

The Museum of Flight Oral History Collection

The Museum of Flight
Seattle, Washington

Bruce Crandall

Interviewed by: Ted Lehberger

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Abstract:

Vietnam War veteran and Medal of Honor recipient Bruce Perry Crandall is interviewed about his service as a pilot and engineer with the United States Army. He discusses his experiences conducting topographic studies during the 1950s and 1960s and his service as a helicopter pilot with the 1st Cavalry Division in Vietnam. Topics discussed include his training and service history, his mapping assignments in the Middle East and Central and South America, his participation in the battles of Ia Drang and Bong Son, and the circumstances surrounding the receipt of his Medal of Honor.

Biography:

Bruce Perry Crandall was born on February 7, 1933 in Olympia, Washington. His father was a United States Navy serviceman, and his mother worked as a welder at Todd Shipyards (Washington). After his parents divorced, his maternal grandmother helped to raise him and his siblings. Crandall attended Garfield Grade School, where he lettered in baseball, football, basketball and track. In high school, he was an All-American baseball player. At age 15, Crandall joined the Army National Guard in Olympia.

After graduating high school in 1951, Crandall attended the University of Washington in the hopes of playing baseball as a sophomore. In 1953, he was drafted into the United States Army. He completed his basic training at Fort Lewis (Washington) and his advanced individual training in engineering at Fort Worden (Washington). During this time, Crandall signed up for joint Army/Air Force flight training in fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters. After completing his flight training at Gary Air Force Base (Texas) and Fort Rucker (Alabama), he was assigned to the 30th Engineer Topographic Battalion. He piloted Cessna L-19s, De Havilland DHC-2 Beavers, and De Havilland DHC-3 Otters while conducting topographic studies in Alaska and the Arctic.

In 1957, Crandall received a two-year assignment at Wheelus Air Base (Libya) to conduct mapping expeditions of the desert. Subsequent assignments took him to Howard Air Force Base (Panama) and several Central and South American countries, where he assisted the Inter-American Geodetic Survey with mapping projects. He also served with the 11th Air Assault Division and with the Dominican Republic Expeditionary Force as liaison to the XVIII Airborne Corps.

In 1965, Crandall was deployed to Vietnam. He served with the 1st Cavalry Division as commander of the 229th Assault Helicopter Battalion's "A" Company, providing aerial support for the infantry. His duties included delivering troops and supplies to specified landing zones and evacuating wounded soldiers. During the Battle of Ia Drang (November 1965), Crandall and his wingman, Ed W. Freeman, evacuated approximately 70 wounded soldiers from Landing Zone X-Ray while under enemy fire. For these actions, Crandall and Freeman received the Distinguished

Service Cross and Distinguished Flying Cross, respectively, which were both later upgraded to Medals of Honor. Crandall also received the 1966 Aviation & Space Writers Helicopter Heroism Award for his actions during Operation Masher, when he successfully landed his helicopter using a flashlight beam as a guide and evacuated 12 wounded soldiers from a combat zone.

After completing his first combat tour, Crandall attended the Armed Forces Staff College in Virginia, then returned to Vietnam for a second tour. In January 1968, he was shot down in a friendly fire incident and returned to the United States to recover from his injuries. His next assignments included serving as executive officer of the 339th Construction Battalion at Fort Lewis (Washington), as a facility engineer director in Bangkok, Thailand, as a deputy chief of staff at Fort Leonard Wood (Missouri), as commander of the 5th Engineer Combat Battalion, and as the Defense Mapping Agency's director in Venezuela.

In the early 1970s, Crandall suffered a stroke, which ended his flying career. He retired as a lieutenant colonel in 1977. He subsequently served as city manager for Dunsmuir, California and as a public works employee in Mesa, Arizona.

Crandall married his wife, Arlene, in 1956. They have three sons. Crandall's educational credentials includes a bachelor's degree from the University of Nebraska (1969) and a master's degree in public administration from Golden Gate University (1977).

Biographical information derived from interview, from a biography prepared by the U.S. Army, and from additional information provided by interviewee.

United States Army. "Biography for Medal of Honor – Lt. Col. Bruce P. Crandall." Army.mil. Accessed October 9, 2019. <https://www.army.mil/medalofhonor/crandall/profile/index.html>.

Interviewer:

Ted Lehberger is a member of The Museum of Flight Docent Corps and has worked in broadcast, cable, and satellite television operations for over 40 years. He holds a degree in Communications and Political Science from the University of Washington, as well as an FCC license and a private pilot's license. He also served in the United States Army Security Agency in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a Morse Code Intercept Operator.

Restrictions:

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Index:

Introduction and personal background.....	6
Joining the United States Army	8
Flight training.....	9
Helicopter training	12
First assignments.....	13
Mapping assignments.....	17
Meeting President Kennedy	20
Assignment in the Dominican Republic	21
Service in Vietnam, Part One.....	23
Medal of Honor process.....	33
Service in Vietnam, Part Two.....	36
Assignments after Vietnam.....	48
Post-military life	50
Closing thoughts	52

Bruce Crandall

[START OF INTERVIEW]

00:00:00

[Introduction and personal background]

TED LEHBERGER: My name is Ted Lehberger, and we're at The Museum of Flight in Seattle, Washington. It's the 24th of August, 2017. We're interviewing Colonel Bruce Crandall. Colonel Crandall has been an Army officer, a helicopter and a fixed-wing pilot. Colonel Crandall, we thank you for giving us your time and talking about your flying abilities. Would you please state your full name, sir?

BRUCE CRANDALL: My full name's Bruce Perry Crandall, and I was born in 1933. You were going to ask that next, so...

TL: I was going to ask you where you were born.

BC: Olympia, Washington.

TL: Tell us about your parents, please.

BC: My father and mother built a house up on our West Side and just before the Second World War. And then the war came along, and my dad, who had been part of the Navy, said he's going back in, because he had been at Pearl Harbor and had a lot of friends. And my mother didn't understand that, and so they got divorced. And all she had to do was stay married—my mother would have gotten money for herself and us three kids. But she divorced my dad. And so he went back in the Navy, and at the end of the war he came back. And my mother had become a welder at Todd Shipyards during that time. And one evening, somebody welded the doors of his car shut, so my mother never agreed that she did that, but—

TL: That's a pretty good idea.

BC: She grinned a lot.

TL: How about your siblings? What did you have there?

BC: I have a brother and a sister. My sister was a year older, my brother a year younger. And we all were raised by our grandmother, because when our mother went across to the shipyard, someone has to take care of us while my mother's working. And then she would come back and sleep during the day.

TL: Oh, boy.

- BC: And so Grandma was—and then my great uncle—my grandmother’s brother came and lived with us. So—
- TL: Where did you go to school at?
- BC: I went to school at Garfield Grade School, which was about a half-mile away. And I was a four-sport letterman.
- TL: You were four-sports?
- BC: Yeah. Baseball, football, basketball, and track.
- TL: And you were an All-American?
- BC: No. That was in high school. Yeah, I was in baseball. I was an All-American in high school.
- TL: So what is an All-American?
- BC: It’s somebody who has a batting average three times his grade point.
- TL: And what was your batting average?
- BC: 640.
- TL: That’s a pretty good one.
- BC: Yes.
- TL: And you played in the—I think the school tournament in ‘41, was it?
- BC: ‘51.
- TL: ‘51.
- BC: Yeah. I’m not that old.
- TL: [laughter] So how about your further education? You went to the University of Washington?
- BC: I went to the University of Washington for one year. And I went there so I could play ball. Of course, you can’t play ball at the universities in those days as a freshman, so you have to wait and then you can compete as a sophomore.
- TL: I see.

[Joining the United States Army]

BC: And so I didn't play ball at all because I got drafted. But not by one of the pro teams, but by the Army.

TL: Now, how did that work? Was the draft going? Were you going to be going into Korea?

BC: No, I got drafted for Korea. That was the timeframe. I was in the Army National Guard in Olympia. There was an antiaircraft outfit. And I joined that Guard when I was 15. I had to have some kind of income and so I joined the Guard. And I didn't have to get drafted by the Army. Because if you're in the Guard, you're—

TL: You're in the Army, more or less.

BC: Yeah, you're already—and so I ended up wanting to play ball, and I knew I could play in the Army. And if you get drafted, you only have to serve two years. So I had it all figured out, and I was going to play ball as soon as I got through the training—the basic and stuff. And I thought I might not have to take basic because I was already trained in the Guard. And that didn't work. They sent me 12 miles from home from Olympia to Fort Lewis after they drafted me. And—

TL: Camp Murray?

BC: Oh, no. Just—North Fort. It was all wooden barracks. And I spent some time there. And then after basic there, I went to AIT at Fort Worden, so now I'm 40 miles from home.

TL: AIT is what?

BC: Well, Advanced Individual Training. It's your second training. Your basic training is just—and then your AIT is your branch training. So I'm—

TL: Your specialty?

BC: ...I'm being trained as an engineer, assault boat type. And that was for Korea. The Corps of Engineers had the most boats. It had more boats than the Navy. They had these big amphibious support command types. And they were training us—they didn't tell us this—but for the Inchon invasion in Korea. So we were running these boats up and down—

TL: LSTs?

BC: M-boats.

TL: M-boats.

BC: And they're just carrying the—it would carry troops and some supplies. LSTs usually stayed off the shore and sent boats in. So anyhow, I was getting trained at Fort Worden. And the sergeant there finally decided I was too effed up to be in the Army, and he thought—he said that someday I might make corporal, and he didn't want that on his conscience. But he said, "You'd make a good second lieutenant." So he had me sign a document to get the hell out of the unit. And that sent me down to Fort Ord to leadership school. And then I went to Engine OCS from there.

00:05:59

[Flight training]

TL: And is that where you learned to fly?

BC: Yes. Right after that.

TL: So tell us a little bit of how that works. I mean, briefly, how does an engineer learn to fly an airplane?

BC: Well, have an engineer colonel come down when you're going to be a second lieutenant, and the week before you graduate to get commissioned, he comes in and says, "We want all of you guys to go to flight school that are physically—" Because the Corps had the two largest aviation outfits in the world. We had two outfits that had over 100 aviators. And we had fixed-wing and helicopters, and we were in mapping, Topo. So this colonel comes in and says—and I had never been in an airplane.

TL: You had never figured you were ever going to be in an airplane as a kid?

BC: That was not part of my—but by then, I knew I was not going to play ball because in basic training I had thrown a hand grenade too far and tore my rotator cuff. And that was before the Tommy John surgery, so—

TL: Your career was done.

BC: It was done. And I still—

TL: Before it began.

BC: I still have problems. If I had to throw overhand, I would be—but anyhow, I ended up signing up for flight school. And that was—the Air Force rented at Gary Air Force Base the fixed-wing part.

TL: And where was that at?

BC: In San Marcos, Texas. And I ended up going there. And I had to lose ten pounds. Because when I went to OCS, I weighed 150. When I came out, I weighed 192. And I

had grown from five-foot-seven to five-ten-plus. And so I grew when I was 20. Anyhow, I get to flight school, and I have to lose weight. And I was solid. I—you know, running several miles at a whack.

TL: You were an athlete.

BC: Well, we were training. Push-ups, I'd do 150 of them at a time. And sit-ups, you'd do a couple hundred. So everything was building muscle.

TL: Bulking up.

BC: Yeah. And stamina. So—and I get down to flight school, and I'd never flown an airplane. And my instructor pilot got—put money in a pot. They put 20 bucks apiece in, and he soloed me at three-and-a-half hours. And he had come to the aircraft—I think he wants me to go park.

TL: What kind of plane was it?

BC: It was a little Piper Cub.

TL: Tail-dragger.

BC: Yeah. Very simple. But I'd only parked the damn thing once. I'd never flown it by myself. And everything was done by light guns. You take off, and they would control you by pointing the lights at you.

TL: No radio?

BC: No.

TL: Okay.

BC: But I don't even know what those lights mean. If red means stop doing it, how the hell do you stop doing it in a fixed-wing, you see? Anyhow, when you're in the traffic pattern, if you get a flashing yellow, it means somebody's getting too close to you.

TL: How did you land? Was it a [good?] experience?

BC: As I took off I went a long ways. And there were eight aircraft in the traffic pattern until I turned crosswind. I didn't know what the hell that was, but I knew that I had to make a square coming around, so—and then I went a long way down on downwind. And I could just barely see the airport when I turned back on final.

And so I'm flying up to that frickin' runway, and I bring the power back, and I start to settle too fast. And then when I hit the runway finally, I just bounce and I went off to the side. Now I'm over in the grass. But that's okay then. You know, I didn't know that. Now

I think I'm going to crash because I'm in grass. And all of a sudden, there's firetrucks in front of me because that's where they parked. So I feed full throttle, and we jumped the firetrucks because the aircraft did it. I don't recall ever doing anything. And I end up on the other side, banging on the grass again. So now I've got full power, and it takes off. Now I don't know what the hell to do, so I've got to go around again. By the time I had landed, there were nobody—nobody was in the traffic pattern. All the instructor pilots got the hell out of there. That's when the red lights were being flashed at them.

TL: I see.

BC: So I ended up coming around the second time and so scared. And I can remember I landed, got on the runway finally—and I didn't get there the first time. I got there six or seven times. And I shut the aircraft down and got out and went and relieved myself behind the aircraft.

TL: So you weren't a natural first thing?

BC: Oh, God no. But I was dumb enough to solo first.

TL: And you had the reflexes to save yourself, too.

BC: Yeah. And my instructor finally got that money. And he's wanting to kill me for that stupid little pot. And I'm ready to kill him.

TL: So how long was the train—once you got over that, how long was the training in the fixed wing?

BC: It was about four months. Because you had to go through Gary, and then you go to Fort Sill. And I got appendicitis a week before I'm supposed to go to Fort Sill in the instrument training part at Gary. And I so ended up—instead of going to Fort Sill, I ended up in the first class at Fort Rucker. It was Camp Rucker.

TL: And that was the helicopters?

BC: No. Fixed-wing still.

TL: Fixed-wing?

BC: Because that's where you get the advanced training. And then you've got L-19s. And some of the guys got to stay, and they would fly twin engines if they—if—

TL: So what got you into helicopters? Being in the Engineer Corps?

BC: As soon as I got through fixed-wing, then you had to go to helicopter school. And usually you had to get a couple hundred hours in the fixed-wing. But then it was better than a year later that I got into the helicopter program.

TL: Were you in the fixed-wing the whole year before you got—

BC: Yeah. Flew floats, skis, and wheels up in the Arctic.

00:12:36

[Helicopter training]

TL: And where did you learn the helicopter at?

BC: At Gary again.

TL: Oh, Gary?

BC: And then we went to Fort Rucker.

TL: And those were like the—

BC: Most of us were at Rucker.

TL: Those are the Korean—like whirlybird types?

BC: H-13s, H-23s, H-19s.

TL: So briefly, what's it like to fly—the mechanics, what's the mechanics of flying a helicopter, briefly?

BC: Both feet are busy. Both your hand—you had the power—you had to adjust the power with your throttle. You had to be real careful about moving the cyclic because—

TL: Now, what is the cyclic?

BC: That's the control of the left, right, forward, and back.

TL: And you're controlling the pitch of the blade on top of you?

BC: Yes. It tips whichever direction you—

TL: And there's your angle of attack on the blade?

BC: Yeah. And that's—the secret was that you put your elbow on your knee—[demonstrates]. But the instructor pilots would never tell you that. Because if you kept your hand out like this—[demonstrates]—pretty quick, you're getting—your arms won't handle that. But if it's on your knee you're resting, and so you—it's no problem. But the instructor pilots wouldn't tell you that.

TL: Did you find flying the helicopter easier than the fixed-wing?

BC: Oh, I did.

TL: You did.

BC: Yeah. I liked them both. I really enjoyed floats and skis.

TL: And as an athlete, you had pretty good dexterity, too.

BC: I could play ping pong both hands. I could switch hit in baseball. And so I was pretty comfortable—

TL: Either way.

BC: ...either way.

00:14:10

[First assignments]

TL: You were a natural. So after you graduated from the flight school, what happened next? Where was your first assignment, please?

BC: I went to Libya, to Tripoli, and went out in the desert in 1957. I got married in '56. Went out in the desert 20, 25 days a month. There were eight lieutenants in the outfit, about seven captains, four majors, and a lieutenant colonel. So once they figured out what it was like in the desert—because we still had Arctic tents and Arctic sleeping bags. We had floats.

TL: Was that your first assignment? Or did you go to Alaska first?

BC: Oh, I went to Alaska in the fixed-wing. And yeah. I was in the Arctic my first assignment.

TL: Okay.

BC: But I was out of the 30th Topo in San Francisco. And we were sent to different places. We were in the Arctic strictly for oil companies. They couldn't figure out a way to get the oil out until they could figure out where their drilling was going to be allowed. The University of Alaska says the oil was found in the '60s. But if you ever get a map from the Second World War, all the way across the Arctic Slope it says "U.S. Navy Petroleum Reserve."

TL: They knew it was there.

BC: Yeah. It was there.

- TL: So when you say mapping now, did you actually fly a certain grid? Or how—what does the mapping mean?
- BC: We mapped on the ground. It was triangulation. We had surveyors out there with—
- TL: Spectroscopes or something?
- BC: ...satellites, and it was on-the-ground surveying. And triangulation. We'd have four parties out so they could triangulate across and then back and forth. And so you got all of the lines you had to get. Then you'd move the two that were in the back up to the—out front.
- TL: Oh, boy. And you flew these people all these different locations?
- BC: Yeah. Across the desert. And there were three million live mines in the desert.
- TL: From World War II?
- BC: Yes.
- TL: Wow.
- BC: And they were put in by the Italians, the British, the Americans, the French. Everybody and his brother put them in, but nobody put maps. One minefield was 17 miles long. And there were three million live mines in the ground in 1957. And we cleared 7,000 in my little survey party the first year.
- TL: That's amazing.
- BC: Yeah.
- TL: So you got to be pretty good at short-field landings then. You were landing at unimproved strips?
- BC: Oh, yeah. I'd land on the coastal highway because it has some blacktop on it. But yeah. Out in the desert, you landed anywhere. As long as it wasn't sand. The hard—most of the desert in Libya is hard desert.
- TL: And what airplanes were you flying there in Alaska, before you go—
- BC: L-19s, Beavers, and Otters.
- TL: I see. And then the next one you went to Libya after that?
- BC: Yeah. And I flew helicopters and airplanes. And I was instructor pilot for the unit. And I would be gone 20, 25 days a month. And then the families got sent over there, and mine arrived with my first son. And they should never have been sent over because we

couldn't live at the Wheelus—at the air base. We had to live in town. And my wife had to be sent home because when she would drive the car to take the baby out to the hospital or to the commissary, the Arabs would ride up on their bikes and kick the car and spit on her. And she—first time I came in from the desert—I had been out 22 days, I think—and she handed me the baby, and I—that was great. I had never had that experience. New father and everything.

TL: Yeah.

BC: And I handed her back the baby and went around the car and saw the scratch marks on the side of the car. I said, “What did you hit?” And she broke into tears. And I'd gone with her from the time she was 16. We got married when she was 20.

TL: I see.

BC: But I'd never seen her cry. And this was a couple years after we were married. And anyhow, she said, “I want to go home.” I thought she meant home to where we lived in Tripoli. And she said, “No. I want to go home. I'm an infidel woman driving a car, and it's totally unacceptable. And they can—they just scare me to death.”

TL: So she came back home? Back to Washington State?

BC: Yeah. She came back to Kent, and she had our second son. Because being a good aviator, I got her pregnant again before I sent her home.

TL: You were doing your duty.

BC: Yes, I had to—

TL: So you were over in Wheelus—over in Libya how long?

BC: Two years plus.

TL: So you were at Fort Lewis?

BC: Yes. And I was commanding the headquarters of the 4th Engineer Battalion in the 4th Infantry. And the 4th was one of our STRAF [Strategic Army Forces] units. They were—

TL: Aside from the flying, what does an engineering battalion do?

BC: They don't fly.

TL: No. They don't fly. But what do they do?

- BC: They're combat engineers. They build bridges, they blow them up. Their—have amphibious—they have heavy equipment. They support the infantry units in their movement, in their building of any facilities. So engineers are multiple task types.
- TL: But you—it was a non-flying command that you had?
- BC: Yes. That was my first ground assignment. And the day before I arrived, there were five officers in that company. The day I arrived, there was one.
- TL: And why is that?
- BC: I was an aviator. And we weren't popular. They didn't object to our flight pay, but they didn't think we should get our base pay, too. So they would—my battalion commander didn't even welcome me.
- TL: So resentment because you flew aircraft?
- BC: Because we flew aircraft and got flight pay. And so they thought—the battalion XO invited—welcomed me to the unit, and when he did, he said I was taking the place of a real officer. And I thought he was kidding. He says, "I want you to know how I feel." He says, "I'd rather have a sister that's a whore than have a brother that's an aviator in the Corps." And I thought that was pretty poetic.
- TL: Yeah.
- BC: And I thought he was kidding.
- TL: And he wasn't kidding?
- BC: No.
- TL: How long was that command?
- BC: I stayed there six months. And the first sergeant of the unit said, "I knew you'd be an aviator the day I checked in." And he came into my office to welcome me, and he told me all about the unit. He says, "I knew you'd be an aviator." I said, "How did you know that?" He says, "Because yesterday I had five officers in my company." I didn't get that possessive. Because, "My company."
- TL: I see. I see.
- BC: And he says, "We can do this two ways." He didn't mean that. Because one way was I would run it and he would do the best he could for me. That's the first way. The second way was he would run it and I could learn. That's the only one he meant.
- TL: Which one did you take?

BC: I took the second one.

TL: Did you?

BC: Yeah. But I made a mistake. I says, “Top, I appreciate your doing that.” And he shut the door and came back to me and got over the top of me, and he said, “Lieutenant Crandall, my name is First Sergeant Joe [Pellin?]. You don’t call me ‘Top’ or ‘Sarge’ or any other cute name you can think of.” And thank God I didn’t say, “Yes, sir,” because I’d still be getting my butt chewed. But he ran it. For six months I was learning. And I went off to—engineer OC—engineer advanced course at Belvoir. And they didn’t think I was coming back. And I volunteered to go back to ground duty because I wanted—and when I got back to there, there were five officers in that company.

00:21:53

[Mapping assignments]

BC: And I got a line company on my own, and I got the proper number of officers that were—

TL: I see. Did you do anymore mapping after that?

BC: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

TL: Where was that at?

BC: In Panama. We went to Panama in 1961. And I flew all over Central and South America. I was TDY up the Amazon. I flew in every country in South America.

TL: Helicopter and fixed-wing?

BC: Both. Yeah. And I was the instructor pilot in the Canal Zone for both.

TL: Tell us about the early ‘60s in the Dominican Republic and all that area in the Caribbean.

BC: Okay. When—that was in ‘65, we went to the Dom Rep. Before that I was in Panama, but I was all over Central and South America. I was in every country.

TL: Where were you during the Cuban Missile Crisis?

BC: I was in Costa Rica. My wife and I were—we were assigned there from Panama for two years. You started out in Panama, and you flew support missions in all those countries. And you go TDY for a period of time doing—

TL: TDY means...?

BC: Temporary duty. We’d go to Guatemala, and we’d be out in the jungle in Guatemala. Because all that mapping is done in the jungle. It’s—

TL: Same way they do it any place else?

BC: Oh, no, but it's the only place they needed to have it. Because they've already got the control in the cities because they build their streets and stuff. But in the interior, they don't know where their property lines are or where the country limits are.

TL: I see.

BC: The borders.

TL: Boundaries.

BC: Yeah. Because, for example, Venezuela's always pissin' with—excuse me—always having arguments with Columbia and with Brazil. And you'll never see a map of Venezuela that shows French Guiana. It has to show "Zone of Reclamation" because they argue over who owns what. The borders are usually a river or a mountain range, but rivers change their banks. So right away, you've got an argument.

TL: I see.

BC: And we went in mapping in the early '60s with what was called the Inter-American Geodetic Survey. And it was stationed in Panama, but there were pilots and aircraft in every country except Brazil and Argentina and Mexico. But we would then spend a couple years in Panama, and then we would go out to another country.

TL: So it was kind of interesting that the Army would be working for, like, the Geodetic Survey. Was that just because they were government agencies? Or what was—

BC: No. The purpose of our mapping in Central and South America was so a country could do land reform. We didn't say that, but you couldn't do land reform if you don't know where their damn borders and stuff are. And, for example, in Costa Rica, when we finally got most of the country mapped, the government went to United Fruit and all the big property owners and said, "You're using all this jungle—or you're claiming all this jungle and that mountain and all the way up that river, and yet you're only planting this many acres in bananas. Now, we know where the properties are, and your argument that you have a Spanish land grant is not going to fly because we know they're not any good. So either you give up all this land that you've claimed or you're going to pay big taxes for undeveloped land."

TL: So you helped establish modern boundaries on these countries?

BC: All of your countries could do land reform once they got that.

TL: I see.

- BC: Most of Costa Rica is in public hands because once we got the maps, they took all that land and brought it back in to government use. So they have wonderful tourism, and it's a—
- TL: Because of the work you guys did?
- BC: Yes.
- TL: How about the Dominican Republic?
- BC: That was a—we went down there for—because of the government was going communist. And that was in '65. And we had just finished training for a couple of years in the Carolinas, and we had most of the helicopters in the Army were in the 11th Air Assault. And the XVIII Airborne Corps, which was the unit that was supposed to be ready to go, didn't have any. We had them. And there just wasn't that many helicopter Hueys available in the system. So they were all brought to Fort Benning, and we had them. So things get hot on the Dom Rep in '65. And I'm now the battalion adjutant. I hated that job.
- TL: What is that—what—?
- BC: Oh, that's a paperwork guy. You're doing nothing but checking people in and out and doing all of the things—
- TL: Clerking, kind of.
- BC: Oh, yeah. Every time that somebody wrote a performance report on somebody or they had to leave or something, you end up doing the paperwork. And I was TDY—or, no. I was on leave when the commander of the battalion canceled my leave and had me come back. And the XO called me to tell me I was—my leave had been canceled. And he says, "You have to come back." I said, "Why?" He says, "Because you're now the adjutant." And I says, "I want to talk to the battalion commander." He says, "The battalion commander don't want to talk to you."
- TL: This is at Fort Benning?
- BC: Yes. And I was off visiting some friends over at another fort.
- TL: Right.
- BC: Anyhow, I ended up going back, and I couldn't get out of it. So I ended up being the battalion adjutant. But then comes a thing that says, "Send 200 men and 20 helicopters to the Dom Rep to support the XVIII Airborne Corps." I sent 201. And I went down there as the liaison to the XVIII Airborne Corps.

TL: I see.

BC: So I was the boss representative from our battalion

00:28:20

[Meeting President Kennedy]

TL: And during that time, you've known a couple presidents?

BC: Oh, yes. Yeah.

TL: Tell us about that a little bit, please?

BC: Well, President Kennedy came to Costa Rica in '63. And we have no military in Costa Rica. It's a—there's no mil group because—it's been a democracy, but we've never had—they don't have a military. So we have no excuse to have a mil group, and now I'm in there in civilian clothes, but I'm the only military in the country. My crew chiefs and—so my job is to do everything to support the president before he arrives. So I do all the flight times and the emergency airfield, helicopter pads and all. And when he comes in, they take my hangar and kick my butt out and put his aircraft in there.

TL: Air Force One?

BC: Air Force One is out at the airfield, but his helicopters.

TL: I see.

BC: And now I can't go in my own hangar. I can't go in Air Force One. But every place the president goes, I have to get under the bridges to make sure there's no explosives, and my crew chief has to drive a three-quarter ton with the president's rocking chair in the back. And we go from the ambassador's quarters to the Presidential Palace, where all of these six presidents from Central America and Panama are meeting. And so then they make me get in uniform one day, and they said, "Be in the Presidential Palace at such and such an hour." And I'm in there with my wife.

TL: What rank were you at the time?

BC: I was a captain. And he comes out, and of course, I immediately salute. We shake hands, and he says, "How do you like it here?" And I says, "I love it." And he turns to my wife, and he takes her hand, and he starts rubbing the back of her hand with his other hand. And they're holding hands, and he's rubbing. So for 15 minutes he's—

TL: While he's talking?

BC: Yeah. And I have peripheral vision. I'm at attention, but I can still see. And my wife didn't wash her hand for a couple of months. [laughter] But anyhow, he was so charismatic.

TL: Did you find him charming?

BC: Oh, he was. And he was loved. He got killed before I got out of there. I was still in Costa Rica. And when my neighbor came over and she had big tears in her eyes and she's telling me—and she's a Costa Rican. And she's saying, "The president's dead," in Spanish.

TL: Yeah.

BC: And I thought she was talking about her president, but it wasn't. It was John F. Kennedy got killed in Dallas. And a—but they had—for three days, they were in mourning. Everything shut down. Everything. There was no gas stations open. There was no—the hospitals might have been, but everything else was shut down. And black flags and people brought flowers to my house.

TL: In Costa Rica or all over?

BC: In Costa Rica. The whole country.

TL: I see.

BC: And I'm sure it was that way all over Central and South America because he did the Peace Corps and the Peace Corps was really popular in Latin America.

00:31:36

[Assignment in the Dominican Republic]

TL: Getting back to the Dominican Republic, is that where the Army first started to refine the techniques that were later used in Vietnam? The Dustoff and the assault?

BC: No. Because we didn't have any enemy to speak of. We flew over the town with 105s hanging, telling people, "Knock it off." And we went over Haiti and the border and so we covered the country because it's not very big.

TL: No. It's an island.

BC: And we did low-level stuff, which—that got their attention.

TL: So most of the training was done at Fort Benning and some of the big—

- BC: Oh, yeah. And the Carolinas. We did everything there. We tested smoke generators, for example. It didn't work because you can't control the smoke once you release it. And you've got to find a couple of really dumb pilots to fly the damn thing because you've got to fly at 35 knots over an enemy position, possibly, and blowing smoke. And then I've got to come in behind them with gunships and—
- TL: So that's—could you describe Dustoff? The term “Dustoff” that Americans use?
- BC: Dustoff was medevac.
- TL: Okay.
- BC: And they had a responsibility for taking out wounded. And that was it. That was their job. And we had a Dustoff, but it was called the medevac unit, the 115. And it wouldn't go. They had a commander that said, “You've got to have a green landing zone for ten minutes,” and he restricted his pilots from going. So you don't get a green landing zone and no fire for ten minutes.
- TL: No.
- BC: And so he was the coward, but he made all his men follow that. So as a lift unit commander, I ended up doing medevac.
- TL: What was the ideology, though, in term of using the helicopter as like an attack vehicle, bringing in troops, softening them up with the rockets and stuff? Who thought—how was that developed?
- BC: That was developed in the Carolinas. The medevac stuff wasn't.
- TL: Okay.
- BC: But all of the rest of it, the gunships flying alongside of us on the assault going in, the timing, the artillery preps and everything, even though they didn't fire it, we still would—everything was planned so that you—it was like a ballet. When I would take off from a pick-up zone to go to a landing zone—and I would have the gunships alongside of me, so I have to fly slow. They could only do 90 knots. I could do 120.
- TL: Hueys. They were all Huey gunships?
- BC: They were all Hueys, but they were C-model gunships that couldn't go as fast as the Ds and the H. So we ended up—the gunships had rockets. They had mini guns. They had a cannon up front. So it was all heavy stuff.
- TL: They were heavy?

BC: And they were—yeah. They were loaded. And so we would plan for—I would plan for how soon I would be landing in that landing zone. And would I have—we would go low level, and I would have the rocket ships meet us en route. And I would call on the artillery when I'm 15 to 30 seconds out. They're supposed to say, "Splash." They're supposed to know when I'm coming—when I'm going to be there.

TL: It's all choreographed?

BC: It's all choreographed. Now, when they say, "Splash," that means that there's a white smoke supposed to show. It's exciting when you don't see it. Because then you don't know if you're—if that's the right place. Is the artillery finished?

TL: You're not sure.

BC: No.

TL: You're not sure where you're at.

BC: But when you buy weapons and ammunition from the lowest bidder, it doesn't always work.

TL: I see.

BC: So—but the gunships—and I'd say, "Run," and the rockets would go in front of me. Then the gunships would go alongside of me. And when I wrap—flared up, the gunships would be firing on both sides of me. And there would be two sets of gunships, one behind the other. And as soon as the one up front got past me a ways, he would break and the other one would come in. So I've got all sorts of power going on. They made a point of the fact that I didn't have weapons. And we didn't have at that time. We—our M60s hadn't been issued yet. But it wouldn't have made any difference because everything's going on and you can't fire once you've got infantry on the ground. So going in, I can't fire because I've got these gunships out there—the rockets. And so the M60s didn't do me a hell of a lot of good.

TL: So all of this stuff was choreographed and developed through operations in the Carolinas prior to—

BC: In the Carolinas—most of it in the Carolinas. We killed a hell of a bunch of turkeys because we didn't know where the turkey farms were until we went across them.

00:36:31

[Service in Vietnam, Part One]

TL: So would you tell us how you ended up in Vietnam? What you were doing?

- BC: When—first off, when I found out I was going to Vietnam—when we were going—we were down in the Dom Rep still. One of the sergeant's—
- TL: The Dominican Republic?
- BC: Yeah. One of the sergeant's wives got on the radio and—Marge—we were talking to our families at home—and told him that he was an SOB and that he was going to Vietnam. And he had been gone for a couple of years in the Carolinas, and now he's down in the Dom Rep, and she's tired of that stuff, and she's going to divorce his rotten arse. And he said, "Did you hear her?" And I said, "Yeah. Tell her to stop swearing on the radio." And he says, "No. We're going to Vietnam." And that's when I swore. But the next—
- TL: Did you want to go to Vietnam?
- BC: Hell, I didn't know where Vietnam was. We had a lot of guys in the outfit that had been to Vietnam that had come back—their first tour. But they were Special Forces types.
- TL: It was '64?
- BC: '64 is when they first—and this was '65. And—but the Army, in its great wisdom—we took all the guys who had ever been to Vietnam out of the unit just before we were scheduled to go. So I got to be the commander of that unit that I had down at the Dom Rep.
- TL: What unit was that?
- BC: The A Company, the 229th. Because the company commander, Bernie [Queedens?], had been in Vietnam, so they took him out.
- TL: And why?
- BC: They took him out because he had already been to Vietnam and the Army didn't want to have him have to go back a second tour. Now, it didn't really matter once we really got involved, because 12 months and 12 days after I got home the first time, I'm back in country. So it was—but they took all these guys out, so we took all the experience—the guys who could speak the language, the guys who had been Special Forces—all of these guys were out of the unit, so now they're having to be replaced. And that was including NCOs.
- TL: What was [unintelligible 00:38:36]—what was your function? How did you work with the military? Or with the infantry, in that case?
- BC: Oh, we'd had them with us in the Carolinas. See, the 11th Air Assault had infantry units. All it did in '65 was they brought the colors back from Korea, where the 1st Cav was in

Korea, and they brought them back to Fort Benning—the colors—and they converted the 11th Air Assault to 1st Cav.

TL: Just like that?

BC: Just like that.

TL: So you worked with a group of troopers, and you were all one unit and would go in as a unit, you airlifting them in, them fighting, and then bringing them back out again?

BC: Yeah. And we had done that in the Carolinas. We had done the training. We had done night assaults, and we had done day time. We had tested all of the different equipments. We had a—I had a—something that looks a little bit like a computer sitting in front of me that drew a line on the map and would tell me where I was on that map. And I wasn't allowed to look out. And I'm flying that damn line.

TL: What's the highest you ever flew in your career?

BC: The highest?

TL: The highest. The highest altitude you ever flew. This is an aside. How high did you—

BC: Probably 12,000 feet.

TL: You were a treetop flier most of the time?

BC: Most of the time. But when you go through—down in South America to get through those mountain passes, you got to go up. And I was flying the Otters and fixed-wing. And sometimes you get a downdraft, and it scares the living hell out of you because you're not sure if you're going to make it across.

TL: Could you describe for us the situation, the—Ia Drang Valley, if that's how it's pronounced—what the Vietnamese wanted to do, what we wanted to do, and the situations that unfolded there, please?

BC: Well, in 1965 in October, the Vietnamese started an effort to cut the country in half. And they were going to do it in the Central Highlands. That's where they'd tried it before with the French and going across the Dien Bien Phu type stuff. And when—in—so they started hitting our Special Forces camps. They had Du Co, they had Plei Me, they had—they hit Pleiku. When we were halfway down toward the coast in a small area—and so we got the word to go up to Pleiku to support those and to stop that stuff. And so Plei Me in early November got hit really hard. And the enemy was going to come across and head down Highway 19.

TL: That's on the east coast of Vietnam?

BC: That's in the Central Highlands.

TL: Central. Okay.

BC: In the central part of Vietnam.

TL: Okay.

BC: But that's where you could cut it in half. And below the DMZ, it's halfway to Saigon. So you're sitting there where they could cut the country in half, and that's what they had in mind. So they came out of Cambodia and Laos. So they came down the Ho Chi Minh Trail and all of their buildup was there. So on a—early in November, my unit got called up, and we did support for several other places. But the 13th of November, I got instructions that I'm going to support the 1st of 7th on the 14th, and we're going to recon flights. I've got to pick Hal Moore [Harold Gregory "Hal" Moore Jr.] and his staff up for the 1st of 7th, the commander there, at 7:00 in the morning. And I'm in Pleiku. So they want two aircraft to do the recon to decide where we're going to have landing zones along the border of Cambodia.

So we picked up Moore and his staff. And he's in my aircraft, and I've got a second aircraft—that's Freeman [Ed W. Freeman]. And we head to the border. And then we turn north, and we fly up to Du Co. And I picked out landing zones that looked okay to me, and I showed them to Moore and told him how many aircraft I could get in there. And he looked at them. And so then we flew back—after being on the ground for a little while, we flew back, and that's when we flew—I didn't fly in the treetops. We were up at 2,000 plus feet. But we were picking out places to go.

TL: What would be a place that would be good for helicopters to land briefly? What were you looking for?

BC: An open area that I can put eight helicopters in. Because I wanted eight or ten. I want to get half my unit in. And I only had 16 flyable aircraft at the time. That was the other dumb thing we did. We got all of the aircraft, and we put them into their 100-hour inspections while we're still in the carriers coming over. I was already over there. I was an advanced party. But they did 100-hour inspections on all the aircraft on the carrier, even if they only had ten hours to go or if they had ten hours—

TL: And that tied them all up?

BC: Yeah. So they all came up for 100 at the same time for the next 100. And now I've only got 16 aircraft and four are from another unit—on the 14th of November. So as I take off from Pleiku—from Plei Me to go into what we called X-Ray [Landing Zone X-Ray], and it's in Ia Drang Valley.

- TL: It was named X-Ray?
- BC: Yeah. But X-Ray was the landing zone. And when I took off, Hal Moore's in my aircraft and he pats me on the helmet and says, "We can't land yet. We got to orbit for a while."
- TL: Now, who was Hal Moore?
- BC: He was the commander of the 1st of the 7th. But he was also going to be the commander of whoever units were going to be in there. He's the landing zone commander—
- TL: Okay.
- BC: ...X-Ray. And he became a three-star general. He—graduate from West Point, very dedicated officer. Jumper, airborne. All your damn senior officers were jumpers.
- TL: Well respected?
- BC: Yeah. He was—yeah. When you're a lieutenant colonel—and he was only two weeks from his promotion—three weeks. And he bumped his own boss. He was that highly respected.
- TL: I see. So he was in the helicopter with you guys?
- BC: Yes. And then he makes me—I can't go because the artillery prep hasn't gotten in there.
- TL: The choreograph of shelling and the whole thing.
- BC: Yeah. So now I've got to fly around for 20 minutes over Plei Me, and now I'm going to run out of fuel before I can get him in. So I can only get four lifts in before I have to go refuel in the first eight aircraft. And we only could refuel four at a time. And the second eight are going to have to wait because they're only 30 seconds behind me in that landing zone. As soon as I pull, they're in. And so anyhow, I have to refuel after four lifts instead of getting the fifth one in. The fifth one I would've had all the infantry in. So now—
- TL: How many did you get on the ground before that—before you had to go back?
- BC: 400 and—I had 450 when I really got shot up, so probably 400. I don't know. But I had all but his D Company, really. And so I'm out there in that orbit, and then we make our assaults. And then on the fourth lift, I have to go refuel. Now I come back for the fifth lift, and I'm carrying D Company and the mortar platoon leader and D Company commander in my aircraft. Six people get shot off the aircraft. Three killed, three wounded. The company commander and the mortar platoon leader are both wounded. Their radio operator is killed. But when I come out, I've still got six. Three killed and three wounded.
- TL: At what point did America start engaging the enemy? When you first landed or when?

BC: No. Fourth lift.

TL: Fourth lift.

BC: We got—in the last six there—or eight aircraft, a couple of them get hit.

TL: I see.

BC: So on the fifth lift in, they're shooting at me from right there. They're picking people off, they're shooting in the head. They're—I can see them 20, 30 yards from the aircraft there—

TL: Who were you fighting? I mean, was it Vietnamese Army? The Viet Cong? Who—

BC: They were NVA.

TL: North Vietnamese Army.

BC: Yeah. They had come down the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and this was when they started getting serious about—Viet Cong couldn't handle us, but the NVA were—

TL: How many were there roughly, did you guys figure?

BC: Probably 4,500, I think they said. We only had 450. They said it was ten times as many. I suspect it was less than that. But they were supposedly in Cambodia and came down off the [unintelligible 00:47:46] Mountains and got in.

TL: So your mission was to go out and find them, and you found them and—

BC: Oh, yes. We found them and big time, on that fifth lift. And so I had to change aircraft, and I called ahead. I had another one running. And I had all of my aircraft commanders come to the aircraft, and I said, "I need somebody to go with me." And I had them load all the ammo that was left at Plei Me. And there wasn't any left, really, but I had them put it on my aircraft and Freeman's. Freeman volunteered to go with me.

TL: That's Ed Freeman?

BC: Ed Freeman, who also got the Medal of Honor in that—and he and I had been together for ten years before we went to Vietnam.

TL: He was a Korean War veteran.

BC: Korean War. Got a battlefield commission. Been an NCO. And he didn't go to school, and so he got passed over when I got promoted.

TL: And he was too tall.

BC: Too tall. Yeah. He was not—he beat the system by—I think he scooted low or something. Anyhow, when they measured him, they didn't get his real height.

TL: You had said previously that when you took a new helicopter they changed the doors on the helicopter.

BC: Yeah. Always. I had snakes painted in the form of sixes.

TL: So what is the beginnings of your call sign? What is that all about?

BC: That's not nice.

TL: Well...

BC: My call sign when I was in the Dom Rep and going to Vietnam was "Ancient Serpent."

TL: Where did that come from?

BC: Beats the hell out of me. That was just one of those things that we had in the Carolinas. So you'd have a call sign. One of our call signs for B Company was "Preacher." D Company was—the gunship was "Happy Tiger." So mine was Serpent—"Ancient Serpent 6." But if you take the first letter it makes you an ass. And so I liked the idea of Sixes being coiled on my doors rather than having a bare butt or something that wouldn't have been so good. And I—everybody called me Snake. And I—

TL: That was your nickname?

BC: Yeah. And it was my call sign, too. I was "Snake 6."

TL: So every time you'd change the helicopters, they'd change the doors.

BC: They changed the doors. I would call ahead and have another aircraft running. I changed aircrafts three times on the 14th of November. And I went back to flying the one that got shot up so bad, the first one, because they checked it out and there was no fuel leaks and there was no binding in the controls. And so they put duct tape on the holes so I'd know where the new ones were. And I had to change aircraft because I got shot up again. But I was going back to find out what the hell was going on. Because I'm the commander of the helicopter, see. The infantry commander can't tell me to do anything. He can be in my helicopter and be a general, and he can't tell me what to do. Now, you don't want to get too carried away with that.

TL: No.

BC: No. You don't want to tell a general to stick it in his—because when you hit the ground, you're back under his control.

- TL: Right.
- BC: So, you know, you can't fly forever.
- TL: No.
- BC: Yeah. Anyhow, when I got up with the ammo, I called—and I was listening on the radios. I know what's going on in that landing zone because I can hear Tony [Tony Nadal] and the rest of them yelling about the enemy.
- TL: There's a lot of shooting and dying.
- BC: Oh, and every one of those radio transmissions, "I'm running out of ammo. I'm running out of water. I got wounded in here up the gazoo. And we need to get some more support," and on and on. And all I'm doing is sitting there—
- TL: And as you had said, that the medevac required a ten-minute lull in fighting before they—
- BC: Oh, they never went in. When I called Hal Moore on the radio and I said I was out there and I had ammo—in the book [*We Were Soldiers Once... and Young*] he says he went and—had built a special landing zone for two ships, and that's all BS. He didn't know I'd have two ships. He didn't know I was coming. But anyhow, where he was—I landed where I'd been before, at the front part. And while I was on the ground, they shot people loading on my aircraft. The two of the battalion, Metsker [Thomas Curtis Metsker], got killed loading the D Company commander on, who had been wounded on the fifth lift in.
- TL: Yeah.
- BC: So now I'm taking out guys that were wounded twice and—but I stay on the ground while they load the wounded and they're taking off the ammo on one—the ammo's going off one side and the wounded are coming on the other. Now, this creates a little problem because I still have all the seats in the aircraft. And by a couple of days later, I got rid of all the seats.
- TL: Was that your longest day of flying?
- BC: Oh, God, yes. Fourteen-and-a-half hours. We changed aircraft. And my award, it says we went in 22 times. But it's probably 50 or 60 because we were only going five miles and that's two-and-a-half minutes. And so I would take off from X-Ray and fly to the fire base, and then I would load up again with ammo. And that would take a couple of minutes, but they were ready to go, and then I'd go back in. I'd take water and—
- TL: Was it Holloway [Camp Holloway]? Was that what the fire base was?

BC: No, no. Holloway was at Pleiku. That's 45 minutes. No this—the fire base was Falcon, and it was where the artillery was firing from.

TL: And that was like five miles, like you said.

BC: Yeah. And the enemy didn't go get them. That's what they should have done. Because that fire base only had less than an infantry company securing it. They could have taken that fire base just like that—[snaps fingers]. But they didn't. So for the 14th, 15th, and 16th, the fire base existed and fired support.

Now, when I went to the fire base the second or third time, I see two medevac aircraft sitting on the ground. And so while mine is being loaded, I jumped out and relieved myself and ran over there and told them to follow me and land where I did, that we need to do a lot of medevacing because there's a lot of wounded in there. And they said yes because I'm a major.

TL: Yeah, you have rank.

BC: Yeah. They're a couple of younger—

TL: Lieutenants.

BC: Yeah. And then probably a couple warrant officers are in there. So they crank up, and they follow me out of there. And Ed and I go in and unload the ammo and whatever we had—

TL: Right. Resource.

BC: ...and take wounded, and we get the hell out of there. Now, they're coming in and they're coming in from too high. I'm coming in from the treetops. And the first one is quite a ways in front of the second one, so now you're giving—they can shoot at one and then they can line up and shoot at the other. If you got them both up there, why, it takes them a little—they've got to divide their fire. Anyhow, the first one comes in and hits the ground, and the second one says, "I'm hit." The first one takes off, and then the second one takes off. Now—

TL: Without people?

BC: Oh, yes. But when they say, "I'm hit," that means the pilot's hit. You don't tell me your aircraft is hit. I don't care. I don't care. Because a helicopter isn't going to go down nine times out of ten. Well, much more than that. It might have holes in it, but unless they hit the hydraulics or the transmission or something in the engine that—you have to fly a shot-up ship out of the landing zone. You never leave it in there because it'll block it up. So I'm—even if I crash in the trees next—right out of the—better off. So my people always flew the six—a shot-up ship out. But here these two medevac guys go and the

pilot yells, “I’m hit.” So I think the pilot got hit. So aborting the second helicopter might have made sense but not that first one. He should have loaded wounded.

So later that night, when I’m finally finished—and we flew 14-and-a-half hours—at 11:00 at night, I’m in the ops tent. And I’ve already got my birds lined up to go again because I think another half hour, hour, we’re going. We’ll be carrying in more troops. Because we did night stuff. We didn’t—that wasn’t a big problem. And I had already put a couple pathfinders in there, so they had the lights.

Anyhow, I’m lying on a cot facing the wall, and I’m still in full uniform. And I’ve got a pistol on and my flight helmet is next to me. And a hand grabs me and pulls me off the cot. Now, I think—we’re not in a secured area, so I’m thinking the next thing I’m going to feel is a knife going across my throat. And I roll away from the—and pull the pistol. And if he hadn’t been calling me a son of a bitch, I’d have shot him.

TL: Because you didn’t know who he was?

BC: I had no—I thought he was an enemy. And he’s calling me a—“Don’t you ever lead my troops into a hot landing zone again. Don’t you order my people around.” And I’m—he’s the only guy I wish I’d killed. Because a few years later, he committed suicide and took his wife with him and they had—

TL: How is that?

BC: ...four kids. He took off from California heading toward Hawaii in a single-engine Piper Cub or Cessna and had about two hours of fuel. And he wrote a suicide note. But he was a coward, shouldn’t have been in command. Moore should have taken care of that. Moore got promoted to full colonel. And he was a brigade commander, and he could have got that guy bumped out of there.

TL: So you’re saying that the officer in charge of medevac didn’t show enough leadership to go in and get them?

BC: He showed just the opposite. He showed cowardice. By him setting that ten minute green, he didn’t—and he didn’t fly those damn birds.

TL: Ten minutes does seem—it’s a very long time.

BC: Oh, if you’ve got dead—wounded people on the ground, you’ve got people dying.

TL: How long would it take you guys when you’re really hot doing this? How long in and out? How long would it take you on the ground? How long were you on the ground?

BC: Count of ten.

TL: Ten seconds?

BC: Yeah. I only get to the count of three when I'm leading assault in because the next group's coming and the infantry's gone off. We took the seats out, and my boss, Albert [unintelligible 00:59:15]—wonderful commander. He died as a three-star from illness. But wonderful, wonderful commander. He had all the aviation in the division. And he would remember everybody he flew with. He'd be able to tell you where their hometown was and how many kids they had. Anyhow, he came by and he looked and he saw that my seats were all out of my helicopters in the back. And—

TL: The bench seats that go through the helicopter?

BC: Yeah. And he said, "What did you take your seats out for?" And I says, "Sir, you don't think those infantry guys are sitting in there with their seatbelts on, do you?" [audio malfunction] [unintelligible 00:59:58] says, "You're not a safety officer. You know better than that."

TL: Is that the action in which—the medal you're wearing, the Medal of Honor. Is this—

BC: That was that day. Yeah. It—Ed got his in 2001, and I got it in 2007 when—Congress passed a bill to tell all the services to go back and reconsider and review the medals that were inappropriate. In the 1st Cav, no aviator ever got an award higher than the Distinguished Flying Cross in the first three—

[scene transition]

00:01:33

[*Medal of Honor process*]

TL: Briefly describe, if a person does something meritorious—and there were plenty that did—but give us the steps it would take for a person to get the Medal of Honor.

BC: Okay. In '65, if you were to get anything higher than a Distinguished Flying Cross, a Silver Star—in other words, you would get a DSC or the Medal of Honor. The Distinguished Flying Cross had to be approved at division level. So your general could do that. And there was no paperwork even made out, hardly.

TL: What, they would get witnesses say, "So and so did this and this—"

BC: Yeah. Even if there were no witnesses, the general could—they had to stand in formation and describe what went on, and he came by and pinned the damn Distinguished Flying Cross on all of us. Crew chiefs—copilots and pilots—

TL: Officers only? Or anybody?

- BC: Warrant officers. And if enlisted guys got out of the aircraft, then they got, you know, a Silver Star—or they could. But Congress passed a bill in 1990-something—'94, I think it was—that required all of the services to go back and reconsider awards that were not appropriate. So for three years, no one in the Cav got any higher award than—and yet we were being looked at and receiving civilian awards and—
- TL: Was it politics?
- BC: Oh, no. It just—we just couldn't—if you were going to get a Distinguished Service Cross, that had to be witnessed, it had to have people fill it out that witnessed it, and then it had to go to your unit commander, and then—I had nobody to do paperwork. They were flying as my gunners. But then you would have to go to the battalion, and then it would have to go to the infantry who witnessed it, then it had to go up to division and—or to group and then to division. And at all these places, people had to endorse it. And then it had to go to MACV in Saigon, and they couldn't approve DSCs at the time. It had to go out to McCain's dad [John S. McCain Jr.], who was CINCPAC.
- TL: In the Navy?
- BC: Yeah. But he was in charge of Vietnam. It was under his command. John McCain wasn't supposed to be in Vietnam because you're not supposed to serve under a parent or relative.
- TL: So Admiral McCain, the elder, would look at a list of names and say okay?
- BC: Well, he never got it because we couldn't get the paperwork done. So nothing went forward, with very few exceptions. Hal Moore got a DSC for being in there. I think that was done by radio, and I think somebody in our division called and got it done. Anyhow, the—when the Congress passed that bill, they were looking at the Tuskegee Airmen and the Japanese-Americans. And the idea was that those guys got screwed during the Second World War. Because the most decorated unit was the Japanese-Americans in Europe, but they didn't get any medals. They didn't get the Medal of Honor. They got Distinguished Service Crosses and Silver Stars and—but they didn't get the Medal.
- TL: Why? Racist?
- BC: Racist. But it's racist to say, "We're only going to go back and check the Tuskegee Airmen and the Japanese-Americans." So Congress passed it. They would consider everybody. So Freeman and I were going to a board. We were getting Distinguished Service Crosses, and that had to be upgraded then to the Medal of Honor. But the process was it would—you would go for the Distinguished Service Cross first, and at that board would be three-star generals—senior board—and they would approve the Distinguished

Service Cross, and then another board would look at it to see about if it should be a Medal.

TL: I see.

BC: And with Freeman, I put him in and the DCSPER, the Deputy Chief of Staff of Personnel, decided Freeman and I would go to the same board. Now, the purpose for that was—

TL: What year was this?

BC: That would be in 2000, maybe. 1999. Anyhow, he—they wanted to establish that Freeman followed me on every flight. Now, one of the standards for the awards, you have to make these decisions on your own. Now, Freeman is behind me in every flight.

TL: He was your wingman?

BC: Yes. But he's the only one that volunteered to go. And I've got him in for the Medal of Honor, so I can't fight for Freeman without pulling mine. It's a moral thing. So I find out that Freeman and I are going to the same board, and a senior officer in the Army—when you say "senior officer" and they say they're a senior officer, that's a general. Colonels don't call themselves senior, not unless they've really got a problem with ego.

TL: Yeah.

BC: Anyhow, I get a phone call, and it says that, "You and Freeman are being sent to the same board so this DCSPER can establish to that board that Freeman was behind you on every flight."

TL: Right.

BC: And he gave me the phone number on that DCSPER's desk. So I call him on the phone and told him who I was and told him that he could stuff it. I wasn't going to accept any award and that Freeman needs to get a fair shake.

TL: So Freeman got the award before you did?

BC: Oh, six years.

TL: Six years. And you—

BC: But I got a DSC in the mail from Moore, who sent a letter and said, "I under—" He sent it to my wife without a return address on it, so my wife didn't know what the hell it was. But it—he said, "I understand Bruce won't accept this." That means he's been talking to this damn DCSPER because he's the only one I told that. So there—Moore used to be the

DCSPER. Now, he had put me in for two Distinguished Service Crosses. And so I'm cutting both out as far as the DCSPER is concerned. But—

TL: Well, how did you finally get the—how did you—

BC: It beats the hell out of me how I finally got it.

TL: You don't know. But—

BC: No. General—I think President Bush made it—

TL: Just cut all the crap—

BC: He cut all the crap. He knew that I had been with—that Freeman—I was there in the White House later when—after the movie [*We Were Soldiers*] was premiered, we flew to D.C. and had dinner in the White House and—

TL: I see.

BC: But he knew about it. But the DCSPER—there's no doubt in my mind—he sat on the board for my second DSC. And he wrote on it, "This is obviously a Distinguished Flying Cross."

TL: Yeah. So let's go back to the—back to Vietnam for a second.

BC: That's politics.

TL: That's poli—it sounds like it. It sounded pretty—

BC: Oh, it was.

01:07:49

[*Service in Vietnam, Part Two*]

TL: You don't—you deserve it. Boy, that was a lot of politics. The Ia Drang campaign was a first in a lot of ways, was it not? The first use of B-52?

BC: It was the first time B-52s were ever used in support of a unit in contact. Yeah. They were used besides that to bomb in North Vietnam. They were used to bomb some border stuff. If there was anything going on over in Laos and Cambodia, it wasn't announced, but I suspected, you know, they might have missed a target.

TL: Was that the first real engagement with the North?

BC: It first—it was the first, yes, really heavy. And we—the reason that we had Albany [Landing Zone Albany] was because all of us had to get two miles away from X-Ray. We

emptied X-Ray on the 15th or 16th and went—the 1st of 5th went to Falcon. The second—

TL: Fire Base Falcon?

BC: Yeah. And the 2nd of 7th went to Albany.

TL: And then they bombed it?

BC: They bombed X-Ray.

TL: They bombed X-Ray?

BC: Yeah. But we're going to go back. So everybody had to go get away two miles, and then they'd come back in and clear that battlefield. And so Albany went cross-country, and they went with companies on line, instead of, you know, with—and dancing artillery with them. They didn't do that. They were going to go back, and so the battalion commander is saving his troops. And they got into Albany with him in the headquarters part, and he got a couple of prisoners, and he called his company commanders for it. There was no company commander with the units that were on line, and they got chopped up. They lost 155 dead.

TL: So after the Americans left X-Ray, the Vietnamese just came back then?

BC: Oh, yeah. The day—

TL: So what was gained, what was lost? I mean, a lot of men—

BC: Well, that's the way we were doing. Every place we fought, all the landing zone, we left the next day.

TL: They were just killing fields.

BC: Yeah, they were. But we didn't keep it. That's one of the problems we've got in Afghanistan and Iraq—

TL: Yeah. Keeping territory.

BC: We go in and kick ass, and then we don't have enough forces to keep it.

TL: To keep it. So then you rotated out of Vietnam after a year and came back to where? What did you do in the States then? What was next?

BC: I came back to Fort Carson, Colorado. When I arrived there, I'm going to be 13th ranked in the—in an assault helicopter company that's getting ready to go. And that means I'm going to be Peter Pilot. And so I tell the general—I waited for him so I could see him and

he didn't want to see me, so he was going in his staff car and I beat him to it. And I told him I wasn't going to go to an outfit that's going to Vietnam where there's—I'm going to be 13th ranked or 14th. And he said, "If you're a coward, you should get out." What I told him was, "I don't want to go back with that unit to Vietnam." Because the guy who was going to command it has been passed over the most. He's a major that has been non-selected for—

TL: You didn't have confidence in the commander going over there?

BC: Oh, hell no. And I'm going to be flying a helicopter.

TL: Okay.

BC: I'm not even going to be in command of two of them. I'm going to be in command of one.

TL: Your own?

BC: Yeah. And that—I won't even be doing that because I'm going to be flying behind some idiot that's been passed over so many times he gets to be commander.

TL: So what was the circumstance that got you back to Vietnam?

BC: I went to the Armed Forces Staff College and got the hell out of Fort Carson. I had 1,400 troops and 450 were in the stockade. The commander decided I wasn't a coward—the commanding general—and he says, "I'm going to give you a full colonel slot." Now, I'm still a major. Dumb, because there's not a lieutenant colonel on the post that took that damn full colonel slot.

TL: Why was that?

BC: They wouldn't—because you had 450 people in the stockade. You had 400 others guarding them, feeding them. And so out of 1,400 troops—

TL: You had nothing.

BC: ...I got 900 that are useless. In fact, more than useless, because every day I had to be in the stockade. Every day I'm kicking people out. I got general court-martial jurisdiction. I could kick every one of those guys out. And I would talk to them, and I'd say, "Are you going to go back to duty?" And they'd say, "No, sir." And I'd say, "Good." And I'd kick them out. And the general would call me, and he says, "You haven't sent anybody back to duty." I says, "Sir, if you were commanding a company at Fort Lewis, for example, and I sent these hoods back to you and then they went and deserted and it goes on your record, what the hell are you doing to those young officers?" And these guys are not going to stay. That's why they're in here.

TL: They're undesirables?

BC: Oh, God. One of them committed murder in Germany and got away with it. Because when they sent him back to be tried, it was the Escobedo and the Miranda finding. They sent him back to be tried, and there was nobody there. So now he's in the stockade, and he's telling me how many kids I have and where they live. Some asshole—excuse me—some guy that was guarding them told him all that information. Now I want the guard—and that young guy that had committed murder and admitted it.

TL: Yeah.

BC: But you couldn't do anything to him because they couldn't prove it.

TL: So how did that lead to you going back to Vietnam the second time?

BC: To get the hell out of that unit, I had to go to the Staff College. And of course, that put me up for reassignment at the end of 12 months. And 12 months and 12 days later, I'm back in Vietnam. And when I arrive, I'm supposed to fly the commander of the 937th. I'm going to be a pilot for a staff officer. And there's no way in hell. I told him I had been in the Cav and I had had a year of [unintelligible 01:13:27] leading assault outfit. So the next day, I'm on the way to the 1st Cav again.

TL: Flying Hueys?

BC: [affirmative head nod] But I didn't get to do that then. Commanding general put me in his friggin' headquarters for a while. And I finally convinced him that I really wasn't that good at being in the headquarters. And he really didn't want me up there. He wanted me to tell him when they were doing things that weren't the same as we did the first time. And no general officer wants to hear that.

TL: No. No.

BC: No. He was lying to me when he said he—so I convinced him I ought to go out to command the 1st of the 9th, and I would fly with the different parts of the different troops in the 1st of the 9ths to get to know them. And they wouldn't know what I was there for, and I'm going to take command as soon as the one that's there gets—

TL: And what operation were you involved in? A large operation at that time, the second time around?

BC: Yeah. The battle at Khe Sanh, the 1st Cav sent a unit up there. The 1st of the 8th went up outside of the Marine—the battle that was going on for Khe Sanh. It was a real heavy battle at the time. And it was—Tet had—

[production talk]

BC: Anyhow, Tet—in January. And the Marines are catching hell, so the Cav sent a brigade up. And the 1st of the 8th was in that brigade. And the command helicopter got knocked down because the enemy brought 50s in for Tet. And we weren't used to 50s. He was flying at about 1,500 feet, and they ate him up. You've got to be at 3,000 or—to get away from 50s. Anyhow, I got two of them. They went down, and they burned. And the enemy was sitting up around them, and they were banging at my aircraft with 50s. But I was on the deck going to beat hell.

TL: Wow.

BC: And so I got over the downed aircraft, and I could tell everybody was dead. And it got dark while I was out. and I got back and when I arrived back at the 1st of the 8th, I'm the senior guy now. The CO and the XO and the three were all dead. So I tell them we're not going out at night. They want to go. These young captains are all eager. "We've got to get to the boss. He's down. We—" I don't allow people to get killed for dead bodies. I won't go in—if a commander wants me to take out wounded, I go every time.

TL: They're baiting you, in a way.

BC: Oh, well. But no. They believe in it. The creed of the Army is that "I will never leave a comrade behind." It should say, "I'll never leave a living comrade behind." Because I've been asked many times after I do medevac, come back and take out the dead bodies. And I said, "No way. I'm not going to get killed, and I'm not going to have my people killed."

TL: Because everybody out of X-Ray, they—dead or alive.

BC: Yeah. Yeah. But—in fact, we took out a lot of dead bodies because they died at the hospitals or—71 guys lived. And so—but I don't mind going after live bodies. Dead bodies—the Army ought to change the creed. "I'll never leave a living comrade behind." But when you are doing all of this evacuation stuff, you've got to be damn sure that it's for living bodies. And it's not that way even today. But it wasn't that way back in the Ia Drang and—

TL: How do you mean? That they will go back in for a dead body today as well?

BC: Absolutely. Because they have that creed, and they have it—when they go through training—and these guys, these young captains wanted to go get them and to go out at night. Now the enemy's knowing you're coming. So who's got the advantage?

TL: Were you flying the UH-1? Or had you changed ships?

BC: No. I was flying the UH-1 gunship.

TL: Oh, you were flying the—okay. So you were flying the Huey—

- BC: Yeah. Because the 1st of the 9th had their own guns, their own infantry, their own artillery units. They were—that's the unit to command if you—because they're a smaller unit. They're equivalent to a battalion. They got troops instead of companies. But they start fights. They go out and find the enemy and they start a fight, and then they get the hell away from it and let the brigade take over. Bring the big guys in.
- TL: Could you tell us about the situation at which you landed at night by the—up by a flashlight? What was that—
- BC: That was the second DSC. Moore and my boss, Keller, were overhead in Keller's helicopter because Moore's was in maintenance. And I had been up on the Bong Son plain, and we had been in combat all day. And Freeman got wounded that day.
- TL: Okay.
- BC: And my aircraft had been shot up a couple of times.
- TL: So not to interrupt, but this is almost a replay of X-Ray. It's the same kind of a situation?
- BC: Yeah. We're back at it. We're up on the Bong Son plain. And a lot of units are committed, and the enemy is down there raising hell. And as I'm flying back from further north, I've got a—I'm coming over where Moore's headquarters is, his brigade is set up, and his battalions are setting out. And one of them is the 1st of 7, and it's got Tony Nadal on it. And I'm listening on his frequency, and I hear him yelling. And then he's yelling about he's got 12 wounded in there, and the medevac's refusing to go. And the lift unit commander—
- TL: And you and Tony Nadal go way back?
- BC: Yeah. But he had been in Ia Drang. And I trusted him. And he's a West Pointer and a hell of a company commander. Should have been a general. Anyhow, he's in there and—so I'm flying back to refuel and shut down. It's after dark, and I can't see a damn thing, but I can hear him. And so he's yelling—and he knows my radio frequency. Pretty quick I hear him, we're talking. And I'm not sure if I contacted him or he contacted me. But anyhow, we're talking and he's yelling, "I got to have—get my wounded out of here." He says, "I've got 12 guys that are—and they're collected, and I have a hole where a helicopter can get in, but they won't come." And I said, "Well, I can't—I don't have fuel to do this." So I have to go back and refuel. When I was refueling, I kicked off the door gunner and the weapons because that's weight.
- TL: You lightened it up.
- BC: Well—and I know I'm going into a hole. And when Tony says—
- TL: A tree hole? A hole, a clearing?

- BC: Yeah. When he says it's small, I don't trust him. I'm not even sure I can get in there because he's going to tell me—the infantry guys will lie to you a little bit. They can tell you haven't had any fire for a few minutes, and you see all the tracers going across. You wonder who in the hell is doing it. Anyhow, I finally find him by that tracer fire when I come up. And I've only got three of us on the aircraft, and I've unloaded the ammo and the water and all the other stuff and the weapons. You can't shoot when you have infantry on the ground.
- TL: Right.
- BC: I didn't do a damn thing with those weapons. It was—they were worthless. They're weight.
- TL: In a helicopter, that would be called a "slick," wouldn't it?
- BC: Yeah. The slick.
- TL: The slick. Okay.
- BC: But it still has M60s. See, that door gunner and a crew chief—it's like this one—[points to Bell UH-1 Huey helicopter behind him]. But they're worthless. If you have infantry on the ground, you can't shoot up their backside. Because they're facing away from you, so their backside is open. And so you never fire once you have infantry on the ground.
- TL: And the muzzle is always pointed down when you land.
- BC: In my aircraft. If I ever saw pictures taken and it shows a weapon up and we're on the ground in a landing zone, whoever—I'll get rid of them. Because you can't trust yourself.
- TL: Right.
- BC: If you've got a weapon and you see somebody shooting at you, you're going to shoot.
- TL: Right. Please continue with your landing there.
- BC: Anyhow, I refuel and I go up there. And I took a second helicopter with me, but I don't know who the hell it was. It was somebody that I could tell to do it. But they don't know any of this type stuff. They're used to coming in in formation and doing what they're supposed to do. Anyhow, I get up there where Tony is, and I'm talking to him, and I'm orbiting. And I can see all this damn tracer fire, and I'm looking down at that hole. And I can't see it, but I know about where it is because of all the fire around it. And so I told him, I says, "I'm going to—if I come in and I use my searchlights or landing lights, I'll be backlighting all those wounded and your people, so I'm going to do more damage than I am good. So I can come in, but I'm—flashlight. I will blackout. I'll turn off all my nav

lights and everything, and I'll come in to a flashlight." Now, I've done that in the desert a lot.

TL: So, really, a lot of what you had done you're doing again.

BC: Except that I didn't—in the desert, you know you're not going to hit anything. So anyhow, I'm—I get overhead, and as I'm trying to make up my mind whether to do it or not, Hal Moore and my boss come on the radio. First my boss. He says, "Bruce, don't go unless you're absolutely certain you can make it." Now I've got eight months in country. Now I'm up for being relieved anyhow. Once you had six months, they want someone else doing it so they get their tickets punched. That's what happened with the 2nd of the 7th.

TL: "Tickets punched" meaning what, briefly?

BC: Get your command time.

TL: I see.

BC: Your combat time as a commander. See, McDade [Robert Alexander McDade] had been the Division 1, and he was the Albany guy. Anyhow, I'm told then by my boss, "Don't go unless you're sure you can make it." You can't ever be sure.

TL: No.

BC: So I know if I get knocked down, I'm in deep doo-doo because I'll get replaced. It's my time anyhow. I got to stay for a year, but they had to keep somebody that had experience. So I got—

TL: You were risking more than your life—

BC: Oh, I was risking my career. And then Moore comes on and he says, "We don't need a helicopter down in there." Now, these guys wrote this up for that Aviation Space Writers Award, which is what you were talking about, that I got for that rescue. Anyhow, I started my approach onto that flashlight, and the damn thing—I lost it. And I said, "I'm going to hit the trees," and I abort. And Tony comes on the radio and he says, "Why did you abort?" And I says, "Because I was going to hit trees. I lost the flashlight." He says, "I turned it off. I was getting shot at. And I said, "Tony, they're not shooting at you. They're shooting at me. I'm the helicopter coming in. They don't give a rat's ass about you right now. They want to get me before I can get in there. So put the flashlight on the ground and leave it on."

So then I land on it—and you can see the bubbles on this aircraft—[points to Bell UH-1 Huey helicopter behind him]. I land and they don't turn the flashlight off. And it's spotlighting me through that damn bubble. And my windshield's starting to get holes in

it. And so I have to tell him, you know, “Please turn the light off.” Politely, of course. And so I carry out six, and then I come back in and get the next six. And I—

TL: The same way?

BC: Yes. And this time, though, they shut it off when I hit the ground. But then he calls me on the radio and he says, “Will you come back and take out my dead because I can’t maneuver?” And I says, “You can maneuver. I’m not coming. Leave them.”

TL: And for that you won an award?

BC: Well, yes. They—Moore and my boss were told to write up what they saw by General Burdett [Allen Mitchell Burdett Jr].

TL: A combat report.

BC: Yeah. Well, General Burdett was telling them to do it for this Aviation and Space Writers Award and for a Feinberger Award [Frederick L. Feinberg Award]. Anyhow, General Burdett was in—a staff officer at the Pentagon. And he’s the one that became a three-star. But he was senior to these two guys, and he was already a general. And so they wrote it up, and they described how they told me not to go and all this. And there were 56 nominees for the award. And it’s an international award. It’s a helicopter heroism award for a year. And the 56 nominees, they—mine was ranked number one. And it got me out of the Staff College to Las Vegas for a week, got me on the Today Show, got me all sorts of stuff that I wasn’t supposed to be doing.

TL: I see. What year was this?

BC: This was 1967.

TL: Oh.

BC: It was for ‘66.

TL: I see. A year after.

BC: Yeah. At the 20th anniversary of that award, they ranked the three guys that were on each one of those boards that had done it for the whole 20 years—ranked it, and mine was ranked number one for the 20-year.

TL: That’s longevity.

BC: And that’s the one that never got upgraded. It became a permanent Distinguished Flying Cross.

TL: Did you fly the Huey gunship as well when you were in Vietnam?

BC: That was what I was flying the second time.

TL: Yeah. This—

BC: That's what I went down in. I loved it. I—but I had flown it in—before we went to the Carolinas. And then after, I was the XO of the gun company in our—I served in B Company, in D Company, and I commanded A Company, and I was in headquarters company as the adjutant. And my boss kept transferring me around for morale purposes, he said.

TL: So the first time in Vietnam, we had the Ia Drang campaign. And then you left and came back, and then you had Bong Son? Or was Bong Son in the first one as well?

BC: No, Bong Son was in the first one.

TL: Was as well.

BC: Yeah. And then my second one, I was going to command the 1st of the 9th. And I joined them, and I was only there 18 days or so. We were fighting. I ran through four gunships in a very short period of time and—but then I got knocked down.

TL: Knocked down, how?

BC: U.S. Air Force dropped two bombs on my helicopter while I was on a gun run. And I flew pretty low. I was probably ten feet off the deck and picking up sniper fire on a unit that was moving out.

TL: And you were coming in like you were doing in the Huey? You were one of the gunships on this situation?

BC: I'm picking up sniper fire on the troops and—yeah. I came across a rice patty shooting at these guys. And the gunship shoots straight ahead, unless they're using the door guns that you see. But you have your mini guns point straight ahead. You've got your rockets straight ahead—

TL: Your platform.

BC: You've got a canon up front that you can move a little bit, but everything's straight ahead, more or less. So I'm shooting at some guys shooting on our troops, and they're coming out of holes to get their shooting in, so I see them. And I just hit the mini guns and blew up. And it paralyzed me. We cartwheeled until we finally stopped, and I'm right up next to the guys I was trying to shoot. And that kind of pissed them off, and they come out of the holes trying to kill us. And I'm crawling away from the aircraft because I think it's going to burn. Nine times out of ten, they—if you went in that hard—and there was nothing left. But I crawled out through a windscreen that had been there. The doors were

jammed up. But I'm paralyzed, and I'm crawling. I think it's going to burn, and then they try to kill me. And that kind of offended me. [laughter] I was hurt. I didn't want them trying to kill me, too. But I had a Loach overhead.

TL: A small helicopter?

BC: Small helicopter with a guy with an M60 in his hands. And he cleaned that up.

TL: So what caused it—what caused the—

BC: Air Force said I flew too close to their bombing run

TL: Was it a B-52 run or what was it?

BC: No. It was B-57s out of Takhli in Thailand. And I had him doing a mission for me, and they were supposed to bomb at 7:00 in the morning and then at 10:00 to a downed aircraft. And I wanted them to bomb that aircraft. Because everybody in it was dead. I didn't want to have to get the guns out, and if it blew up, burned up, I didn't care. But we got infantry moving out to get to them.

TL: So it was a destroy mission then to take out a downed aircraft?

BC: Yeah. And I got infantry moving out to secure it. But the enemy knows it, and so I'm having a 7:00 bombing run and then another one at 10:00. And I wanted to bomb in close to them where we were moving out and—so that they would pick up anybody that was trying to ambush us.

TL: Yeah. Clean them out.

BC: And then at the aircraft. And so they called and they couldn't get off for the 7:00, so we moved out. And then at about a quarter to 10:00, I blew up. And I'm still three or four miles away from their target. And so I didn't fly too close to a damn bombing run. Their damn bombing run was in the wrong location.

TL: So then you were picked up then and sent to the hospital?

BC: Yeah. Yeah. I was lying in the edge of the rice patty in the ditch that goes along it. And my crew chief—all the guys on board were badly injured. We had four of us on the aircraft, but they all survived. And my crew chief had a compound fracture of his leg. And I had a Thompson submachine gun hung over the seat—

TL: I see.

BC: ...and he went in there and got it. He walked.

TL: So you were shot down in a Huey—or in a Huey?

BC: Huey gunship.

TL: In a Huey—I thought they only carried two people in the Huey gunship.

BC: Oh, no, no, no. That's why a Huey gunship was a lot better than the Cobra. The Cobra is two.

TL: Oh, I see. I see.

BC: One behind the other, and that stinks. Because they're air conditioned and they don't hear the ground fire—

TL: I see.

BC: ...so they can't work real low level.

TL: You were in an armed Huey and not a Cobra. I see.

BC: No. It was a C-model gunship.

TL: I see. I see.

BC: And it's built for that. But it—when you're in a Cobra, one sits behind the other and there's only two people. But in a Huey, pilots sit alongside each other, so you got this and you got this—[demonstrates]—with the two pilots. Then you got two guys back in the back. You've got one over here who's picking up ground fire that's coming up from your— shooting at you from behind. And you've got another one over here, and they've got M60s.

TL: Was Mills [Jon Mills] flying with you when that happened?

BC: Yes.

TL: He was. He flew—

BC: No. No. This was my second tour.

TL: So Mills was the first one.

BC: Mills was my first tour.

TL: Was he a good guy?

BC: [affirmative head nod] But—he was a perfect copilot. He didn't like to fly the aircraft. And he had gone and requested to be relieved from flight duty because his wife really hated it. And he was the assistant adjutant. And we got orders to go to Vietnam, I had him put in my unit.

TL: I see. I see.

BC: And I made him my copilot, and he turned out to be one hell of a—and he became a commander of an assault outfit his second tour.

TL: I see. So then you were in the hospital for how long after this—

BC: Five months.

TL: Five months. In Bangkok?

BC: No. I went first to the Philippines. And then General Burdett found out that I—he told my wife within 24 hours of when I was down. He had a tag put on me from the Pentagon. And so he called my wife to tell her that I was down. And she told him that my brother was in Japan. And I'm in the hospital in the Philippines, and the next thing I know I'm in Japan.

TL: I see.

BC: And so I spent a couple of months there. Because I kept trying to tell them I'm going back, but I had five vertebrae crushed and I had a chest—this was broken, both shoulders were out—

01:35:31

[Assignments after Vietnam]

TL: What was your assignment then after the hospital? What did—

BC: I went to Fort Lewis. And that was an interesting assignment because I wasn't assigned there. I just went there. My wife was getting tired of me convalescing at home, so I went down to Fort Lewis and convinced the general to put me in a unit. And he gave me the XO of the 339th Construction Battalion. And my job was bringing in another construction battalion out of Idaho on active duty, and we were interfacing with them.

TL: I see. So you were still in the construction business then?

BC: Yeah.

TL: You never got out of it?

BC: No. But I was supposed to be the XO, but there's no CO. And the CO is a staff officer. He's the facility engineer for the—anyhow, I get orders to open the safe and look—take out something that says "Garden Plot." I take it out, and my job is to take the Black Panther headquarters in Oakland, California. And I find out that Martin Luther King just got killed, and there's all sorts of hell going on. And they think the Black Panthers might

do something. And so I'm getting my people organized, and I get this other battalion in, and so we got 800 troops getting ready to go to Oakland.

TL: Wow.

BC: And as it turned out, we didn't have to because everything stayed reasonably quiet after Martin Luther King. Because you'd already had the Kennedys and Martin Luther King was a pacifist.

TL: So at the end of—after your accident or the—you spent a lot of time then being an administrator during your last years in the military. Is that correct?

BC: In the what?

TL: You were an administrator, more or less?

BC: Eh, I've never considered myself that. Because I was a commander and I did—commanders, they're never administrators.

TL: I see. But you did run groups of like, I guess, the construction and oversaw people?

BC: Yeah. I was a facility engineer director. I had a contractor in Thailand, and I had eight—3,800 employees. Eight hundred were American. We had 52 installations that we did the water, sewer, gas, electric. Most of it was in hotels in downtown Bangkok.

TL: And that was through the Army, for the military?

BC: Yeah. Yeah. And then I went to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri as the deputy chief of staff for a couple years. I wasn't supposed to do that. I arrived and there were two colonels that had been in Bangkok with me who told the general he ought to make me his deputy. And so the general calls me in, he said, "Would you mind putting off your command of a battalion for a year?" Two years later, he gave me the 5th Engineers, and I had that. So then I went to language school, and I had a stroke.

TL: And what caused the stroke?

BC: I had veins leaking in my—[gestures to head].

TL: Was it due to injuries of—from the war?

BC: Beats the hell out of me. I had one—can't be injuries from the war because I had one in '64 in the Carolinas.

TL: I see.

BC: But I was put in the hospital at Fort Jackson. I convinced my doctor that I needed to go back to Fort Benning. And I was going to have a helicopter come and get me, but I needed my medical records. He gave them to me. The helicopter came, and I went right back to my unit.

TL: Oh, did you?

BC: Oh, yeah. My boy—

TL: Were you still flying then?

BC: Oh, yeah. I did all this stuff in the—'65 on. Because I did this in '64. But in '74, I had a second stroke and I found out I only stole half my records. And that's when the Army got all excited about—they grounded me, and they did—they took—

TL: That was kind of the end of your military career at that point?

BC: Not really because I went—I convinced Moore—Moore was Head of Personnel in the Army, and I convinced him to let me stay. And I went down to Venezuela, where I wore civilian clothes for a couple years.

TL: And you were the attaché? You and your wife were—

BC: I was the Defense Mapping Agency Director there.

TL: I see.

BC: Dealing with their cartographia.

01:39:50

[Post-military life]

TL: And your life, it's like people and situations have arose, come and gone as you progress through your career.

BC: Yup. And I enjoyed it. I kept going to school, and I got a bachelor's degree in 1969. I got out of high school in '51, so it took a while. And then I to—I got a masters before I got out. And I went to being a city manager in California. And I like combat better. [laughter] I spent three years in a little town—

TL: What town was that?

BC: Dunsmuir.

TL: Dunsmuir. Northern California?

BC: Yeah.

TL: And then you went to Arizona?

BC: Then I went to Arizona, and I got in public works there. And when I retired from there after 15 years, that city grew 1,000 people every month. It's bigger than Tacoma and Spokane, population-wise, put together.

TL: What does a—briefly, what does a city manager do?

BC: He runs all of the administration. The mayor's an elected official, but the operation of the city in city-management form of government is done by the—and the mayor keeps—you know, like in Mesa America, be elected for two years twice.

TL: I see.

BC: A council member could be for two years twice. The city manager stayed there almost 40 years. The best city manager in the country. He planned everything for 35 years. He put a waterline in the ground. It was for 35 years. It would go from the water treatment plant all the way to the city limits. And it would be able to—anything that was growing—any subdivision or commercial or manufacturing would be planned in the city plan.

TL: I see.

BC: And he would make sure that that waterline going out would be enough to get the water all the way to the city limits. Then the sewer line coming back would be—so it could get to the treatment plant.

TL: It's like a military operation.

BC: Oh, he was. But he was really—and he had been the public works manager before he became the city manager.

TL: So your life, your personal life then—you're a widower?

BC: No. No.

TL: And how about your children? What do you have on them?

BC: I proposed to my wife when she was 16, 17, 18, 19, 20. She finally said yes. And she's from here. She's from Kent. And we were married for 54 years. I loved her for 58. We had 53 homes, three sons, all have master's degrees or better. They were all Eagle Scouts. They all were outstanding students. But my wife says she raised four boys. And she did. I couldn't have had a better wife.

[Closing thoughts]

TL: You've had a life of five guys, I would say. What are you giving back? What is your legacy? What do you want to be remembered for as your—

BC: Well, I still try to do things. I've been the mentor for our young Army recipients. We have 11 total out of Afghanistan. All but three I think are Army. And I meet with them and talk with them, and every one of them has the same problem.

TL: Really?

BC: [touches his Medal of Honor] Wearing this is really difficult for the person that first gets it because you know you didn't do anything except what you were supposed to do and what you had to do. You know that it isn't—we didn't volunteer for anything, you just did it. And they think that this—[touches his Medal of Honor]—belongs to the guys that died and the ones that didn't come back. But every one of them has a row of Good Conduct Medals. So I have them wear Good Conduct Medals under their collar. That's harder to explain for me by far than this. Because I never said I earned this. I've never said I earned this. But by pointing out that they have the Good Conduct Medals—and then usually they have three or four, you know.

TL: Right.

BC: And I say, "Even your mother and grandmother wouldn't believe you deserve a Good Conduct Medal. So wear this damn Medal of Honor with pride and understand you're going to have it for life. You have no options. You are a Medal of Honor recipient. You're not a winner. You're a recipient. You receive it for all the others that you were with or that you weren't with, even, that have served in our military." So they get the idea. And every one of them is an excellent speaker. All of them, Army ones, I think could have probably been soldiers of the year in their units. And because they were so good in their units, when they did something that was heroic, so to speak, they—somebody took the time to make sure they were written up and it was carried on.

TL: It was acknowledged.

BC: Acknowledged. That was the word I was looking for. But yes. And our young ones all have families or—and all are hardworking, excellent speakers. And I'm proud of them.

TL: You've got a baseball team named after you, too.

BC: Yes. In Olympia, the Ball Fields. But that was because I was the first All-American out of there.

TL: Colonel, we appreciate you talking to us. And I think we've all learned a lot, and I hope the people who see this in the future will get something out of this. Thank you very much. We salute you.

BC: Well, thank you.

01:45:39

[END OF INTERVIEW]