

U.S. NAVY MEDICAL DEPARTMENT ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL HISTORY WITH MR. DAVID FERRIERO,
ARCHIVIST OF THE UNITED STATES

CONDUCTED BY
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OVERVIEW

The National Archives is the largest repository of Continental and U.S. Navy historical records in the United States. There is also a great deal of Navy in the Archivist of the United States. Several items in his office offer clues to his deep Navy connections. On his walls there is a framed drawing of USS *Constitution* and on his desk sits a piece of this hallowed ship's deck. Amidst his collection of pictures of visiting dignitaries, there is a photograph of a young Sailor dressed in service whites with an unmistakable crow on his sleeve. This is David Ferriero in a preamble to his more famous career. Long before becoming the director of the New York Public Library and the 10th Archivist of the United States, Mr. Ferriero was one of our own, a Navy Hospital Corpsman. From 1967 to 1971, Petty Officer Ferriero served as a neuropsychiatric (NP) technician at Naval Hospital Chelsea, Mass., and aboard USS *Sanctuary* (AH-17). As he admits, his short Navy tenure would forever impact his future life and successes.

Mr. Ferriero, thank you again for your time today. Before we discuss your service I would like to capture a snapshot of your early life. I understand you grew up in Beverly, Massachusetts.

Yes, the "Birthplace of the American Navy."

There are people in Marblehead who might disagree.

Those people in Marblehead. [laughter] On Navy Day two years ago Trevor Plante¹ and I went to the *Constitution* Museum in Charlestown, Massachusetts to do an expose on the number of places in the United States that claimed to be the birthplace of the American Navy. There were six towns that claimed the Navy from Machias, Maine to Philadelphia. It was really interesting because the audience was evenly split between the folks from Marblehead and Beverly. The entire Beverly Historical Society was there and at the end I had everyone vote which one it really was. So the real story is the ship *Hannah*,² which was the first ship built by George Washington, sailed out of Beverly harbor. It was owned by a merchant in Manchester, Massachusetts, and just about the entire crew was from Marblehead, but it sailed out of Beverly. No question in my mind.

Were you interested in naval history as a child?

Yes I was. But I also came from Irish and Italian immigrants. The Irish relatives came to Massachusetts in the late 1800s and I had great uncles who were fishermen. The fondness for the sea was in my blood and I grew up on water. So the Navy was an easy choice.

Why did you enlist in the Navy?

I was fed-up with my undergraduate degree. I was an education major at that point and hated every minute of it. I figured the Navy was safe and still remember at the bottom of the enlistment form there was a block that read "Volunteer for Hospital Work." How could you be any safer? [laughter] I also had a brother who served in the Army in Vietnam and he made it clear that I should not join the Army and that the Navy would be safer.

I understand you went through a very significant co-op program during your undergraduate years that would influence the course you took in the Navy.

¹ Chief of Reference at the National Archives.

² *Hannah* was the first armed vessel to sail under Continental pay and control, and was taken over 24 August 1775. She was the beginning of the small fleet fitted out by George Washington in the fall of 1775 to aid him in the siege of Boston by capturing provisions ships making for the harbor from British ports. Her first Captain was Nicholson Broughton, a captain in the Army, and her crew was recruited from John Glover's regiment. (<http://www.history.navy.mil/danfs/h2/hannah.htm>)

Yes. Occupational and recreational therapy. It was as close to education as you could get. It was very important because it exposed me to a profession which heavily influenced my trajectory in the Navy. I was trained in a hospital in Connecticut to do occupational and recreational therapy so when I came out of Corps School and came to Chelsea Naval Hospital I was pegged as a NP Tech and an Occupational Therapy Tech because of my experience.

What were your first impressions of the Navy?

It was in boot camp and it took me a while to latch onto what was going on. It was all this unnecessary stress put on people. I was older than most of the Sailors in my company and I was wondering why are they were terrorizing these people. It was all a game.

And then it was off to Corps School.

Yes, I aced Corps school with flying colors and still have the bronze coin where I was the highest scoring student in my class.

After Corps School you were selected for NP technician training. How long was this course?

February to June 1968. I trained at the Bethesda Naval Hospital and St. Elizabeth's. I then received orders to Chelsea Naval Hospital.

Chelsea was a historic property that went back to 1836. Were any of the old buildings still standing?

All of them. In fact one of the oldest buildings on that campus was designed by Charles Bullfinch. It was Officers Quarters at that point. I worked in the neuropsych ward. At the time neurology and neuropsych were combined and these World War II ramps ran the entire perimeter of the campus. It was right next to the main hospital. I was the senior ward corpsman so every morning was change of shift and sitting down with the night crew going over every patient. They were mostly what I would describe as character disorders. Very often these were kids who were in trouble with their parents, sometimes with the law and were told "you are going to jail if you don't join the Marines." So these kids who were really troubled ended up in Vietnam with rifles in their hands. It was really sad.

At what point did you get orders for Danang?

It was Veterans Day of 1969. They were orders directly to the field. I did not have field medical training nor did I have time in my enlistment to go through this training. It was a screw-up. When I talked with the folks in the personnel office at Chelsea Naval Hospital they contacted Washington and the orders stood. So I flew in March from San Bernardino, California, stopped in Okinawa and everyone got off the plane except me. My orders were directly to Danang.

This must have seemed a cruel joke.

Before I left Chelsea I was told by the personnel folks that I needed to hunt down Chief Dusty Rhoads in Danang. He was the first person I saw in Danang and said to me, "What the hell are we going to do with you?"

It was like 110 degrees and I arrived in dress blues. Since I was a psych tech I was told to report to Corpsman Gamble on the psych ward.

And I said to Dusty, "Is that Norman Gamble?"

And he said, "Yeah. Do you know him?"

I said "I went to high school with him." He was in charge of the ward at this point.

So the deal was they were going to park me there until they figured out what to do with me. I was with the First Medical Battalion, First Marines. Sometime in mid-March Gamble's father died so he went back to the States and I became the head corpsmen for the rest of the month. At the end of the month I had orders to the hospital ship *Sanctuary*. I was an HM2 at the point. I can't remember feeling unsafe. Even in-country I remember getting up to go to the head and realizing that there was fire on the perimeter of the compound and I was walking through it.

As I said I didn't have field training so when I got there they issued me a flak jacket, a .45 and all this gear and the PX was a mile down the road from the hospital. You couldn't leave the compound without a weapon. I hadn't any training and would probably have killed myself if I tried to shoot someone. So I cleverly figured out this way of pulling my shirt down over my holster so it looked like I had a gun when it was really just a holster. I remember they would do these personnel inspections where they inspected the gun. In boot camp we had half a day of firearms training, but it was mostly rifles. So figuring out how to open it and then to clean the bullets. It was hysterical.

After a month with the Marines you literally found yourself on a *Sanctuary*. What do you remember about this storied hospital ship?

It was a pretty awesome sight when you are going from shore to ship on the launch. It was a big white monster. Another irony of the whole thing, they had recently taken the psych ward off of the ship because patients were jumping overboard. So here I am a NP tech serving aboard a ship with no psych ward. I remember when I reported to the ship they asked us, "Does anyone know how to type?" Since I could type I ended up working in hospital personnel. But I quickly discovered that the Corpsman in charge of triage, Jim Maroney, was someone I had served with at Chelsea. I got to volunteer in triage and thought it was a place I would actually get some experience. A memorable moment was the night when we had seven or eight come in directly from the field. I was starting an IV for one of them and had trouble getting a vein. I remember pulling the needle out and trashing it then starting all over again. As I trashed it he started screaming in agony. I thought, "Oh my god, I am losing him here." It turns out I had thrown the needle onto the gurney he was on and it rolled underneath him and it was sticking in his ass.

Jim Maroney must have had a field day.

Yeah.

Who was the hospital's CO at the time?

The commanding officer of the ship was [Capt.] Elgin Cowart³ [Medical Corps, USN]. He was a really nice guy. Because I was in personnel, I was responsible for all commendations and correspondence. I would have to go up to his state room and get signatures. The doctors were the chief source of booze aboard the ship. They would always come back from the launch loaded with booze which they were quite generous with. I used to hang out in the pharmacy. Jeff Jones was the pharmacy tech and he had made friends with one of the cooks in the ship's company. That friend would often bring us these carved watermelon fruit baskets and the highlight of this relationship was that Jeff was able to get a turkey from him on Thanksgiving. So we had spent Thanksgiving morning running back and forth from Sick Officer Quarters where there was a kitchen with an oven for baking our turkey. We got wine from the medical officers and a group of seven or eight of us had Thanksgiving dinner.

The ship was anchored in Danang harbor for the day and because they were afraid of enemy frogmen it made a big circle up to Hue and back all night long. Because I was personnel I

³ Elgin Cowart (1923-2010) served as the the Commanding Officer of *Sanctuary* from 1970-1971. he would later serve as the Commanding Officer of Naval Hospital Port Hueneme, Calif. and later the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology in Washington, D.C.

often had the need to be in Danang to deliver papers. In Danang there was a naval hospital and one of the Corpsmen that worked with me at Chelsea was there so I was able to get a ride with him into town. Helicopters would be landing dropping patients off. And there were enough military vehicles all over so it was no trouble to be able to get a ride to town.

Were you taking on a lot of casualties?

Yes, even as late as then. And we were doing a lot of civilian cosmetic surgeries repairing cleft palates.

One of your collateral duties was serving as the director of the "Fantail Follies" show. How did this come about?

`It was a *Sanctuary* tradition where they would put on variety shows for the crew. On my second year aboard the ship Jim Maroney asked me to become more involved and be the director. I also helped write some of the biting dialogue. [laughter] We did a lot of parody of the officers aboard the ship. It was hysterical.

***Sanctuary* was your last duty in the Navy and you left service in 1971. Was there ever a chance you would have stayed?**

They tried to convince me, but no. I was planning on coming back home.

I read that you thought about becoming a physician when you returned Stateside.

Yes. In fact, I had already made arrangements to come back to Northeastern to finish my degree and change my major from education to liberal arts and load up on the science courses that I had never taken. That first semester back at Northeastern I was doing physics and organic chemistry. I still remember taking this crash course at Harvard over the summer in inorganic chemistry. I went through the process of applying to five or six programs but didn't get into them. I had already gone back to MIT to work and really liked what I was doing.

It's really funny because for two months I fought with my co-op advisor, Nancy Caruso, but she takes complete credit for my career. She was trying to convince me to shelf books in the library at MIT because that was close to education. That was the last thing I wanted to do, but I finally caved and if I hadn't you wouldn't be sitting here. [laughter]

You started off as an education major and then served in the Navy as a psych tech. Why did you ultimately decide to pursue a career library science?

I was very fortunate in that I had some people around me who took an interest in my career so while I was hired to shelf books they expanded my set of responsibilities and redefined the job and it was a lot of fun. It was a great group of people, a wonderful environment and I started think seriously about library science.

You have a great story about how you were selected as to become the Archivist of the United States. Could you share this story?

It was April 2009, I was the director of the New York Public Libraries and my assistant comes in and says that the White House is on the phone. I knew I had been nominated to serve as the head of IMLS (Institute of Museum and Library Services) and that's what I had assumed it was. So I get on the phone and this twelve-year old who is working on appointments for the president said "We are looking at you to be the Archivist of the United States."

I was completely flattered, but said "You are looking at the wrong guy. The Archivist is a political appointment and they have never appointed someone who knows the business. Maybe you want the governor of Kansas."

This was a Friday and he asked me to think about it over the weekend. I come back and first thing Monday morning we had the exact same conversation. Ten minutes later a man from the transition team called to ask if he could come to New York and talk with me. That man was Tom Wheeler who is now the Chairman of the FCC. We had a great conversation; we talked about what the president was looking for, the whole government initiative and opening up the records. He asked me if I could come to Washington and talk with the president. So at the end of the week I was in Washington at the Old Executive Office Building meeting with David Jacobson, then the head of the president's appointment committee. It was clear by the time I left that meeting that I knew a whole lot about how to run an operation like this. My entire career I had been responsible for records management and archives as well as library services.

As I was leaving David Jacobson asked, "Can we consider you a candidate?"

And I said, "Yes."

At that point everything was locked down. I couldn't talk with anyone, but the whole vetting process started and seven teams of agents across the country talked with anyone who ever knew me. I kept getting emails from folks asking me what was going on. The vetting teams could not say why they were asking questions all they could say was that it wasn't a criminal investigation. That went on through June. The Senate finally approved my appointment in November 2009.

Over your tenure as Archivist what initiatives are you most proud of?

I think linking our mission more directly with the Administration's is a real accomplishment and being able to demonstrate that records play an important role. The biggest challenge the federal government has is the shift from paper to electronic and getting our act together around that. We were able to capture the president's attention around this and the White House issued a memorandum on records management. This was the first time since the Truman administration that the president's administration has gotten involved with records management. This gave me the authority to issue a directive to the agencies on where we are going to be after 2019. And these are the things that we are going to do to meet this target. Part of that is the creation of a family of records manager positions within the federal government hierarchy. Right now there is no such thing as a records manager.

How can this be? We have records managers everywhere across the government.

Yes, we have records managers everywhere across the government, but they are filling slots with designations. There is no such thing as a records manager. So we are working now with OPM to create that family of jobs. If I had to point to one thing that would be it. I have been making the argument since I got here that you can't have

an "open" government unless you have good records. Good records management is the backbone of government. And in the president's memorandum he said, "good records management is the backbone of the government."

Can you discuss your involvement in presidential libraries?

We are working now with the White House on their library. The process can take years. First of all there is site selection and we have nothing to do with that. It's establishing the foundation that raises the money to do it. I am really hopeful that we are going to use this presidential library to create a new model for presidential libraries. It is going to be more electronic than any of our other presidential libraries. We are taking advantage of this and making it less "site bound."

Now I look over at your desk and I see a piece of the USS *Constitution* prominently displayed. What does that artifact represent to you?

Having grown up outside of Boston whenever we went to the city the ship was always one of the first places I wanted to go. We have the logs here and I remember this story of the *Constitution* hiding in Marblehead harbor from a British ship and I actually had the opportunity to read that section of the log and it was pretty powerful. Every year the commander of the ship brings some of his crew to Washington, to the Navy Memorial and then here to look at the logs. And one year the commander brought this hunk of a deck and the shell from the cannon.

What are some of your favorite historical documents in the collection?

It changes every day because the more I see the more I am absolutely stunned that we have it. There are things you know from history that happened but you don't associate them with documentation. So for instance Duke and the New York Public Library have fantastic Walt Whitman collections. Whitman worked in the Bureau of Indian Affairs. When I discovered that we are responsible for civilian personnel records I asked to see Walt Whitman's personal file. In it there is a 4-page letter of recommendation—he was applying for a position in the Attorney General's Office—written by Ralph Waldo Emerson. Isn't that something? We have Clark Gable's discharge papers in World War II signed by his personnel officer Captain Ronald Reagan. We have a wonderful letter from Annie Oakley to William McKinley offering to raise a troupe of fifty sharpshooter women who would supply their own rifles to fight in the Spanish-American War. You can't make this up. We have the request for a proposal from the Signal Corps for the first ever heavier-than-air flying machine and the contract signed by the Wright Brothers.

That's incredible. Do you make any connection between your experiences as a Corpsman with your later successes?

I think it's a combination of the co-op experience at the psychiatric facility and then the psych and medical training that the Navy provided that was incredibly useful. It's stuff I use every day. I know how to listen and paraphrase, how to be empathetic and how to be supportive, and carve out time for people learning how to work together. All of these things can sometimes get lost.

Mr. Ferriero, again thank you for your time today.

My pleasure.