

ONE FAMILY'S WAR

Program transcript

Narrator

This is the story of one young man in a distant battlefield, and the family he left behind. The life of Bret Crandall is more than a single lost story from the Vietnam War. It is a reminder of an ageless truth: When soldiers go to war, many hearts go with them. And battlefields claim many lives near and far. Told in their own recorded words, this is the story of the Crandall family, of love, and loss, and forgettable moments weighed against an unforgettable connection. This is the story of one family's war.

[One Family's War]

Female VO

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Helen Crandall

When we first started to cut these tapes, it was something kind of impersonal, this set sitting here and talking on these little wheels that turn, but now we've got the feeling that when we're talking like this we're in direct contact with you. And I think when you've served your tour over there and you come back, this is when I think we will enjoy hearing these tapes come back, and you had a tremendous idea that on neither end we should erase anything, we should just preserve them because say a year from now, these tapes, oh, we'll get such a kick out of them and we'll all three be together and we can go back and laugh about some of the grammatical errors we've all made and how we fumbled and him'd and hawed.

Bret Crandall

Hi, Mom, hi, Dad, how you doing? I bet you're sure surprised to hear my voice in this thing. I just can't wait to hear your voices and I think the feeling's mutual on the other end. I'm sitting out here and it's October 7th, 1968 at eight minutes after 11 at night. I'm looking out toward the ocean from Camp Eagle, I see three big red towers that look like the towers you see back in the States with blinking lights there. We got Constantine wire and I'm kind of inched to the edge of the perimeter. We have a bunch of choppers flying over with big search lights going. Tonight, sitting out here we heard three shots, I guess they were Charlie's I don't really know. Don't really care as long as they're not around me. Very different than back in the U.S. It seems funny to be so far, far away from home.

Male on Radio

What side of the hill they're on and where's the enemy? They're on the east side, enemy 360. And as far as I know, right now they're not taking any fire. We've put a lot of ordnance in there. OK Roger.

Dale Hansen

Well he was obviously their whole world, only son. I mean they thought the world of him and he loved his mother and father. Just to no end. They were just wonderful people. He'd tell me about them, and I looked forward to meeting them too. And I knew one day I would, it just, unfortunately wasn't under the circumstances I would've preferred.

Helen Crandall

It's really your dad's turn to talk now but he just fired up a smoke and took a sip of his coffee. Today we really hit bonanza in the mail delivery. We got four letters from you and they were fantastic letters, Bret. The way you described the duties you've been going in over there. But the big thing is that the time's going faster. And pretty quick it will be November 2nd and three months to go. Well, here's your father, ready or not, here he comes.

Irwin Crandall

Bret, this is a new experience for us as I'm sure it was for you. And when you talk about the leeches and the things that you've experienced and kind of brush them off, we know that you try to minimize your problems for our feelings but we know that it's no bed of roses over there.

Bret Crandall

That was some more mortars. Darn things anyway. But don't be scared. I mean I know God's with me and I sure have learned to pray a lot to him. I think he hears me and I think he hears the folks back home praying for me and I think he's answering my prayers, and I know I'm coming back to the States. I got too much to live for back there to let my life go getting shot up here, so don't worry.

Alan Rohlfing

Bret was a Beet Digger. He went to Jordan High School and Jordan was a rural area, there was a lot of sugar beet farmers in that area. And Bret had his dog, Stubby. They would go out in the fields and Bret was an active hunter. He was a boys' boy. He kind of reminded me a little bit of Eddie Haskell, you know?

Jan Carlston

It was hard to ever imagine going over to their house and not hearing lot of laughter.

Alan Rohlfing

And they always included you in all their activities and just made you feel like that's where you wanted to be. They were fun to be around.

Jan Carlston

Bret and I grew up together, our parents were friends and basically we were friends. And we hunted, we fished, we skied, and we grew up skiing in Alta and Brighton. And you know, storms are exciting. So we'd ski in the storms because that was the very best snow.

Bret Crandall

The weather over here is completely different than back home. When it rains, it rains. And I mean just like somebody was up there taking a bucket and dumping it on ya. Sure can't wait to get in that big double bed when I get home. Oh, boy. Don't think I'll be able to see a set of sheets until I get back in the States there.

Helen Crandall

Irwin, what are you doing?

Irwin Crandall

I'm mixing a drink.

Helen Crandall

Oh, did you hear what your dad said? Say it a little louder.

Irwin Crandall

I'm mixing a drink!

Helen Crandall

Stubb's sitting here in the living room floor looking at us like he thinks we're nuts. Of course he just hears our voice talking, he doesn't hear this noise coming. But I'll bet anything, the more we play these tapes the more he will pick up your voice and the more he'll come back.

Bret Crandall

Uh is old Stubb there? Hey, Stubbs. (*Whistles*) Come on, boy. I sure miss being home. Boy, that good old home life sure makes a guy, especially when I have one as good as I do, I sure miss it. Boy, those breakfasts you used to fix were nice. I remember them so well and especially those steak dinners with the mushrooms. Oh, man. Sure wished I was back there and settling down to a meal right now. Looks like just about everybody's in bed. There's still a few guys walking around. Boy, you'd be surprised at the amount of pot that's smoked over here. (*Bombs going off*) There's quite a bit of it. They're pretty strict on it. And I've been staying away from it. No whiskey or anything, but oh, well. When I turn 21 in February, on my ration card it says that I can buy wine and whiskey so I think I'll go out and celebrate then. (*Laughs*) A heck of a place to spend your 21st birthday, but that's life. It's my duty to do for my country, I mean, I don't know why they keep saying that "for our country" when you're over here. It makes you wonder 'cause we're not dying for the United States, we're dying for the Republic of Vietnam. Not that I'm a coward or nothing, but I guess everybody's scared over here and I'm scared too, and I'll admit it. My knees start to clatter and my teeth start to chatter.

Irwin Crandall

Hi, Bret, it's now Monday evening after work. We're very glad that you're seeing new country and that you enjoy it and that the time is going fast. But the thing I want to impress on you is not to get careless there. Your enemy is still there and be alert. Keep your powder dry, as they say, and be ready to go. But the main thing I'm afraid of is that things might seem to ease off and then it's natural for a person to kind of ease off themselves and then all of the sudden whambo. Well, Bret, we just finished eating our dinner and wished you were here to enjoy it. I just got the final score on the Arizona/BYU game and Arizona won it 19 to 3, which makes them look pretty strong.

Helen Crandall

Ya and back in those old, old days they never had these playbacks on TV where you stop the camera during the timeout or a huddle or something--they have some flashbacks. I think that's one of the most marvelous things that I've seen on TV as far as football, baseball, anything.

Irwin Crandall

Oh I do too Bret, and this is where I think that within your age, gee, you've seen so many things. I mean I thought our generation saw a hell of a lot when we, well, the first thing that came along was radio and then air travel and I didn't think that that would ever be equalled, but then your generation comes around, they're talking about going to the moon, the atomic age and you're a real great generation. And there's a lot of hippies and that thing around that maybe the old fogies kind of resent, but you can't hold back progress and we want you to come home and get as much education as you can and really be a contributing factor in this because this is kind of a stalemate in your life, but when you come back, there's gonna be a hell of a lot of opportunities for you which are even unheard of in our day.

Helen Crandall

We haven't been getting much news back here on what's happening over there. It's mainly yakking about what's happening at the peace conference, it looks like nothing is. That doesn't look very encouraging but we'll keep you in touch.

Alan Rohlfing

Helen would watch the news every day. She'd read any kind of periodical. *Newsweek*, *Time* magazine, anything, *Life* magazine. And she would do clippings and she had maps and she'd put pins in the maps of where the different troops were located and she kept meticulous records of that. And they were very concerned. As the war escalated, it just kept getting worse and worse and there were more people coming home in body bags.

Bret Crandall

I just took another look at the tape with a cigarette lighter and looks like it might be getting down close to the end so I just want to let you know, before this tape runs out that I sure appreciate everything you've done and everything you're doing. You two are the greatest and you're always in my mind and you're included in all my prayers. I thank

God, the dear Lord, that I've got parents just as great as you guys and if you hadn't brought me up like I been brought up, like Mom said, that I had the personality to make lot of friends and I know I wouldn't have had that if any other parents would've brought me up. So thanks a million you guys. I think you did a pretty good job of bringing me up, if I do say so. I've sure learned a lot about life since I've been out of high school. Life is unfair. (*Laughs*) I keep quoting that. That seems to be the fad around here when anybody says anything, you say that. But you guys are the greatest and these packages and letters, you've really helped me out over here. Especially the letters. I really meant it when I said that I had tears in my eyes that first couple of letters that I got and I've had a couple tears in my eyes since then when I read your letters. I got a lot of love for you. And I just want you to know it. And Stubby too. He's the best dog in this whole world.

Irwin Crandall

Bret, the things that you've given back to us has more than compensated for what we've done for you. We've tried to be good parents. But the proof in the pudding is the reaction we get from you and we feel that you've matured. We know that you've made mistakes, but the fact that you realize them and the way you're coming on strong now is the best compensation you could ever give any parent.

Helen Crandall

And another thing, if you think you're the only one that has tears come to your eyes when you get a letter or something, we do the same on this end. And not only that, but we've had tears, laughs, all kinds of feelings on hearing these tapes. And as your father and I listen to them, we both, a little tear will come down, a tear of happiness in hearing your voice. And then we'd reach for he, a handkerchief, and me, a Kleenex, and we'd blow.

Bret Crandall

The news, it's funny, boy. It sure leaves out a lot of happenings over here. And people just don't realize that this is a crummy situation over here and how us guys over here feel. Boy, if I was a millionaire I think all's I'd do is get packages and just send the companies over here to distribute out to the guys. That mail in those packages are wonderful boy.

Bret Crandall

Hey, where's your loudness on this? We're all pulling together in this war and if everybody didn't work together, we couldn't go anywhere. It's a team that's what's doing it.

[Singing]

...upon the railroad tracks. They said they found my high school ring...

Bret Crandall

Dutton's over here with the recorder, recording of a bunch of us guys singing and I'll put this mike by it and let you listen to it.

[Singing]

... can you hear me, Teen angel, can you see me

Bret Crandall

Hey, Mom, Dad, you enjoying this? This is a love in. (*Laughs*)

[Singing]

...and am I still your own true love?

Bret Crandall

No

Helen Crandall

It's still on, and the music is still going. And your father's over here, shelling some pecans. Speak, speak father.

Irwin Crandall

Yooo hoooo. Down Stubby. (*laughing*)

Irwin Crandall

Maybe this sounds a little silly to you, Bret, the levity in here going on, but we're thinking of you and that's the reason we kind of wanted to let you know the spirit of the occasion here. You know how well Robby and I have always gotten along and it has been great to be down here and also to try and bring you into the spirit of the occasion.

Tom Carpenter

Bret was sharp enough to be a leader and he was a leader and recognized among his peers as somebody who had his act together. And he was the most successful sniper that we had had.

Dale Hansen

He was so well prepared and he was confident. And having Bret out in the field with you, you know, you just felt safer. You always wanted him to be somewhere around you.

TV Announcer

Third down...

Irwin Crandall

Hi, Bret, this is Sunday the 20th. I went over and opened the store up and stayed for about an hour and then Mom relieved me so I could watch this football game. You can probably hear it in the background. It's the only one on this afternoon, it's Buffalo and Houston. Maybe you can hear part of it.

TV Announcer
It's fourth down

TV Announcer
Davis is going to try to do better than that, passing over the middle. Intercepted...by Beverly. Going the other way now. Finally dragged down and that's for one of the Oilers ends almost as soon as it starts at the 39 yard line on the interception by Randy Beverly, number 42.

Bret Crandall
Before the end of this tape runs out, I'd just like to say God bless you all and tell everybody back home hi and Stubby too. And I hope you get a lot of enjoyments out of these tapes that I've made and this will be the last one for this stand down and I hope the next stand down that you guys have a couple there waiting for me to listen and I'll try to get some more out after this stand down.

Helen Crandall
Well Bret, I think we'll go to bed. It's getting to be that time. And we sure hope that your new operation you're in on is a change for you from the other and a change for the better. We hope the monsoons aren't washing you out too much. Well, the main idea Bret is that we're thinking about you all the time. We're thinking about you when we're not recording, when we're recording. We think about you as we go to sleep and we think about you when we wake up in the morning. Good night, Bret.

Irwin Crandall
Good night, Bret.

Tom Carpenter
Bret was on the ground, in a fetal position, drawn up and evidently he had tripped off a fragmentation booby trap. And 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, a scream in a night still gives me an eerie feeling, almost sometimes a sense of panic. But fortunately I don't have many screams in the night, but I did that night.

Dale Hansen
I was sick. I was just sick to my stomach. Because you never think, you know, your buddy's gonna get hit. It's always gonna be somebody else.

Dale Hansen
Bret was doing what he always did, he was helping somebody. They had a new guy in the unit and he was showing him how to put out a claymore mine and trip flares and whatever else for their night defensive position and somehow a booby trap was tripped and Bret got a head wound.

Alan Rohlfing

Helen spent all the time in Bret's room. I'm sure she slept in the room. I don't know that she left there. But it was a time when Bret was in the Texas hospital when Ir said, "I just got the best present. Bret was able to sit up and talk and he's coming around. It looks great, you know? So he's gonna make it."

Jan Carlston

I called him on the phone when he was in Texas and Helen was there. And the wound wasn't as bad as all that, but things changed.

Dale Hansen

It wasn't until I started receiving letters from Helen that I actually knew. And then, while I was in the hospital recovering she sent me another letter that said that Bret had encephalitis and swelling of the brain. In late March he died. Devastating.

Dale Hansen

I went there and I saw Helen and Irk. But boy, that was a tough one because we sat and we talked and cried over Bret. And I remember Irk was so proud of him. He went in the other room and came back with his SKS rifle that our old company commander had personally delivered to him with his condolences.

Alan Rohlfing VO

And Helen, she was still a happy person, but there was a flame that died in her. You could tell that a big part of her was missing.

Dale Hansen

And after Bret died she just wrote to me all the time. She wrote to my wife. Helen and Irk were always sending cards to my kids filled with dimes. They never missed a birthday. It reached a point where Helen actually told me one time that one of their friends tried to warn them not to get too close to me. That you know... I was no replacement for Bret.

Helen Crandall

Wherever you are, whatever you're doing, my thoughts are with you, Bret, and all of our prayers and all of our love. And we're just living for the day when you get back.

[END FILE]