*KUED interview with Tom Carpenter*
*Salt Lake City, Utah*
*October 15, 2013*

*When you left Vietnam what was your rank?*

Tom Carpenter
I had previous time through the Nebraska Guard. When I got to Vietnam, I was already a first lieutenant. I had changed my military operational job from ordinance to infantry. Had been trained as an infantry officer. I wanted to be a rifle platoon leader. It was kind of probably a childhood dream coming from a World War II veteran. And so I worked my way through the training system and joined Delta Company in early December 1968. It took about two days to get down to my platoon. I became First Platoon Leader, Company D, Second of the 327th Infantry, First Brigade of the 101st Airborne Division in -- at that time of Vietnam. Since then they've been very active in Afghanistan and Iraq and the Middle East wars. They still are at Fort Campbell, Kentucky and will go out of their way to show you a good time historically. We will go there and meet the young troops, and they think a lot of us from Vietnam because we didn't have the equipment that they have now. When we were lost, we would really be lost because we didn't have a GPS to tell us that we were lost. Like those men of the *Band of Brothers*, we differed from them because they started training together in I think 1942 and they stayed together as a unit. And they could tell each other's name and their job just by the silhouette or hearing their voice. They'd been together that long and they'd been on nine operations. In Vietnam they went to a replacement system. The First Brigade, also known as the Bastard Brigade because they didn't have a home for the first three years. We eventually got our home in what ended up being the area of operation between the city of Hue and Lang Co Bridge on the south, the city of Hue on the northeast, and the Laos border, which was the A Shau Valley on the west. So much of the area of operation was coastal plains, and the other was mountainous jungles. And this is where we would divide our time up with the different elements. They kept moving you around, and so this way the bad jobs got spread among the others. The coastal plains was wet, a lot of action--just physically miserable most of the time. It was cold and wet it seems, at least during the monsoon. But once the weather changed, then you could get air support. Then we moved to the mountains and tried to intercede on the enemy that were moving supplies to this A Shau Valley or through the Ho Chi Minh Trail. I joined First Platoon right around my birthday. I met my sergeants. I think I had about thirty-two, thirty-three people plus the platoon sergeant. And we were securing Lang Co Bridge.

*Tell us your name.*

Tom Carpenter
Thomas Keith Carpenter.

*And you led a squad-sized patrol with Bret Crandall. Was that the first time that you had met Bret?*

Tom Carpenter
No. I had met Bret on other operations up to that squad-sized one that I think you're referring to it. We were deploying into the free-fire zone of the coastal plains with a reinforce squad. And it would usually be two snipers, two fire teams, which each had about three to four men in it, plus a medic, a radio man, myself. So there would be ten to fifteen of us deployed at that. Sometimes you'd have one sniper. Sometimes we'd take out two snipers. But I had had experience with Bret up several operations prior to his getting wounded.

*Tell me about his sniper skills.*

Tom Carpenter
He was one of the snipers that had the most experience. I think he was one of the earliest snipers. He evidently had a background of hunting, and those guys always seemed to take easy to the weapons and know about wind and wind agent. I think any of the snipers, they were trained and they had a weapon. I think it was an M-14 matched and balanced, and it would reach out there. It had an effective range of at least eight hundred to a thousand. That was stretching it. But the rest of us were more to keep them safe, the snipers, to position them. The only other weapon that we had that could really reach out into the coastal plains was the M-60 machine gun. Once contact was established, you could bring in artillery with your radio, or you could bring in air support also with the radio. Now, I had been on several missions with Bret before, and my first experience with a post-combat sweep was I think on one of Bret's missions. He had already been there, and I brought the platoon out to reinforce Bret and the squad that he was with.

*Tell me what a post-combat sweep is.*

Tom Carpenter
A post-combat sweep is after an engagement if at all possible you still maintain security and designate people to go into the area, check for equipment, check for intelligence, check for dead or wounded. It's just good soldiering is going in and seeing what happened. And there's a little bit of competition, too. The artillery wants to get it. If there's any kind of a victory, the artillery has to get some of the credit. The air support people need to get some of it. And of course the men on the ground, they were the ones that often initiated the combat. But you would usually try and go in there and make a sweep and look for different things. It's post operation.

*Did you talk to him? Did you know Bret personally very well?*

Tom Carpenter
No, I didn't. Bret was one of five snipers that we had in Delta Company, and I was in first platoon. I think Bret was in third platoon. The other four snipers, Dale Hansen, “Shike” Barnett, also called Jim Barnett, I believe. Ken Jolley was another one, and Robert Clark. Those five snipers we had. And when we weren't doing sniper operations, they went back to their former job of being riflemen in most cases. A lot of

the area of operations was not conducive to snipers. The coastal plains, it was just about ideal because you could slip in under the cover of darkness, ambush the enemy trails in case they're moving during the night, but before first light you move everybody up high and concealed and then wait for targets of opportunity. Which in a free-fire zone nobody should be in there that wasn't considered enemy. And so we would do that. We'd spend the daytime hours in a high ground, and it was a good time to write some letters. I don't think I would've allowed a tape recorder out on that operation because we'd be wading through rivers and you probably wouldn't want to take it anyway. But you set up and then you wait. And in the meantime write home. At nighttime, you go back down and set up a different ambush on the trail, and you just try and intercede where the enemy is active. And so the area of operations in the mountains, which we spent about half our time in the jungle-covered mountains, it was not conducive to the long-range engagements.

*What was the area of operation where he was wounded?*

Tom Carpenter
Our company commander, Captain Lester "Red" Walkley they called him for short, he had capitalized on some ideas that were floating around about -- we knew that this free-fire zone had a lot of enemy activity. And the concept of the snipers were coming along, and Bret Crandall, Bret Fletcher Crandall was one of the first snipers of Delta Company. And they were starting to get some results on the coastal plains. We were operating off Hill 88. We had about a platoon and a half that secured firebase, Hill 88, 88 meters above sea level, so it wasn't real tall. It had a National Guard Company, or battalion. I think it Battery C of the 138th Kentucky National Guard Artillery Battalion. And they had five guns on Hill 88, 155-millimeter weapons. We would assemble near the entry point and exit point of the hill, and I would go over the last-minute details, check the men, check the snipers, check the equipment, make sure everybody knew their radio frequencies and a general idea of where we were going, designate last-minute changes. And the night that Bret got wounded, two snipers come down and reported to me. And the second sniper, Dale Hansen, I know he was disappointed. He was looking forward to another sniper operation with his good buddy, Bret Crandall. But for some reason, this time I only took out one sniper. Other operations I had taken out two. And other operations we had taken out more than one team and then split up and gone multiple directions with the two teams. So Dale turned around after I told him and I sent him back up the hill. And we were pretty well ready to leave and waited until it was dark. Hill 88 was still surrounded by villages, and so for our night ambushes, our night operations we preferred not to be seen leaving the hill because the enemy did have their own intelligence service, and if they knew where we were going they would eventually either attack us or avoid the area completely. So we'd move under the cover of darkness through what used to be rice paddies, but it had been made into a dead area of plants sprayed with the Agent Orange defoliant. And using a compass and the silhouettes, we would move out of the populated area and into the free-fire zone. We had crossed the river that we always had to cross. It was a coastal river and it fluctuated with the tide coming in and going out. The whole mission was geared around the sniper.

*Pick up where you left off.*

Tom Carpenter
I had a point team from the squad that was escorting the single sniper. I had a machine gunner that was with the squad, and that was also one of the valuable weapons that we used on the coastal plains because they had the range that our M-16s did not have. So I think I had two men on point, and crossed the river that we have to cross to get into this free-fire zone. I called it Bali Hai. When *South Pacific* came out in the early '60s I just fell in love with that movie. And Bali Hai was a mountain that came out of the sea and was often in the fog or in the clouds. I think most of the other men referred to it as "The Hook" because it was part of a ridge that extended out to the sea surrounded by beach, rugged coast and then just jutted up from the sea. And it was a hard area to get to, and so the enemy had used that as a point of operation and also as a place to live. It was close to their food source, the people in the villages. And the marines, who we had inherited that area of operation from, didn't seem motivated to go into that free-fire zone. They eventually went north. They were the first division north of us, and then there was the 101st, and then to the south of us was another marine division. We got across that river, and I was looking for a good well-used trail to set up a night operation. I probably had 12, maybe 14 men with me, one of which was Bret Crandall. With the mission being focused around Bret and the machine gun, the two weapons that would go on out there, I kept them in the middle of the column. We traveled in a column and probably five to six, seven meters apart. We did that so a booby trap or a grenade wouldn't kill or hurt too many of us. It would just maybe get three or four instead of all 12 of us. So I kept Bret secured in the most secured place in the column, which was in the middle, as with the machine gunner. I found a good spot to ambush on, a well-traveled trail and I started setting up the night ambush. Quite a bit goes into it depending upon how many people. I've done a few ambushes with only one or two, but you can do quite a bit with a squad, or even more with a platoon. Platoon has three squads. And I usually placed myself in the middle. We line up on line parallel to a trail, and with Crandall being a key person, I sent him with two others in the back to just kind of -- I told them I'd get back there with them, but I wanted to get the front set up first. So I set up a position on the right, my own little headquarters group, myself and a radio and the medic in the middle, and then another position on the far left. And Bret Crandall was with two others behind me. I was going to use them as rear security. That's another problem, especially at night. You can have them walk in on you about as easy as you can walk in on them. And so I told Bret to go back there and help be back there and coordinate the final decision. During this busy time, people would be setting up their claymore mines, little anti-personnel mine. Everybody carried one. We would set up some type of a communications system with pulling of a rope or a string tied to each other so if somebody sees something coming down the trail they can pass the word on without noise. We just about learned to work in silence. And so I was keeping pretty busy. You need to confirm your location and make sure the artillery knows where you're at. And I was doing the buys work that it took probably a good hour to set up, and that's when the explosion went off. And I was probably only about 15 yards away from it, so it didn't take but ten steps to get there. And I was there immediately, and then Bret was

on the ground in a fetal position drawn up. And there was kind of a ditch to his left. Evidently, he had tripped off a fragmentation booby trap, and it might have been close to his head because I don't think he could hear what was going on. A lot of times with an explosion you do have sort of a ringing in the ears. So Bret was down on the ground not getting up. The other two guys were getting up, but they appeared uninjured. But Bret, I couldn't tell what was wrong with him, but he was definitely wounded. So immediately I called the medevac. I cancelled the ambush and formed everybody around a circle. We went from a linear ambush to a circular perimeter. I just wasn't sure. It could've been an attack on our cell, so I was preparing for that and also preparing for a landing zone for the medevac to come in. A lot of guys, especially when they are first hit, they lost their sense of timing, their sense of where they are. They're in just a state of confusion, and I'm sure that's what Bret was going through. When you go from a dead silence that we were trying to maintain to having a wounded man that probably had no idea how much noise he was making, to this day the scream in the night still gives me an eerie feeling--almost sometimes a sense of panic. But fortunately I don't have any screams in the night, but I did that night. And one of the things you can do for that is to treat the pain, and this was when I told the medic to give Bret a shot of morphine. And the medic did and a peace settled over Bret and he was no longer in pain and he was conscious. He wasn't passed out. Wasn't talking. I left him with the medic and I started working on getting the medevac called out, making sure the perimeter that we had filled, polishing that up and getting them to where they could see each other and coordinate it so that we could work as a whole instead of as 13 or 14 individuals. Hill 88 and the free-fire zone were on the southern tip of our area of operation. The mother camp, Eagle, was probably I'd guess 30 or 40 miles to the north. And usually on the system of firebases they would have, for operations like ours at nighttime – and there was a lot of night stuff going on--mostly night ambush, but sometimes there were night patrols like we did, infiltrated into the area at night. But as a precaution, some of these medevac would be waiting on the firebases, but for some reason we didn't have a medevac, or they might've already been busy with some other mission that night. It seemed like it was an hour and a half before we finally got the medevac in. And I brought it in, and it was just that quick. The guys put him on into the helicopter and they took him direct to the hospital ship Repose, which was stationed just off the coast. So he did not go back to the Mash unit that was stationed at Camp Eagle. He went directly to the hospital ship. Once the helicopter got away I needed to get out of that area because obviously our location was pinpointed when the strobe light went off and it started being pinpointed when the booby trap went off. So we formed up again into a linear column -- ranger file we call that -- and moved out of that area and set up a different ambush in a different area that same evening. And it ended up being just a quiet night except for all of the moving and except for the wounding of Bret Crandall. Ended up being the last time I saw him was that night. I didn't get real close to him. The job I had was real busy. You just didn't have a lot of time to jack your jaws and learn about what your hobbies were and things like that. One of the things I did enjoy about moving at night on the perimeters was it gave me a chance to talk to the guys a little bit and learn where they're from and if they're married and the personal stuff that you don't usually get to know until you've been with somebody for quite a while. And I never had that quality time with Bret. I remember him as an exemplary soldier. And

your bad soldiers, you tend to remember them. But the good ones, because you have no incidents or bad incidents that mark the relationship, you tend not to remember the good guys. The adage of three percent of your people give you 95 percent of your problems, that holds for the Army, too, so I wasn't real familiar with Bret, nor with any of the snipers. I was responsible for taking them out and hopefully have some success and bringing them back safely. And it got towards the end before we left that area of operations, the coastal plains, somebody was getting wounded just about every operation when we went out. The enemy just started putting booby traps all over that area, and to make the price of what we wanted to invest in too costly to do. So when we left, it was about another four or five months I think before we came back to the coastal plains.

*What year did you write "The Fatal Wounding of Bret Crandall," and what motivated you to write about him?*

Tom Carpenter
I was concerned that Bret -- he was my first man that I had had seriously wounded, and he was also the first one that died. And he died with complications. He died from swelling of the brain, also called encephalitis, several months after he was wounded on the operation we were on. I could not find him on the Vietnam Wall in Washington, D.C. and I was concerned -- was looking for Bob Crandall. And I was concerned that he might have been left off the wall because the actual cause of death was complications of a combat wound. So I needed to know for the family of Bret that if he wasn't on the wall he needed to be on the wall. I had been so quiet about my tour of duty that I had to get it out. And this was in 1969 when I got out of the service. And I started writing just personal stories. In I believe 1992 I wrote my first one. And that was just a letter to the editor, like, "Hey, friends of the community that I live in, work in, I've got something to tell you. This was on Veteran's Day. By the time you read this, I'll be at the Vietnam Memorial Wall in Washington, D.C., and maybe I'll be able to write some other stories some other day." The second story I wrote I believe was about a good friend name Jack Vann Crump that had been my ranger buddy through much of the Army training. But Bret was right up there at the very top. I needed to get that found out about. And then a local friend and I were going to the ten-year anniversary of the Vietnam Memorial Wall. This would've been in 1992. And the Internet wasn't real plentiful then or as user-friendly as it is now. And so we were operating by the void of information, and I hadn't been able to find hardly anybody I had served with. I had for my business, did have a webpage, and a little section of that webpage I put my Vietnam stories. And this made it available for a Google search. And so one of the things that I did find out before going to Washington, D.C. and during this trip that the guy I was looking for was not Bob Crandall. It was Specialist Bret Fletcher Crandall. And they had books and books of stuff at these tents set up in Washington, D.C. that you could go in and try and find somebody from your division. This particular group called In Touch, were Volunteers from Ross Perot, one of his organizations, and they had the paperwork -- some of the data on that particular individual. Once I found out it -- I think we traced it down to this guy named Bret Crandall was in the 101st, had died from fragmentation and wounded from fragmentation wounds, and he died later. And all this got complicated. But once I

started looking for the right name, then he showed up just where he needed to be. So that was a big relief on my part.

*How did the word filter back to all of you that Bret had died?*

Tom Carpenter
Real slow. Most of these guys that we had wounded, our own men, the first thing you hear back is, "Oh, they're not wounded very bad. They're going to be all right." We weren't told the truth. We knew when a guy was pretty well chewed up and he's not going to be all right. Because Bret was taken to the hospital ship, which got the navy involved, we didn't find out through our traditional channels what happened to Bret other than we heard that -- somebody comes in, in the helicopter and then tells somebody else. They'd say, "Hey, I heard Bret went to -- he's in Japan now." Or even they sent him to the states and he's going to be all right, you know, and all this stuff. Last we heard he was going to be all right, and then suddenly somebody gets off the helicopter and says, "Crandall died." At that time, we didn't know what from, but we figured it was complications. And you mentioned, or we had talked about the encephalitis, swelling of the brain. Whether it was a hospital infection or some of the research that I did on encephalitis is that it could be contracted from mosquitoes. And there were certainly a lot of mosquitoes. It's similar to Hepatitis C, and Hepatitis C is spread by mosquitoes. But also, I think when many of the Vietnam veterans contracted hepatitis C, it was from sharing razorblades, sharing razors. We would do one razorblade for five or six, seven people. And that's one easy way to spread all sorts of germs. So that's probably how Bret contracted the encephalitis, but I'm not sure. I wish I knew more about that.

*His best friend also said it could've been bad blood from a transfusion. Did that happen often?*

Tom Carpenter
Back then you didn't know. You were grateful for any blood back then, bad or good.

*Stateside?*

Tom Carpenter
Stateside, sure, where you could buy it on skid row. A lot of people still to this day sell blood for profit. At least now since the HIV, at least the blood in this country are tested. But oh, I'm sure blood-borne diseases were quite common in the infantry especially. We carried the identification of the type of blood we had so we could give transfusions to somebody wounded. And there was no testing. There was oftentimes the stuff was dirty and just from the last mud hole you fell in, you know. Everything got dirty. And it was probably -- it could've been bad blood. It could've been the mosquitoes. It's hard saying.

*Why is Bret Crandall still on your mind today?*

Tom Carpenter

He was the first man of my -- well, he wasn't in my platoon, but he was part of my operation or my patrol. He was the first man that I lost. But as I found out more about him, they say that the first to die are the best, and it was certainly, in his case, he was the most successful sniper that we had had in our company, Company D or Delta Company. Didn't have any problems with him in disciplinary. He stayed out of trouble. He kept his equipment clean. Good attitude no matter what assignment you gave him. Willing to help and teach somebody else. If he hadn't have been a sniper he most certainly would've evolved into a squad leader, possibly even a platoon sergeant. Probably would've made E-5, sergeant E-5, and might've even gotten a field commission. He was sharp enough to be a leader and he was a leader and recognized among his peers as somebody who had his act together. So that's one of the things that chewed on me as you look back, and to try and find out the things you might've done different. And one of them was, of course, I wish things had worked out different with Bret. I'd had a few troublemakers I wished had gotten wounded before Bret did. But they've survived the war and doing fine. There's nothing fair about the war. It doesn't take long to come to the conclusion that war is not fair. It's about the most evil thing that has been contrived and invented. So it's one of the things, there's no such thing as a good war. If you're a civilian especially, and if you're a child especially. It seems like they really took the beating between -- the Vietnamese especially were caught between super powers, third world countries and counting the Japanese after World War II, they were on their third generation of people in the war. The French. And they had victory over the French and kicking them out. I don't know. I look back at that, and I needed to get it settled that he was on the wall. The wall meant a lot to us and still does. Still does.

*So he's there. He's there on the wall.*

Tom Carpenter
I have gotten to go there twice, once in '92 and again in 2001 I visited it again. Tried to go back a couple years ago, but couldn't find a parking place near the Mall.

*You think about Vietnam every day. Tell me about that.*

Tom Carpenter
My first five years especially in the infantry, it's intensive. It doesn't limit yourself to -- you don't break for lunch.

Tom Carpenter
With the intensity of the infantry, you tend to remember even the small things. I think for the first five years, it was so burned into my brain that I could remember almost every cigarette I smoked and where I flicked the ashes. And your mind was working 24-7, especially in a leadership position, like the sergeants or myself as a junior officer, a lieutenant they called me. You're checking supplies, you're checking enemy, you're checking civilians, you're checking, it's always something to do, and when you stop checking things, that's when you get caught short, and usually at the expense of somebody's health and certainly sometimes their life. For the first ten years, I didn't feel

comfortable about being outside again. I was always looking for snipers, mostly booby traps. I still haven't hunted since -- I make a little joke out of it. I hunted the two-legged critters in Vietnam that hunted back, and that was the last time I have hunted. I have got no desire to hunt animals anymore. I would do that for food, but not for sport again. So it was the intensity of life. Earlier I heard you talking about how time slows down. And this works also, I would think, for emergency medical people where the intensity of the situation, you've got feedback coming in from all directions all the time, and your body realizes this. When you get into combat, it shifts down and everything goes into slow motion. It's one of the more stranger things. It's not limited to combat but it's certainly influenced by day-to-day stuff. I think somebody in a stadium with a hundred thousand people cheering, football stadium, you know, they probably have those times when they go into slow motion. Your body is actually moving full speed, but your mind and your sight is moving in slow motion. It's strange. The first time it happened I couldn't, I had heard of it happening, but it had never happened to me before. And doesn't take much to bring it on, you know. Just a boom of something, an explosion close by. I can still see myself and Bret, and that was just probably a little two-hour incident. It wasn't little for Bret, but I remember just from the time of that explosion back behind me to the time that we got him hauled out of there and then put on the helicopter and taken out of there. Much of that was in slow motion. So there's a lot of intensity. I don't know that -- and we have it. People work with it day to day.

*You said he was quiet, but conscious. So he went from screaming, which endangered the squad with the noise, to quiet. Explain that again.*

Tom Carpenter
I guess in the screamings of the night, to go from being on top of a situation, like we had our people in order and our ducks in order I guess is one way to put it, ready for the ambush. We had maintained our sound discipline throughout the whole operation, and it all ended with that explosion. We had lost the advantage of stealth, sneaking into the enemy territory. We had made our presence known to the enemy, and they weren't far away. They were looking for their own chance to interrupt our day and night. Just going from the strength of silence to the noise, especially the screams of the night to me bring a sense of out of control, a sense of what am I going to do now or what can I do now or is there something else I could do that I haven't done yet, and what's going to happen next, you know. And I was still looking for the enemy to be starting to toss in grenades from around, so as we had been trained, the first thing you do is secure the situation, which my men did. They instinctively, most of them were experienced, they formed a perimeter around Bret and the medic and myself and kept us safe until we got him taken out of there. And then we moved on, reorganized, tried to make a better situation out of a bad one.

*Do you have any happy (Vietnam) stories?*

Tom Carpenter
Oh, sure. There were a lot of good times. Probably the combat is less than one percent of the time, if even that. The rest of the time was day to day, hour to hour. We

were on a 24-7, so we did more than the people who were working ten and twelve-hour days and then going to the mess hall and the enlisted club or the officer's club for that night. We still had security at night. We still had operations at night. There is one story we talked about. Maybe you might have to edit this out for the sake of mothers and congressmen. But I had just joined the platoon, and my platoon was about a half hour's drive to where the company commander was on Hill 88. We had one platoon securing a bridge. We had my platoon securing another bridge running ambushes off of both those bridges at night, and another platoon securing the Kentucky National Guard artillery people. And I got a radio message to hitchhike or make my way to meet the company commander on Hill 88. And I told my platoon sergeant I was going to be leaving and to keep on our projects that we had going for daylight. We also did traffic control. And it was almost dark by the time I got back from that round trip to Hill 88 and back to Lang Co bridge. And I notice the morale was sky high. Guys were moving with purpose from point A to point B and snapping high salutes and saying, "Airborne, sir," which you normally don't do in the field. But the Airborne does a lot of things they normally don't do in the field. And I made the comment to my platoon sergeant, Sergeant Robert Frye, I said, "Gee whiz. Look at these guys. They're pumped. Maybe I need to go more often." And SFC Robert Fry got this big grin on in his face, and he says, "Yeah, well, maybe you do need to go more often, but I think I need to let you know that while you were gone I brought in a pimp on a little motorcycle and we set them up a little place in the tent there and half the men used his prostitute." And I thought oh, my gosh. I thought to myself and I told Fry, "Well, I can see why everybody's happy now." Not everybody did that. There were the married guys. But some of them were 18, 19 years old. And so I told him, "Well, okay, Sergeant Fry. If we lose any time to venereal disease you're going to be in trouble." And Fry says, "Well, I can just about guarantee you we will lose no time to venereal disease." So that was one of the lighter moments.

Tom Carpenter
A lot of good times. Comradeship, the things that guys especially say. They're friends for life. But that's one of the things I did not like about the military is most paths and acquaintances were made for a short time and you'd never see them again for the rest of your life. So we just moved on. But with the Internet and with shared experiences we sometimes find each other, and this is what soldiers do, I guess, since war was invented.

*Is there anything you'd like to share?*

Tom Carpenter
Myself and many a soldier have come back from a warzone with a shattered spiritual conception of God. And our churches in general, our schools and the army in particular they train you for battle, but they don't train you for the repercussions of battle. And when you start seeing the kids, the good guys getting hurt, the innocent civilians, all the unfairness of war, including to your own soldiers -- the enlisted man back then was not paid well and they were draftees and they were looked down upon by a lot of people in other career groups. I came back an atheist. Had a traditional upbringing, but it didn't

prepare me for a warzone. And I don't think they're doing it nowadays to any of the military training, nor the churches. I'm not sure how all the religions are handling this. But I guess that might be one thing that impressed me with Bret was his -- the discipline that he had probably came through much of his religion. I understand he was a Mormon, and he really seemed to have his stuff together.

*You came back an atheist. What happened?*

Tom Carpenter
Oh, yeah. It went from downhill quick. I started a search. And I think you're probably too young to remember the searching years of the late '60s and the '70s. But I investigated every world religion there was, including Mormonism, including Islam, including the Eastern Religions, the Buddhists and the Hindus and tried to stay interested in my own Christianity. And I fell into the new-age religions. They had addressed much of these concerns. The thing that brought me back to Christianity was that it's the only major religion that deals or offers grace. And these other religions offered karma. And I had created so much karma, especially from the military years, that it didn't seem in my mind that I was ever gaining on karma. And then so -- and it kind of made me even more of a loner than I was when I got out. I think I was the only new-age person east of Kansas City in several million people, much less a small town in Missouri, Carrolton, Missouri. I know I was the only new-ager there. So I kept searching. I kept looking for answers. And finally I discovered or remembered or -- there's a neat story that's behind all this. But I accepted the grace that the Lord Christ extends to us, and it's easier to be an older soldier now working under grace than one working under karma. So I found my faith again in 1992 and tried to save the marriage as a Christian husband and father. Because my wife, she remained a Christian and my kids were brought up in the Christian faith, and I finally joined them again in '92. So yes, I've put a lot of thought in this trying to figure out what happened, but also not to miss out on what's going to happen. It takes a war experience to appreciate the day to day, the minute to minute of how you fill -- fill, not feel, but how you fill a day using all your senses. You don't just use your eyes or your ears or your taste or your smell, but you can combine them all together. And as I sit here, I'm enjoying the fluttering of the leaves outside. That tells me there's wind and there's fall and there's light reflection and somebody coming down the sidewalk. This is all the type of stuff that if you don't tune into that you're going to miss it.

*So you feel more alive.*

Tom Carpenter
Yes. And part of this was the infantry training, although I didn't have a lot of that. You get training. And you can teach yourself to pick up on the little stuff and don't take anything for granted. Looking for ways that the Lord wants you to go, and it's a neat path and I'm glad you've raised this point. But that one's not over yet.