Transcript of Interview with Rod Gragg, 3-8-16 at CCU TV Studio

Introduction

Hello, I am Charmaine Tomczyk, Director for the Coastal Carolina University History Project which collects oral histories from individuals who have contributed to the growth and development of the university.

Today I am honored to interview Rod Gragg, Director of the university’s CresCom Bank Center for Military and Veteran Studies. He is also an adjunct professor of history at the university and the author of more than 20 books on American history, including eight on topics in military history. One of his books won the Fletcher Pratt Award from the New York City Civil War Round Table, and another earned the James I. Robertson Award as the year's best Civil War history. A former instructor in the University of South Carolina ROTC program, Gragg was the longtime host of SCETV’s "War Memories" television program, which featured oral history by veterans of the Second World War. Currently he serves as the host of "Military Memoirs" -- a regional television program that preserves the oral history of American veterans, and which is produced here at Coastal Carolina University.

Tomczyk: Hi, Rod. Thanks for visiting with us today. It’s my pleasure to interview you for the CCU History Project. I know that you came to Coastal as a public relations director in late 1978, but I want to begin by asking you a little about when you were a student here because I understand you also were a student here in the late 60s.

Gragg: Right I graduated from Conway High School in Conway in 1968. I wasn’t really sure what I wanted to do. I thought that I would go I guess about half way through my senior year my thought was to go apply to the Univ. of Georgia and try to major commercial art. I was all interested in commercial art. Then my mother stopped at a radio station in North Carolina on the way to Wilmington one day for an errand and when she walked out of there I had a job. (laugh)

So she found me this job I had only been in a radio station at one time and that was when I was in 6th grade on a tour. So I thought that would be an interesting job. I ended up working at this little radio station in Shallotte NC as a disc jockey my senior year in high school. My whole career, focus, goals changed. No more commercial art.

So I wanted to be in broadcast. After working there I knew that I wanted to be in broadcast news or television news. I really got the bug; reading the AP stories that would come in on the teleprompt, teletype machine. So anyway the whole purpose of that is that. So I really wasn’t sure where I should go. Carolina had a great journalism school so I thought I ought to do that. I know it would cost my parent a lot of money to go to Columbia and live up there.

I could go to Coastal which was then USC –Coastal Carolina Junior College and then it affiliated with the university, USC- Coastal. I graduated in 1968 and it just made all the sense in the world so I came out here for two years and it served me very well. All the courses transferred right into Carolina. Everything was seamless in a couple of years going up there. You do your two years
and then go and focus on your major the last two years. It was all very well done. Students like me could make that transition just very easily.

And the administration here was so student-focused. Dick Singleton was the chancellor – they called him something else then – maybe he was the Vice President and they made him Chancellor later I’m not sure. – A USC Vice Chancellor. Anyway he was the boss; he was the head of the school and Larry Biddle was his associate. Those two guys were just so – first of all they were very community oriented. Dick Singleton grew up here and he played ball here. He was kind of the local hero. He had taken the American legion team to the nationals or something like that I think and has been in education a long time, was a WWII veteran and people loved him. He was very community focused. He really understood this community and he understood the need for higher education.

Coastal had begun, you know, as a little junior college in a farming community, because Myrtle Beach opened on Memorial Day and closed on Labor Day. People in Myrtle Beach in the 60s came to Conway to shop. There was no mall over there. Conway had the first mall in 1966. So this community was very different and it was still largely a farming community. Horry County had been – I guess since the middle of the 20th century, had been – the great Chamber of Commerce slogan was – it was the largest producer of flue-cured tobacco in America. So people grew crops, row crops, and tobacco was king in Horry County. It was a farming community and people couldn’t really afford to send their children far away. Some would maybe do some AG courses and get a major in Clemson and people went to Carolina. It was hard for people to do that so in the 50s that was the goal of the founders of the institution to try to get a local college here. The closest one was over in Hartsville, that’s Coker College.

So Dick Singleton and Larry Biddle were very community oriented and they were very student friendly. I can remember as a student just walking into the President’s Office and talking to him. If you had a question about something, or I can’t remember exactly what it was. It was something about a class that I was concerned about and I just went and asked his secretary if I could see the chancellor. And she said “well, certainly”. A minute later you’re telling him your situation and he was listening to you. In that particular case he did things to correct the problem.

It was really remarkable just a small faculty, and a small number of administrators, and small student body, but all very, very personal. I think the overriding atmosphere was the desire to be a real college. And that was kind of the feeling among the students. You are taking the courses, they were counting for credit you’re doing it for USC. As far as the environment, the atmosphere, there was this real driving force to have a real college.

**Tomczyk:** To be bigger than we were – to grow enrollment?

**Gragg:** Sure, that was always Coastal. But even more so I think there was this whole idea of trying to create what was thought to be a collegiate atmosphere. There was all this encouragement to have a legitimate sports program, to encourage other student activities, to have a feel of a traditional college education. This of course was a commuter college. People drove in from Hemingway and Georgetown and Aynor, and North Myrtle Beach and Myrtle Beach and so everybody would drive in and then come 6 o’clock everybody would be gone.
There was always this desire to try to get more people to come to the ball games, more people to come to the athletic events, more people to participate in various things. Because that was the great strength of the commuter college was it was your home town school. You could work; you could make your schedule around it. I worked while I was a student out here locally. You came in and did what you had to do and you left. The weakness was, if there was a weakness that it felt like that wasn’t a traditional college experience because you didn’t live there. You just came and left.

It was generally very positive at least it was for me and I think for others too. You had a sense that there were people who really wanted to help you. They wanted to get you through and get you on to Carolina. They were so accessible; always so accessible. Dick Singleton took a real interest in people. Larry Biddle - he was really the guy working out with the students and he was everywhere and doing everything, He was a great guy. He would just sit down and talk to you about everything. He had a large family, I forget how many children he had – maybe three, four or five.

I can remember one time, just as an example of the accessibility of this #2 administrator to a student. I can remember sitting in his office having this philosophical conversation about “should you really have that many children.” He said there was not population explosion in Conway. Of course I ended up with seven children and there was still no population explosion in Conway. It was just how accessible they were and how they really, really cared about the students and I think, I hope that’s a tradition that Coastal has continued.

Tomczyk: Larry was from California, wasn’t he? He was not from Horry County.

Gragg: He was from somewhere far away and exotic. And he spoke Spanish. And we didn’t know anyone really who spoke Spanish.

Tomczyk: I think some of the courses he taught here were Spanish and maybe in business. He also got involved in athletics. You talk about building a community. Larry was involved in some of the teams, intramurals, coaching…

Gragg: Yes, he was and I think he even coached some. He was always there. Anywhere you went, any event and Larry Biddle was there. You couldn’t be on campus in just moments and you’d find Larry Biddle. Dr. Singleton was just like the rock. He was the glue that held it together. He was very respected in the community and the students respected him. He just brought in a great amount of stability to this whole new thing that was going on.

I was here in 68 and 69 and I went to Carolina in 1970 so I was here for two academic years. A lot of things were going on that would affect the institution. The mascot was being developed at that time. Check me on this. - I think there was an English professor I believe his name was Timothy Sullivan. You can double check this. Whoever is watching this can double-check this. [NOTE: According to Coastal’s website www.coastal.edu/about/history/mascot.html an English Professor who was also a basketball coach, Callie Franklin Maddox suggested the change of name in the early 1960s from Trojans to Chanticleers]
Tomczyk: I thought it was Don Millus who taught Shakespeare.

Gragg: Ok, that could be right. My memory from being a student was it was the English Professor who loved Chaucer. It could be, but my memory was there was a professor who loved Chaucer. You know it may have been Millus. But there was an English professor who loved Chaucer so he came up with this whole Chanticleer. Because being part of the university system all the campuses and I think eventually there were nine of them - eight campuses? They [regional campuses] were all over the place so everyone wanted to be part of the Gamecock. Ours was more literary and academic to call it the Chanticleer. Later on when I was working out here there was a movement to change it but students squashed that in the minute. I thought it might be a good idea to change it to something like the Coastal Wave or something that would denote that you were on the coast.

Tomczyk: There were many attempts over the years to change the mascot, because it was hard to pronounce. There were people who didn’t know its history or what it meant.

Gragg: And when they shortened it to Chants, no one knew what that was at all. So to get over that confusion, there were attempts to do that. I remember one, maybe it was the last attempt it was when I was working here so it was probably in the early 80s. I thought that’s a good idea from a PR or a marketing part of view. They don’t know what a Chanticleer is. Maybe if we called it the Coastal Wave or something people would identify us with the coast and it would be good name recognition and it goes along with Coastal. All that marketing logic but the students just killed it. Some of us were really surprised. We figured the students would jump all over something beach related. They didn’t want to lose that name they wanted the name Chanticleer to remain.

Tomczyk: That was a strong campaign from the students to keep it. Let’s go forward a few years and you’ve gotten your degree in journalism and then came back to Coastal as public relation director. Tell me a little about that job and what your duties were like then?

Gragg: Again there is Dick Singleton. I graduated from Carolina and I was working in the news media while I was up there, working for the Associated Press and after I graduated I took a TV job at WBTW in Florence channel 13. It was in Florence then, entirely. I worked there a while and then I took a job and was hired as an early anchor and news director ABC affiliate in Wilmington WWAY. I was doing the 6 o’clock news and trying to run the department. I was 23 years old and learned everything not to do.

Anyway I got a call from Dick Singleton saying he wanted to meet with me and I met with him and he offered me a job here at Coastal. He said he wanted to develop the first public relations dept. People were doing things but they wanted to make this a separate identity, actually a public relations dept. for the university. Other places called it public information.

Tomczyk: How did he get your name? How did Singleton know to contact you about the job?
Gragg: Well at that time in this area you watched really only about three television stations. There were two in Wilmington and one in Florence and cable was just developing. Most people had these antennas on the roof tops. You may get three stations strong signals. You might pick up one in Charleston and maybe WIS if you had really good antennae. So every night I was doing the 6 o’clock news and I was an alumnus. I grew up in Conway. I suppose – he never told me – I suppose that’s how.

Tomczyk: He knew who you were and where you worked.

Gragg: It really took me by surprise because I never really thought about doing that. I was in a field that I really liked. I came over and met with him and he offered me the job. I was very complimented and I thanked him for it. But I explained I had just taken a job a new job at the CBS affiliate at Charlotte WETV and that’s where I was going. I worked there for several years and then decided to go back and get a master’s degree. Then I took a job and I guess Dick got me thinking about it. I was offered a job at Montreat College in western North Carolina near Asheville. I went to work up there. I was up there about a year and I got a call from Dick Singleton trying to recruit me.

And I turned him down because I had only been married a year and I was really into what I was doing there. I was born in Asheville and grew up in Conway, so I actually liked being in the mountains and I liked the job that I had. I was very complimented, but he was insistent. I really liked working at the school; it was a Christian college I really liked the aggies. And Dick kept calling me. I remember my secretary said, you better pray about this – ‘cause that man keeps calling you.

Tomczyk: and you keep turning him down…

Gragg: And you keep turning him down. She said “have you prayed about this?” And I thought no, not really seriously because it’s not what I wanted to do. My wife and I talked about it and we did pray about it. And Dick would continue to be persistent. I finally reached a point where I thought that’s what I’m supposed to do. I wasn’t really sure why. It was great to go back home but I really didn’t know why and in fact as kind of a PS to the story (personal side), I came back to work at Coastal for 5 years. It was a really good job. But from a personal, spiritual point of view I still didn’t know why I felt called down here other than it was a good place to be and to raise a family. It was growing; all the good things. I remember thinking “Was that really what it was all about?” Eventually after five years here I made plans to open a marketing company in Myrtle Beach and leave.

By then Dr. Singleton was gone and there was a new chancellor, Fred Hick. He was great and did a lot of good things, but I felt I needed to do this business. It was the right time for it and just before I left Coastal my wife and I wound up almost overnight adopting three kids. I so thought wow if I was in Montreat, NC, I sure would have not known these three kids. And we eventually adopted five. So I could see all of that coming together. That’s the long story to tell you how I got here.
I came here in the fall of 1978 and Dick Singleton was the Chancellor and the school was just on
a tear of growth. And it was what Coastal would continue to be. I remember I hadn’t been here in
several years and I came driving in. Still in my mind there were two buildings at Coastal. I
hadn’t been here since then. Maybe there had been three or something since last time I was
there.

When I was a student there was what we called the administration building that we called the
Singleton Building and what we called the Athenaeum building – that was the student center; it
had an auditorium, a classroom. – Yes, the little theatre. It has small but everybody could get in
it ‘cause we were small. Right, it had a student lounge and then it had great wonderful greasy
food grill. That grill…

**Tomczyk:** I’m told it was operated by Oliver’s Restaurant.

**Gragg:** I think that’s right. The food was great if you’re a kid it’s the best kind of greasy
hamburgers and French fries you could ever want. Forget about health food. It was just wildly
popular with the students because it was really good.

But two buildings; So when I came in 78 and I drove in for the first time I hadn’t been here in
several years and I came driving in and in my mind it was three. Then the administration
building, the gymnasium had been built, Williams Brice and some little buildings out there. The
library – a great beautiful spacious library, the academic building which is now more classrooms,
Kearns hall and then under construction was a new student center. You could just see that things
were happening. My wife who had never been on campus, she looked around and said “this place
is great.”

**Tomczyk:** Is she from Conway?

**Gragg:** No, she is from Florence. She went to Carolina.

From the beginning there was a sense that this place was really growing. It was part of the
university system. That was the positive and the dynamic that was always at Coastal. It was also
a source of tension it was just growing and you could not contain it. Yet it was supposed to be
one of those little satellites of Carolina but it wasn’t like any other satellite. It was just ready to
burst, just incredible growth.

**Tomczyk:** I think it was just in 1977 or maybe 1976 before you came back that we were
awarded to give four year degrees. **[NOTE: the first 4-year degree was awarded at Coastal in
1975]** Prior to that we had two year status. We gave baccalaureate degrees. We were growing.

**Gragg:** I remember the basic stats from the time when I was here. We had 53 faculty and we had
about 1,900 students. We hadn’t popped 2000, we were working on that. And didn’t have quite
60 faculty. It was on the move, it was just growing. There was always this sense of expectation.
There was always this future ahead. You just didn’t think about the past too much. And you
didn’t think about the status quo. You just had this sense that is was always growing.
Tomczyk: You mentioned earlier that we were a commuter campus. Students would drive in, park and then drive out at the end of the day, probably going to their jobs or their families. What changed it? When we got residence halls?

Gragg: Yes I think the growth even before there were on campus dormitories; I think the sense of growth and the increased number of activities. A very active athletic program, sports and Coastal even then in the late 70s and early 80s here were really excelling. Playing in different places and different ways but they were successful. The teams were successful wherever they competed; different conferences, smaller ones but always competitive. So even though it was a commuter college, students who were nearby would come back for that. And people in the community would come in. There were different programs going on.

I think in the five years that I was here ’78 to ’83. One of the big milestones I saw was the construction of Wheelwright Auditorium. That was more than just having a bigger auditorium. It was almost like the institution was going to make its mark. It would be bone fide. That would be a first class community university style auditorium there that would bring in a whole new level of fine arts in the community. And it was really going to help Coastal make its mark and define itself. That’s the view that everyone had at the time. The cost was – you can check me on this – was about 8 million. Now that I think about it, it was more like $4M - 4.8 maybe. You can check this. [NOTE: The building cost of Wheelwright according to the Coastal history webpage was $3.1M]

Tomczyk: I remember it being billed as the cultural arts center of the region. There was nothing comparable in Myrtle Beach in terms of seating capacity.

Gragg: Right, and the quality because the whole purpose was to build something first class. So that was a big development that helped define Coastal but of course shifted it from a commuter community college to being a college that was on track to be a university was the addition of dormitories which opened the university to students outside the region. This had been largely folks from - still up through the 70s –the bulk of students were coming in from this region. Now the whole region was changing. Coastal was along for the ride as the Grand Strand was growing and the Grand Strand was booming.

You know historical the Myrtle Beach area, Grand Stand was North Carolina line down to Georgetown, about 60 miles. It never grew on some steady trajectory. It always grew from plateau to plateau. It would shoot and then it would be flat. Then it would shoot and then it would be flat. Eventually it reached a point where the growth was steady. The growth of the region was shaped by things like Hurricane Hazel which kind of wiped out the beachfront. People were willing to sell their properties and outside developers came in; that was one kind of thing. The development of golf you went from two and a half golf courses in the area and all of a sudden you had 20 then 40 then 60 and then it topped 100 eventually. And then the development of shopping, the outlet shopping, with Waccamaw Pottery; that was a huge fuel to the economy, growth and people coming in and name recognition. So these various things kept happening to Myrtle Beach and as it grew it affected everything including this institution.
Tomczyk: I believe our admission requirement or view at that time was a five or six county service area which included Dillon and Marion. Our admission policy actually stated specific counties. So even though Myrtle Beach was growing, I think we continued our responsibility to counties inland like Williamsburg and Marion and Dillon.

Gragg: Yes, the principal mission area or service areas was three counties - Horry Georgetown and Marion - under the university system but there was always this outreach. We always had a lot of people from Williamsburg County and from other places, like you said, Dillon County... It was always getting bigger. But I think the development of dormitories which transformed it from a community college and a commuter campus to a broader college on the university track. Then recruiting students - that really had a big impact.

I think there were two things: one was the dorms and the other was becoming an independent state university and that occurred after I left. You could see the forces at work even in the late 70s and early 80s that led Coastal to leave the university system and become an independent state-supported institution. You could see that. The tensions became greater than the benefits. Even in the last few years or so that I was here. It wasn’t really a negative thing, as much as it was more a sense I guess of the relationship between Coastal and the university was always stretching. It was always pushing. It was frustrating because the opportunity and potential was so phenomenal here. And yet you had to abide by these rules that really kept you cramped. It was not negative so much as cramped.

Tomczyk: That was true of the residence halls. Wasn’t there legislation that barred us from having residence halls on campus within the university system?

Gragg: That was a really turning point I think. I think that was a trigger that really led the local community, the movers and the shakers, the leadership in this community to say “We like being part of USC but there is no amount of limitation on this place – on that college at that time if we are outside the university system.” And the dormitory thing was the trigger that caused that thinking that led Coastal to being independent. As I remember it there was a big ongoing debate. We had the opportunity to apply for a HUD grant and it was huge then, small by today’s standards probably, but $4M and that was huge. We had to get permission from the University system to do it and there was real resistance to give it because we had to be taking up a lot of their time. You had all these campuses.

Beaufort did great things, Spartanburg, Aiken. But nobody was growing like this place was growing and I’m sure there was this constant. Coastal wants to know, Coastal wants to know – in Columbia. And I know they were probably tired of it, just tired of it. I also think among the administrators there were some fears. Eventually we turn that place loose down there and they will eventually be competing with us, the main campus. That’s how we referred to Carolina, being the main campus. It just wasn’t what was planned. That was really the issue.

Tomczyk: Well we were a feeder college to USC so they would get revenue from our students who we were sending up there to complete their degrees.
Gragg: Excellent you bring that out; that was really the point. We need to know our place. Our place had been staked out for us like all the others; our place was to feed Columbia, but you couldn’t hold this place back it just couldn’t hold it back. You just couldn’t hold it back. There was this sense all the time that they couldn’t hold us back. There was this friction all the time. The natural feeling here was we have this opportunity to do this and we need to ask Columbia. Well Columbia says that’s not your role as a feeder institution. There was this friction all the time. The natural feeling here was always this friction and the friction became tension. The bubble popped with that whole dorm thing. Coastal got permission. It was hard, but Coastal got permission. The message from Columbia was “We are not giving you money to build dorms.” But if you can get money from somewhere else you can build dorms. Then ‘bang’, there’s a HUD grant and there’s local money to go with it.

Tomczyk: What I heard from Dr. Squatriglia who was the VP for Student Affairs at the time that the original HUD grant had to be declined. The legislation was vetoed by the governor. You were in Columbia at that time, weren’t you?

Gragg: It was more complicated than that. I was involved at the legislature trying to get people information about Coastal. I was there when the vote came. And here is what I remember. It’s been a long time but here’s what I remember. Check all these facts. We got approval from Carolina to go forward with the HUD grant but it had to be approved by the legislature. Well, Francis Marion had had one that went through. It was one of these local issues. The legislation didn’t get into regional, local issues. When Francis Marion, which was then USC – Florence; which became Francis Marion University. When they wanted to build dorms they got the funding and they got Carolina to say if you can get it you can do it. They got it. They went to the legislation to get it approved. This was basically a rubber stamp; that was all it was supposed to be a technicality that they had to get approved.

The legislature historically was not going to get involved in whole legislature that something local that would affect Myrtle Beach or Florence. That was poor form. You just didn’t do that. The unwritten rule politically in SC at the time, the legislation would not get involved in something that was a strictly related local issue. Now if they did that then it could happen again when it was on your turf. That just didn’t happen so when USC – Florence put in for dormitories and later to be independent, it went in just like that. [snap of fingers] that was a local thing and you didn’t mess with it. USC – Florence was a great institution. It did some great things over there. Frances Marion is a great institution but it didn’t have the threat. Not just to Columbia but to other institutions around the state.

The feeling at the time there was really opposition from other schools that were struggling around the state, public ones and private ones. Because the fear. Remember this was early 80s late 70s coastal was looking at the dorm thing, this was a difficult economic period. There was a recession under way, gas prices were soaring long lines and there was a lot of fear and there was fear among these institutions that if you let Coastal loose If there was a college in Myrtle Beach, it will explode and not only will they take in people from all over the place they will take away our students. So there was a political movement in the legislature.
I saw this firsthand and talked to some of these legislators. The legislators were feeling the push. They were feeling the push. They were feeling pressure. These elected representatives didn’t want Coastal to get dorms. You think, why? Why did they care what’s way over here. They were feeling the pressure from their constitutionals. They didn’t want that competition. It came to a dramatic vote in the legislature in the House and in the Senate. There were two power brokers. Rembert Dennis was one. Both were from the Low Country. I’m sorry I can’t remember the other guy’s name; they called him the gray fox. The legislature really took sides. When it came down to the vote that Coastal could receive this grant, they voted it down. I remember seeing Dick Singleton he was up there to see it go through.

Everyone got the word from the local legislators in Horry County. This isn’t going the way it should be going it should go. There is all this opposition. Everyone was puzzled and shocked. Only at the eleventh hour did you realize what was going on. The scenario I just described.

We went up there to see the vote, to celebrate. By the time we got up there. They voted it down and I remember Dick Singleton. He was up there to see it go through. Everyone was completely shocked. I remember seeing Dick Singleton with tears just streaming down his face… just streaming down his face. So much had gone into getting those dormitories. That was the vision for Coastal – to be able to grow. I had been a television reporter I covered the legislature. I was a legislation reporter. I was picking up this and that. I knew what was going on.

I remember getting on the elevator Dick Riley was Governor at the time later to become Secretary of Education under Jimmy Carter. I knew his aides. And they knew me. I had been a reporter there. I got on the elevator and the doors closed and two of the governor’s aides were high-fiving and they were laughing and they were celebrating. They looked over there and saw me and all of a sudden they remembered I wasn’t a reporter, I worked for Coastal. And then it was like [snap] stone face. But it became a political issue.

**Tomczyk:** So do you think that if it hadn’t been voted in the legislature that the Governor would have vetoed it?

**Gragg:** I don’t remember all the details; it’s been a long time. I remember being on that elevator. I remember working with Bill Baxley who was director of development and I was director of public relations and we shared an office suite and shared a secretary. We worked together and he was a great guy. He and I were friends. He had to make this call to Washington, to HUD that we were not going to take that money. They had given us that money instead of a long line of other institutions. I remember he made that call. He hung up that phone “They are not happy and the message I feel is ‘Don’t ever ask us for any more money’.”

**Tomczyk:** It must have been disappointing to Bill Baxley because wasn’t he the one who went to Washington to try to get the grant?

**Gragg:** Yeah and he got it and it was a long shot, an absolute long shot.

Now at the moment everything seemed dark. But dormitories were inevitable. An independent university was really inevitable and you look back at that point of view and the dynamics of
growth in Horry County at the time nothing could stop it. Eventually, those who worried about it realized it wasn’t going to be stopped. They really didn’t have to worry. I think that was a key point, kind of a watershed in the local thinking to go, “We are not going to give up after this. “There wasn’t an attitude of “well we lost this and we’ll never do that again”. The attitude was the next day was “Ok how do we get going.” That was the attitude the next day “Ok that’s over, now let’s figure out another way.” There was always that can do attitude at Coastal.

Now the other side of this, is that in some ways that growth the change in the status from a commuter college, from a community college was sad. It was sad in some ways because it was a total change of what the mission had been. The mission had been to take care of farm kids.

I can remember one of the founders, George Lovell who was the pastor of the First Baptist Church in Conway. He was an icon in the community. He was an absolute leader People went to him for spiritual advice and moral direction. He was a principal leader in the community and he was one of the handful of people who had met in 1954 in a meeting one night in Horry County Memorial Library in Conway across from the First Methodist Church and they had that meeting that night. They pledged together to raise the money and to raise that support to start a college for this rural community. I remember George had always been a supporter of Coastal. When we were going for the dorms, he said to me one time when we were going for the dorms, he said “I know it’s the right thing I know we cannot NOT grow. But it’s also kind of sad because our little college that was so focused on the community and was so a part of being Horry County in this rural community is going to change. It’s going get much bigger and he said I just hope it will never forget its roots.” I think that was the real intent of Coastal. I hope it will always be that way. “

Tomczyk: He was one of our founders who we commemorate every year; those strong tenacious individuals who worked to start this college.

Gragg: Well, I’ve been wandering around with war stories taking up the time.

Tomczyk: No, this is perfect, wonderful. I discovered some documents in the Records Center that talked about ROTC. ROTC kind of waxed and waned it seems in the 70s and 80s; maybe when you were here, Rod, there was an ROTC program, and now with the [CresCom] Center of Military and Veteran Studies you are connected with ROTC. Can you tell me a little about the history as you remember it of ROTC on this campus?

Gragg: Yes, the first ROTC on campus was in the early 80s and that’s how I actually came to teach; moved from administration to teaching. I think it began - I’m trying to remember – Roy Talbert asked me if I would teach ROTC. I would teach two courses, Survey of American Military History and a Survey of Civil War. Maybe I started right before I left and taught some after I left maybe that’s how it happened. There was a desire to have a ROTC on campus at the time. They needed faculty to teach at the time. I had a master’s in American History and I was writing history books and writing military history books. There were not a lot of guys doing that. Roy was doing great things. Roy Talbert was the academic dean and vice President. He was always doing innovative things. So he asked me to teach in the ROTC program. The program – the university college was small still, compared to today. The program never really got legs. It
was part of the ROTC program at the University of South Carolina. They kind of withdrew it and took it back to Carolina. There was an extension here.

**Tomczyk:** I don’t even know how it got started. What are its requirement? How do you get started with courses the students could take?

**Gragg:** They would take standard courses and then take courses for ROTC. My courses had a lot of people in them that had nothing to do with ROTC. They just wanted to study the Civil War and American history.

**Tomczyk:** And they wanted to have you as an instructor! The word spread. What does ROTC stand for?

**Gragg:** Reserve Officer Training Program. Now jump forward later about 2008 or 9, there was another attempt to have ROTC. The whole dynamic had changed. The GI bill was out there but it had more opportunities. Some people could spend it at a college and they could do that. Then there was a whole desire – the whole dynamic about veterans changed. I think it changed because of in great measure the passing of the WWII generation. They were known as the greatest generation and as they were going away, people stopped and looked at what they had done. There was a whole surge of appreciation for that WWII generation. The Greatest Generation as Tom Brokaw called it. That name stuck. I think that happily it caused a rise in appreciation for veterans in all uniforms. And in that climate and the changing economics of what was available, a growing military; there were other ROTC programs developing across the county and they were vibrant and bringing new people into the student bodies and so on. I wasn’t privy to that starting here at Coastal but that was my understanding... In that atmosphere, the ROTC started again and is still – at the time of this interview – it is still connected to ROTC in Columbia. There are programs here, Francis Marion, USC, Benedict College and many others.

I became involved with ROTC through the Center which became the CresCom Bank Center of military and veteran studies. I taught some ROTC courses again. I was invited out here before the Center began. I was invited out here in 2001 by the history department here, Chaz Joyner and Wink Prince, kind of recruited me. I had been doing more writing, Civil War in particular. Chaz Joyner recruited me and asked me to teach a special Civil War, an upper level Civil War course which I came and did for about 10 years.

**Tomczyk:** That was very popular as well.

**Gragg:** I hope so. It was well received I think. It was called The Civil War: Up Close and Personal. We dealt with primary sources, students studying different primary sources, military records, diaries, and all this kind of stuff. So I came back and doing that

**Tomczyk:** Was that full time?

**Gragg:** No, as an adjunct, part time, I still had a marketing company. I was in the process of selling the marketing company to another company here in town and concentrating on my writing and less on marketing business. One of my clients at the time was Goldfinch Funeral
Home; been around forever, very well respected. George Goldfinch called me in. My marketing company had represented Conway National Bank and it had done their 100th anniversary. And Goldfinch Funeral Home was about to do their 100th anniversary so they called me and asked me if my company would do that. I was in the process of transferring that to another company but ZI said sure we would do that.

My clients all went over there. George, --the reason I’m telling this, -- George wanted to do something special for his 100th anniversary, some outreach to the community. They went to a convention in Asheville or somewhere... They had encouraged people in his industry to show outreach for veterans. They showed us a program on D-Day. He said, I wish we could do something like that, maybe get that program. After talking we said “Why don’t we do our own program?” We have D-Day veterans around here. George agreed. We put together a group of Goldfinch, HTC and then we came to Coastal and asked Eddie Dyer if we [CCU] would be a co-sponsor. So there were originally three sponsors, later we had more but originally three, Goldfinch, HTC and Coastal.

The whole ideas was we would have a Veterans Day program for the community to show its appreciation to veterans and we would have this program. So we went to Normandy and we shot all this footage and for the centerpiece of this program, a documentary on D-Day. We used local D-Day veterans as the commentators. And we advertised the thing as a Veterans Day program -- there were others out there. We filled up Wheelwright Auditorium. We were shocked that it filled up Wheelwright Auditorium. Of course it was free but people came out at night for an event. Everyone was taken aback. It hit all of us. The strength, the size, the scope, the influence of the veterans’ community in our region. And if you consider veterans and there are about 40,000 in the immediate service area in Horry and Georgetown area and counting Marion, but if you think about their extended families, and you think about the number who retired down here, it’s a huge community. They really responded to this event. We called it “A Salute to American Veterans.”

Tomczyk: You did it more than one time.

Gragg: We did it in - the first one was in 2005. All the sponsors involved wanted to continue to do it. The next year we filled it up. Coastal’s contribution was the equipment, and editing and media services and of course they are superb. It was just an air quality documentary and ended up airing on SC ETV and lots of other exposures and it was good for everybody involved. The size and score of this veterans community and they were so appreciative. The next year we did it and we had to do an overflow. So it continued that way.

So after about five years of that, Eddie Dyer and I got talking. What if we had a Center for Military and Veterans Studies at Coastal? Eddie saw the potential for it – more than I did. Dr. DeCenzo and others saw it immediately for all these veterans it was compatible with the growth of ROTC which the university had gotten into and there was a whole body of people who appreciated Coastal for its support of veterans.

Tomczyk: …and many of our own faculty and staff are veterans as well.
Gragg: Bob Squatriglia agreed to head up an alumni Veterans Association and in short order he had about 100 signed up. And that’s how it started and now we are moving into our 7th year.

We have support from CresCom Bank; it’s called the CresCom Bank Center for Military and Veteran Studies with a three part mission; to collect and preserve oral history with our veterans, a partnership with the Library of Congress the program they have there with military history project and with other service branches from time to time like the air force museum in Dayton, Ohio and the marine archive at Quantico and so on. So preserving our history that’s part of the mission and on Time Warner Cable and HTC. It is produced here. Like other things in this media center it is first class. The production value is first class. It’s not really marketed except the program itself. It airs two three times a day seven days a week as we speak.

In one week - I told this story a while back - I talked to a local political leader said he watched it who liked it. I ran into an attorney and I know that guy and it was so good. Then, the bag boy at Bi-Lo told me how much he liked watching this program. You know we are just cutting across. I think there is a genuine appreciation in America today and in our community especially for veterans for those men and women in uniform who served and sacrificed and were willing to sacrifice, all of it if they had to. There is a renewed appreciation. Collection of oral history is part of the mission. Outreach through various programs is part of what we do. We have kind of a knockoff program that is still sponsored by those original sponsors we call it a Memorial Day tribute. And other things we are involved in. and I’m involved in teaching American history here.

And I do what’s called a staff ride. Staff ride in military parlance is a battlefield tour. It was command staff. Officers would go and tour battlefields and draw what they could learn from it. It’s a tradition within the military and within ROTC. So we have this staff ride every year in the spring to Fort Fisher just north of here. It’s a perfect historical campaign and battle to study because so much was done wrong and so much was done right. It was a joint service Army and Navy, it was an amphibious operation. It was a huge defensive fortification and huge offensive operation. So many modern day applications.

So every year I lead this with the Colonel who commands ROTC at USC in Columbia and he’ll bring the ROTC from USC, from Francis Marion, Benedict College and from Coastal. So all four came together. I talk about the history tell the story and he will do the modern day application which is fascinating to hear by the way. So our three part mission is Oral history outreach in the community and into the classroom with ROTC.

Tomczyk: You said you think the response is spawned by the veterans. I love your show too by the way. When I’m clicking and I see it through I hear those veterans talk about their sense of duty. It’s heart wrenching sometimes what they sacrificed.

Gragg: Out motto is “Every veteran has a story.”

Tomczyk: Don’t you think 9-11 had something to do with it as well; the renewed sense of patriotism and an appreciation of wanting to honor our veterans?
Gragg: Yes, you say that very well. That’s exactly right. It was really almost a perfect storm in a way in the sense that I think in the late 90s in particular a number of things had occurred – the late 80s and 90s.

1984, the 40th anniversary of D-day, President Ronald Reagan went to Normandy, the first to go there. Eisenhower had gone there after he had been a president. He’d gone on the 20th anniversary in 1964 and he had done this famous interview with CBS live sitting there overlooking Omaha Beach. Nobody had done that; it’s almost obligatory now every President has gone to Normandy. I don’t know that will continue now that the WWII veterans are diminishing so greatly.

It started with Reagan he was the first to go and it was no small thing. I went there for the first time in 1985 and it was largely undeveloped. That part of France is beautiful, very rural, much like the South, very agricultural in that part of Normandy, La Manche, Normandy is what they call it; the Sleeve - that little area on the continent peninsula and it was very undeveloped.

The first time I went there I walked where Reagan had given his speech, a place called Pointe Du Hoc. He had been there the year before and he really got my attention. I thought if he can go there and all these other people, then I can go there and do some projects. I went there and I was writing some stories about D- Day. I went there the year after he did. And when you walk down the path, which is undeveloped largely Ponte du Hoc, which was a major German installation that Army Rangers had taken, there were still signs in French and English stating “stay on the trail.: unexploded ordinances’ You didn’t want to walk onto a land mine, or more likely in that case, an unexploded bomb.

Reagan really captured everyone’s imagination. He did this incredible speech about the Boys of Pointe du Hoc, this Ranger outfit that had scaled these vertical cliffs. It’s an incredible dramatic story anyway and when he told it in that ability that he had to really communicate it in his speech, it captured the imagination. That really was the beginning of people stepping back - my generation and my children saying “This was an incredible contribution.” This generation - my father, my grandfather, our parents, our grandparents, they really saved the free world from a horrible evil. There was this surge of appreciation of what they had done and who they were. It is so easy to love that generation. They are so humble. It’s so easy to love them.

Tomczyk: That comes across in your show as well. I watched you try to pull that out of them - what was it that made them do what they did. They don’t take credit. They say “It was my duty. I went and that’s what I was supposed to do.”

Gragg: I’m not a veteran, I ‘m a military historian. That’s how I got into this. I have a real heart for veterans and it began with that generation. I feel all veterans are heroes.as men and women of all enlists and those who are active duty now -- who are going to be veterans but it really started with me with those people of that generation. My father was a veteran. You know, growing up I’m not a whole lot older than you maybe, we all knew it. They are everywhere. We all knew it. They were everybody. They just didn’t talk about it. You had to pull them out, you know.
So anyway my point is that there was this rise in appreciation for veterans. Reagan helped do that with that speech in Normandy. I think the film Saving Private Ryan that started a whole new surge and the book that Tom Brokaw wrote, the Greatest Generation. There were several things that happened that caused people to step back and really appreciate the veterans of WWII. Then there’s 9-11 - as you put it so well - and the surge of patriotism; an appreciation for the country we have, warts and all – the best anywhere. All of that came together and there was this real recognition and it spread to the veterans of the modern era.

I’ve seen that and continue to see it, and now part of my duties are speaking from CresCom Bank Center for Military and Veteran Studies and I have a talk that I developed actually to give to corporate retreats – beginning with defense contractors – but it fits perfectly what I’m doing here and it’s called Lessons on Leadership from the Greatest Generation. I actually ended up spinning it off to a book, usually you take a book and spin it off to a speech but in this case it’s the speech that made the book. I go out all over the place, from Charleston to Wilmington to service group, veteran groups, and civic clubs. It’s always the same positive response to it. So we are seeing this appreciation for veterans and I hope it lasts.

**Tomczyk:** I’m glad we have this Center at Coastal. I think it’s one of the centers that gives a lot to our community. All of our Center’s do, as they do research but I think this one in particular as you said earlier really resonates with the public so deeply and gives a special service to our community.

**Gragg:** I appreciate that. I hope so. It’s not an archive. It’s an outreach center. We don’t want to build an archive. You know what that would be like. We are small and we do that but what we do, we take these interviews and we send them to other places that are well established in housing them, like the Library of Congress or like the Marine Corps Archive. They air in our television program. Everyone we interview we give lots of DVD copies for the family which is always appreciated and then they go into a repository that knows how to take care of them.

**Tomczyk:** I think the only real value to an archives is for people to use them. There’s no value to these documents sitting on the shelf. They need to go for additional research and we learn from them.

**Gragg:** Right and technology is making that easier in some ways. CresCom Bank is taking the Military Memoirs programs we do and putting them on the website. We have other sponsors, Agapé, TGBA, and Blue Cross/Blue Shield. And they are doing the same thing, so they are going out there in lots of different places where people can be exposed to them and have access to them. And of course the Library of congress is doing that in a big way.

**Tomczyk:** I’d love to talk about this more but, Rod, if I can bring us back. I have some general questions that I ask all interviewees about Coastal. So let me close with those. I want to ask “What has the biggest change in Coastal been in your view?”

**Gragg:** Well it’s obvious its phenomenal growth and all the various things that are added all the time for the students and for the community at large. To me it’s just the focus on quality and the focus on positive growth
**Tomczyk:** What do you think the challenges will be for Coastal as it moves forward?

**Gragg:** I think the challenges that are really representative of our day - the impact of economic changes, that’s one, the technological developments and how does that effect what your do and how you serve your constituency, your students, the community.

I think always the challenge is. - I would say two things: in general for any institution like coastal, how do you continue to maintain quality in all that you do and for Coastal for me it’s holding onto those roots, how do you grow as a major university now and not forget who you are and where you came from. And so far I think Coastal has done a good job of that.

I hope that Coastal will always be able to do that because the identity of this institution is deeply rooted in how it began and what the vision and mission was for it originally. It will always be a challenge to hold on to that legacy and to always be true to your beginnings.

**Tomczyk:** You are right. It is a legacy. It’s a distinctive one that’s worthy of our making sure it stays. It is front and center when we tell the history to students here now. What event had a lasting effect on you?

**Gragg:** Well those things that we talked about. The whole thing - The dynamic development of the institution.

**Tomczyk:** As you think about your time here, were there any other special events or happenings that you would like to share?

**Gragg:** No, I have rambled all over the place far more than I expected to. I think I covered it all. Thank you for remaining awake.

**Tomczyk:** Thank you for sharing so much of your own personal life as well as talking about Coastal. It’s very helpful to put all these perspectives together and see them against the actual documents because that’s when you get a full picture of what happened at Coastal.

Thank you so much for coming back to Coastal after being coaxed so many times by Dr. Singleton to come here and we are glad you said yes to Dr. Singleton. And you have held many different roles with no small task in new initiatives starting here. Thank you for doing that and for your time today.

**Gragg:** And thank you for this archive. What a great idea and I appreciate your doing it. You are a good interviewer.

**Tomczyk:** I have to say I learned from the best.

**Gragg:** Thank you. My pleasure being here.