

U.S. NAVY MEDICAL DEPARTMENT ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL HISTORY WITH HM3 (ret.) ROBERT INGRAHAM, USN

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Interview with former HM3 Robert Ingraham, assigned to Lima Company, 3rd Battalion, 1st Marines Regiment, 1st Marine Division in 1966. Edited, amended, and expanded by Mr. Ingraham in September and October, 2006. He was wounded in action during Operation Utah in Quang Ngai Province on 5 March 1966. On that day, the 3rd Battalion suffered 42 killed and 102 wounded in an attack by North Vietnam Army troops (although the official Marine Corps after-action report indicates that only Viet Cong were involved). Lima Company's casualties were 10 killed and 20 wounded. Third Battalion had 42 killed and 102 wounded.

Where are you from?

I was born in New York State in 1943, but my family moved to New Mexico in 1949. I had an ordinary middle-class American boyhood, did neither badly nor all that well in school, joined the Boy Scouts, half-heartedly tried a few sports, found my best friends in high school band, learned that I was a better-than-average writer, developed some rudimentary photography skills, and entered Western New Mexico University right after graduation from high school in 1961. I had little ambition except for a vague idea that I wanted to be a foreign correspondent, preferably a war correspondent.

Politics had never been of any great interest to me, although I was aware of the salient features and events of the Cold War. As a child I had watched newsreels of combat in Korea, and later was astonished when President Eisenhower first denied and then admitted to overflights of the Soviet Union by the U-2 spy plane. Before that, I never dreamed for a moment that an American president could or would lie. In high school, although I was a Protestant, I was swayed by the impassioned rhetoric of a local Roman Catholic priest, Father Killian Dreiling, who pilloried Communism and the Soviet Union in lectures and patriotic rallies. I became an instant disciple of President John F. Kennedy when, in his inaugural address, he told me to ask what I could do for my country. What I largely missed was the largely untold story that loomed in the background, that of the continuing civil war in Vietnam. In an American history class, I read about it in a weekly current events newspaper that we were required to subscribe to. I remember feeling a vague unease, and a premonition that Vietnam would come to impact on me *personally*.

My attempt to get a university education and continue to live at home was not successful. I failed American history because I had no respect for the professor (the most boring teacher I have ever encountered, to this day) and because I had no interest in political history. Why are so many historians so blind to social, scientific, and military history? (On the day that John Glenn first orbited the earth, the professor strode into the classroom, opened his notebook,

and lectured for an hour on John Adams or some other politician, closed his notebook, and walked out. So much for history in the making.)

I also needed to get away from home, away from my father, who was psychologically abusive, and away from my mother, who insisted on smothering. Although I had a part-time job as the local stringer for the *El Paso Times*, I was drifting, without real direction, and my parents were allowing me to drift. At a time I needed to have demands made on whatever talents I had, my parents' demands were minimal. On a fateful, cold, rainy night in early October, 1962, while my dispirited "pep" band played soggy "fight" songs for the university football team, I complained to a female friend about the sad state of my life. I couldn't complain to my girlfriend, because she was home with a cold. "Bob," my friend said, "you should join the Navy." The very next day I went to the local Navy recruiter, who promised that I could be a Navy journalist. I signed my recruitment papers in Albuquerque on 15 October 1962. Why the Navy? I had never seen an ocean and I longed to go to sea.

Did you go to boot camp in Great Lakes, or San Diego?

I went to boot camp in San Diego, and while I had pretty much forgotten about Vietnam, I almost immediately came face to face with Cold War politics. I had been a recruit for only a few days when we were all marched to a parade ground and told that our enlistments had been extended indefinitely because of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

The remainder of my recruit training was routine, and valuable from the standpoint of personal development. I gained a new self-confidence, and for the first time in my life I developed muscles that actually showed! I gained 27 pounds in boot camp, none of it fat. I also developed a great respect for our recruit company commander, Chief Petty Officer James O. Henley. In some ways, he was more of a father to me than my own father had been, and I knew instinctively that he was a man who would die for any of us, if necessary. By the end of boot camp, I would certainly have died for him.

I have to mention our first marching experience with Chief Henley, if it could be called marching. He was patient with our civilian clumsiness, and charmed me with his guttural-yet-musical marching cadence, which sounded like, "Airlip, airlip, airlip-rye-leh! Airlip, airlip, airlip-rye-leh!" Although the intent was clear, it took me a couple of days to figure out exactly what he was growling: "Your left, your left, your left-right-left!"

I grew to love Chief Henley. His steadfastness and openness were something new in my life. His expectations were clear but not excessive, and his punishments--sometimes severe--were meted out

without rancour. One recruit who suffered Chief Henley's displeasure was a dirty recruit. Dirty, at least, in the chief's eyes. Our recruit commander reported to Chief Henley that the recruit had not been bathing. It was, in truth, a serious offense given the closeness of our living conditions and the constant threat of disease, including meningitis, which had recently killed a recruit in the barracks next to ours. Chief Henley's solution was basic: he ordered the recruit to put a clean garbage can on a table, fill it with soap and cold water, and climb in and clean himself with a stiff bristle brush, the same kind of brush that we used to scrub our clothes every evening. He scrubbed. And he scrubbed and he scrubbed, from stem to stern, so to speak. At the end, that recruit was the cleanest among us, and red. Very red. He paid more attention to personal hygiene after that.

My dream of being a Navy journalist ended a few weeks before the end of boot camp. We had taken various aptitude tests, including a sonar test which I failed utterly. I stepped up to a petty officer at a table and waited to hear where I would attend Naval journalism school. He looked at my record, which included my college transcript. Noting that I had taken an ecology course, he said, "You'd make a good corpsman!" And I did. I didn't really mind: a journalist, after all, needs a broad education, and being a corpsman seemed like it might be interesting.

I was assigned to Hospital Corps School at Balboa Naval Hospital in San Diego, where I fell silently in love with Miss Curteau, our company nurse, and did well in my course work, placing 11th in a class of 32. Corps School had its sobering moments. I encountered death for the first time, when a sailor I had been caring for the previous day died from septicemia. He was unresponsive on the first day I was assigned to his ward; I reported for my shift the next day to find his bed empty.

On another occasion, we recovered "casualties" from a "battlefield" on a steep slope beside our barracks: I learned how difficult it is to move an inert human body, even on a quiet California hillside. It was probably about that time that the reality of being a corpsman struck home: we *could* find ourselves in harm's way. There was a wall in the Hospital Corps School administration building filled with framed photographs of corpsmen, each of whom had died in combat.

At the end of Hospital Corps School, in a stroke of extraordinary good luck, I was the only corpsman in my company to have his "dream sheet" dreams fulfilled: I was assigned to the duty station I had requested--the U.S. Naval Hospital at Yokosuka, Japan.

My tour of duty in Japan was a wonderful adventure, right from the beginning when I flew to Japan on a MATS (Military Air Transport

Service) C-121 Constellation. By today's standards, it was a gruelling flight--26 hours in the air from Travis Air Force Base near San Francisco to Hickam Field on the Hawaiian island of Oahu, overnight to Wake Island, then on to Tokyo. The highlight of the MATS flight was spending the better part of an hour in the co-pilot's seat between the States and Hawaii; I had asked the steward if I could see the cockpit. The co-pilot invited me to sit in his seat while he went for a coffee. I spotted Oahu before the pilot did.

Japan presented a kaleidoscope of new experiences. My first job at the hospital was working in the delivery room and nursery, not exactly something that I expected when I enlisted to defend my country. Our patients were Navy dependents. The babies, many of whom I helped deliver, opened my eyes to the incredible range of human joy and tragedy. Most of the babies were perfectly normal, but a few were shockingly abnormal. Twins were born, one of preemie weight but otherwise normal, his brother an anaencephalic "monster" twice as big, without a skull or a functioning brain. A baby girl would have been normal except that her prolapsed umbilical cord deprived her of oxygen. She lived about six months, completely paralyzed and unresponsive. I was not sorry to be assigned to the pediatric ward, and then to sick bay and then, because I could type, to clerical work, with sick bay duty on some evenings and weekends. I lived an idyllic life in my off-duty hours, enjoying concerts in Tokyo, teaching an English class to Japanese civilians, buying inexpensive Japanese electronics and cameras, and chasing after three very different and very attractive young Japanese women. I got a glimpse of my military destiny in early August, 1964, when I was visiting one of the women and her family in Hamamatsu City. We were watching the evening news, in Japanese, when we heard the report that an American destroyer had been attacked by North Vietnamese gunboats. That was the beginning of the infamous Tonkin Gulf Incident, in which two destroyers were supposedly attacked on consecutive days. President Johnson used this incident as a pretext to escalate American involvement in the war in Vietnam.

My tour of duty in Japan came to an end in June 1965. On my dream sheet, I requested duty on three different types of ships--an icebreaker, a cruiser, and a destroyer--but I was not surprised when I received orders for the Fleet Marine Force for training at the Field Medical Service School at Camp Del Mar, which was part of Camp Pendleton in Southern California.

I guess you knew where you were going after that.

There was no question that I was headed for Vietnam, or that the Marines were in a hurry: I had to wear my Navy dungarees through most of my of training at Camp Del Mar because they didn't have enough

Marine fatigues. The course was supposed to last a month but we were graduated after only three weeks.

After a short wait in a holding company at Pendleton, I was assigned to Mike Company of the 3rd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division, which is permanently based at Camp Pendleton. I was unpacking my seabag when I walked Chuck Pierson, a high school friend. His bunk turned out to be right next to mine. He was the company armourer and driver for the company commander.

I was at Pendleton long enough to go on liberty a few times with Chuck, and to go on one overnight hike; we practiced throwing hand grenades, and that night at chow we offered thanksgiving for the benefit of our chaplain: "Rubbadubdub, thanks for the grub, yaaaaaaay God!" Another time, we played a war game, briefly and ineffectually defending a ridge with the blank cartridges in our M14s. By late summer we were on our way to Okinawa for additional training, crossing the Pacific on an attack transport, USS *Magoffin* (APA-199). At last, I was on a real ship in the world's biggest ocean.

The *Magoffin* was no luxury liner. Our quarters were below the waterline, and our bunks were stacked three or four high. Water use was restricted and the heads became pretty foul. But we were free to go on deck (although the upper decks were off-limits) and we had no duty to speak of. I read a lot (we didn't have many books, but we shared what we had by tearing out the pages one by one and passing them on) and enjoyed watching the flying fish. South of the Aleutian Islands, we hit a squall; the Marines were ordered below for safety, but I had never experienced a squall at sea, so I found myself an out-of-the-way nook near the port bow and rode it out in the spirit of pioneering James Muir, who once climbed a tall tree during a windstorm just for the experience. That squall was the best experience of the entire voyage.

My battalion spent several months training (and waiting) at Camp Schwab, but I had been transferred to Headquarters Company from Mike Company because I needed to have a hernia repaired, and I stayed with Headquarters Company.

The most popular off-duty activities during our time in Okinawa were drinking on base and frequenting bars and brothels in nearby Henoko. We treated a dozen or so Marines for gonorrhoea and one officer for syphilis. I went on one forced hike, fired one clip of bullets with my newly issued .45 pistol, and spent a few days at the Northern Training Area (NTA) learning guerrilla warfare tactics. The NTA, located at the northern end of Okinawa, was in a mountainous area featuring a low, fetid jungle dripping with moisture. At night mushrooms, dead leaves, and branches glowed with a soft green luminescence.

During my stay at the NTA, I got had the opportunity to practice

field first aid skills on a real wound when a Marine sliced his palm open with his K-Bar knife while trying to build a sleeping platform out of small saplings. One of the sergeants who was in charge of the camp had a bottle of Jack Daniel's which I used as a disinfectant, although the sergeant was not exactly a willing supplier. I sutured the wound and it healed perfectly.

I also had my only opportunity to take command of Marines on a nighttime map-reading exercise. After an hour or so of walking in a valley and then climbing up a steep ridge in inky darkness, our squad leader didn't have a clue where we were. We appeared to be on a ledge where a misstep could have been fatal, but it was impossible to tell for sure. He dithered, but I didn't: I outranked him, and told him that we were returning to base, which we did. I got chewed out by an officer, but I knew my actions were reasonable and responsible. Later that night I felt somewhat vindicated when I helped rescue a Marine who had fallen down a steep embankment and into a stream, and fractured a femur.

As the time to embark for Vietnam came closer, activity on the base heated up. We had a battalion photo taken (I never did get a copy), and a general arrived to review the troops. He stopped in front of me and asked me if I was ready for Vietnam. "No, Sir!" I said. I could have said more, but the general moved on. Obviously, he didn't want to know more.

There were some disquieting incidents. On a hike, one of the Marines shot himself in the foot; he insisted it was accidental. Then one of our corpsmen intentionally shot himself through his right hand. He was taken away, but I never learned what happened to him; he was probably dishonorably discharged.

The most disquieting incident of all was the arrival of a group of Marines direct from combat in Vietnam, all of them aged 17 or less. The Pentagon had ordered them taken out of combat because of their age, and they were a mess: they were angry, armed, and dangerous to themselves and to others. There were fights in their barracks, which was near sick bay. It was my first glimpse of what Vietnam could do to us, assuming we survived.

In mid-January, 3rd Battalion left Camp Schwab and boarded USS *Paul Revere* (AP-248), which sailed for the Philippines for training and provisioning. We did a short forced march ashore at Subic Bay, and took part in two practice amphibious landings. The first was in Subic Bay, the second on the Island of Mindoro, where we moved inland and bivouacked near a farm. The farmer, an entrepreneur at heart, sold us a case of dusty but delicious bottles of San Miguel beer. We then re-embarked on the *Paul Revere* and steamed for South Vietnam, landing in Quang Ngai Province on the morning of 28 January 1966. Our battalion was an element of Operation Double Eagle.

You were in Vietnam pretty early in the game.

Only one other Marine unit had gone into Vietnam before us. That was the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade, which made an amphibious landing at Da Nang in March, 1965. Operation Double Eagle was also an amphibious operation, with the Marines going ashore in Mike boats much like the landing craft used on the beaches in Normandy on D-Day in 1944. The night before the landing, our battalion commander gave us a "pep talk" over the ship's PA system, but it was an uninspiring call to arms; I wondered how he had come to command a battalion.

The next morning, reveille was at 3:00 a.m. After the traditional breakfast of steak and eggs, we donned our battle gear and waited in the hold to be called on deck, where we would climb down cargo nets into the Mike boats. It would be a dangerous procedure.

There was a heavy swell running; the cargo nets were fastened to the Mike boats, which were bobbing like corks. When the Mike boats rose on a wave, the cargo nets would hang in a loop between the boat and the ship. Because of the rough sea, the Mike boats often crashed heavily against the *Paul Revere*; any Marines caught in the loop could have been crushed between the two. When the Mike boats fell away in a trough, the nets would snap taut; one Marine was halfway down the net when he was literally snapped off and fell into the sea between the boat and the ship. We thought he was a goner, but he managed to swim under the Mike boat. The first thing to appear was his hand, firmly holding onto his M14. A sailor standing near me dived in and saved him. Another Marine fell from the net and landed in the Mike boat on his head, which was fortunately protected by his helmet; we later transferred him back to the ship for treatment of concussion. When my turn came, I got about halfway down the cargo net before the Mike boat started rising on a wave. I just let go and rolled down the net and into the Mike boat, badly bruising my right knee.

The ride to the beach was unnerving. The battalion commander had told us the night before that the landing might be resisted, and I'm sure all of us had visions of D-Day going through our heads. It took a long time for all of the boats to be loaded and assembled for the landing. The gunwales of the Mike boats were too high to see over, and the rolling and pitching of the boats soon induced seasickness. My own arrival in Vietnam was more farcical than dramatic. As I was wading through the surf, my poncho came unrolled from my pack and trailed in the water. An NBC cameraman filmed the landing, but I doubt that this intrepid corpsman appeared on the evening news!

Our arrival in Vietnam, it turned out, was unopposed. Leaflets

dropped by air had warned civilians of the invasion, and apparently neither the Viet Cong (V) or the North Vietnam Army (VNA) chose to engage us. Not, at least, for a few hours. Soon after we arrived, I was sent to take a message to someone or other, and as I trudged alone across the expanse of white sand on the beach I met a young Vietnamese man, certainly of military age. We regarded each other with something that was between caution and mistrust. He wasn't armed, but I was, so he probably more worried than I. In the end, we each continued on our errands. In retrospect, I suspect that he was a VC sent to check out the arrival of the Americans. Throughout my time in Vietnam, he was only two or three young Vietnamese men I saw who weren't prisoners or who had been killed.

It wasn't long before we had our first casualty. On the night of the landing, a Marine on patrol was wounded by a sniper. The bullet grazed his scalp and plowed a furrow right across the top of his head. Our battalion surgeon sewed him up in an amtrack that had been converted to a temporary operating room. The Marine had an awfully bad headache but was, of course, very lucky. I was to treat several more wounded Marines before I myself became a casualty.

For the first several days after arriving in Vietnam, I stayed with Headquarters Company in our bivouac area on the beach. We spent time on Medical Civic Action Program (MEDCAP) visits to civilians who were living nearby on the beach. Our intentions were good, but we could do nothing substantive to help these people. They were all victims of previous fighting in Vietnam, and had taken refuge on the beach because their homes inland had become uninhabitable or no longer existed; there was a lot of evidence of previous fighting in the area. They were farmers and fishermen, and during the day men would go to sea in interesting boats with woven-reed hulls, and the women and children would go inland to work on their farms. In the evening, they would return to the beach. We held sick calls for them, and diagnosed a variety of conditions, including tuberculosis and syphilis, as well as malnutrition. But all we could do, literally, was provide Aspirin and antibiotic ointment. It made no sense to me that my country was spending millions of dollars on weapons when the people needed good medical care, good food, and good government. At that time, I assumed that the South Vietnamese government was a good government. Only years later did I learn how thoroughly corrupt and contemptible it was, and how the MEDCAP program had been, not surprisingly, a complete flop.

I first encountered death in Vietnam when a South Vietnamese soldier who had been assigned to our battalion was killed in a "friendly-fire" incident. I had volunteered to maintain a radio watch, using a walkie talkie. Night had fallen, and I was in a foxhole near the perimeter of our bivouac area near the beach where

we had landed. The soldier was a member of an ARVN unit that was operating with us--ARVN stands for Army of the Republic of Vietnam. He had needed to relieve himself, and must have wanted some privacy, because he decided to go outside our perimeter. There wasn't supposed to anyone outside the perimeter, and a Marine mistook him for a VC killed him.

I heard the shot (it wasn't far away), and then a short crescendo of rifle fire, and then on the radio some officer was shouting not to shoot, that the guy was friendly. A few more nervous rounds were fired off into the night, and then it got quiet, and eventually a squad went out to retrieve the body. My response was...interesting. I withdrew as deep as I could into my foxhole, curled into a ball (armoured with my flak jacket, which was about three sizes too big for me), and stayed there until dawn. I slept, but it was troubled sleep.

It wasn't long before I was going out with the Marines on "search and destroy" missions, which consisted mostly of endless humping through beautiful valleys and hills within a few miles of the coast. The long and boring days were sometimes punctuated by an occasional sniper round fired in our direction. Our normal response was to hit the dirt and return fire. The Marines usually expended hundreds of rounds of ammunition in return for one Communist bullet, but I'm not aware that we ever hit one of these solitary snipers, who usually but not always missed their targets.

On one occasion we had been marching all morning, and stopped for a lunch break. A Marine was sitting in an open area only a few yards away from me. Without warning, a shot rang out and he fell over. A nearby sniper had shot him through his upper right arm, shattering his humerus and blowing out his biceps. There were bits of bone on the ground. He still had feeling in his fingers and could move them, so there hadn't been any nerve damage, and he wasn't bleeding badly, but it was nevertheless a very serious wound. We called in a chopper to evacuate him. Only later did I stop to consider the danger I had put myself in by running to help him. It wasn't heroism, just an instinctive reaction. I have no idea what ultimately happened to the Marine.

Sometime in mid-February, a Lima Company corpsman was killed and I received orders to take his place, but that made little difference in the job I was doing. After 40 years, I am no longer sure of the sequence of events that I experienced. It doesn't make a lot of difference whether they occurred before or after I joined Lima Company. The point is that throughout my time with 3/1/1, I spent a lot of time with the Marines while they sought out the enemy, who continued to choose his battles rather than be drawn into them. Nevertheless, our occasional contacts with them were always

dangerous, and our casualties mounted. One casualty, resulting from a land mine, very nearly killed a 19-year-old Marine.

We were bivouacking at dusk in an area which had been occupied by Australian troops, or so we assumed because we found some Australian cigarette packs. We were about 5 miles inland at the time. Since we would be there overnight, we began enlarging the foxholes which the Aussies had apparently dug. We slept in foxholes below ground level whenever we could--if a mortar shell landed nearby and you were at surface level, you were probably going to be killed or badly wounded. But if you were in a foxhole, the shrapnel would go right over you. Of course, if a mortar round landed in your foxhole, you were obviously in trouble, but we were philosophical about that. We never used the word "killed" or "dead," though. Dead Marines or Vietnamese were always "zapped."

Anyway, the 19-year-old Marine was enlarging his foxhole with his entrenching tool (a folding shovel), stepping in and out of it many times. The last time he stepped out he triggered a "Bouncing Betty" land mine. The Bouncing Betty consists of a charge which blows an explosive canister out of the ground to about knee level, at which point the canister bursts. The Marine was about 20 yards away from me when it happened. In a micro-second, a peaceful evening was turned into hell on earth. The sound really cannot be adequately described. Think of an extremely loud comic book "**ka-BLAMMMMM!**" It seemed like the world--my world, anyway--had come to an end. I had no comprehension of what had occurred, except that whatever it was very bad. Even when debris rained out of the sky, I wasn't sure what had happened. The impact of such an explosion momentarily defines and dominates your existence. And then someone shouted for a corpsman.

I reached the Marine about the same time as another corpsman. The Marine's right leg was missing at the knee. The end of his femur was sticking right out in the air like a textbook illustration--it looked like his lower leg had just been wrenched off. His left lower leg was a bloody pulp that tapered off to nothing at what would have been his ankle. Amazingly, he was not bleeding seriously; we assumed that the explosion had cauterized his major veins and arteries. Also amazingly, he was conscious and in good spirits. This happened just as twilight was fading, and soon it was dark. We had a walkie-talkie with us which didn't work half the time, but we managed to contact a Marine helicopter pilot who was flying off the coast. The helicopter pilot managed to fly to our location and land in the dark within 10 feet of the Marine. And all we had was one weak flashlight to guide him in. We bundled the Marine into the chopper and away he went. I learned later, after I myself had been wounded and evacuated to San Diego, that he was being fitted with artificial legs.

(The morning after this incident, one of the Marines found one of his big toes several yards away from the site of the explosion.)

There was one incident in which no one was injured or killed on either side, but stands out in my memory as one of the worst incidents I recall. We were on yet another search and destroy mission when we got word that VC had been spotted in the area ahead of us. We literally ran for a long time to get to the area, which by the time we arrived had come under fire from a Marine Huey that was circling a stand of trees. I don't know the outcome of that attack, but nearby we "captured" two men who were obviously farmers, one quite elderly, the other quite a bit younger. An officer decided that the younger one should be interrogated, behind some bushes, and ordered me to hold the older man at gunpoint, which I did, reluctantly. Not surprisingly, the elderly man was terrified--I have never seen a human being shake so violently. I tried to indicate to him that he didn't need to fear me, but under the circumstances my gestures were useless. His terror was compounded when the officer decided to frighten the younger man, or perhaps both of the men, into "confessing" by pretending to execute the younger man. He fired his pistol, at which point the older man lost it, and wet himself. That was certainly a low point for me. I can only imagine the effect the incident had on the two Vietnamese men. I don't recall if we left them behind, or they were taken into custody. It was long after the war that I learned that it is illegal under the terms of the Geneva Convention to coerce information from prisoners in this manner.

On another occasion, I accompanied a squad of Marines and "PF" or "Popular Forces" personnel. The PF "soldiers" arrested several men and took them along with us, their wrists tied with bailing wire and their heads covered with black bags. When we stopped at noon to eat, the prisoners were taken into a nearby patch of bare ground field where they were told to sit. The sun was blazingly hot, and they had no food or water. The Marines and the PF rested in the shade by a cool stream for perhaps an hour. I could only wonder what specific values we were helping the South Vietnamese to uphold.

In all honesty, I cannot pretend that I was immune to the culture of combat. On another occasion, in the middle of a stifling afternoon, we were tired and on edge, having learned that there was a VC gun emplacement in the area. We soon found a small Chinese artillery piece that had been abandoned. Not far away, my squad rounded a curve on the trail that overlooked a rice paddy. Two Vietnamese men, who might have been working in the paddy, saw us and ran toward some nearby trees. I don't recall whether the Marines fired any rounds, although that was common under similar circumstances. The rule in search and destroy missions seemed to be, "Shoot first and *don't* ask questions."

By this time, I was thoroughly irritated by the day, the war, the VC, and just about everything. I took out my pistol and aimed it at the fleeing men. However, they were at least 50 yards away by that time, and I knew I had little chance of hitting them. In my one session with the pistol, on the shooting range back on Okinawa, I hadn't even hit the target at a much shorter distance! My best chance was to aim high, really high: I raised the gun about 30 degrees and pulled the trigger.

There was no effect at all on the men I was shooting at. I might as well have closed my eyes and lobbed a rock in their general direction. They just continued running and vanished in the trees. Nevertheless, that big .45 automatic made a hell of a noise and bucked in my hand in a most satisfactory manner, and for a few minutes I felt less impotent. That one shot had an impressive effect on the Marines: "Hey, Doc fired his .45! Way to go, Doc!" I holstered the pistol, relieved that I hadn't actually hit either of the men.

Another event shocked me to my core, and yet, in retrospect, it was bound to happen. If you put guns with live ammunition into the hands of nervous young men, you create a potential for tragedy. We had set out marching on the morning of a cold, rainy day. Even before we started marching, I got a chill reminder of how dangerous a situation we were in: near our bivouac area, I found a pair of Marine fatigue pants that were covered with old blood. Not a good start to the day.

I don't recall if we had breakfast, but we certainly didn't have enough food for the rest of the day: low clouds and fog were keeping supply choppers from reaching us. We walked throughout the day in a long, single file through green valleys. It never stopped raining, and the trail was ceaselessly muddy and slippery. At some point in the afternoon, we were on a trail in yet another open valley. To our right were large rice paddies, and to our left a thick vegetation. We were plodding along, wet, hungry, and miserable, when I spotted a piece of paper on the ground ahead of me. I picked it to find that it was a crudely printed Viet Cong propaganda leaflet. I still have it. I have preserved the misspelling and punctuation errors:

"TO AMERICAN SERVICEMEN IN THE SOUTH VIET-NAM

- Stop torroist raids massacre plunder, house burning and wemen raping.
- Stop spraying noxious chemicals in south Vietnam.
- 230,000 expeditinary French corpses were routed here. Don't follow their footsteps
- Don't massacre innocent children weak women!
- Death is following you every step you take in the path of war."

The message was almost laughable: to think that Americans would use "noxious chemicals"! (I would not hear about Agent Orange until long after I had left Vietnam.) I had, admittedly, seen one "hooch" torched by a Marine, but we had certainly not engaged in plunder and rape, at least not as far as I knew. There was, however, one thing about the pamphlet that was not at all funny: when I picked it up, it was almost dry, on the wettest day we had seen. The VC who dropped it on that trail had been uncomfortably close. At that moment, I had no doubt at all that Death was indeed following us.

Not many minutes later, a sniper fired a single shot at us from across the valley, putting the entire battalion to earth and causing us to uselessly fire hundreds of rounds of ammunition at a puff of smoke on the distant hillside.

We picked ourselves up out of the mud and plodded on. A while later, my squad rounded a bend in the trail and we saw an ancient man in the distance, eighty or a perhaps a hundred yards away across a rice paddy. He was walking slowly on a trail beside a stone wall, supporting himself with a walking stick. He had a long white beard, and seemed to be unaware of us. He was certainly not a threat. Without a word, our machine gunner fired aimed toward the old man and fired a burst from his M60. A tracer streaked in a nearly flat trajectory across the rice paddy and smashed into a stone wall right in front of the old man. He stopped, startled, and then fell as more bullets smashed into him. He didn't move, and we continued on our way. No one suggested that we should do a thing to help him, or even check to see if he was dead. That scene remains embedded in my memory. In my mind's eye, I have seen that tracer streak across that rice paddy thousands of times. Thousands of times the old man has stopped, and fallen. I'm not sure that he will ever die, not, at least, in my memory. Part of the tragedy was that the valley was incredibly beautiful: the emerald green vegetation and the surrounding hills were softened by the rain and mist. Thatch-roofed houses completed a picture that was the model for a Chinese scroll painting. Today I cannot look at such paintings without going back instantly to that terrible day. Unfortunately, the shooting of the old man did not bring the day to an end. It had begun badly, was going badly, and would end badly.

As evening approached, my company started climbing out of the valley. It was a tough climb for me, but it was worse for the Marines, especially those carrying the parts and ammunition for the 80mm mortar. Never before or since have I seen men perform harder physical labour than that mortar team. The mud made it all but impossible for them to ascend that steep trail. To my mind, their sheer willpower had a nobility to it equal to any human endeavor in

history.

Eventually we reached an open, flat area and decided to bivouac there for the night. It was still raining, and thick fog made it certain that we would not soon see a supply chopper. Someone in my squad produced the only food we would see that night—one can of C-Rations chicken stew. We heated it and ate it—five or six men sharing part of a meal intended for one man, after a day of strenuous exertion and psychological stress. We talked but little, in soft voices, and moved about as quietly as possible: there was occasional gunfire in the distance, and we knew well enough that VC could be very near indeed. The hillside and nearby forest were cloaked in dripping silence, and hidden in mist. The smokers among us didn't smoke for fear the aroma of the smoke or the flare of a match would reveal our position.

With the fall of night, there was nothing to do but to try to get some rest. The day and hunger had taken their toll. We didn't even try to dig foxholes. I rolled myself in my poncho and eventually slept, despite the cold rain that occasionally trickled down my neck. It was troubled sleep: I dreamed about the old man over and over, falling again and again and yet again under the hail of machine gun bullets.

I had been with Lima Company for 10 days when we were taken out of the field and sent to Da Nang. That was on 1 March 1966. We were told to take a few days R&R on the beach, after which we would spend the rest of our tour guarding the airfield. However, we would still be used as an "emergency strike force" and would be on a 2-hour standby alert. We spent the next 3 days resting, swimming in the ocean, and reading our mail--long enough to get the trots from badly prepared field-kitchen food--and then Operation Utah started. We learned about it after breakfast on the morning of 4 March 1966. Our mission was to interdict the flow of North Vietnam Army troops into South Vietnam; helicopters would pick us up that afternoon, and that's exactly what happened. Of course, in a classic Marine Corps SNAFU, Lima Company was flown to the *wrong* hill, and we marched the rest of the afternoon to get to the *right* hill. That evening, we could hear a firefight in the distance. I actually got hit by a stray bullet that night.

You were shot?

I was sitting on the hill talking with a friend when I suddenly felt a sharp pain on the inside of my left thigh, as if something small and fast had hit me. It had. I looked down to see a bullet lying on the ground. I picked it up and it was hot. It looked like it was from an M-14. It was scratched and had obviously gone through some brush and had come a long way. It didn't even bruise me. The

damn thing had bounced off my thigh! I pocketed it as a good talisman. (At the time of this incident, Mike Company of 3rd Battalion was operating nearby and had a brief engagement with VC soldiers; the bullet could have come from one of their weapons. It would have made a nice souvenir, but it later went astray.)

Throughout most of that night, naval artillery shells roared over our heads from ships offshore into the area beyond our bivouac, creating an memorable fireworks display. It's hard to believe, but I actually slept quite well that night.

The next morning at about 10:30 we moved right into the area that had been pounded the night before by artillery and where that firefight had taken place. We walked maybe a half an hour or so; signs of the artillery barrage were everywhere--tree branches were broken and slashed, and rice paddies had craters in them. During this time, a couple of Marine F-4 Phantoms dropped napalm just a few hundred yards ahead of us, without any effect unless they were trying to incinerate a bare field. We learned that a low, green hill in the distance was our objective. We started receiving some small arms fire from the hill, and the Marines returned it. At about the same time, some soldiers wearing American-style uniforms appeared at the crest of the hill and set off a yellow smoke grenade, a signal that there were wounded and a helicopter was needed. Our return fire had resulted in casualties. Someone passed the word to cease fire. We assumed at that point that the soldiers on the hill were ARVN, and we were correct. We further assumed that they had fired on us by mistake, but subsequent events caused us to question that assumption.

Specifically, the soldiers at the hilltop were members of an ARVN Ranger unit whose advisor was U.S. Army Captain Pete Dawkins of West Point football fame. The Rangers had apparently reported earlier that our objective, the hill they were on, had been secured. We then proceeded up the hill to link up with them, but within moments we were ambushed. The hill had not been secured at all, because an NVA company was well dug in on the hill between the Rangers and us.

The NVA ambush was sudden and furious. The quiet morning just exploded with gunfire and explosions. Within moments of the first shot, someone yelled for a corpsman and I went flying up the trail as fast as I could, only to encounter an unexploded naval shell. It must have been three feet long and was lying right across the trail. I assumed that it came from the bombardment the night before. I was moving so fast that I couldn't have stopped short if I had wanted to, so I just leaped over it, praying it wouldn't explode beneath me.

Just a few yards beyond, I found a Marine who had been shot. He seemed to be asleep, but a trickle of blood on his temple told a different story. I took his helmet off and the top of his head

was gone. He was breathing but unresponsive, of course, and as good as dead.

By this time, gunfire and explosions from grenades and rockets were constant. The hill was covered with thick, thorny brush that was a good 8 to 10 feet high, with trails criss-crossing in every direction. The enemy was invisible; I never did see an enemy soldier that day, but they could obviously see us: we were taking casualties every few seconds. I wasn't a Marine and had had no combat training per se, but even I knew that from a tactical standpoint it was a really bad situation.

I was called to help one of our platoon sergeants. He was lying on his back with a pumping chest wound. I was just getting ready to apply a compress to it when he twisted away and yelled, "Grenade!" I looked up to see a grenade flipping through the air right over our heads. It landed eight or 10 feet away, and I hit the deck just as it exploded. Amazingly, nobody was hurt. It was apparently a Chinese grenade: they were powerful and could certainly kill you, but if you were some distance from them, they were not nearly as dangerous as American ones. If it had been one of our grenades, both the sergeant and I and a few other nearby Marines might have been killed.

I went back to work on the sergeant and the same thing happened again. That second grenade injured a Marine next to me, who got a piece of shrapnel right through his buttocks and was out of the fight.

While I was working on the sergeant, our platoon leader was shot through the shoulder. The bullet just about tore his arm off. Just moments before, he had ordered one of our other sergeants to go up the hill and take out a sniper. The sergeant replied with a "Fuck you!" It had been a stupid order. Maybe charging up a hill toward an unseen enemy is part of Marine Corps mythology, but smart sergeants know it's pretty foolish to throw your life away like that.

I bandaged the sergeant as well as I could, and tried to patch up the lieutenant. His shoulder was mangled; for all I knew it could have been a fatal wound. Then someone said there was a wounded Marine further up the hill. So I grabbed my Unit One medical bag and went looking for him, running through those winding trails. On the way, I found a brand new Chinese entrenching tool. It didn't have a mark on it. It would have made a great souvenir but I wasn't collecting souvenirs at that point.

I soon found the Marine I was looking for. He was lying quietly on his right side. His abdomen had been blown open and his intestines were spilling out on the ground. At that moment, a Marine further down the hill yelled, "I'm gonna throw a grenade over you guys! I'm gonna get that sniper!" I didn't want to be killed by a Marine grenade, so I started to hit the dirt again. At that moment, I heard a gunshot

to my right and in the same instant was slammed to the ground by a bullet.

I had been hit on the right side of my right leg about six inches above the knee. The bullet shattered the femur, plowed on through, and just about destroyed the inner part of my thigh. It just blew it out. And I was down. Instantly. I don't remember falling--I was just knocked flat. I've been told that a rifle bullet doesn't have the power to knock a man down, and that my crash to the ground was a result of gravity taking over when my femur could no longer support my body. That may be, but my subjective feeling was that I was indeed knocked to the ground in an instant of time.

My wound frightened me immensely, partly because it reminded me of an encounter we had had a few weeks before. I was walking not too far behind our point man on a search and destroy mission. He was leading us up a ravine, and eventually climbed up out of it into a field where he surprised a young VC armed with a rifle. The VC sprinted across the field, but the Marine dropped him with one shot. The M14 bullet hit him right below his right buttock, almost tore his leg off, and burst what must have been an iliac artery. By the time I got to him, he was unresponsive and blood was flowing out of him like a river. There is no treatment for such a wound, and within only a minute or two, he was dead. And now I too might be facing the same quick death. The first words out of my mouth were, "Ski, the bastard shot me!" Lesniewski, another Lima Company corpsman, had been nearby when I was shot.

I had enough strength to lower my fatigue pants to examine the wound. There was a small, blue-rimmed hole on my outer thigh, just about the diameter of a 7.62mm M14 or AK-47 round. It was scarcely bleeding. On my inner thigh was a patch of mangled flesh a couple of inches in diameter where the bullet, or what was left of it, had exited my thigh. It looked for all the world like freshly ground hamburger. A trickle of blood oozed from it: it seemed that my femoral artery had apparently escaped damage. And I could still wiggle my toes: there was no major nerve damage.

In case I started bleeding heavily, I decided to use my belt as a tourniquet, but I was quickly losing strength and couldn't tighten it, which was a good thing since as it turned out I didn't need a tourniquet.

I decided to give myself some morphine, which I carried in my Unit One. I got out a morphine syrette, but by this time I was so physically and emotionally rattled that I screwed it up: I forgot to puncture the seal of the tube of morphine, and when I tried to inject myself the foil tube burst in my hand. Even if I had had another morphine syrette, I was so weak by that time that I couldn't have done anything with it. I lay back to await my fate.

The battle was still raging about me and my patient, who was even more helpless than I. The sniper who had shot me was continuing to shoot. I couldn't see him, but I could hear him open and close the bolt on his rifle. Rockets and grenades were still going off, and rifle and machine gun fire was constant. It seemed that every time a sniper fired, a Marine would scream. I began to fear a "human wave" attack, so I took out my .45 and held it on my chest. I was determined to kill the first Vietnamese I saw. I don't know if I could have done so, because I was a terrible shot, but I was overcome with hatred of all Vietnamese. It was illogical, but I blamed them for the situation I was in, and took it as a personal affront that one of them had shot me. It was not an emotion that lasted long; within days I was able to see the Vietnamese people, even the VC and NVA, as pawns, just as I came to believe that we Marines and corpsmen were pawns.

Eventually--I have no idea about the timeline here--a Marine crawled up the hill to try to help us and was shot through the shoulder. So now there were three of us lying there. The Marine with the open abdominal wound kept asking me if he was going to die. I tried to reassure him that he would be fine, but in reality I doubted that he could survive, and I don't know to this day whether he lived.

It wasn't long before I was almost completely incapacitated, not by pain as such but by extreme *discomfiture*, for want of a better word. The sun was high overhead, and intense: my thighs were getting seriously sunburned (I had not been able to pull my pants back up after lowering them to see my wound). My nervous system had been taxed almost to its limits: I was sweating profusely. My skin became ultra-sensitive to touch--even small bits of debris falling out of the sky from explosions resulted in pain. My entire body began to...vibrate. It was as if every cell in my being was charged with electricity. It's hard to describe--maybe there aren't words for what I was feeling. And I started getting painful cramps in the muscles of not just my wounded leg but my good leg as well. My body knew it was in danger, and was essentially locking down to preserve itself, and putting itself on high alert as well.

Eventually, Lesniewski reached us and managed to put a battle dressing on me. The shooting had slowed by then; Lesniewski and three Marines put me on a poncho and half-carried, half-dragged me down the hill, crouching low because bullets were still flying around. I screamed with pain every time my butt hit a bump. I don't think Lesniewski had given me any morphine. With every bump, I could feel the shattered ends of my femur grating against each other. I worried that they would cause even more damage and bleeding.

I finally got to the base of the hill and a landing area for helicopters. I talked with the Marines, and began to get some idea

of how bad the casualties were. One Marine was crying: his best friend had just been killed before his eyes. I asked Lesniewski to take a picture of me, and I took one of him. As I said earlier, I was a wannabe journalist. I had a camera with me against orders. The last night on the *Paul Revere*, before the landing, we were told to turn in our cameras to our commanding officers. I basically said (to myself), "Screw you. I bought this camera to take to Vietnam." I used it openly throughout my brief tour of duty, and no one ever said a thing about it to me, perhaps because I was a corpsman. We were treated very well by the Marines.

After the more seriously wounded Marines were evacuated, I was flown to a nearby field hospital where corpsmen bandaged my wound more thoroughly and put my leg in a splint. I was then taken immediately by chopper out to the hospital ship *USS Repose* (AH-16).

What do you recall about landing on the *Repose*?

The flight to the *Repose* was brief, and I could see the ship as the helicopter approached it. I asked a crewman to photograph it for me, but he couldn't figure out how to operate my camera.

I don't remember the arrival aboard the *Repose* or being taken below. I do recall lying on a gurney in a dark passageway for what seemed an endless period. It must have been late afternoon or early evening when I was finally taken into an operating room. My femur was badly fractured. An x-ray image that I have shows shattered pieces of bone and fragments of the bullet in the flesh. The exit wound that I first saw on my inner thigh told just part of the story. Much of the damage was hidden by intact skin, but the muscle all around the exit wound had been turned to pulp by the bullet, and it all had to be cut away. Skin and muscle around the entrance wound had to be trimmed away as well. I received two units of whole blood during the surgery.

One of the procedures done during the surgery was to drill a hole through my right shin, about six inches above my knee, and literally screw a threaded pin completely through the shin so that it extended out about an inch on either side. Later it would be used as an anchor point for traction, which would stretch my thigh muscles and hold my femur at its original length while it healed.

After surgery, the wound was packed with cotton and thoroughly wrapped in a bandage. Next I was encased in plaster from my right foot all the way up to my armpits and down to my left shin. Only my lower left leg was free; I could bend that leg. I was ready to be shipped home like a parcel.

I don't recall much about my short time on the *Repose*. I was in a bed on a clean, brightly lighted ward with several other wounded Marines. I don't remember being in pain by that time. I probably

was getting morphine or Demerol regularly, and I must have slept a great deal. I was probably on antibiotics at this time, as well.

I was on the *Repose* for 2 or 3 days. I certainly couldn't enjoy the amenities of the ship, encased in plaster as I was. Hanging from a frame over my bed was a bar that I could chin myself on, but I'm sure its main purpose was to make it easier for me to use a bedpan. It also allowed me to see out a nearby porthole. *Repose* steamed constantly in big circles, or so it seemed to me. I have been told by a former *Repose* crewman that the ship sailed back and forth between Chu Lai and Da Nang.

A common result of trauma like I had suffered is urinary retention--an inability to urinate. Standard procedure in such cases is to insert a catheter, which had been done. After they removed it, I couldn't urinate and was in agony. I begged to be catheterized again, but the corpsmen took their time, realizing that I would eventually go--and I eventually did.

I wrote a letter to my parents a day or two after the surgery; I still have that letter with the envelope, which has the *Repose* cancellation on it, dated 7 March 1966 (the letter is incorrectly dated 5 March 1966; I was in no condition to write letters that day). In handwriting even worse than my normal bad scrawl, I described the battle and explained how I was shot, and warned my parents that my recovery would be long. I did not mention that I could still lose my leg. In fact, I don't think that in my drugged condition, and with a fever from the infections that were setting in, I was aware of just how serious my wound was, and how hazardous the next few weeks would be.

Where did you go after the *Repose*?

After a few days on the *Repose*, I was flown by chopper to the hospital at Da Nang and was there overnight. I remember being in bed next to a Marine I knew from my battalion. His wound had been almost identical to mine, except his left leg had been hit. But his leg had to be amputated above the knee because the femoral artery and nerves had been destroyed, and he was getting gangrene. I was just incredibly lucky.

The next morning I was bundled on board a C-130 Hercules and flown to Clark Air Force Base Hospital in the Philippines, where I would stay overnight. I was able to talk to my parents from the hospital. The call was patched through to a ham radio operator in my home town. They weren't even aware that I'd been wounded. The ham radio operator was Dean Battishill. Curiously, I had known about him when I was just a little boy living in New York State in the late 1940s because my uncle, also a ham, used to talk with him.

The next morning I was taken out to the airfield and put on

a C-141 Starlifter. I don't remember much about that flight; I was very ill. I no longer had much pain but infection was raging in the wound by this time, and I was also having symptoms of a urinary infection from the catheterization on the *Repose*. I remember reading part of a paperback detective novel that was set in Tokyo, but I mostly slept.

I was so sick I hardly recall anything about the flight. I do remember this huge, dark, noisy cavern filled with stretchers, and nurses and medics running back and forth constantly. I remember one of them changing my bedclothes once because I had urinated all over myself while I was sleeping. I have always assumed that most of the wounded on that flight were 3rd Battalion Marines who were wounded on March 5. The battalion's casualties were heavy--41 killed and 102 wounded. Lima Company had 10 killed and 20 wounded.

We landed at Hawaii, and a general came on board. I must have been near a hatch because I remember a blinding white light and the general coming through the door. He handed out Purple Hearts to everyone. I have no idea who he was, and I wasn't in any condition to care. I was virtually unable to communicate at that point.

At last we landed at Travis Air Force Base near San Francisco and I spent the night in the hospital there. I remember having huge amounts of intestinal gas at Travis and the nurses being very pleased when I was able to fart. I was even more pleased! It's amazing what a bullet can do to a body. A serious wound from a military rifle amounts to a huge physical assault that effects not just the area of the wound but the entire body and all of its functions.

The next day they flew me to San Diego. I don't remember a thing about that flight, and have only fleeting memories about my arrival at Balboa Naval Hospital. Soon after my arrival on the orthopedic ward, my cast was cut off and in a horrendous procedure my wounds were unbandaged and cleaned. That was truly awful! The blood-soaked cotton had dried and was firmly stuck to the wound. It felt like part of my leg was being ripped out. Without pain medication, it truly was worse than being shot. Those corpsmen were practicing extremely bad medicine. As soon as the cast came off, I was put into traction.

My wound was classified from the start as a dirty wound. We had heard--and I don't know if it's true--that the VC would smear excrement on their bullets before they fired them to guarantee that their victims would get infections, if they lived. And, of course, your skin was dirty, your uniform was dirty, and bits of skin and cloth were carried right into the wound. An open, dirty wound was what resulted and infection was inevitable.

So I was lying there at Balboa with pus dripping out of the cavity in my leg, and I had a fever. My parents and fiancée, Susan Overturf,

flew out from New Mexico to see me about a week after I arrived, but I don't recall much about the visit. I was a pretty sick puppy. There was no guarantee at the time that I would keep my leg if that infection turned into osteomyelitis or worse, and I was showing signs of psychological trauma: one night soon after arriving at Balboa I apparently entertained the other patients with a running commentary on the helicopters that were flying through the ward. (I was on a ward with about 40 men; only one other, a Marine, was a Vietnam veteran.)

My condition did not improve markedly for some time. The doctor I had at first was a reserve and didn't really give a damn. I hardly ever saw him. He'd come by, grunt a few things, write something in the records, and walk on. After several weeks, his tour of duty ended and we got a new surgeon on the ward--LCDR Robert E. Richter. He was also a reservist, but a credit to his profession, unlike the doctor he replaced. He took one look at my wound and said, "This won't do. We've got to get this fixed up." The wound, at this time, was open, with no dressing. Often times, wounds heal better if they get fresh air. He put a drip of antibiotics directly into the wound with orders to the corpsmen to clean me up and report any changes to him, etc. And from that day, I started getting better. I credit him with that; he was a good man. At one point some skin at the edge of the wound became necrotic and had to be cut out, but that surgery was minor (although it increased the size of my scarring even more). I was also given a skin graft, with skin taken from my left thigh to cover both the exit and entry wounds. This was not a cosmetic procedure, but a medical one to speed healing and reduce the formation of scar tissue. Military medicine, at that time at least, was not concerned with how a scar *looked*, but only whether it healed. Today, my wounds are among my least attractive attributes!

I was in traction for 111 days, but I wasn't exactly in bed all the time. I discovered that I could maneuver out of the bed and stand beside it on my left foot, with my right leg still firmly held by the traction apparatus. When the time came to get me out of traction, the corpsmen were amazed that I could stand up without feeling faint; I'm sure that standing by my bed helped a lot.

Slowly but surely my infections disappeared, although I had a flare-up more than a year after I was shot.

Time passed quite quickly. I had a portable typewriter and could watch TV. For a short period I was placed in an isolation room because of my infections, and from there I could watch Navy seaplanes and ships in San Diego Bay. Susan had graduated from university and got a summer job at Ryan Aeronautical, so she could visit me every evening and on weekends. I formally proposed to her one night on the ward, and presented her with a ring which I ordered from a jeweller

in Silver City, all to the great delight of the other patients and corpsmen. She accepted my proposal, and we started planning for a wedding on 27 December 1966.

The corpsmen would create a private space for Susan and me by putting curtains around my bed. Just because you're in traction doesn't mean you can't enjoy some romance! One evening, a corps school student was working on the ward. Seeing the curtain, he assumed that I was using a bedpan and stepped into our love nest to see if I was finished. When he saw Susan sitting on the bed, he turned beet-red, apologized, did an about face, and stumbled right into one of the curtains. The domino effect brought all of the curtains down, much to the amusement of everyone except the luckless corpsman!

Did Dr. Richter take care of you from that time on?

Fortunately, Dr. Richter was my doctor for the rest of my stay there. I'm glad that it wasn't Dr. Stryker, [CAPT William] the chief of orthopedics. He believed that bones healed best if they were immobilized. Dr. Richter believed just the opposite: If you put broken bones to work, they would heal faster. In the case of a femur, if you placed pressure on the broken ends, it would heal faster. So he said, "I want to see you up and walking. We're going to get you out of traction and I want you see you bearing weight on that femur as much as you can. I also want you to stay out of Dr. Stryker's sight."

It was a relief to get out of traction, even if I had to get another cast on and use crutches. There were some very uncomfortable moments, though. The threaded pin that went through my shin was removed in a most prosaic and incredibly painful way: a corpsman merely attached an ordinary carpenter's hand drill to it and unscrewed it. Once again I was enduring a medical procedure that was just about as bad as getting shot!

The slightly smaller cast reached from my right ankle up to my armpits and down to my left thigh. Walking was relatively easy, and I could sit, sort of, in a chair, more or less like a department store mannequin standing in a window could "sit" in a chair.

Despite Dr. Richter's admonition to stay away from Dr. Stryker, I wasn't completely successful. One evening I was outside in a wheelchair watching the sunset with Susan when Dr. Stryker walked by and said, "Why are you out here

"I'm watching the sunset."

"You get back to your ward right now. You're not supposed to be out of that bed."

My treatment was pretty straightforward from then on. I walked around as much as I could, stayed out of Dr. Stryker's way, and eventually got liberty to go off base. Susan and I finally were able

to enjoy some privacy in her apartment.

I got leave in August, and Susan and I drove back to Silver City where my parents lived. By that time, I had a cast only on my on right leg. We drove all 800 miles with me in the back seat because my cast wouldn't allow me to sit in the front seat, much less drive.

After a week or so in Silver City, Susan drove on to Kansas City, Kansas to begin her teaching career, and I flew back to San Diego. Then it was a matter of a few more months of healing and paperwork to arrange for my discharge. I exchanged the cast for an awkward ischial weight-bearing brace which Dr. Richter said I would have to wear for the rest of my life in order to avoid fracturing my femur again; another fracture might never heal, he said. The brace was a heavy, awkward affair which allowed me to walk by taking my weight on my right-hand "sit bone," the *ischial tuberosity* at the bottom of the pelvis. With every step I took, I literally sat on the brace. It was hinged at the knee, but the hinge had to be manually unlocked when I sat down. But it was better than a cast, because I could take it off for bathing. It did limit my choice of footwear since the shoe was firmly attached to the brace.

I would guess that was pretty much it for your Navy career.

I actually spent more time in the Navy than I was supposed to. My enlistment was up October 15, 1966, but I had a hard time getting out of the hospital, not because I still needed to be there, but because I had a hard time finding all the people who had to sign papers to release me. If I hadn't gone looking for them, I would probably still be there! As it was, I finally escaped the Navy's clutches in late November, and was transferred to the Veterans Administration hospital in Kansas City, Missouri, arriving there on November 27.

I spent no more than a couple of days at the VA hospital. In my initial examination, a surgeon asked me why I was wearing a brace. After my explanation, he expressed the opinion that Dr. Richter had been overly cautious and advised me to stop using it. I soon started to go "braceless," only indoors, in the apartment that I had rented. Not until after Susan and I had married and returned to Kansas City from our honeymoon did I venture outdoors without the brace. The muscles of my entire right leg were badly atrophied after nearly a year of inactivity, and for a few weeks I walked with a very bad limp. Eventually I was able not only to walk normally, but to run and even enjoy cross country skiing and backpacking. Today, for pension purposes, I am rated as having a 20 percent disability. I have a somewhat limited range of motion in my right knee, and have occasional pain around the scars where the traction pin went through my shin. There was some nerve damage: a patch of skin below my knee is numb.

So you went to school after that?

Susan and I were married as planned on 27 December, and in January I began pre-journalism classes at the Kansas City campus of the University of Missouri. The following June, we moved to Columbia, Missouri, where I started journalism school. I received my journalism degree in August 1969. We immediately emigrated to Canada, where I had a job waiting with the Canadian Wildlife Federation, in Ottawa, as editor of their newsletter.

Canada seemed like a good place to begin a new life. We weren't pleased with the way things were going in the States. This was the period of political assassinations and the war was just going on and on. I had a whole new world view as a result of my time in Vietnam. Within 24 hours of landing in Vietnam, I was convinced that the Americans had no business being there whatsoever. We were fighting a war which was primarily victimizing poor Vietnamese who for the most part had never known anything but war. The last thing they needed was more bullets and bombs in their lives. The American government didn't seem to understand that, however, and there seemed to be little chance that it ever would.

Well, you went to Canada after you went to Vietnam, which is quite interesting. Lots of folks went before they had to serve.

Many Americans came to Canada at that time and many went into professions. A vice principal in one of Susan's schools served in Vietnam and came to Canada afterward like I did, and one of the school's counsellors was a draft evader. It never occurred to me to evade the draft or become a deserter. I was young and naive when I joined the Navy, and never dreamed I would end up in combat with the Marines. I didn't even know it was possible! Later, if I had understood why my government was sending me to Vietnam--and those reasons had little to do with preserving democracy--I might have deserted and come to Canada as well. I don't know. It would have been a big step to take. My family, all true patriots at that time, would not have understood.

So you've been a Canadian citizen for some time?

My wife and I became Canadian citizens in 2003. We would have done so sooner, but my ultra-patriotic mother-in-law, a member of the DAR (Daughters of the American Revolution) might have had a stroke! We decided to become Canadians after both of Susan's parents had died. My father was already dead, and while my mother did not applaud our action, she did understand.

Maybe this is a silly question to ask, but do you think about that time in Vietnam much any more?

Not a day goes by that I don't think about my experiences in Vietnam, but I don't often dwell on them. I've had a lot of psychological difficulty. I'm hyper-alert and cannot easily relax. It's like I'm always on watch. I don't readily trust people and I don't trust governments or politicians at all. I have a fairly black outlook on life, I'm afraid. I've never been officially diagnosed with PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), but I exhibit most of the symptoms. However, for a long time--18 years in fact--I lived a fiction that said that I hadn't been affected in the least by what I saw and did in Vietnam. I assumed that because I was "in country" for only 37 days, not counting my time on the *Haven* and at the hospital in Da Nang, I could not possibly have been traumatized psychologically. In the mid-1980s I began suffering serious insomnia and depression. My doctor suggested that I attend a "Come Alive" seminar at The Haven, a personal development center on Gabriola Island, BC. To this day I don't know how it came about, but during a late-night talk with a counsellor, I had a classic flashback to an incident that left me grief stricken. It was a shattering experience; that night I learned that it was not only my body that had been traumatized by Vietnam. In subsequent months I had two more flashbacks that stunned me with their power. I had not realized it before, but part of me, a part deep within my subconscious, had never left Vietnam at all. It took several years of counselling before I was able to cope with the worst of the demons. That finally came about because of a counsellor who was adept at a then-new therapy, EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reorganization). Because of EMDR, certain memories of especially traumatic events no longer have the power to move me to tears. I have clear memories of the events themselves, but for the most part it's as if I am watching them as a detached observer and not as a participant.

Many people assume that I would want to forget everything about my experiences in Vietnam, but that's not the case. A complete person is a collection of the all of the incidents that have occurred in life, both the good and the bad. I can no more forget about Vietnam than I can forget how to breathe or blink. Yet, oddly, there are some blanks in my Vietnam experience. When I was wounded, I had been a member of Lima Company for less than 2 weeks, and had barely begun to learn the names of the company's Marines and other corpsmen. Many of them died that day, and others were grievously wounded; except for one corpsman, whom I have mentioned, and two of the Marines, one of whom died, I have no memory of the faces or the names of the men of Lima Company. The names of those who killed in the ambush are on the web site of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington. They died under the same hail of bullets that I survived. We shared the

same experiences that day and in the days before. Nevertheless, I cannot connect the names with faces. I feel grief for them, but it's a detached and impersonal grief, and that dismays me. It can't be only my short time with Lima Company that explains why I don't remember those men: by the time I joined Lima Company, I think that I must have been deeply traumatized. In the 37 days I was in South Vietnam, I experienced no fewer than a dozen events that would have made the evening news back in the States, at least on a local level. Some of them, such as the incidents involving prisoner abuse, could well have resulted in courts martial and perhaps even Congressional investigations. By late February of 1966, I think that I must have been in the process of shutting down emotionally and withdrawing into myself. I didn't get to know the Lima Company Marines well because I was unable to approach them on more than superficial level. What is the point of getting to know someone who might die in the next moment?

Do I regret having been in Vietnam? Not really. I do regret that the war occurred. It was a tragic failure of American foreign policy. It destabilized an already unstable world, and weakened the reputation of the United States as a force for good. And, of course, it wreaked havoc on my generation. But the Vietnam War has become a part of me, and taught me lessons that many people have not had the opportunity to learn. I have no illusions about the true nature of the world: it's a frightening and unpredictable place in which the individual counts for little in the eyes of national leaders and policies. At the same time, during my tour of duty in Vietnam I was privileged to experience the unique brotherhood that is bestowed on soldiers in combat. Most civilians and indeed most military personnel will never be able to experience that.

One of the important lessons I learned in Vietnam was about heroism. Heroes are just ordinary people who transcend their own desire to survive because they have no choice. I have often been told by people who have lived safe lives as civilians that being in combat must be a horrible experience. The implication is that combat inevitably reduces the combatants to cowering shells of human beings whose bowels are loosened by sheer and unrestrained terror. My experience tells me otherwise. Soldiers in close combat naturally have no death wish, but they also come to know very quickly that their chances of survival are slim. On that hill in Vietnam, fear was not a factor in my actions. From the first moments of the ambush, there seemed to be no chance of survival beyond the next few seconds. Although they were not conscious thoughts, I believe that I accepted two facts: The first was that my life was over and that I would soon die. The second was that I was a Lima Company corpsman with a job to do. I could not let my buddies down, even though I scarcely knew

them. One's own death, I learned that day, is not the worst thing in the world. Nor is one's own life the most important thing in the world.

There is another lesson that I learned, too: I learned that you never feel more vibrantly alive than when someone is trying to kill you. That must explain in part why mercenaries do what they do. Combat for them has become a drug to which they are addicted.

One of the consequences of my experiences in Viet Nam was my complete loss of religious faith. I had been an active Presbyterian when I joined the Navy. What I saw and experienced in Vietnam convinced me that Christianity and indeed all religions are based upon fiction: no loving and supposedly omnipotent god could allow mere humans to carry on a war like Vietnam, or indeed any war, or allow civilians to be its victims. It is said that there is no such thing as an atheist in a foxhole. My experience tells me that foxholes have probably *produced* a good many atheists. I have no doubt that my survival was a result of chance, as were the deaths of the 10 Marines in my company. To believe that "God" saved my life and sacrificed the others would be an indefensible conceit.

It may seem odd in light of all that I have told about my experiences in Vietnam, but in the 40 years since then I have come to experience what can only be described as *pride* in the role I played. It is not pride over any specific action on my part. If I saved anyone's life, I am not aware of it. If I acted heroically, it was not because of any intrinsic heroism: as I said previously, I was just doing my job to the best of my ability, simply because I had no choice. The pride I feel is that I did the best that I could in circumstances that tested me more than I would ever again be tested. I did not fail myself, and I did not fail others.

What do you do now?

My wife and I were both retired by 2001, and in that year moved to Vancouver. We live in a nice condo in Vancouver's West End. I worked briefly in journalism. I'm a pretty good writer but not a very good journalist. I became a public school teacher in Prince George, British Columbia, and in 17 years I taught everything from kindergarten through grade 12. After 17 years I quit, mainly because I was bored. It just wasn't offering much challenge any more. But it was also because I was suffering some stress and depression. After I quit teaching, I started my own photography business and operated a portrait, wedding, and commercial studio for 10 years.

I haven't been very successful at "retiring." I've become very involved--too involved--in the British Columbia Philatelic Society. I'm currently its president and the exhibits chair of the annual stamp exhibition that the club sponsors. These activities amount to a

full-time job which is not always comfortable and free of stress. I find it hard to say "No" when I'm faced with a job that needs to be done and I know that I can do it well. I suppose that there's an analogy with Vietnam in this: fatefully, I found it impossible to say "No" to the Marines.

I appreciate you spending time with me this afternoon.