

Interview with RADM Robert Birtcil, 3rd Dental Company in Vietnam, 1967- 1968. Conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian of the Navy Medical Department, 4 January 2005.

Where are you from originally?

I was born in Chico, CA.

Did you go to school there?

No. I went to kindergarten in Red Bluff, CA. Then my grandparents raised me a great deal when I was a kid. They moved to Reading, CA, to run a motel complex. They had owned a motel-gas station-ma and pop store complex there in Red Bluff, too. I moved to Reading when I was about 5 or 6 years old. I did the first and second grade in a little town called Enterprise, CA, and then moved into more downtown Reading. I completed the rest of my grammar school and high school there. I graduated from Shasta Union High School in 1960.

Where did you go to dental school?

I first went to UC Berkeley in 1960, went there for 2 years, and then I worked for a year to get some money to go to dental school. I entered dental school in 1963 at the University of California San Francisco.

When did you graduate?

In 1967. I got out of school in June and was on active duty in the Navy at my first duty station at North Island Naval Air Station in San Diego by August.

How did you decide to go in the Navy?

I completed all my pre-dental school requirements and, the year I took off from college, I wound up getting a draft notice. I was supposed to report to the Army. A considerable number of family members had been in the Navy, some in the Army, and some in the Air Force--Army Air Force during World War II. I was probably closest to an uncle of mine--my mother's brother--and another one of her brothers. They were both Naval Academy graduates.

So I immediately went down to 50 Fells Street in San Francisco and signed up for the Navy Early Commissioning program. All that did was tell me that I had to pay for my dental school education and get a deferment on my military obligation until I graduated. In those days the government paid nothing for an education like that. Some people would remember that medical students got their final year of medical school paid for. But that section of Title 10 of the U.S. Code allowed deferments for medical, dental, and theology students until they got their degrees. You still had to fulfill your military obligation.

Was there any kind of orientation once you went on active duty?

No. Between my junior and senior year of dental school, I went to the officer indoctrination course which was conducted for medical and dental students at the U.S. Naval Academy. It had been done there for at least 4 or 5 years. The class I graduated from would have been August of 1966 in that summer between my junior and senior year. That was the last class given at the Naval Academy. That occurred as a result of some misbehavior on the part of some of the dental students there the final night before graduation.

We all got liberty the final night before graduation. A real, real nice guy by the name of LCDR Inman, who was on the academy faculty there had stayed over the summer to be

officer-in-charge of all these OIC programs. Some of the fellas got a load of beer uptown and came back on the Academy grounds sometime late in the night. Among other things, they broke into a paint locker and then proceeded to paint Tecumseh, a Naval Academy shrine. In fact they didn't climb up on him, they simply threw the paint up all over him. And they had done so with oil-based paints. And here's a sidelight on this story. Because they splashed oil-based paint on Tecumseh, before the next morning, the paints had set. They also splashed it all over the stonework on the pedestal. It was August and it got warm very fast. By the time they got the maintenance people out there to start to remove the paint, they had to blast it off with a sandblaster or something. And it took all the patina off Tecumseh. All of a sudden he was bright and shiny. And that really got the Naval Academy in an uproar.

About 7 o'clock the next morning it all hit the fan because the Superintendent of the Naval Academy, a guy named Kaufmann, was walking to his office on the same sidewalk that Tecumseh sits on. Well here he comes and sees Tecumseh splashed with all kinds of paint. It really hit the fan. They rolled us out of bed in Bancroft Hall, where we were staying, and immediately wanted to know who had done this. Inman lined everybody up and said "I want whoever did this to own up to it and step forward."

Well, none of the perpetrators would step forward. Everyone who had participated--and there were about 10 or 11 guys--all went into denial.

The upshot was that they canceled our graduation. We were supposed to have the Navy Band come play for it. Someone was supposed to come speak. As it turns out, I think they got the Chief of the Dental Corps to come over to speak at some kind of informal graduation and they graduated us.

As a result of this, Kaufmann, the Superintendent, fired Inman. The lasting sadness of the whole thing was the fact that this fellow, [Richard P.] Inman never saw another promotion in the Navy. He was deep-sixed--retired. And that's a real sadness because he was a very well-meaning guy who had given of his personal time to run this course of instruction all summer. And that's the reward he got for it.

That was the last Medical Department officer indoctrination course ever given at the Naval Academy. They made all the medical-dental students go up to Newport the following year.

Where did you go after you finished up at Annapolis?

I went back to dental school for my senior year. Once I graduated in June of '67, I went to North Island in August and reported to the dental clinic there.

How did the Vietnam thing happen with you?

It's an interesting story. One of my good friends was Jack Esvelt. He was another lieutenant dentist just like me. He had just come back from a 1-year tour in Vietnam with the 1st Marine Air Wing. That would have been the 11th Dental Company. He was full of war stories and we were all young. So I got it in my mind that I, too, had to experience some of this adventure.

I then let it be known that I wanted to go to Vietnam. I worked in the clinic most of that August and September of '67 learning how to do dentistry. I was just out of school and hardly knew what was going on. Sometime in the middle of October the CINCPACFLT dental officer came through on a West Coast tour and came through North Island. I expressed the fact to him that I was interested in getting an overseas assignment. In those days, by the way, on your second year of active duty, a lot of fellows would go to a ship. Or if you went to the Marine Corps ashore, that counted as sea duty. So they would keep a lot of lieutenants in a dental clinic for the first year of their 2-year obligation, and then in the second year, would send them on a ship tour.

Because I was such great friends with Jack Esvelt, and he had regaled me with all these tales about the Marine Corps, I was more interested in doing that than going aboard ship. So I let the admiral know that I was interested in having a shore tour with the Marine Corps.

Here's what actually happened. Perry Mills was killed at Cua Viet Combat Base right around the 1st of November 1967. I came back from Veteran's Day weekend and I had a set of emergency orders sitting there at the clinic at North Island to report to the 3rd Marine Division. I was to proceed to the Field Medical Service School, etc. No leave authorized.

Nobody could figure out why they were pushing me so hard to get over there. I immediately went to Camp Pendleton Field Medical Service School and graduated out of there right around Thanksgiving weekend. I think it was only a 2- or 3-week school in those days. By the first week in December, I was on an airplane headed to Okinawa.

Had you heard about Perry Mills being killed?

No. I knew nothing about it. I didn't realize we had lost a dental officer. I didn't know him. As I know now, Perry Mills had done an internship upon his graduation from dental school at Great Lakes. He was then assigned to the 3rd Marine Division and had proceeded overseas. He was rather new in his tour when he got killed. He was in Cua Viet sleeping inside a tent that was sandbagged up about waist-high so that if you got out of your rack and rolled on the deck, you would be protected from shrapnel. But, unfortunately, what Perry did was he rolled out of his rack and stood up. He took shrapnel in his back from a rocket and it killed him. He was the only dentist in the Navy who was killed in Vietnam by hostile action.

When did you learn that you replacing him?

When I got in-country. I went to Okinawa and we had to sit at Camp Hansen for 4 or 5 days because a typhoon hit the area right after we got there. They weren't flying any planes in or out. When the typhoon cleared, I got on another plane and flew into Danang Air Base on the 7th or 8th of December 1967. I then made my way up to Phu Bai, where the 3rd Marine Division was headquartered at that time. When I walked into the company office to report, the chief looked up from his desk and said, "Who are you?"

So I told him who I was. He looked down a roster there on his desk and said, "Yeah, you're Mills' replacement. Well, I didn't know who Perry Mills was. I figured he had rotated out of country or something. In the next couple of days, I got the full story.

What were your first duties there?

I stayed in Phu Bai for a few days and then they sent me up to Delta Med, which was up at the Dong Ha Combat Base. Delta Med was the main surgical and clearing company for 3rd MARDIV forward. The 3rd Marine Division rear was at Phu Bai but 3rd Marine Division forward was at Dong Ha, that is the ADC, the assistant division commander, and some of the staff, who were up at Dong Ha in a little compound inside the Dong Ha Combat Base called Sub Unit 2.

I went to Delta Med and worked for a lieutenant commander oral surgeon named Sam Hardison. Sam Hardison and I are great friends now but we were not good friends in those days because there was a real formality in the Navy. Senior officers just didn't talk to junior officers. Even though he was just a lieutenant commander, he was a boss. He was not your buddy. Even at North Island, you learned quickly with regards to captains and commanders. You just didn't get close to these people. You worked with them in the clinic but it was "Yes sir, no sir."

Part of the work up there at Delta Med was to give us on the job training in advanced trauma

care. How to start a line in a casualty--doing all the stuff you would be doing in the field to keep a wounded Marine alive. So you'd work in the dental clinic there and go up in front when casualties came in. . . We were actually at the back of the compound and all the casualty care was at the front.

Just outside the front of that compound, was a helipad. Right across the way from the helipad was a KIA storage facility. That's where they kept the KIAs in body bags until they could get them out of country. It was refrigerated. Anyway, they put us over there going to work on forensics.

I stayed at Delta Med for several weeks getting spooled up on combat casualty care. After that, they put me at Sub Unit 2. There was another dental clinic there, which was maybe 3 miles from the clinic at Delta Med.

About this time we were getting into the third week of January 1968. Of course, the Tet Offensive started there on the 20th of that month. That would have been the morning that the NVA hit Khe Sanh and blew the ammo dump.

Where were you at that time?

I was in Sub Unit 2. So I was sitting inside a dental clinic and just reporting in every day and doing 8 or 10 hours a day doing dentistry on Marines. The problem we had with the Marine Corps at that point was that they were pushing so many Marines through regimental combat training at Camp Pendleton or Lejuene, that most of these recruits' dental needs had not been taken care of. And that was not a pretty picture in the 1960s with regards to many of these men who had come out of a lower economic stratum of our society. Many of them had pretty bad mouths. But they were pushing these kids so hard through all this training, that most of their dental needs were unmet by the time they got to Vietnam. So many of these Marines were delayed in their assignment to a field unit--a Marine rifle or artillery regiment. And they were held in the rear to get these massive amounts of dentistry completed to where you could at least get them to a Class 2 dental condition so they would not have an emergency out there in the field.

What were you seeing in these Marines?

A tremendous amount of caries, third molars that required extraction, and so on and so on. It was a real mess. They would keep these Marines in the rear and make them into clerks or they'd sweep out the officer's hooches. They just had them doing odd jobs. And that's what these kids would do for 2 or 3 weeks. They'd go to dental almost every day and get their mouths worked on. So there was a colossal unmet dental need over there that hadn't been taken care of in the States before these kids had finished their basic training or advanced training at Camp Pendleton.

How many patients did you see a day?

I can't even venture a guess. The equipment we were using was pretty rudimentary even though it was high quality. It was all packed in a couple of big suitcases as 782 mount-out gear. There was an air brake company called Encore that made that equipment on contract with the Navy. There was a high- and low-speed turbine handpiece and all air drive. The company was in the business of making brakes for trains. I think the handpieces were from Midwest. Encore built the small compressors that provided the air and these small suitcase type boxes to where you could actually break them out and have a manifold to put your handpieces on.

Again, this stuff was not too shabby compared to what I heard was available in Korea. All they had was a low-speed handpiece that was belt-driven off a bicycle wheel. The Marine who was waiting to get his dental treatment was the kid who got on the seat and drove this low-speed handpiece with his feet while you went to work.

Both torment for the dentist and the patient.

Exactly. The high-speed handpiece had not been available in the dental profession that long. In fact, I believe it was a retired Navy dentist who had invented it and it had only introduced in the very late 1950s, early '60s. By the time I got to my clinical training at UCSF in 1965, we had high-speed handpieces in our clinic, and we were one of the cutting edge schools with regards to using the high-speed handpiece. There was also a water/air syringe.

Were the dental materials all standard--Wiggle Bug.

Yes. And we had a rudimentary acrylic that we used in those days. It was horrible. Most of us used silicate at that time because it was a more stable restorative material than were the early acrylics that were around. Serbritron was what we used.

These clinics were not air-conditioned except when the wind was blowing. And the heat was another matter. I went over there in the winter but I remember the heat being such that I'd be working on a Marine in one of these field dental chairs, and the sweat would be running off my chin into his mouth. I'm not kidding. But that was part of the game. Then you couldn't get these acrylics to perform. They wouldn't set or they'd set up faulty. It was terrible. All these acrylics were designed for the States. They weren't designed for 105 degree weather and 95 percent humidity.

How did the amalgam do?

The amalgam was okay. It was an old course-cut alloy. In fact, it wasn't a bad dental material. It was a much better material than the fine-cut alloy that became so popular later on. The course-cut amalgam carved like gravel. They certainly gave a Marine a good quasi temporary-permanent restoration so you could get him to the field.

Good enough for C-rats.

Yes. There were two issues out there. What were you going to do with all the dentists and dental techs when you start taking massive numbers of casualties? Are you going to train these people to be adjunct corpsmen and docs so they can do advanced cardiac support or advanced trauma support? Or are you just going to keep them in the dental clinic and have them hide out. And the answer, to my way of thinking, was that we're going to train these people as adjunct casualty care-givers.

Was that the philosophy then?

It was to a point. That is to say that if you were out with a regiment at a combat base where you had limited medical support, you were expected to pitch in. But it all had to do with the knowledge. How much knowledge do you have about keeping somebody alive? Could you do a cut-down on an ankle, for instance? Could you get a line in somebody in the back of their hand so you could get fluids in him? I dare say that a lot of people wound up being OJT'd in that right there in Vietnam.

How did you end up at Khe Sanh?

About the first week of February, Khe Sanh was really rolling. I was chafing at the bit to get out of this clinic. The guy I was working for was a great guy. I still stay in touch with him. His name is John Williams. He was a commander and the XO of this dental company.

Let me depart for a second. Did I tell you that most of the officers in these dental companies

were reservists? In those days, the dental companies were separate. The 1st Dental Company served in the 1st Marine Division down around the Danang area. The 3rd Dental Company was assigned to the 3rd Marine Division, and the 11th Dental Company was assigned to the 1st Marine Air Wing.

Dental companies in those days, as were the medical battalions, were the predecessors of the FSSG [Force Service Support Group] component of the Marine Corps. But in those days they called it the Force Logistics Command (FLC). So the TO [Table of Organization] for a dental company was 24 officers and 48 enlisted. You had a regular Navy captain (O-6) as a commander of a dental company, a regular Navy (O-5) as the XO, and you had a lieutenant commander in one of these. From there you went down to lieutenants. Almost without exception, the lieutenants were reservists. Those dental companies were 90 percent reserve officers doing their 2-year obligation.

We got a smattering of regular Navy lieutenants--one or two--and one or two regular lieutenant commanders in my company as time went on. But still it's a fair statement that 90 percent of those dental companies with the Marine Corps were reservists. And there were officers in the Navy who refused tours in Vietnam.

How did they get away with it?

The detailers would compromise by saying, "Will you go to a ship?" And the dentists would say "Sure." Shipboard duty in Vietnam wasn't too dangerous. Or they would pull a tour on Guam--which was unaccompanied for a year--or one of the other small islands out in the Pacific. So there were some compromises they could achieve to get their overseas tour. But that threw an inordinate number of lieutenants into those Marine Corps dental companies.

Back to your question about Khe Sanh. About the first week of February, a fellow named Bob Benjamin, who had been up at the Khe Sanh Combat Base, wanted out of there. I was looking for something to do besides sitting around the rear with the gear. So I foolishly put my hand in the air and said, "I'll go." Jack Mahoney, the CO of my dental company said, "Okay." Why did I go to Vietnam to drill and fill all day? There was no point to it. I might have well as stayed in the States.

Anyway, they said, "We can make this work." The first week of February, Benjamin came down from Khe Sanh and I went over to the helopad at Dong Ha one morning. And I caught a CH-53 with some other Marines and supplies heading for Khe Sanh Combat Base.

What was your first impression when you got there?

Well, we almost smacked ourselves into the side of a hill around Khe Sanh because it was socked in with fog. They had a radio direction beacon at Khe Sanh to guide these helos in during inclement weather. Somebody in the cockpit of the helicopter got confused. The ground speed of the helo was very slow. I was sitting up by one of the doors with the door gunner. All of a sudden there was this hill looking at us out the door. And it was vertical, not flat. The pilot came within a heartbeat of smacking a rotor into the side of the hill. Had he done that, it would have been all over. But he pulled away and we eventually got down to the base and landed. I got out and went over to Charlie Med. The place was a mess. You could see that there was a lot going on there. The NVA were throwing a lot of ordnance onto the base. I think the number of artillery rounds coming in during the siege averaged a few hundred rounds a day. And the base at Khe Sanh wasn't all that big. A tremendous amount of area the base occupied was the actual airfield. And there was a perimeter around that. The Marines were mostly concentrated on the perimeter. The NVA would throw two or three rounds into the airfield and blow holes in the matting. Then you couldn't land a fixed-wing aircraft. Then the NVA would go to work on the rest of the base. I think the all-time high for artillery, mortars, and rockets one day was 1,200 rounds. I think the low toward the end of the siege was one or

two rounds a day.

Was there any incoming when you landed?

I don't recall. When we got off the helicopter, the crew chief pointed and we started running and then dove into the trench which was just to the airfield side of Charlie Med. After the chopper took off and it quieted down, I went down to Charlie Med. They took me over to CIC to meet COL [David] Lownds, who was the regimental commander. I had grown a handlebar moustache in my short time in country.

So I walk into CIC and there's COL Lownds standing there. I introduced myself. He turns to me and says, "You're the new dentist. Okay doc, I've got only one thing I want you to do. Cut that moustache off."

And, of course, he's standing there with his own handlebar moustache. I said, "Yes, sir."

Then he looked at me with a twinkle in his eye and he said, "I'll bet you're wondering why I'm ordering you to do that, aren't you?"

"Yes sir."

"Because you're the only son of a bitch here with one bigger than I got." It turned out he was just kidding me. I kept the moustache.

That's the kind of guy he was. He could get very serious at times. I went up to CIC most mornings and gave the 26th Regimental Aid Station morning report on casualties. What was our intake, how many did we have waiting for medevac? How many died? I saw Lownds go all the way from being a jokester like the way I showed up to: One morning he ordered a Marine captain--one of the company commanders--to do something. I think the captain hesitated in executing the order. I was sitting in the CIC, which was a very small place, very dark inside, lit by green lights, maps and radios around. This stuff was going on at the time I showed up. Lownds went into some kind of scenario in which he said, Marines who refused orders could be shot. And he was damn serious.

What kind of dental facility did you have at Khe Sanh?

The first day of the siege, when they hit the ammo dump on the 20th of January, the dental clinic was in an old subterranean part of the French-built fortifications at Khe Sanh. In fact, we just moved around the corner. This thing just had a tin roof on it that was just barely above ground level. When they detonated that ammo dump, everybody abandoned these medical spaces. Regimental aid was in the same bunker complex. Everybody abandoned this place because there was just a tin roof over you. An artillery shell could easily come right through the roof and kill you.

So they went around the corner to a subterranean bunker the Air Force had built. The Air Force had built three bunkers in line just right across the street from one of the 05 batteries. That would have been the 13th Marines. The first day of the siege the Air Force guys packed up and got out of there. But they had three of these very modern bunkers lined up on this one street. They had no real function there any more so all the radio communications went into the middle bunker. We were on the end bunker at the crossroads.

There were some old pieces of dental equipment that had been left in the old French bunker. It was interesting to go in there. During the time the French had occupied it, they had dug a hole in the ground and poured concrete walls and floors. With all the hill fights that had gone on around Khe Sanh, especially in the summer of '67, all these walls were just pockmarked from bullets.

What did you have for equipment?

I had the same stuff we had down in the rear area. It was another Encore outfit.

Did you have a lot of dental patients there at that time?

No. There were hardly any dental patients. The reason was that it was so dangerous to move around on the base. It's not that we didn't move around. The first few weeks I was there, it was very, very foggy at Khe Sanh. When it was foggy, the NVA could fire harassing rounds but they couldn't really see what to shoot at. I treated a kid one afternoon who had his elbow destroyed. He had been hit by recoilless rifle fire from one of the hills around us.

So I didn't wind up doing much dentistry. I did emergencies. If a Marine showed up in pain, I'd take the tooth out or try to restore it. Otherwise, I helped out with casualty care. There was only a physician with me. The regimental surgeon was the only other person in there.

I had two dental techs when I started up there and we had about eight corpsmen assigned to Regimental Aid. These kids--including the dental techs--would go out and pick up casualties after these massive artillery and rocket attacks. And we took a lot of casualties up there.

Regimental Aid was sitting on the southeast corner of the base. On the east side of the base was a battalion of ARVN rangers. I went over there and saw them several times. We wouldn't let the ARVN inside our lines. We made them as a bubble outside the main line of resistance. We didn't trust them. And these guys took some casualties down there. We went down and treated them.

Mostly, you did the dentistry that needed to be done and that included some facial wounds from time to time. And then you pitched in with casualty care. There were six to eight corpsmen and two dental techs in the bunker with us.

By the way, the dental techs pitched in and brought casualties in themselves. These kids had no fear.

You got a Bronze Star for some of your activity up there.

Yes. When you get right down to it, it's a meritorious Bronze Star and not for a single incident. I had gone up and established another clinic at Vandergrift Combat Base, which was the old Rockpile, in the fall of 1968.

My company commander was Jack Mahoney. Jack had lost Perry Mills. But another kid who was killed just 2 or 3 days before I got there was a dental tech by the name of Ron Drinkhouse. He had driven a jeep from Delta Med in Dong Ha to the Seabee landing there at Dong Ha, right by the Dong Ha Bridge. He was coming back in the jeep after going over there to pick up supplies which had come up the Cua Viet River. The NVA dropped an artillery round out there someplace and it killed him instantly. So Jack Mahoney lost two guys when he was there as the commanding officer.

Do you remember any incident at Khe Sanh that was particularly unusual or more horrific than usual?

It was just the sitting and waiting more than anything else. I don't know how to explain it. We did a lot of things up there. I led these working parties outside the bunker about a week or so after I got there. The roof on this Air Force bunker was just a layer of timbers and one layer of sandbags. We were afraid it wasn't going to withstand one of these 120mm NVA mortar rounds or an artillery round, for that matter. We'd go to the artillery battery across the street. They had all these 105 shell casings. Some corpsmen and I would pick up these shell casings up and we put a layer of them over the roof and then we covered that with another layer of sandbags. By the time the siege was over, we were up at least two layers of shell casings and sandbags to give us some blast protection.

But most of the problem with that siege was sitting in these bunkers and just taking it day after day after day. It was demoralizing.

You were probably wondering why you were there.

There was probably sometime after I got there that I wondered, "Why did I ever volunteer for this?" The reason we were at Khe Sanh or Con Thien. The reason we were at Cam Lo, the reason we were at Cua Viet, the Rockpile, Camp Carroll had to do with Robert McNamara's "Magenot Line" concept. He put the 3rd Marine Division in a defensive position against incursions from the North Vietnamese Army. Of course, General [Rathvon] Tompkins was CG after Bruno Hogmuth had been killed in a helicopter crash. When Ray Davis came aboard after Tompkins, he put the 3rd Marine Division into a mobile status. He said, "We're not sitting around and taking this anymore." But that decision probably came from a higher level.

I flew with Ray Davis one time when he was making his rounds up in the DMZ area. He scared the willies out of me. When you went out in no man's land out there you wore a flak jacket. You were stupid not to. The only thing that saved my life when I was wounded was my flak jacket. Otherwise I wouldn't be here today. When you flew with Ray Davis in his personal helicopter, you didn't wear a flak jacket. He didn't wear one. Most people don't know that. When that helicopter landed, he just jumped off and walked over to CIC. Most people wore a flak jacket or had the good sense to get under cover.

How were you wounded?

Early in the morning of the 25th of February, the NVA hit our lines on the southwest side of the base. They put about a battalion across the ground at us to test our resolve. Toward the end of that fight I went up from Regimental Aid to get an assessment of casualties that occurred in those trenches that held out over there. Once I had done that and gotten the figures together I was headed toward CIC or the command center to report those to Lownds. I got caught out in the open with a "get even" barrage from the NVA. The first round just bowled me over. I was lucky as hell that it went over my head and didn't detonate behind me. If it had, I would have been gone. I got the back blast. The front blast from an artillery round is much worse than a back blast.

What kind of shell was it?

The NVA used 132s and 152s. Their rockets were 122s. Their artillery pieces were Russian. Later on in my tour when I went up to the A Shau Valley with the 9th Marines, they captured some of those 132mm artillery pieces. In fact, one or two of them are on display back at Quantico. The 132mm artillery piece was a tough round. Once you heard the round coming out of the tube it was a very, very fast round. It was hard to get on the deck in time to avoid it. But the 152 was a slower round and you had something less than a second to get on the deck when you heard it coming out of the tube. You could hear these rounds coming out of Co Roc, which was over in Laos. The NVA rolled those artillery pieces out of caves and shot at us for 2 ½ months with them. We never found them. The NVA would open the cave door, roll them out, fire a couple of three rounds, and roll them back in. The only reason we eventually found them was that the Marine Corps had a LERP patrol out there. Some Marine was up on a ridge line just short of Co Roc and he was glassing the area where they thought those artillery pieces were, he saw the muzzle blast when they cranked a round out of it. The next thing they knew the Navy sent some jets in there with Bullpup missiles and they put them right through the doors of those caves. It was said that the Japanese had built those caves during World War II.

So this round detonated in front of you.

It went over my head and detonated in front of me. I just rolled up in a ball. Because of the shallow angle that an artillery round comes in, most of the black blast goes into the ground. The front or side blast of an artillery round is just deadly. I saw any number of Marines just decimated by artillery rounds.

Where were you hit?

I got banged up in my shoulder and shin. The concussion just left me absolutely goo goo for 2 or 3 days. I was headed for the deck when the thing hit but it absolutely bowled me over.

Did they take you to Charlie Med?

A Charlie Med corpsman came out and picked me up when this barrage was over, which lasted 4 or 5 minutes. They told me later that this was a 45-round barrage. The corpsman got me under cover when it was over. Then I worked my way back to Regimental Aid. They treated my scratches and that kind of thing. You start to realize that you're not immortal at that point.

How did you get out of Khe Sanh?

I left when the siege was over. I helped Medical and Dental pack up, we put everything on trucks, and left everything there we couldn't take with us, and the Marine Corps detonated it to make it useless to the NVA. And that included all the runway matting. We got on a bunch of 6 by 6s and rode right down Highway 9 to Dong Ha Combat Base again.

Where did you go after that?

First I earned an R&R so I went to Hong Kong. When I came back they sent me down to a dental clinic at Quang Tri. Quang Tri was 3rd Marine Division headquarters at this point. Dong Ha was still 3rd Marine Division forward. There were only 8 or 9 miles distance between the two places. I sat in this dental clinic until about September of 1968 when I finally talked my commanding officer into sending me up to Vandergrift Combat Base. The 9th Marines were up there and they wanted a regimental dental officer to handle their stuff at Vandergrift and go out to some of their fire support bases. I'd go out to the fire support bases and take some tools with me. I had a couple of great dental techs up there also.

I was there through Thanksgiving of 1968 and, believe it or not, I got to liking this so much that I re-upped for a second tour. Can you believe it?

That shell did a lot of damage, didn't it?

Yes. Something happened to me. I must have been crazy. That's what people said to me at the time. Actually, I came back to the States towards the end of November, spent all of December in the States on 30 days leave, and then went back to Vietnam. I did several short field stints out of Quang Tri.

How long was your second tour?

Six months. But that terminated in 6 months simply because the 3rd Marine Division was ordered out of country. From sometime around January or February of 1969 until the end of my tour, I spent that entire time at Cua Viet with 1st Amtracs and Task Force Clearwater, which was the Naval Special Warfare outfit up there. The 3rd Marine Division had been ordered out of country and one of the first outfits to leave was the 1st Amtracs. When they pulled out, that left me without somebody to report to so Tom Stevenson said he could attach me to Task Force Clearwater, which was a PBR

outfit. I went with them and ran the clinic at Cua Viet. We had 1st Amtracs, a recon company, Task Force Clearwater, which was the Navy command, and that was a PBR-Junk outfit. They ran both PBRs and junks up and down the Cua Viet River, and Seabees also.

I took care of the dentistry for all the people at that base. I also took care of patients who came down from Gio Linh, which was an artillery base. I also took care of some Army troops.

When did you leave Vietnam for the second time?

July of '69. Because they were pulling the 3rd Division back to Okinawa, I had more in country than anybody else in my company. So they told me I was out of there. I would have stayed but my commanding officer wouldn't go along with it.

Where did you go after Vietnam?

I went back to Treasure Island. While I was still in Vietnam, I had told my CO that if I couldn't stay in Vietnam, how about if I go to the Antarctic. I thought that would be a good adventure. I wrote a letter to BUMED requesting duty with Operation Deep Freeze and he endorsed it. The medicine and dentistry that was provided to the 15 or 20 nations that were on the Antarctic ice was all done by the Americans in those days. There may have been a physician with the Russians but there was no other dentist but the Navy dentist.

In the meantime they sent me back to Treasure Island in the San Francisco Bay area, which was my home of record. I didn't get orders and I didn't get orders to Deep Freeze. In January of 1970 I resigned my commission. I told BUMED I wanted out. Amazingly enough, I was in San Francisco taking a post-graduate course at Letterman Hospital when someone came in and told me I had a phone call. Believe it or not, it was a captain by the name of John Holmes, who later was an admiral himself.

Later on about 1974-75, John Holmes became the commanding officer of the dental clinic at Treasure Island and I did some of my reserve duty there. John Holmes, who was a captain at that time, was the junior officer detailer. He said that he had a problem. "I've got a set of orders ordering you to the Antarctic sitting here on my desk. I've also got your letter requesting release from active duty. What do you want to do?"

At that point, I was just angry enough at the Navy for putting me in such a poor command environment there at Treasure Island, that I told him to process my release from active duty. I had already found a practice.

My old friend John Williams, who had been my XO in Vietnam, was also at BUMED at this time as a captain. John had told the chief of the Corps to give me a set of orders to the Antarctic then or that I would leave. And sure enough, by the time they got around to it in 1970 it was too late.

Did you go into private practice?

Yes. I went into private practice in a little town north of Berkeley, Kensington, CA. Then I started teaching dentistry half time at UCSF. When I got off active duty, I went over to the reserve center at Treasure Island and affiliated with a VTU dental unit over there.

When did you come back on active duty?

I didn't. I never did. I stayed a reservist. I stayed in the VTU from 1970 to 1977. I was XO of this unit at Treasure Island. I applied for command and got one at Moffett Field. So I went there until 1981 as commanding officer of a reserve Navy dental clinic. We treated patients on drill weekends.

In 1981 I became persona non grata with regard to the Navy Dental Corps in the Bay Area because I took on the then-staff dental officer. I didn't think he was doing a particularly good job and

let him know about it. A bunch of senior officers then told me that I ought to get the hell out of there.

A billet then opened in Special Boat Unit 11 in Vallejo. I went to that unit for 4 years. After about 6 months there, the medical officer there named Scott Benson left and so I took over the medical department at SB 11 and ran that for 3 ½ years. I broke the door down for staff officers qualifying as officers in charge of combatant craft. They didn't want to let me qualify. They said, "Hey, you're a dentist, bub."

They kind of try you out on these boats to see how you do. The next thing I knew, I was in a qualification course. I actually have official paperwork in Washington for NOBC 9279--officer in charge of combatant craft. But it took me 2 years to qualify. It was a long, slow, arduous process for reservists in those days in those special boat units. You had to go through a lot of hoops--navigation, tactical deployment of boats, how to put SEAL teams on the beach, how to come and get them, how to do board and search. It was interesting and I loved it.

Where did you go from there?

I finished up with SBU 11 in 1985. I made captain that year. I then went to another dental command in Alameda Naval Air Station. I reported at the Alameda Reserve Center, spent 2 years doing that, and then went to another command back at Mare Island. We worked at the clinic there at Mare Island. Then I went for a year as the staff dental officer at Naval Reserve Readiness Command 20 in San Francisco from '88 to '89. And then in 1989 . . . I guess the Marine Corps never forgets . . . because one of the guys I served with in Vietnam--Bob Williams--was now the Dental Officer of the Marine Corps. They needed a new battalion commander for 4th Dental Battalion in the 4th Marine Division so Bob called me and asked me to do this. I applied and got the job. It was very controversial for me to come back that way. I had gone 20 straight years without looking at a Marine. Most of the guys who came up in this 4th Dental Battalion as battalion commander had spent several years in one of the dental companies of the battalion.

After Vietnam, the Force Logistics Command or FLC had gone away and in its place the Marine Corps generated the FSSG. At the same time, these separate dental company commands had all merged into a dental battalion command. In the dental battalion you had two ground companies. One company would support the 4th Marine Division. Another dental company supported the 4th FSSG, and then there was another company to support the 4th Marine Air Wing. I faced a lot of opposition because I hadn't done any time with the battalion concept organization.

What happened then?

One year after I took over this dental battalion, I put it into very intense training for combat. I put them through advance trauma life support, through advanced cardiac life support. I put almost every officer in the battalion through field anesthesia. I sent people up to Bridgeport at the Cold Weather Training Center. I had them working everywhere. And there was some heartburn over this initially. A lot of the people in this battalion were in small detachments and were still drilling out of naval reserve centers. They were not working with Marines and that's who they would be going to war with. So I changed the location of their drills and that didn't make some people happy.

Were your strong feelings to prepare these people with this intense training influenced by your Vietnam experience?

Oh, yes. My God, some of those young Marines back then were just shot to shit. You did everything you could for them but despite everything you could do, they died. You just couldn't keep them alive. For the first 10 years I spent in the Naval Reserve--from 1970 until I went to that Naval

Special Warfare Command, I realized I had a mission for myself. And that was to train these young kids to where they did not go to combat as inexperienced as I was when I went. It was a gradual realization that that's what I was good at and it's what I was there to do. When I had that battalion, that's why I instituted the battalion-wide training program.

One year after I had taken over the battalion, I looked like a prophet because the first Gulf War started. Who would have known that would happen? By that time the battalion was coming up on its training modules pretty well. We mobilized half that battalion for the Gulf War. We got within 2 days of going over ourselves from Lejeune when the war ended.

When I finished the battalion in 1991, I went back to REDCOM 20 as the staff dental officer again and stayed there until the beginning of 1994. I was selected for my first star. In early 1994, I left and came to Washington, DC.

When did you get your second star?

In 1998.

When did you retire?

November 1, 2000.

What was your title at that time?

Deputy Chief of the Navy Dental Corps and I was the Force Dental Officer for Commander Naval Reserve Force.

Did you go back into practice or did you buy your ranch at that point?

I had worked some for the State of California at the University. I sold my practice in 1994 after I made flag rank. I knew I couldn't do a job as an admiral and stay in private practice. I had already tried to do that when I was running the battalion. When I was running that battalion, I had detachments all over the U.S. Both years I had the battalion, I put in more than 150 days in uniform on duty. It about ruined my life. The University was angry at me, people in my practice were upset. When I was notified I had made flag rank, I sold my practice. I kept my University teaching position as clinical professor at UCSF and I pretty much did Navy for 6 years.

When I retired from the Navy, I did a little more of that. Ultimately, I wound up with a chronic neck problem--C4,5, and 6. I was told by the physicians who were treating me that I had a choice. I either go through fusion surgery or quit dentistry and do something else. And so that's what I did. I quit and came to Washington State.

Where is your ranch?

It's 20 miles west of Spokane.

What's the name of the town?

Cheney is the closest town. I've got 640 acres here of hay and cows. I put my cows over on summer pasture. Then I farm another couple of hundred acres of hay. For a single-man operation, it keeps me busy. If I do anything in the future, I'd like to travel around a bit and see some of my old friends. This is like owning a 7-11 store. You can't get away from it. I've got about 80 or so animals right here. I've got to watch them every day for hoof rot or whatever ailments they come up with. I've got cows ready to have calves. It goes on and on.

It's been a long time since you were in Vietnam. Do you think about it much any more?

I'll tell you the truth. I've thought about Vietnam more in the last 4 or 5 days than I have for 10 years since you last talked to me. It made me think about it again. And that's a mixed emotion on my part. But I hadn't thought about it for a long, long time. There have been some other people who have tried to talk to me about Vietnam and I won't talk to them about it. I'm not ashamed of what happened. I'll talk to you because I know you. And I have a lot of respect for what you do there. Otherwise, I just don't dwell on it or talk about it. It's just something that happened.

I want to thank you so much for spending time with me today.

It was my pleasure.