ANNOUNCER: Hi and welcome to “Pass in Review.” “Pass in Review” is a weekly public service presentation of radio station KEZY in conjunction with the Joint Informational Services Office at the El Toro Marine Corps Air Station. Stay tuned as we present news and information about the United States Marine Corps. [music]

Bob Vandewalker: From the El Toro Marine Corps Air Station this is Marine Staff Sergeant Bob Vandewalker, and today we’re going to be talking to a Marine from our own Orange County, Corporal Walter E. Rupp, and through his outstanding devotion to duty while serving in Vietnam he was awarded the Bronze Star and two Purple Hearts. [music]

BV: Where’s your hometown?
Cpl. Walter Rupp: My hometown is at Newport Beach right now.
BV: Where did you originally come from? Were you born in California?
WR: No. I was born in Loveland, Colorado.
BV: And your family has moved all here?
WR: Right.
BV: Who do you live with in Newport Beach?
WR: My grandparents.
BV: Where do your mother and father reside?
WR: At 11822 Rest Grove Road, Garden Grove
BV: So both your grandparents and parents live in Orange County?
WR: That’s right.
BV: And how long have you been in the Marine Corps?
WR: About five years.
BV: When did you go to Vietnam?
WR: January of ’63.
BV: Now you went directly from to the States to Vietnam, is this right?
WR: No I didn’t. I left the States. I went to Japan, and from Japan I went to Okinawa, and from Okinawa I went to Vietnam.
BV: And how long were you in Vietnam?
WR: I was in Vietnam about a year, a little better than a year.
BV: And you were stationed at Da Nang?
WR: At Da Nang.
BV: Now I understand that you’ve had some experiences in Vietnam. Can you sort of fill me in on some of your experiences in what you had? For example, I understand that one incident we’re going to talk about was that you were flying with the Army. Is this right?
WR: That’s correct.
BV: How did this happen? Can you tell me a little bit about this?
WR: Well, Colonel Merchant was going to Saigon, and he didn’t need his driver at that time, so I asked permission to fly with the Army, which was granted. So I went over to the 52nd Air Lift Platoon and caught a hop to Phu Chon Valley, which was a mission.
BV: In other words, they were going out on mission?
WR: Right.
BV: And you went just as rider or did you have some one?
WR: No I went as a gunner.
BV: As a gunner.
WR: I was trained as…
BV: So when you got aboard the aircraft what happen? You just take off, and where did you go?
Well, after briefing and everything, we boarded. We flew out to a place called Phu Chon Valley, and this is actually where the mission was taking place. It was a re-supply and troop drop.

And then when you got up into this valley, you were looking for Viet Cong. Is this right?

Well, our mission was to recon the valley, to find out if there was enemy in this area at all. The main purpose is to find out, and to draw fire from the enemy.

Now, do these helicopters fly low enough to where you can actually see the ground?

Oh, yes. If you’re flying above a rice patty, approximately six inches above. If it’s jungle, you’re flying right out over the trees, sometimes you’re clipping the branches, and if it’s over huts or villages you’re flying right over the rooftops.

Was this helicopter by itself in this particular mission or were there others?

Oh, no. I believe at the time we had five Marine Corps helicopters and three Army Hueys.

That are armed with different weapons for hunting out the Viet Cong, you mean?

No all the Army Hueys over there at that time was set up for the same purpose, four M-6 machine guns, sixteen rockets, plus your personal weapons inside.

Who was on this Army helicopter with you?

Mr. Pomeroy.

What was his job?

He was a pilot. I don’t know the co-pilot’s name, crew chief, and a Vietnamese observer.

Do you know the crew chief’s name?

No, I don’t. It’s been quite a while.

Then what happened when you got up into this particular valley as you were flying over?

Well, once we got up there the other UH-1BS called down for us to go for the mission. So we started our run. We came down and we started banking to the right. There was a village that lay to the left of us. As we were making our bank, we saw and
heard automatic weapon fire. At that time, Mr. Pomeroy turned around, smiled and said, “We got a live one.” So we started to pull up for another run. At that time, the other helicopter called back to us and told us we were on fire. He made the statement about three or four times and to set her down on the ground. Before we could set her down, the tail boom blew off. The next thing, as you know, we crashed.

BV: This fire started through a bullet?

WR: Right.

BV: And you did not know this at the time. In other words, you could not see it?

WR: At the time all we could hear was through the intercom was, “Set her down! Set her down, you’re on fire!” and approximately, I believe five or seven seconds afterwards, we could see the flames wrapped around the helicopter on the right hand side.

BV: And who was telling you to set her down? Was this from the other helicopter?

WR: This was our cover helicopter, which is another Army Huey, flying cover for us.

BV: So then, actually, you didn’t have really the opportunity to set it down in the way it should be set down. Is that right?

WR: Oh, we didn’t have a chance at all because at that time the tail boom blew off.

BV: And it just fell.

WR: It fell, right.

BV: How about yourself? Were you hurt at this particular time or knocked out or what?

WR: Yes. At that time I was, after the crash I was knocked out. I don’t believe for too long, and after the operations and everything else has happened to get out of the helicopter, I was hit again.

BV: But how did you get out of the helicopter?

WR: Well, at the time the helicopter was nothing but a burning wreck. There was a couple of rockets in front of the door that had to be pulled out or pushed away to get out of the helicopter—and the crew chief done this—and we managed to climb through that hole.
BV: You were laying what, in a rice paddy with water in then?

WR: Right. Well, like I said, the helicopter was a mess. I couldn’t tell if it was upside down or what. It was just nothing but a wreck, and it was just one little hole to get out of it.

BV: How about the pilot and co-pilot at this particular time?

WR: Well, the co-pilot was hanging upside down in the back. He was thrown in the back of the chopper, and pilot was trapped underneath the chopper at the time.

BV: So then you went with the crew chief to rescue this two people?

WR: Yes. After we set up a position.

BV: Did you have any weapons at all to fire back? You were getting fired on at this particular time?

WR: Yes we were. When I first came out, I realized we were receiving fire. So I went back to the plane to try to get a weapon, and the only weapon I could get a hold of since it was burning was the grease gun, and that happened to be thrown out of the plane at the time, and that’s what we used.

BV: Did you have any rounds of ammunitions in this particular grease gun?

WR: I had about forty rounds. That’s about all.

BV: What type of uniform were you wearing as far as yourself? Did you have a Marine helmet on or what kind of helmet?

WR: I had an Army flight helmet and camouflage flight suit.

BV: And you rescued these, this co-pilot. You and the crew chief rescued the co-pilot and the pilot?

WR: Yes we did.

BV: And then, at that particular time were you hit at all?

WR: I wasn’t hit until I went back out to the position again.

BV: When you say “position,” you said, you got away from the helicopter. Is that right?

WR: Right. I went up about, I guess, fifty feet away from it to set up the position behind some rocks that were in the rice paddy at that time.

BV: Some protection, protection there?

WR: Right.
BV: And then how did you get rescued out of there? How did you get out there?

WR: There was a Marine helicopter that came down, and landed about twenty feet away from us and the burning wreck. And at this time I believe the gunner of this helicopter jumped out, helped get Mr. Pomeroy, which was the pilot, and the co-pilot and the crew chief aboard, and then came out and gave me a hand to get in. And it took about four or five attempts to get the helicopter off because it was fully loaded. In fact it was over-loaded, and it was in the mud, in the water. Like I said, my hat has to go off to them because…

BV: Were they still firing at you through all this?

WR: Oh yes, yes.

BV: Now where did you go? You got taken back to a hospital or…?

WR: All of us were flown back to Da Nang. We were there, and the doctor performed some, I guess, emergency operations or whatever you want to call it. And from there, they took us from helicopter over to Da Nang Air Base, and had a C-123 standing by. We were flown straight down to 8th Field Na Trang Hospital, which is central South Vietnam right off the coast.

BV: The main one, the main military hospital.

WR: Right.

BV: And how long were you in the hospital over there, approximately?

WR: I can’t answer approximately because I was out so for long I didn’t know.

BV: Then you were flown back to the States?

WR: No, not right away. After I got out of that I went back to Vietnam again.

BV: When you say back to Vietnam, where?


BV: Da Nang. After you got on your feet, you mean?

WR: Right.

BV: Did you go out any more missions after you got back there?

WR: Yes I did. We had another mission, which was Phu Chon Valley again. And this time it was nothing but a troop drop again. When I talk about troop drop, it’s picking up troops, taking them in and dropping them off. And we were flying out to this hilltop. It was all fogged in, so we had to fly back, and on our way back, a sniper round
went through the windshield of the helicopter, went through the co-pilot’s leg, and went through the side of my cheek.

BV: So you got hit the second time going out?

WR: Yes, sir.

BV: The second flight. They finally realized by then that you were probably much better in the air than you were on the ground, but you felt probably, you were better on the ground, as a driver?

WR: Not really. It was, I don’t know. It’s the excitement. It’s just something that you can’t explain. It’s just, it just feels, you’re scared but yet you’re excited. You feel alive, but yet you’re not alive. You just feel like you’re a puppet on a string at the time this is taking place.

BV: Well, getting away from Vietnam, and getting back to the States. What happened after you got back here? You were awarded one award plus the two Purple Hearts. Can you sort of fill me in on what happened? Did you know you were going to get the Bronze Star? Or when did you know, I should say?

WR: Well, I had heard rumors when I was in Vietnam that I was up for it, but I didn’t expect to get it. When I came back to the States, I was stationed for two weeks in San Diego. Then I was transferred down to Camp Pendleton. And I guess I was there for almost six months. Then I got the word that my Bronze Star came in. It was quite a shock. I went to San Diego and they had a nice parade there and everything else. Major General Hosmuth made the presentation.

BV: Now what organization are you in right now?

WR: I’m with GHS3, G2 section.

BV: And that’s in the 3rdMarine Aircraft Wing?

WR: Yes, sir.

BV: Now G2 section, what is this? This going to be a new job you’re going into?

WR: Yes, sir. I just shipped over, and I’m cross-training into this field.

BV: Is there a possibility you might go to school in this field?

WR: There is a possibility. I don’t know yet. They’re still working on it for me.

BV: You came a long ways and in such a short time in the five years. Let me ask you another question. Do you feel that you might like to ever go back to Vietnam?
WR: Definitely, yes.

BV: Is this true? You feel this is true of all the Marines? The war that they’re fighting over there, they’re really interested in it? They feel it’s very important, the job they’re doing?

WR: I believe so. It’s hard to explain. They don’t like to fight, but it has to be done. Once you’re over there, you just don’t care to leave it, because when you leave, you finish. You feel that your job’s unfinished and you always want to go back to complete it. In other words you want to stay there until it’s over.

BV: And the esprit 'de corps over there with the Marines, it’s very, very strong right?

WR: It’s very high. The morale is very high, even though the conditions are bad, and it’s just, it’s the Marine Corps all the way around.

BV: That’s the way we live I guess.

WR: That’s right.

BV: Being a Marine, you not only lived with the Marines, but you were on this Army helicopter. What do you feel that, the feeling of the Army personnel over there is? I know that you’ve lived with them.

WR: As I stated before in our brief talks, that the Army is great. I really believe this sincerely. Every man has self-pride and respect for his own unit, such as the Marine Corps, Air Force, Navy and Army. But it’s the same old thing you hear every day. It takes all four branches to win a war, and its just teamwork. Everybody is one big team. In other words, it’s just not the individual branch service, but the United States working as a team.

BV: Well, I think this makes the war this much better as far as the military man. When we go over there as a team, and respect each other. Is that right?

WR: Right. Just like, if you belong to a NATO outfit or something like this. The service doesn’t matter too much. It’s just that we are all under the same flag, United States flag, and that’s what you’re fighting for.

BV: Well, Walt, I want to thank you very much for talking to me today, and I certainly want to wish you an awful lot luck in your future endeavors in the Marine Corps.
WR: Thank you very much.

Announcer: For the past fifteen minutes you’ve been listening to news and information about the United States Marine Corps. Join us again next week as the Marines at the El Toro Marine Corps Air Station pass in review. [music]