

Lt Colonel David Miller

Born:

Died:

Period of Service am
US Marine Corps
Sources: Interview

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VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT
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Interview with

Dave Miller

Conducted by John Gay

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request of the veteran.**

We're sitting at Dave's house on Town Line Road on Washington Island, Wisconsin, on September 9. We're going to talk to Dave Miller about his experiences in the military. So Dave, why don't you let us know how you got into the military and some of the events that took place in the military.

Life Before Entering the Military

Well, I went to Iowa State University, which is a land-grant college. Two years of ROTC was mandatory. I was in the Air Force ROTC. I was in a head-on collision which fractured my back in three places. So when it came time to augment into the advanced ROTC, Air Force wise, they red-lined me medically. They didn't want a back problem, I guess.

So I finished school. I was into my sophomore year when I started getting a draft letter from the draft board in those days.

What year was this, Dave?

1959. So I sent those in and knew I probably was going to get drafted. So I looked for other officer programs. And I found one I liked, which was a Marine Corps platoon leaders' class. I made all the pre-qualifications, and went to a 12-week boot camp at Quantico, Virginia in the summer of 1961. Then I went back and finished my last quarter at school and graduated that fall. I was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Reserves. Then I reported in December for active duty.

I got in there and did very well in the officers' course. I think I was 50th out of 654. So I integrated into the regular Marine Corps. And because I was ranked high I got my first duty station and MOS, plus I got the Fort Sill artillery training initially. It set me up for a good career pattern.

Training and Duty Assignment

Was that in 1962?

No, it was still in 1961-62.

So I got in and immediately saw where the Marine Corps had helicopter squadrons and observers in South Vietnam and Thailand. And I knew we probably were going soon. So I stayed in to get the most training and experience that I could. I volunteered for overseas duty and spent 13 months in Okinawa. I was in Korea four times and Japan two or three times.

What did they have you doing in Okinawa? You were there for fourteen months, you said?

I was there thirteen months. I was an artillery officer. I started out as a forward observer, moving with the infantry. Then I became the operations officer for our battery. Then later on the executive officer for the battery, which is the second in command. I went on several deployments. I think I was on board ship ten different times in 13 months. But I got a lot of experience, and I really liked what the Marine Corps was doing, so I stayed in.

We had activities actually going on at that time in Vietnam. And you were in Japan. What were you doing there?

The Marine Corps has a training base on Mount Fuji. We go up there once or twice a year to train and shoot live ammo up there on those ranges. I was up there late winter or early spring in 1963.

How far up do you go on Mount Fuji? Is it really high up there?

Yes. We probably were half-way up the mountain where our training base was.

Did that give you winter activities?

Oh, yes.

So you were there a couple of times, you said?

Yes.

So then you went to Korea? Was that intermittent?

We went to Korea as a show of force. There was a lot of problems on the DMZ. It looked like the North Koreans were stirring up trouble and could come across. So we went up there and gave a show of force to prevent that from happening. It was cold – it was wintertime – this is the winter of 1963, January or February; I don't remember for sure. We had a good twenty-mile forced march. We waded two rivers and I remember coming out of the water and the clothes just froze immediately, and then freeze-dried. I'd never experienced that before. But we got up in the foothills.

So by that you mean it evaporated, even through the ice.

Yes. And we spent probably a month on that exercise, altogether. And the other three times were training exercises up there.

So you were training troops. How many were in your platoon?

The artillery firing battery has about 136 officers and troops. We supply the infantry with the forward observers, and the fire support crew for the battalion level – the fire support patrol.

So forward observation is seeing where you want the people behind you to shoot the artillery.

Yes.

And hope they go far enough over your head!

They locate targets and call in what is called a fire mission. We plot it on our boards and maps, then compute the firing data and fire our rounds out. So it can be a tricky process.

I can imagine – you want to make sure you get loft on those things enough to clear your line.

Yes. We had a max range on the 105 Howitzer of about 10,000 yards. And we could fire a high or low angle or direct fire, which is right straight out. So if we fired a high angle we could go over a mountain and land rounds on the back side of a mountain.

That's pretty precise. Was there a lot of accuracy doing that? Or was it a testing?

It was very accurate. That was a good old weapon from World War II, and maybe even before that.

The guns that we had in Okinawa were in the battle of Okinawa and were left there. When the Marines reoccupied later they found them, pulled them out and rebuilt them. And we were still shooting them in the 1960's.

That's economical.

Yeah.

When you went up to Korea, the second, third or fourth time, was that also for a show of force?

No. Those were for training missions. We had amphibious training and worked with the South Vietnamese Marines while we were up there.

Were they pretty good soldiers?

They were very tough. When I was in Vietnam [in 1967] I commanded a company initially, and they were brought in to replace part of the perimeter of the air field down at Chu Lai. And because the Marines were being moved north. So my company was split [at] Da Nang [and] Chu Lai [for a short period. Then reformed at Da Nang.]

The Korean Marines came over and took over the perimeter. They sent a patrol out and they didn't come back. They went out and looked for them. They found them tied up with barbed wire and killed by the North Vietnamese.

So the Koreans went out and captured the same number of North Vietnamese, tied them up or hung them and skinned them, and left them hanging out there. The North Vietnamese moved out and never bothered them again.

That's a lesson I guess you want to pay attention to! What year are we?

This is [1967 in Viet Nam]. In 1962-1963 on Okinawa.

[During 1962-1963] there wasn't fighting on Okinawa ... And when were you sent to Vietnam?

That was in 1966. I got in there in December of 1966 and left in mid-January of 1968.

So you were there for little over a year. That was when the war was winding down?

No. That was full [war effort].

When did you finally leave?

[1968].

So a lot of activity was still going on into the late 1960's and into the 1970's. And you were there from late 1966 into 1968. Did you have quite a lot of fighting at that point?

Yes.

How far is it to Da Nang from Chu Lai?

I'd say forty or fifty miles – something like that.

That was a lot of territory for your company to cover, wasn't it?

Well, my company was moved up to the Da Nang area for about a month when I took command of it. Then I had that company for about five months.

Then I went in June or July to the 11th Marines, which is an artillery regiment. I was one of the assistant operations officers for about two months. It was at a time when the North Vietnamese started rocketing the air field at Da Nang. So we formed what we called the rocket team. There were six of us. They would come under attack and a helicopter would come to pick us up. We'd go airborne, and as soon as the launchers were located we would drop in there, analyze – at that time we didn't know anything about the capabilities – so we would analyze from that position the range and direction, and try to figure out how they got them in there. We were able to establish a kind of safe zone out around Da Nang, from about 8,000-11,000 meters out from the air field.

Then we beefed up the flights over that zone, observing that. We set up ambushes at night and we ambushed the North Vietnamese as they were bringing in rockets and launchers.

And they brought them in by jungle trails?

Yes, carrying them in one round by a pole – two guys. The same way with the launchers. They look like a stovepipe, about a foot in diameter.

They'd send one team in who would set them for range and direction. Then they would leave and the ammo crews would come in and load them and run their wires back, usually to a fox hole they had dug. One guy would be left there with a flashlight battery, and he'd set off the launchers. Then he would, of course, run off right away.

But we eventually didn't really stop all of the firing, but we greatly diminished the effect on the air field.

But they were always a nuisance because they could hide in the jungle.

Oh, yeah.

Did they have all these subterranean tunnels?

Yes. They had the tunnels. I didn't get into those. They took the shortest guys who did that.

I also, during that time, took the Marine snipers out on a hill in what was called Elephant Valley. It was a hot area... and I taught them how to call in live artillery. While they were out there, many times we had live targets to shoot at.

Tell me how that works – calling in a target or whatever you call it. You see visually what you want to hit, then you estimate how far the distance is or something like that?

Well, there's three different methods. If you know from your map or your knowledge of the area you get your coordinates and send the coordinates back. And the azimuth from your position as the FO, or forward observation, to the target. Then they plot those on the maps back in the rear, at the operations center, and determine the fire commands for the guns. Then they send that to the battery and put them on the guns and fire.

So it's a pretty complicated process.

It can be, yes.

And you've got to do it quickly.

Very quickly.

And if something you've called in doesn't hit, you estimate how it didn't hit – how far or short?

Yes. You shift your fires until you get on target.

Did that take experts back at the gun?

No. That would take forward observers. He does that adjustment.

So you say 100 meters further?

No. If you shoot, say, over the target, you're looking on your azimuth and you say you dropped 400 or 200 or whatever it may be. Then they'd fire the second one. And what you'd try to do is bracket over and short of the target, split that bracket and fire.

Are the people actually firing, are they able to adjust the way you want them to, or is there a loss of communication sometimes?

Oh, you lose it sometimes. But that didn't happen a lot in Vietnam. Sometimes you hit dead zones, but I never had a lot of trouble there. The radios we had in Vietnam were super compared to what we had pre-Vietnam.

Is that through experience, training or better equipment?

Better equipment.

Tell me about the snipers. You had snipers you were working with at one time. What was their range – would you say a mile and so on?

With their rifle? 1200 meters was a common range. They'd say that at that range whoever they're shooting at doesn't hear the gun or rifle. And they'd drop a guy and everybody else runs around, because they don't know from what direction or what's happening.

Did you have some who were pretty special, some guys who were pretty good at it?

Yes. It didn't take them long to learn how to call it in. And later on when I commanded a firing battery I did a lot of shooting for those re-con teams out there. Sometimes we'd have to adjust in 25 meters from them.

That's pretty close! How did they calculate them? Is that all done automatically from the equipment they had?

No. They had to locate and send us the coordinates of where they wanted a round to go. If they wanted the first round real close I'd say we were going to start out 100. So I'd fire that for their own safety. You get some dispersion, and I wanted it safe. So then first round would land and go off and I'd adjust from there.

And the bullet drops, so you have to adjust for that, even though it's traveling at a terrific rate of speed.

Yes. As you're shooting you adjust, as part of the firing data you figure in elevation. And as you shoot the air pressure changes, and you're building that in to the data. Range, of course, is another factor. It's not computing the data. It isn't that difficult. In those days you'd have either a slide rule or a firing table that you'd use to compute out your data, and getting it all coordinated. And the more shooting you do, the better you get, the faster you get the commands down and guns off.

And more effectively. Were these people who did that – the snipers – were they part of an elite group or did they just pick them.

No. They were assigned as snipers. In those days they were under division control. And whenever there was a mission for them, then they would go out. Then we were notified if they were in my area.

Were they a group of two, three or four?

Yes. On a re-con team there'd be maybe one sniper. And so they weren't deployed solo – they were with a re-con group.

They were pretty effective.

Yes, they were very good.

Did the Vietnamese have the same kind of sniper?

Oh, yes.

Were they good at it?

Yes.

So you're in Vietnam in 1966-1968, and in 1968 you're out?

Yes. The last five months I took command of a 105 Howitzer battery, about 30 miles southwest of Da Nang. I was in an area called the Arizona area. It was real hot. In 102 days we fired 100,000 rounds. That same day the battery also fired the 200,000th round since they'd been in country. It took – I had ten two-and-a-half-ton trucks, and ton-and-a-half trailers. It took nine of those with their trailers hauling ammo every day. Plus, I was augmented from six to 12 flat-bed semi's loaded with ammo every day.

How big is a round?

They're about 18". A completed round is probably about 2', and they weighed about 42 pounds, with a 24 pound projectile.

And somebody had to feed those in?

Yes, the assistant gunners.

They were probably worn out!

Yes. One time we went two weeks without sleep. I had one kid fall asleep carrying a round up to the gun. It dropped and broke his foot. I had another assistant gunner who was on the lanyard. He fell asleep as he pulled the lanyard. And the breach came back and hit him in the chest, knocked him clear out of the gun pit. It didn't break anything, fortunately, or kill him. But he had the outline of the breach on his chest and stomach.

That was brutal, then, that long without sleep. Even you had to be awake most of that time.

Oh, yes. I slept in my cot four times in five months.

Did you just lean up against a tree?

Well, the bunker – a sand pit.

Wow! 100,000 rounds in 102 days – that's 1,000 rounds a day.

Yes, well, 1,000 to 1,500 – it varied.

You obviously were pulverizing an area. Was it effective?

Well, some of them were live missions. And we did very well on those.

What do you mean by live mission? You were rescuing somebody?

No. Live missions are when somebody spots the enemy or enemy organization and we fire on them. Those were very effective.

I did have what was called an intelligence mission. This is usually information gathered by witnesses, or the South Vietnamese telling us what was going on, or some intelligence gathering where the schemes that were used. And we'd fire on those targets.

Well, this one, a battalion commander – North Vietnamese – was having an officer meeting in a hooch – they're little houses. I had a direct hit on that hooch and killed them all except one. And the infantry patrols picked him up later.

That was pretty effective. Did it have an effect on what they were doing for a while? I mean were they able to re-gather?

Well, we were hot all the time. But I think what it did – at least for my battery – they knew we were shooting well. And they couldn't tell how many guys I really had because we were shooting 24/7. So they left me pretty much alone. They would mortar and rocket me, but they didn't land an assault on us.

They didn't want to get that involved with you?

They didn't want to play with us. And I also had the beehive ammo. That's the little flechettes that are in the round, and you use those when you get assaulted. That goes out in a cone shape, and it just clears everything from the muzzle of the gun on out – whether it's human or vegetable or animal or whatever. They looked like little nails. They're about 1 1/2" long.

How many of those are there in a single shot?

Several thousand.

In my area I was the most inland battery that completely resupplied itself. There was one other one across the river and out a ways that got helicopter support. But I had to get out and bring everything from food to ammo. During the monsoons we got cut off out there. Roads were inundated with water. We almost ran out of ammunition. The guys in the rear got kind of scared and upped my on-position allowance from a few hundred to 10,000 rounds. So if we'd ever taken a direct hit, my hill would have evaporated! Fortunately, we didn't.

You had that much ammo stored. Wow! Did they keep it in a single dump or did they try to spread it around a little bit?

What I had were revetments that were dug into the side of the hill I was on for truck protection. I had to pull trucks out of there, and we loaded those with the ammo.

When the monsoon was on, were you just immobilized?

No. We'd get out there everyday, as long as the roads weren't flooded out. We plowed mud that was axle deep. You just get used to that. We're outside all the time. I never had anybody get sick. The guys I had were super. They never complained or whined.

We had trouble getting clothes. What I had to do – because we were at the end of the supply train – by the time they got to us they usually didn't have anything left. So when one of us would leave to go home we would leave the good jungle utilities and boots and that kind of stuff. And we kept them in a box in my first sergeant's office. And when somebody tore up his clothes or needed fresh clothing, he would just go to the first sergeant and rummage through the box to find something.

And then as long as we could get out we had fresh food.

They had plenty of fresh food there?

Yes. I really can't complain there.

I mean, they were so far forward that they gave you a little extra?

No. What we did for Christmas of 1967, I sent one of my lieutenants back to the rear to the clubs. He bought these little steaks. We got enough for everybody. My motor transport sergeant cut a barrel in half and made a grill. So we grilled steaks in addition to the fancy dinner that they had.

I had my own cook, so I had a cook and a baker.

How many men were you supplying with that?

Well, I rated 135. I had 88 in my position.

So the cook and the baker had a lot to do every day.

Yes. And then at midnight they would make sandwiches, hot soup and coffee. We had coffee 24/7. It's not like the coffee back here, they just took a couple of handfuls and throw them into the pot, heat it up and that was it.

It wasn't Starbucks!

No, it wasn't. But when it's cold and you're soaking wet that goes down pretty easy.

When did they start calling it MRE – meals-ready-to-eat? We always called them C-rations or K-rations.

Well, in Vietnam we had C-rations. That was my back-up. So if we couldn't get out to get fresh food, then we'd go to C-rations.

Did they actually change the composition of meals-ready-to-eat, or was it pretty much the same thing but a different name?

No, it was different – it was freeze-dried. So you'd open it up and there'd be a hamburger. But it's freeze-dried, so you'd add water to it and heat it up. Some of it was okay.

Jane liked some of the meals. I took my family a package of MRE's. One night we ate those. I don't know – I don't think anybody liked them.

But the good thing about MRE's, you can eat them as they come out of the package. You don't have to heat them or add water to them.

The nutrition is still there.

Yes. The hamburger tastes like ashes. I never ran out of food. In the three days we got cut off, once we used up the fresh food we ate the C-rations. And we got along all right.

And once you drew down the supply they resupplied you with those?

Yes.

So we're up to 1969. Then what? You were in until

I came back in January of 1968. I was there from 1966 to 1968.

And you came home to the States?

Yes.

Returning to the States

And you were stationed where?

Well, I went to Marine Corps Career School in Quantico. And then I was assigned to headquarters Marine Corps in Washington D.C.

You got to see the silent drill then?

Oh yes.

That was very impressive. How long were you in D.C., then?

Three years.

So we're up to 1971 or 1972?

Yes.

What did you do in Washington?

I was with the disability system. I was a counsel for, well, I'd be the trial counsel in a court.

Did you have to have legal training for that?

No.

Were you defending the person or prosecuting?

Prosecuting. With the medical stuff it's all there. My job was to get it all together and present it. We had a lawyer for the defense. I was also the coordinator for the office, so I'd put the cases together.

What kind of cases did you have? What would be the typical arraignment?

Well, some kid had his jaw shot off. The hospitals had done everything they could up to that point in time. Then they had to wait until the bone and everything else was healed. So they had to go through the process of sending him home, then he'd come back later after it was healed. And then they'd surgically put in a plate of some kind.

Was it metal or plastic?

Plastic of some kind.

What did that case involve? Were you trying to get him ...?

We were trying to get him a disability. I'm presenting the facts, and if there's an investigation involved – some of these guys go haywire and shoot themselves – so then there's an investigation. Those end up probably not getting any disability. It depends.

What kind of disability would he get from something like that? 40% or 50%?

Well, if it's misconduct he doesn't get anything. If it was an accidental discharge the investigation would say it was not a suicide attempt, or attempt to get out of combat or something like that.

Oh, so some cases would be an excuse to leave service and you would have to put together whether it was intentional or something like that?

Yes. Most of the time it's legitimate.

That they didn't try to get out of the service or something like that.

Yes. Most of the time it's from hostile action.

My one grandson was in Afghanistan and was hit with an IED, and he's still picking shrapnel out. He's able-bodied – it's not like he's limping or anything. But he's got stuff that are still moving around inside.

A piece of a bullet hit my hand. One piece went in one scar, and then there's this one in my hand. This one still moves up and down this finger. This one traveled to the heel of my hand and I dug it out with a pocket knife! Small pieces they don't usually take out unless they're causing problems or infections, because they'd do more damage.

Well, he's got pretty good disability, I think. But there are still things coming out of his knees and so on. And it causes him quite a lot of pain. What about PTSD? At the time you were in they didn't have that term, did they?

No. I don't think anybody who's been in close combat can come home and be fully right. I know it took me a long time to get settled down.

Years?

Yes.

Steve – this kid I'm talking about – will wake up in the middle of the night and be ready to run a battle.

I found myself one time out in the middle of my room going through the motions that I would go through to get my helmet, flak jacket, rifle and all that. I woke up and was standing out there just wringing wet with sweat. And Jane – every once-in-a-while I'd have a nightmare. The first time she made the mistake of touching me.

And you just whopped her one?

Yes, in the chest. Which, for her with breathing problems ...

A guy I was in school with was a Marine. He said one guy came back from Korea. He said his arm fell out from his bunk and happened to touch the arm of the guy in the next bunk. The guy grabbed his wrist so hard he yanked him out of bed. Those things happen.

Yes. You go through the stage. For me the nightmares and stuff started [about 2-3 months after I got back home]and it continued.

I wonder why the delay.

I don't know. For me it didn't start right away. Three or four of us were down at a bar having a drink – we were at the careers course at Quantico. We got to talking and every one of us were going through the same thing.

So you were in Washington D.C. until 1974?

Yes.

And when did you stay in the service for?

1986.

So you were in for fourteen years of service after Washington D.C.

Yes. I went out to Fort Sill and was involved in what they called TAC fires with the new computerized artillery system.

[Disc 2]

Where were we?

Christmas of 1967 I told you about the little steaks. That was Christmas Eve we cooked these up. And everybody had their steak, so to speak. And everybody was down, real down being over there for Christmas. So I think it kind of helped to beef everybody up for a while. They had their normal Christmas meal, plus the steaks. So that was something special.

Then we fired a cross in the sky, using special corrections, using flare rounds. They'd go up and 'boom' and we had a cross. It would float with the wind. We got radio calls all over our whole area down there.

That was pretty neat! How did you make that happen?

Well, you take each gun and compute corrections, or data, for each gun. So each gun is going to be a little different to get a flare here and one there. And when you fire them out ...

It came out pretty well?

Yeah. It was perfect!

We'll have to have you run the fireworks over here!

So what we did, periodically that night, we'd just fire what they called illumination rounds and put them up there. It also served as self-illumination for the battery.

It was pretty effective, then.

Yes.

Well, you're in Fort Sill?

Yes. After my Washington D.C. tour I went to Fort Sill. I had the first battalion test team. I went out to work for Litton Industries for six weeks.

A defense supplier.

Yes. And they were the ones building this computer system. So I'd go over there about midnight and work until the day crew shift would come on. Then I'd go home to the motel.

What were you trying to do there? Get a computer system

That handled the fire directions for the batteries, and do fire planning. The ones at the division artillery level also got into nuclear computations. And ... [it could compute] all of the target area survey.... [data for us.]

Did you have to do something special for nuclear, or was it just a different head on the weapon?

Oh, no. It's a totally different ... [type of ammo.]

Different calculations?

Yes.

So that was what they were trying to set up so everything goes into the computer and you can do just one thing and it will take care of all the needs?

Yes. When you push that button it computes the data, sends it down and the gun fires.

Return to Overseas Assignment

So you were there for ...

Three years. On that test it took the team through the operational test and the service test. I left before it was fielded. I don't know, I assume the Army had it.

Then I went back to Okinawa, and in 1975 I took part in the Operation Frequent Wind, which was the Saigon evacuation.

So you were there when they evacuated Saigon. That was a kind of sad affair, wasn't it?

For us in the military, we were kind of ashamed of our politicians. We had the war won in 1968, and they wouldn't let us finish it – militarily.

Our problem has been in the past that we are very good at making war, but very poor making a peaceful end of it. In what way did you have the war won in 1968? Did you have the Viet Cong on the run or subdued?

You've heard of the Tet Offensive. Well, we butchered up a few of their outfits. We knew they had thrown everything they had south except for one battalion that was guarding the palace up there in Hanoi. All we had to do, in my mind, was take the third Marine division, which was waiting – they were sitting on Okinawa – do an amphibious landing up on the DMZ, turn and drive south and we would pinch them up between the troops already in country and the third Marine division.

Was it just a lack of political will to do that?

Yes, I thought so.

I got the feeling even when that was happening, because I remember the situation, that we were spooked by how big an event that was. And we were afraid we wouldn't be able to handle anything more like that.

The military wasn't.

So it was the media and the politicians who were spooked.

The media reported a lot of inaccuracies and untruths. I never saw a media agent, a reporter, out when the action was going. They'd come out during mop-ups. So you'd hear the gunfire, but it was just mop-up. And they'd be crouching next to a bush or something like that, making whoever was watching back here at home think they were right there.

The fact is, I wouldn't let those guys in my position.

Is that right? As a matter of course?

Yes.

Did they offer to be in your group?

No. They wanted to come in and I wouldn't let them in.

So in 1975, when Saigon was evacuated, what did you have to do there then?

I was fire support officer. I developed the plan at the brigade level. And then, when they reconstituted forces off the coast I went down and planned the regimental landing teams plan. Fortunately we didn't have to use it.

So the last thing we saw of Saigon was the helicopter and the evacuation of the embassy and things like that. Were you involved there?

No. I had the fire support end. I didn't have to do any of the prep. The force had to go in and prep for the landings. We had five different places to go into. We couldn't get the ambassador to initiate the action. So we went and called to the White House and told them we had to execute now. They came back and said to do option whatever it was. We said all options except one were overtaken, and we were executing option whatever it was and we went in.

How did you go in?

With helicopters.

You weren't in the helicopter – you were on the ground?

Yes.

Was that outside of Saigon?

No. We went to into the DAO compound, which is not far from the embassy, and we also went into the embassy. We had selected high rise buildings in Saigon early in the prep phase. We put a special material on the roof tops to strengthen them. We took Americans, third party Nationals and selected Vietnamese and brought them out.

How many trips did that take? How many helicopters.

I really don't remember.

But it was on-going for a while.

Oh, yeah. We planned to bring out something like 1,500; we brought out 22,000 in about 22 hours.

How many did they take at a time – 20 or 30 or something like that?

I really don't know.

Were the helicopters being shot at while this was happening?

No, I didn't hear of that. I think the North Vietnamese wanted us out and left us along. But we had fixed wing fighters up ahead circling, so ...

Just in case. How long did the operation take?

I think it was about 22 hours.

That was it. Suddenly it was 'this is it,' and 22 hours later it was all over.

Yes.

That's pretty remarkable. And you took 22,000 people out. Where did they put them? On aircraft carriers?

All the ships in the group out there. I was on the Blue Ridge. The President of South Vietnam, they brought he and his wife out and put them in a room down below with a guard on the door. Ambassador Martin and his wife they brought out and put him under guard down below.

In your ship.

Yes.

What was the Blue Ridge?

It was a command and control ship. It's where we did all our planning. They've got special radio equipment.

Was the President of South Vietnam a decent guy, or was the corruption involved there? That was the case in South Korea.

That I don't remember. I imagine there was some corruption, but I never got involved in that.

So that was over in 1975. What month was that?

April.

And then you were brought back to the States?

Then, at the end of my tour in Okinawa I came back and went to the Command and Staff College in Norfolk, Virginia. That's a graduate level training.

You were teaching then?

No. I was a student. That was a six month course. And from there I went to a joint billet. I was the coordinator for the CINCLANTFLT [Inspector General].

What is that?

The CINCLANT is the joint unified command and also the admiral had it as the CINCLANTFLT, which was the Navy part of it. I was the coordinator for the IG – Inspector General. We traveled the Atlantic seaboard inspecting units. My part was physical and information security, and some other stuff ...

In these military courses – the one you took at Norfolk for five or six months – were they effective? Did they really give you the kind of material that was useful later on? Or is the actual action so chaotic that the principles can't work?

A little of both, I think. It was more into the planning – high level planning. So that paid off for me when I got back in Marine commands. I was at fleet Marine force headquarters in Norfolk. We were the senior operational command for the east coast. At that level we did a lot of planning. So that paid off for that job.

And I got into logistics at that level.

The movement of goods and things like that?

Yes. When Lebanon broke out they put the Marines in there. I took in some special equipment to Lebanon. I was in there about five days.

And you had to provide for movement of materials and ...

People and re-supply. I didn't do the supply itself. I coordinated the movement.

Now Lebanon – was that where our barracks was bombed?

Yes. And also the American Embassy. I got in there three days after the American Embassy was blown up, but before the Marine barracks were hit.

Reagan – did he take us out?

I don't remember.

We moved our troops out of Lebanon after that, didn't we?

No, it was a while after that.

We lost a lot of men in that.

Yes, over 200.

234, I think it was. So what year was that?

I want to say 1979.

Reagan came in, in 1980, and I think he was involved in that. And you got out in 1986.

Yes.

So you still had six more years of service, then.

Yes. I had two tours of duty in two different organizations in Norfolk. And I was in this logistics job for ... [four] years. And then I went out to a joint command up there by the Naval training center in Illinois – Waukegan or North Chicago; Great Lakes. I was the assistant operations officer for the command, and I was also the head of plans and policy.

What was your rank at this point?

I was a lieutenant colonel. I was there two years and then I retired.

So you got out in 1986 from Great Lakes?

Yes. I retired from Great Lakes.

So how many years did you have in?

25.

That's a pretty good piece.

That's a long time. It was good. I had a good career. You've got your up's and down's.

When you were in Saigon were you actually one of those evacuated by helicopter at the end?

No. I didn't get in on the ground when it was going. I was operating from the Blue Ridge.

And that was off shore?

Yes.

How far off was that from Saigon?

I want to say about 17 miles.

Lasting Impressions

So in sum, you thought it was pretty worthwhile.

Yes. I wouldn't change it. I'm still quite bitter the way things went with Vietnam. We had it won and they gave it away.

The other thing – when I had command of the firing battery. We had units around us and we all got hit. I had no losses, but all of a sudden I got inundated with letters from parents and wives asking if their son or boyfriend or husband was okay. They hadn't heard from them and they'd seen on TV where the battery had been overrun and wiped out.

Your battery.

Yes. We had been hit, but they didn't get in the wire.

So I called these guys in and sat them down and made them write letters home. They put them in their envelopes, handed them back to me and I mailed them! So I knew they'd get home.

So I went home after the end of my tour. I put my uniform on and went down to the TV station. They welcomed me and put me right in to the director's office, the person in charge of the station.

What year was this?

It would be 1968.

After the Tet Offensive?

Yes. He said, "What can I do for you?" "Well," I said, "I commanded the India battery, third battalion [11th] Marines out there southwest of Da Nang. I said we were in a battle and came out of it okay. And I got inundated with letters from folks who had seen on TV that my battery had been overrun and annihilated. This didn't happen! And a lot of people were extremely upset and worried about their loved ones." And just like that he clammed up and escorted me right out of the building. So I never found out who, but somebody in the upper Midwest – Iowa or Minnesota or Wisconsin – was circulating all those rumors.

What station was that?

KWWL is the one I went to. That was in my hometown.

And then there was a lot of bad blood generated by some of Hollywood's people.

Jane Fonda for one.

Senator McCain was part of that victim.

Yes. Some of those prisoners were tortured to death after she left. I had Admiral Jeremiah Denton. You've probably heard of him. He was in for six and a half years in the Hanoi Hilton. He's got a lot of stories to tell.

I got a letter someplace around here from one of the former prisoners. He said when she [Jane Fonda] came to visit she got on one of the anti-aircraft guns and posed for pictures which were sent over. And then they brought her to the Hanoi Hilton. The thing she asked the most was something to the effect of "Are you happy you killed all these children up here." The guys would give her their social security number or name and whatever and ask if she would get this to their family. She had them in her hand, got down to the end of the row, turned to whoever escorted her, gave him all these names and ... So they were tortured.

And you knew some of these guys?

... [I knew Admiral Denton.] I met some of these guys later on and they all said the same thing. Admiral Denton was the head of the graduate level school I went through in Norfolk ... He spent two different days talking about his experiences there.

Was she the only one, or were there others? I know there was a lot of media talk about the evils we were doing in Vietnam and a lot of students – there was a lot of student activity condemning what we were doing. But was she the most notable Hollywood person, or were there others as well?

I think there were others, but not to the extent of Jane Fonda. I, honestly, did not see any around me – where I was. I didn't see any of the horrible things we did to the Vietnamese. I mean, sure, we killed them. That was our job. But we didn't drag them in and torture them.

We've seen that happen in other wars.

A lot of the civilians, when they would get hit, they were either in areas they shouldn't have been and knew better. Or fate – they were just in the wrong place.

So you were out of the service, mustered out at Great Lakes.

In 1986.

Returning to Civilian Life

What happened next? Were you married then?

Yes. Jane was with me the last eight years I was in the Corps.

How did you meet her? Where did you marry her?

I married her up here at Trinity Lutheran Church. We met – she was finishing college and I came back from Vietnam the first time. I met her and we went on a date – blind date I guess it was. We struck a chord!

So you met her and went back in the service before you came back to marry her.

Yes. We got married up here on the Island, and we've been together ever since. So we've had 45 years.

What happened after you got out of the service? What was your activity then?

That was during the recession of the 1970's and 1980's. I canvassed four different states trying to find a job. So finally I saw this ad for management positions with Ace Hardware. I went down and talked to them and ended up hiring on there. I was hired on as assistant manager and got promoted in about two years to manager.

Was that at a store?

Yes.

Where was that?

The first store was in Dundee, Illinois. I was there for a couple of years and then promoted up to a bigger store in Cary, Illinois. Then I was promoted to a bigger one in Carpentersville, close to Elgin. Then I became manager at the Elgin store. That's a bigger company store, if you want to call it that. And there I managed a store that was 21,000 square feet on the sales floor, plus a 22,000 square foot supply warehouse. I had that for about five years and then I retired.

I was with Ace Hardware for 12 1/2 years.

Did you get a pension from them or profit sharing?

I had 401K.

So we're up to 2001. Did you move up to the Island at that time?

I'd say yes. We moved up here and Jim Gunnlaugsson put our addition on starting in the fall of 1999. And then the house in Dundee didn't sell, so that fall we closed up this house and went down there and spent the winter down there. Then we listed with another realty outfit and it sold and we moved up here for good.

And that was in 2001. So you've been here thirteen years. It's a pretty place. And you had always wanted to have a farm, I guess, and couldn't because the farm was sold or something?

Yes. Well, my dad farmed the family farm with his brother and lost it in the Depression. It was taken away illegally. And they didn't know that until beyond the ten-year statute of limitations. And he hired a lawyer who looked into it. He said, "I can't guarantee I can get it

back, but it's going to cost a lot of money." So the family got together and decided to just forget it and move on. So I lost the chance there.

And then on the other side of the family, my grandfather, who had been a very wealthy guy, lost everything in the Depression. He lost his farm and his three other brothers lost their farms and their parents' homestead that they built up to 500 acres was lost.

My grandfather rented the farm next to the one he owned. So he was the only one who continued farming. I worked for him as a kid for a number of years. I had always liked it.

When I went to college I majored in animal husbandry. But I never had a chance to get started at a younger age. But it fell into my lap, so to speak. And I went through the stages. My financial advisor said that yes, I could afford it. My accountant said, "It's a good write-off. Go!"

That wasn't altogether encouraging, was it!

And then there were two others. My lawyer said to do it. So Jane and I talked it over and decided to give it a try.

What we're talking about is the farm that you bought and have cattle on up here on the Island, which you started three years ago?

Well the farm was three years – two-and-a-half – and the cattle I've had for a little over a year.

So, Dave, I appreciate the time you've spent. This has been very interesting. Thanks a lot!