

U.S. NAVY MEDICAL DEPARTMENT ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL HISTORY WITH HM1 ALAN J. KENT, USN

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TELEPHONIC INTERVIEW

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Interview with former HM1 Alan J. Kent, assigned to Delta Company, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines. Present during the battle of Hué City and the fight for the Citadel.

I had a great discussion with your former skipper yesterday, Col. Myron Harrington. We spent about an hour on the phone talking about his perspective on Hué City and the Citadel. I thought we'd pick up with you today and get your perspective on that event. But first I'd like to ask you where you are from originally.

I was born and raised in a small town about 120 miles north of here, a town called Hancock, Michigan. If you look at the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, there's a peninsula or finger that sticks out into Lake Superior. And that's where I was born.

Did you go to high school in Hancock?

I graduated there, attended Michigan Tech, and that's when I went into the military.

Why did you decide to join the Navy?

Actually, I was going to be an aviation reserve officer candidate. And, believe it or not, that's how that all started. I joined the reserves when I was an undergraduate and changed my mind as far as my undergraduate program went. Then I got called in on active duty in 1966. They asked me what I wanted to do. I said I had always been interested in medicine-biology and all that stuff. I found out later that medical personnel for the Marine Corps come from the Navy. So it was like, Wow! I wasn't quite sure if I had made the right choice or not. I was thinking Navy and ships and coffee and warm food and having a good time, not a ground-pounding grunt Marine.

Did you go to boot camp first?

Yes. Great Lakes.

And then corps school?

Yes. San Diego.

When was that?

That was '67. Then I was stationed at Oakland Naval Hospital for a while in the Department of Surgery.

You didn't know you were going with the FMF at that point, did you?

No. In fact, just before Christmas of '67, the commanding officer said, "Oh, no. You're too vital to our organization. You'll

never go to Vietnam. We're pulling your name off." Well, about 2 weeks later, I got my orders for the Nam.

Did you go to Field Medical School at Pendleton?

Yup. That was December and January of '67-'68.

When did you actually go over?

I think it was the last day of January, the first day of February of '68.

Do you remember arriving in Vietnam?

Oh, I sure do. We staged in Okinawa for a few days, which meant nothing more than storing all our seabags and that sort of stuff, a little indoctrination. All the rumors were flying about the Tet Offensive that was going on in Vietnam at the time. Of course, we didn't know what the hell that was all about. All we knew was that new troops were needed badly and let's get going.

We landed in Danang. It was at night and rockets were all going off all over. Even though the airfield was getting hit, we got to the end of the runway and everybody bailed out and into the edges of the runway. They had some parapet things there and what have you. We all lay pretty low until things died down. Then they piled us in these cattle cars and got us someplace that night, not too far from the airport in some staging area.

This would have been around the beginning of February.

Yes.

So the fight up in Hué was already underway when you got there.

It was just starting. The south side was getting hit.

You arrived in Vietnam just in time.

It was my welcome to Vietnam without any prior introduction to combat. There was no gradual orientation. It was, "Right now you're going into battle."

When did they assign you to a unit?

One day after I arrived in Danang, they said I was going up to Phu Bai because I was assigned to Delta Company, 1/5. That's where Delta 1/5's rear area was supposed to be, but their rear area wasn't even there yet. They were still moving all their junk from Phu Loc. So some were in transit up to Hué at the time and the 3rd Platoon was cleaning things up and bringing things up from the rear. So when I got to Phu Bai, there was nothing but red mud. I still had my leather boots and starched utilities on looking for Delta 1/5.

Even though they weren't there yet, there were a bunch of Conex boxes sitting there and tents laying on the ground. Not knowing anything, with no direction, and being in a combat environment with rockets going off, it wasn't a very secure welcome to Vietnam. Nobody knew where anybody was and who was doing what to whom. And that basically described the entire organization of the Marine Corps offensive at that time or defensive, whatever you want to call it.

When did they issue you your gear-your Unit 1 and all that?

Here's what happened. A bunch of us-new guys in country-put up some tents, some shelter out of the rain. They said, "Come on. We're gonna issue you some equipment but we don't have any new stuff." They had a hospital company there that had some inflated hospital buildings. When the choppers could fly in, they'd bring in the wounded. You knew they were the wounded because they dropped them off on one side. If they were KIAs, they'd kick them off on another side in a different pile. So this is the way things came off. It was from the pile of equipment that was being recycled, that I got to pick my gear.

This had been gear that had been used by corpsmen who were now dead.

Yes. This stuff had all come off the dead or severely wounded. My flak jacket was full of holes. I got a Unit 1 that was all torn up but I was able to outfit it as best I could.

That must have been somewhat demoralizing.

Demoralizing? It just scared the shit out of you. You're wondering, who's running this show? And that's the way it was in Vietnam. It was just basically utter confusion followed by more frustration and exasperation.

Did you get a sidearm with the rest of your gear?

I got a .45 and ammo for it, my M16, and bandoleers of ammo. The ammo had the wrong kind of primers, though. They were making shitty primers-blue and red ones at the time. If you didn't get the right color ones, they'd hang up in the chamber all the time. I got outfitted with the basic stuff for light infantry combat plus IV fluids. I got a pack from someplace.

Did you get some serum albumin?

Yes. I had some of those. In those conex boxes, they had IV fluids and I just jammed that stuff in my pack. I rolled it up in whatever I could find to protect it from breaking because we didn't have plastic bags or bottles in those days.

So these were glass bottles?

Oh, yeah. Everything was glass, including the plasma expanders and all that.

Did they mount you up on trucks?

Where this hospital company was there was a small LZ. The choppers would come in and out of the area where this hospital company was, when they could fly, but the monsoons were keeping the flights down. In fact, we waited for 2 days at the edge of that LZ waiting for a chopper to take us up to Hué City. Hell, every time one came in, we were watching all these bodies being thrown off and the wounded coming in. Then we'd walk through those buildings and see all these guys in agony. There was just a long line of saw horses and stretchers down both sides of this inflatable building. The Marines had arms and legs missing—massive trauma. It was like, "Oh, my God! What the hell's going on? This is hell and I'm never gonna make it outa here to start with." I didn't have any idea what incoming rounds sounded like or any idea of how I would react in combat.

I previously mentioned that the 3rd Platoon of Delta Company was still on road security. Well, they ended up joining us and we all finally got on choppers and got up to Hué City. We landed in the old ARVN compound, which had been originally a French military compound.

Was this on the south side of the river?

This was on the north side of the river. 1st and 2nd platoons of Delta Company had already gone up the river in sampans and LCUs. They went around behind the city because the trick was to come around behind the NVA although the NVA had plenty of time to move their emplacements. We had a little bit of a foothold over there on the northwest side where the ARVN compound was.

There was a forward battalion aid station set up in a semi-bombed out building in the ARVN compound. When I got off the chopper, which had landed on the edge of a wall, tracers were coming up. We ran and got under some cover. There were other corpsmen, too, who were coming up to Hué but a lot of them were just coming to the battalion aid station.

So there I was. It was dark and there were wounded guys waiting to get out. I started to make them as comfortable as possible.

So you had a whole bunch of patients already?

Oh, yes. They were all over the place. There were guys lying in corners bleeding and in pain. It was amazing. Everybody was trying to do as much as they could for them but the equipment was

minimal at best. The conditions were ridiculous. It was ironic because some of the guys who came in in the 3rd Platoon had decided they were going out to find the rest of Delta Company. They were gone about half an hour before they were back already full of holes. I'm thinking, "Holy shit. How in hell can this happen?" Here I am, just dead meat.

How many other corpsmen were in that aid station helping you out?

There was a doctor there by the name of Brock, a really nice guy who worked to save the wounded, while reduced to the extreme basics.

Is he still around?

He could be. He had intentions of becoming an orthopedist after his enlistment. There was also a Chief Folio, who came in with our group. And there were a couple of other guys who went up there. Most of them were new and when they saw all of this horror and trauma of war, suddenly it was very impacting.

What were you able to do for some of these casualties?

Stop bleeding, give them morphine, give them a cigarette, some water, start some IVS. I used some of the IVS I had in my pack because some of these guys were shocking out on me. But, by and large, this was basic compassionate care, more or less. There wasn't a lot of level one trauma treatment taking place!

And while you're doing all this, there was probably incoming all the time.

Not so much back there at that battalion aid station. This was the rear and supposedly a safe place.

The next morning I got up and they said they would take me over to where they thought Delta Company was. There was a Marine driving one of those flat bed little utility vehicles they called mules. It had a little rail around it. The driver's name was Ray Howard, a Black kid. He should have gotten the Navy Cross a hundred times. Anyway, he said, "Get your head down, Doc. We're going." So I hung on to the rails and lay flat. Every time we came around a hot corner, he'd say, "Keep your head down; they're "gooks" right around here." And then they'd start firing at us. And we were zipping up and down these streets. Sometimes, when he'd make a wrong turn and find some enemy crossing the road, he'd turn around.

And while all this is going on, there was some naval gunfire coming in like crazy. Naval gunfire is the most horrendous stuff you ever did hear. Ray finally got to a place where he thought Delta

Company was, and he said, "Jump into this ditch right here and you'll be fine." Then he spun right around and took off.

So there I was laying in this ditch on the edge of the street and I didn't move. I thought, "I'm just gonna wait for this war to be over and then I'll move."

It wasn't 5 minutes later when I heard somebody. Now, this was a long street which followed the northeast wall. Across the street was a little courtyard with a couple of pillars. There was a house inside of it which was pretty much bombed out. From over there, I heard a couple of grunts saying, "Hey, Doc. When we tell ya, come running across the street over here."

Well, pretty soon, they opened up with their M16s down toward the end of the street and I started running across. The NVA had a .51 caliber machine gun at the end of the street and were blasting anybody who came across that road. I got across without incident even though they were shooting at me. This was the beginning of 2 weeks straight of this shit.

When you got off the mule, the Marines had seen you in the ditch and they were just waiting to give you the word when it was safe to cross.

Right.

Did you have your M16 with you at that point?

Oh, sure. I was armed to the teeth. I came from northern Michigan and shot more deer and spent a lot of time in the woods so I figured I could survive one way or another. I could just hope my luck would hold out.

So now you're with the Marines of Delta Company.

Yes. This was it. We were up against the northeast wall.

Of the Citadel.

You could call it that. Of course, it's the Citadel surrounding the Imperial Palace. The city was a walled city-walls within walls built dynasties ago to protect the populace from the Mongol hordes. And these walls weren't small. They were 50 feet thick and 50 feet high and made of brick, mortar, and stone.

Anyway, I ended up joining the group and meeting everybody. At that time, there was a little bit of a lull and, being a real novice, I hooked up with a guy who saved my life more than one time. His name was Tommy "Spanky" Mitchell. He was a forward air controller and a real bristly Marine from Tennessee. He had been in country and wounded a couple of times. He took me under his wing and began teaching me the ropes quickly. He taught me what incoming AK-47

rounds sounded like. It didn't take long because any time you moved, if you weren't careful, the NVA were behind you using you for target practice. The NVA would get into the sewers and crawl underneath, popping up in manholes. They had spider holes all over so you had to be constantly vigilant as to what was going on.

It was a situation where we'd try to make pushes down the streets, maybe get a half a block, come up against B-40 rockets, machine guns, and snipers who were all over the place. My first recollection of dead GIs was a tank that had been debilitated. The commander's head was blown in half and his brains were spilled all over the place. Someone had thrown him and his brains in there. I still can see that skull snapped like an eggshell.

And the casualties continued to happen on an ongoing basis. I don't think we had 30 guys left in our company who weren't either killed or wounded by the time we were done. It was a very ferocious campaign.

COL Harrington mentioned a particular incident that involved you. He said you had done a tracheotomy on some lieutenant. Can you tell me about that?

Oh, yeah. I was originally written up for a Silver Star. Some HMI named White in the rear who never was in combat squashed it, according to Chief Folio, who wrote me up for it! I ended up with a Silver Star.

We started making another push. I told you about the two pillars in the courtyard. Lo and behold, there were some wounded GIs across that road where that machine gun had been zeroed. They also had that courtyard zeroed in with their mortars. As I would run out and grab these guys who were getting hit and falling behind the houses or shot in the street, I'd drag them back and get them in that little courtyard area. I'd patch them up, stop their bleeding, apply a tourniquet and doing this back and forth, back and forth. Each time I'd go out there, they would be shooting at me and the mortars would be coming.

Well, I finally got the last guy in, put him down on the ground, and took care of him. He was okay. He just had a little bleeder in his arm that was pumping out, which I fixed. Then I went back to see if there was another man down. I was standing by this pillar that was 2 by 2 by 2 feet square. The mortar round came in and hit the top of that pillar. Some of the blast went into that courtyard and threw me across the road. Luckily, the majority of the impact went behind me. I didn't even know I was hit until later on. I was in shock and just ignored what was going on. I ended up basically in the same ditch I had jumped in when I got off that mule. Everything was so surreal. I looked back into that courtyard and all these guys

I had just brought in there were flopping on the ground like a bunch of fish in the bottom of a boat.

I went back to clean these guys up again. The guys who weren't hurt originally, like our gunny, had the back of his head blown open. So I had all these guys to take care of once again. I was reduced to the basic essentials. I was using rags or clothing or whatever we could find.

Was anybody helping you or were you doing this all by yourself?

All by myself. There was another corpsman who was wounded during this time. He got hit for a second time and lost his eye. There was nothing but a big hole where his eye had been. I managed to get him patched up, and then we evacuated all those guys.

How did you get these people evacuated under fire?

We waited until we called in naval gunfire for cover fire. Don't forget now, that naval gunfire was coming right at us from the sea. It was not like they were shooting from behind us or over our heads or laterally. This was coming right at us. We'd call in the fire to try to keep Charlie's head down. These shells would go off in front of us about 50 meters in front of the wall. Pieces of shrapnel would come off the size of a car hood. It was amazing that anything could survive. It was one hell of a battle in that sense. We dumped a lot of ordnance on the city and it really didn't seem like it was doing a hell of a lot in terms of impacting the enemy's ability to fight.

So, at this point, you didn't know that you yourself had been injured?

From the time I got there until the time I left Hué, I was blood from the top of my head to the tip of my boots, whether it was mine or somebody else's. It got to the point that it didn't make any difference after a while whether it was mine or not.

When we were able to get these guys out, if I could keep them alive long enough, we'd get them on the mule and Howard would shuttle them back to that BAS in the rear. This guy was tremendous. He should be in the annals of someplace, I'll tell you what. He had more balls than a brass monkey. This happened on a daily basis.

On one occasion, it was actually a guy by the name of Dennis S. Michael. He was a PFC. We were down to leading these platoons with PFCs. There was no such thing as officers. The only officer around was Harrington. All the others had either been killed or wounded. We ended up making another push. There was David Greenway of *Time*, Al Webb from UPI, and Charlie Mohr from the *New York Times*. (Greenway, Webb, and Mohr were awarded Bronze Stars, the only

civilians so awarded.) There were reporters running around there like crazy. They were all crazy! Every one of them, in my opinion, was completely nuts for being someplace where they could lose their life in a heartbeat and still want to cover that war. It was unbelievable. I've been written up in a bunch of books-*Dangerous Company* by William Tuohy. He's got my story in there. I was featured in his article.

What's the story about this guy Michael?

He was a PFC who was leading a platoon. He'd be everywhere leading guys and never got hit. You can't believe how many times he should have been killed. So, lo and behold, this LT Williams came in. He was a lead magnet. Anywhere he went, he'd get hit. He had been in the rear because of his history. But he decided that he was coming to help out. He, Michael, and a couple of us took off and were running up the edge of the wall making a push trying to get into a better position along that northeast wall. The North Vietnamese were all dug in waiting for us and just blew the shit out of us.

Michael got hit in the face and Williams got knocked down. He had three bullets pumped in him. Michael was the worst. I could see Williams laying there breathing but bleeding. I turned Michael over and he had bad trauma to the jaw and face. He wasn't breathing. By that time, I had been reduced to a K-bar fighting knife and a little tube you used for mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. I grabbed the K-bar and did a cricothyrotomy and slipped the tube in him but I couldn't get it in right away because he still had a lot of cartilage and a clot in there. So I just took my mouth, put it on the wound, and sucked all the fragments out of there. Then I slipped the trach in him and got him going again. Al Webb, Dave Greenway, and Charlie Mohr were there and they found a green shutter they used for a stretcher and got him back to that courtyard area where they were trying to stage people to get them out of the direct fire.

Williams, who was hit in the side of the neck, was lucky. The bullets missed his jugular. He had a little bit of a spurt from a branch of his carotid, but I was able to control that with some direct pressure. He also had some holes in his leg but none of that was life-threatening at the time. The only thing he was worried about was his shoulder holster and his .45. He didn't want anybody to get his fancy shoulder holster. I told him to "Forget that shit. You're getting out of here."

Did Michael make it?

He ended up dying back in that battalion aid station waiting for evacuation. One of the guys got a letter from his mother eventually thanking us for everything we did to try to keep him alive.

But he made it all the way back to the BAS, but because of the lack of a way to get him out of there to a higher level of care, he expired. Nowadays, they're taking these guys who are wounded in Baghdad and they're in the ICU at Walter Reed in 72 hours. We're saving guys now who shouldn't have been saved. I have a friend who works at Walter Reed and he tells me these horror stories. Anyway, to make a long story short, we were lucky if we could get the guys out of combat in what amounted to days or weeks rather than hours like today.

The climate, of course, was against us. It was the monsoon season. You could touch the ceiling with your hands so there were very few days they could fly. And we had no air cover because of that. Then they also had this policy where you couldn't dump ordnance into the Imperial Palace or the Citadel because they didn't want us (Americans) destroying it. And that's where all the North Vietnamese regulars were holed up with their artillery and what have you. It was off limits. We couldn't get to the heart of things. It was ridiculous trying to fight a war like this.

What happened to Williams?

He recovered okay. Maybe 3 months after the Battle of Hué I ended up in the rear area at Phu Bai and there he was sitting behind a desk. He eventually ended up getting wounded again and was finally sent home.

And the only treatment you gave him was some pressure to the neck to stop the bleeding.

And I started an IV and applied direct pressure to his neck and leg wounds.

What was it, Ringers?

Yes. That's what it was-Lactated Ringers.

Did you ever get resupplied with this stuff?

Not very much. I had taken eight bottles of Lactated Ringers with me a bunch of plasma expanders.

Plasma expanders like serum albumin?

Yes. That was okay as long as your patient didn't bleed out too far or too long because when there are no more red cells, you're screwed.

Did you have any other episodes like that where you had to do some pretty dramatic treatment to save someone?

Ongoingly and every hour. There were guys with femoral wounds with femoral bleeding and just a tremendous amount of trauma to the

lower extremities or the abdomen. At times, if I was lucky enough, if I could find the bleeder, I could clamp it off. Most of the time tamponade wouldn't do it just by putting direct pressure on there. You had to get to the source of things and tie things off. They're gonna lose their leg but at least you might save their life. And here I am trying to be something I'm not. How many field trained corpsmen have dissected out and tied off major bleeders or done a trach under direct fire. You're thinking, "I don't know if I'm doing it right but I'm just doing what I know I should do." You tried to make the game up as you went along. Even though I had all the basic stuff, I knew I wasn't a surgeon. That was the frustrating part about it. I could have used a little more training but I guess baptism under fire is one way to solidify things. It's called field experience!

But that's sort of a tough way to learn, though.

It sure is.

So how long was all this going on?

It started the first part of February and it ended the last part of February. We fought for about 15 or 18 days there.

Not a lot of sleep. Not a lot of food.

There was a lack of C-rations and hardly any water. We had no water. There were wells around the area but they were all contaminated. We loaded the water up with halazone but the high levels of halazone caused diarrhea on its own. The dead bodies laying all over were bloating and decomposing it was a very disease oriented place. Nobody thought they'd live long enough to worry about having typhus or whatever. We tried burning the enemy dead with flame throwers to keep the disease and stench down. I slept next to a rotting corpse, which I covered with a piece of tin roofing for several days.

Living day to day was one thing, but in your case it was living minute to minute.

That's exactly what it was. The enemy would come right at you and not give a damn. It was very difficult to stop them. You'd pump a bunch of rounds into them and they'd end up falling down. What we found out later was that they all knew they were going to die anyway and they were high on heroin and opium. This is why they were so bold and brazen and euphoric, like a Scarface movie.

I imagine you didn't take a lot of prisoners.

We took no prisoners. Actually, I have a picture of me in one of these books patching up an NVA because we wanted to get a little

intel out of him. But there was also a caption that the Marines were pissed that I was doing that because they didn't want to be saving any gook's life with Marines' supplies.

During that same push, there was another corpsman I had gotten to know just superficially. . . [On 19 February] He ran out to get somebody and he got shot off the wall and was killed right then and there. Mike [HN Michael J.] Reinhold's folks and I still correspond. He was put in for the Navy Cross but I think he ended up getting the Silver Star posthumously.

Finally, at some point, you guys got rid of the NVA and won the battle.

Let's go back a little bit. All that time the NVA flag was flying over the Imperial Palace and the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines had been taking the city for all those days and losing all these men. The ARVN were sitting way in the back laughing and having fun, looting and doing whatever they were doing while the Americans fought, which was usually the case in Vietnam. Sounds somewhat like Iraq nowadays.

We were getting closer and closer to the objective, which was the Imperial Palace. When it was time to go in, we were told, "No. No. No. We're going to blow a hole in the wall and let the ARVNs go in there and take their city."

So it wasn't the Marines who took it over or captured the city. It was the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. It was all a bunch of political bullshit at that point and even before that. We saw it as a political farce perpetuated by the United States's political agenda to force a democracy on a people who were against it! Funny how history continues to repeat itself today.

When they sent the ARVN in to take the palace, did you actually see them haul the NVA flag down or were you hunkered down and heard about it later?

We were on the left side of the Imperial Palace gates and when they had blown that north gate, 3/5 had come in to reinforce us. In fact, they had come in a little ahead of the ARVNs and then they stopped. And then the ARVNs came in once there was no more deadly fire going on. By that time, the rules of engagement had changed. Some RVN general someplace said that we could start bombing the Imperial Palace inside of the Citadel and at that point, things changed dramatically. But, yes, I saw the flag come down, removed with much enthusiasm by the RVN troops. That was a testimonial to what a political farce the whole war was.

So the ARVN hauled the NVA flag down and raised theirs after you folks got through doing all the dirty work?

That's right. I've got sources that will attest to that. They called it Vietnamization pretty much like what's happening now--Iraqi-ization. It ain't gonna happen and never will. Why don't we learn our lessons from history?

When was it over for you and your Marines?

The first part of March we did a mop up operation. We finally made it to the Perfume River. If you look at a map of the city and the Perfume River, it crosses the two parts of the city and then it comes back and around to the northwest corner and that's where the ARVN compound was. Our objective was approximately a quarter of that city going back south towards the river. The Imperial Palace was right there off to the right of us. We weren't allowed to go into the Imperial Palace at that time because the ARVNs were taking it over but we finally made the push across the moats. Then we got set up along the river in some houses. But we were still cleaning out snipers like crazy. They were hiding everywhere. We were in a big liquor store and movie theater there. We were actually having a firefight right there in the theater with some NVA regulars that had holed up in there. We found a large safe in the liquor store, Spanky Mitchell and I tried to blow it, but it wouldn't crack. There were a lot of gold leaf wafers floating around. One Marine had a pack full.

Inside the movie theater?

Yes. They were behind the seats. It took a long time to mop up the city afterwards.

Were you getting resupplied with medical stuff?

It was sporadic. First of all, many of my fellow corpsmen were getting hit and I would take whatever supplies they had before I got them out of there. We also did that with ammunition.

When that mortar landed on that pillar and you were thrown across the street, I take it that you were injured and didn't know it. When did you realize you were wounded?

Not until everything died down and I was hunkered down behind a wall. I noticed something warm running down my legs. I had been wounded in my thighs and knee with shrapnel.

So you patched yourself up?

Yup. I had fairly decent lacerations but there was no bone showing and no neurological deficit at that time so I said, "I'm staying with these guys and nothing's going to make me leave unless I get killed." So it was sort of a bonding. It had nothing to do

with the flag or Mom's apple pie or Chevrolet. It had to do with your comrades-the guys in the unit. And that was the key to it all. You just thought that they're gonna try to keep you alive and you're gonna keep each other alive as best you can. And that was more or less the code among brothers. And believe me, our main objective wasn't to try to foster some democratic government for the USA in some country that wanted nothing to do with us. We had met the enemy first hand and found that the enemy was us!

When was it finally over, the first week of March?

The first or second week of March is when we finally got out of there.

You guys must have been one sorry, messy bunch of guys.

Yes we were. Another thing I didn't mention which was an ironic thing. When I first got into that courtyard on the second day, this guy came in very sick. He had dysentery and was looking really peaked. I looked at him. I recognized him. He played football with me on the same football team from Hancock, Michigan. His name was Francis Ploof. He was with 1/5, but I had to get him out of there because he was really, really sick. I evacuated him out, he got better, and we joined up again 4 weeks later at Phu Loc.

They took us out of Hué City and we thought we were going back to Phu Bai and rest up. Well, bullshit. "We're gonna put you on Highway 1 from Hai Van Pass to Troi Bridge. You're gonna be on bridge and road security" So one night we spent some time by the sea just to wash up and what have you and get a new poncho liner and some food. And the next thing we knew we were back on the trucks and back into the shit again. It was like that constantly.

Was this below Phu Bai?

Between Phu Bai and Hai Van Pass. We were there for about a month. We'd try to protect the bridges. The entire company was strung out in different squads, and at night there would be constant firefights. Charlie would come and try to blow this up and blow that up. One night they came in and blew the shit out of the Troi Bridge. We had a fair number of casualties from that.

The company couldn't have had too many men left after Hué. You said there were only about 30 who were unwounded.

Between 30 and 50.

Was the company resupplied with troops?

We started getting new guys in but the attrition was very slow in terms of resupply. I don't remember that company ever being much

over 75 after that. It should have been twice that.

What happened after you got through with doing this road and bridge security?

After that the battalion packed up and we went down to An Hoa. They decided that it would be too easy for us to be up in the Phu Bai area. Let the Army occupy the easy areas! We needed to go into the Arizona territory to really get some action. Marines were dying to get into heavier action.

As if you hadn't had enough at Hué.

Exactly. So then we started a whole different campaign.

How long were you in Vietnam?

I got there the 1st of February and got back home around Christmas of '68.

Do you remember leaving?

I sure do. Number one, it was a relief. Number two, I had a wound in my hip that was bothering me and never really healed.

Was it from that mortar explosion in Hué?

No. It was from a different time when we were in An Hoa. The wound was open and always oozing and infected and it went right to the bone. I eventually ended up having to have surgery on it six or seven times over the course of my lifetime. But, knock on wood, that's minor compared with what I have today.

Did you go to Danang and leave from there?

Yes. Eventually, when the time came, I got to Danang. All the guys were on the plane. It took off and everybody said, "Hear that? That's Vietnam sucking." And away we went to Okinawa and then back to the States.

What was the homecoming like?

There was nobody there. It was nondescript. I went from Travis Air Force Base to Treasure Island. I was attended to there at their dispensary. Of course, I was on convalescent duty. That was probably one of the nicer times that I can remember being able to relax and not having to worry about being in the hostilities.

The problem was that the adjustment was a bitch. Here you are in Vietnam where everything was trying to kill you, from the populace to the animals to the environment. Then, all of a sudden, you come out of that and put into a completely different environment where you're supposed to react in a more socially acceptable way and it's

very difficult to separate yourself so immediately. It's a tremendous adjustment. How can you sleep in a bed? How can you sleep without your weapon next to you? The readjustment was tremendous.

When I came back home to Hancock, Michigan, I couldn't sleep up in my regular bed. We had a basement and I went down and slept there for a period of time. And, of course, my mother said, "Forget about all the stuff that happened. You're home now. Finish college. Do this. Do that." This was the way the world expected people to react and it's not so easy when you've been in that constant trauma for 11 months or whatever—a constant physical and emotional bombardment. It was not like you go over there and you're sitting in an office or some rear echelon area. I remember walking down a home town street with a friend of mine and someone behind me clapped their hands. Well, it sounded just like an AK-47 and I was down on the street. I was so bloody embarrassed it was unbelievable.

But I couldn't believe how fast and how conditioned you become. And it's very difficult once you become conditioned to those circumstances to change your behavior. These are all reactionary survival skills.

I didn't deal with all of this very well. Here, I'm not like one of those pussy Marines because here we were originally from the Navy and transferred to the USMC. We're there because we really wanted to be, not because some judge made us go there. "You either go to the Marine Corps or you go to jail." Among the Navy corpsmen who served with the Marines, there was a hell of a lot less acute psychological trauma or pre-morbid history. It seemed like their personality makeup was much more stable than the average Marine. I think it had to do with the choices, and purpose, and character.

When did you actually get discharged from the Navy?

I was discharged in January of '69.

Had you gotten another assignment when you got back from Vietnam?

No. I went right from Treasure Island in San Francisco to home.

So you were on a 2-year enlistment?

Yes. A 2-year active. But because I had been wounded, they expedited things and I wanted to go to college, so we made all the arrangements.

You went to school after that?

I surely did. I became a Physician Assistant like a lot of the corpsmen did back in those days when that field was just opening up.

I graduated with my PA from the University of Alabama. I got a masters specialty in surgery and urology from the University of Nebraska. I did a residency as a PA at Montefiore Hospital in New York City.

So this has been your career since?

Yes. And I've been taking care of veterans basically since I left the military.

Where are you working now?

At the VA Hospital in Iron Mountain, Michigan.

Well, it's been about 37 years since you were in Vietnam. Do you think about it much anymore?

Immediately after I got back, I thought about it all the time and it was constantly in my dreams because your biggest fear was going back and getting killed. I really don't think about it too much anymore. Let me put it this way. I had a lot of issues, including survivor guilt. I tried to use coping mechanisms that I used when I was in combat. Well, it doesn't work in a socially refined environment. I eventually had to say, "I really have to straighten out these issues. And with the help of some really smart psychologists-friends of mine-we were able to put a group together and resolve these issues. I never had gotten married and never thought I deserved to have children. I had a real problem with responsibility after the war because of all the responsibility I had to shoulder when I was in Vietnam.

Resolving all this didn't happen until 1985. Once I did that, then I was okay with myself and I accepted myself as being okay and that I'm not a coward for living and being alive and having survived. I realized that I deserved to be loved and deserve to have a family. I got married to the most wonderful lady in 1989 and we've got two kids. I have a son who's 14 and a daughter who's 12. That's the unfortunate part about it because they are the focus of our lives and right now I'm looking into my longevity, which is in question. I've been through this before. It's all a plus. I most likely should have been blown away 38 years ago.

Well, you're still here and, God willing, you'll be here a lot longer.

And I'm still fighting, too, in terms of trying to stay alive. I've got a respiratory cancer and never smoked a day in my life. All the "medical experts" seem to point to exposure to defoliants such as dioxin, as a probable cause.

I can't tell you how much I appreciate you spending time with

me this afternoon.

Well, what can I send you?