

U.S. NAVY MEDICAL DEPARTMENT ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL HISTORY WITH HM2 (ret) STEVEN BARRETT, USN

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TELEPHONIC INTERVIEW

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**Interview with former HM2 Steven Barrett, Vietnam hospital corpsman assigned to 1st Marine Air Group-11.**

**Where are you from originally?**

New Jersey.

**Whereabouts?**

A place called Flemington. It's where the Hauptmann trial was. I went to Hunterdon Central High School in Flemington.

And the way New Jersey was set up there's like 21 counties, and at that time there were only two high schools in the whole county. There was a north and a south.

**Where'd you go after high school? Did you enlist in the Navy?**

Yes. I got done with high school, and then I started pharmacy school up in Boston for about a year. I went up there and then I ran out of money. So, I enlisted in the Navy for pharmacy school. After I got done with boot camp, corps school, and pharmacy school, they sent me to Lakehurst Naval Air Station. So I went back home to New Jersey.

My dad worked for AT&T at the time and he got grants for Illinois. So I enlisted in the Navy when I was in Illinois. The first duty station after all my schools and everything, I went right back to Jersey again. So I was the pharmacy tech at Lakehurst. Just about the time I thought I didn't have enough time left for Vietnam, I got my orders.

**When was that?**

That would have been '70. I went there in November of '70. Once I got my orders, my orders were sent or from 1st Marine Air Wing. That was the only detail I had and I was going to Vietnam with the 1st Marine Air Wing. Apparently I found out after the fact that there were different billets out there throughout the wing. I was being sent in to fill the pharmacy technician at MAG-11, which was right by the airfield in Danang.

**Do you remember the trip going over to Vietnam, your introduction to that place? Was that a memorable experience for you?**

Yes. We went from -- I'm trying to think here. I missed something. Oh, the other thing that I was going to tell you was that I had extended for pharmacy school. It was like an extra 8 And if it hadn't been for that then I would have missed the trip. So, I was passed the point where I thought I was going to go to

Vietnam, but because of the extension that I had signed to get pharmacy school, I had enough time left, so they sent me.

Yes, I can remember. We flew through Norton Air Force Base -- it was either Travis or Norton. One was in and one was coming back. And from there we flew to Hawaii and from Hawaii, we went to...

**Did you go to Okinawa first?**

Okinawa, thank you, yes. And I was there for probably about a week, maybe a little bit longer and finally we got our flight out of Okinawa into Danang. I know it was a commercial flight until we got to Okinawa and then it was one of the ones like Seaboard, World, or the charter airlines. I was kind of taken by the fact that the stewardesses they had going from Okinawa to Vietnam were a lot older than the ones they had on flights going to the more popular places.

After that they sent us to 1st Marine Air Wing Headquarters in Danang. From there they sent me over to MAG-11, which was 1st Marine Air Group 11. At that time, there were two different groups in Vietnam--MAG-11 and MAG-16. MAG-11 was fixed wing and MAG-16 was helicopters.

**So you ended up with the helicopters.**

No, actually I was assigned to the pharmacy billet or pharmacy technician billet at MAG-11, which is at the air base.

**What was that facility like, pharmacy-wise?**

Basically, everything was prepackaged. We would have a sick call twice a day; once in the morning and once after dinner. And it didn't really test my skills at all. We had a very limited formulary. And it was basically Actifed and things like that.

**Actifed you say?**

Yes. That was one of the ones I remember.

**Yes. I remember I was in the Air Force during that era and I remember Darvon was a big deal.**

Darvon, yes.

**We used to give that stuff out like penny candy.**

Yes. Now we found differently.

**So you had those duties there at the Wing and then did you get out of there or did you stay there?**

I wanted to fly. I had a good friend. In fact, I'm still in

touch with him. He was a corpsman. He was a medevac with MAG-16. Then when I got done with corps school they sent me to pharmacy school down in Portsmouth, Virginia, and I met a person that was also from New Jersey so we hit it off pretty good. And it turned out that he had just gotten back from Vietnam and he had flown medevacs. And in spite of the fact that I told my wife I would not, I did because I wanted to fly, too.

**So you were married at the time.**

Yes. Yes, I was married in '67

**So the medevacs that you flew, were this fixed wing or the helos?**

No, these were helicopters.

**They were?**

Yes.

**And what do you remember about those? What kinds of activity was that being a medevac corpsman all of a sudden?**

Well, the way it was structured, they never had enough corpsmen to do the medevacs and it was a voluntary thing. In other words, you had to volunteer to fly the medevacs; otherwise they wouldn't just put you in a helicopter and send you out there. I remember we used to fly two or three times a week. We had corpsmen that were assigned with MAG-16, which was helicopters and they did not have enough corpsmen to do the medevacs. So it was either that or they didn't want to fly. So they were always asking for volunteers from MAG-11. So I signed up probably about the first month I was there.

**So was this considered an additional duty?**

Yes.

**Because you were assigned to the other squadron and you ended up...**

Right. And I would be TAD'd for a day at a time. Well, actually I had orders for the duty and then I would be tasked on a day-to-day basis. In other words, they gave me flight orders and then it was basically a TBA schedule. Basically, we were flying three or four times a week out of MAG-11. I know they had a day and a night medevac and basically it was a 12-hour shift. And I want to say it started around 6:00 in the evening.

So, you'd go in there at 6:00 in the evening and you'd be there for 12 hours. And then you would go back to, in my case, I would

go back to Mag-11 until the next time I was flying. So whether you had a night medevac or a day medevac it was kind of the luck of the draw. And it was probably evenly split. In that 12-hour period we had two different types of . . . There were two corpsmen assigned to medevacs at any given time. If I was on night medevacs, I would start at 6:00 at night. I would fly for 6 hours and then we would switch. That was because our medevac missions were set up this way. Whenever we went out there were two '46's and then there were four gun ships. And the gun ships could either be Cobras or Hueys depending upon who was tasked with the support mission.

**And they were flying cover for you.**

Right. So, we would go out and let's say that I'm flying lead. There was lead and chase. The lead bird would go out there with one '46 and two gun ships. They would go in and test the area. If it looked okay, we would land and they would be hovering in case there was any trouble. After 6 hours, the lead and the chase birds would switch.

If you were the chase bird for the first 6 hours, now you became lead. And so the corpsman would be there for 6 hours. Sometimes you would have maybe three or four missions in your whole 6-hour period. Other ones you would just be going continuously.

**For example, what would an example of a mission be? Let's take you through a day that you're on call for a flight for a medevac, what would that be? You'd get up in the morning; you go over to the base, what happens?**

Well, if it was the daytime one, I'd be there at 6:00 in the morning and then I would check in with the crew. The pilot would get all the preflight information. The crew chief would be over there checking the bird. I would have my medical supplies in the back of the lead bird, assuming I'm on the lead.

**Which would be a '46?**

That would be a '46.

**Okay.**

On the gun ships you had the pilot and the copilot, and then if they were using a Huey instead of a Cobra, they usually had a crew chief on board, too. On the 46's, you had the pilot, the copilot, a left gunner, a right gunner, the crew chief and the corpsman.

**So there's one corpsman, and that's you.**

Correct.

**Okay.**

Okay. So now I'm starting my day. The first thing they do is they go out over the ocean and clear the 50s to make sure that they're working. And then you come back and land and then you just wait for your first mission to come in. On a busy day your first mission might be actually begin while you're out clearing the guns--the 50's. You might get tasked for your first mission on that. Other days, if it was quiet, you might be there for 2 or 3 hours before you got a mission.

**So in other words, you might be up over the ocean clearing your guns when you got a call that you were going to head off right from there.**

Correct.

**I see.**

Right. It wasn't the most common occurrence, but it did happen. You never knew when you were going to get a mission. While you were awaiting a mission, you would sit in the bunker. And we would fly out of Marble Mountain, which was right along the ocean there, north of Danang in an area of . . . Have you ever heard of China Beach?

**Oh, sure, yes.**

Okay. Well, Marble Mountain was the air base that was right alongside China Beach.

**Okay. So you'd wait in a bunker until you got the call for a medevac mission.**

Right. Then there was a flashing . . . If it was a night medevac, you'd hear the noise. Also, the lights stayed off so that the pilots would not have any problems with their vision. So there was always like a red light inside, but there was a red light that would flash and also you would hear a buzzer going. At that point the crew chief would be running out there. He would turn up the engines on the '46. The pilot and the copilot would be getting the mission information; the two gunners would make sure that their guns were operational, and then I'd be in the back helping the crew chief until the pilot and the copilot got in the back.

We'd usually be in the air in about, I'd say., within 2 or 3 minutes of getting awakened. Then, let's say it was a night one, usually we would launch from Marble Mountain and it would climb to around 3,000 feet. Supposedly we were bulletproof at the 3,000-foot mark. Then we would fly in an area probably around a 15-mile diameter around Danang. Maybe it was a little bit wider.

**Like a radius of 15 miles?**

Right. And I think that the Army . . . All the Marines were up north in the Danang area at that point. And I don't think they ever had any Marines down in Saigon or anything. So the Marines pretty much picked up all the medevacs that they could. There were some Army dust-off helicopters that were out at that area too. I can only remember the Marine ones.

**The aircrews on these helos that you were with were all Marines.**

Correct. There was one Navy corpsman and the five others: pilot, copilot, two gunners, and the crew chief. Now you'd launch from Marble Mountain, go up to 3,000 feet, and then a lot of our stuff was up north and west of us. There was an area called Arizona Territory, which we had a lot of business out of. And also up around Hai Von Pass, which was northeast of us, right along the ocean. At that point, the six birds would split up and the ones that were on the lead bird would start descending to pick up the medevac.

They would prearrange a color of smoke and when you came in and thought you had your people that you were picking up, they would pop a smoke and it was a prearranged color. Even then you'd still come in and they'd get lucky and pick the right color. And you'd be coming in and all of a sudden you'd see tracers coming from down below. Oops, that wasn't it. Then you'd find out it was off to the left a little bit.

**So it may have been the right color, but there were enemy in the vicinity waiting for you.**

Right, but they did the best they could. If the enemy was there and they had the right color smoke and most of the time, they were popping the wrong colors just trying to play the odds.

**How many colors would there have been? There was red...**

Red, green, purple, and yellow.

**Now when you say prearranged, now you wouldn't do this on the radio. Presumably the enemy might hear it and send it...**

Right.

**...the color smoke you were designating.**

Right, that was done before we even left.

**I see, before you left base.**

Now I don't know how frequently they changed it, every mission

it would change or what, because we had radios in our helicopter helmets, but it's basically if the pilot had a question for me or the crew chief, other than that we were supposed to be quiet so they could communicate from the pilot and the copilot.

**So it's pretty much an intercom system within the helo so that you could communicate above the noise.**

Right.

**Okay.**

So now let's say that you got lucky and you found the right LZ, Landing Zone. You would come in and hover at 3,000 feet until the gun ships were comfortable with the situation and that didn't always work, but they would do the best they could. They were there to bail you out if somebody was quiet until the last minute.

**They would go in to try to draw fire, is that what you would do?**

Right. But the Viet Cong weren't stupid.

**So they wouldn't be shooting at a Cobra; they'd be asking for trouble.**

Right.

**So they'd stay quiet until they saw the big guy coming.**

Right. And then you would come in and land. The corpsman was not supposed to get off the ramp, but many times we had to because we had a lot of guys to pick up. We'd get all our medevacs in the back of the bird and then we were out of there as soon as we could. At that point, I would start treating my medevac people.

Basically we're trying to stop bleeding, keep people breathing--basic stuff. We could either take our people to the *Sanctuary* or the *Repose* and when I was there it was the *Sanctuary*, which, I think, was 10 miles offshore.

**And those were head injuries?**

I think...

**I'm trying to remember because NSA, that probably was one of the other places you went, didn't you?**

We had the hospital ship. We had 9050 Evac Army Hospital. We had 1st Med Battalion, which was up at Freedom Hill, and there was a NSA hospital, also. Most of the medevacs either went to the *Sanctuary* or 9050 Evac Army Hospital, or 1st Med Battalion. All I can say is the 2-year period that I was there, from '70 to '71

that's the way it was.

**But if you had head injuries, you knew there was a better place to take them.**

Exactly. And the pilot knew that too. Sometimes there was a question when the pilot would come back and say, "Okay. I have one guy that has an eye injury and another one with a head injury. Which way is the best way to go? Do you want me to take them to the hospital at the 1st Med Battalion, or do you want me to take them to the *Sanctuary*?"

**Where would he be asking that question? Who would be giving him that information?**

It would be asking us, the corpsmen, our opinion. If it was not cut and dry, then he would ask for the corpsman's opinion.

**And you'd assess your patients and say yes, we definitely have to go to the *Sanctuary* with this guy.**

Right. And usually it would be based on the condition of . . . If you had one person then it's a no-brainer. If you had multiple injuries then sometimes one would have a priority over another one. And the corpsman would have to play God.

**Do you remember any specific medevac missions that were hairy enough so you remember them and say, "Oh I remember that one."**

I remember the one that I was shot down on.

**Oh, well that might be memorable. What was that all about?**

That was a day medevac. I remember it partially because it was my wife's birthday and I had already told her that I was not going to be flying.

**A little lie there, that's okay.**

Yes. Another aside on that was . . . I'm not going to avoid your question; I'll come back here, but I wanted to mention something else that was kind of funny. They had a MARS station. It was Military Amateur Radio station, and they could patch you through. You had to make an appointment in Danang and they would patch you through from Danang to your wife's address or town. At that time she was living in Toms River, New Jersey. So once a week you were allowed to, if you wanted to, you could make a MARS call to somewhere, and it was a 3-minute maximum on it. I'd give them the town my wife was in and then I'd sign up for this thing and through the Military Amateur Radio station, or whatever they call it, they would actually patch my phone call from Danang all the

way to my wife's house in New Jersey. And it would be relayed through maybe three or four different other radio people. So I might get from Danang to maybe Okinawa and from Okinawa they'd carry it through to Hawaii and Hawaii would take it to California and California would take it back to New Jersey.

And it was kind of neat and wouldn't cost anything. I had gotten to the point where I would be putting out or signing up for a MARS call every week on the same day at a certain time. And somehow, well, not somehow, but after several months of doing this, they had gotten to the point where she could actually call the person who was patching through to New Jersey. Because they'd be sitting there waiting for your call to come through. Sometimes it took half an hour to set these things up, and so she got to be good friends with this person, who was from Pennsylvania.

This one day that I was supposed to call was the day that I got shot down, and I did not call. I was also flying that day, which was another problem. Somehow after the smoke had cleared from the crash and everything. Actually, if you didn't make it one day it was supposed to be the next day. And I didn't call her the next day because I was still surviving from the crash. I'm sitting there back at MAG-11 at this point and the phone rings and it's my wife. She had put a call through in the opposite direction through her contact in Pennsylvania.

**Highly unusual to go in that direction.**

Right. And it was kind of funny because I'm thinking and someone says, "Hey Barrett, your wife is on the phone." All could think of was, "How many times have I told you not to call me at the war?"

**Call you at the war.**

Yes. In fact she didn't know that I had gotten shot down until after I got back.

But going back to that particular day, I was flying day medevac; it was around 9:00 in the morning. I think we had cleared the weapons and we were back at Marble Mountain maybe an hour and I got a call that the Viet Cong had hit a train in Hai Von Pass, and they had multiple casualties. I had lead bird, so off we went. I think there was about six or eight U.S. casualties that needed to be medevaced and then there were quite a few ARVNs.

**The Vietnamese Army.**

Yes. They had a lot of hurt people as a result of blowing up the train. So we were coming in to pick up the medevacs on that. An RPG round hit us and I can remember hearing on the radio right

before it hit, "Brace yourself" or something to that effect. And then we vibrated a little bit while they put the RPG round in the back of the helicopter, and blew off the back pylon. It all happened so fast after that. The next thing I know we were upside down on the ground and trying to crawl out of the wreck. We had small arms fire hitting all around us.

Later on, the after action report said they had our two gun ships there. They launched another Huey mission. We had F4s and A4s dropping napalm around it. Everything was going on all at once. And then on top of that, the Marine unit that was coming in to help us out, were hit by the shrapnel from our helicopter from the crash so I had about six other guys to treat.

**Do you mean when your helicopter crashed there was an explosion?**

Yes. And these helicopters were made out of magnesium so they burn real fast. So we were trying to get everybody out of it. One of the gunners did not make it. I know the copilot had a broken leg. Everybody there got a Purple Heart that day.

**Did you get injured?**

Yes, I had shrapnel; I broke my back. Actually it was compression fracture, but I didn't know about that at the time until after the fact that I had actually got the compression fracture from hitting the ground.

**How high up were you when you...**

Well, I kind of remember I was maybe a couple hundred feet up, maybe 100, 200 feet up. I've seen other reports on the incident that indicated that we were hit by a command detonated mine. So it's about 50/50. The one that went into HMM-262 indicated that, but I've seen other reports that were written after the fact, maybe within a day or so that indicated that we were hit with an RPG round. Now that's what I remember, and it wasn't until I started looking at stuff at Pop-A-Smoke that it ever changed.

It's like I didn't have access to the reports that were generated at the time and I didn't know how to get them until almost 30 years later. At for 30 years I thought we were hit by an RPG round, and that's what everybody that knew anything about it was told.

My chief back in Danang was told we were hit by an RPG round; the crew members told me the same thing; and it wasn't until 30 years later that I actually saw the actual report and according to that it was a command detonated mine.

**Well, I can't even figure out how that might have worked, because you were in the air at the time. You'd think a mine would be on the ground.**

I know. And there are mistakes out there. We're finding them all the time through Pop-A-Smoke.

**Well, your first inkling that something was wrong was an explosion inside...**

Actually, it kind of vibrated and then there was a hellacious explosion and it might have been the reverse of that, I just remember a vibration. These things vibrate pretty back to begin with, but this was noticeably different. And then there was an explosion, and the next thing I knew I was pulling myself out of the wreck. And that was all. It all happened in probably less than a minute but it just seemed like an eternity.

**Now there's a fire fight going on around while you're on the ground.**

Right.

**You're trying to pull yourself out of this thing.**

Before you launched, they would pick particular direction like 1 o'clock or 7 o'clock or something like that. Then if you crashed and got separated, you were supposed to go in that direction. If you can visualize north and then a little bit to the right of that would be 1 o'clock and then 2 o'clock and so on. That's where you were supposed to go.

**Based on the direction of the aircraft?**

Right. So if you can determine which way is north and the predetermined time or hour let's say is at 3:00 and you knew which way north was, then you would turn right and go straight in.

**But here you are, you just crashed, you're kind of disoriented.**

Right.

**How do you know what direction is what?**

Well, that's where the problems come in. We all came out in different directions. I believe it was the copilot who broke his leg and the pilot was hurt, but not as bad. I believe the right gunner was killed; he had a broken neck. The other one had a lot of shrapnel in the back of his leg. The crew chief had a lot of shrapnel in him, also.

**And you had some yourself.**

Yes. We went in there for probably around 15 people originally and then we picked up six more as a result of getting hit. So I had about seven or eight Marines. And I think there was probably the same number or ARVNs that had injuries from the train crash.

**So did they suppress the enemy at this point?**

That's what I was going to say. That was one of the things that was in the report. Our fire mission was out there. They brought in another Cobra mission that was in the neighborhood. I think two A4s with napalm came in on either side of us.

**Like a ring of fire around you.**

Exactly, but it was more like a linear thing. And then I know they had Phantoms in there too. There were at least three Phantoms that came in with machine guns.

**It was a hot zone.**

I didn't realize that these Marines had been hurt. This was the Hai Von Pass, which is up in the mountains and it kind of overlooks the ocean. We actually rolled over onto the railroad tracks and then rolled over again. I had a small mountain behind me. When I flew I used to have a .45 that I had to have, and then a M-79 grenade launcher in the back of the bird with me if I needed it, and my M16. I remember I had all three of those out there and I was trying to get around to the other side of the helicopter where I was supposed to be and all of a sudden somebody dropped down behind me on the back of the mountain and slid down there. I turned around, and it was a Marine and he said, "Did the corpsman get out?"

I said, "Yes."

And he said, "Well, my friends are up here at the top." So, we had to go up the hill there and get these guys taken care of and then get them back down to where we were eventually going to get picked up. So it was a busy day.

**Yes, I imagine so.**

I think we were probably on the ground for maybe a half an hour or so before they got everything quiet enough to get the chase bird in to get us out.

**And the chase bird was a '46 also?**

Right and the chase bird was hovering at around 3,000 feet, just in case it was needed.

**Was your '46 upside down at this point and burning or what?**

Yes. I don't know if we rolled down the side of the hill onto the railroad tracks or if we flipped over as we were coming down and landed right on top of them. I'm not really sure. I kind of remember rolling upside down, so I think what happened was the bird hit the side of the mountain, then it rolled down onto the railroad tracks.

**Okay. So while you're trying to take care of these Marines, your bird is burning up.**

Right. There was magnesium and once they start to burn it doesn't take much. We were trying to get everybody out of there. We found the right gunner who was already dead at that point.

**And everybody else was injured in some way; the pilot, the copilot, the left gunner...**

The pilot, the copilot, the other gunner, the crew chief and the corpsman.

**Everybody's injured and you have these other guys that you went to pick up and they're hurt.**

Right.

**Wow, you have a lot of work ahead of you there.**

Right. So all I could do was keep my head down for that half hour until we could get out of there and start getting the people back on to the chase bird.

**Okay. So they suppressed the fire in about a half an hour and you got everybody aboard the chase bird.**

Right. It took two helicopters--two '46s--to get everybody out of there after the crash. They put me on the first one because I think there were two guys who were hurt pretty bad. So they wanted the corpsman to be with that one. That was the chase bird.

I think they took the corpsman who was on the chase bird put him on another '46 that showed up to pick up the additional casualties. I think he went on the second one with the other casualties. So I, the corpsman, who was on the lead bird, became the chase bird corpsman. And the guy that was chase became lead for the rest of the day.

**So that was a long day.**

Yes, it was. And that was all before lunch.

**Oh, it was before lunch. So you got back to base with your patients.**

Yes, that was another sad thing. Of all the places they could have put me, we ended up at the 95th Army Hospital.

**So they took care of you all there?**

Yes.

**And what did they do for you?**

They x-rayed me because of the shrapnel. Everybody had blood all over the place, so they were x-raying everything on me. For some reason, they did not catch the compression fracture, but I think they were looking for more of something along the lines of a broken bone or something more than a spinal injury. I know it hurt, but I figured I just sprained it or something like that. And it wasn't until 6 months after I was released from active duty I was seeing a chiropractor because my wife found me crawling around the back of the house one day. I couldn't get up. So I went to see a chiropractor and she went through some x-rays and came back and said, "You know you've had a compression fracture on your spine. When did that happen?"

I said, "I didn't even know about it." So it turned out that that's what it was. It was from the crash.

**Had you had that fixed in the intervening years or is it still...**

It's never gone away. It comes and goes. Right now it's not bad. There are other times when I try to stand up, it takes me about three or four different positions in the meantime.

**Is this a vertebra?**

Yes, it was down, I want to say L6.

**L6, yes.**

Right by my tailbone. The VA is aware of it. They confirmed it when I was filing a claim against them.

**So that was the most memorable.**

Yes.

**I would say.**

We had a lot of fun things that we've done. I used to go out and pick up the nurses. We'd pick up six nurses off the *Sanctuary* and take them into Danang to go shopping when it was quiet.

**So how long where you there?**

I went there in November of '70, and then the 1st Marine Air Wing stood down in May of the following year. I was only there 6

months.

**As far as equipment, what would have taken with you? What were you capable of doing in the helo?**

We would start IVS. We could do a cricothorotomy. I never had to do one, but I know a lot of guys that did, the guys' breathing would be obstructed. You could cut a hole in their throat and put the barrel of a ballpoint pen in to help them breathe. Mainly it was just checking the bandages. You were picking the guys up so there was usually a corpsman on the ground that had treated the person initially, unless you were picking up the corpsman himself.

**Did they have the patients then who had already been presumably treated on the ground?**

Yes, they had done as much as they could. Once we launched the medevac in most cases we were within 15 or 20 minutes. Occasionally, they were way out or sometimes you'd be in the fog in the mountains and you didn't know where you were. In the meantime, if there was a corpsman available, he had already treated the emergency. Our job was just to try to keep them alive from the time we picked them up until we dropped them off, wherever that might be.

**The day of crash you said was your wife's birthday. What date was that?**

It was March 30th of '71, but because of the time zone difference it happened on the 30th, but my wife's birthday was the next day. On her clock or time schedule it was the same day.

**So it was the 30th was when it actually happened where you were.**

Vietnam time.

**You said you could start IVS. What kind of fluids did you have available to you to start?**

Ringers [lactate] was the main thing we had. That was about it.

**Did you have anything like plasma or...**

Well, we had Unit 1 and then you would actually modify your Unit 1 based on what your experiences had been. You would always have something in there to do a crico if you had to. You always had additional battle dressings.

**You had things like hemostats and bandages.**

Yes. The Unit 1 was actually the same Unit 1 that everybody used from the beginning of Vietnam until probably [Tom] Eagles got going and improved the medical supplies.

**Tom Eagles you're talking about.**

Yes.

**I have a photo here of a medevac corpsman named Ira Levitt. I don't if that name means anything.**

I've seen the name.

**In this photograph he's starting an IV on somebody. It's inside the helo and it says on the little caption here, "The corpsman is administering dextrose to the man in the foreground."**

Yes. Dextrose.

**Dextrose would have been one of the solutions that you may have had?**

And ringers was the other one.

**And ringers was the other one.**

Right.

**But you didn't do anything like serum albumin or plasma or anything like that, any blood?**

No.

**Nothing like that, just try to keep them hydrated.**

Yes.

**That's really what I wanted to ask. Okay. So we have you just about ready to leave Vietnam here. So how did that all happen?**

They told the 1st Marine Air Wing to stand down, so they started pulling the squadrons out of there. I was there until May but I want to say there was one helicopter squadron left and one Phantom squadron left, within a year of when we left.

**So you came back home?**

I went from there either to Travis or . . . I want to say that I left from Travis and came back through Norton Air Force Base. At that point, my wife was living in New Jersey and when they gave me my orders when I was still in Vietnam, I was assigned to the USS *Providence*, which is a guided missile cruiser, CLG-6 at North Island.

So I went from Vietnam back to Okinawa. I was there for about

a week and a half, I think and then they sent us back to Norton Air Force Base. And from Norton I flew to Philadelphia, and from Philadelphia I went home. And then we had to pack because I had 3 days of travel pay and I think I had exactly 72 hours from the time I left New Jersey until when I was supposed to report to the ship in San Diego. So basically my wife was already working on the moving. As soon as I showed up we were in the car and we drove straight through to California. We got to North Island and found out that my ship was out at sea for the next week.

**So you rushed out there for no good reason.**

Yes.

**Well, you had to find a place to live though I guess.**

Yes, and it ended up the ship was at North Island and we rented an apartment in Imperial Beach, which is right down the strand from San Diego. It turned out that I was the only person in the apartment building that was not a member of SEAL Team 2.

**Oh boy.**

A good bunch of guys though.

**A lively bunch of guys, I'm sure.**

Yes. And then...

**So you were assigned to the ship after that as an independent duty corpsman?**

No, back as a pharmacy tech again. Then one of the things that happened with the guys who lived in our apartment building. They were always dying their uniforms green. I had whites and I would end up with these pea-green whites every time. So they'd all chip in and buy me new whites. The washing machines had so much green in them. When my ship was sent back to Vietnam at that point, I had about 2 weeks left in the Navy at that point.

**What was your rate at that time?**

I was an HM2 the whole time I was in Vietnam until I got off active duty.

**And you got off active duty, when was that?**

That would have been about May of '72.

**Yes, I was off active duty in June of '72, so a month after you did. I was going to ask you what you did after that.**

I went back to pharmacy school for about a year and then I

decided that that wasn't what I wanted to do with my life. So I switched majors to metallurgy and from metallurgy I switched to manufacturing engineering, and then from manufacturing engineering I went to computer science. I got my degree in computer science and then worked for AT&T at the time, the same company my dad worked for. And then it became Lucent.

And then I did about 22 years with Lucent and then they put us all out to pasture about 3 years ago. It went from 160,000 people down to around 30,000. And since then I've been working with Home Depot.

And also, when I got off of active duty, I joined the reserves, so I did 5 years with the reserves with the Marines. Well, actually I was with VR-51--DC-6s. It was a four-engine propeller. It was replaced by C-9s. We had moved back to Illinois at that point and then I joined the reserves in Glenview Naval Air Station in Illinois.

I was assigned to VR-51, a transport squadron. I think their main job was flying local missions throughout the country. Then we would have one plane over in Rota, Spain for about 3 months and then they would switch planes and a different one would go for 3 months. They would fly around the Mediterranean delivering supplies.

Then I joined 4th MAW Med. It was 4th Marine Air Wing Medical. It was a group of corpsmen. There were probably about 15 of us at the time and we provided medical support to the seven different squadrons at Glenview Naval Air Station--Marine squadrons I should say. So this 4th MAW Med Unit was tasked with medical support to the seven squadrons of Marines who were up at Glenview.

**And you said the aircraft, the C-9 replaced was what? It was a four engine, just a regular reciprocating engine?**

It was a DC-6. They had DC-3s and DC-6s. The DC-3 was a twin engine.

**Right. I think they called it a R4D was the Navy designation for it.**

Right. And then right after I left VR-51, they got rid of all of their propeller and came up with C-9s.

**Right, the nightingale it was called.**

Right. I've flown with them, but not as a member of the squadron.

**Okay.**

And I stayed with 4th MAW Med until Glenview shut down.

Actually I was there for 5 years between the VR-51 and 4th MAW Med. I got out of the reserves totally for almost 10 years. I had a good friend in Peoria. I went down to visit him. We woke up Saturday morning and said what are we going to do? He said there's an air show in Peoria; let's see what's going on. We went there. The Blue Angels were there and Monday morning I was at the recruiter's office getting another 17 years after that.

**Is that right, so you retired from the Reserves then?**

Yes, in '99.

**Well, it's been...**

I made it to senior chief, but I couldn't make it to master chief. There was no war going on at the time and they were making about one every 3 years I think.

**Yes. It's been 35 years since you were in Vietnam. Do you ever think about it much anymore?**

All the time. Quarterly, I go see the shrink.

**Yes, I think everybody I've talked to has told me the same thing. I ask them essentially the same question, "Do you ever think about it?" and they say, "Every day, three times a day, six times a day."**

Why wasn't it me?

**And not a day goes by when I don't think about--the whole bit.**

When Glenview shut down, I transferred from the air side to the grunts with 2/24 and I did about 4 years as the battalion corpsman. Actually there were about 30 corpsmen in the battalion. There were 800 Marines that we were supporting. And 2/24 just got back Saturday.

**From Iraq?**

Yes.

**You know, some of the folks have told me . . . One guy I talked to was a retired Marine colonel and I asked him the same question. The reason I interviewed him was because he was a patient and I was kind of interested in getting it from his point of view and I asked him the same thing, "Do you think about it?"**

**And he said, "Do you know, I haven't really thought about it much until the war in Iraq started and now I think about it all the time."**

Yes, that's funny because I didn't see a shrink until Iraq

started and I've been going quarterly now for almost 2 years.

**...it brought it all back.**

Yes.

**Brought it all back just like it was yesterday.**

Yes, actually it's almost worst because it didn't bother me as much then as it does now.

**Yes. He said the same thing and he went off. He said, "No one would accuse me of not being a patriot. I spent 30 years in the Marines and I was pretty badly shot up in Vietnam and I still spent 30 years in the Marines. I don't know what the hell these people are thinking getting us in another war. Didn't they learn anything from Vietnam?"**

Yes.

**That's how he read it.**

Yes.

**Well, so you're active in the Pop-A-Smoke organization?**

Yes. It's a good organization. I think there are about 4,000 to 5,000 members, but usually we have about 2,200 show up for the reunions.

**Do you go to all the reunions?**

Yes, haven't missed one since I found out about it.

**Where's the next one?**

The next one will be in Fort Worth. It's getting harder and harder to find hotels that can handle that many bodies.

**Yes, that's a lot of people.**

The last two of them have been over 2,000 people.

**Well, I'm trying to find some of the guys who may have flown at the very end when they were leaving Saigon at the very end in '75. I know there were a bunch of missions flown out to some ships, some LPHs and carriers offshore. There must be some guys in Pop-A-Smoke who were involved in that.**

Yes. The last reunion was in Reno. At our banquet that night, one of the guys sitting at the table, was with the last mission with HMM-364. He was the last pilot that flew a combat mission before that unit left.

I flew medevacs with three different units. It was HMM-262,

263, and 364. The reason for that is because when you are assigned to a particular . . . In other words I guess BUMED had billets associated with the different units. And in most cases there were only two or three corpsmen assigned to a given squadron. Then everybody else was in either a MABS, Marine Air Base Squadron. So all the other corpsmen that were not assigned to a particular squadron were assigned with MABS, MABS-11, or MABS-16. So a lot of the guys that were assigned to a particular squadron flew medevacs with their squadrons. The balance of us medevac missions were from guys who were not in the particular squadrons.

So, on Monday, I might be flying with 364; on Wednesday I'm flying with 262 and on Friday I'm flying with 263. And you don't really establish a good..

**Rapport?**

Yes, because every time you're flying it's with a different guy or a different crew chief within the different squadron. So the guys that get the most benefit as far as seeing each other are the guys that were with a particular squadron. Now the ones like myself that were dragged in from other units, every now and then . . . In fact, the last reunion I ran into two guys. I didn't know them, but they recognized me. That happens at every reunion. I run into a couple more that remember me. But you put a helmet and a flight suit on somebody and everybody looks the same. And when you're flying with them for 12 hours and then you don't see them again for a week and a half, all you know is their first name was John or Bill or something like that. You don't have the luxury of trying to remember everybody that you flew with because all you ever knew was their first name. Whereas the guys that were with a particular squadron, they were seeing these guys on a daily basis whether they were flying or not.

**Right, that makes sense.**

In fact, that's one of the questions that the Marines always ask me. "How'd you guys figure out who you belonged to?"

**A good question. The other day I had Mr. Barber who gave me your name.**

J.D.?

**Yes. He sent me a copy of the latest Pop-A-Smoke newsletter. What'd you think of it?**

**Oh I love it. It's great. It's really a nice piece of work. Someone puts a lot of work into this thing. It's really slick**

looking, nice. I enjoyed reading it. I was going to ask you maybe if I'm looking for somebody. Do you think I could put a letter to the editor or something, looking for somebody.

Either that or. . . You have the website, right?

**Yes.**

Okay. On the far left of that there's an area called NOTAM, Notices to Airmen. I don't know what they call it in webland, but basically if you're looking for somebody or if you have a question, you can put it into that area and there are different subtopics on there.

**Yes, and I'm sure lots of people see it.**

Right. And one of the ones that you always see is they're looking for somebody, a particular person or maybe a mission that they're looking for the names on. And also, most of the larger squadrons like 364, 262, they have their archives. So if you had something that happened on a particular date, you could go to the archive for that squadron and get all the details. In fact, I use that as a source for myself to figure out exactly what happened. And that's when I found out that I didn't get hit by an RPG; it was a command detonated mine.

**Of course that still doesn't make a lot of sense. And I'm sure it doesn't to you either.**

I was able to find the pilot's name. He lives in Hawaii now so I'm trying to get to him now. It seems like everything takes forever.

Now the other thing that I was going to tell you is I've accumulated a database of corpsmen pretty much on the air side.

I probably have incidents and names of things for probably 50 or 60 different corpsmen. Tom Eagles is one of them, and there were a couple other legends out there. One of them just died. He was a retired master chief. He died 3 years ago. A super guy, but he's gone now.

I'm trying to make it more readable. I have notes all over the place and I'm trying to get a database. I have it now but there multiple databases. At a reunion I would grab names and things like that with as much information as I could--squadrons, years that they were here, and things like that. But when I create this master database I should have everything that I have for corpsmen into one area.