

ORAL HISTORY WITH PETTY OFFICER FIRST CLASS (ret.)
LONNY CONNALLY, USN

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TELEPHONIC INTERVIEW

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Interview with former hospital corpsman Lonny Connally assigned to Fox Company, 2nd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division. Present at the Battle of Hue.

Where are you from originally?

I'm from Baltimore. In Vietnam I only had three things written on my helmet. On the front-"Doc." One side had "Mickey Squid." And the other side had "B-More" on it.

Did you go to school in Baltimore?

Yes.

When did you decide on joining the Navy?

Actually, it was the war. When I was in high school, I knew I wanted to continue with college. Even today, I still joke that I'm still a poor boy from Dundalk. I had worked in high school starting in my sophomore year. That summer I worked as a caddy at the Sparrow's Point Country Club. This was the era of "Happy Days" and cars and the drive-in burger places. I had inherited my mother's old Volvo, but after I graduated from school I wanted to go and work for a year full time so that I could buy a car.

So I worked for a year but the draft was breathing down my neck. This was the beginning of 1966. As people were turning 19, they were getting their notice to report for a draft physical. So by May I had come up with my own plan. At that point, everybody was being drafted into the Army. I was thinking of Vietnam as a land war. I also had this premonition that there would be a war and lo and behold, Vietnam was there and I was old enough. My grandfather had been in World War I. My father had been in World War II. My uncle was in the Army during the Korean Conflict. So in May I decided to enlist in the Navy because Vietnam wasn't a naval war.

A nice ship, clean sheets, and three squares a day. And no foxholes.

I didn't even know what a foxhole was at that time. I was really innocent. I thought that my father would be happy that I made this choice.

Anyway, I enlisted in what was a 120-day deferred program, which gave me another summer at home before I had to go away.

Did you eventually go to boot camp at Great Lakes?

Yes, I did. And eventually they decided to make me a corpsman. Little did I know at that time that the Marine Corps was part of the Navy. And I did not know that the Marine Corps used Navy doctors, Navy nurses, Navy chaplains, and Navy corpsmen.

So, you, like a whole bunch of folks, learned the hard way.

That's right. But in boot camp I didn't know that yet. But I was accepted into hospital corps school, which was also there at Great Lakes.

So you ended up in corps school.

Yes. And that was a 16-week program. It wasn't until after 8 weeks that I started learning that Navy corpsmen are used by the Marines. And that Navy corpsmen were being killed over in Vietnam. I didn't realize that my last choice had become my first choice.

Did you go to Pendleton after corps school?

No. I went to the Field Medical Service School at Lejeune. It was a place called Camp Cherry, a little corner where the Navy corpsmen were trained in all the field tactics of the Marine Corps. Some people were leaving from there and going directly over to Vietnam.

Where did you go after you graduated from the Field Medical Service School?

That was a 5-week program. I had had 7 days of leave before I got there and now I got 7 days more. Then I went to my next duty station which was the Philadelphia Naval Hospital. I was a ward corpsman there. I started on a general orthopedic unit, which was in the main building of the hospital. We had patients with everything from back pain to a broken leg. Philadelphia was the amputee center for the East Coast.

I was there for about 6 months. Having been to the Field Medical School, which was a C school, I was already qualified for field duty. At that time you could spend anywhere from 6 months to a year at a stateside hospital.

When did they tell you that you were going to Vietnam?

The fall of '67.

Did you go to Pendleton first or did you just go right over there?

No. I got 30 days leave beforehand so I was home. I went to the photographer in town, who did my high school pictures and had a Navy picture done. At this point I was convinced that I was gonna die. I thought that if I was lucky, I'd come back as an amputee. And if I were an above-the-knee amputee, I wanted to get a hydraulic knee.

So you figured that this was going to be a suicide trip.

I wasn't trying to commit suicide or anything like that. I just knew the odds weren't in my favor.

Did they send you directly to Vietnam after your leave?

Yes. My friend Gordon and I reported in to Treasure Island, which is right in the middle of San Francisco Bay. They formed us into a group and put us onto a military plane, which flew us to Okinawa. We got our shots, they took our sea bags from us, and gave us jungle utilities. We then flew into Danang. This plane was mainly filled with corpsmen. When we got there they put us in a hut next to the airstrip. The Tet Offensive had already started. That night was the first time I had ever seen an M16. So they gave 30 corpsmen M16s and a corporal taught us how to load the thing. Fortunately, no one was killed that night.

Had you been assigned to 2/5 yet?

Yes. We were assigned there in Danang and then waited for about 2 days for a plane to take us to Phu Bai. At that point it was Chief Legarie. I don't remember him that much except for the fact that I recall a standup chalkboard with squares on it representing the companies. He was the one who assigned the corpsmen to their units. Gordon was assigned to Hotel Company and I was assigned to Fox Company. Our names then went on these squares on the chalkboard. I never saw Chief Legarie again until one of the Friday evening parades years later when he was the Honore. General Christmas was there. This was about 10 years ago.

Now that you were assigned to Fox 2/5, did you go right up into Hue?

Yes. On the far east side of the city was a landing zone for the helicopters. It took another 2 days to get up to Hue because the two things they really needed desperately was ammunition and food. And they were a higher priority than getting us there. Every chopper coming back was bringing bodies. And every chopper going up was taking food and ammunition.

Finally we got aboard a CH-46 and went up to Hue. It landed and we all got off. We pretty much crawled from there to the MACV compound.

Were there any doctors in there at the time?

I didn't see any doctors, just corpsmen.

Did you immediately begin patrolling with Fox Company?

At that point, Fox was occupying building spread out at Hue University. At first, I had no idea where I was. Things got smaller and smaller. The senior corpsman was a guy named Stout. He was very

thin, wore glasses, and was disheveled and dirty. He had already been there about 8 days during the heaviest of the fighting.

After I joined Fox Company, they were running me from one room to another in another building at the university. There were cans from C-rations and short little red candles and black cloth over the windows.

Chris Brown told me about the first casualty you treated, a guy named Crapse. When did that happen?

Before that happened the whole CP of the 2nd Platoon had been wiped out. They killed the staff sergeant, and the corpsman, HM3 James Gosselin. All these guys were killed by a sniper in a house. This was one of the things that was unusual about Hue City. It was portrayed very well in the movie, "Full Metal Jacket." If they caught someone in the middle of the square, they would periodically keep shooting them so they would get them to scream so more Marines would come out to rescue them. But they killed the whole CP. I don't know who was acting as the platoon commander at that point. I was just with a couple of other guys. I didn't know them.

I started asking questions. There was a corpsman but he was from Echo Company. They had to borrow a corpsman from Echo for Fox 2 because they lost a corpsman. They were killed on the 2nd of February so they had a couple of days where they had to borrow this corpsman.

So I asked, "Where's the other corpsman?"

And they said, "We don't have one."

I said, "Who was your last corpsman?" but they didn't know his name. I asked them how long he was with them and they told me that he only lived for 3 days. This was the scenario. I didn't think my odds of coming home from Vietnam were particularly good but now those odds were looking terrible.

And then when Crapse was shot, I didn't think I was going to live the rest of that day and that was my third day.

Actually Crapse didn't die in the field. He died after he had been evacuated. I was down behind one of these knee walls about 3 feet tall and pinned down. It was the kind of wall that separated a garden or the front from the back of a house.

So you were down under that wall.

Yes, scrunched down. Because of the firefight going on all around me, my knees started knocking so bad, I had to hold them together to keep them from making noise. Crapse was hit. Now I didn't know any of these guys. We were fighting from one yard to another, diving through hedges, etc. And then I heard someone yelling, "Corpsman up!" and I had to go.

Crapse was at the front of the house along hedges going down

the street. I went out there by myself and got to him. He was still alive but had a gunshot wound to his right temple. I figured the shot came from across the street and it suddenly occurred to me that I was totally exposed. But apparently he was standing up with his head turned to the left and was shot from forward.

Anyway, another Marine and I dragged him back into the same house. And I treated him on the floor of the house. He wasn't conscious. I put a bandage on him, gave him albumin. The Marines always need something to do so I said, "You are the IV post so hold the bottle of albumin." I had only been there 3 days and didn't know any of these people's names. I hadn't had time to bond to any of them. I knew my reputation was on the line because if this man died, I'm not a good corpsman. If he lived, I'm a good corpsman.

That's a lot of pressure.

It was. Anyway, I treated him and we called for a medevac. We didn't have a nylon stretcher so we ended up with one of those canvas army stretchers with the wooden poles. He got all the way back to Danang, had surgery, but died back there with a mortal wound. I don't know if he ever regained consciousness. But the word came back a couple of days later.

How long were you in Hue? You were there pretty much for the whole fight, weren't you?

I got there on the eighth day and was there for the rest of the battle. Another corpsman, Jim Reynolds, finally joined us near the end. That was a 38-day siege. After the main fight in the city, there was a series of sweeps around the city.

You were pretty fortunate and didn't get hurt yourself.

No.

That was a miracle.

Yes. Toward the end, Gordon caught shrapnel on one of the last operations. He got pulled from the field with the battalion aid station. This was in August. This was when Hiller stepped on a mine. That was a heart-wrenching thing for me because he was the only casualty who was mortally wounded. He said, "Doc Connally, help me!"

Like I said, Crapse made it back. The rest of the guys who were wounded all made it back. Their wounds weren't mortal. Their second day in Hue was when Chris Brown got trapped on that one street and all these other guys were killed and wounded. That's when Morrison was killed. He was the one who only lived for 3 days. Doc Gosselin was the corpsman they had for about 6 months.

I understand that after Hue, you were in Vietnam a lot longer. You had about another 11 months to go.

Yes. I was with 2nd Platoon until after we got wiped out by napalm, which was in August.

What happened?

We were on an operation down in An Hoa, about 20 miles southwest of Danang. We were supposed to clean out some North Vietnamese who were operating in the valley. Chris Brown later told me that the jets couldn't land with the canisters of napalm still intact. I don't know if that's true. But they needed to get rid of them or wanted to get rid of them. There were two jets, one with high explosives and the other with the napalm. It was the end of the day and the Viet Cong were trying to sucker us back up into the hills. Dave Brown was the company commander at that point.

The senior corpsman was killed that day. He had gone out to take care of a casualty and was shot in the back by someone coming out of a spider hole.

At some point, the Marines had set a hooch on fire. It was just smouldering with white smoke rising from it. Unfortunately, a spotter plane marked the enemy with white smoke instead of a different color. So when the jets came in at over 300 miles per hour, they couldn't differentiate one white smoke from the other and they ended up dropping the napalm directly on us.

Did anyone get hit?

Oh, yes, a whole bunch. After that there was only eight Marines and myself left. Several men died from their burns.

When did you leave Vietnam?

I got out of there in January of '69.

What was the homecoming like for you?

It was pretty quiet. Gordon and I left at the same time. We flew back together. He got a Purple Heart for being hit by shrapnel on that last operation. He was running across the field with a stretcher and got hit with shrapnel from a mortar round.

Did you encounter hostility when you came back?

No. Obviously, my family was supportive.

Did you find it difficult to adjust?

Yes. Very much. I think more so because I went from there to independent duty at the Navy and Marine Corps Reserve Training Center in Canton, OH.

Is that where you spent the last 2 years of your enlistment?

Yes. The Navy wanted me to stay in. I had come back from Vietnam as an E-5 and they gave me an E-6 billet, which was independent duty. I was replacing a Navy corpsman who was retiring.

When did you actually leave the Navy?

I got a 3-month early-out so it would have been in June or July of 1970.

What do you do now?

I'm an orthopedic physician assistant and work at Union Memorial Hospital.

According to Chris Brown, you still go to reunions and come down to Washington every year and go to the Wall.

We've done this for the last 12 years or so.

It's been 36 or so years since you were in Vietnam. Do you think about it much anymore?

Number one, you're changed forever. The Marines truly had an admiration for their corpsmen. I hadn't realized that until I was up at Philadelphia Naval Hospital before I went over. The Marines wanted to know if you had served in Vietnam yet. You didn't become a doc until you had served in Vietnam with them. That distinction came only after you had paid your dues. This was when I learned that I had to earn their respect. It wasn't until Crapse that I knew I had the platoon's respect. I went out there, got this guy, and brought him back. Now he didn't survive but I gave him the best chance to live.

If it were today, I probably would have registered as a conscientious objector. But then, I really thought I was destined to go over there and I didn't fight it. I didn't think about deserting. I had goals when I went over there. The two goals were to see the Bob Hope USO Show and to go to Australia on R&R.

When Chris Brown and I come to the Wall every year, we stop at all the names of all the guys in our platoon that we lost.