

CHARLES EARLE CRAFTS

August 17, 2006

EYEWITNESS STATEMENT OF CHARLES CRAFTS

My name is Charles Earle Crafts. I was drafted into the U. S. Army on 3 June 1964. My service number was US 51 479 671. I arrived in Vietnam around Thanksgiving, 1964 as a Private E2. I went through a brief MACV Advisors Orientation Course in Saigon and was then assigned as a Radio Operator (MOS 05C) for Advisory Team # 95 at Bien Hoa.

I was captured at Binh Gia along with SSG Bennett on 29 December 1964 and held in jungle captivity until 23 February 1967. I was released by the Viet Cong for humanitarian reasons because of poor health from jungle diseases (primarily bouts of malaria) and malnutrition. I sincerely doubt that I would have survived another year because Captain Donald G. Cook, USMC, who had been captured two days later at Binh Gia and held captive with me, supposedly died from malaria and malnutrition on 8 December 1967 according to the communist Provisional Revolutionary Government's accounting of American prisoners who died in VC captivity.

In 1967, the Central Committee of the National Liberation Front for South Viet Nam decided to release two POWs to influence public opinion against the war in the United States. They decided to release a Caucasian (me) and a Black soldier, SGT Sammie N. Womack, RA 13 811 472, who was captured on 8 October 1966. Each of us were directed by the VC to write a letter to the national Liberation Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam requesting release from captivity. These letters stated that each of us had received good medical care, were fed well, clothed well, and received humane treatment. There was nothing derogatory to the United States Government in these letters. Our releases were approved by the VC hierarchy, and a release ceremony was held in the jungle on 14 February 1967.

On 16 February 1967, the two of us were escorted from our jungle POW camp and stopped at approximately five rest camps along the way. On 23 February 1967, the VC put us on a southbound Vietnamese bus on Highway 13 and, when the bus stopped at a checkpoint in the vicinity of Lai Khe, we were returned to US military control and freedom.

When I returned to American military control, I learned that I had been promoted to PFC on 24 August 1965, while in captivity. I was honorably discharged on 12 May 1967 and subsequently had a correction to my DD Form 214 which promoted me to Specialist 4, with date of rank of 28 May 1965, as recommended by CAPT Cook.

My DD Form 214 credits me with two years, eleven months, and ten days of service. Of that, two years, three months, and four days were spent in Vietnam. Based upon my capture date of 29 December 1965 and return to US military control on 23 February 1967, I calculate that I survived two years, one month, and 25 days of brutal jungle captivity.

The events leading to my capture are as follows. When I arrived at my duty station in Bien Hoa in early December of 1964, Captain James E. Behnke was the Senior Advisor to the 33rd Vietnamese Ranger Battalion. Sergeant Harold G. Bennett was the Non-Commissioned Officer assigned to our Advisory Team and I joined as a radio operator, for which I was school trained. I did not have any advanced Infantry or Ranger training.

On the 29th of December, our battalion was placed on alert because the Viet Cong had overrun the defenders of the predominantly Catholic village of Binh Gia. Our battalion then boarded helicopters for an air assault to take back the village. Sergeant Bennett and I accompanied part of our Battalion while Captain Behnke accompanied the Ranger Battalion Commander and another part of our force.

Sergeant Bennett and I landed at about 1430 hours and things were quiet initially. We were armed with M-2 carbines and I was carrying a PRC-25 radio. We could see the Catholic Church steeple in the distance and began moving in that direction. We had gone approximately 500 meters when we began receiving sporadic sniper fire. We deployed into a double-pincer formation of two attacking columns and continued to move forward.

Before long, the enemy fire began to increase in intensity, but the Rangers continued moving towards the village. As we neared the village's defensive perimeter, our right pincer was pinned down by intense machine gun and recoilless rifle fire from a nearby wooded knoll. The enemy fire was so intense that it cut down stands of banana trees behind us.

As we lay exposed in an open area near the southern outskirts of the village, a large force of Viet Cong rose from camouflaged holes and overran our Rangers from the flank, killing or wounding scores of them, including officers and NCOs who were trying to get us out of the killing zone. We had inadvertently walked into a classic L-shaped ambush.

Sensing our desperate situation, Sergeant Bennett began moving around fearlessly with me always next to him because we were tethered to each other with the PRC-25 handset cord. I was able to keep the radio in operation and free from enemy jamming. Otherwise, the VC would have jammed our ability to transmit to the helicopter pilots.

Despite the heavy fire and mounting casualties, we kept trying to rally the surviving Rangers and called in air strikes all around our position. Both of us returned as much fire as we could, but it was soon clear that we were being overwhelmed by a much larger enemy force. During this time, SSG Bennett was constantly talking on the radio and throwing smoke grenades to direct two helicopter gun ships who came to our aid. The situation then grew worse when we realized that, intermingled with our Rangers, was a large group of Viet Cong who were well armed and wearing camouflage capes.

Sergeant Bennett and I continued to move from one vantage point to another in an attempt to organize the few surviving Rangers and to direct fire being delivered by the helicopter gun ships. Our situation became more desperate, because there were dead or dying Rangers all around us and others began to surrender. The ones who were continuing to fight were beginning to run out of ammunition and Sergeant Bennett had thrown his last smoke grenade, so there was no way for us to guide the gun ships that were trying to help.

At about that point, one of the gun ship pilots recommended we move to a clearing located to our southeast where he said he would land and pick us up, but Sergeant Bennett refused his offer, telling him it was too dangerous and would only result in the helicopter being shot down. A medical evacuation helicopter was also returning to our area after delivering casualties to a hospital in Saigon and its pilot offered to pick us up too, but Sergeant Bennett told him not to try it.

Since our reserve company of ARVN Rangers had not arrived, we found ourselves in an extremely difficult situation. We were trapped and essentially on our own. In the best traditions of a Non-Commissioned Officer in combat, Sergeant Bennett continued to rally the survivors and made a tough decision when he twice refused the offers of the helicopter pilots to rescue us. In retrospect, his decision was the correct one because we were surrounded and it would have only meant the loss of more helicopters and their crews.

A few minutes later, a VC assault force of 20-30 men was on top of us and captured us. We were standing in the open while Sergeant Bennett waved his handkerchief to mark our position for the helicopters flying overhead after we had used our last smoke grenade. There was a tremendous amount of enemy small arms fire all around us and why Sergeant Bennett and I weren't wounded or killed is either a miracle or else the VC must have made a decision to take us prisoners.

Both of us were immediately bound and tied. They took our boots, helmets, dog tags, the glasses that I was wearing at Binh Gia, but missed my spare set of glasses. Also taken were Sergeant Bennett's Bible, his money and ID card, and a copy of a promotion list with his name on it for his promotion to SSG. The captors missed a set of jeep keys and a pair of fingernail clippers in his pocket and they let him keep some cigars and a class ring.

Sergeant Bennett and I began planning to escape right after we were captured at Binh Gia. While on the trail, they placed guards in front and back of us. I told him it would be his decision as to when we should make a run for it. About that time, they moved guards closer in back of him. By now, it was night, so he told me the next time we stopped, we would make a break for it, but to forget it as long as they were directly in back of him.

On 30 December 1964, we were taken to a POW camp that held from 50-70 ARVN enlisted men, 8-10 ARVN officers and 2-3 Vietnamese women as prisoners. On 1 January 1965, Sergeant Bennett and I were moved to another camp about two miles away.

Our next escape attempt on 2 January 1965. As I mentioned earlier, our captors overlooked a pair of jeep keys and a pair of fingernail clippers in Sergeant Bennett's pockets. They had us chained around the ankles with cheap padlocks and we were confined in a structure made of small diameter tree poles firmly planted close together in the jungle floor. The top of our cages was composed of the same tree poles lashed together with jungle vines. Once the vines were cut, we intended to push the ceiling poles aside and escape out the top.

During the afternoon, we used the jeep keys and kept turning the locks back and forth until we weakened their springs and they popped open. Just before dark, we took the fingernail clippers and cut the vines that lashed the top ceiling poles together. We removed our shirts and reversed them and tore out the white labels inside.

The previous night, a guard had checked us at approximately 8 or 9 PM, so we waited for the guard to check us again, but he never did. In fact, no one checked us. Instead, the guards went to bed, except for one. It was deathly quiet at that time, so we knew that, if we tried to escape that night, the noise would awaken them. Prior to this particular night, the guards usually sat around the fire chatting away and would not have heard us, so we decided to wait for another opportunity.

The next morning they came to unlock the locks and found they would not open. I'm sure we had weakened the springs in the locks during our earlier attempt to open them. They worked on the locks for about a half hour before finally getting them open, but I don't think they suspected us. I suppose they thought the locks were worn out. Later that day, they came back with some US Army-type locks. They were the heavy duty, bronze type and you can't pick them. The guards apparently never noticed that we had clipped the vines in the ceiling of our cages.

About this time, Sergeant Bennett and I were joined by Captain Donald Gilbert Cook, USMC, 072 794. He had been wounded and captured two days after us when the battalion of ARVN Marines he was with suffered very high casualties while trying to re-take the village of Binh Gia. Captain Cook became our Senior American Prisoner and instilled in us a strict adherence to the Code of Conduct. Both SSG Bennett and I accepted CAPT Cook as our superior officer, and we pledged our loyalty and obedience to his authority. The three of us stayed together in that camp

until 26 January 1965, when all three of us traveled for two days to a village and stayed there for four days.

On 30 or 31 January 1965, Captain Cook stayed behind at the village to let his wounded leg heal and Sergeant Bennett and I were moved to a POW camp that we called "Camp SOB." Twice the VC Camp Commander at Camp SOB told SSG Bennett that they wanted to kill him, and that he should realize he could be killed at any time by them.

In February of 1965, Sergeant Bennett went on a hunger strike to protest the poor quality of our food; however, I don't think he understood the consequences of his actions. I believe the VC purposely gave us inadequate rations to reduce our bodies' ability to resist disease and, more importantly, to sap our stamina to escape. Once the effects of weight loss took over, it would be almost impossible to escape captivity. An individual wouldn't have enough stamina to out-run the guards, even if they made it out of the camp.

About mid-March 1965, Captain Cook rejoined us. The VC had told us early on that we were forbidden to have a military organization while in captivity. Enlisted men were considered equal to officers under their concept of abolishing distinctions of military rank among us American POWs. The VC hated CAPT Cook because as Senior American Prisoner he set up a covert military organization under their noses. CAPT Cook set the example for all of us to follow in resisting interrogation and indoctrination. He was a constant inspiration for us to follow and he maintained our morale and comforted us when we faced death from disease and malnutrition. He voluntarily shared his food and medicines whenever needed. He was always a great morale booster. The VC told us several times that just because the war would end some day in the future, that didn't mean that CAPT Cook would be released.

The third escape attempt occurred on 20 March 1965. Captain Cook, Sergeant Bennett and I planned to escape while being allowed to go to the latrine. At that time, the three of us were held together in a "pole house" about 25-30 feet in length. It was partitioned into four cubicles with a walking space in the front. Sergeant Bennett was in the first cubicle, Captain Cook was in the second, I was in the third; and the fourth cubicle was empty.

As we walked out of the "house" that day, the VC guard said only two of us could go to the latrine and told me to return to my cubicle. When they got to the latrine, Sergeant Bennett asked Captain Cook "Can we leave Crafts behind?" Captain Cook said that he was in command and it was his decision to attempt an escape. They began running, but Sergeant Bennett got his foot caught in the crook of a tree root and was caught by a guard. He put his hand over the guard's mouth to keep him from alerting the others but the VC guard was able to nearly bite Sergeant Bennett's finger off and yell out for help. Another guard came and they were brought back at gunpoint.

The guards then put all three of us individually into leg shackles attached to an iron bar such that we could either sit up or lie down, but we couldn't get up to walk around. Captain Cook was handcuffed, but not Sergeant Bennett or me. We were unshackled once a day for about 10

minutes to go to the latrine and for about 30 minutes to bathe and wash our clothes. This lasted until about May 15 when we moved to a new camp. In the meantime, the guards never bandaged Sergeant Bennett's finger. He kept it wrapped with rags, but didn't receive any medical treatment for that very painful injury.

After this last escape attempt, Sergeant Bennett was beaten at least three times before I last saw him on 28 May 1965. The first was on the day of the escape when a guard hit him with a closed fist on the side of the head. Later, he told me that he had been struck with a bamboo stick, struck on the head with a rifle butt, and hit with a clenched fist. I did not witness any of these attacks.

All three of us received reduced rations during this time and Sergeant Bennett had particular difficulty eating rice. He gagged on it and vomited it up. He simply couldn't adapt to a rice diet. Once on bivouac, Captain Cook ordered Sergeant Bennett to eat his rice, which he did, but it wasn't enough to stop his rapid decline in health.

The VC rations were simply not adequate to support a Western person's weight, so we all lost weight over time. Captain Cook also suffered loss of night vision due to Vitamin A deficiency. I don't know whether the VC gave him any vitamins.

I would say that Sergeant Bennett's health began deteriorating rapidly beginning in April or May of 1965. He had lost a tremendous amount of weight making him unable to complete an arduous forced march to a new camp that began about 15 May 1965. That was probably the beginning of his last days.

May 28, 1965 was the last day that Captain Cook or I saw Sergeant Bennett alive. The guards got us up about 1 or 2 AM to move to a new camp. Captain Cook and I knew Sergeant Bennett was very weak and told him to try to go on. Although Sergeant Bennett was very weak, he claimed he was still very strong. We walked approximately two or three miles before the guards stopped and told us to sit down. Sergeant Bennett was lagging behind, exactly where I do not know.

Later, the guards came back and told us they had killed him, but neither Captain Cook nor I heard any gunshots. At the time, we believed they were leaving him behind with three other guards, one of whom had malaria. It was our belief that he would rejoin us in a few days. If it had been any other American prisoner, the guards would have put him on a bicycle and pushed him to the new camp, but our guards hated Sergeant Bennett and beat and kicked him when he would stumble.

Captain Cook and I reached a new camp that we called "Camp Carefree" on 1 June 1965. There were already four other American POWs there that had been captured at the Hiep Hoa Special Forces Camp on 24 November 1963. They were SP5 George E. Smith, RA 13 552 780; SGT Claude D. McClure, RA 14 703 075; SFC Kenneth Roraback, RA 13 322 146; and SFC Isaac Camacho, RA 18 468 655.

While we were in Camp Carefree, a very high ranking VC officer (we gave him the nickname "ALEX") told us that Sergeant Bennett had tried to escape and was being punished very severely. This supposedly happened at a rest camp that Sergeant Bennett had been taken to when we last saw him on 28 May 1965.

On 4 July 1965, Captain John Schumann, 084 511, joined Captain Cook and me in captivity. We would be held together until Schumann died in my arms on 7 July 1966 from pneumonia and kidney failure due to the prolonged effects of bouts of malaria, slow starvation and malnutrition. I did everything possible to prevent CPT Schumann from dying, but he had lost too much weight from slow starvation and malaria, and despite last minute feeble efforts by VC medics to give him vitamin shots, death was the inevitable outcome when his kidneys failed. The VC weren't ever going to release an officer on humanitarian grounds like they did for some very sick enlisted men, so he was allowed to die. CAPT Cook and I washed his body and buried him in an unmarked jungle grave. His remains have never been recovered to this day, despite having died under VC control. I'm sure that somewhere, there are archival records indicating where the men who died in jungle captivity in South Vietnam were buried.

On 9 July 1965, SFC Issac Camacho managed to escape alone from Camp Carefree during a monsoon thunderstorm. He was the first American POW to escape from captivity and return to U. S. military control all by himself. Just before SFC Camacho's escape I had a recurrence of malaria for the second time in four months.

On 16 July 1965, the entire camp was moved to another location that I called "the Bivouac Area," believed to be located in Tay Ninh Province. I didn't have the strength to keep up with the main group, and I fell behind with three VC guards. I was apprehensive that I would meet the same fate as Sergeant Bennett, but the VC guards put me on one of their transportation bicycles and pushed me along to the new camp, which took us ten days to get there.

We stayed there about two weeks then moved to another camp on 7 August 1965 we called "Camp Tay Ninh." It was located about 15 miles northeast of Nui Ba Den Mountain in Tay Ninh Province.

In late September of 1965, the guards came and took SFC Kenneth Roraback away on orders from the camp commander. The guards never said anything further about him and took away all of his gear. After my return to the United States, I learned that he had been executed along with Captain Humbert "Rocky" Versace on 25 September 1965, in retaliation for the Saigon government's execution of several VC terrorists. Neither of these two brave soldiers' remains have been recovered from their unmarked jungle graves.

On 21 November 1965, a ceremony was held by the Provincial Viet Cong commander to announce the release of SP5 Smith, a Caucasian, and Sergeant McClure, a Black Soldier. This pattern would be repeated for my release with Sergeant Sammie Womack in 1967.

Douglas Ramsey, an American State Department officer who spoke fluent Vietnamese, joined CAPT Cook and me at Camp Tay Ninh on 24 January 1966. The VC kept him in isolation as they suspected him of being a CIA spy. He survived the longest in jungle captivity of those American POWs who returned alive during Operation Homecoming in 1973. He was the last American POW to see CAPT Cook alive in 1967 before the two of them were split up on a move to a new jungle camp. I learned that Mr. Ramsey was released on 12 February 1973 during Operation Homecoming.

On 28 August 1966, an interrogator we named "Grandpa" asked me to make a tape recording and a written statement critical of the U. S. Government. I refused. I discussed this demand with CAPT Cook and he told me it was up to me to decide what to do. The next day "Pussy" the interpreter came down and repeated Grandpa's demand for the statement and recording, implying that I had agreed to do so. I refused, and was placed in a six foot deep punishment hole with a tarp covering the opening to think over my decision. I was told by the VC that if I didn't sign the statement and make the tape, that both me and CAPT Cook would be killed. After a few hours thinking over the threat to kill CAPT Cook, I didn't want his death on my conscience.

The guards had a .45 caliber pistol at CAPT Cook's head. He calmly started naming the military definition of the pistol nomenclature. He was absolutely fearless facing death, but I couldn't forsake CAPT Cook – if he were executed because I refused to make a derogatory statement, I would be lost without his leadership. Remember, this was after the execution of SSG Bennett and MSG Roraback, and MAJ Schumann dying in my arms. The mental duress was too much for me to contemplate the loss of this man who I had the most respect for as our Senior Prisoner.

I made the statement and the recording which were derogatory to the U. S. Government much to my regret, but I did so to save CAPT Cook from being executed. He didn't condemn me for making the statement, but he didn't want any of us prisoners to make statements. He knew from his Code of Conduct training that mock executions were a standard indoctrination practice in the communists' playbook on how to break a prisoner. In his notes of 12 January 1967 that I smuggled out he said this about this incident:

"Item 4, Crafts: Promoted E4 28/5/65 [28 May 1965.]

The next item is: "Fell 29/8/66 [29 August 1966.] Guilty, Mitigation, frightened and dense; recommendation, no action be taken, IAW, which means in accordance with UCMJ."

SGT Sammie Womack, RA 13 811 472, joined CAPT Cook, Mr. Ramsey and me at Camp Tay Ninh on 21 October 1966. On 26 October 1966 the four of us left for another camp, which we named "Camp Bien Hoa." It took us 14 days to get there and it was the hardest forced march any of us had been on. The conditions at this new camp were horrible. I stayed here until SGT Womack and I were released from captivity on 16 February 1967. That was my last time to see CAPT Cook.

When the VC camp commander announced in early January, 1967 that I would be released from captivity, Captain Cook gave me several handwritten notes dated 12 January 1967 that he had written on cigarette paper. I smuggled them out in a slit in my eyeglasses case. If the guards had found these notes, I am sure that I wouldn't have been released, and more importantly, the world would not have known of Captain Cook's heroism while in captivity. Also, I believe that I would have been marked for death, either by execution or by slow starvation and malaria. At that point in my captivity, I was very weak physically from recurring bouts of malaria and malnutrition. If it is true what the communists said in 1973 that CAPT Cook died of malaria on 8 December 1967, I think I would have died also about that time. No one who hasn't survived brutal jungle captivity could ever imagine how difficult it was to stay alive. My survival was a miracle from God Almighty.

Among the notes that I smuggled out were several recommendations for awards pertaining to Sergeant Bennett. I gave Captain Cook's notes to my Army interrogators while being debriefed in 1967, but Army officials apparently didn't act on them. The Marine Corps was notified and the Commandant of the Marine Corps started an effort that led to Captain Cook receiving the Medal of Honor for his conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity while in captivity. I was asked to write a letter to the Commandant and signed statements supporting Captain Cook's heroism while in captivity. At the time, I was under the impression that the Army would act similarly on Captain Cook's recommendations for Sergeant Bennett, but, to my knowledge, the Army never did anything.

I have not asked anyone for any medals for my captivity experience. My commander, LTC James Behnke and COL Douglas Moore have advised me that the awards recommendations they are submitting resulted from their initiative. I am just happy to be alive, but I would accept any awards that honor my service in the U. S. Army.

Respectfully submitted,

Charles E. Crafts