

## Transcription: Charles Cromer

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*My name is James Crabtree. Today is Thursday, March 5<sup>th</sup>, 2009, and I am interviewing Mr. Charles Cromer, and we are at the William Courtney Texas Veterans Home in Temple, Texas, and this interview is being done in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board's Oral History Program. And with that said, sir, thanks for taking the time to chat with me for a little bit today and record your story. The first question I always ask is can you tell us a little bit about your background before you went in the service, where you were born, maybe a little bit about your family or where you went to school, or any of that sort of thing.*

**Charles Cromer:** Well, I lived with my family in Lone Star, Texas, and my dad worked at a steel plant, Lone Star Steel Company for 25 years, and he retired in '80 and he passed away in '90 with congestive heart failure. He served in the 144<sup>th</sup> Infantry.

*OK, during World War II?*

**Charles Cromer:** Yeah.

*So there's a tradition then of service in your family.*

**Charles Cromer:** Yeah.

*Tell us a little bit about how you came to join the Army. Were you drafted or did you volunteer?*

**Charles Cromer:** No, I volunteered.

*OK, tell us a little bit about that, what made you want to volunteer.*

**Charles Cromer:** Well, I just didn't want to get drafted. I was in high school. I really didn't have any plans to go to college, so I just decided to go in the Army. My brother went in the Navy and I went in the Army.

*What was your folks' reaction when you told them you were going to sign up?*

**Charles Cromer:** Well, I just signed up when I was 18, and so I just went to an appointment to Shreveport, Louisiana for a physical, and passed the physical, so just went ahead and got inducted in the Army.

*How long was it after you did that physical before you were on your way to basic training?*

**Charles Cromer:** Probably a few weeks.

*Where did they send you to boot camp?*

**Charles Cromer:** Fort Polk, Louisiana.

*Fort Polk, OK, I've been there, I know that spot. What were your thoughts when you first got to Fort Polk and boot camp?*

**Charles Cromer:** Well, being a family boy, it's kind of hard breaking away, being with family most of your life, while you're still a teenager, and it took some getting adjusted to and getting used to being in the military. Mostly I was a loner anyway, so there wasn't too much of a problem when I was in the service. I was pretty well knew how to live independent.

*When you were in boot camp, did you know at that point whether you were going to be a cook, did you already have your MOS assigned to you?*

**Charles Cromer:** No, they just told me I wasn't going to be in combat. They said I was going to be a cook. I said well, whatever you all decide on. As far as I know, the fact that I wasn't in combat probably saved my life.

*You went through your basic training at Fort Polk. Did they send you to a follow on school after that, a cook school?*

**Charles Cromer:** No, I stayed right there at Fort Polk. I was there in basic training 8 weeks AIT, and then I got orders to go to Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

*OK, I've been there as well, I know that spot.*

**Charles Cromer:** I was there six months. I really enjoyed it.

*So lived at Fort Bragg –*

**Charles Cromer:** Real nice living quarters.

*Were you assigned to your unit at that point, to the artillery battalion?*

**Charles Cromer:** No, I just got orders to go to Vietnam and then I went home to spend a little time with the family and then I had the orders to report to Fort Louis in Washington, and I left Fort Louis Washington on a C-130 for Vietnam, and I don't know if we refueled in the air or we stopped off in Hawaii and Japan.

*I'm sure it was a long flight.*

**Charles Cromer:** I don't know because we never did get off the plane. Those engines vibrate all the way over there.

*That's a long flight on a C-130.*

**Charles Cromer:** So we didn't have to ditch or anything. I would've had to learn real quick how to parachute. I wasn't trying for that. But I had to do all my time at Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

*Where did you land when you got to Vietnam?*

**Charles Cromer:** We landed in Cameron Bay.

*What were your first thoughts when you got off the plane?*

**Charles Cromer:** Well, I was told by soldiers in the National Guard at Fort Polk that we was gonna be shot at whenever we landed, and none of that occurred. It seemed to be always safe, you know. I took RBN training in Vietnam, and then I got some orders to go to a firing basin but I don't remember exactly where it was at. I was out there 30 days. Then I got transferred to, a chopper took me into Plaku, and I was, my first thoughts when I saw Plaku was they had aluminum mess hall and they had stack ovens from the United States, and we had all the modern facilities to prepare meals. We served the higher echelon, generals and colonels and lieutenants, and first lieutenants, second lieutenants, captains.

*How many meals a day would your chow hall make?*

**Charles Cromer:** Three meals a day.

*Do you remember how many guys ate there a day?*

**Charles Cromer:** I think a big Red One came in and quite a few of them that were in the field, you know, came in, off duty or something, to have meals. If the general enjoyed the food, then everybody else will pretty well all followed in suit.

*What was a normal day like for you over there in terms of your schedule?*

**Charles Cromer:** In the daytime, I cooked mostly, and then they wanted somebody to work nights so I volunteered to work nights. I had a staff sergeant E7 that I worked under and he showed me how to prepare, like figure out dough from scratch to prepare pies, and he just always came in and checked if everything was all right. He didn't stay around much.

*When you were there, did you guys ever come under any sort of attack?*

**Charles Cromer:** Yeah, I heard a red alert and I was in the mess hall that night, and I didn't take time to turn the lights out, I just laid flat right where I was at. I felt like that's what God told me to do because it's just at that moment when you freeze up, so I just kind of froze in place, I just laid flat and I guess I stayed there until the sirens were over. I was there at what they called Artillery Hill. They had a big spotlight up on the mountain and it shined all around, and every now and then the Viet Cong would stir up a little skirmish, but we had an air strip and we had those gun ships.

*The C-130 gun ships?*

**Charles Cromer:** Yeah, with M-60's mounted on 'em or something, and so it didn't last long, whatever they started. Those bullets sprayed even in the jungle, you know, and they had napalm, too. I checked into that about agent orange and I was in the area where they sprayed, but I didn't get no, I didn't have cancer or diabetes so I didn't get no compensation for that.

*You said at one point you were at one of the firing bases. What were your conditions like there trying to serve food and that sort of thing?*

**Charles Cromer:** Well, the first time I reported to the battery commander and he was going to put me on the tanks, and I told him that I would train for that and I showed him my orders and he told me to report to the mess hall in the morning, and I saluted him and said yes sir, and so a lot of the time I was out there 30 days, I tried to do a little primitive cooking under tents, but it was

entirely different after I got to Plaku. So really my experience is not like what you would call a man that was a veteran in combat. Most of them had PTSD or something, and there are some other veterans that stay here, but it's not too many Vietnam veterans here. There's mostly World War II and Korea.

*During your time there when you were at the firing base, did you see how far out the perimeter was like the wire, did you know the guys would go out and walk along and do the patrols and stuff? Was any of that going on?*

**Charles Cromer:** Well, I didn't see nobody patrolling. I guess they had guards at night, but in those firing basins they are constantly firing all the time, day and night, so they are hitting targets, and they had those 175 and 80-inch Howitzers, and they would fire about 30 miles without hitting the ground. That's like firing from Temple to Waco, it's a long distance to hit a target. But I really didn't have much experience with tanks. One time I had a little experience of getting on one, but you make friends pretty fast over in Vietnam, and I had all kind of friends, black friends, white friends, and so it's been since 1970s since I was in the service, so there might be a lot that I don't recall.

*What was the average morale like of the troops over there, especially the draftees? You hear a lot of stories of guys who were drafted who didn't want to be there. Did you come across a lot of that?*

**Charles Cromer:** Well, no, everybody was just, zeroed in on doing their job. There was too much friendship and everything going on. They knew that they were going to be there a year, so they wasn't singled out more than anybody else. Everybody had to serve a year. So I served a year and then I put in a 9-month extension or 5-month early out, and so I didn't know if it was going to be accepted or not, but it was and so I got my 10 months stateside duty along my 21 months Vietnam time, and got the 5-month early out.

*Did you ever have any R&R time while you were in Vietnam?*

**Charles Cromer:** Yeah, I had two R&R's. I went to Australia and enjoyed that. Australia once and Philippines once.

*What was that like going from a war zone to a civilian environment for R&R and knowing you were going back into a war zone again?*

**Charles Cromer:** Well, you want to try to enjoy it as long as you can because you know just because you're a cook doesn't mean you're not in harm's way, but I was fortunate enough that I didn't, I didn't go to the rifle range when I was in Vietnam, but I did have an RBN training, but I never fired a weapon except in basic training I fired the M-14 and got the sharpshooter and marksman.

*How many other cooks were in your section? Was it a pretty good sized group of cooks there?*

**Charles Cromer:** In Plaku? There wasn't too many. It was a pretty good sized mess hall. Everybody was kind of spread out and all had various duties to perform.

*One image I always had of cooks from my time in the service was that cooks always had to get up really, really early. What time were you guys getting up in the morning to start preparing?*

**Charles Cromer:** Well, different times, early, just early in the morning until I started working nights and then my time changed.

*When you guys were there, did you get much mail from home? Did you know what was going on back in the United States?*

**Charles Cromer:** I didn't get much mail. I don't know if I had a girlfriend that sent me a letter or not, but my parents might have sent me some mail. I was making pretty good money a month and I would send money home. But I had a hard decision to make. I didn't know whether I wanted to get out or stay in, and it was a hard decision to make, and kind of got ready to be discharged. I left Cameron Bay on a 747 and got home and I had mental, emotional and psychological problems from Vietnam, and wound up at the veterans hospital in Washington.

*Washington DC or Washington state?*

**Charles Cromer:** Washington state, where I left Fort Louis. I guess that was Fort Louis VA, I don't know. All I know I was in an ambulance and somebody let me, provided me a place to stay overnight or something, in a motel or some kind of deal, and then an ambulance came and got me and went to VA hospital and I stayed there a while and my parents couldn't visit me, so I got transferred to Shreveport VA.

*Were you still on active duty at this time?*

**Charles Cromer:** No.

*Or you'd been discharged.*

**Charles Cromer:** Yeah, I was discharged on Cameron Bay. They wanted to make me E6 and pay me \$10,000 in Vietnam, but I turned it down. Rank is good, you can make rank pretty fast if you're a cook.

*You decided you were ready to come back home at that point?*

**Charles Cromer:** Well, I didn't really know what I wanted to do, so I guess that's part of some of the confusion that I was having in my mind. Plus I didn't feel safe on the flights, you know. Too many things happening. C-130, you know, is a pretty safe aircraft, but a 747, you never know if you're gonna have to ditch or anything like that, and there's been times when soldiers have been on 747's and they crashed. You get to thinkin' about all this if you're gonna make it home or not. So I did make it home. Unfortunately about 58,000 American troops were killed in Vietnam, a longer war than what I felt like it should have been. I think it was 15 years, wasn't it?

*Yeah, it ended in '75.*

**Charles Cromer:** It lasted about 15 years and so I think it was more of a political war than it was -

*Yeah, I think it got really ramped up around '66, '67.*

**Charles Cromer:** I think Russia was supporting the Viet Cong, the North Vietnamese with weapons and supplies.

*Russia and China.*

**Charles Cromer:** Yeah, so they always had some coming in when we were getting low.

*When you were over there, were you aware of all the student protests on all the college campuses and all the hippie movement and all that sort of thing? Were you aware of that or did you not know about that until you got back home?*

**Charles Cromer:** No, I really didn't know about any of that until I got back home. I heard about veterans going to Canada and to escape the draft, and I heard soldiers burning their draft cards. It wasn't enough but also they wanted to burn the flag and a lot of other stuff going on.

*How were you treated as a veteran of the Vietnam War when you got home at that time? You hear all the horror stories about the bad treatment. Did you experience that?*

**Charles Cromer:** Well mostly I was in the VA hospital, so I was treated pretty good. You did have some priority in your work history for jobs, things like that. I worked various jobs because I was having problems and taking medication and trying to hold up to hard labor jobs, and I was married 13 years. She stayed with me 13 years and the judge had it down that we were not compatible or it was a conflict of personalities. I don't know if that's grounds for divorce or not, but we was having some financial problems, too, so a lot of that going on now.

*When you got back home, you said you were at Fort Louis and you were at the VA a while there. When was it that you finally got to see your folks again, come back to Texas?*

**Charles Cromer:** I think I might've been there two or three months, I don't remember exactly. Just go through a lot of testing and stuff after just coming back, go through a little session program. A pretty nice hospital up there, the VA up there in the state of Washington. But I really was looking forward to seeing my parents. I wouldn't take for the experiences I've had in life. If I had it to do all over again, I'd still serve my country. I told my parents when I was young before I volunteered that if I got killed, it would be better off to be killed in the military and be serving your country than it would be just outside of the service. So that didn't happen but it could've happened. I don't know how far we were from the demilitarized zone in Plaku, but we had quite a few red alerts, and I was marking my time off on the calendar. We went underground a few times.

*So you had like a bunker?*

**Charles Cromer:** Yeah, that's what we had out in the building we had bunkers. We had a string coming down with a weight on it, and when those rounds fired off with the pressure would move those sound bags and you had to readjust 'em. I think it kind of affected me mentally, emotionally and psychologically being around those tanks day and night. Even 30 days, that's long enough, and you're not trying to be on one, if you're just around it, you know, it's a lot of power going on there. So that's my story. I went Army, my brother went Navy. He was on the USS Roosevelt and he served some time in Iceland.

*How long was he in the Navy for?*

**Charles Cromer:** Four years. He was in communications, so I guess that's a pretty good job.

*Did he volunteer as well or was he drafted?*

**Charles Cromer:** Well, I guess he volunteered.

*You said now you're a member of the DAV -*

**Charles Cromer:** Life member, DAV.

*You attend a lot of the meetings?*

**Charles Cromer:** Not since I've been here, no. I make donations each year. I think it's \$30 annually for VFW. I haven't got my prescriptions from DAV because they don't know I've moved, so I need to contact them and start getting the magazine.

*You need to let 'em know that, absolutely.*

**Charles Cromer:** At least I do have an idea of what issues going on in the military by the VFW magazine. But I enjoyed my time in the service. I don't have any regrets.

*Are there any particular stories or memories that you want to share with us for posterity about your time in Vietnam? Anything you think we should know, or anecdotes that stand out?*

**Charles Cromer:** Well, I served with white and black when I was a cook, I served black men, and we enjoyed our time off duty. Mostly my enjoyment was on R&R in Australia and the Philippines, and I was in the Philippines where I saw those white crosses from previous wars. Australia is a beautiful place to live.

*Did you ever keep in touch with guys that you served with in Vietnam?*

**Charles Cromer:** No, I look in that VFW magazine in the back to see, under Army, if there's 52<sup>nd</sup> Artillery group's on there or maybe got someone's name on there. There's something else in there that we can contact other veterans.

*Do you ever look to see if your unit has an alumni association or a reunion group?*

**Charles Cromer:** No, they do have a listing under in the back pages of reunions for different units and I haven't seen one.

*Well sir, I really appreciate you taking the time today to let us interview you about your time in the service and some of your memories, and what we do is we save this in our archives at the Land Office in Austin, and so there we've got documents that go back to the 1600s and 1700s, and the original documents from when Texas was its own country and all that sort of thing. So we're gonna save this for hundreds of years from now people can be listening to these interviews. Is there anything in closing that you think you'd want to say to future generations who might listen to this interview?*

**Charles Cromer:** Well, I'll just say God bless you and I'll pray that everybody will come to an understanding of what the veterans experienced, and that there will be adequate funding for VA administration, and to pass more legislation to have a higher budget for the ones that are serving now in Iraq and Afghanistan and other countries around the world.

*Well sir, I know that the Land Commissioner who is my boss, Jerry Patterson, was a Vietnam veteran, and a lot of us are veterans, and everybody at the Land Office and even the state of Texas appreciates your service and your time that you spent serving our country in the war, and thank you for just letting us talk to you and record the story. We'll make copies of this interview that we'll send to you and if you want extras you can give them to your family or friends or whomever, and if you have any pictures, too, of yourself in the service, we'd love to be able to get some copies of those and we can put those in your file as well.*

**Charles Cromer:** I used to have some pictures but I don't know, through the years I don't know what happened to 'em, but I had in my mother's home in her closet, I had my suit with my medals on it, and I've got a letter that you can send off or something to get your medals from Washington, from the Department of the Army, and I never have done that but I need to do that for family. I'm divorced now since '83, and so I do have a son that's 35, a daughter that's 25, and I have a daughter that deceased in '94 from a car accident, she was 14, so that was quite an experience being divorced and then losing a daughter, too.

*I'm sorry to hear that.*

**Charles Cromer:** And I'm living here alone and everything. It brings back a lot of memories.

*Well you have my card, so call me if there's anything you need and if you find any photos or anything like that, let me know because we'd love to add that to your file and we'll get a copy of these interviews made and we'll send those to you so you can have that or pass that on to folks. Again sir, I really appreciate your service and your taking the time to talk to us today and I know everybody at the Land Office thanks you for your service.*

**Charles Cromer:** I guess you'll be interviewing some other veterans here?

*Yes sir, a couple more later this afternoon.*

**Charles Cromer:** OK.

*[End of recording]*