

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
ROBERT L. CRAHEN
Radioman, 69th Field Artillery, Army, Korean War.

2000

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Crahen, Robert L., (1932-). Oral History Interview, 2000.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 22 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 22 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Video Recording: 1 videorecording (ca. 22 min.); ½ inch, color.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Robert L. Crahen, a North Freedom, Wisconsin native, discusses his Korean War service as a fire direction controller with Company C, 69th Field Artillery, 25th Division. Crahen talks about basic and survey training at Fort Sill (Oklahoma), his duties as a radio telephone operator and fire direction controller, and arrival in Korea. He describes the artillery guns and states they were terribly noisy. Crahen speaks about living in a nine-man tent, beer and food rations, and volunteering to be a mail clerk. He recalls the South Korean Infantry in front of his unit being overrun and talks about being shelled. Crahen touches on his discharge, lifetime membership in the American Legion, buying a home, and his career with the Foster Grandparent Program.

Biographical Sketch:

Crahen (b.1932) served in the Army with Company C of the 69th Field Artillery during the Korean War. Drafted in 1952, he was honorably discharged from service in 1954 and returned to Wisconsin, eventually settling in Waunakee. He worked for the State for thirty nine years, starting as an institutional aide at Mendota State Hospital and retiring as supervisor of the Foster Grandparent Program.

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 2000.

Transcribed by Michelle Ruppert and Noreen Warren, 2010.

Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2010.

Transcribed Interview:

James: Okay, now, talkin' to Robert Crahen, and it's uh 22 July, in the year 2000. When were you born, Bob?

Crahen: I was born 4/24/32.

James: April '32?

Crahen: Right.

James: Where?

Crahen: North Freedom, Wisconsin.

James: And when did you enter military service?

Crahen: Uh, April, I mean uh, November 18, 1952.

James: 11/52.

Crahen: Right.

James: Are you drafted, or—?

Crahen: Drafted.

James: Drafted. Into the Army?

Crahen: Army.

James: Yep. (pauses) And where did you, where was your first, uh, experience in the Army? Where you trained, and so forth.

Crahen: Uh, at Fort Sill, Oklahoma.

James: Oh, that's where they—

Crahen: I took basic training at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, and then I took uh, survey training.

James: Survey training?

Crahen: Yeah.

James: Well now, that's not a term I'm familiar with. What's that mean?

Crahen: Well, when you go into any area, before you go into it, you survey it, 'cause this is where you wanna have the gun sections. I was in the 105 outfit. I was a—but, I did survey plus I did a radio telephone operator.

James: Oh, I see.

Crahen: And so they were—

James: An artillery outfit.

Crahen: Artillery, mm-hmm.

James: I see. *Heavy* artillery.

Crahen: Heavy artillery.

James: 101?

Crahen: 105's.

James: 105's, yes. That's not as big as 155.

Crahen: 155, 155's the biggie.

James: Yeah, didn't do any of those?

Crahen: No.

James: Did they keep those separate? People don't interchange—

Crahen: Yeah, they, there, that's the different—uh, yeah, they're bigger, they all stay together in that area. With 155's, and 105's stay together.

James: But a guy who's trained to, to operate a 105 wouldn't necessarily be able to handle a 155?

Crahen: I dunno. I never had anything to do with the gun section. Ya know, so, uh, only thing I had to do with it was, when we were caught up on our work, uh during the war, and we had to open ammo boxes because we couldn't keep up with the way they fired around the clock.

James: Oh, I see. So your job was puttin', gettin' that ammo up to the—

Crahen: Yeah, when I wasn't on the radio or on my regular shift that I had.

- James: Your, your training involved, uh, learning to use the radio?
- Crahen: Yeah.
- James: And learning to read maps?
- Crahen: Right, uh-huh.
- James: All that.
- Crahen: And uh, yeah.
- James: Anything else they taught you?
- Crahen: Uh, yeah, the radio and the telephone. From the outpost, they would send down the messages down, and then they would send it from our office. The officer would send it from there down to the gun sections and tell how close they were to the, where they wanted to fire up on, and when they got it in there, you just kept firing whatever was—
- James: Right.
- Crahen: Yeah.
- James: Right, okay.
- Crahen: I think the 105's could fire about five miles away. And the 155's I think, were quite a bit farther, ten.
- James: Yeah. Okay, and did you get uh, artillery training uh, right at, at Fort Sill, too, or did you go somewhere else for that?
- Crahen: Nope, at uh Fort Sill, Oklahoma.
- James: And uh, training involved uh, about how many months?
- Crahen: Uh, I got there in November, by the time--well we went to Fort, uh, yeah, went to out there—Fort, Fort Sheridan, then from Fort Sheridan they told us that we'd either go to Fort Sill, Oklahoma, or Camp Chaffee, Arkansas. And they took alphabetical order, I guess. Every other one went where--somewhere, and so I went to Fort Sill in the end of November, first part of December. I stayed there until the first part of April, and, and uh, basic training was over, and uh, our, uh, training and artillery and, and all that. And then, I got a delay en route and had to report to, uh, uh to Fort Lewis uh, by eight or nine days. And, so it didn't make any difference if you walked, or rode a camel, or went on train. So I took a train, went home,

stayed about six days. Then I went to Portage. My home was La Valle at that time. And uh, went to Portage, then—

James: (speaking at the same time) The Northern, Great Northern Route?

Crahen: —took that, yeah, took the, the train outta there to Fort Lewis, Washington, and then we stayed there a while ‘til we got shipped overseas.

James: Was there further training at Fort Lewis?

Crahen: No. Uh, we just uh—

James: Just waiting for transportation.

Crahen: Yeah. Oh, that’s right.

James: So when did you get to Korea?

Crahen: Uh, well I left, uh, Fort Lewis on my twenty-first birthday, which was April 24th, until we got there, uh, thirteen days later. It was the first part of May, first week in May.

James: And what was the artillery unit? What was that number?

Crahen: Uh, 69th Field Artillery. Uh, it was the 25th Division.

James: 25th Division, yeah.

Crahen: Yeah, 69th Field Artillery.

James: 69th.

Crahen: Uh-huh.

James: Okay. And, when did you get there again?

Crahen: The first part of May.

James: In May, of, uh, (both speaking at the same time) ’53.

Crahen: ’53. Yep.

James: Okay, and uh, so where was your first chance of gettin’ into the action? Right until you got there?

Crahen: Yeah, right after they took us by, uh, after we got into Korea, took us to our Charlie battery, and uh, um, it was terrible noisy with all these guns firing all around the clock, you know, and I wasn't used to that.

James: No. How many 105's did they have in your group?

Crahen: Uh, probably um, six or eight I think.

James: Mm-hmm. They were all coordinated.

Crahen: Yeah, uh-huh.

James: Spread out how far apart?

Crahen: Uh—

James: Ten yards, fifteen yards?

Crahen: Yeah, about, uh at least from here to the wall over there, if I remember, yeah. Somethin' like that.

James: 'Kay. And, um, but the noise was pretty—

Crahen: Oh yeah, lots of--lots of noise.

James: Did you have any protection for your ears?

Crahen: No. But, (mumbling) I never, but you weren't fired, you know, I was— that, that was down in the gun section, and I was out farther—

James: You were further away.

Crahen: Yeah, father away, yeah.

James: So you weren't listening to that all the time.

Crahen: No, not—You could hear it real good, but I mean, it wasn't—

James: So, how much further forward were you to the guns?

Crahen: Uh, the, the guns were, kind of off to the side of, front of us, kind of, and we were in back in a--in a tent in back.

James: In back of the guns?

Crahen: Yeah, uh-huh.

- James: Oh, okay. And uh, operating with radios, or—?
- Crahen: Yeah, telephone and radios.
- James: Well, there must have been somebody, somebody up front—
- Crahen: Yeah.
- James: --who was pointing out the, the, the objects to hit.
- Crahen: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, they, had the radios there that we could call down from the outpost down to where we were at.
- James: So you just were more relaying the message from the outpost to the gunners.
- Crahen: Right. To the, there was a captain inside there, and then he would go on to map, and, and then he picks a spot and send it down to the gun sections, and then they zero it in on the enemy from there.
- James: Mm-hmm. How much did those shells weigh that you had to carry?
- Crahen: Oh, they weren't so heavy, uh—
- James: Eight pounds?
- Crahen: I think eight, maybe a little more, yeah. They were about that long, mm-hmm.
- James: About a yard long?
- Crahen: Yeah, about that long, yeah. And then, the one-oh—155's are quite a bit longer. Yeah, they're big. They were very big. No, they weren't that, you know that it was so heavy handling or anything.
- James: Yeah. So when you, when uh, things got busy, then you went out and—
- Crahen: And then of course it was raining, it was raining a lot then, and that time of year it was a [unintelligible].
- James: Did that interfere with the gun?
- Crahen: No. (laughs) They'd fire.
- James: Fired right through it.

Crahen: Yeah, right through it.

James: Even through the pouring rain?

Crahen: Yep. Yep.

James: I bet. So how was, would you live in tents there?

Crahen: Yes, uh-huh. There was nine of us in our tent.

James: Mm-hmm.

Crahen: That was our home away from home.

James: Right.

Crahen: And my icebox was underneath the tent.

James: Oh, where'd you get that?

Crahen: It wasn't. It was, (laughs) that's where you kept cool or warm.

James: Oh that's, I see, you just made it.

Crahen: They used to get beer rations and toddy rations, and no you'd just--nobody was on--there was a floor in the tent, and then you'd just put it on there because the tent, there was cold air coming in there, and so it would keep—

James: Keep it cool?

Crahen: In the, in the winter. Summer, you, you know, the beer didn't taste that good. Warm, you just—

James: So you were there in May of '53 'til how long?

Crahen: Until uh, uh September of, uh, '54.

James: That's when you left Korea?

Crahen: Yeah. Got discharged September 22, 1954.

James: You left Korea in September of '54, right?

Crahen: Yep. Right.

James: 9/54. Things had quieted down pretty much—

Crahen: Yeah, then—

James: By that time.

Crahen: Yes, oh yeah, it was over in July 27th, and then, uh a little later, uh, they asked me if I would like to be mail clerk. And uh, I said, uh, well, that would probably be alright. I didn't have to even drive my own jeep. I could uh, call down to the--get a jeep driver, and have him pick me up, take us, take 'em over to headquarters, take all the mail that was to be sent out, take it over there and mail it, and then packages if they wanted to send.

James: That was your last duty in Korea?

Crahen: Yeah, uh-huh. And uh—

James: Well, that's a lot easier.

Crahen: Oh yeah. And then we'd go over there usually in the late morning or early afternoon and uh, then come back and sort the mail. Five o'clock was mail call. Five thirty, the door went down. The captain says no more after that. You didn't have to worry. Everybody right there at mail call, ready to get their mail.

James: Oh, I know.

Crahen: You know, it was a great thing for—

James: I was in Korea in 1950.

Crahen: Oh yeah? Uh-huh.

James: On a hospital ship.

Crahen: Oh, yeah. Yep, that's one, one of the nice things about gettin' mail from home. Everybody—

James: Everybody likes it.

Crahen: Yeah. Yeah. (laughs)

James: How was your food?

Crahen: Uh, well, it was—

James: [unintelligible] just ate uh, C-rations?

Crahen: Yeah not all—no, not all of the time. They cooked different food. Yeah, we had C-rations at times, but not all of the time. No, they'd cook—the only thing we didn't have fresh was milk, eh, never had any, you know, there was powdered milk that you put in everything in there—

James: Eggs, too.

Crahen: Yeah, and eggs. Mm-hmm.

James: Yeah, I hated those things.

Crahen: Them powdered eggs.

James: They were totally tasteless.

Crahen: That smell of powdered eggs, I can smell that yet.

James: (laughs)

Crahen: Yeah I, powdered milk wasn't as bad as the powdered eggs.

James: No, just I wouldn't eat any. I tried to at first, but then it was just—

Crahen: Yeah, yeah it was, uh, bad news.

James: Yeah.

Crahen: And some of them C-rations wasn't that bad. You could get beans and uh, or the ravioli or the meatballs and spaghetti wasn't bad. And I wasn't--I'm not a complainer anyhow. It wouldn't bother me.

James: Uh-huh.

Crahen: Have 'em in--they'd have 'em in the--course you'd have been the same thing, they'd have 'em in the tanks where they kept 'em hot.

James: Sure.

Crahen: Yeah. Hot water, hot water.

James: Was the Red Cross visiting, visiting frequently?

- Crahen: Yes, they did, uh, once. You know, I can't remember much about it, but, once I think or so, maybe. I'm not sure. That's fifty years ago. My memory isn't like it used to be. I can't remember all that stuff.
- James: Okay, and um, did you join any Veterans' organizations when you got out?
- Crahen: Yeah I did one, the Legion.
- James: The Legion?
- Crahen: The Waunakee, Waunakee Legion, yes.
- James: No VFW?
- Crahen: No, I don't belong to VFW, yet. They want me to join, and I haven't yet, but I, I may now because I'm a payed-up member of the Legion. I belong forty years, and then you're paid-up.
- James: Ah. And did you use your G.I. Bill when you got out, out of service?
- Crahen: No, I didn't. Uh, I was going to, one time, on a house, and uh, then they told me, uh, that I didn't have enough for a down payment. I went right up to there, and he gave me a chart right there and he says, "How much money have you got for a down payment? How many is in your family? How much take-home pay you got?" He said, "You can't afford that house." He says, "No use spending money to take a picture of it," and he said, "You can't afford it, I advise you to buy an older home in a good location." Which I did. I went out and took his advice and bought an old home in, in a good location.
- James: Where?
- Crahen: In Waunakee. And uh, had it nine years, and then, I bought it on a land contract from this man, and then he, he uh, had this big five-bedroom home which was kitty-corner over across the alley. And uh, he said, uh, one day that he's gonna sell that house and, because he didn't need that big house anymore, and uh, he was gonna--if he bought another one he'd let me know. He uh, put a bid on another house and he said uh, "If you're interested, come on over." So I bought that house on a land contract then, and I sold this one. And kept that for fifteen years and then uh, bought a, er, built a new house, uh, thirteen years ago, in Waunakee.
- James: What did you do for work?
- Crahen: I worked for the State for thirty-nine years.

James: Doing what?

Crahen: I started out at Mendota State Hospital as an Institutional Aid. I was there about four years, and Central Wisconsin Center Colony opened up. And of course, they posted it all, you know, job openings and all that. So then, they needed--so then I went over there as an Aid Supervisor, and I did that for about four years and uh, then I--I went uh, they needed, uh, Therapy Assistants--Physical Therapy Assistants, and that was straight days. And, they'd teach you how to do this, so I, I applied and got in there as a Physical Therapy Assistant. I did that for about four years, and then uh--I don't know if you've ever heard of the Foster Grandparent Program. It's for senior citizens, you come out to the Center and work with the retarded children. Uh, the uh, supervisor said he may get a job as a State Director, and he told me about it, and he said, "Would you be interested in taking that job?" And, he said, "I'd put a good word in, and besides that, you were in the service, you'd have Veteran's points."

James: Sure, advantage.

Crahen: Advantage. And then, you had seniority over Mendota. So I applied, and of course, I got it. And I did that for the last twenty-five years. I was a Foster Grandparent Supervisor.

James: Oh.

Crahen: And I retired six years ago.

James: Well, that's a pretty good job.

Crahen: Good job. I did some—we had meetings out in Washington, D.C., we had regional meetings in different, in, and uh, like in Illinois, Rockford, Chicago.

James: How big of a program is it here.

Crahen: Well, that one there out at Central Colony, when I took it over we had thirty-seven grandparents, and then at that time, if you could get grandparents to head the moneys, and I built it up to ninety-two.

James: Ninety-two.

Crahen: Yeah, and I had a—

James: Whoa, that's a big program.

Crahen: Yeah. And nine—I had a half-time assistant and a secretary. And then, after a while, though, and then the moneys start goin' down. They cut our program about five percent.

James: Oh.

Crahen: Mm-hmm. And, uh, but that, never had to lay any of them grandparents off. It mostly was, uh, where they were movin' on, move somewhere, or too old, too old—

James: Croaked. (laughs)

Crahen: --yeah, passed away--or too old to do their duties, you know. And then—

James: These were volunteers?

Crahen: Yeah. No, they got paid a stipend.

James: Oh, they did.

Crahen: Yeah, a very small stipend. A dollar sixty-six or somethin'. Plus, mileage. They would get mileage. That was our--we had to keep records of how many days they'd come in, so much a mile, so many miles, and then when—bus, a lot of them rode the bus. We'd reimburse their bus transportation.

James: Very good.

Crahen: And it was a very interesting program. I uh, I can't say enough about it. And uh, now it's been goin' down, down since. I think they only got uh—

James: Runnin' out of money.

Crahen: Yeah, they uh, they can't get the grandparents. It's not what people wantin' to come out and do that kind of thing anymore. There's more money available today, and more, other jobs, lots of jobs, you know for senior citizens if they wanna work. And then this, you know, when you're working with the most severely and profoundly retarded in the State of Wisconsin, it's just a lot of them that see those that can't move a muscle, you know, just lucky if you can get eye contact. You know it's, it's difficult for a lot of people if they've never been around 'em, you know.

James: It's pretty depressing.

Crahen: It's very depressing. Unless you really have a feeling for something like that. You got grandchildren like that or something. Then, it's different.

But uh, if you've never been around it and you come in and some of them just can't cut it. And so, they don't—

James: Yeah, it's hard.

Crahen: They don't—yeah--they work—they come in four hours a day, five days a week Monday through Friday. And uh, it was, I met a lot of good senior citizens through that program.

James: Oh, I'm sure.

Crahen: Yeah. Mostly women. And when eligible—see, it was for low-income people. So, my job was to go in, over their incomes to see how much they're—

James: Oh, oh everyone couldn't do this?

Crahen: Oh, no, that was another thing, that, too many people made too much money and so, and they couldn't—weren't eligible, so I had to, 'cause the other, the poor people were first, and then last, you know, 'cause we couldn't take the ones that made a lot of money 'cause a lot of 'em would love to do it even just to vol—well, they could come and volunteer, but then it was my job to be their supervisor. They could come through Volunteer Services and come out and work with them.

James: Sure.

Crahen: Then that was another program.

James: I'll be darned. Huh.

Crahen: Yeah.

James: When you were in Korea, did uh, did anybody get sick a lot in your group.

Crahen: No, uh—

James: Stayed pretty healthy?

Crahen: --you know, I--before, when I was home before I went into the service, I had a lot of sinus problems in high school. Jeez I'd get sinus headaches and go to the doctor and, and uh all of that. I got over there, which was the dampest place in the world. I never had a sinus headache while I was over there. But it must— isn't that strange that you go over there and never have—

James: You came back home did the stuff come back?

Crahen: Yeah, come back, yeah, oh, yeah, I had surgery then, yeah, after I got home a while. After I got married.

James: So it was definitely the area that you're in.

Crahen: Yeah.

James: That seemed to cause it.

Crahen: Uh-huh, so.

James: You proved that.

Crahen: Yep. Well, I had uh, surgery, oh, four, five years after I was married. And uh, then I--I was smoking cigarettes a little at the time, and I started again after the surgery and then got the headaches again, so then the doctor told me, "If you never smoked another cigarette again," he said, "You'll be better off."

James: No kidding.

Crahen: I—I got home and gave them to my wife. She smoked Lucky Strikes, too, so, I gave them to her, and she wasn't a heavy smoker, but I never smoked another one except—

James: She still smokin'?

Crahen: No, no she quit probably fifteen years ago.

James: Ah.

Crahen: Yeah, she saw the light, too. Them goings in your lungs, you know, when you think about it, why you ever started. Yeah, it's no good.

James: Alright, I can't think of anything else. Uh, anything special happen, any particular incidents while you were in the field?

Crahen: Oh, yes, uh, the one time, uh, when we had the big push, uh, this one, this is about a month after I was over there when uh, got—we had just moved back, and uh, somewhere, we moved up or down or somewhere, I can't remember how that went. But anyhow, we was in there in the morning, they woke us up and said, "We gotta get outta here." The, uh, the, uh, Korea infantry is being overrun, and we saw them comin' down the road.

James: The Chinese.

Crahen: The Korean, yeah, the South Koreans--Infantry that was in ahead of—in front of us. And they, uh, were getting overrun, and so we had to back up. They were--they had been hit, a lot of them had blood, you know, you could--and it was a mess. So they, we backed up about five miles, and, and that's when the big push was. And stayed there until it was over. And bang, that's when we really went to work on 'em until July 27th when they signed that—

James: They, uh, those guns move by truck?

Crahen: Yeah. Uh-huh, they pulled behind 'em.

James: There weren't so-- they couldn't move them on their own?

Crahen: Oh no, they're pulled, they're pulled behind trucks. Uh-huh, yeah.

James: So you had to really skedaddle there for a while.

Crahen: Yeah, had to get outta there.

James: But you finally got to the line and stopped them and then drove them back?

Crahen: (both speaking at the same time) Yup. Yup. Mm-hmm. And then this one night, too, uh we were, we were—I don't remember if it was that night or not—but anyhow it was—you know how it sounds when a round comes in (makes high-pitched whistling sound)—and one came in, and this guy was on this pole puttin' up a wire, and the rest of us hit the deck, and, and he got it right across the throat I guess or somewhere they claimed. Of course, I didn't see him, but, they [unintelligible], and they took him, and I don't know if he, how bad he was hurt or not, and we never saw him again. And uh, another time there was a--a round came in and--we thought it was a round. It was a dud. And they never—And then that one there was the only one that ever came in. Two that night. That was strange.

James: Did you find it?

Crahen: Uh, I don't know if they, they must have went out and looked and it. I didn't look for it (laughs) you know, because uh, it, buried in the ground and—

James: Who knows what's gonna happen.

Crahen: Yeah, I don't wanna be lookin' around there. Another one might come in.

James: Right.

Crahen: Yeah.

James: Okay, that should do 'er. (Long pause)

Crahen: Okay. Thank—

James: Did you get any decorations when you're over there?

Crahen: Uh, probably, but I don't know, I don't know what ribbons—

James: Nothin' special?

Crahen: No.

James: Area ribbons mostly, right?

Crahen: Yeah.

James: We all got those.

Crahen: Yeah.

James: Okay, you came back to the United States right after in '54 then?

Crahen: That's right, mm-hmm. Came to Fort Sheridan, and we got discharged out of Fort Sheridan.

James: And you returned home?

Crahen: Yeah, 22nd of uh, September, 1954.

James: Yeah, and then, but, uh, where'd you got to? Where'd you go, where was home then?

Crahen: LaValle.

James: LaValle?

Crahen: Uh-huh. It was my folks'—

James: L-a-V-a-l-l-e?

Crahen: That's right. L-a-capital V-a-l-l-e.

James: Right. Alright, super. Right, I don't-- we don't need that, you can keep that.

Crahen: Oh, okay, sure.

James: And uh, turn that off and get you unhooked there.

Crahen: Okay.

[End of Interview]