

U.S. NAVY MEDICAL DEPARTMENT ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL HISTORY WITH HM1 WILLIAM GERRARD, USNR

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TELEPHONIC INTERVIEW

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**Telephone interview with former HM1 William J. Gerrard, Vietnam.
Assigned to the 3rd Battalion, 26th Marines.**

Where are you from?

I was born and raised in the little town of Schuyler, Nebraska.

When did you join the Navy?

I joined the Navy reserve in '63. I joined on a Monday and Friday Kennedy was killed. It put a different perspective on it for me.

In what way?

All of a sudden, instead of a high school kid, here I was a member of the Naval Reserve and my leader had been killed.

When did you go on active duty?

The Naval Reserve wouldn't let me become a hospital corpsman. So I talked to the regular Navy recruiter and came in under the program in which I would become a hospital corpsman in 1965.

Was there a special name for that program?

No. I came in as an HA/HS, I think they called it.

So, at first you couldn't be a hospital corpsman but you decided that's what you wanted.

Yes.

How did you become a hospital corpsman?

My mother was a nurse and in some ways I was challenging her. She was my example. I ended up going to Brooklyn, NY, and sat there for 3 months waiting for my orders.

Where was this, at the Navy Yard?

Yes. It was at 136 Flushing Ave. I still remember it. That was my first duty station working in the medical department--the little clinic there. That was one of the places I learned just how much corpsmen can get away with. One night one of the young kids went out, got drunk, and started raising hell. On his way back, he punched several windows out of the car he was riding in. And he had cut his hands up pretty bad. We were under orders not to wake up the senior corpsman on watch. When this kid came in I gave him some first aid and told him to go to his rack and come back in the morning. He went into the barracks and began raising hell all over again. An E-6, who was the junior officer of the day, came up and told me that the kid was down in the barracks doing all this and what should they

do. I told him to lock the kid up in the restrictive barracks overnight and to bring him up to the clinic at 8 in the morning.

And they did that. This was an E-6 with 14 years in the Navy. And he did what I told him to. Here was a 30-year-old is listening to an 18-year-old. That made a lasting impression on me.

Where did you go from Brooklyn?

HM "A" school at Great Lakes. That was in September of '65

How long was the program at that time?

Fourteen weeks. They had cut it down from 16 to 14. They took off 1 week of ward duty and then they consolidated another week. They didn't shorten the curriculum at all; they just shortened the time.

Where did you go after corps school?

I went to Portsmouth Naval Hospital as a ward corpsman. I worked there about 7 months.

That's kind of a short tour. What happened?

Vietnam. At corps school they crammed into us in 6 months 4 months worth of theory. During those 6 months we got to break that theory down and put it into practice on the wards-- Everything from giving shots to prepping patients to starting IVS to passing meds to dealing with death, admitting patients, discharging patients, treating wounds, treating infections--the whole shootin' match. It really gave us a sound basis for what was coming.

Had you known anyone who had been in Vietnam?

No. When I first got to Brooklyn there were about 25 or 30 corpsmen there. By the time I left there were only 10 or 12. And they'd all been ordered out to Vietnam. Some of it was 24-hour notice. One of the guys I knew was a third class, already on his second enlistment. He got orders to report to the 3rd Marine Division to detach the next day. His orders came in on Saturday and he had to be out in California on Monday.

How did you hear that you had orders for Vietnam?

From Portsmouth, I went to Field Medical Service down in Camp Lejeune at Monford Point. That's what the place was called. That was the place the Marine Corps trained the Black Marines before Truman integrated the troops.

From there I went out to Camp Pendleton to the 5th Marine Division.

What kind of preparation did you get at the Field Medical Service School at Camp Lejeune?

Some of it was about guns. Some of it was about dressings. Some was listening to the guys from the Korean era and what they had done. It was both classroom stuff and field work. They taught us a little bit about field sanitation, treating the wounded. We got to go out and shoot the .45 caliber pistol on the range--two clips--10 to 14 bullets.

The kids who graduated with me all had orders to the 1st, 3rd, or 5th Marine Division. Nobody knew what the 5th Marine Division was at that time. It had been decommissioned after Iwo Jima and they reformed it the day we reported in. That was about September of '66. That's where I really got familiar with weapons. I spent a year there with the Division. The unit I was attached to was called the 5th Service Battalion. I made three wet-net landings at different times throughout the year. That's the scariest thing I ever did. There's nothing like dropping down to a mike boat at 4 o'clock in the morning from a cargo net in 5- to 10-foot seas.

While you were there with the 5th Division, you were doing all the amphibious operations and getting some more fam fire with weapons.

I fam fired everything. I was a country boy and liked going in the woods. We had corpsmen who really didn't like going in the woods. I volunteered to do that. I also got to shoot the .50 caliber machine gun, throw grenades, fam fire mortars, fire the M14, the M-60 machine gun. They'd give me one or two of those green ammo boxes filled with ammunition and tell me to go out and have fun. And I did. Sometimes I'd come back in and my ears would be ringing for 3 days afterwards.

When did the Division go to Vietnam?

They never did. Regiments of the 5th got there. Both the 26th and 27th Marines were 5th Marine Division units.

How did you get there?

After a year out there in Pendleton, my orders came in assigning me to the 3rd Marine Division. After leave, I reported to Travis Air Force Base, jumped on a plane, and went out to Okinawa. They put us on a C-130 from there and flew us into Danang. When we got there, they said, "You're on your own getting to Phu Bai." We then climbed on trucks and drove up Route 1 to Phu Bai. We had no weapons, no gear, just a bunch of dumb corpsmen. There were 10 of us that came in on that C-130. Nobody was expecting us. Danang was not division headquarters. That was 1st Marine Division headquarters, not 3rd Marine Division headquarters. So they didn't know what to do with us. "Go to Phu Bai; that's where your division headquarters

is." So we showed up at Phu Bai.

When was this?

It was October of '67.

What kind of job did they give you?

They assigned me to 3rd Battalion, 26th Marines, which had been a 5th Division unit. I got up to 3/26 and they told me that I was going to Mike Company. I was already an E-4 and had taken the exam for E-5. One thing led to another and I was assigned to weapons platoon of Mike Company. I was kind of spare corpsman in case someone got hurt.

Things went along for a couple of weeks and then my senior corpsman came down with amoebic dysentery. So all of a sudden, I ended up as senior corpsman of the company about 2 weeks in. Then my senior corpsman came back for a couple of months until his time in the bush was done.

On Christmas eve night, the leading chief of the battalion aid station came down and told me that I was senior corpsman of the company for good. I actually thought that was a cool Christmas present at the time. All of sudden, I had 200 guys that I was medically responsible for.

About 3 weeks later, we went up on Hill 881S for a 24-hour operation. And it lasted for 77 days.

What was the operation supposed to be?

We were going to cover the perimeter while India Company went over to 881N. You could see 881N from 881S. CAPT Dabney, who was Chesty Puller's son-in-law, was taking his troops over to 881N, and that was the first major contact we had for the beginnings of Tet. What they ran into was a battalion of NVA coming to attack us that very same night. So instead of evacuating us back to the base, we ended up spending the next 2 ½ months right there on Hill 881S.

What did you do for supplies?

Everything came in by chopper. Every ounce of what we needed from water to food to whatever. But we weren't really prepared to stay there 77 days. We had gone there on a 1-day op and I don't know if you know how Marines travel on a deal like that. We had taken a few extra packs of cigarettes and a change of socks. And that was basically it.

How did you find out you were going to stay a little longer than planned?

I don't remember. It was, "You guys are here, and you're

staying. You have the bottom of the hill and India Company has the top of the hill." We were there to slow up and stop the NVA if they tried to come through us. On certain parts of the hill, you could see over to 861N. And we could see the main base at Khe Sanh.

So you had a vantage point and could down and see the whole base.

Well, not so much the whole base but you could see the runway.

But the idea was to keep the enemy from occupying the hills and being able to shoot down at the base.

Yes.

What kind of contact did you have with the NVA?

There were snipers and we had guys come in at night. Most of our contact was sitting there taking mortar rounds, rockets, and some artillery.

As a corpsman, did you have a lot of business?

Oh, yes. Mostly shrapnel wounds. Every 2 or 3 days there was a medevac. It seems that every time you turned around, you were medevacing kids out. It seemed like every 2 or 3 days you were in the saddle with maybe three or four cases of shrapnel wounds you were medevacing out. Sometimes you'd sit in that saddle for 2 or 3 hours with the guys.

When you say saddle, what location was that?

There was a little saddle between our perimeter and India Company's perimeter. It was covered by both sides but it was where the trash dump was and stuff like that. That was one of the safer places for medevac birds to come in because the enemy didn't have a good view of it. The enemy couldn't get their mortars on it quick enough to hit the saddle, for some reason.

What did 881 look like to you? Was it pretty much denuded of foliage by that time?

Yes. It was bare. There was nothing up there. On Mike Company's side of the hill. . . Mike Company was 1st and 2nd Platoon and Weapons Platoon. They had gone up there. Third Platoon was left down at base. There was absolutely nothing up there. It was just bare ground.

What did you use for cover?

If you see pictures of World War I with guys living in the trenches. That's what our guys did. They lived in the trenches. They dug holes back in the sides of the trenches--two-man crawl spaces

in which to sleep. I had a bunker in a thousand-pound bomb crater. That's where we initially brought the wounded. It was below ground and considered one of the safest spots there.

We'd load them on stretchers and then haul them out to the saddle.

The NVA had guys spotting the hills. If there were more than two or three guys out on top of the hill during daylight hours, they'd drop a round on them.

And they were pretty accurate, weren't they?

Oh, yes. I lost my corpsman that way, a kid by the name of Jerry King [HN Doyle G.]. He was my weapons platoon corpsman. We heard the first round leave the tube. Then we heard the second round leave before the first round even hit. And in between, they yelled "Corpsman up!" Jerry already had his gear on and jumped out the door to go to the Marine who was down. He ended up getting hit by the second mortar round. That was probably one of the bravest things I ever saw a man do. He knew it was coming and he went anyhow.

At times I had gone out in answer to "Corpsman up!" When you heard that call, you grabbed your unit 1 and scrambled. But this time I didn't get out there quick enough and Jerry got hit.

One time we were holding company "office hours" for guys stealing chow. Office hours is the same thing as captain's mast but it's held by the company commander who is a captain or 1st lieutenant. He can make the man pay a fine or restrict him to base. And the NVA saw us gathered around there at sundown during office hours and dropped a round on us. I was one of the witnesses. Three of us got dinged.

Where was the enemy where they could see you so well? Were they occupying a higher hill in the vicinity?

881 North. They could look across at us.

Were you shooting at those guys on 881N?

That was about a click or two away from us. They could fire mortars at us and we could fire mortars back if we could see anything. But they had their stuff on the reverse side of the hill. They knew where we were but we couldn't see them.

What kind of medicine could you practice up there?

Pressure dressings. We also had to do preventive medicine for the troops. We had shitters there which we burned out with diesel fuel. One of the other corpsmen from India Company used artillery rounds, filled them with waste, and just rolled them down the hill towards the NVA.

Were you eating C-rations all the time?

Yes. Once or twice we got down to one meal a day. You don't put on a lot of weight eating C-rations. The best we ever had was two meals a day eating C-rations.

Was there any time during those 77 days where enemy action got really hot?

Yes. The first night there. I was in my bunker all by myself and the grenades were flying and mortar rounds were landing, and illumination rounds were going off. I wasn't real comfortable sitting in my bunker all by myself not knowing what was going on. I finally worked up my courage to go out and go to the trench line where Mike 2 was. As luck would have it no one got hurt that night. We lost kids during resupply and any other time, but not that night.

But sometime during the 77 days you had these sporadic rocket and mortar attacks and you were dealing with a lot of injured people.

Yes. Of all the guys who were up on that hill, only 11 guys came off who were not wounded.

How about you?

I got a small ding during that officer hours incident. But I was so short on corpsmen at that time that even if it had been more than it was, I couldn't medevac myself. I was down to three corpsmen.

How many Marines did you have to take care of with those three corpsmen?

There was 1st Platoon, 2nd Platoon, Weapons Platoon, and Headquarters Group. There were probably about 150 men.

That would be a lot of business for three corpsmen.

Yes. Jerry was wounded. One other guy got his second Purple Heart and was medevaced because of that. I then got two corpsmen in and they both went to Mike 2. Three days later, they took a direct hit in their trench line from a mortar, were both WIAs, and were medevaced out. So there I was down to no corpsmen again.

With the exception of the office hours incident, the casualties you took during those 77 days were pretty well spread out. Was there any other time after that when you really got pummeled heavily, all at one time?

The scariest moment was when they dropped some artillery on us from C-roc, an artillery base on a hill off toward Laos.

These were NVA throwing this stuff at you?

Yes. The company gunny and the weapons platoon gunny came up and said, "Hey Doc, "Can we borrow your foxhole to have lunch in. The rounds seem to be following us around."

And I said, "Sure." They got into my foxhole which was in the bottom of that thousand-pound bomb crater and I went into one of the next hooches to talk to some guys from Weapons Platoon. About 3 minutes later an artillery round came in and made a direct hit on my foxhole. They were both KIA. It's a memory that stays with you, needless to say.

I would imagine that all the incidents you've described pretty much blend together after those 77 days. It must have seemed like one long 77-day day.

Yes. After guys got hurt, I'd hear, "Doc, how come him, not me?" "How did this happen?" And, "What are we doing here?"

Did you ever see any of the B-52 raids while you were there?

We didn't see the B-52s but we heard them. They were so high up. But then all of a sudden, you'd hear the bombs hitting and the ground shook. Sometimes they were dropping within a thousand yards of us.

Did you know that Tet was going on?

We knew nothing about it. We were in our own little world for those 77 days.

So the normal procedure up on 881 was this. If someone was hit and had to be medevaced out by chopper, they would first take them to the main base at Khe Sanh.

No. If they were wounded and needed further medical attention, most of the time they went straight to Dong Ha or Quang Tri.

So guys were not medevaced down to the main base.

No. Not routinely.

But in your case when you were, as you say, "concussed," they took you to the main base because you weren't critical.

I wasn't critically injured or did I need further attention. I was all recovered by that time and there was no reason to send me anywhere. The guys who were coming off the hill the same time as I was were either going on R&R or rotating, and they all had to go through the company office to get their paperwork.

So the company office was at Khe Sanh.

Yes.

What do you remember about leaving that hill?

When that artillery came in and got the gunny, it kind of concussed me and they turned that in as a wound. All of a sudden a new corpsman came in and said, "I'm your replacement." I came off the hill by chopper and went back down to the main base.

What did Khe Sanh look like from the chopper?

There was nothing really standing. Everything was done from a bunker--a hole in the ground. Everybody lived underground. I wondered, "What are a bunch of Marines doing here? Sitting here and holding a piece of real estate is an Army job."

What kind of reception did you receive?

When we got there we all walked down the company street in combat formation--5 yards in between down both sides of the road. When we got to the company area, I walked into the aid station and someone said, "Who the hell are you?" They just looked at us strangely because we had been living on a canteen or less of water the whole time we were up there. We didn't shave. So I came off the hill with 70 days growth of beard and had lost about 20 pounds.

While you were there, did they put you to work as a corpsman?

Yes. I was assigned back to the BAS. They didn't quite know what to do with me because I was the odd man out at that moment.

How long were you at the main base?

I think it was only a week or so. The first night I stayed at the BAS and that made the doctor very uncomfortable. He didn't think I should be living inside the BAS where he was sleeping.

The next day or so I got assigned to night duty at the Combat Information Center for the battalion. That's where I spent my nights.

When did you leave Khe Sanh?

About the middle of April, we got rotated out back to Quang Tri. The first night we were back, the place they put the majority of the battalion got mortared and we had casualties. Some of the corpsmen got hit. I don't remember where I was sleeping, but I was there.

Within a week they had us running patrols on Route 9. They'd load up a convoy, go up to Route 1 to Dong Ha, then across on Route 9 just short of Khe Sanh. They would unload us, put another company on and we'd replace those guys. They would not let us go to Khe Sanh.

Nothing ever happened to us on those trips but we were damned worried about getting ambushed.

When did you get relieved from that duty?

We did that for 3 or 4 weeks and then started pulling some routine ops outside of Quang Tri. Then all of a sudden, we got opconned down to the 1st Marine Division which was down by Danang and started pulling bush operations out there.

So you were seeing a good deal of combat, I bet.

Yes. I was in the bush the whole year with the battalion.

But that wasn't the normal routine. You were only supposed to spend so much time in the bush and then they'd bring you back to a facility and you'd get to work the rest of your time in relative safety.

Right. The division surgeon told us that he had 60 corpsmen that he didn't have to find places for. So they left us in the bush. And when we got down to 1st Marine Division, the division surgeon said, "Look, guys, here's the scoop. I don't have billets in the rear so I'm leaving you in the bush."

I imagine there were some unclean words said at that news?

They both did a job on us. The division surgeon from the 1st Division told us he would do that to us. When you're getting screwed, it's nice to know ahead of time. So that's what happened to us in the 26th Marines.

When did you leave Vietnam?

At the end of September, the 1st of October '68. I ended up drawing 13 months worth of combat pay.

How did you get back? Did you go to Danang and fly out of there?

Yes. It was the first night flight out of there in about 5 years. I thought, "Just get me the hell out of here."

How long did you stay in the Navy after that?

I had about 10 months left to do. I was due to get out in July of '69. I went up to Great Lakes to ADCOM and was assigned to brig duty for the rest of my tour. So I was back with the Marines again.

When did you get out?

I got out in '69. An MSC officer called me in at that time and said, "Bill. You've been back almost 9 months. If you go to reenlist, you have to understand that you're eligible for orders back to Vietnam with the Marines again."

I was out until '72 and living outside Omaha, Nebraska. The Surface Reserve headquarters was there. I was going to college at the time and they wanted to run a summer program with underprivileged

kids. You could go on 50 or 60 days special active duty for training. And I said, sure. So I ended up doing that time and while I was there, the only corpsman they had was transferred out.

So you were still in the Navy at this time?

I was in the Naval Reserve. I had rejoined the reserves by that time. I had been discharged in the latter part of '69. When the corpsman got transferred, I went to the commanding officer of the support activity and said, "If you want me to hang around on ACDUTRA for a while to provide medical coverage, I will do that."

He didn't think he could do that but he mentioned it to the admiral and he said, "If he wants to stay on ACDUTRA, cut him orders." So I ended up spending 270 or so days on special ACDUTRA that year.

I then decided I wanted to come back into the TAR program. And where I was at that time gave me the political power to do that on the aviation side of the house. So I was then assigned to [unintelligible] Naval Air Station and was there for a year. Then I went down to New Orleans and spent 4 years there. One of my collateral duties was flying sea-air rescue with the Coast Guard. I ended up pulling 93 missions in about 3 years.

What do you do now?

I opened up a little pack and mail place here in Liberty, Texas.

It's been over 30 years since you were in Vietnam. Do you ever think about it much anymore?

Oh, sure. It's a ghost that never leaves. It was part of my life for 365 days and some of what happened was mind-boggling. I'm still adjusting to it. That's the one place where the military truly screwed up. The biggest mistake they made was getting us home to our families. How do you tell your family about someone who was killed next to you? You could talk about what happened with someone you had shared the experience with. You couldn't tell your brother, your sister, your mom, or your dad about that stuff.

So all that got buried and never got ventilated out and a lot of it is still there. Right after I opened my business, I found a website about Khe Sanh. I visit there almost daily and read the notes. I post stuff there myself.

So it's kind of a support network. You guys who understand each other get to talk to each other.

Yes. When I retired, I got a shadow box with all my duty stations and all my ribbons and a flag. And I keep that here in my office. I'd rather have it here than in the closet at home. People walk in and see it. "That's really neat. Where did you get it?"

When did you retire from the reserves?
In '87.