

U.S. NAVY MEDICAL DEPARTMENT ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL HISTORY WITH HMC (ret.) STEPHEN BURWINKEL

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TELEPHONIC

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Telephone interview with former HMC Stephen Burwinkel, corpsman aboard USS Kirk (DE-1087) during Operation Frequent Wind, April 1975.

Where you from originally?

I was born and raised in Cincinnati, Ohio.

When did you decide to join the Navy and become a corpsman?

I graduated from high school in 1959. I actually had no intentions of joining the Navy. I went to the recruiter with my buddy, who was going to join. The recruiter looked over at me and said, "And what are you going to do, young man?"

I said, "Oh, I'm going to college."

And he said, "Oh really! Do you want to take this test?"

Anyway, I took the test. He then said, "If you join the Navy, I can send you anywhere you want to go--any kind of school you want to go to."

I looked over on the wall and saw a poster showing a corpsman with the Marines. I said, "I wanna be one of those guys."

He said, "No. That's a corpsman. You don't want to do that. You can do better than that."

So I replied, "If you don't guarantee me that I can be one of those guys, I'm not gonna join the Navy."

He said, "Okay. I'll do that."

Anyway, that's how I went to corps school.

Did you go to boot camp at Great Lakes?

Yes. And I went to A school at Great Lakes.

Where did they send you after that?

I went to Port Lyautey, Morocco.

What did you do over there?

I started out working in the wards. After 7 months, I worked in the operating room.

How long were you there?

A year and a half.

What was your next assignment?

USS *Constellation* (CVA-64). I helped put her in commission. I was aboard from 1961 until 1963. While serving in *Constellation*, I was selected for the NESEP (Navy Enlisted Scientific Education Program). I went to prep school in San Diego, and was ordered to Miami University at Oxford, Ohio.

Unfortunately, I never got established academically and I was

disenrolled from the program. From there I received orders to the Reserve Training Center, Abilene, Texas. While I was stationed in Abilene I received orders to the USS *Weiss* (APD-135), about 6 months prior to my expiration of shore duty, which was not bad for a corpsman during that time frame.

What were you doing during the Vietnam era?

When the Vietnam War got going, I was aboard the USS *Weiss*, which was APD-135. From there I went to 2nd Battalion, 26th Marines. That unit was in Vietnam. From there I went to Headquarters 13th Naval District in Seattle, Washington. And from there I went to the *Kirk*.

What year was that?

That was about June or July of 1972. In fact, I was on the commissioning crew.

What kind of sick bay did the *Kirk* have?

It was a small, one-room sick bay about 10 feet by 4 feet. There was enough room for me and a junior corpsman. I always had an HN or a 3rd class working with me.

So there was just two of you?

Yes. Just the two of us.

Were you a chief at that time?

Yes.

We're coming up on April of 1975. Had you heard about Operation Frequent Wind?

We were in WESTPAC. As things unfolded, we were in that area about 28 and 29 April when things went all to hell and Saigon fell. It was on the 29th when Frequent Wind really started for us.

The *Kirk* lay off shore some distance.

We were offshore and began taking on some refugees on the 29th. We had a LAMPS helicopter aboard but it was broken. As it turned out, that was fortunate for the Vietnamese because the helo was in the hangar. The first Vietnamese helo that came out landed on our flight deck. When another came out and landed on our flight deck, that filled us up.

You could fit two helos on your flight deck at the same time?

Yes. Two Hueys. I was truly amazed when the second pilot landed. I thought, "He can't put this thing down here," but sure enough he did. Then they started coming out like butterflies or hornets

circling around us and other ships out there.

We immediately realized this wasn't going to work so we pushed those two Hueys that had initially landed over the side. Then another one landed on our fantail so that filled us up again. Our LAMPS pilots took that Huey on the fantail, took it off, and then landed it on our flight deck. So now we had two more Hueys up there.

Are you saying that you had four Hueys on the flight deck?

No, just two. But in the process of landing the second Huey, our guys didn't do so well. They damaged the front end of one and the back end of the other. And that leads to another story.

At that point, a CH-46 came out and acted like he was going to land. He saw that our flight deck was fouled and couldn't land there. He then came around towards our fantail and CAPT Jacobs knew he couldn't land there. We were fortunate to have a first class storekeeper who had done a tour with the advisory group and spoke some rudimentary Vietnamese. He was on the radio and in very broken Vietnamese he told the pilot not to land. The pilot then hovered over the fantail and people began jumping out of the back of that '46 onto our fantail.

How high up was he?

Probably 10 or 12 feet.

Were people injured?

Oh yes. There were assorted broken ankles, etc. But most of those people were uninjured. In fact, there were quite a few unsung heroes. Our guys were catching people. I recall one guy caught a little boy, maybe 3 or 4 years old. His mom threw him out and the sailor caught him just like he was catching a baseball out of the sky.

That helo must have been really loaded with people.

There were probably 30 or 40. But after it was empty of passengers, the pilot flew some distance from the ship, and then rolled the helo on its side, and landed in the water. When that helo hit the water, rotor blades went everywhere. He waited for all the stuff to stop flying around, got out of the window, and popped to the surface. By that time we had our motor whaleboat in the water and picked him up.

Was he a Vietnamese pilot?

Yes.

And the folks who were arriving on the Hueys were all Vietnamese?

Yes. I take that back. There were two Americans

But those Hueys were packed to the gills.

Yes. A Huey can probably hold six normal size people but they probably had maybe 12 to 20 people aboard. By that time we were probably maxed out with about 150 refugees aboard. Good old CAPT Jacobs, being the hard charger he was, went around looking for more. In fact, he came to sick bay all excited and said, "Doc, I think we found a lady who's pregnant!"

I said, "Skipper, we don't need any pregnant women on this ship." As it turned out, we ended up with five pregnant ladies.

"Please, Doc," he said, "tell me that one of these ladies will have a baby aboard ship."

That possibility didn't really cause me any anxiety because part of my tour in Morocco included duty in the delivery room. The process of a woman giving birth wasn't fearful to me. My third class, in fact, asked me, "Chief, what are we gonna do if one these ladies has a baby?"

I answered, "I assume we'll witness the miracle of birth."

As it turned out, one of the ladies went into labor but then stopped. None of them delivered aboard ship. In a space we called the "Ballroom," we set up a mini maternity ward. So that's where we put the five pregnant ladies.

So now your maxed out with refugees and can't handle any more incoming helos. And the deck is fouled anyway, so you can't land any more. What shape were these people in?

They were in pretty good shape. I had my usual fears that I had voiced to the skipper. I thought about tuberculosis, dysentery--all the diseases endemic in Vietnam. But these initial people were what we would consider the upper crust. They were the wives and family members of Vietnamese officers. They were wealthy enough to get out first. In fact, many came aboard with shoe boxes full of gold, which we confiscated. That was to prevent a situation in which theft might occur. We gave the people a receipt. I recall our supply officer collecting a lot of gold.

I understand even after the helos stopped coming, many small boats loaded with refugees began arriving.

There were lots and lots of small boats. One I remember in particular was a large pleasure craft which came alongside. They had a fire aboard so we ended up putting that out. But there were many, many other boats, too.

Were you also taking those refugees aboard, also?

No. We were full. We had rigged up some canvas awnings on the

O-1 level and the refugees were living up there. We had granted them some head privileges. Those 150 refugees taxed our food and water situation.

After the initial influx of refugees by helicopter, the Kirk was ordered to proceed to Con Son Island for a special mission.

Yes. We were ordered to move down to Con Son Island down near Vung Tau. When we got there on the 1st of May, we found what was left of the Vietnamese fleet--everything from a swift boat to one of our old Coast Guard cutters. And this is when all the fun and games started for me.

When you got there, were all those ships loaded with refugees?

Yes. Just about the whole time between rendezvousing at Con Son Island until we got to the Philippines, I spent my time going from ship to ship. We were steaming in two columns either us in the lead or Cook, or one of the LSTs leading the way. As I said, I went from ship to ship to see what I could do for these refugees.

On one of the ships I boarded, I discovered two Vietnamese armed forces physicians. One was army and I think the other was navy. I thought my luck had changed. They both spoke pretty good English. I said, "When I go back to the ship and get some more supplies, I'll bring you stethoscopes and whatever else you need.

They said, "No, the war is finis. And we are finis." They would not do a thing.

I said, "At least I'll bring you back some medical supplies."

They answered, "No, we're not doing anything. We're refugees like everybody else."

What were your feelings about this behavior?

I was pissed, to put it very plainly. "Wasn't this typical," I thought. "No wonder these guys lost the war."

So CAPT Jacobs had you going from boat to boat to boat. Were you holding sick call?

Basically sick call. Sometimes I'd go back to the *Kirk* during the day to replenish my supplies such as Ace bandages, battle dressings, and other dressing materials. Usually I'd do that until about dark, then come aboard to get something to eat and change my clothes. Then I'd start out again the next morning. A few times because of certain circumstances, I spent significant time aboard some ships--sometimes all night. I didn't want to take the chance of finding the *Kirk* in the dark.

What kinds of things were you treating with these refugees?

Just about everybody had some kind of eye infection. After the second or third day, I began seeing upper respiratory problems. I saw some trauma but not much. One situation was very unusual. I came across a man on one boat who had been gut-shot.

He had a gunshot wound in the abdomen?

Yes. I could see his intestine and that's why I thought he couldn't survive but would probably die of peritonitis. I noticed that he already been treated by someone; he had a dressing and what looked like sulfa powder. A Vietnamese officer wanted me to take him back to the *Kirk* but I didn't know what I would do with him there.

To make a long story short, he ended up back aboard the *Kirk*. I really didn't know what to do with him but wait for him to die. I opened up the table in what we called the after battle dressing station and inserted an IV. I then got a young 3rd class [petty officer] and showed him how to do blood pressures and change the IV. Then I said, "This guy is yours until we reach the Philippines or he dies. Don't give him anything to drink except to wet his lips." And the old coot didn't die.

When we got to the Philippines, they took him to surgery at Subic Bay. Afterward, he was doing fine--sitting up and smiling. He was a tough old man.

Did you have your HN with you?

No. He was back aboard the *Kirk* taking care of the refugees and the five pregnant ladies.

So you did these rounds pretty much all by yourself.

All by myself. If I remember correctly, there was a first class bosun's mate and maybe even one of the other chiefs. But they went aboard to make sure that these people weren't armed. I can't tell you the number of .38 caliber pistols, shotguns, and rifles that are on the bottom of the South China Sea. As we found these weapons, over the side they went.

Were there higher ranking officers of the Vietnamese Navy there?

No. The highest ranking officer I saw who ended up aboard *Kirk* was a Vietnamese air force one-star general. He came aboard in one of the original groups in a Huey.

What did you do about the language situation. Did you have someone with you who could interpret?

No. A lot of it was hand signals. Usually aboard these Vietnamese vessels, I could find maybe one person who had at least some knowledge of English. As soon as they knew that I was what in Vietnamese was

a *bacsi*--a doctor--then they would light up.

So it was a pretty ordered arrangement.

Yes. It was pretty ordered.

What was the general temperament of these people? Did they seem excited or apprehensive?

They seemed to be very relieved that the initial danger was over. They were out of Vietnam. They were away from all the hell and disorder that was taking place in Saigon. Of course they were very apprehensive because they didn't know where they were going. In many cases, families had been split up. Mom was there with the kids. Who knew where dad was or vice versa. But generally, they were a pretty calm, cool, collected group of people considering what they had just been through.

CAPT Jacobs mentioned an incident to me when a large Vietnamese boat came alongside and the passengers were in pretty bad shape. And a near riot started on this thing with people shoving and pushing. Some woman was actually pushed over the side.

The one larger ship we came across was a civilian freighter called the *Tan Nam Viet*. That thing was loaded to the gills with refugees. The XO, a few other people, and I went aboard that ship. That's when my adventure started. I recall the XO--Dick McKenna. He said, "Doc, you need to stay aboard and see what you can do for these people. And I'll be right back in about 4 hours to get you." And the rest of the guys left. I think it was 2 days later they came back and got me.

There was another incident. An LSM we had given the Vietnamese showed up in very bad shape. It was loaded with refugees and I recall. I went aboard and could see the ship was taking water through the bow doors and was sinking; the doors wouldn't close properly. A young Vietnamese lieutenant was acting as the CO. I asked him if he spoke English and he said yes.

"Do you know your ship is sinking?"

He answered, "Yes, I know that." At that point we went alongside another Vietnamese Navy ship and that's when people on the well deck and the deck above it realized that the ship was sinking, and panicked. As we were alongside the other ship, they put two wooden gangways across to the other ship. At that point one of the men panicked and pushed a woman in front of him, who fell into the water. I don't know what happened to her after that. A Vietnamese officer walked right behind this man, put a gun to his head, and executed him right on the spot. Suddenly it was just like a church. Everybody quieted down and went over to the other ship without further incident.

You witnessed this event?

I sure did. I was probably standing not more than 50 feet away from it.

What's the story on that other Vietnamese merchant ship, the *Tan Nam Viet*?

That ship had put out a distress call. When they had gotten underway, they had done so without any regular crew members. They did not know how to transfer fuel oil from their storage tanks into what they called ready service tanks. When the ready service tanks went dry, they went dead in the water. When they put out the distress call, the XO, a few engineering types, and I went aboard and showed them how to transfer fuel so they could get underway. When that occurred, the XO told me to remain aboard and see what I could do for the refugees.

Of course, I didn't have a lot with me. I had my Unit 1 and some penicillin. We identified one lady who spoke some English. I used her as my interpreter. She brought me a baby, who I thought was already dead. It was listless and unresponsive. I listened to its lungs and determined it was still alive but was in very bad shape with what I thought was pneumonia.

I had no way to figure out the baby's weight and what the penicillin dosage should be. But I administered a great big dose of penicillin. And I'll be darned if it didn't work. The next day this baby was not only alive and well; it was pretty pissed off! It was hungry and crying.

How old was this child?

Probably 6 months old. These refugees had a lot of minor things wrong with them. I saw many cases of conjunctivitis caused by the unsanitary conditions, being exposed to the sun.

Conjunctivitis is highly contagious, isn't it?

Highly contagious. In fact, I was afraid that if I caught it, that would be the end of it. Your eyes get swollen and you can't see--pink eye.

I quickly ran out of ophthalmic ointment. Three things I desperately needed: something to treat diarrhea, large amounts of antibiotic ophthalmic ointment, and diapers. A C-130 came and dropped barrels of supplies. I think I had more Kaopectate and Lomotil than I had ever seen in my life.

And it presumably helped.

Yes. It came in real handy. But one of the problems that contributed to all this was the unsanitary situation. The ships discharged wastewater directly from the heads into the sea, especially the older ships. As the Vietnamese on the aft end of the ships would dip water out of the sea to wash their faces and bodies with, they were dipping water contaminated with fecal material. I tried to explain to more than one CO not to let the people do this but to insist that they go up forward and get their water from there. But in most cases, this was impractical because the freeboard up forward was too high and they couldn't lift a heavy bucket successfully. At the aft end where there was less freeboard, they could do it. And this was one of the major reasons for their problems.

This incident happened on the way to the Philippines. As I recall, the man who was in charge of the ship wanted to take it to Australia. But the CO convinced him he'd never make it there and to follow us to the Philippines.

There's an incident I've heard about both from Hugh Doyle and the skipper, CAPT Jacobs. It concerned the Vietnamese man with a severe leg injury. What are your recollections of that?

I can't remember how that injury happened. He had a compound fracture of the femur. I knew immediately that this guy needed some pretty sophisticated medical treatment. You recall I had told you about the two Hueys we had taken aboard. The front end of one and the back end of the other had been damaged. They took the good front end and the good back end and married the two. They were just put together with a couple of bolts and wires. So they made one good Huey.

Who did the work?

Our LAMPS detachment. I told the CO that we needed to find a ship with a doctor. I think it was the *Mobile*-an LKA- that had a physician and an operating room aboard and get this guy over there. So we loaded him up in a Stokes stretcher.

What had you done to stabilize him?

I applied a Thomas half-ring splint to immobilize his fracture. He had to have some open orthopedic surgery.

What was that flight on the Huey like?

Our of our LAMPS pilots were going to do the flying. He had previously been with HAL-3 so he knew how to fly a Huey. In taking off, we snagged one of our radio antennas and tore a hole in the bottom of the Huey. We had to land so they could patch the hole with duct

tape and took off again. Of course, I was sitting back there on the deck because all the seats had been taken off. The pilot said, "Hey Doc, if something happens and we go in the water, you need to push yourself out the door, pull those things on your Mae West, and you'll pop to the surface."

I remember responding to the pilot through the mike, "What about this guy who's in the Stokes litter?"

One of the pilots responded, "He's bought the farm."

I heard from Hugh Doyle that on the way back to the Kirk, these pilots decided to have some fun with you?

They did. They decided to do a few aerobatics. They turned this Huey over on its side. Of course it had no doors. I was literally sliding out the door and thought I was going to fall out. I hadn't remember that I was tethered by my waist to a tie-down on the deck and that jerked me up short. These guys were up in the cockpit laughing. "Are you okay back there, Doc?"

I cut you off prematurely. You were still flying to the Mobile with your patient. How did that work?

We landed on their flight deck, they came and took the guy off, and we left. I assume the man made it. At least I hope he did.

So you got back to the Kirk and were making rounds every day.
Yes.

What did you do with the five pregnant women you had back aft?

Caring for them was one of the things that cut into my time. After I did my thing during the day, I'd come back, they'd tie the swift boat up and we towed it like you would an extra lifeboat or a dinghy. Then Mark Falkenberg, my 3rd class corpsman, and I would compare notes and catch up. It might be 11 at night or midnight before I got a few hours of sleep.

In the morning, we'd get the engine started on the swift boat started and I used to worry about that thing. It was long overdue for an overhaul and it would sputter and such. Then I'd go up and down the lines of boats doing my rounds.

I understand that you had very good luck with the weather.

Yes. Luckily the weather held. We had no bad storms and that was a good thing because some of those boats would never have made it had we gotten into some heavy seas.

This probably doesn't lead to many happy memories, but there was another incident with a young child who had pneumonia who didn't

make it.

We only had one real tragedy. We had a young mother with the refugees aboard the *Kirk*. She had five or six children. One of those children--a baby--had pneumonia. But he was doing real well. For all practical purposes, he was cured. The child was about a year old. I recall vividly that I was out on my rounds. The first class bosun's mate who was with me said, "Doc, we just got a radio message and we've got to get back to the *Kirk* right now. When we got back, I found that the mother had been feeding the baby a bottle. Either in her exuberance because the baby was doing well, he coughed, aspirated the formula from the bottle, and due to his compromised lungs, he died. It was a real tragedy.

Somehow, we found the father, who was on one of the other ships and brought him to the *Kirk*. Then we had a formal burial at sea of this little baby. That really shook me up.

But considering all the patients you had, your record was still very good.

On another occasion a mike boat pulled up alongside us and a Marine was giving a young girl mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. But she was already dead. I thought, "I don't know what this young lady died of but partner, you're a hero." If she had tuberculosis or whatever, you've got it now. Her younger brother was there and said, "Is my sister dead?"

I answered, "Yes." And then the mike boat took him back. But we only lost that little baby. I don't know whether it was anything I did or didn't do, but as I said, the refugees we had aboard ship generally were in pretty good shape.

What do you recall about arriving in Subic?

I didn't know this at the time but we weren't sure we would even be allowed to land in the Philippines. After some long negotiations, Marcos said that no Vietnamese ships could land. However, American ships were welcome. So just before we were going into Subic Bay, we repossessed those ships. We put either a junior officer or a chief aboard each of the Vietnamese ships to take charge. If it were a warship, we dumped all the ammunition over the side, lowered the Vietnamese flag, and raised the American flag. So when the ships arrived in the Philippines, they did so as American and not Vietnamese vessels. I think our old friend Armitage was involved in those negotiations. I didn't know who he was at the time.

What happened to the refugees after you landed?

They went to some gathering point. By this time our ship was in total disarray. Our daily cleaning routine had come to a screeching

halt. I was pretty well stripped of all my supplies. The CO told me, "Doc, we're C-4." We're going to be down until you tell me you're ready to go.

The refugees were gathered up and taken to Guam, a place called "Tent City." In fact, we ended up in Guam at a shipyard. While in Guam, we had a reunion with some of the people from the *Tan Nam Viet*. In fact, the first of the pregnant ladies to deliver did so there. If it was a boy, she was gonna name her child Kirk. But it was a girl. So her middle name is Kirk. When we had our ship's reunion down in Orlando, she was there, and her daughter, and her other son. Her husband has since died. A lot of Vietnamese made their way to the States. Many are in Long Beach.

Have you been in touch with any of them?

No. A young man named Jim Bongaard is the Vietnamese coordinator in our organization. He has kept track of these people.

When did you retire from the Navy?

I retired in June of 1989.

What have you been doing with your time?

Just after I retired, I went to work for CHAMPUS as the civilian program liaison officer here in Pensacola. Then I retired from that and worked for Humana. When that wasn't fun anymore, I retired for good in 1997.

It's been 32 years since all that happened. Do you think about it much anymore?

Quite frankly, just about every day. One of my hobbies is history. I do a lot of reading. In fact, I'm just finishing a book about our Vietnam experience. To be truthful, I've gotten quite cynical about our involvement in that part of the world at that time. In those days, I was probably as hawkish as they come but as time goes on I'm not too sure we should have been there. I guess I'm upset about what it did to this country. It seems like we spent a lot of time, money, and lives. I'm not sure that I trust politicians anymore.

Does the current situation in Iraq have any bearing on this?

Yes. If you read about what took place back then and compare it to now, the climate is different. The terrain is different. The enemy is different. But the bottom line is, the situation is exactly the same.