

Charles Franklin Austin
Narrator

Wayne Clark
Interviewer
New York State Military Museum

Interviewed March 15, 2012
at the Isaac C. Griswold Library in Whitehall, New York

WC: Today is the 30th of June, 2010. We are at the Isaac C. Griswold Library in Whitehall, New York. My name is Wayne Clark, I'm with the New York State Military Museum, in Sartoga Springs. Sir, for the record, would you please state your full name and your date and place of birth, please?

CA: Charles Franklin Austin. My date of birth is January 4, 1929. My place of birth is West Rutland, Vermont.

WC: And did you attend school in West Rutland?

CA: No. I attended school in Corinth, NY, Whitehall, NY, and then went into the military.

WC: Okay, and uh, let me... Before we get to the military, you mentioned that at age 13 you had joined the New York State Home Guard?

CA: New York State Home Guard, Company K, Glen's Falls, NY. From 13 to 16 December, 1945. We was in the Home Guard.

WC: Okay. How did you get involved with that?

CA: Well, my uncle and I, we were just young kids and we wanted to become part of the American armed forces. And we knew we couldn't go on active duty so we did the next best thing and uh, I guess we told a little white lie and they asked us how old we were, and I said 17. And I spent three years there. Went to summer camp training, all the military training that was involved with it.

WC: Where did you go for the training?

CA: Camp Smith, Peekskill, NY.

WC: And did you wear a uniform?

CA: Oh yes. We had the home guard uniform which was at that time green shirts and green pants. At the time. They indicated NY home guard, or State of New York.

WC: Were they like WWI uniforms? At that time?

CA: No, they were like WWII. Just the color was different, so you could distinguish the difference.

WC: I see. Did you have any weapons training?

CA: Oh yes. We had the 1903 Springfield, machine gun training, and familiarization with all other military weapons.

WC: And what rank did you advance to?

CA: That period? Private. [Both men chuckle]

WC: And I'm assuming that you enjoyed the military life and that's why you went on to a career in the military?

CA: I, uh... In 1945 when I joined, enlisted in the home, The United States Coast Guard at the time, which incidentally, the Coast Guard was under the Department of the Navy at that time, because my uncle has been, made a career of the Coast Guard and I wanted to be like him, at that point.

WC: When you joined the Coast Guard, where did they send you for your training?

CA: Curtis Bay, Maryland. It was in Curtis Bay, MD. We had a couple months of that, then we were assigned to a U.S. Coast Guard Cutter, Owasco. During that time period, in 1946 we were on North Atlantic patrol which is the same patrol that the U.S.S. Dorchester was torpedoed in torpedo alley. Even though it was after the war, or towards the end of the war, it was still patrolled.

WC: And what was your job aboard ship?

CA: I was a fireman. I went to basic engineering school in the Coast Guard, and I was a fireman in the engine room.

WC: And how big a crew was on the ship?

CA: Oh, I really don't recall, but I would say...

WC: Approximately?

CA: ... in the neighborhood of 200 – 250 because it was a patrol boat.

WC: And how long did you stay out to sea, normally?

CA: We would stay out several months at a time. Until 1947 when we returned to Boston and I was then assigned to U.S. Coast Guard cutter Algonquin, who was Air/Sea Rescue. We would rescue ships that were sinking during storm periods, and what have you. And from that point, I was separated in May of 1947, honorable discharge.

WC: And did you have any desire to reenlist or did you want to try something else?

CA: Well, being of a very young age, I was undecided what I wanted to do. So I met my wife and married her in April of 1948 and in January 1949, I went into the U.S. Army National Guard in Whitehall, NY. And with periods of active duty in 1953 and 1955. September of 1955 I was separated from the New York National Guard and went into the United States Army, on active duty and remained there until July 1, 1973 and retired.

WC: Okay. Let me go back to the National Guard. Were you just a part-time National Guardsman, or did you hold one of the full-time positions?

CA: No, I... the only time I held full-time positions was when I was called to active duty for four months in 1953, four months in 1955. That was considered active duty, uh, periods because I was recalled to active duty through special orders.

WC: Where did they send you during those periods?

CA: Fort Knox, Kentucky.

WC: Both times?

CA: Yes. I went to Tank Leadership School, and I went to Armor Advanced NCO School, which I attained the rank of Sergeant First Class, ¹E-6. At that time I was tank commander and armor instructor, on tanks.

WC: And what unit were you with, with the National Guard?

CA: I was with the tank company, 205th Infantry.

WC: And they were based out of?

CA: Well, in Whitehall, NY. The company. Except for the periods of active duty in Ft. Knox, KY.

WC: And did you enjoy your stay with the Guard?

CA: Oh yes. Yes I did.

WC: And you went to summer camp every year.

CA: Summer camp every year.

WC: Where did you go, mostly?

CA: Pine Camp, now Camp, uh, Fort Drum.

WC: Okay.

CA: And went to Officers' Candidates' School in Peekskill, Ny.

WC: So you went through the program called ESMA? Empire State Military Academy?

CA: Yes.

WC: And you were commissioned as a...

CA: No. I wasn't commissioned. I stayed a sergeant. And I didn't make Chief Warrant Officer until I went on active duty. I was a Sergeant First Class, E-7 for seven years, and then I made Chief Warrant Officer [CWO]. I worked six years in the Pentagon on active duty. And I was assigned to the Defense Atomic Support Agency out of the Pentagon.

¹ Sergeant First Class is currently pay grade E-7; Prior to 1958 Sergeant First Class was pay grade E-6

WC: Wow! Okay, well, let me ask you about your active duty time. What made you join the active Army?

CA: Several reasons. One; I had a lot of military training. Two; I enjoyed the military life and I had some wonderful assignments and I just got along with it. I had periods of doubt, at times, but the majority of the time it was satisfactory.

WC: Do you want to tell us about your commissioning? To Warrant Officer? And what duty assignments you held and what the job entailed?

CA: I was personnel Sergeant Major in the Pentagon with the Defense Atomic Support Agency. I was also one of the team that was part of the Joint Task Force 7, the last nuclear testing in the Pacific. That was my responsibility, administrative responsibility to provide the troops and arrangements and what have you. From the duty in the Pentagon, in 1966, I was appointed to Warrant Officer, W-1. At that time, I had an assignment with NATO, as the Personnel Sergeant Major of NATO forces, American forces in Belgium. When they were just changing from Paris to Belgium. And when they appointed me a warrant officer, they changed my orders and sent me to Vietnam.

WC: Now you were, you held the rank of sergeant major?

CA: Yes.

WC: And how did you feel? Going from the highest enlisted rank, to like the lowest of the officer ranks?

CA: I accepted it, very well. And I adjusted real quickly. Because I did have the majority of my military training as a sergeant major, and a sergeant, so it wasn't hard for me to take command and give orders. And my period of adjustment went very well. I made a very good career of it.

WC: And when were you sent to Vietnam?

CA: 1966 until 1967.

WC: Okay.

CA: And my second trip was January to December 1970, a full year.

WC: Alright. Now your first trip to Vietnam, how did you get over there? Did you go by...

CA: I travelled by the U.S.S. Eltinge, George, Eltinge. We spent 29 days on the Pacific.

WC: Did you get sea-sick at all?

CA: No. I never did, but a lot of troops did. But if you remember, I was in the Coast Guard and out at sea and I never got sick then either. So, but, I never got sea-sick. I was the Assistant Adjutant, because I was a warrant officer, I was Assistant Adjutant to Troop Command. Which each ship, as it goes over, is a command. And I was assistant to the commander.

WC: And whereabouts did you land in Vietnam?

CA: In, we, uh, had a stay over in Da Nang, Vietnam and then our home port was Cam Rahn Bay.

WC: What was life like in Cam Rahn Bay, 1966?

CA: Sand, sand, and more sand. And we lived on the side of the dunes, we pitched our tents in the sand, and that's... sand. It was arid, it was hot. Sometimes when we had the opportunity to take showers, we'd take a shower at midnight and the water was almost scalding hot, because they put them in 55, water in 55 gallon drums and when you' come out you had to be very careful because it was so hot, just from the sun.

WC: So back in 1966, Cam Rahn Bay wasn't really built up, at that point then?

CA: No, no. Matter of fact, I uh, because of my duties, and I did very well, I was assigned to an engineer company to construct some enlisted barracks. And I had some teams of enlisted people to do that for me.

WC: Did you have Seabees working with you guys too?

CA: No. Nope, just strictly from our own ranks. Strictly Army built.

WC: Were you guys rocketed, or hit with mortars?

CA: Almost on a nightly basis. It's something you got used to. Occasionally, uh, what they were doing, we were adjacent to an air force base, and what they were trying to do was shell the air force base. Of course, they sent some our way too.

WC: What about ground attacks? Did you experience any of those at all?

CA: Not in '66, '67, no.

WC: Okay. Did you get out of country on an R & R, at all?

CA: Yes. I went to Hawaii. A captain and I, we called our wives, made arrangements and we spent a week on R & R in Hawaii.

WC: Did you see any USO shows, like Bob Hope or...

CA: Oh yes I did! I saw Bob Hope. I think it was Christmas, 1946. '66, pardon me, '66. And I was helping on the stage. I also was the altar server with Cardinal Spellman, who was the military chaplain at that point, at Can Rahn Bay. Another warrant officer and I served as altar boys for him.

WC: Did you travel to other parts of Vietnam during that tour?

CA: Very slight. Because we were building up. Building up our camps, our barracks, buildings to operate from. So, during that period. So we got out very, I think just one trip. We made a tour, temporary duty for whatever happened. Yes, just once. That time.

WC: Were you able to communicate by telephone, at all, back to the States? Or was it strictly by letters and snail mail?

CA: I was very fortunate, I had gotten acquainted with another warrant officer who ran the signal outfit and I had access to the United States whenever I wanted it so I felt pretty fortunate. So, yes, I could. And I did call my wife once or twice.

WC: Okay. What about the food? Did you have fresh food, or did you rely on a lot of C-rations?

CA: Well, we had a lot of C-rations, but what some of those Army cooks could do with the C-rations was amazing. Plus, I have very little dislikes when it comes to food. I'll eat anything that you put in front of me. So, uh, but there was a lot of troops didn't, but I did. I mean like I said. I was not fussy. I ate what was presented to me because I needed the nourishment.

WC: What about the mosquitoes? Malaria? Any problems with that?

CA: Well, we took our malaria pills once a week, and...

WC: Did you have the big orange ones?

CA: The big orange one and a little white one. And then we spent the remainder of that week, until we got the new pills, running between the office and the duties and the bathroom, latrines. Sorry about that. But that's the way it was. Yes.

WC: Okay.

CA: But we did excellent as far as food was concerned. It was great.

WC: Now what about your supplies? Were you adequately supplied with enough equipment and construction...

CA: At Cam Rahn Bay, we had storage buildings. And they had already had a storage unit in place, with the equipment. We had plenty of new combat boots when we arrived, and new uniforms. And we had access to whatever we needed.

WC: Were you wearing the jungle uniform at that time?

CA: Yes. We were reissued uniforms, the jungle ones.

WC: What type of weapon did you carry?

CA: I carried a .45 pistol and an M-16 rifle. We went over with M-14s, which is the 30-06 and while we were there we were issued the new M-16. In 1966-1967, we were one of the first units to get the M-16s.

WC: Did you have any contact with the civilian population?

CA: Only through the motor pool, and when we would go to a village, visiting a village. And that's the only contact we had at our level.

WC: So you didn't have civilians working on...

CA: Well, yeah. They worked as firemen, and other civilian jobs, and maids, and what have you. And sometimes they took care of the, they worked in the messhall, mainly. And maids.

Clean up the barracks, and what have you. That wasn't, that wasn't an acquaintance contact. They were there.

WC: And you left in 1967.

CA: Yes.

WC: What major changes did you see from when you got there in '66? I'm assuming you were there for an entire year?

CA: Yes. You mean when I went back in 1970?

WC: Well, at the end of, well in 1967.

CA: Well, there was a major build up, because we had gotten word that there was going to be quite a bit of activity, which happened February 1968, which was the Tet Offensive. And they were building up, sending in units of infantry, troops and barracks at various locations. And they were well warned it was going to happen.

WC: So they were prepared...

CA: Preparing.

WC: ... for all the troops to come in country.

CA: Well, in country, plus infantry units that were there. Combat units that were already there, and what have you. We left in October of 1967, and the Tet Offensive was February 1968.

WC: Okay. When you left Vietnam, how did you go back home?

CA: I flew back.

WC: Flew?

CA: We flew back, yeah. Yeah, I didn't want to go back to the States, some 29 days on the ocean.

WC: Uh-huh. And I assume you had a 30 day leave?

CA: Yes I did.

WC: And whereabouts were you assigned after your leave?

CA: I was assigned with the United States Army Security Agency, in Washington, DC.

WC: Okay. And how long did that tour last for?

CA: Well, until 1970.

WC: When you were called back to Vietnam?

CA: Yes.

WC: Okay. During that period of time, when you were in Washington, was there a big anti-war movement?

CA: There was all kinds of anti-war movement. If you'll remember, recall, the Kent College.

WC: Yes. Kent State.

CA: People speaking out. People speaking, shouldn't have it. There was some, yes. But we still had our duty to perform and that's what we did.

WC: Were there a lot of protests in the Washington, DC area?

CA: Not as many as other places, apparently. Because they were too well prepared.

WC: Okay. And at the end of that tour in Washington, they sent you back to Vietnam.

CA: Yes.

WC: And whereabouts did you go?

CA: I went, I was assigned to the 4th Infantry Division, Pleiku, in the central highlands. Camp Enari, if you want to...

WC: What was that camp?

CA: Enari [spells the word out]

WC: Alright. And when you went over the second time, did you fly over?

CA: Yes.

WC: And did you land in Cam Rahn Bay? Or Saigon, or...?

CA: Saigon. We landed in Saigon and took another transportation from there. Saigon to Pleiku.

WC: Okay. What was Pleiku like, January of '70?

CA: It was, uh... We were assigned to an Air Force Base, Camp Enari was an Air Force base, not an Army base, but we had Army and Air Force there. And it was kind of isolated, really. The city of Pleiku, city... I guess you could call it a village, it was a small place, which I never did get to see the village. But we stayed right there. And then, until the fall of 1970, when we deactivated the 3rd Infantry Brigade and we moved to Chu Lai. And then from there, from Chu Lai back to the United States.

WC: Okay. During that second tour did you notice a buildup of enemy troops?

CA: There was, when we were in Pleiku we had a lot more evening activities. Mainly, many times the enemy would come running through at midnight. They would toss satchel charges against the buildings, blow up buildings. We were very fortunate that we had a very minimum of casualties. But they would happen. And you never knew when it was going to be, then the whole base would shut down. And then they would go through. You never knew when it was going to happen.

WC: So on a fairly regular basis then, you were still hit with rockets and mortars?

CA: Yes. Matter of fact, on one... I used to have a team of people who would go to landing bases and check them out. And my sergeant and I, one day we were in a bunker and Charlie hit and we were blown sky high up into the air and landed 4-5 feet away. Very fortunate it wasn't more of a direct hit.

WC: Were you wounded at all?

CA: No.

WC: Okay. What were your quarters like? Were you in tents at that point, or were you in semi-permanent barracks?

CA: Well, my quarters was... we had wooden barracks, we had regular bunk beds. That was good. But when we went to visit landing bases, we took what we could get. Matter of fact, we slept on the side hill at one time. And uh, we'd be, I don't know. It's just a matter of doing what you're doing and getting it done. We did our duty and did our job.

WC: What did your, if there was a typical day, what was your work day like?

CA: Well, one day we were up on the, checking the troops out. Our mission was to check the troops; make sure that they had everything, that their records were in order, their files, if they needed anything. To make sufficient contact with the right people, and just generally talking with the commander, the brigade commander, at the time. And just taking, I guess you would say almost a morale issue. And that's why we were there. To let them know that we were still supporting them and doing what we should do.

WC: Did you find that overall the units were in good shape and the morale was good?

CA: To, on the most part, yes. As long as you could get the helicopters in with fresh supply, you know, cold drinks and a couple other things, ammunition. Yes it was good.

WC: During that time period did you ever encounter any sort of racial problems or racial unrest?

CA: Only one time, and I didn't have the experience, but one of the units was standing down, and as I recall there was a couple black soldiers, they sprayed the orderly room of one of the companies and killed the first sergeant. And of course, they were apprehended. But that's the only...

WC: Just an isolated incident.

CA: But there was a certain amount of uh, you had to be, I would think, had to be careful. But I was a career soldier. I got along with, didn't matter to me what color he was. He was a soldier.

WC: Alright. Did you get an R & R on that second tour?

CA: Yes I did.

WC: Back to Hawaii again?

CA: Back to Hawaii. So, yes I did.

WC: Okay. And did you have any children during your career?

CA: I had two; a daughter and a son.

WC: Let me ask you, how did your children adapt to Army life? With their dad gone for a couple tours, Vietnam?

CA: They were used to that, they adapted better than my wife. I was gone over a longer period. But anyway, they accepted it. So... and they were “military brats”, as they call them.

WC: And, uh, you mentioned going to Chu Lai, during the last part of your tour? Tell us about how that transpired.

CA: Well, that was our jumping off space for the drawing down of the division. And we just made, I was in an advanced detail to make sure that places for the troops, and food, and what have you. I was one of the project officers. The team I had of enlisted people, we’d go visit some of the native people.

And we got, it was just... it was mainly routine. You did your business, you’re getting ready to deactivate, you’re standing down, you’re taking inspections, taking inventories of your materials and equipment; what’s going to be kept, what’s going to be sent, and what’s going to be left behind for the Vietnamese soldiers.

WC: Was there rumors floating around that the United States was pulling, going to be pulling out of Vietnam?

CA: All the time. All the time. And it was our responsibility to make it look like we were going to stay forever. So, I think we did a pretty good job.

WC: Okay. Alright, you left in December 1970. Was that before Christmas?

CA: Yes.

WC: So you made it home for Christmas?

CA: Uh-huh. I was home for Christmas.

WC: Okay. And, uh, once you got back to the States, did you retire at that point?

CA: No. 1970 I was assigned to Ft. Belvoir, VA, because I was right back in the Washington, DC area, which I had been there previously. And I was the personnel officer for Officers’ Engineer School, at Ft. Belvoir.

WC: And how long did that tour last?

CA: Until I retired.

WC: Okay. And how many years’ service did you have when you retired?

CA: I was going on 27 years. With accumulation of my Coast Guard, National Guard, Active Duty time, and Active Duty Army.

WC: Did they try to talk you into staying?

CA: No.

WC: No? You just decided it was...

CA: We were, basically because they were having a reduction in armed forces.

WC: That's right.

CA: You asked for it, you were almost, got it.

WC: Okay. And I suppose your wife was relieved.

CA: She wanted to go home. Or come home. One or the other.

WC: Okay. Alright. You had 27 years military service, you retired. What happened next?

CA: I retired. I came home.

WC: You came home to, uh, you don't seem like the type of person who could sit still.

CA: Well, we moved to Florida for a year. And came back. And then in the mean time I got, worked various places. I worked for Vermont Job Service in Rutland, VT for four and a half years. Then I went to, went up to International Paper, worked up there for four or five years. And then I worked at Lake George at a motel/resort for seven years.

WC: Did you find it difficult going from the military regimen to working in the civilian world?

CA: I had, one of my major problems I had was it took me almost three years to adjust to the fact that I didn't have to tell anybody where I was. I mean, you know, before you had to sign out, sign in, somebody had to know where you were going to be. And for the longest while, I'd tell them, I used to say, "I don't know who I should let know where I'm at!" So, but I got adjusted.

WC: And you finally retired. Did you join any veterans' organizations at all?

CA: I joined the American Legion, Whitehall. I joined the VFW, the DAV, uh, yes.

WC: Okay. Now, I'm looking at your date of birth. You are 80 years old?

CA: 81.

WC: 81.

CA: Yep. 81 and a half.

WC: My goodness. You don't look 81 [both men chuckle].

CA: Sorry.

WC: Now, how do you think your time in the service changed or affected your life? Obviously it was quite positive.

CA: Well, I enjoyed my career. I had moments, but I overcame them. Because my goal was to achieve what I've gotten. And I always kept that foremost in the back of my mind. That this is what it's all about. You have to give a little, take a little and survive. And I did. That's exactly what I did. Not only for myself, but for my family.

WC: Have you stayed in contact with anyone you were in the service with?

CA: Very much so. We recently got letters from my coworkers and warrant officer's families. They live in Virginia, Pennsylvania, Florida, all over. Yes, I have stayed in contact.

WC: Have you attended any reunions, at all?

CA: No. I've been thinking of trying to get a uh, doing it myself and getting established for the 518th Personnel Service Company, on our first trip to Vietnam. I've got some current information and I was going to try to get a reunion started.

WC: Oh.

CA: But I haven't done that much about it yet.

WC: Okay. Is there anything that we didn't touch on that you'd like to tell us or further discuss?

CA: Well, it would take a long time. Buncha stories. But, you know, I have several medals. I didn't mention them, but I have those. I can send you a list of those.

WC: Sure.

CA: There's just so many, too many of them.

WC: Uh-huh.

CA: I earned a lot of them when I was enlisted and I earned a lot of them when I was an officer, warrant officer.

WC: Okay. [to someone off camera] Did you have any questions?

UI²: Yeah, just a couple. Did you bring anything back from Vietnam? Along, mementos?

CA: Yes I did. My last day in Chou Lai I had bought two green elephants. And I bought them, paid for them down in the civilian village and they shipped them back home and I still have them. Matter of fact, they beat me home. I flew back and they were too, elephants, I guess, to the Vietnamese are a sign of good luck in their homes.

WC: Uh-huh. And how big were they?

CA: Oh, they stand, I'd say, about 20 inches high. And I put glass tops on them and you put a lamp on top of that.

WC: Were they made out of wood, or?

² New, unintroduced speaker.

CA: Ceramics.

WC: Ceramic.

CA: Ceramics. Yes I did.

UI: Any military stuff?

CA: Uh, just myself.

UI: Just yourself? Now, you retired, I think you said, in '73?

CA: Yes. July 1973.

UI: I think the Vietnam War ended the next year?

CA: In '75.

UI: How did you feel when you saw the films of Saigon falling?

CA: I'm sorry, I didn't hear you.

UI: How did you feel when you saw the films of Saigon falling?

CA: Uh, it must've, uh... I don't know how I felt. All I know is they were evacuating, the people were trying to get out. I saw a lot of troops trying to help people, trying to take care of the masses. If you want the truth, I'm thankful I wasn't there.

WC: Okay. Thank you very much for your interview.

CA: That it?

WC: That's it.

CA: Okay. Do you want that list of medals and [dvd skips] get it up. Shut off. [skips again] and uh, maybe you'd better let me tell it before you hear it. And...