

**Donald Charles Little  
Narrator**

**February 5, 2009  
At Saratoga County Veterans Transitional Home  
Ballston Spa, NY**

Interviewer (**INT**): Sir, for the record, please state your full name, date and place of birth?

Donald Charles Little (**DCL**): Donald Charles Little. May 13, 1949

**INT**: Where you born?

**DCL**: Elmira, New York

**INT**: Did you grow up in Elmira and go to school in Elmira?

**DCL**: Yes I did. I lived in Elmira until 1982 and then we moved to the Albany area. I went to the Southside High School in Elmira and graduated in 1967.

**INT**: After graduation did you go on to college or to work?

**DCL**: I attended Corning CC for approximately a year and a half and then I dropped out of college and I went to work at Sears and that was during the time when the draft was in place and I received a notice to go for a physical in June and in August of 1969 I was inducted into the U.S. army

**INT**: So you were drafted for 2 years?

**DCL**: Yes.

**INT**: Whereabouts did you go for your basic training?

**DCL**: Fort Dix, New Jersey

**INT**: And was your first time away from home?

**DCL**: Yes it was my first time away from home.

**INT**: And what was basic training like at Fort Dix?

**DCL**: [pause] It was kind of a challenge. One of the ways that I've always look at things is that I want to put forth my best effort. And while you hear a lot of stories about basic training, I really kind of enjoyed the challenges of some of it. As a matter of fact, one of the goals was you could go from E1 to E2 if you were recognized for accomplishing certain things in basic training and I was able to do that

**INT:** After basic training you went to school to be a medic?

**DCL:** Yes, at Fort Sam Houston.

**INT:** Did you choose that or did the Army choose that for you?

**DCL:** The Army chose that for me. I had no [laugh] medical background at all and no thoughts [laugh] of being in the medical field .

**INT:** What was that school like?

**DCL:** It was interesting in terms of being something that I had very little experience in. Most of the companies down there at Ft. Sam Houston that were going through the medic training were being sent to Vietnam. What was my reaction to the training? I enjoyed some of it.

**INT:** Was it difficult and pretty intense?

**DCL:** Some of it was. To think that you might be put into a situation where some of the things that you were learning might make the difference with somebody else's life, yes.

**INT:** Do you think the training you received there prepared you for what you saw in Vietnam?

**DCL:** No. Not at all. It was a ten week training and our company didn't go to Vietnam. I ended up spending some time in an ambulance unit at Ft. Polk, Louisiana prior to going to Vietnam. But I don't think it in any way did it really prepare you for what you might experience over there

**INT:** At Ft. Polk were you really able to work in your MLS?

**DCL:** You really didn't. We provided coverage at the hospitals, firing range, and maybe basic training companies..... so you really didn't have too much exposure to things that would help prepare for things in Vietnam.

**INT:** How long were you at Ft. Polk?

**DCL:** I was at Ft. Polk from November, 1969 to [pause] just about a year.

**INT:** And then you received orders for Vietnam?

**DCL:** Yes. While I was at Ft. Polk one of my top 3 choices of places where I would like to be in the military-and that was the case with most of the people that were at Ft. Polk-they wanted to get out of there. I ended up putting in for an opportunity to apply-for a program where they tested different army equipment and different experiments that were going on, and so I applied for that and I ended up going to Edgewood Arsenal, right outside of Baltimore, Maryland.

**INT:** What was that like for you?

**DCL:** It was interesting. Just to give you an example, one of things I participated in while I was there was testing gas masks. So you would be put into a situation where you

would test a gas mask and there would be a follow-up and they would ask you questions they had about your experience with that. I was there about a month and a half and that was when I got my orders for Vietnam.

**INT:** Did you get to go home on leave before going over?

**DCL:** Well, that was one of the incentives about going to the program. There was a lot of leave built into it – so that I could get home on weekends being that Baltimore wasn't that far from New York-I was able get home on the weekends, and sometimes they would be extended because of participating in some of the experiments they were working on.

**INT:** Did you have your own vehicle at that time?

**DCL:** No, I didn't. I would use the bus to get home or I had family that would come down and pick me up and take me home.

**INT:** Were you surprised when you eventually did get your orders for Vietnam?

**DCL:** I was a little surprised because I figured the tour over there was a year, and I was down to about 11 months and so when my orders came through for me to go to Vietnam I was a little surprised that I was going.

**INT:** So you went over there with a little less than a year left?

**DCL:** Yes.

**INT:** Where did you leave from to go to Vietnam?

**DCL:** I left from Oakland and I returned to Ft. Lewis, Washington.

**INT:** Whereabouts did you land in Vietnam?

**DCL:** In Ben Hoa, the Air Force base right there. That was where I came into the country and from there I was taken to where the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division headquarters were. That's where I was assigned.

**INT:** When you stepped off the plane in Vietnam what was your impression?

**DCL:** [chuckle] I had a funny experience. While I was over in Vietnam I really only saw a couple of people that I knew prior to going over there, and one of the individuals getting on the plane to come home was from my hometown. And the interesting thing about it was that we went to high school together. We were never very close but he knew who he was and I knew who he was. He was on his way home and I was just coming in with my new jungle fatigues. And so the feelings—and it was around Christmas time when I was coming in—and I guess I was thinking about just getting through this time and being able to tolerate whatever assignment I was given over there.

**INT:** Were you sent up to the 25<sup>th</sup> division right away?

**DCL:** The way that it worked was you were taken to an area, and there was an area-not really barracks-where you were housed and they would call you out every morning and the first morning I was there that was—I'm not really 100 percent sure of how all this

worked and again it's been awhile. But they called my name for the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division and there was another medic and he was from Connecticut and we both ended up going to the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division.

**INT:** Where was the 25<sup>th</sup> located at that time?

**DCL:** It was right in Ben Hua and we went to the rear and there was very little orientation before you were actually assigned to a company and your platoon that you're going to be with. I was assigned to Alpha Company and the other medic-Bob from Connecticut- I can't remember his last name-went to Charlie Company.

**INT:** So you were based on Ben Hua at that point?

**DCL:** Yes.

**INT:** And how long was it before you actually went out on patrol?

**DCL:** It wasn't that long. It was within a couple weeks and I went out to fire base. I believe it was firebase Miri Ian [unclear] and the medics had an area there in the fire base where the aid station was and then you were given information about which company you were going to be assigned to and got your aid bags ready and all the essential information that you needed to go out into the field. You had an opportunity to talk to some of the medics that were out on a mission and be able to ask questions about some of things I needed to know to be effective and to be a medic.

**INT:** Talking to the other medics, could you narrow it down to – what was the main type of wounds they dealt with? Were they gunshot wounds? Shrapnel wounds? Dysentery?

**DCL:** One of the things that I remember that [made me] was most beneficial. The guys would have a lot of trouble with their feet and so we would try to carry medications that would help with that. It wasn't so.....[pause] the thing that was impressed upon me the most important thing was our job was to get to somebody wounded, to apply first aid and stop the bleeding and to help get them into an area where they could receive whatever medical attention was required. It was our job to get them out of those kinds of situations. So, as a medic I used to carry two aid bags to let my platoon know that I was there for them and to help them and if there was anything that I could do to make anything easier for them, I would.

**INT:** Did you find that your equipment and supplies were adequate?

**DCL:** Yes. I guess for what we were supposed to do, our job. There was probably situations-not for myself but for others-where may have not been items in the aid bag that needed to be there. But I didn't experience that.

**INT:** How many times did you go out on patrol before you actually came under fire?

**DCL:** I think it was about a month and a half. We were radioed that there was some enemy in the area and they were supposed to be headed in our direction. And they did appear and as far as I know one of those was killed but we didn't experience any casualties at that time.

**INT:** And were you fighting the NVA [North Vietnam Army] or VC [Viet Cong]?

**DCL:** I believe it was the VC.

**INT:** And at what point were the personnel in your platoon wounded?

**DCL:** Again, I had a pretty quick orientation to this. Because the day I went to the fire base there was an accident right on the perimeter where they were unloading grenades. What happened was that a pin had come out of the handle and there was a loud noise and I was over at the tent where the aid station was and there was a lot of noise and yelling. When they were unloading the grenades the person who was unloading them saw that the pin had come out and panicked and instead of throwing it out on the perimeter it went off and it was a staff sergeant and he had a lot a shrapnel. I don't really know whatever happened to him because he was taken to an evacuation hospital where he could get the attention he needed.

**INT:** Were you involved in his treatment?

**DCL:** He was brought to the aid station and then he was taken by helicopter to an evacuation hospital. The only really bad experience I had was that we used to set up a line with claymores and we used to put grenades in front of them so that [it was] an area that we thought the enemy was using. It was being taken down-I wasn't close to it-and one of the guys in my platoon was taking down the claymores and they would explode the claymores, but with the grenade placed behind it he got some shrapnel in his eye and I applied immediate first aid and we got him back to the hospital. As for casualties, I never had anybody that was actually shot or wounded from enemy fire.

**INT:** While you were out on patrol did you ever witness any of the enemy or did you have to treat any of the enemy soldiers?

**DCL:** I never treated any of the enemy soldiers. Shortly after I started going out on missions we set up one of the lines of the claymores and grenades and I experienced—they were detonated and we heard that and we weren't very far from them. There's a procedure you go through when that happens. When we went up there were three bodies on that trail and I remember looking at them. [pause] The Vietnamese tended to take on a younger look anyway but I was looking at it and it was my first experience with that and seeing somebody. That was what we were there to do, and yet it was hard to look at those faces and I began to think about their families and that they had a life like I did.

**INT:** They were Viet Cong?

**DCL:** I believe they were VC, yes.

**INT:** Typically, how long were you out on a patrol?

**DCL:** It was nine days and then we would come back in.

**INT:** Did you have to treat any tropical diseases? Obviously with the wet feet?

**DCL:** Because you were in the wet a lot you had leeches that would get on the guys so we had ointments that we would provide for them and powder and talc. I went through a lot of foot powder. [pause] The other thing I was thinking about was the fever.

**INT:** Dengue fever?

**DCL:** No, the pills you would give guys—malaria . We would have them available. We did carry morphine syrettes and that kind of thing, but I never had to administer anything like that

**INT:** Typically when you out on a nine day patrol were you resupplied with hot chow?

**DCL:** Every three days we'd be re-supplied. For the most part you were re-supplied by helicopter. They would have a helicopter bring out a hot meal, or any ammunition, mail, cigarettes. That was very consistent. Every three days we'd go to a certain area where the company would be resupplied.

**INT:** As a medic did you carry a weapon?

**DCL:** Yes, I did.

**INT:** What kind of weapon?

**DCL:** An M16.

**INT:** Did you have anything on your uniform that designated that you were a medic?

**DCL:** No. Because when you got re-supplied you'd get old jungle fatigues so you tried to find something that somewhat fit, but there was no designation except for the aid bags that you'd be carrying.

**INT:** You did receive the combat medic badge?

**DCL:** Yes.

**INT:** At what point you receive that?

**DCL:** You have to be in country with an infantry unit – I'm not sure what the amount of time you actually have to be assigned to be able receive that. But it's almost automatic. If you're in combat with an infantry unit or whoever you were assigned to, if you were in combat you were eligible to receive that.

**INT:** You were with the 25<sup>th</sup> until they stood down?

**DCL:** Yes, I was with the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. I believe it was in March or April of 1971 that they ended up going back to Hawaii but I didn't have enough time in country to go back to Hawaii so I ended up going to the Americal Division—my assignment was in Chu Lai with an artillery unit. The first of the 18<sup>th</sup> Artillery unit.

**INT:** How did you get to Chu Lai?

**DCL:** I was flown up there.

**INT:** On a C130?

**DCL:** Yes.

**INT:** What was life like for you in Chu Lai?

**DCL:** Well, it was quite a few steps above, better than [pause]. While the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division was stationed in Ben Hoa we worked out of the fire bases so we didn't see Ben Hoa very much. But life in Chu Lai, was quite a bit easier because it was back in the rear, an aid station and we weren't far from the South China Sea. Our work was mostly with GIs that were going back, making sure their shot record was up to date or treating individuals who were back in the rear that didn't need immediate first aid but things that would make life a little bit easier for them while they were there.

**INT:** In Chu Lai what kind of living quarters did you have?

**DCL:** I lived in a building that housed all the medics. It was a one story, screened. We had refrigerators if the generators were working. The shower was a 55 gallon drum. Again, life there was a whole lot easier. There were things to do there.

**INT:** Clubs? Mess halls?

**DCL:** Yes. You had food. You weren't eating c-rations. You were getting regular meals in the mess hall and you had a few things to do while you were there.

**INT:** Did you see any entertainment at all? USO shows? Bob Hope?

**DCL:** I never saw any of those. They had NCO-enlisted men-clubs. You could go there and on different nights they would have entertainment. I had access to that.

**INT:** What rank were you at that point?

**DCL:** When I went to Chu Lai I was an E4 but I made E5 while I was there, shortly after I got there.

**INT:** How long were you there in Chu Lai?

**DCL:** I think it was about March until I went home in August.

**INT:** You went home in August because you were ETSing?

**DCL:** Yes.

**INT:** When you left Vietnam where did you fly into?

**DCL:** From Vietnam into the U.S. we went right into Ft. Lewis, Washington.

**INT:** You were discharged from Ft. Louis?

**DCL:** Yes.

**INT:** And you went back home to Elmira?

**DCL:** Yes. Prior to going to Vietnam I was married. We got married on November 7<sup>th</sup>.

**INT:** Where did you meet your wife?

**DCL:** I met her in Elmira. [laughter] The date isn't hard [to remember] because the first night we went out was the night they landed on the moon, the first trip to the moon. But we didn't really know each other. We dated and we corresponded while I was in the military and then made a decision that we would get married before I went to Vietnam. Really, the "getting to know each other" part happened afterwards. But I'm happy to say that when you hear Vietnam vets and marriage it isn't always a good outcome, but we've been married for over 38 years now. That really is a good thing and we have a good marriage.

**INT:** When you were in Vietnam did you get any kind of R and R at all?

**DCL:** There was some in-country R and R that I could have participated in. I didn't. I didn't participate in any out-of-country R and R because one of our goals when we went over was to save some money to put down on a house when we came back.

**INT:** Did you encounter any sort of animosity or protest or anti-war movement people traveling back to the area in uniform? At the airports, anywhere?

**DCL:** I didn't have any bad experiences that way but I do remember because of the way things were in this country, the reaction that our country was having to our involvement in Vietnam. When I went back to school to finish up my associate's degree, I remember not wanting to let anyone know I had been involved in that. As I look back at that now, not being able to be proud of your service, to be able to talk about it with people and have them respect that you participated in something like that, it was difficult for me. And it's taken me.... [pause] Because of my involvement with veterans since coming back from Vietnam and now because it's part of what I do as a job, it's given me some time to really think about that and look at why shouldn't I have been able to be proud of my service in Vietnam? And now when I look at vets returning today from the Gulf War or Iraq or Iran and how they're looked upon is a whole lot different than how we were. I've always said this that Vietnam was a different experience. Everybody experienced it a little bit differently.

**INT:** Did you stay in contact with anyone you were in the service with?

**DCL:** I haven't. There was one individual when I was down at Ft. Polk and we ended up meeting over in Vietnam. And he came to my house after the service. He visited my wife and I. But I haven't kept in contact with anybody that I served with.

**INT:** What about veteran organizations like the VFW, The Legion?

**DCL:** I'm an active member in GBA [Government Benefits Association].

**INT:** Of course, you made use of the GI Bill?

**DCL:** Yes. I used all of it. I finished up my associates degree and was able to get a bachelor's degree. And even in my time that I worked for the NY State Department of Corrections, which was almost 30 years, I started out as a Corrections Officer, but



because our training was 13 weeks long, you could use the GI Bill for on-the-job training. So I used a good portion of it for that.

**INT:** How do you think your time in the service changed or affected your life?

**DCL:** It had a significant impact on it. I never thought when I went into the military that I would be in a position where I would be working with others that had served in the military. I am really thankful for the opportunity to be in a position to do that and to be able to help others that served in the military. Because I think that one of things that always troubled me-some of what was brought on myself- because I had no desire to stay in the military. All I wanted was to get out, so I didn't look at some of the resources that might be available to me other than immediate ones like the GI Bill and some dental work that I had done.

I think that is really the case for a lot of veterans that come out of the military. They don't look at some of the resources that are available to them. I think they do a better job now than when I came out, but I still think oftentimes a lot of the things that might be available for the vets are not taken advantage of, and it could make a difference in their lives. As I mentioned when I worked in Corrections, one of the things that we tried to do- and there are a lot of veterans that end up in that situation-we try to help them sort that out as to what kinds of things might be available to them to help put their lives back together.

**INT:** Is there anything else you want to touch on that we may have missed?

**DCL:** No, I appreciate the opportunity to talk about this and appreciate your interest in doing something like this because I think it's something that veterans need. Especially in the era I served, I think it's good that we can talk about these things now. Whereas you hear so many of the vets that served, not just in Vietnam but even before Vietnam, who just didn't want to talk about their time in the service. I appreciate your efforts.

**INT:** Thank you very much and thank you for your participation in the program and thank you for your service. And welcome home.

**DCL:** Thank you.