

U.S. NAVY MEDICAL DEPARTMENT ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL HISTORY WITH COL. (ret) DONALD BALLARD, ARMY NATIONAL GUARD

CONDUCTED BY
JAN K. HERMAN, HISTORIAN, BUMED

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TELEPHONIC INTERVIEW

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Interview with Donald E. Ballard, HM2, Co. M, 3rd Battalion, 4th Marines, 3rd Marine Division during the Vietnam War, and Medal of Honor recipient.

Where are you from originally?

Right here in Kansas City, MO.

Did you also go to school there?

Yes.

When and why did you join the Navy?

I joined in December of 1965 to finish my education and have a career. I wanted to make a career in the Navy as a dentist.

Where did you go to boot camp?

Great Lakes, IL.

And you went to Corps school there also?

Yes.

Had you decided earlier that you wanted to be a corpsman or involved in medicine or did that just happen?

It basically just happened. I was a premed major in dentistry and so when I went into the Navy, but after I got in, they said they didn't need dentists, they needed corpsmen. So that's what changed the course of my life.

How many weeks of corps school was there in those days?

At that time, they divided it up into two different categories. One was academics and some ward duty, and two, they sent us out to the hospital to get the practical skills, or internship. The academic side of it was probably about 12 weeks long. I don't recall for sure.

After you graduated corps school, what was your first assignment.

I went to the Navy hospital in Millington, TN, just north of Memphis.

Were you a ward corpsman, or did they have a special job for you to do?

Yes. I served as a ward corpsman.

How long were you there?

I was there twice. The first time I was there for about 10 months.

Where did they send you after that?

They sent me to the FMF school.

Probably by that time you knew what FMF meant.

No. I actually learned it just prior to departing.

How did you end up in the FMF? You hadn't volunteered for it.

No. It was by virtue of having your name on the list. At that time, Millington was one of the largest orthopedic receiving hospitals in the Navy getting patients coming in from Vietnam. We would get 20 or 30 patients every day or every other day at the height of the war. We'd stabilize them, do reconstructive surgeries, cast them, and then send them on to a local hospital close to their hometown. For the most part, they didn't stay in Memphis for very long. We had a fairly large team of orthopedic doctors there and quite a few corpsmen as well.

So you found your name on the FMF list. What happened then?

I was sent to the FMF school at Camp Lejeune, graduated from there, and then was assigned to 1st Battalion, 6th Marines at Camp Lejeune. I stayed there as a line corpsman with 1/6. During the time I was there, 1/6 made a Mediterranean cruise. That's when I was stationed aboard ship for the first time.

We had training before that deployment on dry nets and in the papa boats, and all that stuff. So my first night aboard a U.S. ship at sea, I was in a Marine Corps uniform.

Going back for a moment. What kinds of things did they teach you at the Field Medical Service School?

They taught us how to cope and survive in that type of environment that was found in Vietnam, and how to get along with the Marine Corps.

What do you remember about that first time aboard ship and being in the Med?

A Med cruise is very positive. It was very nice. Being the first time aboard a ship of that size was an experience. There were 5,000 men on that ship.

What ship was it?

USS *Cambridge* (APA-36). It was a converted cargo ship. It had big holes in the decks and they could reach in with cranes and lower

in the equipment. I was on the USS *Sandoval* (APA-194) for training as well, which was a rear-end loader.

Did you practice landings while you were out there?

Yes, we did. There was supposedly a film company over there that filmed us practicing some of our assault landings on Corsica and on the island of Crete.

What do you remember about those landings?

It was the first time we had been employed as Marines to do what Marines do. It brought home some of the movies that we had watched about the Second World War where they made the landings on Iwo Jima and the other islands. We, as corpsmen, had distinctly different jobs than the Marines. We didn't run in with weapons to attack. We had simulated mock casualties. And we had real injuries as well. We had a guy who was crushed before we even got into the papa boat. The waves were pretty high and the guys would get on the dry net climbing down the side of the ship and the papa boat would come up with the wave and the net would drop and the people would be between ship and papa boat. And then they'd get smacked. So we had real casualties even before we got into the training mode--kids slipping, falling off, getting caught in in the dry net.

And then we had people who were injured when they hit the beach. They'd step in a hole. The sand was too far out so the papa boats had to stop short of actually hitting the beach. I was shorter than the people ahead of me and the water went clear over my head. I don't know who the hell grabbed me, but some one dragged me or I would have drowned right there.

What kind of gear were you carrying at that time?

We were carrying packs with a shelter half, clothing, and other gear, which weighed about 40 pounds. The Marines were also carrying ammo, not live ammo but blanks, and their weapons. As corpsmen, we were carrying the .45 in the holster. But for the most part, we were carrying medical gear.

There's always a culture situation when a Navy corpsman is assigned to the Marines--earning the respect of his Marines. Did you have a pretty good relationship with those guys from the beginning?

I did because I was older. I had a wife and two kids at home. I had been out in the world and was able to deal with the stress a little bit differently than the 18- and 19-year-old kids. I had a nurturing attitude even prior to being a corpsman. I'm a people person so I dealt with them on that basis and we developed an

understanding. We had rivalry as well, typically the kind you see between the Marines and the Navy corpsman. The corpsmen generally had a better education, a better, more rounded environment and exposure, for the most part, than the Marines did. But the inter-service rivalry was always pleasant and good-natured. We still enjoy a great relationship today in our civilian lives. FMF corpsmen love the Marines and the Marines love FMF corpsmen.

How long were you over in the Med?

Six months. While we were over there, we sat off the coast of Israel for the Six-Day War. While we were there, they actually showed us the inventory on the morphine syrettes and how to use them because we never really had exposure to that before. A Navy doctor gave us the training and it seemed like this was for real and we might really be going ashore in the event this war didn't resolve itself.

In the end, it was resolved so we never got off the ship. We had liberty in all the countries--France, Italy, Spain. I can tell you a funny story since I'm retired now and can't get court-martialed. We were required to carry both our Navy uniforms and our Marine Corps uniforms. When I reported aboard, of course, I was with a Marine Corps unit. We had the Marine Corps dress and the Navy blues and the whites. We'd have to make two or three trips to get on the ship, while the Marines had only one duffle bag and their weapons. Actually, they didn't have their weapons with them. All they had was the one bag. And we had two bags. Every corpsman who went aboard with us had the same problem. We were required to keep both uniforms.

We complained about this situation throughout the whole deployment. When we went into port at Toulon, France, we had port and starboard duty. As I said, there were approximately 5,000 guys on that ship--3,000 Marines and 2,000 sailors. Port and starboard duty meant that the Navy stood duty one day and the Marines stood duty the next. I was one of the brazen ones. I would put on the opposite uniform and went off the ship every day. I'll give you an example.

Sometimes my duty was later in the afternoon or later that evening. I'd be off during the early part of the day with nothing to do. When I had the opportunity and didn't have any duty to pull, I'd put the opposite uniform on and go off on liberty. It was the only time I had an opportunity to use that Navy uniform.

When did you come back from the Med?

About September or October of '67. I was still with the 1st Battalion, 6th Marines. The next event was just before Christmas. We took leave to settle our wives at wherever our home station was because when we returned we were going to Vietnam.

You were at Camp Lejeune at that time?

Yes.

When did you find out you were going to Vietnam?

About 45 days before Christmas.

I'm sure you all heard about Vietnam and had seen guys come back from there. You probably weren't at all thrilled with the prospect of going.

I wasn't. But I wasn't surprised. We'd already been trained in that direction.

How did you get there?

We flew a commercial jet over to Okinawa and then I was there for about a week while they did whatever staging was required. Then we took a C-130 and flew into Danang. I remember that plane reeked with some kind of stench you just couldn't put your finger on. When we landed in Vietnam, the plane didn't taxi up to the normal terminal. It went instead to a huge metal building. We sat outside for quite a while waiting for someone to pick us up because we were miles away from anything.

While we were waiting, I began talking to some of the other corpsmen who had been in Vietnam for some time and they explained what that building was. It was a staging morgue. And while we sat there, they were loading bodies aboard that C-130 for the return trip to Okinawa.

So your impression of Vietnam was a little bit unnerving.

It was. Within the first hour I was already looking at body bags.

Were you with your unit on the plane or did you go over individually?

Individually.

So, you were no longer assigned to 1/6 anymore. You were going to be assigned to another unit when you got over there.

That's correct. We didn't mount out as a unit; we went as individual replacements.

How did you get to the unit you were now assigned to?

We had people come down and pick us up and take us to a regimental or division headquarters. They gathered us up like sheep and took us to a mustering in area. So we reported in and spent another day

there figuring out what unit we were going to be assigned to. Then they contacted the units and the units sent personnel back to get us. Then we helicoptered out.

This would have been late December of '67.

Yes, I think so. I try to forget as much as I can. I don't have any good thoughts. Seems like all I remember is the bad, so I try to forget.

So they took you by helo from Danang to your unit. What do you recall about reporting to that new unit?

It wasn't my first helicopter ride but there was a fear factor because we thought we would be shot at. But we didn't take any fire. We went to the headquarters of that unit near the rear. I went to 3rd Battalion, 4th Marines.

Every time we asked a dumb question, as kids did, we were repeatedly told that we didn't have a need to know. I learned not to ask any questions. We had no idea where we were anyway. We didn't have any maps. It would be like me bringing you to Kansas City and taking you a hundred miles out in the bushes. You wouldn't have any idea where you were.

We kind of went along with the flow, more like "sheeple." They herded us along and told us what they wanted us to do. Then they assigned me to a company, which was called Mike Company. It was my final destination.

They walked me over to the Mike Company headquarters and again, it was just a tent city. When I checked in, they had just finished sick call so everything was kind of chaotic. I scoped everything out and began meeting some of the other Marines and corpsmen and getting acquainted with what was happening.

The next day they gave me my first assignment--inventorying some personal gear. I ran into a Marine who was from Kansas City. He told me that I was inventorying the gear of a corpsman who had been killed. I was putting what the Marines call 782 gear in one stack and the personal stuff and the sea bag in another. Then I was making a list of both sets of items and taking everything back to supply. Later the same day I found out that this was the corpsman I was replacing. So that was my second in-country impression of Vietnam and it was just the second day.

Now that you had replaced this corpsman, what happened after that?

I think they had either 10 or 12 individuals we were inventorying stuff for. I stayed there about 2 days, got to work the sick call, and just hung out because there wasn't much going on. I was thinking

that this was going to be my job so I tried to learn as much about the routine as I could.

We took incoming mortar rounds and so I had that drill the second night I was in country. You could hear the whistling and the locomotive coming through, then the explosion. Only after it hit did everyone run for cover. They only sent one in but you lay there waiting for more. Luckily no more came.

There were real casualties to treat because some people got injured. A lot of people got injured just trying to get away from the mortars. They tripped over the ropes holding up the tents. We had bruises, abrasions. We weren't the only medical unit there. Each company had their own little sick call area. None of my company were injured with that first incoming but we did help the other companies that did.

Did they have you going out on patrols after that?

Yes. The third day a corpsman came and got me and said, "You're going to be joining my unit so I'd like to get to know you and take you out there." We went to the battalion supply area where we drew supplies. That was his main purpose. He came back to get supplies and pick up the replacements, which I was.

So he picked me up first and then we went over to get the supplies so I could help him carry them. In about an hour or two, we got on the helicopter and went out to the unit. Again, we were flying across the terrain and landed in an area that looked just like the place we had come from. It was all jungle and all hostile looking. The remainder of the day was spent introducing myself to Marines in Mike Company.

All we did that night was dig in. They wanted me to dig a fox hole. I later learned that wasn't going to work because when I'm doing my job, I'm not laying in my hole. So I only dug one fox hole the whole time I was in Vietnam. I told the Marines, "If you want me to come and treat you, you'd better dig a hole deep enough for both of us."

Did you have any idea, at this point, about where you were?

No. I later learned I was up around the Con Thien area, straight north and pretty close to the DMZ.

This then, was the third day. Did you go out the next day, after you had dug the fox hole?

Yes. They assigned me to a platoon and wherever it went, I went. We did patrols and security around the perimeter. We had a perimeter defense posture. There was no concertina wire, just an identified field of fire. I'd walk around and hold sick call and get to know

the Marines.

Where you armed with just a .45 at this point?

The stupid part of it . . . When they gave me the .45 there was no magazine or bullets given with it.

That's real useful.

That's what I thought. I said, "Sergeant, what the hell am I supposed to do with this?"

He said, "Regulations say I have to give it to you."

I said, "Well, it's worthless. If they ever get this close, I'll have to hit them on the head with it."

"Well, I have to give you one." His memorable line was, "Doc, if you want a weapon, don't worry about it. There's plenty of 'em laying on the ground down there."

And he was right. Right after the first fire fight there were all kinds of weapons. The helicopters wouldn't take them. You couldn't evacuate people with their weapons. They didn't want weapons or live ammo in the helicopters so if we had casualties we were medevacing, we had to hump the extra weapons out of there.

Yeah, you couldn't leave them behind for the enemy so you had to carry them out.

Right.

So you had your pick.

Right.

You must have gotten into your first fire fight pretty quickly, then.

Yes. We took some fire but no one got hurt. They'd shoot at you, you'd take cover, and fire back. There'd be some kind of fire fight going on but luckily we were able to kill the guy or chase him off and we didn't take any casualties. It was 7 to 10 days before I saw my first fire fight with casualties.

What do you remember about that?

I remember we were on the trail just walking through the jungle, not on any path. We never took anybody else's path because of booby traps. We were cutting through the jungle and getting slapped in the face with foliage. It was just a mess. I couldn't see 20 feet either side of me because of the elephant grass and overgrowth. All of a sudden I heard the familiar small arms fire. The AK-47 has a distinct sound. And, of course, the M16 has a distinct sound as well. You could hear the two chattering back and forth. We hit the deck

first thing and I hadn't been lying there 5 or 10 minutes or maybe 15 before I heard the Marine Corps battle cry--"Corpsman up!"

So, I've got to get up out of my safe place--and I didn't even have a weapon--and go to whoever is hollering at me. And they kept yelling, "Corpsman up," and they'd keep pointing farther up forward where the first or second guy in the squad was. The damn enemy knows where I am because they've already shot the Marine. I'm leaning over the guy trying to treat him. And that's how most corpsmen get killed. They're paying attention to their patients and not paying attention to the enemy.

I tried to treat him as best I could laying as flat on the ground as I could. After a period of time, I didn't think I was going to get out of the country alive.

Were you able to take care of that guy?

He had an abdominal wound and an extremity wound of the arm. The bullet must have gotten his stomach and arm at the same time. So I was able to control the hemorrhage, treat him for shock. The rest of the Marines took off after the sniper. I don't know if they killed him or not. Anyway, I leaned later they kept on going until they did. They never gave up and were relentless in getting their man. But I didn't have a need to know and my job was focused there on the injured Marine.

The other corpsman was senior to me so he joined us and we called in a medevac helicopter and medevaced the guy out. I had to learn radio procedure there in a relatively short time. You did the best you could in a very stressful environment.

Did you have a lot of these events going on regularly?

We did. We were the farthest unit north and never got much farther south than Cam Lo, which was right there on the river. The enemy had to go through us to get to Khe Sanh. We moved in and out of Khe Sanh ourselves several times. We operated out of Dong Ha, Cam Lo, and some of the base camps--J.J. Carroll, and "the Rockpile."

The Rockpile was pretty far north and up by the DMZ, wasn't it?

Yes. Again, the 4th Marines were the farthest north unit. There were probably times we were possibly in North Vietnam but again, we didn't have a need to know. The lieutenant wouldn't say anything. There are no signs out there in the bush that say, "You're now leaving Vietnam and going into Cambodia."

So, no customs stations or welcome centers. Just plain jungle.

Just plain jungle. A lot of times we didn't see any signs of life--no villages or anything. It was pretty desolate.

Were you still getting involved in fire fights on a regular basis?

It kept getting worse up to the Tet offensive.

So you were there during Tet?

Yes. We had just left Khe Sanh and were on Hill 881 and 689 and through that area. Then they took us back to Cam Lo where we sat inside a perimeter with three strands of perimeter wire. And we'd sit there for maybe a week. Then they'd pull us out and bring other units in. It was on a rotational basis.

Then they'd load us up in helicopters. The one I remember was Operation Sparrow Hawk. We went out and rescued some other Marines who were trapped. They dropped us into a hot LZ. Two helicopters got shot down so we were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Is this the patrol where you had the little encounter with the grenade?

No. This was much earlier.

When did that happen?

May 16th was the day I earned the medal.

What do you remember about that day?

The whole experience has stuck with me. The guilt feelings, the loss of lives, the loss of buddies. I don't think that day meant much more to me than any other day. Looking back, it was similar to other actions. The day was like any other day except I did some other things. We were constantly in fire fights and lately were taking more casualties because of where we were and what terrain we were trying to hold.

That day was certainly one that comes to mind but I have concentrated most of my life trying to forget most of Vietnam because of the inner feelings I have. There were no good feelings. We didn't sit around the campfire telling jokes. It wasn't a party and we didn't have any good times. There was not one day that I could say was a fun day. There was no fun. There was no entertainment. We might sit around and complain about the C-rations or about the gooks we'd just killed but, no, there was never a day that didn't have some negativity about it.

If we weren't fighting, we were remembering the buddy we were talking to the day before but was not there today. It's not like he had checked out to go on R&R. You remembered him because you treated him. As a corpsman you had to play God in a mass casualty situation. You worked on so many people and often you had to choose

who was gonna live and who was gonna die. And there was no one who I wanted to die so when I made those unconscious decisions, I had to reflect back on my qualifications and whether I did the best I could. Today when I think back, all I can do is remember the bad days and wonder if I did all I could have done to save the guys. I have a lot of guilt feelings at times. I have to work hard sometimes to put it behind me.

So they were all bad days, but that one day when you earned the Medal. Do you recall anything specific about it? How did it all come about? I recall that some years ago, you had told me that you had jumped on the grenade because you knew it was a dud. You said, "You wouldn't think anyone sane would jump on one he thought was alive." I remember you joked about that.

The story I revealed to you at our meeting is one I try to convince myself of. No one likes to think that they just committed suicide. For me to say that I had to think of it as a dud . . . I was trying to get my own mind to accept the fact that I was killing myself. The easiest thing for me to do is laugh and make light of it. When I rolled off of it, I grabbed it and slung it down the hill. And I could tell you for a fact that a grenade went off in the area where I threw it. I can't tell you if that was the same one or not. The Marines who were with me told me it was the same one.

So it was hot. What were the actual circumstances that found you in that situation? As I understand it, you were taking care of some wounded Marines.

We were involved in a fire fight while we were on patrol. The only involvement I had was taking care of the Marines. I feel I had the best job in Vietnam, that was to save Marines and get them home to their loved ones.

Things had kind of settled down and we decided to move off the hill. I had selected a staging area and had five or six patients laying there. I had asked some of the Marines to help me get some ponchos so we could take them down off the hill to where we could medevac them out. The helicopters couldn't land on the side of the mountain and that's why we had to take them down to a flat, grassy area.

Because we were the only thing on the side of the mountain that was moving, we brought attention to ourselves. We were loading the patients onto the ponchos, getting ready to drag them down the hill when this North Vietnamese soldier threw in a hand grenade. What are you going to do with it? You don't have too many choices. It was inappropriate but acceptable to throw a dead body on it--something to absorb the blast. And I didn't have any volunteers.

Nobody wanted to play dead. Another choice was to get rid of it. The third choice would be to try to hide yourself or run from it. That was not going to work.

My patients who were lying there couldn't do any of the above. They were wounded, I had been treating them, and they were out of the war and ready to go home. Therefore, I was the only one who could do anything to deal with this new crisis.

You really didn't have a lot of time to be thinking about all this.

That's right. It was more of a reaction than a conscious decision. I didn't want to commit suicide. I had a wife and two kids, I had a life, and I loved myself as much as I did the Marines. But again, I didn't see a whole lot of options at the time. I had to do something because the patients couldn't. I thought I could absorb the blast and save their lives. I believed it was going to kill us all if something wasn't done.

Could you see the grenade smoking or anything?

I saw it come and roll down the hill toward us. It wasn't smoking or anything. It looked like a C-ration can with a handle in it. And it just lay there. I had a flak jacket on that was supposedly bullet-proof. I figured that would probably help a little bit. I wore that jacket all the time except when I was in the shower. I even slept in it.

So you rolled onto the grenade?

I lunged forward and pulled it underneath my chest and waited. It seemed like an eternity. When you've got time to think about what you're doing you relax. So I rolled over onto the patient beside me. I already had the grenade in my hand. Then I slung it down the hill. Of course, my second worry after I threw it was, "Damn, I hope I didn't throw it on my own guys."

Let me see if I understand all this. You saw the thing on the ground, you jumped on it and shielded it with your chest, and then you waited for what seemed like an eternity. Then you realized that "Maybe I got a chance to get rid of this thing."

Yes. A second instinct kicked in. And that was to throw it away.

You say that you were shielding your patient at the same time.

Right. I guess I was thinking that my body would take most of the blast and save the others.

Were you on top of him?

No. I was laying beside him and as I rolled up off the grenade, I rolled up onto him and in one motion I threw the grenade as I rolled. I wanted to get it as far away as I could.

And then you heard an explosion but you weren't sure it was the same grenade.

In the citation it says, that when the grenade failed to go off, I quickly continued my efforts taking care of the Marines. It doesn't say anything about me getting rid of it. It's not the kind of thing you leave lying around.

So now you realized that you dodged a big one here. What was your attitude after that?

I was glad that everybody survived it and doubly glad that I threw it in a place where there weren't any of our Marines. I didn't even think that anybody saw what really happened. It didn't appear to me worthy of a general flying in and saying, "You're a hero." When I was actually being awarded the Medal, they didn't tell me why I was getting it. I was thinking there were other things I had done that no one knew about. There were more Marines there with me who deserved the Medal of Honor more than I did. But I was the lucky one, in several ways. I thank God every day.

How did you learn that you were going to get the Medal?

After I got back from Vietnam, I went to Millington and ended up working at the same hospital I started in. In fact, I had the surgery clinic again. I'm a surgical tech and I'm working the same thing. It was a multi functional facility so we had Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines coming to it.

I had a long-term patient who was an Army recruiter. Every time he came in he tried to recruit me into the Army. I saw him every other day for a good 2 months. He talked me into taking the battery of pre-entrance exams for the Army. When I had a day off, I went down to the recruiting station and took the entrance exam. And I qualified for the OCS program.

About a week later, he came back to my clinic for treatment and said, "I've got your test results. And we can guarantee you OCS." So for the next 3 weeks, he was convincing me that I needed to be an officer and I had the capability of doing that. It got to a point where I agreed with him.

I had already talked to the Navy because I extended once. Part of the extension was supposed to be so I could be sent back to the Marine Corps. I didn't like the Navy attitude at that time. The

chiefs and first class I was dealing with in personnel at that time were not proactive, and didn't care about me or my family. I didn't get anything I wanted out of the deal. So when this Army guy was talking to me, I was listening. The opportunity to go on and get my education as a dentist was not happening. The Navy wasn't going help me with the bootstrap program that I originally signed up under either. I wanted to go back to the green uniform. They told me they couldn't guarantee me that. It was just all negative with the Navy at that time. And the Army sounded positive.

After I found out I could qualify for Army OCS, I got out of the Navy. It was February of 1970. I turned in all my uniforms and went home to Kansas City with my wife and kids. The Army told me that all I had to do once I got home was to take the packet they had given me before I left. Within 90 and 120 days, my packet would still be viable. Then all I had to do was have my physical and the recruiter would take care of the rest.

So I went home and was there about 5 or 6 weeks. In that time, I had gotten about six calls from the Navy recruiters wanting to get me back in. They had gotten the word that I had been released. I told them I wasn't interested.

I got the final call from a lieutenant j.g. somebody. I felt like the recruiter had turned me over to his supervisor. He said he needed to come down and talk to me. I told him, "I told the first class that I wasn't interested. I am not interested in joining the Navy again."

He said, "Oh, no. The Navy wants to give you an award."

"For what?"

"For action you did in Vietnam."

I said, "Oh, I don't care about awards." I thought they were going to give me a badge or something--another ribbon. "I'm busy."

He said, "No, son. You don't understand. The President of the United States wants to give you the Medal of Honor."

"Who the hell is this anyway?"

He says, "Can I come visit you at your work?"

And I said, "Yes, I guess."

So, this staff car pulls up and a commander and this j.g. in uniform get out of the car. And I thought, "These guys are going all the way if they're pulling a prank." They set me aside and said, "We want you back in the Navy."

I said, "I know you do but I'm not coming back. I have no interest in it."

He said, "No, the President wants to give you an award."

I said, "Is this the way you recruit people?"

He said, "Have you got an hour? I want to take you down to meet the admiral."

And I said, "Okay." So I checked out with the boss and they took me in the staff car down to the MEF station and that's where I met the admiral. So I'm sitting in his office and he says, "Well, I'm proud to meet you. It's the truth. President Nixon wants to give you the Medal of Honor."

Well, it kind of soaked in then. So that's how I found out. His final comment was, "We need you to be in uniform and check it out to make sure it's proper."

I said, "Well, that's gonna be fun because I turned them all in and don't have one. The only uniform I've got now is for a second lieutenant in the Army."

He says, "You're kidding me." or basically he said that. He looked at that commander and said, "I want that man issued a new uniform. He's not going to get a Navy medal in an Army uniform on my watch."

Before I left that day, they got my sizes and everything, and within 2 or 3 days, they brought me a uniform with everything on it I was due--all the ribbons and hash marks. And it was a complete uniform and it looked sharp.

What do you recall about the day you got the Medal of Honor? It was awarded at the White House, wasn't it?

That's right, President Nixon awarded it. It was obviously an awesome experience. It was very positive to have the President of the United States come to you and tell you that he's proud of you and that he's glad that I was an American. And then to have a photo op with me and my family. After that, we had a luncheon and I met ADM Moorer, GEN Walt, GEN Rogers, and GEN Westmoreland. And so I got to meet these guys too. It was a day that a typical soldier, sailor, airman, or Marine would never experience. Remember, I was an E-5. I never had a need to get around a general or an admiral, or anybody of any rank. I was just in awe to have a full bird colonel as my driver. I was up there in the stars, and it was kind of hard for me to come back and deal with the lieutenants and the captains again.

You've been a member of this very special organization--the Medal of Honor Society. There aren't too many folks who can say they have a Medal of Honor. Has it changed your life? Do you feel different?

A thousand percent different. I don't know who Don Ballard is. Or who he would have been. My entire life has changed drastically. I retired out of the Army as a full colonel. I'm asked repeatedly not only for my autograph, but also to give speeches. I visit schools and try to teach youngsters that there are other kinds of heroes out

there besides basketball players. I'm always selling Americanism, patriotism, and veteranism, a new phrase that I coined. You can't have Americanism and patriotism without veterans. It's easier to earn the Medal than to wear it. I am very grateful but it can be a heavy burden sometimes.

What do you do now?

I run and operate a cemetery and a funeral business. I'm also a residential and commercial landlord. And I develop real estate. I take farmland, divide it into 10 acre chunks, and build new houses on them.

So, you're a real estate developer.

Yes.

When did you retire from the Army?

In December of 2000.