

George W. Kraft interview by Richard E. Killblane at Ft Eustis, VA, March 5, 2004

MR. KILLBLANE: Okay. Would you start out by telling me, well, what was your rank when you joined in 5th Boat?

MR. KRAFT: Oh. I was a PFC. I came out of the Basic Seaman Course, and they had attempted to send me to Vietnam three times; but I was 17 years old, and they couldn't send me over until I was 18. So, they finally in the spring of 1966 signed me to the 5th Transportation Company (Heavy Boat), which was forming up. It was due to deploy after my 18th birthday.

During that spring and summer and fall, the unit gradually came together from mostly recent graduates of the seaman school here, and there were a few, I think, former non-commissioned officers that had been in the transportation corps and in boats for a long, long time that made warrant officers. John Gregg was the warrant officer of the boat that I was on, and that was [LCU] 1546.

We formed up. We did some basic training on operating the vessels. The vessels were thoroughly reconditioned from a place -- I think it was North Carolina, to a place that just rebuilt and repainted everything.

MR. KILLBLANE: So they were older boats that you were --

MR. KRAFT: They were older boats.

MR. KILLBLANE: Okay.

MR. KRAFT: But I think this boat had been built in the mid-'50s. And they went through every system on that boat and refurbished it; rebuilt the engines, repainted everything. It looked showroom new, I mean, when we got it back. Right -- it was in December of '66.

The unit was sent over in February of '67. There was an advance party that went over to Vung Tao to scout the area. There were no barracks built at the time. I think we were just allocated an area within the compound at Vung Tao, or actually next to the long pier. And they sent an advance party over. The main body went over in, I think, it was mid to late February of that year. I was assigned to escort six of the boats.

There were two Norwegian ships that were hired. The American ships were all busy. As you know, there were a lot of ships, containers and various materiel to Vietnam. There were no American ships to do it. So, they hired MS *Teresie* and MS *Terra* from a Norwegian company. They put six LCUs on each of those boats down in Hampton Roads, and two Americans escorted each of the ships overseas.

So, our time counted from the day we left CONUS.

MR. KILLBLANE: You said six Norwegian ships, but you mentioned --

MR. KRAFT: No. Two Norwegian ships with six boats each.

MR. KILLBLANE: Okay.

MR. KRAFT: There were a total of 12 boats that went over.

MR. KILLBLANE: Got it, okay.

MR. KRAFT: The tug and the J-boats, I really don't know how they went over. They went over separately. We each carried six LCUs on the *Teresie*, six on the *Terra*.

MR. KILLBLANE: Okay.

MR. KRAFT: The warrant officer that was with me was -- I think his name was Morris, Chief Warrant Officer Morris. I'm pretty uncertain about

that. I was just 18. I think I had just made SP4 at the time.

We got on board the Norwegian ship. Mr. Morris came to me. I had my own private cabin; I was very impressed. I had expected something like a Liberty ship, something where the crew slept in, you know, three-rack bunks and, you know, you ate in the mess hall, and it was going to be just like a military thing. It was more like a cruise ship than anything. The Norwegians are professional sailors, and for an 18-year-old kid, Army soldier, to get treated with his own private cabin with teakwood furniture and it was pretty nice.

Mr. Morris came to me the first morning and said the captain has given us a choice. He said we can join him in the captain's salon for meals or we can eat with the crew. What do you want to do? And there was no choice. The captain ate with the first officer and the chief engineer. There were four women on board, and he had a stewardess. You ate on the table with white linen and silverware, and she served your meals just like in a state dinner. We ate all three meals.

MR. KILLBLANE: Every day?

MR. KRAFT: Every day, with the captain, the first officer and the chief engineer, and Mr. Morris and I. So, there were five of us in his salon. And it was pretty nice.

MR. KILLBLANE: Now, it's just you and Warrant Officer Morris --

MR. KRAFT: Morris.

MR. KILLBLANE: -- that were escorting the vessels over to the --

MR. KRAFT: Right. And there were two other Americans on the Terra.

MR. KILLBLANE: Okay.

MR. KRAFT: It took 46 days for us to go from Hampton Roads terminal around Cape Town, Cape Hope. The captain originally planned on going through the Suez Canal. It would've been a lot shorter. But things were heating up between the Israelis and the gypsies at that time and he didn't want to have his vessel with American military equipment -- six LCUs, very obvious on deck -- going through the Suez Canal. And it's a good thing he did, but that would've been in March of '67, and I think in June of '67, or shortly thereafter, that they had the 6-day war. All the vessels that were in the Suez Canal at that time were stuck in the canal for many, many years. And so, it's a good choice on his part. His concern, though, was that the weather was very bad in March going around the cape, and he was concerned that the LCUs wouldn't survive the kind of seas that you could expect down there.

It took us four weeks to get down to South Africa, and when we rounded the cape, fortunately we hit a spell of good weather and we had no problems. So, going up through the Indian Ocean, it was pretty good sailing. In fact, I don't recall a single storm during that trip, which is unusual for a voyage of that length.

We came up into the South China Sea from the Indian Ocean through the Sinda Strait, between what was then Java and Sumatra. I think it's Indonesia now, Malaysia, or something like that. It changed names quite often over there. And passed Singapore. The Navy intercepted us about a day out of Vung Tao, and we sailed into Vung Tao Harbor in early April of 1967.

The plan was to go to Saigon and off-load in Saigon, because they have the heavy lift equipment. These vessels weighed well over 100 tons and they needed some very heavy gear. We stayed out in Vung Tao Harbor for about a

week, and instead they brought down an amphibious crane that was capable of lifting it.

CPT Skorsta was amazed at the size of this thing. He had been all over the world. He was a PT boat skipper in the Norwegian Navy and he'd seen a lot of military gear and maritime gear, and he never saw a crane that big that could float. And they took all the boats off the ships and put them in the water, and the tugs came out, towed them into the dock, and there we were in Vietnam.

While I was having fun -- and I did have fun. We got to cross the equator. In fact, I kept up a letter writing with CPT Skorsta all my life. You know, whenever I graduated from college and got married and so on and so forth. And last year, I was invited to Sweden to visit with some friends, and I said the only way I would go is if I took a day trip over to Norway, and I went and saw CPT Skorsta and his wife, and didn't get to meet one of his beautiful daughters, but we still keep in touch.

MR. KILLBLANE: Wow.

MR. KRAFT: So, it's great. Quite worried about us in the 5th over there.

Anyway, we began to operate shortly thereafter, and we operated largely out of Vung Tao. I don't recall that we had any documents anywhere. I think one of the boats did go up to Qui Nhon or Da Nang briefly, and it might've been Cam Ranh, to help up there. But generally we operated along the coast, down to an island off the very southern tip of Vietnam called Hon Kau; it's also called Poulovi. We provided supplies to the Navy down there that was operating a radar, looking at Viet Cong boat activity at night along the various rivers and inlets down in the Sikbah Peninsula. It's the very southern tip of Vietnam.

We operated extensively throughout the Mekong Delta. Probably our most common place that we operated to or we provided cargo to was Dong Tam, which was the 9th Division's base in the Mekong Delta. They were the only American unit that was there division size, that had a lot of helicopters and a lot of transportation and so on and so forth. But no real maneuvering forces at that time down there. It was kind of the Vietnamese own little place down there, because it was a rice bowl.

We hauled every kind of materiel you could imagine, and a lot of the ordnance that supported the fire support base 105 and 155 [mm] projectiles and charges, along with a lot of AVGAS (aviation fuel), general cargo. Occasionally we'd move a company of infantry or two, artillery pieces, a tank. You name it, we took it. But the most dangerous thing we took, and we often took it, was ordnance. And (indiscernible) there would've been --

MR. KILLBLANE: I thought the fuel would also be a danger.

MR. KRAFT: Well, I've got pictures somewhere of four AVGAS fueling trucks. They're, you know, semi-trailers, just like you see delivering gas to the gas stations. On the outside of the LCU, and then in the middle, between them, is loaded artillery projectiles and charges. These are all loaded with AV gas. You didn't get paid extra for it. A lot of guys that handle that stuff do get a little stipend out of the Army, but we didn't. It was just part of the job that we did.

MR. KILLBLANE: Who was your skipper on this vessel?

MR. KRAFT: Warrant Officer John Gregg, who is from this area. I looked him up in 1987. I haven't really made contact with anyone from the unit since then. But I do remember John Gregg; he's kind of a memorable guy. We spent the entire year together as crew, and he was a good skipper.

Let's see. What else did we do? Other places that we went to fairly regularly out of Vung Tao was Kam To, Long Binh. There was an ammo discharge point up near Saigon called Cat Lai, and we would go up to Long Bin from there, a place called Kogido. Why they called it Kogido, I don't know. I was actually a Korean name, but they named this particular discharge point up near Long Bin, Kogido.

MR. KILLBLANE: For each one of those places, what were they primarily discharging?

MR. KRAFT: Well, Long Binh would've been ammunition. We would off-load from the Liberty ships, the ammunition ships. I don't know if you're aware of this, but the Saigon River and the Long Tao shipping canal are navigable by ocean-going vessels. And they would go up to Saigon, as far up as Newport, which was the large off-loading facility right next to the Newport Bridge, which blocked any further passage.

MR. KILLBLANE: That was a port built by the Americans and run by the Americans?

MR. KRAFT: It was, yes.

MR. KILLBLANE: Yeah.

MR. KRAFT: I think P&E perhaps had something to do with that. They did just about everything there. So, we would off-load there, and Camp Davis was another place along the Saigon River that was a military base. But there were several other places that we could off-load at. Almost the entire stretch of the Saigon River was off-load point for ships.

MR. KILLBLANE: Well, what was a Can Tho?

MR. KRAFT: Cam Tho. I can't remember if we had a pier at Cam

Tho on a beach. The Navy operated PBRs out of there. But we would often go to Can Tho. I think we used a beach at Can Tho.

MR. KILLBLANE: See, at Dong Tam you've got a unit, a combat unit there.

MR. KRAFT: Right.

MR. KILLBLANE: And Cat Lai and Long Binh are both transportation units, okay.

MR. KRAFT: Stevedores would. We would not. The boats would be well out in the river, and the ammo ships, and we would off-load directly from the ship to the --

MR. KILLBLANE: To the barges.

MR. KRAFT: -- to the barges. The stevedores, taking care of most of that. I mean, that's their job.

MR. KILLBLANE: And they're shuttling it. From there, they're shuttling it to --

MR. KRAFT: We would shuttle it.

MR. KILLBLANE: Oh, no. You'd take it to Long Binh, Cat Lai, or --

MR. KRAFT: Oh, then yes. We put it on the beach, and then they'd take it to wherever it was to go.

MR. KILLBLANE: But I'm trying to figure out Can Tho, Camp Davis. What was there?

MR. KRAFT: Camp Davis was at Saigon.

MR. KILLBLANE: Okay.

MR. KRAFT: You could just pull up and they'd bring a crane over

and take off whatever you need or put on whatever you need, or they would get on and get off. There were a lot of barges that were up there, along there as well.

MR. KILLBLANE: Okay. And Can Tho, what was there?

MR. KRAFT: I think we just had a beach in Can Tho.

MR. KILLBLANE: Just a beach?

MR. KRAFT: Um-hum.

MR. KILLBLANE: So again you're transferring cargo to another means?

MR. KRAFT: Yes.

MR. KILLBLANE: Okay. It's not a consumer. Dong Tam is a consumer there.

MR. KRAFT: Yeah, 9th Infantry Division.

MR. KILLBLANE: That's right, okay.

MR. KRAFT: And again, Dong Tam had the best forklift drivers I've ever seen. I don't know if they were training stevedore school.

But particularly in the latter part of the year, particularly during the Tet offensive, we would be carrying ammunition and other supplies up there, and the Viet Cong would, especially at night, had a little game that they'd play with us all night long. They would fire mortar rounds from opposite ends of the camp, with two teams on opposite sides. One team would fire, and then they'd pick up their -- fire four rounds; they'd pick up their gear and run before the spotters that were out there on the listening posts would return fire.

Fifteen minutes later, the team on the other side of the camp would drop in four round and pick up and move, and this would go on all night. Every 15 minutes you'd get mortar rounds. Snipers would come in.

So anyway, when you're off-loading cargo, you're exposed. I mean, you can't go anywhere, and particularly when it's ammunition. The forklift drivers were a beautiful thing to watch. These guys would operate a forklift; just magnificent and these were large forklifts. They would charge onto the boat. They never missed with the prongs, get them under the skids. They couldn't miss, because a lot of this was ammunition. You just don't screw around, punch through the side of those things. Pick it up and go off the boat, and race as fast as they could to the ammo dump.

I'll just never forget watching them. Even to this day, I just think it was just -- those were probably some of the most skilled operators that I'll ever see in my life. And they had to be. Because they were running around with the ammunition charges. And, you know, we'd get mortared or shot at periodically, particularly during Tet.

Otherwise Dong Tam wasn't that bad.

Let's see, what else did we do? Vin Long (phonetic) was another place that we frequented.

MR. KILLBLANE: What was it, Binh Long?

MR. KRAFT: Binh Long.

MR. KILLBLANE: Binh Long?

MR. KRAFT: Binh Long. Long Bin was up north, I think, of Saigon; only went up there occasionally.

MR. KILLBLANE: So, Binh Long, what was there?

MR. KRAFT: It was just the odd thing. I think we used the beach there too. I remember we tied up one night at a pier there. I don't think we off-loaded. I don't remember there being a big military facility like there was at Vung

Tao, but the long pier.

MR. KILLBLANE: So you just kind of rested overnight there?

MR. KRAFT: We'd get it wherever we could get it. If there was a road going down into the water, we'd just stick the front in, drop the ramp, and it would come on.

MR. KILLBLANE: All right.

MR. KRAFT: Not a lot of formality, except back at Vin Long and Dong Tam. It was probably the only other really prepared facility that we used. Well prepared facility; well facilitized, with the stevedores and the forklifts and so on and so forth. Otherwise, it was kind of, you know, go over here and pick them up. And go over there and pick them up, move them wherever they had to go, or get up and move it wherever.

Always moving, rarely stopped. There were no weekends, there were no holidays.

MR. KILLBLANE: How long does it take to get upriver to your destination and back?

MR. KRAFT: Well, something like Dong Tam would be an all-day trip. Getting across the bay, Vung Tao was probably about two or three hours, and then you're winding up one of the rivers. I think it was the Bassac River, I'm not quite sure. There were several rivers. Past My Tho, and then on into Dong Tam. Usually get in right late afternoon, depending on the tides. They're tidal rivers, so you could be making a lot of speed going up that river or you could be making next to nothing.

MR. KILLBLANE: Well, that was my next question, is, did you -- Did you pick the times that you're moving according to the tides, or you just tried

pushing your way up?

MR. KRAFT: You just go.

MR. KILLBLANE: Okay.

MR. KRAFT: You pick it up and you go. And you just look at the tide. Looking at the tide is just going to give you an idea of your ETA [estimated time of arrival]. You're going to pick it up when it's ready, and you're going to go right then. I don't recall any consideration for tides, other than, you know, it's going to affect us this way or that way. We're going anyway, you know. It'll just take us longer or shorter.

And there were never any fuel constraints for us. So, if it took a little longer, if the tide was running out and we had to come in at night, well, it's just what you had to do. I mean, we weren't on a schedule.

MR. KILLBLANE: So, how was life on the boats?

MR. KRAFT: Great.

MR. KILLBLANE: My question is, what kind of amenities did you have compared to, like, the Mike boats or?

MR. KRAFT: Oh, much better, much better, I thought. Going into town and having regular hours was something that other guys that were on the Mike boats [LCM-8s] and the stevedores. I mean, it was six-seven-day weeks, too, but they could get a day off. They were stationed ashore. They would have to eat at the mess hall. They had more regular hours. Even though they were long hours, they were more regular, and they had more amenities, the PX and so forth.

We didn't. We lived aboard the boat. We got our food or drew our rations from, you know, the commissary. We had our own cook. Everybody treated the cook well and he treated us well. So, occasionally we'd take PAX

(passengers) that had to go to Saigon or someplace like that, and they would always comment how great it was, you know, to be on an LCU. It wasn't air-conditioned or anything. Army provided us a lot of fresh air. But, you know, nobody had air conditioning over there. But the food was good, it was hot, it was fresh. You got fresh vegetables occasionally, and we ate well. And you sat down and, you know, you had all the amenities. We sat at a table that could hold six people, so we had to eat in a little bit of a rotation; but, you know, since you're running watches, that's always easy to do. I think there was six or eight people on that. They're not like the LCUs you have today. They're huge.

MR. KILLBLANE: You had showers and laundry --

MR. KRAFT: We had shower, right. We had a washing machine. Dry, you'd have to hang up. Dryer was the clothesline. We had two toilets, washing machine, two sinks and a shower. The shower had hot water. So, not bad.

MR. KILLBLANE: Okay. What was the enemy threat like running up the river with the LCU?

MR. KRAFT: It wasn't bad for us. Like I said, we were mortared fairly regularly. I got mortared very closely. In fact, we got straddled on a 1546 one night at Dong Tam.

MR. KILLBLANE: Now, you say you were mortared. You were mortared when you were berthed at some beach?

MR. KRAFT: Right, exactly.

We never drew fire, which amazed me, because one bullet often would've just, like I said, probably would've made a lake out there in the middle of (inaudible).

Some of the other boats did. I'm trying to remember. I think we may have lost a couple of people through accidents; but to my knowledge, during my tour, which was February to February of '67 to '68, we had no combat casualties. I think shortly, or right about that time -- and this is an anecdote, so I'm giving this to you third-hand. I think it was a company clerk, one of the replacements from our unit. Since we went over as a unit, we were replaced by a hundred other people, who was killed when a 122 rocket hit the company office. Like I said, that's an anecdote from someone that I ran into later. But I wasn't there; I didn't witness it.

MR. KILLBLANE: Okay.

MR. KRAFT: So, we were very fortunate. During Tet, for example, we were at Newport Bridge the night it was overrun.

MR. KILLBLANE: Tell me about that. Yes, this very significant event.

MR. KRAFT: We got the hell out of town. In fact, we had been scheduled to leave Newport that morning. And that night, Tet was a cease-fire. It was a holiday. But like every other cease-fire for Christmas or for, you know, a Vietnamese holiday, there were always violations, and there it was a 24-hour-a-day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year, and 360 degrees around war. It was somewhere around you all the time. You would see shooting, you would hear it, you know. You would see planes dropping bombs, artillery tracers going up. It's just, you know, how close you were on that particular day.

We heard it that night, you could hear some explosions out in the suburban areas of Saigon. Early in the morning we could hear a lot going on around six in the morning, as we were getting up. We have 24-hour watches. So, we thought that's just another holiday truce broken; it's no big deal. Turned out

they were hitting the embassy at that time in Saigon, which we could hear.

I think it was around 0800 that we departed, and we were right underneath or next to the Newport Bridge, which ran right into the camp. I think it went from Binh Hoa into Saigon. A four-lane bridge, American built, concrete, one of the few modern structures in that country. A lot of the bridges were French built, made out of steel and, you know, slapped together. This was a very nice-looking bridge.

Apparently about 20 minutes after we had pulled out, a platoon-size VC unit went across the bridge. They killed the guards on the outside. Went across the bridge, tried to get all the way across the bridge, but everybody started shooting at them. And they were on a forward-facing slope, so they had no cover on the bridge, and they were pretty much decimated.

People that were there in the boats were firing up at VC that were firing over the top of the concrete wall along the sides of the bridge. Again, this is anecdotal, because we were 20 minutes down the river and just listening to all this stuff, 1546; and that was the difference. It turns out we wouldn't have been able to shoot up at the bridge anyway with our 50 calibers. We would've had to use M-16's, because we operated with canopies on the back of the boats. Sun shade. Not just so much for when you're working back in the boat, but to keep the sun off the middle deck, which would've turned the insides where you did live into an oven. And you can't shoot up with the 50 calibers with that canopy over. So, you wouldn't have been able to do any good other than with their M-16's.

But Tet was definitely different. The war just went up over a magnitude.

MR. KILLBLANE: As far as your boat, though, how did it affect it?

MR. KRAFT: How did that affect it? Operations were more urgent. We operated with manned gun crews more often. We got more fire in places like Dong Tem than we had previously.

We still never took fire while we were on the rivers. I don't recall one time where we took fire, and only one time that I heard anecdotally that one of our boats took fire. And that always amazed me. It just amazed me.

We made four amphibious assaults; one at Ham Tan, and I can't place the date. The one I do recall was at Sa Dec, that was during Tet, and that was a night amphibious landing. We took an infantry unit and we landed right in the middle of town at night. We were buttoned up; that is, we had the bullet splinter shields up over the windows, so none of us could see out except for the skipper who was up on the con, and he was providing steering commands down to the rudder and the helmsman in the engine room. And I could just remember seeing nothing but flame coming out of the little peephole slits.

As we pulled into Ham Tam and dropped them off, the entire city was on fire. It was heavily contested, I guess. And we brought in reinforcements. Again, I was buttoned up, I was on the helm. I didn't see anything. There were only three guys up on top, I think. That was the skipper, who was up on top; me on the rudder; and one of the engine men on the throttles. And everybody else was down below.

MR. KILLBLANE: Now, you mentioned you participated in four amphibious assaults, one at Ham Tan.

MR. KRAFT: Ham Tan.

MR. KILLBLANE: What's the others?

MR. KRAFT: There was one at Sa Dec, and the two others were

farther up in the Mekong at places I don't even think had names. They were just coordinates. You know, a beach here or a beach there.

MR. KILLBLANE: All you did, just drop infantry off? How long did you hang around?

MR. KRAFT: At Sa Dec it was get off as fast as you can and get out of town as far as you can, because there was -- it was a rather large battle going on. And this was all at night, so, you know, we --

MR. KILLBLANE: All four of them?

MR. KRAFT: No. This one at Sa Dec was entirely at night. The one at Ham Tam, I recall, was the first crack of dawn. We sailed up all night from Vung Tao. Skipper never told us where we were going, other than we were going somewhere, but he and the chief engineer were the only ones who actually knew. And then, as dawn broke, he told us what we were going to do and why we were doing it, and we had some armor that was with us, and they were camped out that night on their tanks, and eating C-rats, and we fed them whatever we could. We sailed up all night, hit the beach that morning at Ham Tam.

MR. KILLBLANE: Was it just your boat?

MR. KRAFT: No. This was periodically. We operated general independently as a boat (indiscernible). Occasionally there might be two boats going somewhere or three boats; but generally, we operated independently.

I don't recall, other than a couple of those missions, where we operated as teams.

MR. KILLBLANE: Okay. Well, where did you pick up your troops for these missions?

MR. KRAFT: I don't recall. I think it was probably Dong Tam, but I

really don't recall.

MR. KILLBLANE: Okay.

MR. KRAFT: Ham Tam, we picked them up in Vung Tao. And for the other two missions, it was other big units up at probably Kam To or Binh Hoa; my recollection. In fact, I'm sure Can Tho was one of them. Drop them off; there'll be PBRs out, you know, providing helicopter gunships, (inaudible). Just drive in drop the ramp and off they'd go, and off you'd go as fast as you could.

MR. KILLBLANE: Now, did these amphibious assaults take place after Tet or before?

MR. KRAFT: Sa Dec was during Tet. I left during Tet. I rotated out. In fact, I went to a helicopter unit after this. But three of them occurred before Tet, I think; one for sure during Tet. That was Sa Dec.

MR. KILLBLANE: How did you feel about when you were going to Vietnam, and then how did you feel about coming back? Coming back home, not coming back for your second tour.

MR. KRAFT: Well, I left the country and came back to a different one. When I left in '67, there was no real big anti-war movement. My parents were living in Chicago, and I came back to Chicago about six weeks after the Democratic National Convention, which was a huge fiasco, large-scale riots. I mean, it's in all the history books. People were very much against the war. And I think most Vietnam veterans kind of just turned towards each other, quickly learned that in a conversation with people that hadn't been there, they wanted to know about, you know, they wanted to know about the war, was it morally justified, and so on and so forth. Things that you didn't even think about when you were there. Of course it was morally justified.

Of course we were winning, because we did. Everywhere we went, you know, the situation was never in doubt. Even during [siege of] Khe Sanh, which occurred during '67, you know, we prevailed. We prevailed in every military operation, and yet the perception at home was that we were losing the war.

MR. KILLBLANE: Kind of like today, right?

MR. KRAFT: Well, yeah, exactly. But in a larger way. There was a lot of agony in this country at the time over that war.

It only got worse in '68 and '69, '70.

MR. KILLBLANE: Right.

MR. KRAFT: You'd get pretty much a standard set of questions. You have to remember that it was my peer group that went over there; guys that were just graduating from high school. I was 18 when I got there, and that war was fought mostly by guys five years either side of my age. So, you went over, your brother went over, your cousin went over, your high school buddy went over, your college buddy went over. It was from your peer group, were the guys that went over. The guys behind you and the guys a little bit ahead of you.

And when you came back, you just got tired of the questions. We knew kind of where they were going. It was always towards something negative. Did you see any atrocities? You know. Do you have nightmares? And stuff like that.

And after most guys went there, they did their thing. Some guys suffered, you know, but most of us didn't.

MR. KILLBLANE: But you were on the boat. Did your whole crew rotate out at the same time?

MR. KRAFT: All at the same time.

MR. KILLBLANE: So you didn't have any sense of guilt by leaving anybody behind --

MR. KRAFT: No, no. We had a few people that left to do other things, but generally we stayed together as a crew, and left in February of '68.

MR. KILLBLANE: And so you came back to do what?

MR. KRAFT: Well, I stayed. I had joined the Army to be a helicopter crew chief, and it didn't happen. I don't know why. But I ended up going to sea school here. It's a seaman's course here. And I decided I was going to get in a helicopter unit. I had seven or eight months left on my enlistment, and I volunteered to crew on helicopters, and I was accepted. I was a gunner on a B-model gunship with the 48th Assault Helicopter Company up in Ninh Hoa. So, I did that for six months and my tour was over. I DEROS'd [date eligible for return overseas] back to the States. It was within a few weeks of my ETS [expiration term of service], so they just let me out a few weeks early.

MR. KILLBLANE: Wait.

MR. KRAFT: DEROS?

MR. KILLBLANE: No, no. When you said you had six months left in the Army, you went to helicopters?

MR. KRAFT: I extended my tour.

MR. KILLBLANE: Oh, that's what it was, okay.

MR. KRAFT: In Vietnam, right.

MR. KILLBLANE: Well, tell me, what unit did you go to where they were at?

MR. KRAFT: 48th Assault Helicopter Company in Ninh Hoa.

MR. KILLBLANE: Okay. So you were a door gunner?

MR. KRAFT: Right. Joker Gun Platoon, and my aircraft was Joker 084. 6414084.

MR. KILLBLANE: Where was that again?

MR. KRAFT: Ninh Hoa. N-i-n-h, and then H-o-a.

MR. KILLBLANE: Yeah. And that was in support of what unit, what --

MR. KRAFT: It was actually in support of the 9th Korean Division. One of the untold stories of Vietnam was that it was actually an allied operation. When I was in the 5th Transportation Company, we took a battalion of Australians of the HMAS Sydney, which was an aircraft carrier that they had. The Australians operated at -- I think it was somewhere between a regiment and a division, not far from Vung Tao at a place called -- I think it was either My Duc or Borea, or it may've been both places. But they had a rather large unit up there. And when we took them off the Sydney, we got this tank battalion off the boat during the course of a day. They formed up on the road leading out of Vung Tao. In combat formation they drove into their base camp, which was only about ten miles away, all night, shooting. And they came into their base camp with VC prisoners strapped to the front of their tanks. They went in fighting.

You never heard a word about the Australians.

MR. KILLBLANE: Right.

MR. KRAFT: But I guarantee you, they were there as a maneuvering and a very effective fighting force. Never was reported back here.

The Koreans, on the other hand, were there in large numbers. They had three divisions.

MR. KILLBLANE: Right.

MR. KRAFT: They had one marine division, two army divisions, and we provided the helicopter support for them, for the 5th Special Forces, for the 173rd Airborne, and anybody that needed us, basically. But we were assigned, I think it was, 29th Regiment, 9th Korean Division, at Ninh Hoa, and there were two other regiments, one up in Ban Mi Thuot area, another one down at Dong Ba Thin, which is just outside Cam Ranh Bay.

Koreans were outstanding. We enjoyed working with them much more so than the Vietnamese, the RVN, because they were -- it was an honor for them to be in Vietnam. They were very dedicated, very disciplined, highly motivated soldiers. All of them to a man had been affected by the Korean War, which you recall was only, you know, less than 20 years old. The Korean War was '50 to '53; this was 1968. So, that's 15 years to 18 years prior. So, all these men, either as children or as young adults, depending, had experienced communists coming across and laying waste to their country; probably more than once.

They're still at war. To this day, they were still at war, and their army welcomed the opportunity to season their troops, to season their officers, and to pay back, as -- help us in our fight. And they did, and they were great. And they killed a lot of communists, which made them very happy, because the communists, you know, obviously had been quite a problem for them for many, many years and still were.

So, they were highly motivated and very effective, and it was an honor for them to be there and they were good to work with. They didn't waste any time. They didn't play games like the RVN did. You could count on them. They liked you. We had a great deal of respect for each other. And because we were the helicopter unit, we were treated like gods by these guys, especially gun

crews.

So, it was nice working with them.

But we didn't only work with Koreans. We worked with, you know, occasionally we worked with the RVNs; occasionally we worked 173rd [Airborne Brigade] or 101st [Airborne Division]. It was wherever they needed you.

MR. KILLBLANE: Now, was these gunships or lift?

MR. KRAFT: Well, both. In an assault helicopter company, you have two platoons of slips, the lift helicopters. I can't recall what the TOE [table of organization and equipment] was, but it was somewhere between 12 and 16 D and H model Hueys per platoon. You had a maintenance platoon that had a few aircraft, but they didn't go out. And then you have a platoon of gunships, and the guns were -- eight gunships in a platoon. They were B and C models, the older ones that had been converted with strap-on weapon systems. You had five grenade launchers, 19 flex guns, which were 460's mounted on a remote control mount; usually 14 rockets, two seven-round pods. It was the standard gear. You had ships that were what we called pigs, which was 38 rockets and two 19-round pods and two door guns. All of them had door guns.

M-5 40-mm grenade launchers generally had M-5 chunkers and rockets. You can carry the (indiscernible). It's just too heavy. And then you had a hog, which was 48 rockets, and it's tough to get a Huey off the ground in high density altitude with 48 rockets. I don't think they always carried 48 rockets. Had to off-load until you were able to hover, and then that's what you took off with.

So, it's hard, because you're operating in 90-plus-degree temperatures and 90-plus-percent humidities, and aircraft, jet engines and rotor blades don't operate very well like they do in cold air.

MR. KILLBLANE: What did you operate on?

MR. KRAFT: I was on a gunship. I was gunner on a gunship.

MR. KILLBLANE: Okay.

MR. KRAFT: So you know, you're responsible for the weapon system, all the weapons. Crew chief was responsible for the aircraft. The pilots rotated systems; that way they can stay current in all of the different systems, weapons systems. The gunner and the crew chiefs were assigned to an aircraft; that was your baby, you're responsible for that.

Generally, with eight aircraft, you'd be assigned -- there'd be two aircraft. You always flew in teams. Light fire teams, two aircraft. Rarely you'd fly in a heavy fire team, which was three aircraft. It's harder to control three airplanes in a firing pattern than it is two. And we never had the occasion to do it except during (indiscernible) really needed a lot of fire support. (Indiscernible) Special Forces camp in August of '68, was one of the few places that was overrun. So, targets everywhere. So, they wanted a lot of ordnance on targets, so we operated in three-ship teams. But it's only occasionally.

But we had two aircraft on for primary status, you know, ready to go at a moment's notice. You had two aircraft on secondary status. They would go on a moment's notice; they had to be ready to go and loaded, armed, cocked, all set. If the primary team was either out there or replace the primary team, if it was a long operation, or to go do something else.

You had a standby team which something like you had to be ready to go in, oh, an hour or five minutes or something like that. So, you could do light maintenance. And then there was a down team, and that's when you did all the heavy hundred-dollar inspections or you replaced rotor blades or, you know,

whatever it is that you had to do that took a lot of time. Those two aircraft were down.

So you had eight aircraft -- primary, secondary, standby and down.

MR. KILLBLANE: Now, what's the shift on this?

MR. KRAFT: Every day. Changed every day.

MR. KILLBLANE: Okay.

MR. KRAFT: You know, one day you'd be primary and next day you'd be -- it was a 24-hour thing. So if you're on primary team, for that 24 hours you'd be ready to go anytime during that 24 hours. You were on call -- our secondary or our standby team.

MR. KILLBLANE: So what kind of missions were you normally pulling?

MR. KRAFT: Well, in a gun platoon, it's the class of mission. You support the slicks that are in your unit. Or, another unit. Because they would send us wherever we were needed. We operated out of Phu Gia, which is the next base north of us. There was an assault helicopter company up there, the 134th, and we would fly in their AO [area of operation] all the time. In fact, we would spend all day up there on standby waiting for missions. I don't know why they never got called, but we would. Maybe they just like us. I don't know.

But in the classic assault, combat, assault, the guns would go out five, ten minutes ahead of the slicks,¹ and find the LZ [landing zone], fire into it, generally it's what's called prepping the LZ. You'd dump 25 to 30 percent of your ordnance on the LZ. You'd look for secondary explosions. You'd try to kill anybody that was in there. We'd try to draw fire to find out if the LZ is going to be

¹ Slang for transport helicopters

hot or cold. In the meantime, while you're prepping the LZ, the slicks are coming in with the troops or whatever. Then you would escort them in. You'd change patterns over to the side and you'd fly cover as they came in so you could suppress fire in the event that they took fire going in the LZ.

That was (indiscernible) going to be a one-ship LZ. The whole flight going into an LZ. You know, if it's out in the rice paddies, let's get all 12 in there, or 100 in there. But if you're up in the mountains and it's -- might be a hole in the middle of the trees, then it's one ship at a time. And they're strung out, you know, trying to wait their turn to get in. And so, it's different all the time. That's the classic mission.

You might go with your own unit and you might go with another unit. You went where you were needed. The Army operates that way. There's no grand loyalty; there really isn't. Well, there is within the unit. But, you know, when it comes to daily operations, you do what's necessary for whoever needs you.

I know that was true of the landing craft. I mean, you just did what you had to do when you had to do it, and that's just the way it is.

The other thing that you would do in the assault helicopter company, at least in the gun platoon, is we'd do fire missions. We'd get called any time of the day or night to go out and fire on a target if somebody made contact; they need air support. So, you go out and fire on the target, until you're expended or until the target was done. Call you off. Sometimes they would be maneuvering while you were firing, taking advantage of the suppressive fire. Sometimes they would wait. But we had an informal rule that whenever they came in and policed up the bodies, half would go to the aircraft and half would go to the troops (indiscernible).

MR. KILLBLANE: Oh. Body count?

MR. KRAFT: Body counts. And with those guys, you believed them. You know. They were good; especially with Koreans.

The third thing that you would do in a gun platoon is we'd call it "snooping and pooping," or gun patrols. You'd go out and look for something. There were no free fire zones, there were rivers and canals, bays, mountain passes, and you'd go out on patrol day or night looking for something to shoot. It was a night thing, which was rare, you'd have illumination, you know, call for illumination. We had a flare ship that provided flares on call; or you could get artillery illumination on demand. Just call them and tell them where you want it. Here it is a few seconds later.

MR. KILLBLANE: Now, when you guys are flying missions, what altitudes are you flying?

MR. KRAFT: Gunships, safe altitude was 1,500 feet. We've used that only if you were transiting large distances. Every mission was a combat mission, so we would generally fly either nap of the earth or under 500 feet. You want to fly low, because you can hear a Huey coming a long way off. And the lower you fly, the more you're masked, your acoustics are masked, but you can still hear it come. So you want to fly as low as you can and surprise them by popping through the trees.

You rarely see people, even on a fire mission where you know there is a company or platoon or crew-served weapon or whatever, you never see them, because they were very good at camouflage. And just by virtue of the fact that you're moving at low altitudes at high rates of speed, relatively high rates of speed, and there's so much to look at, it's just hard for the human eye to see something as small as -- If they were moving, generally that was a dead give-away. You would

see moving things. You wouldn't see fixed things. In fact, we knew that -- they were told, and we were told, that if an aircraft appears, just stand still. Don't move. That's why everybody wears green uniforms, I guess. You won't pick the weed out from the chaff unless it moves. There's just too much happening, going by too fast. Your eyes are going everywhere. You don't stare at anything very long.

But generally it was low altitudes. So if we had to transit from one place to the other, we would go in an altitude low enough to check things out on the way up; and if we saw something suspicious, go take care of it -- with permission. You always had to call back to the TAC CP [tactical command post], unless you had an observer out there. We rarely had observers out there.