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**The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Peggy Cornett
Conducted by Dr. Philip F. Napoli
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Transcribed by Mark Steven Varela**

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NOTE: Any text included in brackets [] is information that was added by the narrator after reviewing the original transcript. Therefore, this information is not included in the audio version of the interview.

1 Dr. Philip F. Napoli: I am Philip Napoli, today is November 11, 2005. I am
2 speaking with Peggy Cornett at the Crystal City Hilton Hotel in Virginia. We're going to
3 be speaking about your brother and your memories of your brother and the aftermath of
4 the Ia Drang Valley for you personally. First—

5 Peggy Cornett: Well I live in Charlottesville, Virginia and I work at a historic
6 home in Monticello. I'm from North Carolina originally and Don, my brother and my
7 sister, Carol also live there but he actually entered the military when we were living in
8 Louisiana. We moved around a lot, my father was a lieutenant colonel in the Army. My
9 brother was—I'm all over the place here, but my dad was older when I was born so he
10 retired when I was three years old. We still ended up moving around a lot and we ended
11 up living in Louisiana. My brother and sister went to McNeese State College in Lake
12 Charles. He was in the ROTC (Reserve Officers' Training Corps) and he was twelve
13 years older than me and he married there and then, after he graduated he joined the
14 military as a lieutenant and moved to Fort Benning. He was stationed at Fort Benning and
15 that's when you know, they were shipped out to Vietnam from there. He had a son; his
16 son had just turned a year old when Don was killed. His birthday was a couple of days
17 ago, November 9th so he just turned forty-one. Hard to believe. So I have a lot of
18 memories of my brother. Well, families are always a little screwy anyway, but ours was

1 kind of clouded I guess by the fact that my father was an alcoholic. Which in a sense,
2 Don became like a father figure to me as well as an older brother. Especially because my
3 father was still in Korea when I was born, I never really saw him until I was three years
4 old. We were living in Southern Pines with my mother, sister and brother. So it was
5 particularly—it was a particular loss I guess, his death was like a double loss for me, I
6 guess. It was also an incredibly traumatic and unfortunate thing to the whole family, our
7 family. I mean you always think of someone's death bringing people together but ours we
8 all kind of spun off into our own little orbits of grief and tried to deal with it alone. I
9 always said my mother and father kind of made a pact with the devil before my brother
10 left and if he would come back they—some strange reason my dad stopped drinking right
11 before he left and my mother stopped smoking, and then of course right after he died, all
12 those habits start up again even worse. My mother especially was profoundly affected.
13 Don was just her son, her first born. She became very withdrawn and of course my father,
14 his drinking got worse after that. My sister was already living on her own down in
15 Louisiana, so she dealt with it kind of in her own place. We were living in North Carolina
16 at the time, when Don was killed. Anyway, the first year was very dark.

17 PN: How old were you?

18 PC: I was twelve. Yeah. He don't—they'd only been there for a couple of months.
19 You know, they went in August, they were killed in November and I had a real hard time
20 even accepting that he actually died. It was real denial. But I'll never forget when we
21 found out. My parents were watching a football game. It must've been on a weekend,
22 Saturday or Sunday, anyway. The phone rang and I went to answer the phone and it was
23 Don's wife's father. Didn't really ring a bell that this was serious. He said he wanted to
24 speak to my dad. My dad went in and I just felt this kind of energy going between my
25 mother and then he came in and he just said, "He's gone." They both started crying and
26 you know my parents were never affectionate with each other, but he went over and sat
27 on the couch and put his arm around her. My mother was just dissolved and sobbing. I
28 was just sitting there, "Who? Who's gone?" it didn't really—I didn't want to accept it I
29 guess. I just remember everything became black in the room. It was—I must've fallen in
30 a well or something. It was very—like an incredible storm came over. Anyway, my
31 brother was over—they didn't really get his body back for a long time. It was several

1 weeks; it was almost Christmas when it came back, so it was this waiting and waiting.
2 They were going to have this big memorial service for him down in Lake Charles
3 because he had been student body president, he was a big guy, very well liked. Hundreds
4 of people, you know. We went down there and it just wait, wait and wait until his body
5 got back and of course, I was down there with my family, I was taken out of school. I
6 even got a case of pleurisy, which was very odd. It was just a real dark, dark time, dark
7 winter. Finally, his body came and I don't know why I have this memory if it's true, but
8 he was sent on a train and we went to meet the train and there was a military escort with
9 his casket. My memories that his coffin must've been in a wooden crate or something and
10 it had "Do not open" stamped on it. I don't know it seem so—you know like he was
11 luggage or something being shipped. They wouldn't allow my dad to identify the body
12 because he had decomposed so long, so again that fed into my fantasy that he didn't
13 really die, that he was over there somewhere. There was this memorial service there in
14 Lake Charles and huge thing. The minister—I used to remember his name. Anyway, they
15 were Methodist and he—who married my brother and his wife Silva. He was at the
16 funeral or at the service and then his body was shipped up to Arlington. He's buried in
17 Arlington. So we had another you know, a grave side service there. By then, it was quite
18 cold. I'll never forget also you know the fact that we went to where he was going to
19 buried, there was a whole row of open graves next to his open grave, which was very—
20 just stuck in my mind. Then, for months after that I was really—you know we came back,
21 I finally got back to school, I was just a real outcast. I was weird because no one knew
22 how to approach me. People would come and try to say that they were sorry, but I could
23 tell that people were afraid to talk to me, so I was kind of a loner—I was always kind of a
24 loner, but I really became a loner then. I started having terrible nightmares for a long time
25 of—couple I really remember vividly to this day, I wanted to dig his grave up to look at
26 him. I was just digging, trying to dig his grave up and I woke up and my hands were
27 clinched so tight. My nails were dug into my hands and then another one—I was in
28 Vietnam and I was in this field, a place with tall grass and I didn't really know all this
29 was what the scene was like when he was killed, but there was tall grass and all of the
30 sudden it parted and there was a Vietcong—he was there and shot me in the face and I
31 fell back and it was like I went into the sky or the stars. Then, I kind of opened my eyes

1 again and I was in a room, there was a casket in the room and I walked up to the casket
2 and looked inside and of course I was in the casket, but half my face was gone and I sort
3 of jump back, looked around me and the room was full of mirrors and I was not reflected
4 in the mirrors. It was just a horrifying dream that I mean—I was screaming. That first
5 year was very hard. My mother as I said, she just went off on her own—and this is before
6 people sent you to therapy and that sort of thing. (Laughs) You just dealt with it, you
7 know. But she did deal with it in the spring, I'll never forget. All of the sudden she just
8 started disappearing and we realized that she had gone out in the back—we had an acre of
9 land; it was a long narrow acre. She'd gone out into the backyard and started planting a
10 garden and she really got into that garden, I'll never forget. Because she grew up on a
11 farm and they were self-sufficient. Her father was—incredible family. He had ten kids
12 and lived out in West Virginia. She was a gardener, but she kind of took it up again and I
13 remember going down there and just kind of being with her in the garden. We wouldn't
14 even talk, I just kind of helped her you know, weeding or planting or whatever. We
15 started coming little-by-little, kind of coming out in that spring, I guess. At least back to
16 the living, back to somehow going on, so that was a real positive. I mean it had a
17 profound effect on my life because I went on and studied botany in college and
18 horticulture and that's what I do as a profession, I'm a director of a plant center in
19 Monticello. So gardening really became my vocation and it really grew out of that I
20 think—even today when I dig, there's something about the soil it connects me to that
21 time. Anyway, is it okay I just keep rambling on? (Laughs)

22 PN: You're doing great! You're doing absolutely great!

23 PC: Well, all the stuff just kind of on bubbling up here. There were some other
24 things I wanted to say about that time. Anyway, I don't know if I can get in on all that
25 but, it was a year—over a year later it was in January of 1967. So that must've been—it
26 was a year and several months later. We were sitting at the dinner table, my dad was
27 reading, seemed kind of sober at the time and he was reading the Saturday evening post
28 and he was very intent on it he was just really studying this while we were eating dinner
29 and he just kept flipping. Then he said, "This is about Don." It was an article that
30 described the whole battle. It was actually written by Jack Smith and I brought it
31 (Laughs) a copy of it because I—reading this article made me finally accept that this

1 really happened because he talks about my brother in this article. Jack was probably the
2 last person to see my brother alive.

3 PN: Could you tell me where in the article?

4 PC: It's sort of near the beginning. He talks about the XO (Executive Officer).

5 PN: Yes.

6 PC: That was my brother and it's an amazing article, I think. Jack was like twenty
7 years old when he wrote it. He had been injured, I guess you know the whole thing.
8 Anyway, I wrote something about it, Jack died last year. Well, I always kept it, reading
9 his article had an incredible impact in my life. So like in the early nineties, when Joe
10 Galloway's book came out came and there was this big hoopla about it. Something came
11 out in *US News* and *World Today*, big thing about the whole battle. They kind of took
12 excerpts and they interviewed Jack and they had that whole scene in this article, "Death
13 in the Tall Grass". Which I think is a great title. Better in some ways than *We Were*
14 *Soldiers...Once*. Anyway, he's my brother here, this picture of Jack. But they used my
15 brother's name in this article and this thing that Jack wrote is really amazing because you
16 know there's no photography, there's drawings, no names were used. It's very interesting
17 the way it was written. So here they have my brother's name and it was really quite
18 touching and again, it just brought this whole article back into my mind. Jack was
19 working for *ABC News* at the time, so I kind of just mustered up the courage and wrote
20 him a letter, I didn't know if it would ever even get to him. But it did and he called me
21 immediately and yeah, it was 1992. He called me and asked me to meet him for lunch. I
22 came up, and it was just this "Wow". You know, Jack Smith. You know, I went to his
23 office and all this stuff and then he said, "You know, there's this reunion that happens
24 every year and it might be a kind of a healing thing, something that you would like to
25 attend." So I did, I came. Actually, I have come almost every year since, to this reunion
26 and so—but I'll never forget the first time I walked into the—it was in another hotel and I
27 walk in and there's just a few other guys were sitting there. I came in and I said my name
28 and they looked at me and it was like they were looking like a ghost because I kind of
29 look like my brother. We have similar features and it just blew their minds (Chuckles). I
30 keep in touch with these guys, we're like on this email loop with all the jokes and all that
31 stuff. So it's been very, I don't know, I've just become their friends, I guess one of the

1 guys. Anyway, I was so sad when Jack died. It's weird because my father died of
2 pancreatic cancer too. It was just so sad and I wrote this about Jack right after he died. I
3 don't know if I should read it?

4 PN: Yeah, I would like it if you would.

5 PC: Okay. Still needs a lot of work.

6 (Editor's note: Interviewee reads from a document.)

7 Jack Smith, a personal story and the legacy he left. Jack Smith's story "Death in the Ia
8 Drang Valley", about America's earliest major battle of the Vietnam War appeared in the
9 January 1967 issue of the *Saturday Evening Post*. This is what war reporting looked like
10 in those days. With no photography or accounts from embedded correspondents on the
11 front lines, only words with crude and gruesome black and white drawings painted the
12 scene. No soldiers names were revealed, only titles and ranks. No instantaneous footage
13 of burning bodies and screaming adversaries. This was published over a year after the
14 event, almost an afterthought. The magazine arrived along with a regular mail at our
15 home in North Carolina. I can still see my father quietly reading the story in the dim light
16 at the dinner table one winter evening and hear him whisper, "This must be about Don."
17 As he flips the pages. Even without my brother's name, my father knew immediately by
18 the date, battle, and the rank that the lieutenant, the XO, was his only son. I was a child
19 when all this took place, but old enough to grasp the magnitude of the event because my
20 brother was mortally wounded at Jack's side as they lay side-by-side in the tall grass.
21 Until then, I had many ways of denying that Don ever died. His decomposing body was
22 not returned for burial for nearly a month and despite my father's insistence and protest,
23 no one was allowed to identify it. I had watched the sealed coffin flag draped, poised next
24 to a row of open graves at Arlington in utter disbelief. It took Jack's own stark
25 description, his very words for me to finally accept the truth. I sequestered that issue of
26 the *Saturday Evening Post* under my bed where I hid my father's *Argosy* and *Playboy*
27 magazines and in the weeks and months after we first read Jack's wrenching story, I
28 reread parts of it many, many times. And if eyes could bore through print and paper, mine
29 would have vaporized completely the magazine's glossy pages. Parts of Jack's account
30 were eerily familiar in my morbid imagining and nightmares following Don's death. I'd
31 even dreamed of the rustling grass, of parting the blades and shooting a man in the face

1 and watching the face disappear. But there were other parts that were not expected and
2 that had affected me profoundly through my life. “Then the XO screamed” Jack wrote. A
3 bullet had gone through his boot, taking all of his toes with it. He was in agony and
4 crying. It’s funny how certain images stick in your mind. All his toes. It was not the
5 killing bullet, not the one that hit seconds earlier and was already lodged in the small of
6 his back. He would’ve lived if this were all there was, he would’ve had a limp and a cane
7 or perhaps a wooden foot, but he would’ve walked away from that terrible place. All of
8 his toes. It’s funny how an image gets stick in your mind. Don in a chair wearing bright
9 white socks, intently polishing his boots one sultry August night, the last night my
10 parents, older sister, and I would ever see him. All his toes in still intact. All his toes. It’s
11 funny how we can obsess over seemingly innocent moments. Don holding the soft
12 chubby toes of his infant son splashing in the bath, as he surely must have done before
13 shipping out along with all the others from Fort Benning, Georgia. Leaving behind his
14 wife and child, one sultry August night. Curiously an obituary about Jack in the
15 *Washington Post* picked out this one scene. The author writes, “Enemy bullets suddenly
16 transformed three commanding officers into desperate men. Crying in agony about toes
17 that had been shot off.” This was true, but the reporter missed the rest of the story, the
18 gift that Jack gave to me. In Jack’s story, the scene continues. For my brother somehow
19 managed to crawl off into the tall grass to rally the troops and Jack found courage in his
20 act. “It was his positive decision to do something,” Jack wrote, “that reinforced my own
21 will to go on.” I saw that in my brother’s last effort, Jack found the strength to snap out of
22 his own battle trauma to keep fighting and to live. Although Jack’s account haunted my
23 youth in many ways, with time it also gave me a sense of strength, purpose and clarity.
24 Through Jack’s words, my big brother became even more than a courageous and heroic
25 but untouchable icon of my imagination. I came to understand that he was a fragile
26 human being, barley an adult, who instinctively managed to do something very human
27 and wonderful as he died. Jack endured many brutal and agonizing deaths that day and
28 onto the night. This was just one. The awesome power of journalism is often not without
29 unexpected long-term impact and unsettling repercussions. In his life and actions, Jack
30 proved himself not only a worthy soldier on the battlefield, but also reporter worthy on
31 the tremendous responsibility inherent in the profession he would ultimately embrace.

1 (Editor's note: Document ends, interview resumes.)

2 PN: It's wonderful.

3 PC: Yes, it still needs a little work. (Chuckles) Anyway, it's kind of crazy in a
4 way—it's funny how I was just trying to capture how I couldn't let go of him dying. It
5 was very graphic.

6 PN: I know, I know the article.

7 PC: Also, we knew that he suffered. But to clarify that, he did suffer and he knew
8 he was dying. It was—his wife remarried within the year after he died, she just had to
9 have a husband, you know. It was kind of in those days. To take care of her, but my dad,
10 he never liked her anyway. (Chuckles) So he really just cut off. But my mother kept
11 trying to keep in touch because she wanted to know Don's son, you know. She did do
12 that over the years. Especially, my dad died in '78, but mother kind of slowly got the
13 connection back there and we—I still, I'm not very close to Kevin but I at least am
14 connected to him. That's about the only connection, our family has kind of dwindled
15 away. I guess you always think about what my life would've been like if Don had lived
16 and how different I would be. How different our whole family might've been. I mean, it
17 is what it is. That's it. I don't know what else to say.

18 PN: You brought other things, could you tell us about the other things that you
19 brought? I mean there's more than one thing in your hand.

20 PC: Yeah, I brought the article and the thing from the *US News and World Today*.
21 I think he really acknowledged Don in this article, Jack did and a picture of him is just
22 great of Jack when he was eighteen years old I think. But he really said outright how Don
23 gave him the will to go on because he was in shock and there's more about him here.
24 Then I also brought—well, after the movie came out, *We Were Soldiers* and this kind of
25 all brought, you know articles in reaction to the movie. I guess this was sent to us from—
26 it was in a newspaper or somewhere. It showed, it talked about if—I guess it was from
27 Lake Charles and it talked about Don who was a local casualty. The movie brings back
28 memories of him and they talk about him here and there's a picture of him. This was a
29 picture that I will always remember because it was from his yearbook, when he was a
30 cadet colonel in the ROTC. Then there's a picture of him, says it's in the McNeese State
31 University archives, which is kind of a neat picture of Don in full battle gear. There's

1 another thing that was given to me just a few years ago. Brigham, Jim Brigham. Have
2 you talked to him?

3 PN: I know the name, but I have not spoken with him personally.

4 PC: He's been coming to these things for years too and he had a video clip of
5 Don. Just a real brief thing it's sort of like the length of time you always see, what's that
6 thing out in the Pacific northwest, bigfoot?

7 PN: Bigfoot? (Chuckles) Like a little flash that goes by?

8 PC: (Laughs) Yeah, it's like this little—it's real primitive and it's like in the
9 middle of this real long—apparently they had one of those cameras over there and they
10 were just shooting out of the helicopters and it's goes on and on and you're looking at
11 scenery. It was just for hours and all of the sudden, there's this little middle section there
12 and it's of the guys building a temporary hut or building. It's just for a few moments I see
13 Don in there, but it's funny how seeing something like that it's like you don't expect that
14 to happen, but I forgot how he used to carry himself and kind of his building. He wasn't
15 really all that—he was tall but they were other guys that were taller than him. At one
16 point, he looked over, he really wasn't looking at the camera, but he was kind of just
17 looking in that direction. He used to get this look in his face. He was kidding around but
18 he would look like he was looking serious and he did that and god, that was so amazing
19 because I just remember when I was six years old and he used to give me that look and
20 yeah. He was—he did a lot of things when I was a kid. I remember, you know, I couldn't
21 have been more than six years old because we were living in Florida and he had just
22 learned how to drive. He drove me around his lap, let me steer. When he was in—he also
23 learned how to, he got his pilot's license I guess before, maybe in college. Anyway, he
24 took me up in his little plane and let me take over the—

25 PN: Oh my.

26 PC: (Laughs) I pull and we're going straight up and then we're going straight
27 down and he was laughing and laughing. I was like freaked out, but then it kind of settled
28 out. I guess he had it all under control. I was probably like ten at that point. It was very,
29 kind of surreal memories. Obviously, he's kind of idealized in these images that I have of
30 him, but he was a good guy, he was such a good hearted, funny guy. The guys loved him,
31 his comrades in Vietnam. They all just, you know they say that he was their best friend.

1 He had—he affected people. I think all of his comrades really took it hard too, to lose
2 someone is like unbelievable. The whole Vietnam, you know I was still so young and I
3 really didn't understand a lot about it and it was still so early and then of course it went
4 on for about ten years. By then, I was grown up. All of my friends were antiwar and all
5 that peace stuff. I was kind of part of that too, but I never really could go with it
6 completely because I felt like I was being—not really acknowledging Don and what he
7 did to sacrifice. So it took a long time to kind of move away from all that, but it was
8 strange times then. It was a long war.

9 PN: That hasn't ended.

10 PC: Yeah, (Chuckles) that's right. It's still—it's just so funny, weird or creepy, I
11 guess. You know in Iraq, you know it's like, "We don't want this to turn into another
12 Vietnam, you know." It's conjured up as this bad war, or this bad event. We didn't win.
13 That kind of mentality, I guess kind of followed me. They talk about vets when they
14 came back at that time, they were shunned and they weren't given any kind of
15 acknowledgment like they do now. I felt that way too, it was almost—maybe not
16 embarrassed, but I just didn't want to talk about it. It was really hard to even say my
17 brother's name to people for years. It's just sticking my—it was very emotional. Now, in
18 some ways I almost feel a little angry. When I watch tv, I watch news a lot and
19 everything and it's just this instantaneous saying where they're family is all—everybody
20 knows about them now. Like, no one knew about us. They showed when they were
21 coming home, none of that was really done back then. It was just a whole different
22 mindset I guess.

23 PN: Do you think it would've helped?

24 PC: That's a good question. (Laughs) I think it would've made me feel validated
25 you know, what he did. I guess I never really thought that he died in vain, but it was just
26 a tragic event. It was really unfortunate. It would've been—I don't know, I'm not really
27 into the celebrity of victimhood sort of thing.

28 PN: But some acknowledgment of your grief would've been a good thing?

29 PC: It would've been a good thing, yeah. Like I said, that first year was very—it
30 really affected my personality after, all through school. I was a real outsider, kind of a
31 loner. Even when years went by and I kind of felt that students didn't really remember

1 that I have this history or whatever. I just kind of became this other person I guess, it took
2 a long time. I kind of associated with—I latched onto one other friend and she and I are
3 real outsiders because she had a lot family issues and problems too. My sister was only
4 two years younger than Don. She'd have whole different interview because they grew up
5 together, went to the same college together and they were really close. Don was a lot
6 more distant for me as far as time and age and everything. So my sister, she was always a
7 pretty strong person, stronger in some ways than me. It was really hard on her too. My
8 dad became pretty bitter. He never really snapped out of it. I mean, I wouldn't say he
9 became like—I don't know, he was just very, very angry and bitter about what happened.

10 PN: Distant from you I guess?

11 PC: Oh yeah. He was, like I said was an alcoholic and that was something that
12 was always kind of a big secret. Don really kind of buffered him because he was really
13 violent too. There were times when he kind of intervened when my dad was trying to beat
14 up my mother. I was sort of this, why does evil survive and good die? It just didn't seem
15 fair to me that Don would die and dad would live. In the end, he was sort of a sad person,
16 my dad. I felt sorry for him in the end. I can't think of anything more to say.

17 PN: Okay.

18 PC: I think I said too much already.

19 PN: All right. Well we can stop.

20 PC: I appreciate it.

21 (End of interview.)