

Elam: My name is David Elam. I was born December 18, 1946 in Wheeling West Virginia.

Interviewer: What were you doing before you entered the war?

Elam: Well I graduated from high school in 1946 and immediately went to college for a year at George Peabody College for teachers here in Nashville. And I had a good time, didn't learn very much, and so I spent the next year more or less just working at a job and trying to get ready to go back to college. One day a friend of mine came along and said Dave we need to change we need to get something done, we need to accomplish something. I said well what do you have in mind? He said well let's go enlist. I said well you know I need a change it's time to be out on my own so okay. So we went down to the recruiting station in Nashville talked to the army and they said since you have a year of college we'll make you a general and put you in charge of whole divisions and stuff, we knew that wasn't true. We asked the air force if we could fly and they said no we don't think so, and what's the point of being in the air force if you can't fly? Okay the marine core promised us we would be in Vietnam in a little less than a year and the navy said I don't know if we need you. So we both enlisted in the navy and were accepted. I went to boot camp in July of 1966 to Great Lakes Illinois from there I stayed in Great Lakes and went to hospital core school and after hospital core school the next year in March I went to Camp LeJeune North Carolina for field medical school, field medical technician school for the navy became a field medical hospital core man. Then I was transferred to Portsmouth Naval Hospital in Virginia where I worked the emergency room for several months in the emergency room I worked the night shift. There were just two core men and a nurse for a total of 70 days, I got a lot of hospital experience there. The first of my war stories if you don't mind is I was working at night at the emergency room and several of my friends got their notice that they were going to be transferred to Okinawa and eventually to Vietnam. I didn't get my card and so the logical assumption at least for my brain was that I was too important to leave Portsmouth Naval Hospital and go to something like Vietnam. Unfortunately they didn't have a replacement for me and that's why they didn't tell me until the last minute that I was a part of that group that was leaving. So when I got to San Francisco to meet up with the folks we had a rather unpleasant reunion as they gave me a hard time about being too important to. Now they got a chance to go home they got, I had to go immediately from Portsmouth to San Francisco and meet up with them. And we went to Okinawa to the northern training area to a place called Camp Swab Marine Core. They were part of the 9th amphibious brigade. And we were in training to eventually go to Vietnam as kind of reinforcements because by that time the 3rd Marine Division was involved in a lot of activities and they were losing core men. Another war story, on the weekends we really didn't have much to do. We were up in the northern part of Okinawa, all junior troops with very little money. Some of them got to playing mumbley peg with their bayonets.

Interviewer: What's that?

Elam: Mumbley peg is just basically you throw a knife in the ground and you have to stretch and reach it then the next person and the first one that falls loses and you either pay a bet or you know. My name is Elam, there was another fellow in our unit by the name of David Dines. David Dines was playing mumbley peg the weekend that we were supposed to get word of who all was leaving. He was 12, I was number 13 in the group he got a bayonet through his foot that weekend so number 12 became nonexistent until I took over his new number and I became number 12. And that's how I ended up going to Vietnam because the other 12 people never left Okinawa. So fate or luck or kismet or whatever you want to call it I ended up going and David Dines ended up in fact I saw him when I came back. He was stationed at the hospital the marine core hospital there in Okinawa. I went to Vietnam to Denay flew into Denay, I'm sorry that's not true, I flew into a ship. I was on the USS Ewagema which was a

helicopter landing ship because my unit that I was assigned to the first battalion third marines was on what they called float. We were a reactionary battalion. Whenever other units got in to serious trouble we'd fly off the ship and rescue them and that always seems by the way, history will probe this, it always seemed to be the first battalion ninth marines. Their title throughout the whole Vietnam conflict was the Walking Dead. Early on they were the first ones to land in Vietnam. And the Vietnamese particularly the Vietcong took an instant disliking to them. And so they were called the Walking Dead whenever the Vietnamese had a chance to do them harm they did that. The second war story is that I was a petty officer third class I was doing some triage on the ship for those marines that were left get hurt fall down a ladder those kinds of things. And the battalion chief comes to me and says Elam I need you to take the pay roster around to our core men wherever they are in country. Oh sure, how cool is that you know what kind of guns do I get? I was just really any kind of gun I'm ready to go. I got a rusty 45 with two magazines and was told to hop on the chopper the next morning and fly in to Contain artillery base and from there you can find the three companies the four companies who are out in the field. And I did exactly that, I flew in the next morning I landed at the base in Contain and they were under fire from artillery. We landed in a secondary landing zone and I fell up to my knees in mud because I was the last one out of the chopper as the chopper was quickly leaving. And I just knew that would be the end of it I mean I'm stuck in the mud, I can't move and the rounds are coming in. Well a couple of people I knew from the battalion in Okinawa came and rescued me. Brought me down to the aide station and I spend the night my first night in country in Contain shooting the breeze and getting the pay roster signed. The next day I was offered a convoy to another place where I thought B Company first battalion marines was and I could get that party. Well to make a long story short, I spent almost a week thumbing rides, going from place to place looking for these four units so I could get the pay roster signed then finally bumming a ride back to the ship. What an adventure, and that whole time when I got back the chief was mad at me because he didn't know where I was. I said well you're not the only one chief, I didn't know where I was. About a week and a half later the whole unit off loaded off the ship my first time doing the wet ropes, climbing down the ropes and we went into country we were being swapped out. And I went to a place called Fubi away it is the imperial capital of Vietnam. This is still 67 November of 1967 and we were there at the headquarters with the third marine division. The chief came to me and said Elam you're going out with the advanced party because the battalion is moving up to Aintree City in Aintree Province which is northern Icore the very top of South Vietnam. And I said great, so 16 marines, myself and a gunny sergeant boarded a couple two vehicles and off we go down the road actually up the road to Aintree Province the airbase there. We get there, checked in with the airbase and they said you're across the street in that field. That's right it was a field, it wasn't it was nothing it was a field. And I spent Christmas in a field with 16 marines outside the main base airfield which was kind of exciting. Fortunately nothing happened and then eventually the rest of the battalion came up and started to establish which later became the third marine division headquarters there in that area. The battalion was back we set up some tents within three or four days I was assigned to C Company Charlie Company first battalion third marines as their senior core man. There was eight core men including myself. And so off I go to a place called C4. History will tell you that McNamara decided to do something he called the McNamara wall. We had four artillery bases right along the DMZ. Contain, GON, Camp Carol, and Khe Sanh. Back behind that and staggered between that were C Camps what they called C Camps because they were company sized fortifications. And I was in C4 which was right near the coast and I stayed there for approximately three months give or take as senior core man. We had a little aid station with a couple two other core men. And our job was to guard that shoreline the sand dunes that little strip of land that we were responsible for for infiltration and things like that. My first real taste of combat was in early January we had a patrol go out and set up an ambush and on the way back they got ambushed. And so the company goes out to rescue them. We had significant fire fight we had a tank with us. One of my core men, I'll never forget this, one of my core men jumped on the tank when they were told

somebody was shot, injured, jumps on the tank under fire, goes inside the tank, finds out the tank commander was dead shot through the head, jumps back out of the tank, comes back over to me and said Doc he's dead. And I'm going why did you do that? Because they called for a core man. It's what core men do okay it's the first major point in this discussion that's what core men do, they take care of their marines anyway they possibly can. I submitted him for a Bronze Star it was turned down because quote, "Doc he was just doing his job." Yes the first disappointment. So we had several operations. The next one that comes to mind is it was late one night and I was called to the command group for a briefing. The next day we were supposed to take off in helicopters and land in the middle of a Vietnamese North Vietnamese regiment. We were to secure the area, destroy the regiment and intelligence was saying that we would probably take about seventy percent casualties. I looked at the captain and I said I don't have that many bandages I don't have there's no way that I can treat seventy percent of the troops, two hundred and some odd people including some attachments. They said don't worry about it doc. So I stayed awake all night trying to figure out in my mind how I'm going to do this how I'm going to do that where you set up triage. I looked at the map and there was a place for a landing zone you know I was doing my job. We go and we attack this place we land during the two days that we were through that area one tripped and fell and shot himself in the foot and there was one booby-trap and that was it. We didn't see a Vietnamese we didn't see a Vietnamese cow, buffalo, nothing for two days. Got back that night and were attacked on the perimeter by the group that we were supposed to be going to attack. It was quite a lesson in intelligence operations. While I was there we were not far from a supply base called Quaviet. It was on the mouth of the Perfume River the Quaviet River. Because it was a supply base the major ships would offload to this place on the mike boats. The mike boats would drop them down to smaller boats and go into country to Don Ha a couple to other places on the river to supply the troops. Well I went back on time with a casualty somebody who was just really sick, and talked to the medical folks there and arranged for the overnight R&R for my core men. So when they came back from patrol they had a chance to go in the next day or that evening depending on when they got back go in the next day on supply run, spend the night hot shower, meal maybe even a movie and come back the next day, it would be awesome. I also arranged to transfer particularly dental and eyeglasses and some of those things that weren't routine out in the field transfer them for a three day trip back to Don Ha in order to get glasses or some dental work if they needed it and stuff like that. So I was really proud of that little back door maneuver and several folks were able to take advantage of that little brief opportunity. We moved from C Camp to several places we walked around a long time. I must point out because this will come up later as we talk about after the war, we went into the same village three separate times and received casualties three separate times. But third battalion headquarters would not allow us to destroy the village or do anything serious about that. We later changed our area of operation to another place and the second battalion eighth marines took over our area. They took fire, not casualties, took fire, evacuated people and leveled the place. I'm sorry, to this day that's how you conduct those kinds of things. You shoot at me, we solve the problem. You are not going to have a place to shoot at me from anymore. And then after you do that hopefully a few times or a lot of times then people will understand this is how this works. You know so if you don't want your village destroyed then don't shoot at us, it seems like almost simple. But anyway so that's my first political comment on that. We moved around for a while. My next place we went to we were sent to guard a bridge between Camp Carol and Khe Sanh during a particular period of time. And the bridge you had a hillside on the left on the right side, dips down into a valley on the right a little stream the bridge and kind of an open field out in front of us. We had a the unit up on the hill a small unit up on the hill the major bunch right there at the bridge and then we sent off another platoon off in another place which is not significant. The first story comes with the only time that I led a platoon or a patrol in Vietnam now first of all I'm a second class hospital core man by now. I am not a marine I'm not trained as a hunter killer type, there were times and experiences where I thought I was but my main function

was to treat the sick and injured and not go out there and do this fancy stuff. But the macho got hold of me and they had a new staff sergeant and the only person that was senior enough to show him the ropes was me. That tells you how sad transfers and all that stuff was they had to pick me. So I go out and lead this patrol well the first things that happened was we go down off the cliff out on our left side and there are tiger prints in the sand along this little ravine. I mean as big as my hand tiger prints so we get to looking around. We go a little further and follow the streambed around to the right and through this little trail out comes a Vietnamese with his rifle on his shoulder. And my point man was just kind of skylarking just I don't know what he was doing. Well they see each other and both of them empty a magazine at each other and never hit anybody. Now the point it, the AK47 was too heavy a weapon for the Vietnamese. They had real difficulty particularly in a surprise situation controlling it. His weapon missed him because he was busy holding it down. The M16 is very light weight so when my guy empties his it's going up. They missed each other well my marines were just ready they were going to go jump this guy they were going to catch him. He goes running up the trail I said no we are not doing that we're not going up there because there is obviously a trap and whether it was or not who knows, I'm just pretending I know what I'm doing. So we call in some mortars and we go on and proceed. Go on a little further and the staff sergeant says, hey doc that's that over there? And on the side of this ravine is this little round thing moving slowly along the edge of the ravine. A boa constrictor about probably seven or eight feet long. Well to finish up this particular story, we finally succeeded to come around through the ravine come back and get back in there. I never led a patrol again never volunteered to nor was I asked to. I don't know if they asked me but I know the volunteering was a decision I made. The other story that occurred there at our little place upon the hillside we had a patrol a squad of people just kind of observing that's what they were supposed to do. We were short of people in the CP group so I manned the radio from midnight until two o'clock that was my turn. And the deal was if something should happen medically somebody else would have to take over. But that would give everybody a chance to get a little more sleep. About one o'clock in the morning I heard this gosh awful sound on the radio and says doc doc there's somebody out in front of me can you identify? No all I can see is all of a sudden this blood curdling scream yelling, hollering, and carrying on. So the reaction force gets up and they go charging up the hill and they drag this guy down and he looks like well he looks like the prize fight that's going to occur this week. He looks like he'd been beat up by the champion. What on earth happened? A rock monkey climbed up the hill because the guy was eating smelled the food climbs up on the hill and literally beats him up to take the food. Well we're all just what? Well why didn't you shoot it? I didn't know what it was doc. Well needless to say, bless his heart he only stayed for two more months before he rotated back. The rest of the time he was monkey boy. Send monkey boy to do that, send monkey boy to take, send monkey boy to clean. He was monkey boy. So those kinds of things happened and thank goodness, they are a lifesaver. If you don't mind I would like to get serious about one episode. During monsoon season we were ordered to go and setup a blocking force for an operation. A blocking force simply we go somewhere and set in, dig holes, and wait for them to be pushed towards us so we can shoot at them. It rained all day all night it was just nothing but rain. We dug our foxholes and we sat there for over 18 hours as they filled up with water. Now most of the marines being marines I'm sure they just sat there because they were following orders and that's what they are supposed to do, I'm not knocking them, good kids. Me being a hospital core man with probably two points more intelligence than the marines I'm thinking this out. What in the world's going on why are we doing this? The point was we're sitting there the holes filling up and nothing is happening nothing's happening. All of a sudden when the water was about waist deep it dawned on me I have no control over this. And I can swear to this day I heard God say don't worry about this, I've got this, I know what I'm doing. And it was a moment of epiphany, it was a moment of calm in this madness and it was a moment of okay you're right. There's nothing I can do about this so here I am. And like I said about eighteen, nineteen hours after we got there we finally got to move. Everybody was soaking wet everybody's gear was soaking wet

but I've held onto that because there are certain things it's like baseball you throw that ball. Sooner or later you are going to have to throw the ball and then you have no control over what happens. I throw the best pitch I've got you do the best you can to hit it, but you've got to throw the ball to make something happen. And that's been a very important lesson for me. During the Tet offensive in 1968 we roamed around loose. We were not in villages we were not in any major place we roamed around loose. So we did not see a very serious Tet offensive like the people who were assigned to the cities and the villages and stuff. Shortly after the Tet offensive we were assigned to go and escort the third marine division from Fubi way up to Quaintree which would be the new headquarters. Now I went through Fubi early on in my stay in country and then this it was devastated. We were the first unit the first convoy to actually make the trip without being attacked. Going down to or coming back up to Quaintree Provence. It was pretty interesting to see the devastation in the cities the devastation of war and how that takes place and the mass destruction there. It was really sad the Way was a pretty city it wasn't it was just a pretty city. So I go on R&R in late July for a week I went to _____ Malaysia. I came back stayed with the company maybe a month or so and rotated to the third medical battalion where I became night triage. I was the senior core man of the night group. Got a few people in late at night, medivacs didn't fly at night but occasionally we'd get some people right towards dusk and stuff. The main job was to get the place cleaned up and ready for the next day. I was there approximately three weeks to a month when some of my guys from my old company showed up. They had gotten into a little fire fight and a lot of grenades and RPGs and so they had shrap metal. The last corporal that I practically liked was in what we call shock and de-bereavement. If they are not really serious they go into this little area so they don't bog down the surgery unit (tape messed up at 24:25 and the sound could not be heard)