the next corner. It didn't sound like incoming fire and no more came. We started sticking our heads up thinking "Where did that shot come from?" We finally realized that it was from the tent of the medic that had been talking to me ten minutes before. We ran over there and he's lying there with a hole in his foot. He put his foot on the ground and put his gun on the middle of his foot and blew half his foot off.

AR: So that he wouldn't have to go?

DC: He said, "Doc I told you I wasn't going back out. I'm going home now. I'm gonna get medevacked out but at least I'll go home alive."

AR: Oh my word. So then you actually went there, to the place where he didn't want to go?

DC: Oh yeah probably about a week later. But he's going out into the jungle and I was on a little base which was a little safer but probably not. Anyway I replayed that in my mind a hundred times thinking, "Should I have just said I'll send you home?" But I said it wasn't fair to the other thirty guys. I can't send that unit out without a medic.

AR: Right, you can't blame yourself for that but I can totally understand why you would have those thoughts.

DC: That's my melancholy. I think over and over wondering what I could have done differently. Should I have talked to him longer? I didn't realize how serious he was. Anyway that was just another story that I thought I would share. Anyway, very soon two or three days later I'm in a helicopter flying out to the Ashah Valley which took about 30 minutes and you know they have weapons to shoot us down. We had to go over a lot of mountains. From where we were to the Ashah Valley it was just mountains mountains mountains. Ruth (current wife of the interviewee) had never been in a helicopter before and when we were in New Zealand we went for a helicopter ride! Yeah so she was excited, but anyway I'm deterring. So the only way that you can really tell how I lived is with pictures but I'll try to describe it. It was in the middle of this valley which is maybe a mile or two wide which is where the North Vietnamese soldiers walk through. They had to walk miles and miles all the way to Saigon. If it took them two months, they don't care. They'll take a big machine gun or something like that and break it down into little pieces and they'll give them each pieces that they can carry for about fifty pounds and then they can put it back together. We used cars, trucks, and airplanes. All they have is walking. 24 hours a day we shoot artillery. We have 105s and 155 millimeter. 155s will make a hole in the ground about 10 feet deep and bigger than your bedroom. They were being fired from far away-I don't know how far whether it was a mile, two miles, or whatever. I'm telling you, if you were there you would be gone. Anyway when you look down on it, the Ashah Valley looks like it caught chicken pox because there are these holes everywhere. So if we happened to, it looks like highways that they walk down, and if one of our bombs were to hit their path, that wouldn't stop them. They just walk around. They just make a 10 or 12 feet detour. It's amazing. Anyway, so I got to my camp...Hamburger Hill is the most famous battle in Vietnam. There is a movie that is a movie that is extremely realistic. If you wanted to learn anything about my unit then, if you have Netflix or anything like that, you should really watch it. It is called "Hamburger Hill."

AR: Oh okay I do have Netflix so I should definitely watch that.

DC: It shows my unit the week before I got there and it shows the doctor that I replaced. He got injured and that's why I was sent there. We were as far out as you can go. We were a mile or two from Laos. I had nothing, like I said before, I had a stethoscope, no oxygen, no blood, no refrigeration. All I am is a "ra ra lets go troops."

AR: You had to have knives didn't you? You had to have knives to work on people?

DC: No, I couldn't cut. I had no sutures, no clamps, I have nothing.

AR: Then what's the point of you even being there?

DC: That was my question! We have IVs and we have narcotics. But the medics carry that. So I would have two or three medics in my little base camp. It was probably a 125-yard circle and we are a little parcel of that in a little corner of that circle. The guys before me had dug a hole in the ground probably-not as big as your bedroom. Probably six feet in the ground and I told you they had sandbags and the Constantine wire on the top and each of us had a cot. That was my home for the next five months or so. The very first day I was there I went swimming in the river probably about an hour and a half and I thought, "Oh man this is cool." There was a fairly good river probably 80 feet across. You had to go down a hill, and here's the river, and we're on the high ground, and I went down there and we swam in the river for a while. I mean I thought, "Wow look at all of the artillery that we have, firefighters, helicopters, they're not going to mess with us." I was deluding myself because about two days later...

AR: Boy were you wrong. (chuckles)

DC: Yeah, I mean we were on the high ground, you could go down to the river, come back up the river onto the other side where they had sprayed all these trees with Agent Orange. They now realize that it causes so many cancers. That's a defoliant which means that every green thing on that hillside was now instantly dead. That means that the bad guys couldn't just sit over there and pick us off. So two or three days later, I mean the guys would go down there all the time to swim for two or three hours a day and all of a sudden one of the bad guys blew away one of our GIs. Just a single shot, hit him in the head and killed him. So do you think I ever went back in the river again?

AR: Nope.

DC: Thank you, thank you. Because you remember, my job was to come home alive. So toward the end of my stay I went to Hawaii and spent a week with Shari, but while I was gone the enemy came up from the river quietly during the night and attacked our base. I wasn't there thank goodness but apparently it was a pretty bloody ordeal. I was so glad I wasn't there. There are several companies and the big guys, the bosses, determine we are going to go fight the enemy on his grounds. So we're in Laos, over and over and over say "We will never go into Laos." That's where we were stationing. They knew we were there...everybody knew. If I'm boring you, just cut me off because I could talk all night.

AR: (Laughs) You're not boring me at all.

DC: What usually happens is we send one or two guys out. These are the type of boys that can live without reinforcements, live off the Earth, Green Beret, bad boys, hard core, so we would drop them in to scout out the land before to say, "Hey is this a safe place or were there any bad guys before?" That would determine if we could send in 30, 40, or 50 troops. All of a sudden they walked into way too many guys and it was almost dark. We knew that they had to go there with a couple of helicopters with these ropes that hang down and pluck them out of the forest. Well of course when a helicopter hovers they get shot at, and lots of

guys in helicopters get shot down so that's another way to die. So we're hearing this on the radio because all of the officers had radios, and we knew that they went to get them and here over the tree line come these helicopters. If you can imagine a rope that's 100 to 150 feet long with a knot on it, and here comes a helicopter doing whatever they do at maybe 125 miles an hour with one guy on it and there are two guys that are stacked above each other hanging onto a knot and landing on our base.

AR: Oh no, how long did they have to hold on?

DC: I don't know where they came from, but I would say that they had to hang on for at least ten minutes. And if they didn't hang on, they were dead.

AR: Wow ten minutes using that upper body strength?!

DC: Upper body strength, yes these were the best of the best and they had been ambushed and if we didn't get them out of there tonight then they were going to be dead. They had to get them before dark.

AR: So how many do you think were on the rope?

DC: Two on one rope and one on another rope in another helicopter. And you would think that a rope would be hanging straight down but this thing is blowing behind them.

AR: Oh, I'm sure!

DC: Yeah and if you can imagine with 125 mile an hour wind in your face-they don't care. Close your eyes and one thing you've got to do is hang on till you got to Curahee, our base.

AR: And if the one above you falls then the one below you will fall most likely?

DC: Well, they're not vertical because the wind has them blowing and trailing way behind the helicopter. They both hung on and got to camp-escaped.

AR: Wow!

DC: Pretty good. And then about once a month these guys get a new set of clothes. They go into the jungle there for a month camping here and camping there. If you can imagine-although this is the dry season for up North-where I had come from it was now their wet season because they were inversed. After a month of going through rivers and sleeping in the same clothes, the clothes rotting off your body, they get back to the base and I have to perform an inspection on each one of them and they had flown in these huge 500 gallon bags of water and then they'll put a hose to it with four different shower heads and they get to take a shower and given all new clothes. But before they do that, and you have to know that you have to think like a soldier. Many of them do that month after month and you have to get new clothes. While they are sitting around waiting for their turn they are sitting around cleaning their rifles. You would probably think, "Okay guys, go ahead and

clean your rifles.” No. What if at that moment while everyone’s rifle was broken down, the enemy attacked? No one would have a gun.

AR: I never thought about that!

DC: Yeah, so the most that they will allow is one fourth of your unit to break down their guns at one time. And when they get theirs back, within an hour or so they’re all done, but why would they want me to give a total body examination of every soldier head to foot?

AR: To make sure that they didn’t transfer bugs and everything?

DC: No, you’re on the right track. The number one thing in Vietnam that soldiers got was jungle rot where their toes-if you can imagine that you soaked your toes in water for 40 days morning, noon, and night, what would they look like?

AR: So it was like Trench Foot?

DC: Yes, that is the same thing as Trench Foot. So the most common thing, you know if you’ve got it you only have one pair of socks so you can’t change out of it, but if you caught it early, the medics had tubes of fungal medicine to stop it. So if you went over there you could treat it and never get it, but I don’t even want to be here. I’m not going to tell the medic. I’m not going to complain and when my toes rot off they’ll have to send me back to America and I won’t have to fight again.

AR: Is that really what they did?

DC: Oh yeah. That’s why I had to inspect every one of them.

AR: Well if that one guy was willing to shoot off his foot then I guess that’s not too far out there.

DC: That’s why you have to think like a soldier would think. Like, “I am here, I don’t want to be here, how can I get out of here. If I talk about it, they’ll treat it and then I’ll have to go through it again.” So anyway, a couple more stories if that’s okay. We had a big push-we had gotten a new commander. The other one had gone onto another assignment. This guy had maybe been there a couple weeks. I have pictures of the helicopter leaving that morning, and you could put six guys in a helicopter, go from point A to point B, drop them off, pick up six more guys go from point A to point B, and come back. We probably had I’m guessing, a couple hundred soldiers so we must have had at least twenty helicopters. Anyway, so this doesn’t happen often. Days and weeks and months go by and we don’t do much. Anyway, apparently they had found a big enemy location and we were going to go take them out. You can imagine sick call that day, how do you think everybody was? Everybody was sick and couldn’t go out to battle that day. Sick call everywhere up and down the whole camp! And I said, “What’s your problem?” And one would reply, “Oh doc, I’ve had a cough for three weeks and I can’t stop coughing.” I’d say “Okay you’re fit for battle. Next!” Then someone would say, “Oh doc my back is killing me, I can’t walk.” I’d say, “Okay you’re fit for battle. Don’t worry about it, take

an aspirin. Next!” All 100 and something of them would have just stayed home that day! That was my number one job, to get soldiers out there to fight. Everybody had a reason why. “Oh I have a splinter and it’s full of puss.” I’d say, “Oh let me kiss it and make it better. Next!”

AR: Well that’s another reason why that must have been hard for you with that guy coming to you that shot off his foot. You had no idea how serious he was about not going out there because everybody came to you with small complaints like this.

DC: You know he had been out there battle after battle after battle and always kept coming back with a lot of his buddies having been shot and killed. There’s a bullet out there with your name on it. So anyway, they go out and they were out there two or three days and I’m on my cot because I’m not going far from it and they’re supposed to—they didn’t find what they were supposed to and the word went out to pick them up. They had to go out there to get them but they got called on other missions and couldn’t go to pick them up. When you get to a new location, you have to dig a fox hole. In other words, you have to dig a hole in the ground where you can have some protection. When you’re in a base camp at night and you make a circle and you’ve got a few of you looking in all directions and then you get to sleep and then you get to look. So during the night you might get 4 or 6 hours of sleep. But anyway during the night everyone is still in their fox holes and they’re sitting around waiting for the helicopters to come. And we got the word that we can’t make it tonight but we can make it tomorrow first thing like 8:00. Well you know what that means, nobody has a fox hole and it’s dark and we haven’t found the enemy. Just because you haven’t seen them or fought them doesn’t mean that he’s not there. You just haven’t seen him. So just before dark I woke up with my radio just going nuts. We were under attack. What happened was, their people who were watching us saw that we didn’t go out and they wanted to catch us at our most vulnerable time which would have been morning before we got up. They had string and they had string from where we were—the guys went back to their base which was about two or three miles—and in the dark of the night silently they came back, came back to our base, completely surrounded us and ambushed us right before it was getting light. And that’s how I lost these eleven people, three of them being my medics. And one of them was our colonel. We lost them because they were sitting ducks.

AR: You were so close to all of them?

DC: Well my medics I knew all of them and my colonel, but the rest were just infantry people and some of them were probably in that sick call three days earlier which I patted on the back and said, “You’re good to go.” Now they’re back in a black body bag.

AR: And this is the day that you had to go out and collect all the bodies in body bags?

DC: Well they come in on helicopters. In other words, the battle has got to be won. Immediately our war ships go out, but they have the advantage for at least 30 to 40 minutes. It was a lot. The Red Cross helicopters go in and pick up the wounded and bring them to me to help them and then they go back over the mountains to lastly send out a helicopter with body bags. I didn’t know there were eleven killed. It was close to dark when there were two or three helicopters that landed. My job was to identify them. Go

through all of their pockets and these guys are shot in the head, arms missing, legs, blood everywhere. I had to go through every body bag, take out letters that I might need to send, mail, all of the identification. They have a dog tag and then I had to fill out this, it looks like the size of a ticket for an airplane. I had to fill out all this information and then tie it around their toe and put them back in a body bag. Nobody else helped. That was my job. I had to do all eleven of them. That's when somebody came and said...anyway, there was an emblem or something-there were these little key chains called coat of arms and I didn't know it but one guy in each unit got a coat of arms. What does that mean? I didn't know it but apparently every company has one. I didn't know it, but they said I needed to find it and I had to go through every body bag and find it. So I had to go through each one in the dark until I found it. So I will send you my recollection of how I remembered it over six years ago. It talks about the love letters that were half written...anyway do you have enough material?

AR: Of course, thank you so much for your time. I really really appreciate it.

DC: I'm looking at pictures on my wall and I think I can take pictures of those and send it to you. Oh and one other thing, I got a bronze star. That is the sixth or highest award you can get. I'm looking at it now. When you look at the pictures, when you get them and want me to explain them to you, then give me a call.

AR: Okay I might do that!

DC: Okay and looking at my pictures, the boredom factor is another big thing. One of my jobs was to keep the spirit of the core up. I sat there one day and all of our weapons, orders, come in wooden crates. I'm looking at a picture of me in front of our little-anyway I said "I want you guys to make me a table. Take these crates apart, save the nails, and take the rocks from the dirt (because we didn't have hammers) and I want a chair and a table." It took them quite a few days and they finally figured out how to do it. One of my pictures is of me sitting at the table that they made.

AR: (Laughs) And that was just for fun?

DC: Yeah it was just to keep 'em busy. No one had ever thought about that before.

AR: Yes, I know a common goal for people to work towards helps them to bond.

DC: Right. I'm looking at one other picture, back in Saigon, if you win the hearts of the people-which we're trying to do in Afghanistan, you have to do something nice for them. My mother and anybody else that I could get, would send over soap, toothpaste, tooth brushes, candy bars, and I would get the boxes and then we would go out into a nearby village and we would have an open clinic. We would go to probably four of them and then at first they are always scared and they send their little kids out to see what's going on. I mean TB was rampant. One in every ten kids then had tuberculosis. What would happen, they would love us, and pretty soon they would just mob us. They were very patient, they had to stand in line and we would-if they had an infected finger we would give them

antibiotics. If you looked across the street and you had given one purple pills and someone else red pills, they're doing this "Oh I have a red pill and I'll give you two purple and yellows for one red. So they're all swapping the pills around!"

AR: (Laughs) That's not how it works!

DC: And we had translators so they knew exactly what it was, but we had one brand new guy who was baby faced-and at the end of these "medcaps," we would always give out candy to the kids-I mean a box full. Probably 2 or 3 hundred. Well they knew what was coming, they knew what was coming, so we gave this one guy-a brand new medic who had only been there 2 or 3 days- when we were done with our healing part we said, "Hey take the box and go out there in the middle of the road and pass out this candy." So he goes out there and is surrounded by maybe 50 or 60 kids. He takes about six steps and goes out there and then two steps later they totally knock him down and take all the candy and run! We knew it was going to happen but he didn't and he was caught blind-sided and he never knew.

AR: (Chuckles) I bet you guys got a kick out of that!

DC: Well we laughed but of course the next time you know, he knows, and we had another new guy. The last time we went it was in a building and we had to ask the mayor and it was okay. We cleared it with everybody and we had our Vietnamese interpreter. We got there and were starting to set up in this little building and as we walked in I looked at the ground and just about where we would have walked in was a trip wire. If I had taken one more step we would have been blown up.

AR: (Gasps) And where was this wire?

DC: It was just like walking into your house, it was a tiny house. They knew when we were coming and wanted us to go in there and set off the bomb. I yelled and we said, "Screw you buddy we're not helping you at all. We come here to help you and you set us up and you were willing to kill us all when we were willing to help you."

AR: Why would they do that when you were trying to help them?

DC: This is war! And we lost. They won. Every second of every day, what was your goal again?

AR: To stay alive. To come home alive.

DC: Yep, you go it. Anyway I've bored you long enough, and I hope you have a flavor. I will go through my pictures and send them to you.

AR: Well thank you, you definitely haven't bored me. I really appreciate it.

Bibliography

- Boyle, Coleen A., Decoufle, Pierre, and O'Brien, Thomas R. "Long-Term Health Consequences of Military Service in Vietnam." *Epidemiologic Reviews* 11 (1989). <http://epirev.oxfordjournals.org/content/11/1/1.extract#>
- Khan, Peter C., Gochfeld, Michael, Nygren, Martin, et al. "Dioxins and Dibenzofurans in Blood and Adipose Tissue of Agent Orange-Exposed Vietnam Veterans and Matched Controls." *The JAMA Network*. (March 18, 1988) <http://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/article-abstract/371123>
- Krepinevich, Andrew F., Jr. *The Army and Vietnam*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1988.
- Marx, Brian P., et al. "Concordance Between Physiological Arousal and Subjective Distress Among Vietnam Combat Veterans Undergoing Challenge Testing for PTSD." *Journal Of Traumatic Stress* 25, no. 4 (August 2012): 416-425. *SocINDEX with Full Text*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 3, 2016).
- Wilensky, Robert J. *Military Medicine to Win Hearts and Minds: Aid to Civilians in the Vietnam War*. Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2004.
- Wirtz, James J. *The Tet Offensive*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991

"I plan to give a hard copy of my oral history to David Cromwell by November 14, 2016"

List of Original Questions Posed to David Cromwell

1. Being a physician in the Vietnam War, what kind of environment were you working with to treat patients? (a tent, sanitary or unsanitary tables, etc.)
2. Do you suffer from any form of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder from your experiences over there?
3. Did you witness anyone being killed?
4. What were the most common forms of diseases that you encountered over there?
5. What was your relationship like with your comrades?
6. Because you were a doctor, were you in harm's way often or were you mostly removed from the battle grounds?
7. How many troops were on your base?
8. Did you receive any sort of reward after serving for our country?
9. Over the phone you mentioned being a part of 101st airborne, what was that like?
10. What was life like in Vietnam for civilians at the time?
11. How many other physicians were with you?
12. How many medics did you have working for you while you were there?
13. What types of activities did you participate in with your troops?
14. What kind of pay did you receive?
15. Do you regret going to Vietnam?
16. Have you shared your war stories often with family and friends?
17. Did the dry and rainy season have any impact on your stay there?
18. No matter the environment that you had to work in, did you have all of the equipment that you needed to help the people there?
19. Did you have any specific times that are happy memories that you made in Vietnam?
20. How much authority did you have over there?
21. How did civilians treat you being an American at the time?
22. At what points did you become discouraged?





