DENNIS NOAH USMC MEDIC

Dennis Noah: I was 18 years old. I graduated from a Catholic high school in Saint Louis and I went to a first semester of college, what was … actually I wanted to go into medical training and I didn't really do that well in college. I just wasn't ready and so what I did was, I remembered my last class was a French class and it was the final exam and teacher handed out the exams, I wrote my name at the top, handed it in and walked out and went to the neighborhood recruiting office.

I wanted to be a hospital corpsman, medical field and so I joined. This is like, I guess, November, December of '65 and I had my … when I was going to go boot camp was in March of '66, like three months later. They called it delayed entry, and I never told my parents. I remember Sunday night, when we were leaving on a Monday morning, I had to go down to the train station down in downtown Saint Louis and go to there to get on the train to five o'clock in the morning or something to go to a boot camp in Great Lakes, Illinois and at dinner that night, and we always had friend chicken on Sunday nights and I said, oh, by the way, I'm leaving tomorrow morning at five.

They said where are you going and I said, well, join the Navy. Oh, okay, see my dad was an Army first sergeant and he and Navy did not get along so well because he was in New Guinea during World War II and the Navy actually left him, all the ships and transport vessels left because the admiral thought the Japanese were going to blow up the support vessels and they kind of had to forage for a while so he wasn't real fond of the Navy too much and so then I went to boot camp.

Then I went to what we call A school or hospital course school and then you had six months of training, like on the job training and I worked at a dispensary and in the Naval Training Command in the Great Lakes and then opportunity came along to go for FMF, Fleet Marine Force and I volunteered to do that, just seemed like kind of the right thing to do and I went to … we had orders to Camp Pendleton, California where we went through a kind of a Reader's Digest version of Marine Corps boot camp and then they taught us more field medicine and took corpsman field medicine, was …

It was pretty extensive. We learned how to … just all kinds of procedures, amputations, the whole works and after that, I got orders to Vietnam which basically all were most of the corpsmen were going at that time and I was assigned to Second Battalion Fifth Marines, First Marine Division and I was assigned to a company called Hotel Company and I spent six months in Hotel Company and then six months at the Aid Station and that's pretty much how I got into it because … we're … very patriotic family.

My father would … when he was alive would tell everyone that no family had been in every war since the Revolutionary War which was true because my father side came over in the 1600s from either England or Scotland, we're not quite sure … Whoever tells … Whatever uncle tells the story, it's either one … and landed in the Carolinas and so the family was … We were in the Revolutionary War and so forth and so on and he mentioned it when I came to Vietnam and I said, dad, that must mean the Noah's have a stupid gene and he didn't think that was real funny.

It was kind of okay that I went to the Marine Corps because it was kind of like what more he was used. He was a mortar man and went through the whole Pacific campaign the entire war as a mortar man so and again, he didn't think much of the Navy but going into the Marine Corps, he thought that was fine and it was, I guess from the family perspective, it was almost something that all the sons had done.

That we'd all been in the military in some fashion, all my uncles had been in the military except the one with flat feet, he couldn't get in and so I had family in every theater both in World War I and World War II and we just … It just seemed like the natural thing to do so I did it.

Speaker 2: You remember that first day when you pulled into the South China Sea? What harbor … where were you coming into?

Dennis Noah: We flew.

Speaker 2: You flew, okay, oh, okay … so I was thinking …

Dennis Noah: Yeah, we flew. We flew out of a place called El Toro which is the Marine base in California and they flew us to … in Flying Tiger Airlines, in a DC8 which is kind of like a Douglas' version of a 707 and it was a charter aircraft. By time … this was 1967, May of '67, by the time '67 came along and they no longer sent people over in troop ships.

They sent us over in chartered military aircraft … Chartered civilian aircraft for the most part and then we flew to Okinawa, a camp called Smedley D. Butler, and in Camp Butler, what we called stage which is where you're issued your weapons, you're issued your we call the 702 gear which is your backpack and all the stuff in the field and your uniforms and made sure … I made sure the guys that I was with had the proper shots and so forth.

Then we flew from … after about three days we flew from Kadena Air Force Base out of Okinawa into Denang. Again, civilian airliner which was kind of interesting because on the flight from California to Okinawa, we had female stewardesses,

with stewardesses but from Kadena to the … they pulled the stewardesses off. They would not allow the stewardesses to fly in country and some of those planes, I think they'd get shot up or shot down and we landed and it was … Get off the plane, it's extremely hot. They did not stop the engines. Pilot sat in the seats, ready to go.

They rushed us off, took our sea bags off and rushed the guys going home on the plane, the plane, 15 minute turn around that plane was back in the air again because they would get rocketed in Denang.

Speaker 2: Was there any attacks when you landed?

Dennis Noah: No.

Speaker 2: That first day.

Dennis Noah: Not that first day but we did, the plane I … the picture I showed you, the plane like that, we were in and it was …

Speaker 2: It was hit?

Dennis Noah: It was pretty badly shot up coming in to our fire base and there were about six corpsmen that were assigned to the same Battalion Fifth Marines. A marine regimen has three battalions at the time and first, second, and third and I was assigned the Second Battalion Fifth Marines and we were what they called detached. The other two battalions were with the regimental headquarters in Denang and they operated out of one of the fire bases just outside of Denang.

We operated independently about 30 miles south and I guess southwest of Denang and we were in our area without the other battalions so they had to fly us from Denang in a C130 and I say there's about six corpsmen and as we're coming in for a landing an NVA, I think it was 30 caliber machine gun, hit the plane, hit the wings of the plane and hit the belly of the plane and, well, the plane wasn't really any danger crashing, but the pilot brought it down extremely fast, got it on the ground below the horizon so they couldn't shoot it anymore and it was leaking fuel, obviously.

The runways were made out of steel plates with … They fit together like a … They have a name for it but I can't remember what it is and the steel plates, they look like a jigsaw puzzle and they fitted in together and we hit those steel plates and we didn't know what that was. We all looked at … Six corpsmen looked at each other and we thought we had just crashed and we were fine and they took the plane at the end of the runway and made us evacuate the plane and they left the

plane down there until somebody could chew enough gum to stick the holes and get the plane off the ground, without blowing up.

That was kind of my introduction to Vietnam as far as getting to the original firebase where the battalion headquarters was.

Speaker 2: At that point the war was just starting really to heat up.

Dennis Noah: Yeah, I was there in ’67, ’68 and those were the two highest casualty years of the entire war and we took a lot of casualties. We went to Hue City in January and February. We were on the first battalions in the Hue City during [inaudible 00:09:29] of ’68, and I don’t know if you’ve seen these documentaries where they show the marines raising the flag, those are my guys.

That’s Gunny Thomas and some of my guys that … and I was out of the company by then but with corpsmen, if you lasted six months, they generally pulled you out and put you in a forward aid station which was a little safer than being out in the field and there were almost 700 corpsmen killed during Vietnam War which is percentage wise, it’s a pretty high percentage.

Speaker 2: Now you mentioned Way … I mean the … you saw the old city …

Dennis Noah: Hue City.

Speaker 2: Can you remember some of the details of what was going on with …

Dennis Noah: It’s … Well, I remember … again I was with an aid station and so my job was to take the casualties on their first stage and I did a lot of the record keeping for them also. My first six months I was a company corpsman, a line company, an infantry company and we’re in a field so my unit, my Hotel Company 2-5 under the command of Captain Christmas who ended up retiring as lieutenant general.

He took the company in and they, their job was to cross this … get across the Perfume River into the old city but they couldn’t get across because the fire was so intense, the enemy fire was so intense so they couldn’t cross that bridge and what happened the first two or three days, the South Vietnamese government would not allow any airstrikes or artillery strikes into Hue City which … I mean it’s hopeless. I don’t know how many NVA were in there but they were NVA regulars and there were thousands of them.

Speaker 2: This is because of the city was an ancient city and they didn’t want …

Dennis Noah: Ancient city, it was a beautiful city but it ended up looking like a German city after World War II and finally the South Vietnamese government or the generals,

I'm not sure who made the decision, said to heck with this we're taking very heavy casualties from the other side of the river and we can't get across that bridge.

It was a … It almost reminds me of the bridge, I don't know if you saw the movie, the last bridge, the bridge of Ramogin where that steel rector set type or just what it looked like, it was longer and every time, they'd want to cross, they'd just get mowed down and so finally they allowed air strikes and once the air strikes then the units start to move in and by that time the entire regiment was up there and I'm not sure how many units, Marine units were there. I know Army units came in.

It was all major house to house fighting, kind of like the guys I think do in Afghanistan right now, the house to house stuff which is pretty intimidating.

Speaker 2: You were in there as a corpsman, you were patching these guys up, trying to keep them alive …

Dennis Noah: My job …

Speaker 2: I imagine, I guess it was probably just about some … two places you've mentioned between Way and Hill 937 … I'm not [inaudible 00:12:42] intense as it could be?

Dennis Noah: Well, I mean, it was two different types of fighting. When we were in … our firebase was called Anwa and it was called the Arizona Valley, it was a very heavily booby trapped area. Probably the most heavily booby trapped area in all South Vietnam and we'd run patrols and you'd get booby traps, you'd get snipers and we would have to run patrols on this road, I think it was Highway 1-A but it was an off shoot of Highway 1 which is where our supplies came in by truck almost daily and so we'd run road sweeps and there was a bridge there called Liberty Bridge which was a very famous bridge which they eventually blew up during 10 of '68.

That part of the war was very much down in the mud, in the rice paddies and booby traps and can't see them kind of a thing and we also went into a place called Happy Valley and Antenna Valley. Those places were just … I mean, ask the next fellow that's coming up, he was in Happy Valley and Antenna Valley and those are really, really bad places. They were heavily, heavy concentrations of large NVA units in there and anytime you went in there, it was … you had to fight your way back out and it was really very bad.

That was our AOR Area of Operation until '68, of 10 of '68 when they pulled the entire battalion up to Hue City and it became a little bit different. It became

urban, house to house fighting and actually what came out of that, one of the … our battalion commander, Colonel Arring Cheatham, he became also a three star general before he retired, actually was credited with the developing strategy on to use house to house fighting, formal military strategy and how to use house to house fighting that is still used today.

Because basically going from building to building, you go from room to room, you've got to clear room to room to room. It was two different styles of fighting, two different styles of troops we were fighting when we were in the mud and in the rice paddies, we not only had to contend with the NVA regulars but you had the VC guerillas and they were kind of hit and run. It's almost reminds you of like Fort Apache with John Wayne, where they're all surrounded by Indians and every time they went out the fort they got into a kind of a battle with the Native Americans.

Same thing but … and so … and night belonged to them. They owned the night and as a Marine unit, we spent more time in the field than we did back in our firebase and so we spent a lot of nights out in these rice paddies and heavily mined areas or heavily booby trapped areas with a lot of …

Speaker 2: Tell me about the effort, the various booby traps you ran into, I know some of it but I want to hear you because you're the person who had to fix these guys up after they ran into these. What were you running into in the field?

Dennis Noah: Well, of course, I mean, the most interesting one we found was the bear trap, just like you see on Grizzly Adams television show, it was a bear trap and bear traps it was open and for some reason we found it and tripped it. I have a picture of it in one of my photo albums but punching … I actually found the punji pit and I figure it was … we had punji pits where … They were pits that were driven, dug, actually very neatly with and had bamboo sticks in them and what they would do is they would sharpen the ends and then burn them over a fire and they were just as hard as steel and they would actually rub like feces on it to cause infections.

They would small on these small holes and they would go right through their boots and then we did get … eventually got the steel soled jungle boots which did slow that down but that was a extremely dirty wound.

Speaker 2: They would hide them in the rice paddies?

Dennis Noah: Anywhere. You would have, they'd just dig a hole, a hole, a foot deep, cover it over, it's almost like stepping into a gopher hole, right, and then there was full man sized punji pits which were literally man sized where you would fall in and the bamboo stakes, you would be impaled on them. I actually fell in one of those

in a night mission but I think the guy that dug the hole must have been a trainee on digging punji pits because he left a root that stuck out of the side of the pit and my right leg caught in that root, was right at the top and so I was hanging upside down looking at these bamboo stakes about eight inches from my face and, of course the Marines pulled me out and so I was pretty lucky.

Usually when they dug those pits, they were just as clean as they could be, so they didn't want that thing to happen. He must have had an OJT pit dug in there and we had the usual stuff, I mean, with teenager Marines, teenagers, what's the first thing when you see a can, you kick it but they put booby traps with cans. Glass jars, they were really good at placing glass jars, it's about three feet high with a trip wire and those glass jars would be filled with all kinds of metal fragments and go off and it was almost like a hand grenade.

Oh, it would send them Stateside. I mean those were very, very dirty wounds and if you think of the foot in itself, it's a very complex part of your body, in terms of it has a lot of tendons in it, has a lot of small bones in it and you put a hole in it about the size of a half dollar all the way through it was very … potentially something that would take them out of action permanently and you'd …

What they were trying to do was interesting, was not trying to kill you as much as trying to disable somebody because it … if you ever carry a body, it takes four people to carry a body and so you not only have the Marine that's been injured and you want to Medivac him and put him on helicopter or get him out, get him to a hospital unit. You put five people out of action, sometimes six, if you count the corpsman and so that was one of their strategies.

Speaker 2: Did it give you an appreciation for a people who obviously had very little technology, no money and yet they came up with some incredibly profound strategies against us. I mean did it … did you respect the enemy right from this?

Dennis Noah: No, no. No, hated them. Didn't respect them at all. Now I'd been to Vietnam since and met the people and just … you have to be able to disengage from what happened then and what happens now. I mean, they're lovely people … I mean, I spent a week in Hanoi on a business trip and they couldn't have been nicer but we did not like the way they fought. They fought very much in a way that came across to us to like they didn't really want to fight you. They wanted to hurt you and get away but they really wouldn't fight you.

Until we got into Hue City where we actually … and there was two or three other times where we hit main units but for the most part, it was just hit and hit and hit, run, main kind of thing and we had no respect for that at all. We were taught to fight, we were taught to charge as a Marine unit, you always went forward,

you never went backwards and … I know you read about that in books but I'm going to tell you something, that's how these officers think and, yeah, to have a enemy that hits you then skunked away, if you will, that, we didn't respect that at all.

Speaker 2: Of course, initially, it was guerilla warfare with Vietcong and then finally when we did run into the NVA regulars, that I guess it was the [inaudible 00:21:25] …

Dennis Noah: Yeah, we … well, we ran into NVA regulars in our area also but after the Ia Drang, in 1965, that's when they tried to hit us, the VC tried to hit us with a mainline unit and they lost and that's when the VC lost control of the organization of the war. That's when the North took over the war because the Vietcong units at the time were fairly independent and that's when the North really took over is when Task Force X-Ray, or LC X-Ray, you saw we were soldiers and so that … but they fought differently than we were trained at the time and I was there when General … what's his name …

Speaker 2: General Westmoreland.

Dennis Noah: Yeah, General Westmoreland, he was a big unit kind of guy, World War II tactics, big unit patrols, company sized patrols and then General Abrams took over and then they … strategy was small units. We fight them in our smaller units instead of going out with a company of a hundred some odd guys, you'd go out with a platoon of 40 or 50 or maybe even a squad of 12, 14 guys and so he changed the tactics quite a bit.

Speaker 2: Search and destroy … They really had to change, I guess to adapt to this?

Dennis Noah: Well, I mean, search and destroy was a General Westmoreland tactic and of course, we got a lot of bad publicity in the news for Zippo raids and stuff but, let me tell you something, we … there was more villes that we took fire from that we could not return fire from than there ones we could return fire into. There was a lot of concern about civilian casualties and appropriately so.

I remember one time we were in a … what's called a free fire zone which is … I think we might have been in Tena Valley but I can't remember but we took heavy fire from … of a village and we were not allowed to … it was a platoon sized patrol and we weren't allowed to return fire. Apparently the platoon commander had radioed headquarters to say I want to return fire and they told him no. We did anyway and he was relieved of command since we walked back in the firebase so all of this stuff you see on TV is … I'm sure some of it happened but for the most part, we fought best we could.

Speaker 2: The whole aspect of civilians actually … and even children being part of the resistance, that must have been incredibly difficult, if not incredibly frustrating to know where the next threat was coming from.

Dennis Noah: Well, you never knew. I mean, there was no back area and we had a … We'd have a firebase but it was constantly being rocketed and snapped at and mortared and plus we didn't spend a lot of time there but we understood the civilian population. I mean, I don't think there was a whole lot of animosity toward the civilian population because they were really caught.

In the daytime, we'd be there, nighttime, the NVA or the guerillas or whatever faction would be there at night and so they were kind of divided and if you take a look at the country of Vietnam, it had been in the … the Japanese were there, the French were there and Chinese were there. If you … their history and the people were just, the normal person that agricultural type people, families that … they had, they were powerless and they were caught in the middle of … I don't think we had a lot of animosity toward … I never saw any animosity towards the villagers.

Now the children sometimes they would hand grenades to children and the kids would come up to you and you know what we would tend to do is, nobody wants to shoot a child, so we'd turn around and run down, run back the other way we came. Well, you'd go a hundred yards and you'd run right into an ambush, because they knew … They knew we would not engage a child and then so we ran back the other way and more than once we were ambushed because of that and so … and they knew that.

Now … and that's why we didn't respect the way they fought. We understood the population, civilian population and how difficult it was for them to eke out a living between warring factions, where they had no power in either side and during the daytime, they had to be for the Americans and the nighttime, they had to be for the VC. That's a very difficult position to be in and we understood that but we didn't understand how they could hand a hand grenade to a child and say, go, give this to the big American.

We didn't understand that at all and we didn't understand how they would put booby traps out in all these clandestine, nefarious type of ways to fight. We wanted to fight them face to face, head on and when we did, we decimated them, as we say in Hue City. That was a difficult part of war, plus the fact they wouldn't let us fight.

After Hue City, I remember, John, I was in the hospital and I was laying in a hospital bed and watching Johnson say he's going to stop the bombing and we said … we were 20 year old kids at that time and we weren't exactly military

leaders or military strategists and we said, why don't you just put us elbow to elbow and just keep going north and end this war, because we had them beat. We did have them beat and we stood down and so I think the average Vietnam Veteran, combat veteran especially didn't have a lot of respect for the people that caused that back in the States.

Speaker 2: You had heard about, of course, about the country being torn in two by this. What … when you saw those and, of course, this was a television war, I imagine you guys actually could see some of the reports of what was happening back in the States. What was your reaction?

Dennis Noah: Well, we didn't see … We had no access to televisions, except when you were … like in a big base which we didn't spend a lot of time. I … and the only reason I saw … that's the only television I ever saw was … I was actually in the hospital but we would … you wouldn't see that in the Stars and Stripes which was the military publication but your parents or your girlfriend or your wife, whatever, they would send the papers from the [town 00:28:24], the city papers, Baltimore Sun or the Philadelphia Inquirer or the Saint Louis Post Dispatch and we saw those.

They would come in about a month later and we saw and we were really angry at those is after the Tet Offensive. We were being … people that were reporting were saying that we had actually lost and we didn't. That really angered us and because we knew we had met the best they could throw at us and the most resources they every threw at us and we beat them, big time, and then the papers are reporting how this war was being lost, da, da, da, da, and that's when the military went into the defensive posture.

We could see a change. About the time I got ready to rotate back in May of '68, you could see that the military strategy went more on the defensive, instead of being offensive and taking more aggressive action to fight the enemy, we went more on the offensive and that's where we … I have a friend who was a Marine captain, who was in regiment with me. He resigned his commission. He said if we're not going to fight, and you're going on the defensive, all you're going to do is get people killed and the whole change …

The war changed and if you read General Giap, he did some writing after the war and he kind of wondered why that we stood down after Tet of '68. He was very puzzled by that because he felt that … He had sent massive amounts of material and resources and troops in the South and we beat them in every and what his strategy was, he was going to have a general uprising in the South Vietnamese population once the North Vietnamese came in and it didn't happen and the fact that we beat them so badly and he wondered why we didn't prosecute the war

and that's when he figured out he would not win the war … He could not win the war against US military might in Vietnam, he's going to win it at home.

Everything he did from then forward was to make us, I guess look bad and everything we did was kind of a defensive withdrawal strategy and …

Speaker 2: He's … above the political, these are more at that point much more political strategy.

Dennis Noah: Absolutely, yeah, and so as a Combat Vietnam Veteran I've … I hold some animosity towards people who are back home, holding up signs. I mean when we landed back in May, in mid-May I came back and we landed in El Toro again and after you go through processing the Marine puts you on those grey buses and takes you to the civilian airport, either LA Ex or San Diego and the first thing we did was go to the PX and get civilian clothes because we didn't want to wear our … not that we were ashamed, but we knew the kind of problem we were going to run into and then we went to the gates and I'll never forget this.

We had just … we'd been on the ground maybe a day, and heading into San Diego Airport and there's people standing there with signs saying rapist, baby killers, murderers and they were throwing stuff at the bus like tomatoes or whatever else they were throwing at the bus and we were kind of perplexed by that and that was our welcome home and we were not too fond of that.

Speaker 2: What was your gut reaction when the … I guess to that as you see these people, things are hitting …

Dennis Noah: If I had an M16, I'd have gone out there and shot them. I really would've. I mean, it's just … I really didn't understand it. We went in the military, we thought it was our duty, some of us were draftees but most of the Marines were not draftees. We were all there because we volunteered to go because we believed in our country. We believed in our military. We weren't really so sure what Vietnam was at the time and then to come home after going through that and be treated that way, we didn't understand that. We just thought that was just … It was awful and now they say, well, welcome home.

Well, that's … you're about 43 years too late for me but … and to go against the military and I think that's the legacy of the Vietnam War. As I told you, we do the pre-game ceremonies for our Baltimore football team here and more than once the Ravens, people have active duty guys there on the field, you treat them nicely and more than one of them's come up to me and shook my hand and said thank you and I've said thank you for what, and he said, for this, he says because of the way you guys are treated, we're being treated much better and maybe that's our legacy. We didn't win the war, we didn't lose it either.

We won every battle but we just … we lost it at home but our legacy is maybe we don't treat our military that way. Even if you don't agree with the war, that's okay, but don't treat the military people that way because it's really not something that they have control of and they're serving the country in the best capacity they can and to be treated that way is wrong.

Speaker 2: There was a silver lining if you will …

Dennis Noah: Yeah, I think that's a legacy. I remember one War officer from the Air Force National Guard out of Martin State Airport, they had flown their planes over a number of years ago for the pre-game ceremony and he came up to me, he just gave me the biggest hug in the world. I said what was that for? He said, because we're being treated … Yeah, I'll be in the airport, especially the Baltimore Airport because BWI has a lot of charter flights for military families, military personnel and these coming off the plane and people are standing there clapping and cheering. I think that's absolutely wonderful.

Maybe that's are legacy and if it's that's all it is, I mean, if that's what it is, it ain't so bad, is it? It's pretty good.

Speaker 2: Let's go back to one of the most fallacious battles, the war notoriously, right, and that's for Hamburger Hill.

Dennis Noah: No, I wasn't there.

Speaker 2: You weren't.

Dennis Noah: No, that was not my unit.

Speaker 2: Oh, okay, well, where did you get the Silver Star?

Dennis Noah: That was in an operation called SWIFT. That was on September 10th 1967.

Speaker 2: Can you tell me what happened?

Dennis Noah: Well, I mean, really not a whole lot to tell. We were on a company sized patrol on this major operation called SWIFT, S-W-I-F-T. How they came to the name, I don't know and I … truthfully, I don't exactly know where I was. As a corpsman, they didn't brief you on the military stuff. You just kind of followed, say, oh, yeah, yeah, when they yelled, Corpsmen, up, you went and did your thing. Most of the time, we could have been in the middle of Disneyland as far as I know and …

We were on a company sized patrol and then the skipper sent my platoon out for a reconnaissance and we had actually been patrolling in the company and we looked across this rice paddy, and huge rice … thousand meter wide rice paddies, they were huge and we saw this unit across and they were in [inaudible 00:36:12] somewhere to us, about our size with the green, green fatigues on, helmets, flack jackets, gas masks, backpacks, they looked just like us and we thought they were Marines and, of course, we waved to them, they waved back. Well, it was NVA regulars and apparently these were their first line troops and they circled around and they ambushed us.

We walked right in the middle of them in a very small rice paddy and myself and the platoon sergeant ran out there and treated … and he was wounded very, very badly and treated the people and we were … the guys and we were pinned down for quite some time, so …

Speaker 2: What was the meritorious action that were cited for on that?

Dennis Noah: Well, I mean, basically, it's a … I mean, it's kind of difficult to talk about but doing my job … my job was to take care of the Marines when they were down and that's what I did. We were under fire the whole time and I crawled around and patched up Marines as best I could and lost quite a few and we were pinned down and I ran out of battle dressings and started tearing uniforms apart and then … and the company couldn't get to us because the fire was so heavy that the NVA actually had heavy machine guns.

They had two heavy machine … I don't know if they were 30's or 50's but they were big and they did a lot of damage with those and so I stayed out there and patched the guys up and the ones I could, I kept them alive until we were relieved so somebody could … the company could get a unit in there to pull us out, which they did and we had air strikes, they were actually dropped right on top of us.

They were dropping 250 pound bombs and napalm, just virtually on our position and so …

Speaker 2: Paper said you lost something like 54 in that …

Dennis Noah: No, not that day. The time I was with my company, I had 54 KIA's for the entire time that I was there. That day we had six or seven, that was actually one of our lighter days as far as KIAs but was more intense because of the fact that we were under such intense fire. I mean, the fire was absolutely intense and it was different than when you went into a PC unit, a guerilla unit.

They'd hit you and they'd run. They didn't run and they were dropping bom … I mean it was a constant stream of Navy and Marine corps aircraft coming in at treetop level dropping, just constantly for two, three hours, they didn't budge and they kept that up, that intense fire on us which was pretty unusual to get into that much of a pitch battle and the initial casual ties, main … most of the casualties we all got hit mainly on the first round.

We actually walked into this small rice paddy and most of the platoon was in there, they just opened up and they were good. I mean, they were very, very good shots. These are well trained, well disciplined, experienced troops, that did not run, did not give ground and … until we overwhelmed them with sheer force later that night and then we had another operation called Essex where we lost 30 some odd guys in a space of an [inaudible 00:39:55]. That was the biggest one that I had to deal with.

Well, of course, we had our back packs with our C rations which were cans, so very heavy and change of socks and the personal items but I would have to carry battle dressings, as many as I possibly could because we frequently ran out. I'd carry all kinds of drugs, penicillins, sedatives, pain relievers, morphine. I'd carry … we used at the time, for a blood volume expander and we used serum, was called serum albumen.

When they take the blood and they centrifuge it and get the serum part of it. It's kind of like a milk … it's kind of like a … almost looks like honey and we'd use that to … for IV's they came at pint sized bottles, so I'd carry three or four of those. It got to a point where the original bag they gave you was pretty small, so I would carry a C4 bag, an explosive bag, a satchel, basically, and they're a pretty good size so I could put a lot of equipment in there. I could put a lot of battle dressings.

Your battle dressings come I three size, large, smalls and mediums, and the large, even when they were compressed and bundled were pretty good size and so we would carry that and what I also did was I gave each Marine a small battle dressing to carry on their belt to make sure we had extra to do that and then of course we carried surgical instruments. I had scalpels and retractors and bandage scissors, something called … we called a cut down kit, which is where … when you go into shock you're blood vessels shrivel and you actually have to cut into the flesh to find the vessel to attach the serum albumen for them.

I carried a lot of additional equipment as far as medical equipment and it's … and plus the fact you were issued a 45 caliber, 1911 A Colt 45 which I didn't really see much use in having because I always feared if I had to start shooting, we were probably dead anyway so … but I carried that because they made me carry it and I rarely cleaned it and the times I had to use it … was … well, not too many times,

but I had to use it a few times and sometimes I don't even carry at all and on night ambushes, I would carry a 12 gauge shotgun, sawed off pump for self, basically self defense for myself and the patients because the night ambushes were pretty small units, 12 guys maybe.

The biggest issue I had was running out of supplies, running out of battle dressings because we took a lot of casualties and you'd run out of battle dressings and you would have nothing and then you have to call in a resupply mission and if they could get the helicopter in because the helicopters would … the helicopter pilots were just incredible. I mean they'd bring those things in under the heaviest fire.

You couldn't even stand up the fire was so heavy to take your casualties out or to get your medical supplies and they still would come in. I mean, the holes would be gone, a plexiglass would be exploding and those guys still come in, especially when you had an emergency med evac.

You had to be pretty … you had to be organized and you kind of had to anticipate what was your need going to be like during the rainy season, for example, you had a lot of problems with feet and during the rainy … and we were wet all the time but the rainy season, we were really wet and so therefore you had to carry different kind of medications, antifungal medications, more so during the rainy season than you would any other times.

You would always … I'd always go to the skipper and say, how do you anticipate this to be? Military always have casualty rates and I wouldn't ask him the rate, I said is this is going to be a bad one or good one? No, that's a good a … Then you bring extra supplies and so in the anticipation, that was the worse thing that I hated to worse, was run out of supplies and I can't tell you how many times I did and it just seemed travesty to have to do that and Marine Infantry Company, is supposed to have eight corpsman in it and we never had a eight corpsmen and because there's a shortage of corpsmen, so you didn't have as many supplies as you needed.

Speaker 2: What were the … and indeed, you mentioned about the feeding, the constant weapon … what was the name of that phenomenon that …

Dennis Noah: We called it Trench foot.

Speaker 2: What did that …

Dennis Noah: I mean what would happen is your feet would … I mean when you … if you take a bath or stay in the swimming pool too long, you know how your fingers get all shriveled up, that's what happens but then they'll get fungal infections on them

and they'll actually rot, literally rot, off the feet. I mean your toes will actually rot of. It's almost kind of like … I've never experienced frost bite but it's almost kind of like frost bite where you would lose your toes and one of the things I would always try to do is when we stop for a break on a patrol, is make every other Marine for example, take their shoes off, and boots off and if we could, to dry their feet out.

Of course, I'd always ask the commanding officer if I could do that if we were in position to do that and some of them, would say, yeah, I'm going to get this trench foot stuff and I'm going to go back home. I said do you understand that you … it will send you back home, you can lose some toes but this is something you're going to have for the rest of your life. The stuff does not go away. I mean it's a permanent disability to your feet and so they … it can get pretty bad.

Speaker 2: You mentioned that the ques … in the … after a med evac, would come and take a person a … to a field hospital, but how extensive or an injury could you deal with? I mean you obviously had to be within the field, I mean the guys, he's got shot, or he's bleeding out, you've got, how much could you do in the field?

Dennis Noah: Well, I mean, the … our job was to stabilize and transport and the problem was always the second part, the transport part because sometimes your casualties were so heavy that you couldn't get them out or they couldn't get helicopters in because they'd get shot down or the jungle was so thick, you couldn't get a helicopter in anyway and so you … as a corpsman, you had to deal with everything, from the minor injuries to the life threatening, and to the dying and on certain occasions you would have and the skipper would say, okay, I can get six guys out.

I've got 10 down. Pick six and the rest are going to have to wait the night and so you'd basically play god and the four you would pick were generally the ones that you thought in your opinion, they wouldn't survive anyway … so you'd let them and then the other guys had a chance you would send them out.

Speaker 2: Triage?

Dennis Noah: Ah, triage kind of in reverse. The misconception of a corpsman and medics is that our jobs are to save lives. No. Our jobs are to keep as many weapons firing, many soldiers or Marines in the fight as possible. If I had eight guys down, I would triage basically in reverse. I would see the guy, oh, you've just a nick here, here's a band aid, pat him on the butt, give him back the rifle, go back and start shooting some more. Our job under fire was to keep as many weapons out there firing, as many Marines as possible firing and so it …

You would sometimes have to let the guy that's down, heart down hard, lay, in order to get the guys that were less injured because one rifle, two rifles, three rifles, could make the different of additional casualties. The more lead you send their way, the less lead they can send your way and the less people they're going to hurt or kill on your side and then when the firefight was over that's when you reversed it and did the life things but that was all dependent upon transport and transport was a problem, because on these big operations the helicopters would be engaged with a lot of casualties, the med evacs would engaged a lot of casualties.

The gunships would be doing what gunships do and the ability to get helicopters then were somewhat of a … was a real challenge and so we prioritized. We had … and we … one of the things … what I really … it seemed … Maryland does a marvelous job of airborne casualties. I mean like for automobile accidents, these helicopters that got these … These dolphene helicopters that are running around the trooper helicopters. They're basically to us, they're med evac healthcare, much more sophisticated.

They … recently after that one crash, two or three years ago, they decided that they would triage the patient. They were calling the helicopter in for everybody and so they were teaching them first responders and say, okay this guy can go by ambulance, this guy needs a helicopter and that's what we did, that's exactly what we did and so we … we almost had … They didn't teach us this because back when I was in training, in '66, 57 …

It wasn't that sophisticated as far as … and so we developed a three tier system, emergency priority and routine and we were pretty judicious about using it because if we declared an emergency med evac, those pilots would bring those things in into fire that's … it's just unbelievable.

You didn't want to send a guy back that had a so called flesh wound and risk the life of a crew of a helicopter, being shot down or killed and killed, so we were judicious, we said, okay, this guy, he can wait four or five hours. Let's them know that we've got a med evac. It's a priority med evac and that means you've got three or four hours, you can come and get us but if it's an emergency and then … they just … whatever they're doing they drop and they just come in the closest helicopters. I mean, they'll even jettison cargo.

Speaker 2: Do you remember instances though where a soldier was shot up enough that he should lay down and wait for that copter but he insisted on returning, he could still hold a gun and still returning to the battle?

Dennis Noah: Not, not so much. They … when the … well, it's difficult to say because the casualties when they were hit that hard, they were generally in shock and they

weren't quite really knowing what was going on and if they didn't have any chest wounds or any brain injuries, you'd put them in the morphine stupor and they didn't really know what was going on but certainly the Marines who were not that badly injured, I've had them stay …

Well, my … I'll give you an example. My company commander on operation SWIFT on that September 10th day after all … after we got everybody evacuated. He should have been evacuating, he was hurt, he didn't get shot but he got injured. I can't remember the details of the injury but I was going to med evac him out and I went up to him, I said, skipper, you need to go back, this is a problem, he wrenched a leg or something to that effect and he said, doc, he said, I don't want you to send me back.

He said, if you give me a min … and the Marines are really good at this, no matter what their level was, if I would give … any of the corpsmen would say, it's a medical order, you've got to stop this patrol and we've got to rest for an hour. If they possibly could, they would. They wouldn't say, okay, get lost. They would do that and I said, skipper, you need to go back, this is a problem, and he said, well, we have lost so many platoon leaders. We have …

He was the only officer left in the entire company that day. All the rest of them had been killed, shot, med evac-ed. The NCOs, the senior NCOs were down and he says, if you send me back, I'll follow your orders but if you send me back, this company is leaderless, he stayed behind and I didn't … I med evac-ed him two or three days later and he still has … I'm in touch with him, he still has a disability because he refused to go back and he would have gone back but … I mean that's … that was typical of what I saw.

If you can give him there, their rifle back, they'll go. Heat was a significant problem. It took a while to acclimate to the heat and because of the need for troops, you didn't have time to acclimate them, like in some firebase back here, they literally flew into country, put down the helicopter, went out in the field, so heat was a real problem. We had situations where we had heat stroke and we'd have to get those … because heat stroke, well, your body shuts down and your brain literally fries and it … and sometimes it was so hot that you could literally, if you had an egg, you could fry an egg on the top of a tank.

It was, you couldn't even touch, it was that hot and I remember more than … I used to take … I used to carry about half a dozen thermometers. In those days they were mercury thermometers, not the thermometers you have now but they … we used real mercury and they're glass and that's all we had and I used to wrap them in gauze and wet the gauze down, to keep … otherwise they would actually, literally, the ends of them would literally crack and pop off, then you'd … tips would just pop right off.

Speaker 2: What kind of temperatures are we talking about day to day?

Dennis Noah: A hundred and twenty degrees.

Speaker 2: Say it to give them a copy on top of my voice …

Dennis Noah: Yeah, the temperatures were around a hundred twen … a hundred ten, a hundred twenty degrees and a very humid … and so that was a continual problem and the water. The drinking water that we had, came from wherever we could get it, right, and we didn't … There was no water fountains and so we'd literally use water from the rice paddies or the rivers and the Vietnamese use human waste to fertilize their rice paddies and so we'd put what we'd put what we'd call "Halizone tablets" and it's kind of like an iodine and it was god awful.

I mean it was mud, Halizone particles or whatever else was in there and you drank that so dysentery was a significant problem also, so heat and dysentery was a significant issue.

Speaker 2: I guess my reaction and listening as you described these hellish conditions, I … did the men ever have second thoughts of why the hell they were there? That they vol … many of them had volunteered for this?

Dennis Noah: It … when you first got there, myself as an example, I had a very patriotic family. My father had been in the service for ten years. They've gone through World War II and very typical, where most of us were blue collar kids and so we went there with a sense of duty, responsibility, commitment that was generated by our fathers and our parents but after a while you became disillusioned because you would take a hill for example, sustain casualties, sit on it for two days and leave and then go back and do it again.

We didn't think that made a lot of sense though, we were 19, 20 year old kids, what do we know about military tactics but it didn't make a lot of sense to us, especially from what we saw on television and our example was *Combat*, the show *Combat* with Vic Morrow. He took hills and towns and he kept going and pushed the Germans back and we weren't doing that and so you became … you were disillusioned with the war but you fought because you wanted to keep your buddy alive and your buddy was going to keep you alive.

Many nights we sat back to back because we were surrounded and you depended upon that guy to watch his field and you watched your field of vision and so it became more like a sense of duty towards your buddies and your unit rather than a sense of duty to beat the enemy. Beating the enemy became secondary.

The only reason you beat the enemy is keep from getting everybody killed and because we had … we went over which is another … I think a legacy of the Vietnam War is that we went over as individuals and came back as individuals, not full units and there was a real sense of disenfranchisement because of the fact that we went over as individuals and then they were … you got assigned to a company and there were guys there, had … were leaving the next day, the next month, three months, four months, five months and so there was … It was a constant sense of people coming and going and you didn't … you hadn't trained with them.

There's no sense of cohesion of a unit so because of that, because of the way we fought the war, it was more like a very personal, individual activity just to keep each other alive, that's why we were there, when we no longer cared or understood the war. We didn't really have unit cohesion as because we didn't train with the individuals and we were all strangers. We all started out as strangers.

Here you are, you get off a helicopter, 15 minutes later you're in a fire fight with guys you never even, don't even know their names, have never met, and so that was a real challenge I think for all of us. It's just to kind of no unit cohesion and I guess the second thing that the military learned, that the American population learned that we don't treat our troops that way and the second thing is that units stay with units and if you notice what they're doing now, they're shipping units by units … Unit goes over and unit comes … except for certain specialty … specialties but … and that was a huge mistake, I think we made.

Speaker 2: Military really has learned a lot from this war?

Dennis Noah: I think so, yeah, and I have … I still keep in contact with some friends who have friends that are … and sons and daughters here in the military and I see them once in a while. We have dinner whatever and they talk about what they do now and it's different. I think military's learned a lesson. I think the general public's learned a lesson, we don't treat our troops that way. We can disagree with the war, we can hate the war, hate the politicians, whatever, but we don't treat the troops that way and the military's learned that if you're going to fight a war, fight the war.

If you're going to fight the war, do it in unit actions rather than a revolving door of constant new people who don't know each other and have no sense of camaraderie because you're just strangers. I mean just think about it, you walk into this room and there are a 120 people you've never met before and 15 minutes later that 120 people, you're in a fire fight and your life's on the line, they're life's on the line and you don't even know who they are. That's not a way to run the military and the military has learned that well.

Speaker 2: Well, thank you very much for sharing all this and I want to thank you for what you've done obviously.

Dennis Noah: Thank you.

Speaker 2: That's our … even though they keep saying that World War II guys are the greatest generation, I'm dually, equally impressed by what you guys have gone through and [crosstalk 01:01:00] so …

Dennis Noah: Thank you, thank you.

Speaker 2: Thank you for coming in.

Dennis Noah: Thank you.