

U.S. NAVY MEDICAL DEPARTMENT ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL HISTORY WITH CAPT (ret) BRUCE BOYNTON, MC, USN

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**Interview with CAPT Bruce R. Boynton, MC, USN, former corpsman (HM2) with 6th Platoon, 1st Force Recon Company during the Vietnam War.**

**Where are you from?**

I'm from Roanoke, VA, and went to high school there. I knew I wasn't ready for college so I joined the Navy when I was 18. In fact, I wanted to become a SEAL. When they asked me what I wanted to be, I said a corpsman. This was right at the height of the Vietnam War. I suddenly became conscious of the fact that these folks went out with the Marines and I might have to go to war. They told me not to worry. I'd be fully trained.

So I went from boot camp to corps school. After I graduated I was assigned to Portsmouth Naval Hospital on the wards. I was there about a year. It was probably the hardest work I'd ever done. I worked in the sick officers' quarters. At that time they were just beginning to have intensive care and critical care units. I took care of LTGEN Chesty Puller. I was assigned to give him AM care. One of the things I did was shave him. Well, I always shaved against the grain to get a closer shave. He bore the ordeal with fortitude and when I was finished he said, "Reach over there in my pants pocket, get a buck, and go out and get yourself a SHARP RAZOR! That was my introduction to Chesty Puller. GEN Puller was always in character, and he loved corpsmen. He would gather all the ward corpsmen around his bedside and make stirring speeches. On one occasion he told us to "Go to Vietnam and get decorated. Get a good start in life. Win the Bronze Star, the Silver Star, the Navy Cross, the Medal of Honor!"

After that I went to Field Med School at Camp Lejeune. I got interested in special operations and volunteered for a reconnaissance unit. I got into the 2nd Recon Battalion.

I was really enthusiastic so I went to all the schools I could. They assigned me to the SCUBA school in Key West, FL, to Amphibious Reconnaissance School in Roosevelt Roads, Puerto Rico, and to the Jungle Operations Training Course in Panama. I got some good training and then got into the 5th Force Reconnaissance Company at Camp Pendleton. I was only there about 6 months but I did well there before they sent me to jump school at Fort Benning, GA. We had been out on a rock climbing exercise and had just gotten back from northern California when I learned that my orders were in and they were for Vietnam.

I was originally assigned to combined action platoons out in the village. They consisted of Marines and corpsmen, and were supposed to train the popular forces and take care of the village. But I didn't want to do that so when I got there I told them I had these qualifications and I wanted to go back into recon.

I ended up on Hill 34 adjacent to an ARVN boot camp just southwest

of Danang. It was a very small cantonment which had some 8-inch guns and some 155s. It was the 1st Force Recon Company. I began my career there. I was assigned to the 6th platoon and my team leader was SGT Joseph Crockett. He had quite a few adventures there in 1969. He was later awarded the Navy Cross. He had been the only man who had not been wounded in his platoon. He gave me his bush cover which I wore my time there.

The first night I was in-country I was in a receiving barracks in Danang. Some of the ARVNs were shooting rounds in the air in some sort of celebration and a round came down through the tin roof.

Our mission was to conduct long range reconnaissance patrols in enemy-controlled territory. And that was usually in the mountains surrounding Danang. The area around Danang consists of rice paddies that go westward for several miles. Right after the rice paddies, sharp, mountainous peaks rise and go all the way back into Laos. We were at the neck of Vietnam, which is maybe 40 miles wide. We patrolled that area. Some of the places are well known in Marine Corps history.

The patrol leader would get an order and he would tell all the people in the team--and they were five- to seven-man teams--where they were going, what to bring, whether to carry an M16 or an M79 grenade launcher. Then you'd have a meeting and he'd lay out the mission. After that, we'd be lifted by helo. The insert team consisted of a CH-46 helicopter and two Cobra gunships. We loaded everyone on the CH-46. We each carried a lot of weight, at least 75 pounds. Each of us carried an M16 and about 20 magazines of ammunition and some grenades. I carried my Unit 1 and any food and water. We might also carry Claymore mines or a smoke grenade. So it was a heavy load.

If the corpsman was new, he walked right in the middle of the patrol. We'd go through the bush very slowly and there would be an order of march--first the point, then the team leader, maybe another person, then the corpsman, and then the rear guard. So I was right in the middle and, therefore, protected. That way if anyone were wounded, the corpsman could get to him fast. You didn't have as many tactical responsibilities.

It was very, very regimented and very, very disciplined. We were usually out there for 5 days unless we got extended. That might happen if they couldn't come in and pick us up for some reason. We took very little food with us. Typically, we took C-rations. We took the little cans of fruit because they came in thick syrup that would coat the back of your throat and you wouldn't be so thirsty. Water weighs a lot. I could go for 5 days on no more than 2 quarts of water, even in the summertime.

We were not out in the open and moving very fast. We were

usually deep in the jungle out of the sun. And we were fully made up with camouflage paint, with gloves and covers, no skin showing, and all sleeves rolled down because we wanted to be just as invisible as we could because we were in territory that the enemy was operating in. If five guys ran into them, we were numerically inferior and it would be a while before any help could get to us. Needless to say, we could all be killed very, very fast. Stealth was our only defense. We spoke only in whispers. Everything was clandestine. We couldn't break twigs. At night we gathered in what was called a "harbor site." This was in the deepest, darkest place off the trail. In fact, we didn't travel on trails.

When it began to get dark, the team leader would stop and send out two scouts to find a harbor site. Then we'd move into the harbor site and set up. People would go to sleep and someone would stay up with the radio.

There were two radios, and those were nothing like the radios now. They had big batteries and couldn't transmit but so far. We might be only 20 miles away from our base but that required a radio relay sitting on a hilltop because we couldn't reach back to our communications center.

The first patrol I went on was on October 4, 1969. That was during the monsoon season so they couldn't insert us for a while. As soon as there was a break in the weather they put us down in Antenna Valley and we stayed there for 8 days before they could get us out. We didn't take a lot of food because we didn't want a lot of bulk in our intestinal tracts. You didn't want to have to go off somewhere in the jungle by yourself to relieve yourself. So you tried to stay relatively constipated. In fact, we took Lomotil with us because if you had diarrhea out there, that could be very, very serious tactically.

The first time I was out, I didn't know anything so I took lots and lots of water but not the right protective gear. Consequently, I was miserable. It rained without ceasing for 8 days. It varied in intensity but never completely stopped the whole time. We didn't have sleeping bags. We didn't have tents. We had no fire to warm food. In fact, I took almost no food to eat anyhow.

Even before we'd come into a landing zone, the Cobras would come in first to try to draw enemy fire. The CH-46 helicopters we were on had two .50 caliber machine guns but those helos were big, slow, and very vulnerable. After the Cobras came across the zone, the '46s landed, the back gate went down, people ran out and set up positions. If you were relieving a team, they'd run aboard.

The most dangerous time was probably going off the zone. If that other team had been followed and you were the team replacing them, they could walk right into an ambush. Once we got off the zone,

then you would sit down and watch. I, being the new guy, sat down on an anthill. So in addition to being cold and wet, now I had ants crawling all over my body. As I tried to sleep at night, I lay there with the rain just pouring on me. I've never been so physically miserable in my life. I remember thinking about "Gone With the Wind" when Scarlett O'Hara swears "I'll never go hungry again." I thought, "I'm never gonna be this cold again." And I never was.

Usually, the teams took rain suits like they use camping now. I didn't have any of that. I didn't take a poncho liner as a blanket. But we sort of snuggled together in the rain and SGT Crockett shared his food with me. After our time was up and they couldn't get us out, we just sat there in the jungle in the rain.

We were literally beginning to starve. It wasn't that painful but all your thoughts began to revolve around food. You'd be thinking about something else and then it would come back to food. We sat in the jungle and whispered about imaginary meals we would eat and it was very satisfying to do this.

Then we began to have trouble with immersion foot. There were four teams trapped out there. When we got back they examined everyone's feet and out of 25 people, 13 had to be hospitalized because of immersion foot. The first thing you needed to do to prevent immersion foot was to take off your shoes and socks and dry things out. Well that was impossible. And you didn't want to be in enemy territory with no shoes and socks on. With immersion foot, your feet go numb. I would take off my boots and socks at night, one foot at a time, and massage my feet until the feeling returned. Then they'd begin to ache and throb. I'd wring out the socks and put them and my jungle boots back on. I did that every night and my feet were in good shape compared to everyone else's. I began to do that for my team and those Marines were quite amazed. They said they had never had a man massage their feet before.

I was feeling pretty sorry for myself and asked "Is it always this bad."

And they said, "No, Doc. This is the worst."

They tried to come get us a couple of times but the weather was so bad, the helicopters wouldn't land. But finally we got out after 8 days and everyone was there to meet us. The cooks had prepared a sumptuous feast for us. We took two or three bites and were full. It was as if our stomachs had shrunk. That was my introduction to life as a corpsman with recon. It was never that bad again.

**How was your training different? Were you trained at the Field Medical Service School?**

Yes. At Camp Lejeune. At that time, they didn't have recon IDCs and recon corpsmen NECs they have now. Most people were trained

on the job. I got to jump school by doing the best in the whole company on a personnel inspection. The award was to get to go to jump school.

We did a lot of parachuting there but not for combat purposes. It was just recreational. On Sunday mornings they'd take us down to the air strip, we'd put on our parachutes and jump out. The same was pretty much true for SCUBA. That training did not have a direct applicability to the job we were doing, which was scouting and patrolling.

The real training for scouting and patrolling was Ranger School. Most of the Marine enlisted team leaders had been to Ranger school and learned their craft. Most of them were E-5s.

#### **That was Army Ranger School.**

That's right. That's where you learned the job that really was to be done. But for the rest of us you learned by doing and making mistakes. In fact, I made a really funny mistake on my first patrol. I knew we were out there to collect intelligence. I found some pieces of paper that had Vietnamese writing and so I presented these to my team leader as an intelligence coup. But these turned out to be American propoganda that had been dropped everywhere. There was a program called *Chu Hoi*, which means open arms. In fact, we had two Kit Carson scouts in our unit. I think they were both former Viet Cong. One claimed to have been an NVA officer but I think he was a VC from Chu Lai. I picked up one of these passes. If you presented one of them you could Chu Hoi and become a Hoi Chan.

#### **Where was your base?**

We were at a place called Hill 34 at Hoa Cam. There was an ARVN boot camp near us. Right on this little hill we were on was mostly artillery. There was a unit of 155s and a unit of 8-inch guns. They would work out all night. They would shoot flares over the perimeter and fire all night. Despite all this, I slept like a baby. But when you were in the bush, a twig would snap and you'd sit up and look around.

Another thing. Sound travels so much at night that anyone snoring could be heard a long way off. That was deadly. We carried gas masks and put them on the one doing the snoring. One of the residua of the war for me is going to bed and then having my wife snore. I cannot sleep. I have to wake her up or go into another room. To me it still means danger.

#### **How many patrols did you go on?**

I went on 11 patrols, which was not a lot. In a short time I became one of the senior medical guys in the company area. Also,

at the end, I became the head of the SCUBA locker.

**Did you ever run into the NVA on any of these patrols?**

We did once. It was a weird patrol. This is an example of how atrocities can occur. I don't think people get up in the morning and say, "I'm going to commit a war crime." You get into these situations that are so strange and all of a sudden you're doing something. And this is how this kind of thing happens.

Before we'd go out, they gave us a grid square to patrol. The grid square was a free-fire zone meaning that anyone there was supposed to be an enemy. They were supposed to take the team leader out on an overflight so he could look down from the helicopter and check his map and see what the terrain was. It enabled him to determine if his plotted course made sense. These E-5s were very good map readers. And they could do it in the deep jungle merely reading the terrain features. You had to know where you were just in case you made contact. Then you had to bring in artillery or air support to that location and somewhere else. It was a critical skill.

The Marine Corps decided that they would save some money and not do an overflight. Now we were inserting into an unscouted area. The Cobras were to come over to see if they would draw any fire on the zone. They weren't going to insert us if there was enemy down there. Well, the road to market went through this landing zone unbeknownst to us. "Road to Market," is not written on the map. So the Cobra pilots began shooting white phosphorus to scare the people away. Then they put us down in there. We were off in the bushes and heard all kinds of noise. I didn't know what was going on. Our team leader tried to get us out of there and get up a draw away from these people. There was a guy up in a tree and I was ready to shoot him. The team leader said, "No, he's a wood cutter." They had put us down in the wrong place so the next morning they picked us up and took us a ridge or two over and dropped us.

If you're at the top of a knife ridge, the trail is going to be on top of the ridge. If you're below that and breaking brush, then the enemy can run up and down the trails and throw grenades down on you. If you have a narrow enough ridge, you can walk the trail because the contact you make is going to be point to point contact. The enemy is not going to be able to set an ambush.

So we were walking down the trail and stopped to take a rest. All of a sudden, there was gunfire less than 5 meters away. While we had been sitting there hidden, two NVA came bopping down the trail. When the team leader opened fire, they ducked behind a rock. A lot of team leaders carried M14s because they thought they were harder hitting because they had a larger round than the M16. And they

weren't prone to jam as much. At least that was the belief. I carried an M16.

**Did you also carry a .45?**

I was issued a .45 but that was no good in the jungle. Sometimes I'd wear it for inspection in the rear but in the bush an M16 was more practical. We had a corpsman who carried an M16 and an M79 grenade launcher. There was a wide array of weapons people had. One time I was at an observation post armed with a Swedish K submachine gun. There were also Thompson submachine guns. I don't know where these things came from. When the Kit Carson scouts were out they were dressed in black pajamas and carried AK-47s. Because if you put them on the trail, you wanted them to look authentic in case some VC or NVA came down the trail. There was a guy who had a crossbow but I don't know if he ever used it.

Anyway, one of the NVA was wounded and the other must have died in the bush. Then we set up an ambush just in case more came down the trail. Of course, once we had a firefight, you compromised your position and everybody knew where you are. So then we decided to go off the trail at right angles and do some complicated maneuvers to make sure they couldn't find us.

**What was the tiger incident all about?**

SGT [Robert C.] Phleger was a very interesting guy. He had been our communications sergeant and was an eccentric. We lived in a row of hooches. They didn't have any kind of barracks. Everyone lived in these little hooches, which were quite comfortable. I was an HM2 and hung out with all the sergeants. Phleger told stories about the things he'd done and places he'd been. He had a bachelors in biology from Ohio State, I think. He'd tell us all kinds of strange stories.

One night we were watching movies back at Camp Adenir. We heard from the operations center that someone had heard a scream and that Phleger was missing from his patrol. We all speculated that he had probably had a bad dream and yelled. The rest of the team was pretty freaked out and sat up all night.

When they got up in the morning they saw blood trails going from their harbor site. They followed the blood trail and found a tiger standing over his half-eaten remains. Someone threw a frag and killed the tiger. They then recovered both the tiger and Phleger's body.

This pretty much freaked everyone out. It was a big Bengal tiger. Despite this incident, we continued operating. I took some parachute shroud line and looped it under my arms and tied it to a tree to prevent myself from being dragged off during the night. This event really affected everyone to this day. I've hated tigers ever

since.

After the tiger incident, I recalled an incident that had happened earlier, probably on my second patrol. We had picked the darkest place we could find for our harbor site. You could hardly see your hand in front of your face. I didn't hear anything. I didn't see anything. Then I had the momentary impression that there were two eyes looking at me from a distance no farther away than the distance between you and me. And then it was gone. I didn't think much about it until this incident with Phleger.

**Did you encounter other strange situations in Vietnam?**

Yes. We were told we were going start conducting patrols in Laos. There were no good landing zones to put us in. So they told us they would drop our team in. We would then hump so far west, and then clear a landing zone in which they would land the next team. Then they would hump so far, and clear another landing zone. This would continue all the way to Laos. One thing they did was drop tear gas--CS--along the route. We were then to repel in. The CS was just beginning to lift off the bushes when we saw small trees flattened. It was a mystery. We figured they had dropped the CS on some elephants. The NVA used elephants as pack animals. We heard them trumpeting the next morning.

We humped on down and began clearing the zone with machetes and Kabars but didn't get very far until they dropped a load of axes to us. Well, swinging axes all day in the tropics, we finally ran out of water.

When we finally got the zone cleared off, the helicopter came but wouldn't land. They told us the zone wasn't big enough. So we had compromised our position and were stuck out there. Everybody knew we were there and we were out of water and sick. I was so weak I couldn't walk. That night, I looked up in the sky and saw a brilliant comet. I thought, "That's got to be a sign." I wasn't sure what kind of sign it was. They came back and dropped us some oranges and the next morning they picked us up.

**How long were you in Vietnam?**

A little over 11 months. I got there in September of '69 and left in the beginning of August of '70.

**What do you remember about leaving?**

I had just gotten off patrol and we were turning in our ordnance. Someone came up to me and said, "Doc, your orders came over in the diplomatic pouch." And 3 days later, I left. We had to check out through Danang and flew to Okinawa. When the "Freedom Bird" took off, there was a big cheer from everyone. We were finally going home.

We were so used to being out in the bush or in fairly primitive conditions that even Okinawa seemed very strange to us. We spent just a few days there and then went back to Long Beach. And from there I went to Norfolk to get out.

**Were there any after effects from your Vietnam experience such as nightmares?**

I never had any nightmares at all in Vietnam but on the ride back I began to have some. These were the typical anxiety nightmares. The most common was: You're the rear security for a patrol and a VC or NVA comes up on you and you try to shoot him but your weapon jams. And then you wake up. I had several of those kinds of dreams.

But things progressed very rapidly. I was out of the Navy in just a couple of weeks and went home. I tried to relate my experiences to people but they could never really understand or they would recoil in horror.

After a month at home, I started college at the University of Chicago. There I began to have some other mild symptoms. These were things that were in the normal range. The first Fourth of July after I got out, when they had the fireworks, it was so disturbing that I had to go down in the basement where I couldn't hear anything. Several times I had outbursts of anger over petty things. I was on the track team and we were having a race. There was a woman jogging on the track where she shouldn't have been. I remember coming up to her. She turned around and looked annoyed. The next thing, I found that I had knocked her off the track without even intending to or having the thought. It was a very weird experience.

The other thing I noticed was that when people would do irritating or annoying things, and as adults we'd just laugh them off or pay no attention at all, I would plot to kill them. Later, when I talked to other veterans, they said they all did the same thing.

But, I got into school, was able to apply myself to my studies, and do well. I studied premed--biological sciences. I acquired an interest in that through my work as a corpsman. I went summers and was able to finish the whole program in 3 years, Phi Beta Kappa. I got into Yale med school. While there, I developed a concurrent interest in public health and was able to do a dual degree program in public health and medicine.

After that, I did an internship. I got through college and a year of medical school on my GI Bill and the money I saved in service. I then was out of money. I got one of these health scholarships that paid the tuition through the Public Health Service. So after internship, I had to pay back the Public Health Service by practicing in Appalachia for 3 years as a Public Health officer, then went on

to residency and fellowship training after that.

While I was in medical school, I met a nurse and we got married and we've been married now for 30 years and have a couple of kids. So things have worked out very well. Incidentally, one of my sons became a Marine and served in Kuwait during Desert Storm.

**I understand that you went back to Vietnam after the war.**

Yes. For about 3 years I was a professor of pediatrics at Tufts University. There was someone there who hooked me up with a group from the University of Massachusetts. They were a group of Vietnam veterans and were interested in going back to Vietnam not only for their own edification but also to do something for the Vietnamese. It was called the William Joiner Center for the Study of War and Socialist Consequences. They wanted a doctor to go along with them. So I went back with them. The group included several guys from the Army and two Army nurses. They had made one or two trips to Vietnam.

We toured all over the country. We went to maternal and child health places and veterans' facilities. We went to Hanoi and the Danang area, and down into the Saigon-Long Binh area. We also went up to Hue City. It was really a terrific experience. The war for us was unfinished and it sort of loomed large in our subconscious. I realized that when you have all these very moving, important experiences in your development, then you're separated from that, there's no resolution. So this mythology about whatever is going on builds up in your mind. When you go back, you're able to put that to rest and have some closure.

I found that it wasn't the outcome we had hoped for politically but the war was over and the country was at peace . . . All the shell craters that had pockmarked the landscape had filled in with vegetation.

We found the Vietnamese were very friendly and had quite a sense of humor. Our translator said, "We won the war; now we're all poor." We met some very friendly folks in Hanoi. When they learned where we were from, they said, "America, number one."

This was in 1988 and I found that 53 percent of the population was under 19 so the war was ancient history to them. They were very pro-American.

The hospitals were extremely poor. The disposable gloves we would throw away, they would wash and then dry on racks. In the hall, they had a blackboard where they would write whatever drugs were available in the hospital on that particular day. There was no air conditioning. Hanoi was having a heat wave. It was 104 and the patients were in very miserable conditions.

The veterans had very limited facilities. There were very many amputees. We went to a place where they made prostheses. At one

of these places they turned wooden lower limbs on a lathe. There was a huge pile of them 8 or 9 feet tall.

Down in Saigon there were a lot more facilities. We saw some hospitals that were very adequate but there were no patients. We'd ask where the patients were and they'd tell us they all went home for the weekend.

All the veterans we had on the trip underwent an emotional catharsis, some of them markedly so. I felt many of them were much more affected than I was. Some of the people had seen terrible things like bombing strikes that had hit the wrong village and they had seen all these people killed. I never witnessed any of that.

**At some point, you rejoined the Navy.**

I was a professor at the University of Kentucky and had begun to be very disillusioned with academic medicine. I think the real disillusionment was with the loss of idealism I saw in medicine. It was all how much money could you make. It was beginning to look pretty slimy and I was enjoying it less and less. I thought, "Where's the place where I really had fun?" That was in the Navy. So I decided to come back in. A lot of people thought I was having a mid-life crisis. Then they came back later and said, "You were right. You made the right decision." So I've never looked back. I came back in in 1992 when I was 44.

**Now you're XO at Sigonella and you're shortly to become CO at NAMRU-3.**

Right.

**I want to thank you very much for spending time with me and sharing your experiences.**

Well, it's been my pleasure.