

Interview with CDR William Barber, MSC, USN (Ret.), Vietnam hospital corpsman assigned to India Company, 3rd Battalion, 4th Marines, 3rd Marine Division. Interviewed by Jan K. Herman, Historian, Navy Medical Department, 23 March 2005.

Where are you from?

Austin, TX.

When did you decide to join the Navy?

It was in June of 1966. I went to pick up my brother, who was in the Navy Reserve. While I was waiting, I guess I fell under the influence of the recruiter. He suggested that I take a battery of tests and that they were not binding. I took the test and in June of 1966 I joined the Navy Reserve as a "Two by Six." It meant you attend Naval Reserve drills while in your senior year of high school and when you graduate you are required to go on active duty for 2 years. In all, you committed to a total of 6 years of military service.

Deep down, after high school, I wanted to go to college, but coming from a very poor family that wasn't really an option. So I did like a lot of kids did at that time. I joined the Naval Reserves for 2 years active duty, so I could use the GI Bill to get my education.

Had you already decided you wanted to be a corpsman?

When I joined the Reserve, the battery of tests I took told the military what I was suited for. I either qualified to be a yeoman, a corpsman, or sonarman. So I said I'd be a corpsman and that's how I started striking for being a corpsman. I spent a year at the Naval Reserve Center, Austin, TX, up in sick bay actually learning to be a corpsman. When I went on active duty, the detailer automatically got me a billet at the corps school in San Diego.

What was corps school like for you?

Book learning wise, it wasn't hard for me at all. The hardest part was that it was the first time I had ever been away from home. Except for boot camp which I attended the summer between 11th and 12th grade, I had never really been away from home. There was no privacy. Suddenly, I was introduced to the bay way of living with everybody living in the same bay.

I was a real good student, so learning the material wasn't hard. Corps school was like jamming 2 years of work into 1 year. I was taking all these courses, one piled on top of another and here I was having to learn all this material. It was very intense. It was also the first time I was introduced to standing watches. Basically, corps school gave us detailed knowledge (medical) to use. It was an advanced medical course in stop the bleeding, start the breathing, and stabilize for transporting without professional medical personnel around.

What was your first assignment after you graduated from corps school?

After I graduated, they immediately bused my class to Camp Pendleton for FMF training. I was there for 2 weeks. After I finished FMF training, I went home on leave. My first assignment was at the Oakland Naval Hospital.

When you were at the Field Medical Service School at Pendleton, do you remember

what the training was like?

They taught us basic military subjects to buddy care and how to save lives in the field. The military subjects ranged from facts about the Marine Corps to navigation at night by reading a map, and the use of a compass. But mainly it was lectures on sanitation in the field-- how to dig trenches for latrines. It was basic field medicine needed to stay alive. It wasn't elaborate. It was what you needed to know to keep someone alive until they were transported to the next level of care.

Did you also get some kind of weapons training?

Yes. We learned to use the M16 and the .45 pistol. Like Marine training, they had us break down the weapons and on the firing range firing the weapons. You could qualify for a rifle or pistol marksman ribbon, if you desired to.

So they had the M16 at that time and not the M14.

It had to be the M16 because it was the same rifle we used in Vietnam. And we had the .45 pistol. Yes, it was the identical weapons used in Vietnam.

So you were at Oakland as your first assignment. Were you a ward corpsman?

Yes. I was a General Corpsman (0000) with a 8404 subspecialty, which at that time was a kiss of death. A 8404 subspecialty meant you were a corpsman, who would be going in the near future with the Marines.

They put me on the ward working with paraplegics. I was young and could hardly take care of myself and they made me responsible for a number of patients, who couldn't help themselves, whether it was changing their sheets or bathing. In fact, if they couldn't have a bowel movement, you put on gloves and went into their bowel and pulled the stuff out. It was a dirty job. I always thought to myself, "My God, who hates me to put me in this? I should have gone to pediatrics where I could at least play with the kids." But I learned to do it and it built character.

How long were you there before you got orders?

I arrived there in '67 and got orders to Vietnam in June '68 and stayed there until June of '69. The reason I got orders so quickly was because they wanted to get a 12-month tour out of me before my 2-year active duty obligation ended. This was obvious from the day we graduated from corps school as reservists. Every one of us was sent to the West Coast, so we could get some OJT. Then, about a year left, they cut us orders to the FMF.

What do you recall about your trip to Vietnam?

When I got my orders, I went home on leave. When I returned, they sent me to Travis Air Force Base. Once there you weren't allowed to go anywhere. It was almost like we were in captivity. When my manifest number finally came up, I got on the plane. We stopped over in Alaska, and then continued on to Okinawa, where I stayed about a week to climatize. This sounds funny now but there was an incident there. Some African-Americans were playing cards and some white guy made a remark. The next thing, our whole barracks was fighting each other. The MPs came and someone made an announcement informing us, "You're gonna have enough

fighting down the road. Just cut the crap.” That was the first time I had ever seen a racial incident explode with people trying to kill each other.

As we arrived in Vietnam, the plane actually came under fire at Danang. After we landed and got off the plane it seemed as though the system fell apart. I thought someone was going to pick us up and take us somewhere. But it was really more like we were all there but no one knew what the hell was going on. Somehow I found out where to go to be assigned after a day or two. There was a little shack there and all the guys sat around outside. From inside, they called out names. When you went in, they told you where you were going. “You’re going here. You’re going there.” At that time they assigned you according to the needs of the units. Finally, it was my turn and they assigned me to India Company, 3rd Battalion, 4th Marines, 3rd Marine Division. They told me that my unit was somewhere in Dong Ha and that I should go find it. It was almost like you were on your own. That’s what I did.

I took a truck convoy out of Danang to Dong Ha. I finally found their rear there in Dong Ha. I stayed there about a week to get acclimated. There were four companies in 3/4--India, Mike, Lima, and Kilo. I met the other guys like myself, who were just coming in. That’s the first time I ever met [Donald] Ballard. He later got the Medal of Honor. He went off to Mike company.

After a week, they told me to go to the hangar and get on a helicopter. “When you get out there, tell so and so you’re his relief.” And that’s how you got relieved. Somebody would arrive by helo and everyone would ask, “Who are you here to relieve?” That’s how it was done.

So I got on a helicopter and they took me out to the field. We landed in a clearing surrounded by grass that seemed 7-feet tall. When I entered it, I could hardly see the helicopter, and that’s when the reality that you are in Vietnam really hits you..

That’s how I was introduced to 3rd Battalion, 4th Marines, India Company. It was when I learned that what they taught us at FMF training about the sizes of Marine units wasn’t the way it was in reality. I remembered hearing that a Marine company was supposed to be a hundred men, but here I was sitting around with these guys and instead of seeing a hundred men, I’m seeing more like 20. I thought, “Where’s the rest of the hundred guys? They must be out on a patrol or something,” but it turned out that that was the company! When I got to India Company there weren’t more than 50 men at the most. What really shocked me was that every time we were in a battle, the Marines had an attitude. “A company of ours can take on a battalion of their’s.” And thus Headquarters would send a company against a battalion. But, hell, that “company” of Marines wasn’t even a company. I never understood that mentality. It always seemed to work, but I think it was because of our air power.

Was it the kind of feeling that one Marine is worth 10 NVA?

It was like, “We’re the United States and these people are disorganized and they’re nothing.” I’m sure they wanted each company to be a hundred men or whatever but I got the feeling that they thought the enemy couldn’t do anything to us because we were the United States. And, on top of that, “I’m a Marine and we have a long tradition of getting the job done!”

If your company was 50 guys when it should have been a hundred, what was a platoon?

A platoon was those assigned originally before losses. When I got there they had just had a battle so they were drastically understaffed. When I arrived, Third Platoon had a 2nd lieutenant and may have had 10 guys. There were four platoons, a weapons platoon, and a CP platoon, which was the company commander (O-3), the radioman and forward air-support radioman, senior enlisted, and senior corpsman.

Again, my platoon only had 10 guys. It should have had 20 or 30. On one hand I thought, "This is great; I only have 10 guys to take care of." On the other hand, I then I thought about staying alive, I thought, "Oh my God, we're gonna get wiped." But that's what I went into. I was 18 going on 19 and wondered if I was going to see 20.

In my company there were four corporals and a senior corporal. The senior corporal was an E-4 or senior E-3, while the rest of us were E-1s, E-2s, and E-3s.

Did you feel accepted right away or did you feel that you had to earn your spurs, so to speak?

When I got to my company--and I'll use my own terminology--nobody would talk to me, if you can believe that. The reason that no one would talk to you when you were new was that they didn't want to know who you were. If you were gonna get killed, you were gonna get killed right off the bat, or you were gonna get killed when you got stupid toward the end of your tour.

When I first got there, nobody even wanted to meet me because I might be dead tomorrow. They didn't want to know anything about me because then they wouldn't have any feelings about me. Once you got there, you weren't accepted because you were green. You had just come from the rear and all your equipment was new so you were green in appearance and experience. Everyone else was dirty and muddy from being out in the bush.

It must have been a terribly lonely, frightening experience.

For me at 19, all I was concerned about was not ending up like the paraplegics I had taken care of at Oakland. My main concern was coming back without any legs or arms. Getting killed was nothing. You're dead and that's that. I was afraid of stepping on a mine and losing an arm or both my legs. I had seen a lot of that. That's what scared me more than getting killed.

But as I was there longer and longer, I began to take on the traits of the old timers. Someone new came in and I didn't want to know them because too many times you saw people get killed who you knew. We were so young and immature. Probably the majority of us had never been away from home. We were more scared than anything else. But, as a corporal, it was only through my actions did the Marines really and truly come to trust me when they needed medical attention.

How did you earn the respect and credibility with your Marines?

You got the Marines' respect and admiration through hard work and time. When they went out on ambushes, I went, because to win them over you had to do more than have knowledge of medicine. Of course, I took care of them, but you had to be one of the boys. Corporals fell into different categories. Some were only corporals, kept to themselves, and did their jobs and thus were friendless. Others were more outgoing and did well with the Marines. Finally, there was the kind like myself, who were both corporal and Marine. We served Marines

and were technically Marines.

At some point, you must have seen some action because you earned the Navy Cross.

In November of '68 we were in a firefight and discovered an NVA underground complex up in the mountains. Our area of responsibility was in I Corps. The northwest corner of South Vietnam to the Laos border was our area of responsibility. On our east was Khe Sanh. To our west was Laos. To our north was the DMZ. Our rear was Camp Vandergrift, which was our forward position. From here we began our missions.

You were beyond Khe Sanh, then?

Yes. To the west of there.

So, you say you found an underground enemy complex? What did it look like?

The whole complex was underground and connected by a tunnel system. There was a command post, a hospital, and sleeping quarters down there. Since we had all the air power, the Marines always traveled on the tops of mountains. The enemy always seemed to stay down in the valleys, so they could hide. When they got into the mountains, they didn't want to have a command post where it could be seen. So they did a lot of tunneling. In this case there was one big room where there may have been a radio command post. There were maps on the walls. In the next room there was a treatment table with drugs. The next room contained bunks where they slept. They also had a large number of exits going in all directions.

Was this anywhere near the Ho Chi Minh Trail?

I couldn't tell you where it was. Seldom did I know where we were. We got our position by elevations. "We're going to Hill 416." That's how we knew where we were. At that time, we were in a mountain range in northwest South Vietnam. This could have been a stopping off place for the NVA on the way down the road or just a forward position to stay at for R&R..

Anyway, we got a radio message at that time telling us that a general and some press were coming out to see us and inspect the complex we had discovered. My platoon was ordered to go and secure a landing zone, that the general and his party could land on several clicks away.

What I should point out is that after you've been in a firefight or a battle, you are not mentally or physically prepared to do something like this duty. If you've been fighting, you're both mentally and physically exhausted and not mentally sharp. So when they told us--3rd Platoon--to go over and secure this landing zone, I guess we weren't in the best mental state at that time. Some of the guys weren't dressed. Some guys didn't even take their weapons. We weren't battle-ready to say the least. The attitude was "Why us? Get somebody else."

From the beginning, this simple tasking was doomed. When you approach a landing zone, you go around it and secure it. You don't go right down the middle and sit down. Instead of doing what we were trained to do, our guys started walking down the middle of the landing zone. When we got about three-quarters of the way across, all hell broke loose. We had walked into a horseshoe ambush. We were trapped there in the middle of a landing zone and the NVA were blasting away. I personally saw no way out and honestly thought I was going to die. In a situation like this, it's amazing to observe how people actually react to their situation. Some guys couldn't

get close enough to the ground, but still returned fire. Some guys were just sitting up and crying. Others were wandering around and calling for their mothers. And others, even though they knew they were surrounded, ran right toward the enemy guns that were shooting them. It is an eerie scene when you believe you are going to die. And yet as individuals, we handle/face it differently.

Most people are creatures of habit. If they drink, they usually go to the same bar. Well, we had come onto the landing zone from a certain direction. We thought the best way to get out of there was to go back the way we came. It must be safe because we just came from there. But the NVA had moved two machine guns around to where we had come. We didn't know that, but maybe that was a blessing..

So I lay there, scared, confused, and wondering. I could hear bullets whizzing and observed puffs of dirt being thrown from the ground as the bullets walked up to us. I finally realized that if I stayed where I was, I was going to die so decided to get out of there. What makes a man or group of men react like I did at this time must be the basic instinct of survival. I want to live.

All at once we got up and started running down the trail back to where we had just come from. At that time, I was about the fourth guy in line. There were three Marines in front of me. That was the first time I ever saw a machine gun actually pick a guy up in the air and hold him there while they were shooting him. Finally, when they stopped shooting, he fell to the ground right in front of me. It is a sight that lingers with you forever due to the fact that he was a human, but also you knew him.

He was the first guy who was killed. The second Marine was also shot. The third guy, if you can believe this, got hit and fell across the machine gun on the right knocking it over. As I came down the trail . . . and if it's not your time to die, you're not going to die . . . The machine gun on the left suddenly jammed. I shot the man and knifed the guy beside him. Then without thinking, I turned around and knocked out the other machine gun crew with my .45.

You said you were about fourth in line when you saw the two machine guns shooting your buddies. So you were able to take out your .45 and get rid of those people.

No. I already had my .45 out. I had it in one hand and a K-Bar in the other. When I got to the gun on the left, I shot the guy who was firing the machine gun. When the guy holding the ammunition belt came at me, I stabbed him. Then I turned around and took care of the two-man crew on the other machine gun.

After that, I called out to the others to come to the safety of the bush. People started coming. Then is when you actually ask, "What does it mean to be a corpsman? Why am I here?" That's the only way I can explain what I'm about to tell you. I can only say that there were still Marines left on the LZ and unable to come to the safety of the bush.

Then I went back onto the LZ. I don't know why. Maybe because there were Marines still there and we lived by the code that we wouldn't leave anybody out there. Maybe the answer is simple. It was my job.

I crawled down the trail and got to the first Marine. He was dead. I dragged him back. Then I went out the second time and got the second man. He had been shot in the leg. I brought him back and stabilized him with a rifle as a splint. Then I went out and got the third guy and

brought him back.

Then, being stupid, I went back out a fourth time. As I was dragging the fourth guy back and crawling along, the firing stopped. Off to my left, I saw an NVA with a rifle raised in order to stab me with his bayonet. On the ground, lying flat, and having my attention focused on a patient made me an easy mark. As I said before, if it's not your time to go, it must not be. He tripped over something--a root, a tree stump, or his own feet; I don't know what it was. But he tripped across the trail in front of me. I shot him and he fell face down.

Then, all of a sudden, all hell broke loose again. As I lay there with my face in the dirt, I felt this cool stuff all over me. It was his blood. I don't know how long I lay there staring at my hand covered with his blood.

As my senses returned, I figured I had better get the hell out of there. I began crawling down the trail dragging the wounded Marine, but first I had to push with my left hand the dead NVA out of the way because he was lying across the trail immediately in front of me. I had just killed this guy and yet I stopped as I turned his face toward me. His eyes were open, just staring. All of a sudden, I put my left hand on his cheeks. I don't know why I did that. I then remembered thinking, "This guy is so young, he's never gonna shave." He must have been no older than 10 or 12. We weren't fighting an old man's army. We were fighting young kids.

I pushed him out of the way and continued dragging the fourth guy over to the safety of the bush. It may have been 100 degrees that day, but as I came out of shock, I was shaking as if I had a good case of pneumonia. I guess that was the highlight of my career. I was nominated for the Medal of Honor, and as it went up the chain, it was being approved at each level. When it got to a Navy admiral, who I understand was over all the forces in the Pacific, he thought it should be disapproved. So it went back down the same chain and was re-submitted recommending downgrade. So that's how I ended up with the Navy Cross instead of the Medal of Honor.

They always say that your biggest mistake was not getting shot yourself, right?

This sounds terrible to say, but a year later a guy called to inform me that I was going to get the Navy Cross. His comment was this. He stated that this would have been a hard sell. When I asked why, he said, "America sees her heroes dead, mutilated, or at least wounded. The best thing you could have done that day was to have pulled out your John Wayne and cut yourself."

I didn't have any medals at that time so I figured you couldn't go directly to the Medal of Honor right off the bat. Plus, even though the Navy element in Vietnam suggested that I call/write my parents and get them involved politically, I didn't. I didn't even have the National Defense Medal. But at age 19, I guess was at the apex of my career.

What was the date of that incident?

November 25, 1968.

Who wrote you up for the medal?

The Third Platoon commander.

How were you equipped at that time?

Let me tell you this. It may sound funny to say this. We corpsmen weren't allowed to

carry M16 rifles. I could if I wanted, but when you're traveling on foot in hundred-degree temperatures up and down mountains, you wanted to carry the least amount of equipment you can. At times I would see a totally equipped company going out of Camp Vandergrift. Beginning about 500 feet down the trail and continuing for a quarter of a mile, one could get all of the helmets, extra ammo, entrenching shovels, and flak jackets you wanted. They'd gotten rid of all that crap. I didn't need to carry ammo, grenades, or an M16, because when there was a firefight, all that became available. So that's why I only carried a .45 pistol, wore a soft cover, had a sweatshirt, which, in the end, rotted off of me, wore my trousers with many pockets, and carried a Unit 1.

The Unit 1 to me was ceremonial. You couldn't carry drugs/medicines in it for long durations due to the weather. You were constantly out of powders or ointments. Medicine in Vietnam was about the 3 Bs and rapid transporting from echelon I to echelon III.

No flak jacket.

No flak jacket. I didn't even wear a helmet. It was just too hot. I never changed clothes when I was out in the field. After the battle, you sometimes took needed items from the people you had killed. They might have a sweatshirt or something you could use. One valuable item sought because our backpacks were very uncomfortable was an NVA backpack. The NVA soldiers had a backpack you could carry on the lower part of your back. By the time I left the field, I was carrying one of their packs. My original wardrobe consisted of a green sweatshirt, that from wear and the wet, rotted off me, a pair of dungarees, carriage belt, boots, and a soft cover.

Most didn't even keep their E-tools to dig holes to get into. A lot of people used their helmets, because they got rid of the weight because of the heat. In each platoon, one guy kept a helmet, but he didn't wear it for safety. Instead, he wore it because that's what the platoon cooked in. Everyone would pour the food into one helmet and share from it. In time you ended up throwing everything away, keeping only the necessary items such as: . . . "I've got my boots. I've got a pair of pants. I've got a tee shirt or a sweatshirt, and a soft cover." The Marines, of course, kept their weapons and wore a bandanna to hold their rifle clips, but got rid of excess ammo that they couldn't carry in clip bandannas on their bodies. They wanted their hands to be freed up when climbing up or down mountain trails. That was the life we lived.

Besides treating men for their wounds, what other kinds of things did you have to take care of?

My biggest problem was having to fight with the men to take their malaria pills. The second thing was heat exhaustion. A Marine would go all day loaded down with extra gear and not drink his water. When they were exhausted, the gunny sergeant would get up behind them and just keep kicking them to keep them moving. That was typical. You are a Marine. It took its toll!

If the medical problem was minor you tried to take care of it on location. I saw a lot of immersion foot and a lot of heat casualties. It was always difficult to get the Marines to change their socks at night when they'd been walking in water all day. You had to get down to the basics--Mother says. In a sense, I was their mother, father, and psychiatrist.

In my unit, we lost more people going to battle from different medical conditions than from the battles themselves. They were young like I was and just didn't know how to take care of themselves or because of the Marine image never complained. A guy would cut himself and just blow it off. "I'm 18. I'm invincible." The next thing you know his finger would be swollen up twice its size. "Why didn't you come see me?"

"Because I'm a Marine." My buddies wouldn't understand or would make fun of me. I had a lot of this.

Another problem we as corpsmen had to take care of. If I saw Johnny and he really seemed messed up, I'd go see the commanding officer and say, "I really think we need to ship Johnny out." The CO might say, "But he's one of my better guys. And, by the way, we need numbers."

Many times as a corpsman, I needed the backing of the CO, who was a Marine captain (O-3). If you didn't get it, you can imagine where your ideas went. In the bush, he is in command. As a corpsman, you also had to be a politician, because if you didn't keep the commanding officer happy you might not even get someone medevaced out who needed to be. Yet most of the time they listened to me. He would say, "Okay, Doc, "Give me your pitch." Based upon what I said, and what he thought about me (reputation) and other pending circumstances, he either called or didn't call for a medevac.

How long were you in the field altogether?

About 9 months. I stayed there until I was relieved. When you got out there, there was no doubt who had been out there a long time. Here's an example of how life was. We would march all day in the rain and finally come to a stopping place for the night. Then we'd get word that we couldn't put up any shelters. Each of us carried a shelter half. You couldn't put up the shelters because the enemy might see them. There were no fires either because the enemy might see them, too. But it was still raining. So that night you would lie down in the mud under your shelter half and sleep. The next morning when we got up, you would have to take cakes of mud off your face. It gave you an attitude.

My read on it is that when one was in Vietnam for any period of time, you were not the person that arrived anymore. You reverted to the level of an animal. The things that led or directed your life were the basic survival instincts. I can see myself right now sitting there eating among a bunch of dead people. It didn't bother me at all because in my mind I said, "I've lived to fight another day." My only concern was staying alive. If staying alive meant killing people, that's what you did. I was a corpsman who was trained to assist my Marines, but mentally I was programmed to do what was necessary to survive . . . including killing.

After a battle I observed that men reacted differently. There would be some guys who would sit by themselves pondering about what they had just done. Another group would be bragging how they'd killed x number of the enemy. Others saw it as just another day's work. Then there was the group of men that would be among the dead. These men might be pulling the gold teeth from enemy dead or scavenging souvenirs. Some might even tie a dead NVA to a tree to use the corpse as a target to throw K-Bar knives at. That was the type of mentality that existed. Psychologically, we all reverted back to our basic survival instincts. And those instincts are what drove us--not honor, duty, or love of country.

After being out in the bush for 9 months, where did you go?

I became the medical administrative petty officer at the BAS at Dong Ha for India Company. My responsibilities included all administrative matters and records entries. If there was a firefight and we had casualties--medical or marine, I had to fill out all the forms.

Do you remember leaving Vietnam?

The only thing I remember about my last days was that I watched the administrative traffic and looked at the names for mine. Finally, one day my name appeared. It seemed like that day would never come. I got my stuff and went back to Danang on a truck convoy. When I got there, I stayed at the R&R center, which was both the in and out processing center. There I cleaned up and got a change of clothes for the trip home.

I flew out of Danang sometime in June of '69 and arrived at Travis Air Force Base. Since my 2-year active duty enlistment was up, they processed me out. That's when I saw a lot of guys make a lot of mistakes. It seemed like the processing out routine took so long and guys wanted to get home so badly they were willing to do anything to reduce the process. It became common knowledge that if you signed a waiver letter saying there was nothing wrong with you, you could go home quicker. There were men there with all kinds of physical/mental problems, but to get home, they signed those waiver letters. We were still so young, immature, and without any guidance. Home was security, and we needed it.

What was the transition like? Did you run into any hostility like other Vietnam vets?

No. Once I got back I immediately got out of my uniform. When you were in Vietnam you couldn't spend money. So whatever you earned just rode on the books. When I got back I had something like \$3,000, and I quickly went out and bought clothes. Once I got civilian clothes I didn't look like I was in the military because my hair was still long and I was tanned. I didn't know what some of the current trends were (music, girls) . . . but I looked like I had just come from the beach. Also, I didn't go to any bars to drink. I was still only 19 or 20.

Did you have any problems with adapting to civilian life after what you'd been through?

Sleepwise I did. I couldn't really sleep very deeply. I had a short temper and a chip on my shoulder. I wouldn't let anyone come up behind me and I resented those who didn't go. I later learned it didn't matter how I felt or what I stated, so I just withdrew into myself. My wife donna was also there for me to discuss my attitudes and talk out other matters.

You stayed in the Navy, didn't you?

Yes. I stayed in the Navy Reserve and got educated. I went to the University of Texas and obtained a degree in management. Then I got my graduate degree in finance from Southwest Texas. I was in the Naval Reserves until 1981.

You also got a commission.

I made E-8 in the Reserves and one day someone talked to me about becoming an officer. I asked, "Why would I want to be an officer?"

He said, "What if you retired right now as an E-9? You aren't going to make as much money as an O-3." So the capitalism in me helped me make a decision. I applied for a commission and got one in 1981. Then I applied to come back on active duty. On 1 May of '05, I actually retired from the Medical Service Corps and the Navy.

I only have one regret. When I first went to boot camp, I was part of a "rent a crowd" for someone's retirement. In the course of his career, this guy had gone from E-1 to O-6. He was a doctor so maybe that made it easier. That day I said, "I want to do that." When I didn't make captain, the only thing that bothered me was that I hadn't fulfilled my long-term goal of going from E-1 all the way up to O-6. I didn't make it. Of all the things I accomplished or recognition I have received, the one thing I base the success or failure of my naval career on is my failure to convince a board of my peers that I had the experience or potential to be an O-6.

In your case it's been 36 years since you were in Vietnam. Do you think about it much anymore?

Periodically I do. I see a movie about that time and notice how it's wrong--how Hollywood messed things up. Occasionally I think about what I went through. I wonder about this guy and where he is. Or I think about what could have been. At times I also think about whether today's generation was worth the effort and misery.