

U.S. NAVY MEDICAL DEPARTMENT ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL HISTORY WITH HMCM (ret.) James Harris, USN

CONDUCTED BY  
ANDRÉ B. SOBOCINSKI, HISTORIAN, BUMED

14 OCTOBER 2015  
TELEPHONIC

OFFICE OF MEDICAL HISTORY  
BUREAU OF MEDICINE AND SURGERY  
SKYLINE COMPLEX, FALLS CHURCH, VIRGINIA

**BUMED Oral History Interview Synopsis**  
**HMCM (ret.) James Harris, USN**

*Date and Location of Interview:* October 14, 2015, Telephonic  
*Interviewer:* Mr. André B. Sobocinski, BUMED Historian

**Synopsis**

Master Chief Harris was born in Montgomery, Alabama and grew up across the state in the "steel town" of Fairfield, Alabama. In the interview session, Harris recalls many early memories of life in Fairfield—the local doctor making house calls, attending Fairfield Industrial High School, and what it was like living in the segregated south as a black youth.

Master Chief Harris entered the Navy in 1962 after graduating high school. He attended boot camp and Hospital Corps School in San Diego, graduating in 1963. His first duty station was at Naval Hospital, Memphis (Millington), TN (1962-1965), as a general duty corpsman. Harris describes duty in the Sick Officers Quarters (SOQ) and meeting World War II legend and Prisoner of War (POW), Rear Admiral Winfield Cunningham, USN.

Master Chief followed his tour at Memphis, at the Naval Hospital Key West, FL (1965-1996). While in Key West, Harris reenlisted and also married his wife, Roselyn. He followed this assignment attending X-ray Technician School at the National Naval Medical Center, Bethesda, MD (1966-1967), followed by an additional seven months working as an X-ray technician at the Naval Hospital Bethesda, MD. Harris discusses the state of radiographical equipment in use at the hospital in the 1960s and also relates his encounters with several dignitaries who passed through the hospital as patients.

In 1967, Master Chief Harris went on the first of three deployments to Antarctica as part of Operation Deep Freeze (1967-1968, 1968-1969, 1969-1970). In the session, Harris discusses the daily duties of a Corpsman on Independent Detail in the South Pole. Harris also relates the types of collateral duty he was involved in—including preparing the ice field for transport plane landings and take-offs, and trying to protect Adélie Penguins and their nests from scavenging Antarctic Skuas.

After his deployments to Antarctica, Master Chief Harris served at Naval Hospital Jacksonville, FL (1970-1973, 1978-1983, 1990-1992), Naval Hospital Charleston, SC (1975-1976), aboard USS *Grand Canyon* (1977-1978), at Naval Hospital Roosevelt Roads, Puerto Rico (1983-1986), and Naval Medical Command Southeast, Jacksonville (1986-1989). Harris would serve in various capacities at these duties stations including X-ray technician,

Family Practice Residency Program administrator, diversity affairs officer, and Command Master Chief. Harris retired in 1992.

### **Key Terms**

ADCAP—Associates Degree Accreditation Program SOQ—Sailor of the Quarter  
Adélie Penguins  
Antarctica  
ASVAB—Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery  
DUINS—Duty Under Instruction  
Fairfield, AL  
GEOCOMMS—Geographical Commands  
McMurdo Station/Hallet Station  
Operation Deep Freeze  
NRMC—Naval Regional Medical Center  
Patrol Squadron 56  
Seabees  
USARSS—United States Antarctica Research Support Systems  
*USS Grand Canyon* (AD-28)  
X-Ray Technician

### **Glossary**

Adélie Penguin—Native to Antarctica, Adélie Penguins are among the most southerly distributed of all birds.

Antarctic or South Pole Skua—type of Gull widespread in the South Pole. Their omnivorous diet includes fish, krill, carrion and penguin eggs and chicks.

Cunningham, Winfield, RADM, USN (1900-1986). In 1941, Cunningham commanded naval activities on Wake Island and was responsible for its defense before its capture on 23 December 1941. Cunningham would spend the next 1330 days as a prisoner of war. In 1961, he wrote the book, *Wake Island Command* relating his experiences.

Davisville, RI—Home of the Naval Construction Battalion Center from 1942 to 1994. HMCM Harris was based at Davisville for Antarctic Support Activities from Sep 1967 - 15 Oct 1970.

Duval Street—Famous street in downtown Key West running a mile north and south from the Gulf of Mexico to the Atlantic Ocean. The street is named after Florida's first territorial governor, William Pope Duval.

Fairfield, AL—City founded in 1910. It was the hub of U.S. Steel for much of the twentieth century.

GEOCOMMS (Geographical Commands)—To address perceived inadequacies the Navy Medical Department reorganized on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1982. Hospitals in the continental United States were divided into regions with the largest treatment center in the area hospital the geographical commander and staff. Hospital commanders in the region would report to the geographical commander who would report to the Commander of the Naval Medical Command (formerly the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery). The Geographical Command experiment ended in 1989.

Gore, Al, Sr. (1907–1998). Senator Gore represented Tennessee in the U.S. Senate from 1953 to 1971. He was the father of Vice President Al Gore, Jr.

Hallett Station—Joint scientific base located on the northern tip of Hallett Peninsula in Antarctica. Home to a large Adélie penguin colony.

Higgins, Robert, RADM, MC, USN. Higgins served in the Navy from 1959 to 1993. During his career, Higgins worked in family practice, family medicine, residency training, emergency medical services and clinical services at Navy hospitals in Bremerton; Camp Pendleton, Calif., and Charleston, S.C. He later served as the Deputy Surgeon General, 1989–1993.

Lockheed C-121 Constellation was a military transport version of the Lockheed Constellation in operation from 1947 to 1993.

Lockheed C-130 Hercules is a four-engine turboprop military transport in operation from 1954 to the present.

*March of the Penguins*—2005 Franco-American documentary about Emperor Penguins in the Antarctica. English-version was narrated by the actor Morgan Freeman.

McCain, John (1936–)—Former naval aviator who was shot down on a bombing mission to Hanoi and in captivity from 1967 to 1973. Upon his release, McCain received medical treatment and endured months of physical therapy at Naval Hospital Jacksonville. McCain was first elected to the Senate in 1987.

*Merck Manual*—Medical reference book first published in 1899 as *Merck's Manual of the Materia Medica*.

McMurdo Station—research center on the south tip of Ross Island on the shore of McMurdo Sound in Antarctica. It is operated by the United States through the U.S. Antarctic Program, a branch of the National Science Foundation. McMurdo is the largest station in Antarctica capable of supporting over 1,200 residents.

Operation Deep Freeze—Codename for a series of U.S. missions to Antarctica beginning with Operation Deep Freeze I (1955-1956) and followed by Operations Deep Freeze II and so on. Given the continuing and constant U.S. presence in Antarctica since that date, "Operation Deep Freeze" has come to be used as a general term for U.S. operations on that continent, and in particular for the regular missions to resupply U.S. Antarctic bases, coordinated by the U.S. military.

Physician Assistant Program, U.S. Navy— A 1971 Bureau of Medicine and Surgery study suggested that physician assistants could relieve physicians of the basic, routine, and repetitive aspects of medical care, such as physical examinations and primary outpatient care. At this time the use of physician assistants in outpatient care was rapidly on the rise in military and civilian settings. But with only about eighteen hundred graduate physician assistants nationally, it was apparent that the services would be unable to recruit sufficient numbers. The Army and Air Force began employing physician assistants in the early 1970s. In 1971, the Air Force started a Physician Assistant program at the School of Health Sciences, Sheppard Air Force Base. The Navy joined the program in 1972. Soon after, the program was accredited by the University of Nebraska Medical School. Students completing the school were awarded a bachelor's degree.

Red Ryder BB Gun—first manufactured by the Daisy Outdoor Corporation in the 1930s, the Red Ryder level-action BB gun was inspired by the Red Ryder comic strip (1938-1964). The gun is still in production to this day.

Sparkman, John (1899-1985). Senator Sparkman represented Alabama in the U.S. Senate from 1946 to 1979.

USS *Grand Canyon*—A Shenandoah-class destroyer built at the end

of World War II. It was reclassified as a repair ship (AR-28) in 1971 and decommissioned in 1978. HMCM Harris was attached to the ship from Oct 1977 - 01 Sep 1978.

Water buffalos-Portable water storage tanks.

Williams (Willy) Field is a U.S. airfield at McMurdo Station, Antarctica.

The date is October 14, 2015. Today we have the great pleasure of speaking with retired Master Chief Petty Officer James Harris. Over the course of his 30 years on active duty, Master Chief Harris served in a wide variety of positions across the Navy Medicine enterprise, aboard ship, ashore, and also in the southern most region of the globe. Today we'll be looking back on his distinguished career. This session is being conducted as part of the BUMED Oral History Project.

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Q: Master Chief, thank you very much for participating in this project. It really is an honor.

Oral histories are first and foremost narratives, and all narratives must have a beginning. I would like to start off with your beginning. I know you were born in Montgomery, Alabama, but you grew up in Fairfield,<sup>1</sup> Alabama. What are your earliest memories?

A: I can remember moving from Montgomery to Fairfield, and it was basically for economic reasons. Fairfield was a steel town, United States Steel, and my family actually moved there so that my father would have better work opportunities.

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<sup>1</sup> Fairfield, AL—City founded in 1910. It was the hub of U.S. Steel for much of the twentieth century.

Q: So your father worked in the steel industry?

A: He worked in the steel mills after the war, basically.

Q: Your parents were Jim and Gertrude, right?

A: Correct.

Q: What do you recall about your parents?

A: They were pretty nurturing parents. My mom, probably, had a bigger influence in raising the children than my father did at that time. Basically, men were involved with trying to put food on the table and a roof over their kids and clothes on the backs, so most of my nurturing was done by my mother.

Q: Now, you're one of eight children. Where do you fit in the pecking order?

A: Right in the middle.

Q: So you're the most well-balanced of them all?

A: I believe so, although they would argue that.

Q: Do you have any fond memories of your childhood?

A: Actually plenty. Fairfield, at the time, wasn't really rural, but it really wasn't urban either. There were a lot of wooded areas that my brother John and I would have

adventures in. We would play Cowboys and Indians and go out and pretend we were on hunting expeditions with our little Red Ryder<sup>2</sup> BB guns. We had a great time. There were not a lot of paved streets in Fairfield, so it was always a challenge not to track mud in the house. Of course, we would always be disciplined by our mother for dirtying up our linoleum floor.

Q: Did you have any aspirations growing up? Anything that you wanted to pursue?

A: Actually, we had one black physician in Fairfield, Dr. William Drake. He was more of a doctor to us; he was almost family. He would let me play with his stethoscope and whenever he made a house call he would pull up in a nice black car.

When my uncle—Uncle Green—lived with us he developed some type of respiratory problem and actually died in our house. Dr. Drake let me put his stethoscope to Uncle Green's chest, and everybody had a little laugh, although it was a sad occasion when I pronounced him dead.

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<sup>2</sup> Red Ryder BB Gun—first manufactured by the Daisy Outdoor Corporation in the 1930s, the Red Ryder level-action BB gun was inspired by the Red Ryder comic strip (1938-1964). The gun is still in production to this day.

Also during that time, my mom was afflicted with diabetes, not the Type 2 type, but the bad type of diabetes. A side effect of this was she would always have boils on her body. She allowed me to lance the boils and drain them, and she also allowed me to give her her insulin shots.

Q: That's a lot of responsibility for a child.

A: Yes, I had to have been about 12 years of age.

Q: You're growing up in Alabama in the 50s and 60s when the state was center stage for the civil rights movement and a lot of iconic moments in American history. Were you exposed to any of this growing up?

A: Yes, quite a bit of it. Of course, I joined the Navy in 1962, so prior to that time I went to a segregated school, Fairfield Industrial High School.

Q: That was the school Willie Mays attended.<sup>3</sup>

A: Yes, he did, but I never met him. I actually was too young at the time to know who the high school students were, although in later years I did meet some of the people that were legends.

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<sup>3</sup> Willie Mays played football and soccer at Fairfield Industrial High School. He graduated in 1950.

But Fairfield was a segregated school, and, in fact, just about the whole community I lived in was segregated. We still had some interactions with white people. I do remember riding in the back of the busses and the signs on water fountains.

Q: When did you decide to actually go into the Navy?

A: I was a pretty good student in high school, in fact, an Honor Society student. I also wanted to be the most popular kid in school, so I put off some of the things that I should have been doing until the last minute, like applying for college. I had applied to Tuskegee Institute, now Tuskegee University and in July I had not heard back from them. I knew that I did not want to hang around the house and work in the steel plant. That was the last thing on my mind to do, so I went to the recruiting station in July [1962] and took the test. It was too late at that time to bail out.

I can tell you that when I joined the Navy I went to the recruiting station and they give you a test to take. The petty officer who administered my test looked like he had been having a bad day until he graded my test, and suddenly got very excited; he called the other petty officers and the chief at the recruiting station to look at

my results, and he said, "When do you want to sign? When do you want to go? You can leave today if you want to go." So, I must have done pretty good on that test.

Q: I guess there's no turning back at this point. So, you go out to boot camp in San Diego?

A: Right.

Q: Do you know why you ended up in San Diego versus Great Lakes?

A: My recruiter told me "You're from Alabama. I know you don't want to go up there and freeze in Great Lakes, so I'm going to send you to San Diego." So that's how I got to San Diego.

Let me just backtrack. At Fairfield we were placed on a Greyhound bus to Montgomery where the induction center was located. Now, one of the things that would occur at the recruiting station is the person that had the highest score on the entrance exams would be in charge of the group, and our group was a mix of young whites and young blacks. I was given everybody's papers and when we got to Montgomery and we stopped at a restaurant for lunch while we waited for someone from the induction center to pick us up. When we got to this restaurant the manager met us at the front door

and he wanted to know who had the meal tickets. So I told him I did and I gave him the meal tickets and he told the white guys in our group, "Okay, you guys come with me and you guys stay right here for one minute." So he took the white guys through the front door and he escorted us around to the back. And we stayed in the kitchen with the black employees from the restaurant, and I think that we probably made out better in the back because they just loaded themselves with all kinds of food.

That contrasted to the induction center. At the induction center everybody got along so well. It didn't matter what race you were, people wanted to know about you. We would play card games, and tell jokes; it was just a bunch of guys getting to know each other. The same thing occurred at boot camp.

Q: Did you feel like you're all in this together?

A: Definitely. When I got to boot camp, I definitely felt "we're all in this together." There was no one sleeping on one side of the room. There might be a white guy sleeping underneath you or over you in the bunk bed, so it really didn't matter.

Q: What were your first impressions of the Navy then?

A: I was a non-swimmer too, I forgot to tell you.

Q: Why did you pick the Navy?

A: Nobody told me that to qualify to be in the Navy I had to learn how to swim. I should have figured that out. So, being a non-swimmer, I had to go to swim class and backstroke the length of the pool before I qualified in the Navy. But it was very obvious to me that the Navy was going to be a place where I could probably learn some new stuff and actually develop some relationships that I had not previously had.

Q: How's your swimming today?

A: To this day I don't take baths. I take showers because I don't want to be in any standing water.

Q: So, tell me how you ended up at corps school. Did you have to take the ASVAB?<sup>4</sup>

A: Yes, I did. I think it gave me direction on what I wanted to do, and helped me realize that I could have done a lot more in high school if I had prepared myself. I was selected by my company commander as an outstanding recruit.

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<sup>4</sup> ASVAB—Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery

And when I did take the ASVAB test, I qualified for the HM NEC which turned out to be a good decision. So I wound up going to San Diego for Corps School after boot camp.

Q: During your time at Corps School, did anything stand out about your training? Any notable classmates or instructors?

A: We had a Nurse Corps officer in our company who was very, very intense. She and our Chief prepared us militarily and academically to be members of the Navy health care delivery team. One of the things that stood out in my mind was the wide ranging curriculum from anatomy and physiology to patient care. It was almost like a junior nurse program to me. One of the things that stood out that I didn't know was happening was that they were also keeping track of your grades of tests. Again, when it was time to graduate, I was informed that I was the honor student, and I had no idea that I was the honor student. The only thing I knew is when the test was put in front of me I knew the answers and I needed to put it on the paper, but I didn't realize that they were keeping track of scores.

Q: Was the Corps School located near the Balboa Hospital then?

A: It was at Hospital Corps School Command, San Diego on the hospital grounds. In fact, we also had to do an internship,

or externship, at the hospital under some of the Hospital Corpsmen who were on the ward.

Q: After graduating in March 1963 you get orders for the Naval Hospital, Memphis?

A: That's right, the wooden structure that was on Millington-Arlington Road.

Q: Was this located near the air station?

A: Right, right down the road from the naval air station.

Q: What was your job?

A: I was a general duty corpsman at the time. They did a rotation and I started out in the medical ward, and then I went to the pediatric ward, and from there to the newborn nursery. I went to the sick officer's quarters (SOQ), and my last rotation was in the outpatient records area.

Q: So any experiences stand out in your mind?

A: Oh yes, quite a bit. I was just looking at an article when I was "Sailor of the Month" for something that had occurred, and it was during the time before they had the dialysis equipment that they have now. There was a system where you actually collected fluids from the patient and filtered them back into his system to try to help his

kidneys work. I was chosen for a special watch to do that on a World War II veteran, and it was kind of interesting, but also stressful on account of it being uncomfortable for him. We were trying to keep him alive and I was happy to see that dialysis technology has actually improved since then. But I had so many good experiences working on the wards in Memphis.

When I was on the SOQ, there were quite a few retired officers who had been prisoners of war in World War II, and one of them that took a liking to me. His name was Rear Admiral Cunningham,<sup>5</sup> and I remember he wrote a book called *Wake Island Command* (1961). In fact, at the start of the war he was the senior officer present at Wake Island, but, of course, after it was captured, a Marine Corps officer, who he outranked, was placed in command at Wake Island. Admiral Cunningham gave me a copy of his book and he signed it. I don't think he ever forgave the Navy for doing that to him; he felt that he should have gone down in history as the senior man present there. And I could just see that that hurt him.

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<sup>5</sup> RADM Winfield Cunningham, USN (1900-1986). In 1941, Cunningham commanded naval activities on Wake Island and was responsible for its defense before its capture on 23 December 1941. Cunningham would spend the next 1330 days as a prisoner of war. In 1961, he wrote the book, *Wake Island Command* relating his experiences.

I remember while rotating through the SOQ we had to prepare hot toddies for the patients before they went to bed. It was interesting to see how that all went to the wayside.

Q: I can't believe that. You guys were part bartender as well.

A: That's right, the alcohol, of course, was under lock and key like other controlled substances were, but the nurses would measure out a shot and we would mix it with Coke or juice, or whatever the officers would want, and they would get that before lights out.

Q: That's wild.

A: Yes, when I tell these stories to my grandchildren they really don't believe me. They think I'm making it up, but I'm not.

Q: I've talked to people and they tell me that alcohol certainly was rampant in the Navy for many years.

So how did you end up over in Key West? That's another hospital we don't have anymore.

A: I went to Key West because I got promoted. When I was advanced to petty officer third class, Naval Hospital, Memphis had its quota of Petty officer third classes, so

they had to go where there were shortages. I ended up in Key West. And, of course, during that time I could have been deployed to Vietnam, so I guess Key West was okay.

Q: Was there that feeling that with war escalating in Vietnam that you would eventually be deployed?

A: I was always prepared to go to Vietnam, and for some strange reason my number and name was never came up, but I was always prepared to go.

Q: One of the other things that happened in Key West, I guess you married your wife?

A: Correct.

Q: In 1966. If you don't mind me asking, how did you meet Roselyn?

A: I'm not going to say I met her at church. Actually, one of her cousins introduced her to me and after that we kind of lost touch. I met her again while I was just walking down Duval Street<sup>6</sup> in Key West, and we started talking and started dating after that.

Q: I can imagine. Key West seems like an ideal spot for a honeymoon.

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<sup>6</sup> Famous street in downtown Key West running a mile north and south from the Gulf of Mexico to the Atlantic Ocean. The street is named after Florida's first territorial governor, William Pope Duval.

A: Yes, actually we didn't have a big wedding or honeymoon at all during that time. I reenlisted right before we got married and chose to go to X-ray technician's school. I actually left her in Key West and went to school in Bethesda.<sup>7</sup>

Q: Why did you choose X-ray school?

A: At Key West we rotated through the various departments from the emergency rooms to the wards to other areas of the hospital, and I happened to spend a couple of weeks in the X-ray department with a technician that was willing to talk to me and to tell me how well he liked his job. So when it came time to re-enlist, I requested X-ray school and I guess an inducement to re-enlist, and I was granted it.

Q: This was a seven month program?

A: Yes.

Q: You follow this with a DUINS tour at Bethesda from February to August 1967. What did that entail?

A: When we completed the first phase of the X-ray technician program, we went to Bethesda. All of us were assigned to

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<sup>7</sup> X-Ray Technician (Class - C), NMS, NNMC Bethesda, MD (Honor Man) 16 Aug. 1967

Bethesda because of a shortage of travel money, and so we worked in the X-ray department; we went through the various inter-departmental phases of the department from the chest X-ray rooms to the general shooting areas to the special procedure areas. We just rotated through all those areas of the Bethesda X-ray department.

Q: What was it like to work at the Navy's flagship hospital back then?

A: There was a big divide between students and staff members at the hospital at Bethesda. The staff members looked upon us as being intruders into their territory. So anything we did was just blown out of proportion.

I enjoyed some of the things that occurred while I was there. In the chest X-ray department I managed to do physical chest X-rays on quite a few senators who would come in for their annual physicals. I also wound up X-raying one of the vice-president's wives.

Q: Was it Mrs. Humphrey?

A: Yes, that's exactly who it was. I wound up doing a chest X-ray on her.

Q: Were these people friendly?

A: Oh yes. The senators were very friendly; in fact, I had a great conversation with Al Gore.<sup>8</sup> He was really a nice guy and he gave me a ticket and he said, "I want you to come to the Senate to see the greatest show on Earth." I remember exactly what he said. But they were always so nice to talk to and they were gentlemen.

I think the Secret Service people who always accompanied them, or whoever their aides were, would ask, "Why are they taking so much time with this guy?" I even asked Senator Gore about the Alabama senator, John Sparkman,<sup>9</sup> and he said, "I'll tell him you asked about him."

Q: You mentioned earlier about the dialysis equipment at Memphis. What type of X-ray equipment were you using at Bethesda?

A: The equipment has definitely changed from the time I was there and when I got to Naval Hospital, Jacksonville. In Bethesda, they taught us how to use formulas so that you would know how much radiation to expose the patients to when you X-rayed certain portions of their body. When I started using new equipment I would actually learn all over

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<sup>8</sup> Senator Al Gore, Sr.(1907-1998) represented Tennessee in the U.S. Senate from 1953 to 1971. He was the father of Vice President Al Gore, Jr.

<sup>9</sup> Senator John Sparkman (1899-1985) represented Alabama in the U.S. Senate from 1946 to 1979.

again because I didn't need to do all of that factoring to try to get good pictures or readable X-rays or radiographs.

Q: I have to say when I was reading over your chronology I was amazed to see the three deployments to Antarctica, and I've never spoken to anyone who's served in the South Pole. I understand you had a deployment to McMurdo Station<sup>10</sup> then two deployments to Hallett Station.<sup>11</sup> Can you tell the story of how that came about and how you ended up there?

A: I really don't know how I ended up in Antarctica supporting activities. Leaving the second part of the radiology technician course, we were supposed to be going to hospitals where we could utilize the training that we had just gotten. So when Antarctica support activities came up as my next duty station, I just wondered what it was going to be. Antarctica support activities at the time was located at the Seabee base in Davisville,<sup>12</sup> Rhode Island, and I was assigned to the clinic there at the Seabee base; it had an X-ray room there, just one room, and it already had a technician assigned there. I had very little X-ray

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<sup>10</sup> McMurdo Station—research center on the south tip of Ross Island on the shore of McMurdo Sound in Antarctica. It is operated by the United States through the U.S. Antarctic Program, a branch of the National Science Foundation. McMurdo is the largest station in Antarctica capable of supporting over 1,200 residents.

<sup>11</sup> Hallett Station—Joint scientific base located on the northern tip of Hallett Peninsula in Antarctica. Home to a large Adélie penguin colony.

<sup>12</sup> Davisville, RI—Home of the Naval Construction Battalion Center from 1942 to 1994. HMCM Harris was based at Davisville for Antarctic Support Activities from Sep 1967 – 15 Oct 1970.

experience before the deployment, so I wound up working in the health records section of the clinic. We made sure that the volunteers for Operation Deep Freeze<sup>13</sup> got all of the physicals that they needed so that they would actually be qualified and mentally ready for the challenges of living in an isolation for a year. I wound up in that area and it was really beneficial to me because I learned every facet of the Navy health records systems and what was included on every page, and how the rest of it was supposed to be as simple and how to make these appointments so that people would get their psychiatric evaluations and everything else that they had to have prior to a deployment to Antarctica.

I was dealing with people who were getting ready to go down there either for summer support, or for Operation Deep Freeze, which meant you would only be down there for about six months. That's basically how I got there on the six-month deployment.

Q: What sort of preparations do you need to make health wise for a six month deployment to Antarctica?

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<sup>13</sup> Operation Deep Freeze—Codename for a series of U.S. missions to Antarctica beginning with Operation Deep Freeze I (1955-1956) and followed by Operations Deep Freeze II and so on. Given the continuing and constant U.S. presence in Antarctica since that date, "Operation Deep Freeze" has come to be used as a general term for U.S. operations on that continent, and in particular for the regular missions to resupply U.S. Antarctic bases, coordinated by the U.S. military.

A: First of all, you had to pass the physical, but the biggest concern was dental. You had to make sure there was a dentist that took over in McMurdo. You had to make sure that they did not have any type of medical abnormalities that would cause a problem while they were on the ice. They also had to pass a psychiatric evaluation which determined their stability for being on the ice. So, we would have to go over all those type of things and if we spotted anything that looked out of the norm after they had come back from their consultations, we would take it to the Antarctic support physicians and they would make a determination if this person was fit to be a part of Operation Deep Freeze.

Q: So, when did you finally go down?

A: We would leave in September and we would go to Christ Church, New Zealand. And once we got in Christ Church, New Zealand, we were outfitted with our Antarctic cold weather gear from parka to mukluk boots. Once you got your winter clothing, we were scheduled on either a C-121<sup>14</sup> or C-130<sup>15</sup> to Williams Field<sup>16</sup> in McMurdo. These flights normally took

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<sup>14</sup> The Lockheed C-121 Constellation was a military transport version of the Lockheed Constellation in operation from 1947 to 1993.

<sup>15</sup> The Lockheed C-130 Hercules is a four-engine turboprop military transport in operation from 1954 to the present.

<sup>16</sup> Williams (Willy) Field is a U.S. airfield at McMurdo Station, Antarctica.

about ten hours from Christ Church, New Zealand to Antarctica.

Q: Are you deploying with your medical unit or the entire team?

A: A part of a medical unit would be on our plane, but most of it would be Seabees and other ratings that were going down for either summer support or wintering over. We were actually relieving the people who had been there for Winter, the crew that spent the winter months in Antarctica and we would bring a fresh crew of people to take their places. So when we got there the people would be packed and ready to go home.

Q: Were they quite pleased about leaving at that point?

A: They were more than happy to be leaving. And I think most of them probably had their fill of seeing the same 50 to 100 people every day. They were probably just fed up after a year of doing that, but I'm sure they had good experiences too.

Q: I picture of place that's cold and bleak. How were you able to get through this?

A: On the contrary, if you recall, winter starts in Antarctica in June, so in September you're actually getting there in

the spring getting ready for the summer season. The skies are bright blue; and you're only going to see three colors- white, blue, and some black, that's it. And the black is from volcanic ash from some of the mountain volcanoes that were in Antarctica, so every day was basically sunshine. During the summer you were too busy to become depressed because your workday was maybe a 12 hour day, and you could work long days because the sun was up forever. You kept busy redeploying and making sure that the winter-over people had everything that they needed, and so you really didn't have time to sit around and be sad. There were always fun things that were going on there.

When I was there there was no such thing as women in Antarctica. I really don't know when they started letting women winter-over our summer support, but I can tell you that up until 1970 when I left, you only saw men.

Q: It seems like a very rough assignment. Are there any days that stand out in your mind as particularly memorable?

A: Yes. When I went to Hallett I was trained to do everything that was necessary to do as an Independent Duty Corpsman with about 18 active duty military people. That was kind of stressful. My best friend at the time was the *Merck*

*Manual*.<sup>17</sup> So, anytime anybody came in with health problems, I immediately referred to the *Merck Manual*, and I figured out how to take care of them. The biggest thing was to have people take care of themselves.

For instance, one of the things that can occur in Antarctica is rapid dehydration. If you do not drink water regularly you can actually start dehydrating. Of course, without water through your kidneys and through your bladder you can develop kidney stones, and that did occur to one of the guys that was assigned to me at Hallett Station.

Once we landed at Hallett Station and established communications, the plane took off and left us there by ourselves. To get redeployed until the ice on Hallett Bay melted, we had to build an "ice runway." I assisted the Seabees in building the runway because as a Corpsman, unless somebody got sick, I really didn't have that much to do. I would do everything possible to stay busy helping other people as best I could. Once we built the ice runway, we could have redeployments for as long as the ice was thick enough for a plane to land on. If the thickness of

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<sup>17</sup> *Merck Manual*—Medical reference book first published in 1899 as *Merck's Manual of the Materia Medica*.

the ice got so that a plane could not land we did not get resupplied.

Q: How did you how thick the ice was?

A: The Seabees would come in and they would survey a landing site and it would have to be 6,000 feet long and, I believe, 200 to 300 feet wide for the planes to land on it. The Seabee equipment operators would have to come in with a tractor to smooth out the ice and the snow drifts so that planes could land.

While there I worked with one of the smartest chiefs that I have ever known in my whole life; his name was Chief Bak and he was actually of Polish descent. He was used to the snow, so that was a good advantage for us. But he taught me just about everything that I needed to know in the event something happened to him. The ice needed to be six feet uniformly deep to support a plane. We would drill these holes in the ice; I guess they were about 100 feet apart, to make sure the uniform thickness was at least six feet. Once we'd drill the hole, Chief Bak had devised a system where we would pour oil and antifreeze into the hole that we had dug, and then we would put a weight on one end of the wire, and anchor it at the top. And the wire would be something like ten feet long. We would pull the wire up

and as long as the top of the wire was four feet from the surface of the ice we were in good shape, but when it started getting to be five feet from the surface and four feet from the surface we would send messages back to Air Operations at Williams Field near McMurdo telling them that it was unsafe for the planes to land on our ice runway. They would then cut off flights to Hallett Station.

Q: I'm trying to picture these C-121s and C-130s landing on the ice without slipping off. How did they land and not slip off the runway?

A: I should have mentioned that. The planes coming into Antarctica were equipped with skis.

So to get back to the kidney stones, one of the guys did develop kidney stones. He would drink coffee, but never water or juices. We finally got him to force fluids down and he finally passed that stone. This may appear to have been a small problem but taking a plane out of the rotation for a Med-Evac would have had a great impact on the re-supply schedule. I was very happy when we finally got him to pass the stone, and so was he.

Q: What was the Navy doing in Antarctica at this time?

A: The Navy was actually involved in research projects mostly in support of scientific research. The United States Antarctica Research Program was doing a lot of research in the area, and the Navy's prime purpose for being in Antarctica at that time was to support them.

Q: Anything surprise you about your service down there?

A: Yes. Again, I was telling you about Chief Bak. He didn't let us go out exploring because he knew there were crevices in the ice that inexperienced people would probably not see. He would not allow us to go exploring on our own, but he could do stuff like that himself, and what he did is he found a glacier near Hallett Station that was running pure water. Are you familiar with the term "water buffalo?"<sup>18</sup>

Q: Yes.

A: On this glacier he devised a little way that we could load up our water buffalos with this pure glacier water and take it back to Hallett Station and then put it into our hot water tubers. Unlike McMurdo and the other stations that took GI showers where you soap down and rinse off, we did not have that problem. We could actually just stand under

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<sup>18</sup> Water buffalos—Portable water storage tanks.

the water and take a five minute shower if we wanted to because we were getting this pure glacier water.

When Chief Bak allowed us to wander around, we would come across some artifacts lefts by earlier Antarctic explorations. We would find remnants of little huts with provisions. There's all kind of history down in Antarctica.

Hallett Station was also one of these unique places where people collect special stamps that go on post cards.

Q: First day cancellations?

A: Yes. We would always get these requests. I was also designated as the postmaster for Hallett Station. Any job that nobody else wanted, the Corpsman was designated with those duties. We would get all of these requests and they would send us all their postcards and I would stamp our little Hallett Station logo on them.

Q: Did you see any penguins while you were down there?

A: The unique thing about Hallett Station is that it is on the edge of a penguin rookery. There's Hallett Bay, where the station sits, and right behind Hallett Bay is an Adélie penguin<sup>19</sup> rookery. The penguins would start coming in December. All of a sudden you would see maybe five, then

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<sup>19</sup> Adélie Penguin—Native to Antarctica, Adélie Penguins are among the most southerly distributed of all birds.

the next day you would see maybe 1,000, and then after that you would see hundreds of thousands of Adélie penguins all over the place building their little nests out of the rocks and getting ready to lay their eggs. They were very noisy, but they were very interesting to watch.

Q: I hope they didn't put you on penguin duty.

A: Actually, we did a lot of penguin watching, and we would also look out for them. The penguins just seemed to be, can I say? Kind of helpless. There's a predatory bird in Antarctica that preys on penguin young and penguin eggs called a Skua Gull.<sup>20</sup> And this Skua Gull would use all types of techniques. If you have seen "March of the Penguins"<sup>21</sup> you know. They would try to distract the male penguin from the nest so that the other Gull could sneak in and steal the eggs. Or if a little penguin would wander away from the group, the Gulls would immediately attack and kill him and eat him. So, of course, we nice Americans tried to protect as many of these little penguins as we possibly could, basically, interfering with nature. Our little efforts didn't amount to anything because this was going on 24/7 and we really couldn't make a lasting impact.

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<sup>20</sup> Antarctic or South Pole Skua—type of Gull widespread in the South Pole. Their omnivorous diet includes fish, krill, carrion and penguin eggs and chicks.

<sup>21</sup> *March of the Penguins*—2005 Franco-American documentary about Emperor Penguins in the Antarctica.

Q: What an incredible experience you had down there. Does your family ever ask you about your time in Antarctica?

A: They do all the time, and again, when I tell them some of the stories, I feed it to them so that it sounds funny. They won't think that everything was gloom and that I did not enjoy what I was doing.

Q: After your time down there you received orders for Naval Hospital Jacksonville.<sup>22</sup> What were you doing down there the first time you went through?

A: Believe it or not, the first time I went to Naval Hospital Jacksonville I was assigned as an X-ray technician. And after being in Davisville and then Antarctica, it was great to see all of this fantastic new equipment. The hospital had state of the art everything at that time—from vacuum tube ducts to the X-ray equipment. It was a real revelation and I had to learn how to, basically, take X-rays all over again because I hadn't really done any of that in the last three years.

Q: Anything stand out in your mind about your first foray in Jacksonville?

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<sup>22</sup> HMC Harris served at Naval Hospital Jacksonville from 26 Oct 1970 – 31 Jul 1973.

A: Yes, my first trip to Jacksonville started in the 1970s right as the Vietnam War was winding down. One of the things that I remember is Senator John McCain<sup>23</sup> coming to the hospital after his captivity. Since his family was in the Jacksonville area he actually wound up being treated at the hospital. I also remember his first wife Carol and son were also patients at the hospital. You may know that they were involved in a really serious car accident<sup>24</sup> and most of their aftercare was provided in Jacksonville.

During that time, we had quite a few POWs in the area, so their families all got the red carpet treatment whenever they came to the hospital for any type of care. They were escorted to the various clinics. And, of course, when Mrs. McCain would come to X-ray she got "head-of-the-line" privileges; she was really a super nice lady. I remember X-raying her a couple times, but I didn't get a chance to X-ray Senator McCain. The POWs were well-protected by Navy Intelligence. They had actually prepared one floor, it was on the sixth floor of the hospital, for the returning POWs, and these rooms were refurbished for their convenience with basically stuff that they would need. But normally they

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<sup>23</sup> Senator John McCain (1936-)—Former naval aviator who was shot down on a bombing mission to Hanoi and in captivity from 1967 to 1973. Upon his release, McCain received medical treatment and endured months of physical therapy at Naval Hospital Jacksonville.

<sup>24</sup> Carol Swepp McCain (1938-)—First wife of John McCain (married 1965-1980). She was seriously injured in a car accident in December 1969.

didn't stay in those rooms too long because they wanted to be at home with their families.

During the time I was at the hospital the AMA<sup>25</sup> was trying to figure out how they could shore up the shortage of healthcare workers, nurses and doctors. I remember that Jacksonville was one of the places where they started doing the physicians assistants training with the Hospital Corpsmen<sup>26</sup> who were returning from Vietnam.

But it was very interesting. I went from Jacksonville to ADCOP, the Associates Degree Accreditation Program. This was an Associate's Degree College Completion Program. And it was a two year associate's degree program.

Q: Was that also DUINS?

A: Yes, it was. But it was all done at the college, and other than for administrative support, all of our training was actually done in the college classrooms.

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<sup>25</sup> AMA (American Medical Association)

<sup>26</sup> A 1971 Bureau of Medicine and Surgery study suggested that physician assistants could relieve physicians of the basic, routine, and repetitive aspects of medical care, such as physical examinations and primary outpatient care. At this time the use of physician assistants in outpatient care was rapidly on the rise in military and civilian settings. But with only about eighteen hundred graduate physician assistants nationally, it was apparent that the services would be unable to recruit sufficient numbers. The Army and Air Force began employing physician assistants in the early 1970s. In 1971, the Air Force started a Physician Assistant program at the School of Health Sciences, Sheppard Air Force Base. The Navy joined the program in 1972. Soon after, the program was accredited by the University of Nebraska Medical School. Students completing the school were awarded a bachelor's degree.

Q: So you go through that program and you graduate and you find yourself down in Charleston<sup>27</sup> afterwards?

A: Yes.

Q: Were you serving as an X-ray technician there as well?

A: I started off as an X-ray technician, but I was a chief petty officer. I had gotten promoted to chief petty officer while I was in ADCOP. I started off in X-ray but they'd already had a chief in X-ray, so we had two chiefs in X-ray. I wound up in the Family Practice Residency Program at Charleston working with Dr. Robert Higgins.<sup>28</sup>

Q: Well, you're serving also during the time of Elmo Zumwalt<sup>29</sup> as CNO and the Navy's changing quite a bit. Did you notice any changes taking place first hand?

A: Yes, I did. While I was at Naval Hospital Jacksonville, there were very few senior enlisted minorities there, and at the time I was an E-6, or a petty officer first class. I was called down to the personnel office and the XO was

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<sup>27</sup> HMCM Harris served at Naval Regional Medical Center Charleston, SC 13 from Jan 1975 – 17 Dec 1976

<sup>28</sup> RADM Robert Higgins, MC, USN—served in the Navy from 1959 to 1993. During his career, Higgins worked in family practice, family medicine, residency training, emergency medical services and clinical services at Navy hospitals in Bremerton; Camp Pendleton, Calif., and Charleston, S.C. He later served as the Deputy Surgeon General, 1989-1993.

<sup>29</sup> ADM. Elmo "Bud" Zumwalt (1920-2000)—Chief of Naval Operations from 1970-1974.

there, and they told me that I was going to be appointed as the "minority affairs representative" for the hospital, and they gave me the information on the duties and responsibilities. I was on the distribution list for every Z-gram that came in. I must say that the minority affairs representative position was one of the most misused positions.

Q: It was unprecedented. They probably didn't know what to do, right?

A: That is true. Everything that people did not want to be bothered with they would pass off to the minority affairs rep. If there was a person that needed to get a haircut, they would send it to me and they would call me or tell me, "Petty Officer Harris, I'm sending so-and-so to you. Would you look at him and see that he gets a haircut?" It was totally ridiculous. A lot of people misused it; a lot of minorities misused it too. Whenever they would have a disagreement about something that a petty officer told them to do the first thing that they would do would be to run to their minority affairs rep to say, "They're telling me to do this and so-and-so's not doing it. I don't know why I have to do it."

And my answer would be, "Because he outranks you and because it's an order. That's the reason why you have to do it."

Q: How long did you have that duty?

A: Until they did away with it. I think that once they came out with the equal opportunity directives, they did away with the minority affairs rep position.

Q: You had mentioned Bob Higgins, do you still talk with him?

A: I ran into him when he was attending a family practice symposium while I was on active duty, and of course, I left active duty in 1992. I know that he's up in the state of Washington, but I have not spoken with him in quite a while.

Q: What do you remember about him back then?

A: To tell you the truth, he was one of the greatest men that I have ever known. He really loved what he did, and he had these great feelings about Navy's families getting the best care in the world, and he really thought that continuity of care was one of the most important things in healthcare. If you did not have continuity of care that everything else was secondary. He really just loved being a doctor and taking care of people.

Q: Sounds like he loved what he did. Tell me about Patrol Squadron 56?

A: Patrol Squadron 56<sup>30</sup> was one of my sea duties for some strange reason, and, of course, it would have been in Jacksonville. I basically was the Senior Corpsmen in Patrol Squadron 56 and my first deployment when I left Charleston, I immediately met them in Sigonella, Sicily; they were already there. My job was to take care of my squadron personnel at the medical facility in Sigonella, Sicily, and I was only with that squadron, I think probably, around six months. I was selected for senior chief while there and after I made senior chief there was no billet for a senior chief in a patrol squadron. In fact, they were stretching it to have a chief in it to tell you the truth, so I got a call from the detailee telling me, "Congratulations on being selected senior chief. We would like for you to go to the *USS Grand Canyon*."<sup>31</sup> And so I was reassigned to the *USS Grand Canyon* in Mayport, but I did not have to make a physical move since my residence was only about 40 miles from Mayport.

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<sup>30</sup> Patrol Squadron 56 (AKA, VP-56)—Patrol Squadron in operation from 1953 to 1991. HMCM Harris served with the squadron from 19 Jan 1977 – 30 Sep 1977.

<sup>31</sup> *USS Grand Canyon*—A Shenandoah-class destroyer built at the end of World War II. It was reclassified as a repair ship (AR-28) in 1971 and decommissioned in 1978. HMCM Harris was attached to the ship from Oct 1977 – 01 Sep 1978.

Q: Now, this is a repair ship, right?

A: Right, it's a repair ship, an AR-28, I believe. It was destined to be decommissioned due to its age. I was aboard there for about 11 months before it was sent to dry dock.

Q: Well, you're at Jacksonville as Navy medicine is undergoing another transformation. I think you'd mentioned earlier about the GEOCOMMS. This is right about the time GEOCOMMS, Now the GEOCOMMS,<sup>32</sup> I guess, were somewhat controversial in their day. What do you recall about these new commands?

A: After leaving Roosevelt Roads in 1986 I was assigned to the GEOCOMM. The GEOCOMMS were set up as a middle management piece over the medical centers to try to take some of the pressure of trying to manage all of these things out of BUMED. They were placed in close proximity to Naval regional medical centers. I believe that the GEOCOMMS were impeding into their areas and I think that's where the conflict came from. The commanding officers at the regional

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<sup>32</sup> GEOCOMMS (Geographical Commands)—To address perceived inadequacies the Navy Medical Department reorganized on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1982. Hospitals in the continental United States were divided into regions with the largest treatment center in the area hospital the geographical commander and staff. Hospital commanders in the region would report to the geographical commander who would report to the Commander of the Naval Medical Command (formerly the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery). The Geographical Command experiment ended in 1989.

medical centers thought that the GEOs were middle managing them. GEOCOMMS position was designed to basically assist hospitals and get them the materials that they needed. But, of course, the commanding officers, most of them felt that they could do it themselves without that type of assistance from the GEOCOMMS. I think that the command master chiefs at the regional medical centers felt the same way to tell you the truth.

Q: Were you a command master chief at the GEOCOMM level then?

A: Yes, they call us geographical command master chief. And, of course, we would try to stay in constant contact with the command master chiefs at the dental and medical facilities that were within our geographical area. And we would do site visits to make sure that these things were in place and that they were taking care of their troops.

Q: Anything else stand out in your mind about your time in Jacksonville?

A: I think I just about covered the things that stand out the most for me and I have built some lasting friendships that still go on today with a lot of the people that I met during my time in the Navy and specifically in the Jacksonville area.

Q: As a leader in the Navy Medical Department, what do you think are the qualities that make a good leader?

A: I would say that the first thing that makes a good leader is to be an example. They should be a person that takes their job seriously, does a good job, looks good while doing it, and by doing that I mean make sure that your military appearance is always beyond standard and always outstanding. You should always make sure that you stay current on changes in the military, whether it's a regulation, a new program, or a new uniform. A good leader needs to stay current current on these things, and they should press education, whether it be formal education or whether it be getting military schooling under your belt. A good leader should tell them that the best way to get ahead is to make sure that you keep abreast and try to always expand your knowledge and to get as much education as you possibly can.

Q: Well, you spent 30 years in the Navy. During that time, what were some of the biggest accomplishments in Navy medicine? What kind of stands out in your mind as something Navy medicine should be proud of?

A: Again, Navy medicine should definitely be proud of its Family Practice Residency Program. I think that was just

fantastic. It should be proud that it is now trying to make ways for its Hospital Corpsmen to get certifications, whether it's EMTs or AART, or whatever specialty they might be in. There are now avenues for Corpsmen to get certifications and have made it easier for people to get into the commissioned areas of Navy medicine, such as the Medical Service Corps and Nurse Corps. they've created avenues for people to do that.

Q: As you look back over the course of your career, what are the aspects of your career that you're most proud of today?

A: I am most proud of the fact that when I look at the people that I have been stationed with and I see what they managed to do, I take a sense of pride in that. I take a sense of pride when people say, "Master Chief Harris is my sea daddy." That seems to be the thing that I take the most pride in. I take pride in that my family we were able to live and socialize with some of the finest people in the Navy.

Q: Well, one last question, sir. As you look back, is there anything you'd want to change about your career?

A: I really can't think of anything that I would like to change to tell you the truth. I think I advanced like I

should have. I think I did as much as I could have, and I think that I've probably been on as many winning teams as I should have been on. It just was a great career for me.

Q: That's fantastic. Master Chief, thank you very much. I'm going to turn the recorder off now.

A: My pleasure.