

Carl M. Fosco
Narrator

Mike Russett
Wayne Clarke

Interviewers

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New York State Military Museum
Saratoga Springs, New York

Q: All right, this is an interview at the New York State Military Museum, Saratoga Springs, New York. This is the 24th of June, 2005, approximately ten a.m. Interviewers are Wayne Clark and Mike Russett. Could you give me your full name, your date of birth, and your place of birth, please?

CF: Carl M. Fosco. I was born in Ticonderoga, New York on November 15th, 1947.

Q: What was your educational background prior to entering service?

CF: I graduated from Ticonderoga High School in 1965, and I graduated from State University of New York at Cortland in 1969.

Q: Did you enlist or were you drafted?

CF: I was drafted into the Army.

Q: When were you drafted?

CF: July 22nd, 1969. The reason I remember is that's when our men walked on the Moon, and that was on my way to basic training. I remember that.

Q: Where was your basic training?

CF: Fort Dix, New Jersey.

Q: Could you talk a little bit about your basic and how long it lasted? What were some of the things you did there?

CF: Well, with the basic training, every soldier is an infantryman first, and they concentrate on infantry training. The Vietnam War had ended at the time; most of the drill sergeants and cadre instructors were people who'd come back from Vietnam, so we heard lots of things about Vietnam and why the training was revolved around that.

Q: When you got to Vietnam with this training, do you think you were ready for what you met?

CF: As well as anybody could be, you know, as just a young kid. When you got to Vietnam, they put you through a two-week Vietnam training course. One of the things

they told us was “Forget everything you learned in the States.” We just learned the basics out there from experienced soldiers at the time.

Q: What kind of weapons were you trained on?

CF: I was trained on an M14, the M16 rifle, the LAW 80 tank weapon, a ‘45, and the M60 machine gun, grenades, stuff like that. I did my advanced training as a medic.

Q: Where did you go for your advanced training and how long was that?

CF: My advanced training was in Fort Sam Houston, Texas, and it was a ten-week basic eight-man’s course, they called it. You learned basic first aid, how to treat combat wounds, deal with casualties, triage, how to call helicopters in, things like that.

Q: Did you find the training to be pretty realistic and thorough?

CF: Oh, yes, yep. You were trained not only as a field medic, but you were trained to work in a hospital also. Everything from how to make a bed, believe it or not, to giving shots, which we practiced on each other with saline solutions—even some basic surgical techniques.

Q: How long was that training?

CF: About ten weeks.

Q: Now when you completed were you promoted at all?

CF: I was promoted to the rank of E2 out of basic training. When I finished my medic training, we got the thirty-day leave and then we were sent right to Vietnam.

Q: You weren’t given PFC or specialist [E]4 at that point?

CF: When I got to Vietnam, I was assigned to a unit, and they automatically promoted you to PFC if you were eligible, and that’s when I got promoted.

Q: After your leave, where did you leave from to go to Vietnam?

CF: We left from Oakland Army Base, and then we flew out from... I’m not sure. It was an airbase near there, but I’m not sure. In the last vivid memory, I see the Golden Gate Bridge disappearing in the background. I remember that it was night when we left. Seems to me we took the long way around. We went to Hawaii, and then Wake Island—famous battlefield of World War II—and then to Okinawa, and then down into Vietnam. It was about a twenty-two-hour flight.

Q: What was your sensation when you first arrived and got off the plane?

CF: Well, as we came down near Vietnam—from a high altitude, of course—I looked down and I could see helicopter gunships. You know, they looked like little bees, and they were engaged in a combat mission. You could see rockets firing and stuff like that. And then we landed at Bien Hoa Air Base, and of course being new guys we, you know, kind of ran off the plane because we didn’t know what was going on. And there were jet aircraft taking off, loaded with bombs and things like that.

We got into the terminal and the first thing we had to do was fill out customs forms. It’s like we were tourists for the Vietnamese government, you know, declaring that we don’t

have anything with us or not with us. It was kind of weird. And then the plane that we came in on—a big commercial airliner—had been refueled by then. They were turning it around, and there were probably 200 GIs going back to the States. And they were called to board the plane. There was a big cheer from those guys. And we were kind of saying, “Well, now what are we in for?”

Q: Where did you go from the airport?

CF: To the 90th replacement battalion—I think it was near Bien Hoa. That’s where all the new troops came in. And then you’re assigned to your units from there. I was there about three days. And then I was assigned to a common aviation battalion up in Da Nang—Marble Mountain, actually, was what it was called. We shared it with the Marines.

Q: Could you just describe your impressions when you arrived there and basic life there?

CF: Well, at Marble Mountain- which I said I was at the big air base at Da Nang—I was assigned to what is called the 519th Medical Detachment. And it was a unit that supported the combat aviation battalion. Actually, it was a rear echelon unit. I expected to go, you know, out into an infantry division or something, but I was assigned there. We did flight physicals, provided general medical support, and occasionally we went into a village to provide support for Vietnamese civilians. I had a shower every night; I slept in a bunk. We were mortared occasionally; there were a couple attacks, but nothing really serious. It was fairly good, you know. And then we had an air cavalry troop attached to us, and they had an air rifle platoon. They needed a medic, and our commander was a doctor. All the other medics were married, and I wasn’t, so I got to go to the air cavalry troop. And that’s when my combat experience in Vietnam began.

Q: Did you volunteer for that?

CF: Well, they came to me, and they said, “All the other guys are married, you know, and some of them had children. We’d like you to volunteer.” I guess if I didn’t, they’d have sent me anyway. But I said, “Okay, I’ll go.” And to tell you the truth it was getting kind of boring there. And you know, a lot of young people are looking for more sense of adventure. And so I went, and I was transferred to the cavalry troop up in Quang Tri Province.

Q: How long had you been in the country at that point?

CF: About six or seven months. And I extended my tour from twelve months to fourteen months because if we did that, and you had less than one hundred fifty days left in the Army, you could get discharged, so we’d have to serve the full two years. And I went to the cavalry troop sometime in August, and I stayed there until the end of my tour duty—until the end of February 1971. That was a combat medic staff. The first day I got there I was quickly absorbed into the unit.

Q: Now this was the 17th air-cav [air cavalry]?

CF: The 13th and 17th air-cav, yeah.

Q: What was their call sign? Do you recall?

CF: Yes, Charley Horse. Yep, Charley Horse. The same cavalry regiment is now in Iraq. Part of it was at Fort Drum.

Q: What was it like going back and going into combat till now? How was it different? What was life like?

CF: Of course, the living conditions were much more primitive. And we were on the end of an airfield. We supported the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized). And we were just a few miles from the DMZ and just a few miles from the Laotian border. The first day that I went out with the unit, in the morning, one of our helicopters got shot down, and we had to go and get the crew out. One was dead, and one was pretty seriously wounded, so I treated him. And then, you know, we got out of there pretty quickly. And that afternoon another guy—one of the scout helicopters—one of the men got shot right through the eyes—took his eyes out. And I said to myself, “Is this the way it’s going to be every day?” Now fortunately, it was not. Just happened that day. We did a lot of our patrol action where the old Marine base was in Khe Sanh, and we fought some, you know, fire fights, basically, pitch battles that lasted very short. The North Vietnamese army is what we would fight. And there was a pretty big fight near a place called the Old French Fort, where the French had been on the old Route Colonial 9. It wasn’t easy a lot of times, but then there were a lot of times with just long, boring tedium. We did a lot of patrols, in and out, you know, stuff like that.

Q: As a medic, what kind of weapon did you carry?

CF: I carried an M16.

Q: Anything else, like a sidearm?

CF: No, no. I was assigned a sidearm, but I just didn’t feel that it had what I needed. As a medic you had a choice: you could not even carry anything, but that meant somebody else had to be covering for you. And just having the extra firepower, because our rifle platoon only had about twenty-five men in it. And we usually went out in six- or seven-men groups. So, you know, you need it on you. So, I carried an M16.

Q: Did you wear anything on you that showed you were a medic?

CF: No, no, we were told not to do that. You were a target.

Q: How was the equipment that you had in the field? How would you rate it? Your medical equipment—were you able to have enough with you?

CF: Yeah, of course there’s plenty of medical supplies available, but it was left to kind of my judgement. And then of course there were another couple medics in the unit, and you know, their experience in the field—what did they carry? And I had a separate medical kit I carried. Looked like a small rucksack and in it I carried the bandages—because you’re only going to give basic first aid. I had a bottle of saline solution if I had to give an IV. Just basic medical supplies. I’d carry morphine, but you had to be very careful using that stuff. Mostly it’s just basic medical supplies because all you’re doing is stopping bleeding. All you’re doing if a guy got hit in the face or something is clearing an airway. Then he’s on board a helicopter and gone to a medical facility real quick. So, you weren’t

treating them for very long periods of time. And in the rare area, I just sort of held sick call in the morning. The guys had various aches and pains and things like that; I'd give them aspirin or something like that, or if they needed more medical care there was a medical facility you could send them to. As far as the equipment, the Army's pretty generous with that. I mean, there were never any shortages of medical equipment or any other type of gear.

Q: Let's say someone was wounded. I know it probably depended on the situation- What was the average time between the time you called for a medevac helicopter and the time it came in?

CF: Oh, very quick, you know. Maybe within 5 or 10 minutes. We were engaged in a fight where one of our Kit Carson scouts got killed and another one got wounded, and these were North Vietnamese defectors, joined the Allied side. We had to get out quick because it was just many more of them than there were of us. And they called in an infantry brigade, you know, to deal with that. Because that mainly was our mission- to start to fight, then get out before they brought in heavy troops later on. Anyway, we went back to the hospital in Quang Tri, and I was on board with the wounded guy. It took us only about 15 minutes to get there. The one guy was dead; the other guy survived. What was kind of funny, though, was that they wanted to give me a Purple Heart for cutting myself. They didn't realize I cut myself at first, but I used an M14 bayonet to open up a guy's clothing. I had it sharpened on both sides, being about that long. I could slice the clothing real quick while lying on the ground. You know, you didn't have time to take a pair of the medical scissors and cut away and all that stuff. And when I did that, I cut my thumb. So, when I got to the hospital, one of the medics in the hospital there came up and tagged me, and said, "Well, you've been wounded because you're bleeding heavy in the extremities." Anyway, it was bleeding all over the place. He says, "Okay, I need some information for a Purple Heart." And I said, "No." I said, "I cut myself. Do not do this Purple Heart, and guys observe it." So, you know, of course I made sure that didn't happen, because it wasn't something I earned; I just did it to myself.

Q: Were you ever wounded at all?

CF: No, no, no. Concussion a couple times, from heavy shelling, but never hit by bullets or shrapnel or anything like that. I heard it fly over my head sometimes.

Q: You were involved in the ocean crossing?

CF: Yes, yep. What do they call that? Lam Son 719 or something. Yeah, we actually came near the end of my tour. I had about a month or so left, maybe about a month and a half. And we knew something was going on because they were just moving in all sorts of supplies and the infantry and more helicopter assault companies. But we were part of that invasion because we were the cavalry troop and we knew the area, so they sent us out first. They say no American troops crossed into Laos at the time, but we did. We held the hills where the North Vietnamese gunners had shelled the Marines, because we didn't want to move back in there. I had 8mm film actually showing, you know. I took it as we were crossing Khe Sanh in Laos. And there's a river right there and you could see where

she fell. Oh, I should've brought some with me, because I've got a whole bunch of 8mm film I shot.

Q: Had you known of any American units who had crossed into Laos prior to this?

CF: No, but I'm sure there was a ranger company across. I'm sure they were there. We only stayed a couple of days, then we were relieved by the Vietnamese Army. And then we flew back into Khe Sanh and then back to our base at Quang Tri. And then we operated out of Quang Tri. We took a lot of casualties among the helicopter pilots and crew chiefs, because they had a lot of anti-aircraft. And we went up in there to bring out pilots and things like this. But by that time, my tour in Vietnam was coming to an end, and I left Quang Tri near the middle of February. Then I came home, and I was discharged in late February 1971, because I come under that one hundred fifty-day drop, as they called it. I got an early out, that's what they called it.

Q: Did you encounter a lot of problems with dysentery, dengue fever, and malaria?

CF: I had malaria. Yeah, I was in the hospital a little while with that. I lost a lot of weight. There were two types of malaria, and I had the less dangerous type.

Q: How about among the men in the unit, too?

CF: It wasn't a real big problem, because you had to take malaria pill—big orange pills, and there was a white one we took too. As a medic it was my responsibility to make sure the guys took it. I had a little roster, you know, to make sure that they took that.

Q: Was there much problem with jungle rot or trench foot in your area?

CF: Not with our unit so much because, first of all, we were not in the Delta region, with the mountains, and secondly as an air-rifle platoon cavalry troop, we were in the field, but we didn't stay for long periods of time. We stayed in two days, three days maybe at the most, then come out and go to another area, you know, that type of thing. We weren't out there long enough, really, to have those types of problems.

Q: As a medic were you aware of much drug usage?

CF: Oh, drug use was rampant. By the time I was in Vietnam—'70, '71, early '70s—I remember this curious story. We had a new platoon leader come in- a new lieutenant. He'd come from the 4th Infantry Division. It had begun to stand down, but he had time left. He was a real good guy, and when he first came to me, he said, "Doc, how many guys here are doing drugs?" And I said, "Well, sir, I'm not sure about *you*." Because all the rest were. Cocaine was being used long before it ever got big over here. You could see the vials all over the place. There was a lot of drug use, lots of it.

Q: How about relationships between the men in the unit and civilians? Did you have much contact with civilians?

CF: Not up there, because the villages were in the lowlands, and we were in the mountains. So, we very seldom came across any civilians. If you were out near Khe Sanh or the rock pile or places like that—it was a tri-corner region. I mean that was the enemy. They were out there. That was the Ho Chi Minh Trail coming down through. There weren't any civilians in that part.

Q: Did you have many relationships with the South Vietnamese Army?

CF: Sometimes we worked with them, but we didn't trust them. When we planned operations, they were told at the last moment. I guess experience told the officers that if you brought them in on the early stages of planning, the enemy found out about it really quick, one way or another. Although the individual South Vietnamese soldiers are really good. We worked with them, you know, privates and the corporals and their sergeants and their junior officers and their lieutenants and captains. Because they took a lot of crap out there.

Q: How about racial relationships within the unit?

CF: Within the unit it was okay because you were close-knit. But race was a real problem over there for whatever reason. But it's mostly a problem in the rear area type units where more of them set in quickly, you know, the supply units, truck driving units, and things like that. But in the combat units it wasn't so much, at least in my experience. We had a lot of racial minorities—Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, African Americans, and white guys, just kind of stuck together. So, it really wasn't a problem within the unit itself. We were too busy trying to survive the whole thing.

Q: How do you think drug usage affected the unit's work in the field? Do you think it did?

CF: Well, there was an unwritten rule that while you were in the field, there was no drugs. However, sometimes we'd get called to go find a pilot or do a quick, you know, insertion, and some of the guys were hired types, and they would wing it, and they tended to do crazy stuff. Like, you know, "We'll take on the entire North Vietnamese Army" or something. Then they go rushing off in different directions, you know. It wasn't good like that. But generally, the rule was, you know, if we knew about wherever we were going they didn't do the drugs. Not everybody is, but the temptation was there.

Q: Now you received a Bronze Star and the Army Commendation medals—what did you receive those for?

CF: They were more for meritorious service, you know--you did your job, you did it well. There were no V devices. I didn't get them for valor or anything like that.

Q: Did you receive the combat medic?

CF: Yes, yes. It was fire I treated. But the bronze star and the other commendation medals were given for honorable service, meritorious service, and stuff like that.

Q: When did you leave Vietnam?

CF: Probably about February 20th, 1971, because I was discharged on the 25th.

Q: When you came back to the States, did you encounter any anti-war demonstrators?

CF: No, no. With Fort Lewis Washington- they discharged me, and I flew home.

Q: You wore civilian clothes?

CF: No, I wore my uniform. You were required to wear a dress uniform home.

Q: But you had no [anti-war encounters]?

CF: Not really, you know. I was dead tired, I slept most of the way, and then I rode to Albany Airport and called my dad in Ticonderoga, and they came down and got me. By that time, while I was in Vietnam, I applied for graduate school and had been accepted, so I knew that I had a place where I was going to do. And so, I got to Ticonderoga, and I went to work in the IP mill up there for a few months to earn some more money and use the GI bill and I went to graduate school.

Q: Were you aware of the anti-war movement?

CF: Not in Vietnam. After I got back, when I was actually in graduate school, I learned a lot more about it.

Q: Were there any interactions with you as a veteran on campus?

CF: I just kept it to myself. You know, I wasn't overly concerned about, you know, what I was or not. I was just busy trying to get that master's degree. Although one of the professors—I went to his first class and he taught African American history in a graduate course, and he just called the roll. You know, your army training comes back quick. He says, "Fosco, Carl" and I said, "Sir, here, sir." And afterwards—he'd been in the army—and he said, "You must've been in the army." And I said, "Yes." And he was a good guy. He wasn't one of these crazy guys. Yeah, he and I got along very well after that. But I didn't encounter any, you know, stuff.

Q: Why did you decide to go into the reserves? You went in in 1975?

CF: Right.

Q: Why did you decide to go?

CF: See, the reserves was the hideout spot for guys that didn't want to go to Vietnam- the Guard and the Reserve. But with Vietnam winding down, they lost lots and lots of people. So, they kept sending me these postcards and then they had this "One Year and Try It" for Vietnam veterans, and they give you back your rank—by that time I was a sergeant, when I was discharged. I had just gotten married, and I had a little baby, so the income looked okay. It was right around Glens Falls, and I lived in Hudson Falls at the time—I still do. So, I joined, and I did it for a couple years, and then I finally said, "Well, it's not too bad. I'll stay with this." Then all of a sudden, I had over thirty years of total service because I never really had a break in service. I was in the individual ready reserve after you get out of the two-year employment, and so my total military service is over thirty-three years. I stayed with the reserve, different units, moved my way up in rank, and I retired as a sergeant major back in 2002. I started a thirty-year teaching career, same time. I retired from that too.

Q: Is there anything you want to tell us about your time in the reserves at all?

CF: Well, when I first joined, of course the Vietnam War was winding down; in fact it pretty much wound down by '75. In fact, a lot of reservists were in there at the time, especially the younger ones who were dodging the Vietnam War. They thought we were crazy. You know, "What are you doing joining the reserves for?" "What do you want to

do this for?” and all that. So that made a difference cause the guys—there were quite a few of us Vietnam veterans, actually—what we were going through was the Army’s drill sergeants. That seemed intriguing. A lot of us were Vietnam veterans and we decided to, I guess, duel it. We were there because we wanted to be there, as opposed to a lot of guys who didn’t. In fact, several of those men, a couple good friends of mine now, stayed the entire time and retired as Sarge 1st class, master sergeants, first sergeants, as high as a sarge could be. So, a lot of us went in and stayed, and most of us were draftees who were going in but decided, you know, the reserves might be a good idea. Why throw it away, right? So, over the years there was a Cold War mentality at first, you know. They had the Fulda Gap exercise over in Germany, you know, and then it slowly transitioned when peacetime army of the 80s, and then the Gulf War came up. I was in the unit that was scheduled to go to the Gulf War in 1991, but it lasted such a short time, we stood down. Although we sent about 30 of our guys over. And then I stayed in and took just shortly out before this began. But by that time, I had met my maximum years of service, and so I retired in 2002 before everything broke out through this war.

Q: Do you ever read much on Vietnam?

CF: Oh yes, yes. You know, because you’re a small cog, you don’t really know what’s going on over the years. I got the time-life series in Vietnam if you’re familiar with that. And I read lots and lots of books on it and histories- not just the military side but the political side. It was *A Bright Shining Lie*, if you ever read that. I read Colonel Hackworth’s book and lots of different books.

Q: How about any of the different movies?

CF: At first I didn’t, cause you know other movies were totally unrealistic or just plain stupid. Like everybody thinks *The Deer Hunter*’s a great movie, and if you’ve ever been in the military, all you realize is that the hero of the whole thing is a draftee but how does he become a staff sergeant? He’s in the Special Forces and he has a beard. Now that isn’t the Army, okay? You know, Special Forces soldiers, especially, go through long periods of training, he’s in the misty, he’s in for a long time. It wasn’t realistic. I saw one movie that came on TV or maybe got out as a video. I don’t know if it was *Platoon* or another one, but it was much more realistic. My wife told me that I was squirming in the chair at the realistic mattresses and things like that. There was one more recently there- *We Were Young and Soldiers*. Okay, I read the book, and then the movie came out, and it was such a cheap movie there’s no way it came out on video. I saw that. That was very, very realistic, you know, as far as I could see.

Q: What do you think about Jane Fonda with her apologies and so on?

CF: I think she was just a very young and naïve woman. I think in later years, in retrospect, she understood that you can be anti-war, but you need to be careful of the people, the troops and things like that. They’re put in the harm’s way, and a lot of times not because they want to. I think the difference in this war on terror is you’ll note a lot of people support the troops, but they may not support the war. And also, the first President Bush in the first gulf war and then this gulf war—when you mobilize the guard and the

reserve like they've done and they've had to, you make it everybody's war. In Vietnam they didn't do that, so that's the difference.

Q: You said you made use of the GI Bill after you got out?

CF: Yeah, for graduate school.

Q: Did you ever join any veterans' organizations?

CF: Yes, I'm a member of the life member of the VFW and the American Legion.

Q: Do you go to any meetings?

CF: Well, I'm active in both of them. I've been past commander in VFW, treasurer in American Legion. I just got elected the first vice commander. We're involved in a big, huge project in Glens Falls to raise money to upgrade our veterans mine.

Q: How do you think your time in the service changed or had an effect on your life?

CF: Well, it gives you a totally different perspective, you know? For instance, when I began teaching—most teachers begin teaching around college, you know, then they've had their local summer jobs and things like this. And they teach for the next thirty years. And they have had no real-life experience when it comes down to it and they're teaching kids. Well, I taught social studies and history. So that gave me a much more deep perspective of that whole thing, plus I was little older when I started teaching because I had worked in other industrial work, different places, I had been in the military. So, I was different in that respect. So, when I taught about, you know, a history of the period of the Roman Empire or right down to modern times, I talk about wars. Kids tend to look at wars kind of as a big game, where I was a little more realistic about it. It does give you a different perspective, maturity, I guess.

Q: Did you stay in contact with any of the fellows you served with in Vietnam?

CF: No, but thanks to the internet, there's a guy who called me out of the blue one day. He was with me as a medic in Vietnam, and he's a battalion chief of Los Angeles Fire Department today. He must've been searching the internet, saw my name, and he knew I was from upstate New York, and he called me one night. We talked for a while, and then we exchanged emails. And then on another website I saw a guy's name who served in Vietnam with me, and I had an email contact with him occasionally. You know, we traded grandchildren stories. He lives off in Ohio, and he's a mechanic for Campbell's Soup Company.

Q: Any reunions or anything you've attended?

CF: Well, no, I haven't attended any reunions. Really, I don't have any great desire to do it. I joined a couple of associations, and they send me reunion material inviting me to go.

Q: When was that photograph taken?

CF: [Holding up photograph of himself in uniform] In 1997.