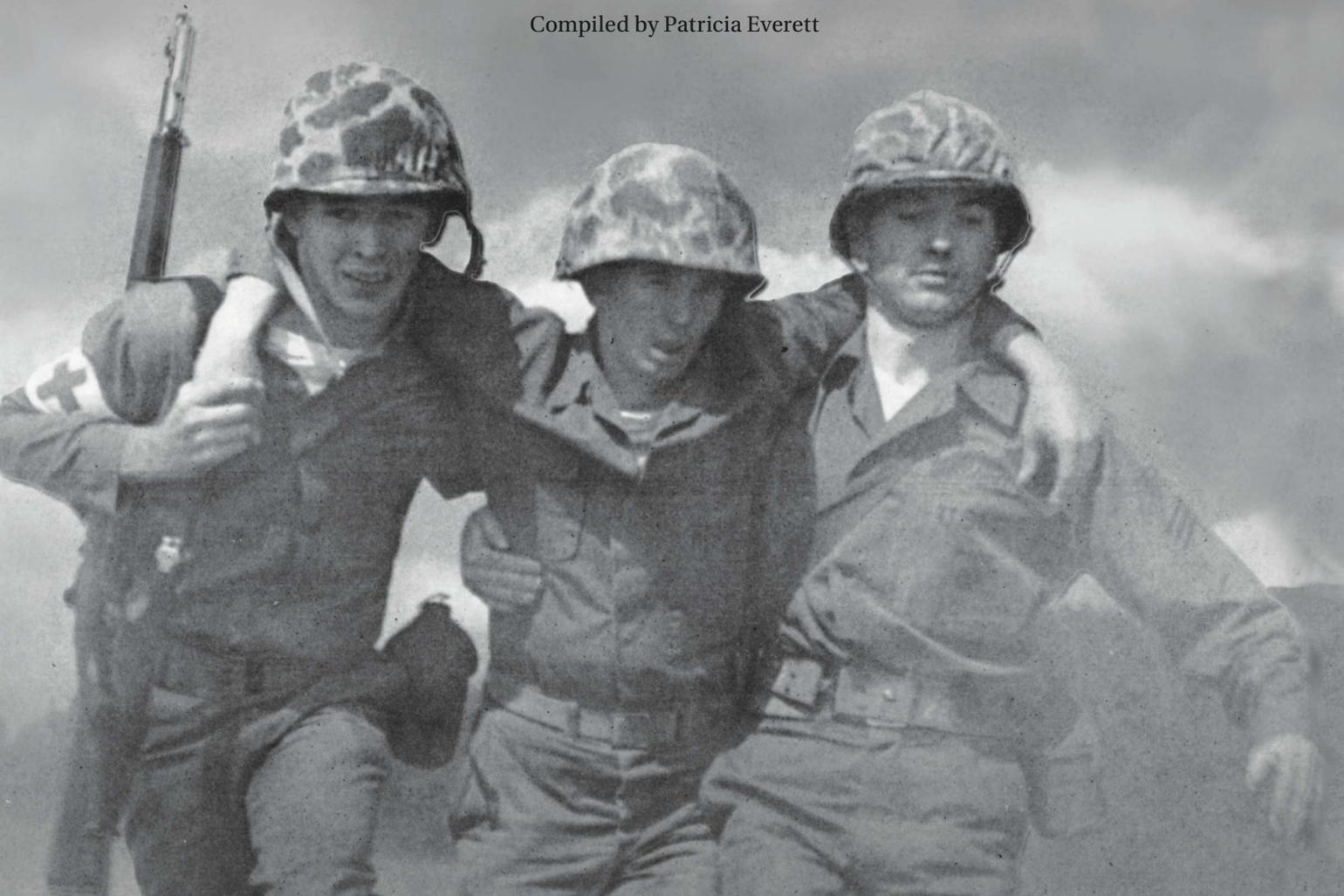


NAVY CORPSMEN

THE UNSUNG HEROES OF THE MARINE CORPS

Compiled by Patricia Everett



There is a unique bond between Fleet Marine Force corpsmen and Marines. Known as “Docs,” corpsmen are the unsung heroes of the Marine Corps who will go to hell and back to save the lives of their Marines. All Marines love and are very protective of their Docs, who are often the difference between life and death on the battlefield.

June 17 is the 122nd birthday of the U.S. Navy Hospital Corps. To mark the occasion, we are featuring stories sent in by *Leatherneck* readers about those who answered when they heard the call, “Corpsman, up!”

A VETERAN'S JOURNAL
By LCpl Joseph Barna

This is a story about a Navy corpsman, the man who saved my life on top of a mountain in Korea and who gave me 66 more years of life. His name was John "Jackie" Kilmer. He was just a boy from Michigan who loved Marines and wanted to save as many as he could. His face is forever cemented in my mind and my heart. Jackie was tall, maybe 6 feet, 2 inches, and very thin. He had a high squeaky voice like the Wally Cox TV character Mr. Peepers. I shared a bunker with Jackie, and we became good friends.

The Navy corpsman is a wounded Marine's best hope for survival on the battlefield where there are no doctors or nurses. In my 13 months in Korea, I never saw an ambulance, field hospital or MASH Unit. During the Korean War, more than 100 corpsmen were killed on the battlefield.

I arrived in Korea in June 1952 and was trucked to my unit, 1st Battalion, 1st Regiment, 1st Marine Division. Assigned to Weapons Company, the first weapon given to me was a M2 flame thrower. Fully fueled, the flamethrower weighs 75 pounds—I stood 5 feet, 9 inches tall and weighed about 157 pounds.

We ended up on a road leading to a mountain hundreds of feet over our heads. There was no vegetation or trees left on the mountainsides because of all the shelling. We got off the truck and began to walk up a trench for the final several hundred feet. I thought I was climbing to heaven, but I soon found out I was going to hell. I saw a lot of tired Marines all around the trench at the top of the mountain called Bunker Hill. It was a gateway to Seoul, and if taken by the North Koreans and the Chinese, it would have changed the outcome of the war.

The Battle of Bunker Hill was one of the bloodiest battles of the Korean War. I witnessed courage there that I will never forget. During the battle, I was knocked down by a shell. As I found myself laying on my back, the flame thrower pinning



HM John E. "Jackie Kilmer

me to the ground, a North Korean came at me with his bayonet. I can still see his face and smell the garlic on his breath. As he lunged at me, I was able to turn, but he stabbed my upper left arm with his bayonet. I had a double-barrel shotgun taped on the arm of my flame thrower and gave him both barrels. I think I blew him in half.

The battle kept going on around me. Weapons fire was all around me, and I heard other boys being hit and falling. I lay there feeling weak as blood from my deep wound seeped out on the Korean dirt. I must have been ready to blackout when I heard that familiar voice say, "Joe, if I don't close up that wound, you'll die." Jackie had found me in the chaos. He took

off my flame thrower and carried me into a bunker. He cleaned my wound. I felt no pain as he sewed it closed with the needle and thread he pulled out of his medical kit. After he tightly bandaged my arm, I returned to the ongoing firefight.

Several weeks later, Jackie was called to go to a nearby battle to help with the wounded. During this battle, he was hit with shrapnel and was taken into a bunker to be treated. From inside the bunker, he heard Marines calling out for help. Looking out, he saw two wounded men on the battlefield. The sergeant told him that if he went out there, he would die. Jackie replied, "If I don't go out there, they will die!" He crawled out to them and began to treat their wounds. As he did, a heavy round of shelling came in. Jackie threw himself over the two Marines. A shell landed so close that he received 15 pieces of shrapnel into his body. Jackie died, but the two Marines lived. He was six days short of his 22nd birthday.

God makes angels and Navy corpsmen. Jackie Kilmer was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor. His medal was presented to his mother. Shortly after I arrived home in 1953, I was able to call Jackie's mother in Flint, Mich. I told her that her son was the bravest man I ever met.

**"GOD MAKES
ANGELS
AND NAVY
CORPSMEN"**

Jackie now rests in a grave in San Antonio, Texas. I carry a picture of my hero, John "Jackie" Kilmer, in a pocket, close to my heart.

Left: As shown in this photo from a 1962 issue of *Leatherneck*, when Marines need medical assistance on the battlefield or during a training exercise, they'll call for a Navy corpsman. (USMC Photo)



A Navy corpsman tends to a minor wound during a lull in the fighting during Dewey Canyon, a 56-day operation in Vietnam in 1969.

USMC

RESPECT AND HONOR By Cpl Ted Decker, USMC (Ret)

In January 1969, the 3rd Marine Division was to begin its last major offensive operation of the Vietnam War—Operation Dewey Canyon. The operation lasted for almost three months. My outfit was “Alpha” Co, 1/9, also known as “The Walking Dead.” I was the forward air controller and had the job of calling in air strikes and landing of helicopters. The head corpsman was Chuck Hudson.

On Feb. 22, Co A was sent on patrol for a water run at the bottom of the hill since we had not been resupplied for several days because of bad weather. About 30 minutes into the patrol, the company made contact with the enemy who outnumbered us two to one. We took heavy fire from all sides. About 10 minutes into the battle, I was hit by a rocket propelled grenade which nearly tore my right arm off. As soon as this happened, I yelled for the corpsman. Doc Hudson came running over, somehow avoiding enemy fire, to get to me. After seeing how badly I was wounded, Chuck started to give me aid. He stopped the bleeding, put a tourniquet on my arm, and gave me a shot of morphine.

After making sure the bleeding had stopped and that I was all right, he said he had to go help other Marines who were yelling for a corpsman. To this day, I just don’t know how Chuck not only missed getting hit but how he survived that heavy enemy fire. He just kept running from one Marine to another to give them aid. Chuck not only saved my life that day but the lives of several other Marines. After the battle was over, the final count was 11 Marines killed and 75 wounded, 54 of whom were medevacked out, me included.

I owe Doc Chuck Hudson my life as do several other Marines.

We kept in touch through the years and talked about our experiences and how lucky we were to get out alive. Sad to say my good friend died a few years ago from cancer. I know for a fact that I’m here today because of him.

I miss my friend dearly. I hold in high regard not only Chuck, but all corpsmen who have gone above and beyond the call of duty. All Marines owe them our respect and honor.



USS Sanctuary was a Haven-class hospital ship during WW II and the Vietnam War. Marines who were sick or wounded were transported to the hospital ship when they needed more advanced care than was available in the field.

LCDR GEORGE E. PILLOW JR., USN

LIFELONG FRIENDS

By Cpl Rhon D. Parsons

I was with 2nd Platoon, "Lima" Co, 3/5 in Vietnam in 1968. We were in a place called Happy Valley on Hill 10. It was in late July and my squad was given an order to check out a hootch when a booby trap was tripped. Another Marine and I were wounded and one Marine was killed in action. When the corpsman came to take care of me, I was hollering from the pain in my stomach where I had received wounds from the shrapnel. Trying to help me and bring some distraction from the pain the corpsman quipped, "You shouldn't eat shrapnel. It's too hard to digest."

After talking, we discovered that we were both from the Philadelphia, Pa., area. We agreed that when we got home, we would find each other and get together and dive into a snowbank.

I do not remember his name but if anyone recognizes this story or knows if this corpsman made it back to Philadelphia, I would love to have the information to reconnect with him and thank him for taking care of my wounds. I made it back after a couple months care on USS *Sanctuary* (AH-17) and then was sent to the Philippines.

**"YOU
SHOULDN'T EAT
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DIGEST."**



Gen Wallace M. Greene, 23rd Commandant of the Marine Corps, visited Cpl Rhon D. Parsons, who was recovering from shrapnel wounds at the hospital located at Clark Air Base in the Philippines. (Photo courtesy Cpl Rhon D. Parsons)



“YOU CAN CALL A MARINE’S MOTHER A PROSTITUTE AND HE WILL PROBABLY GET UPSET WITH YOU. IF YOU CALL HIS CORPSMAN A ‘SQUID,’ HE WILL DEFINITELY HURT YOU!”



FRIENDLY FIRE AND DOC’S HELP By SSgt Richard C. Klawe

In addition to treating Marines, corpsmen also provide medical care to civilians and captured enemy forces during times of war, as seen in this photo (above left) from *Leatherneck’s* June 1966 issue. A resourceful corpsman will use any vehicle available (above) for evacuation purposes, as demonstrated in a photo published in the December 1962 *Leatherneck*.

I served with Headquarters Company, 3rd Amphibious Tractor Battalion, 1st Marine Division in Vietnam from early 1967 to mid-1968. Our company had a Navy corpsman whose last name was Mendoza—we just called him “Doc.”

When the 3rd Marine Division moved from the Da Nang tactical area of responsibility, the 1stMarDiv moved into the places they vacated. We found ourselves on Hill 35, just a little southwest of Da Nang. Around dusk on our second or third night there, we heard incoming artillery or at least that’s what we thought. 1st Tank Battalion was on the small hill next to us, and they had a free fire zone to the east of us. Turns out we didn’t get the word about it.

They would fire several rounds into this zone and the fire came directly over Hill 35. The incoming alarm sounded,

and we all went to our positions. As the company admin chief, my position was in the combat operations center bunker.

Several minutes after the alarm, we determined the shelling was friendly fire. Just as the word came in, the company gunnery sergeant yelled that someone was bleeding as there were bloody boot prints all over the floor. He ordered everyone to stop walking and he checked all of us. When he got to me, he found me standing in a bloody footprint. Every time I took a step, blood was being forced out through the drain hole in the arch of my boot. They looked at my shin and found a very large gash. I had tripped over a steel pole with a large shard of metal sticking up as I ran for the bunker. That’s when I was introduced to Doc.

I went to sick bay and the doctor looked at the injury and told Doc Mendoza to

stitch me up. 28 sutures later I was good to go. There was a sizable piece of me hanging out of the sutured area and I remember asking Doc what he was going to do with it. He held it up with a gloved hand and asked, “You mean this? This is what I’m going to do,” and he took a scalpel and sliced it off and threw it into a trash can. I heard a “plop” then passed out. I have a very small scar. Way to go, Doc! Sadly, like so many folks I served with, I lost contact with Mendoza shortly after one of us rotated home.

When it comes to Navy corpsmen, I’ve been using this analogy for more than 50 years. “You can call a Marine’s mother a prostitute and he will probably get upset with you. If you call his corpsman a ‘squid,’ he will definitely hurt you!” Semper Fi, Doc!

CORPSMEN TREAT MORE THAN MARINES

By HMCM Guy J. Preuss, USN (Ret)

No heroics. Just an account from Operation Golden Fleece, I Corps, RVN in September 1966. First off, it's "Doc" if you're offering coffee. It's "Corpsman!" if there is a casualty.

Doc was a hospital corpsman with "Golf" Battery, 3rd Bn, 11th Marines. Operation Golden Fleece was a two-pronged effort to protect the harvest and protect the polls as the Vietnamese were voting for, I believe, a new constitution.

This operation was one of two during 1966 and 1967 that was done by convoy and not helicopter insertion. The first casualty was a Marine who was shot in the left arm while riding in a jeep that was not part of our gaggle that had pulled up to our command post (CP). The skipper passed the word for Doc to come up. The wound was through and through and easy to treat. Morphine was given for pain and a sling was made out of a Marine's shirt, a button, and a safety pin. We saved the real sling for when it was really needed.

The battery mounted up and drove on. Later that afternoon we reached our destination somewhere south of Quang Ngai and the battery settled at the base

of a hill. The top of the hill was occupied by an ARVN 105 mm artillery btry and a battalion aid station. As Golf was setting up the CP, there was an explosion. "Incoming" was the cry. Doc gave a quick look and yelled, "Not incoming. We're in a minefield!" We were in a minefield with trip wires all around meaning there were more mines.

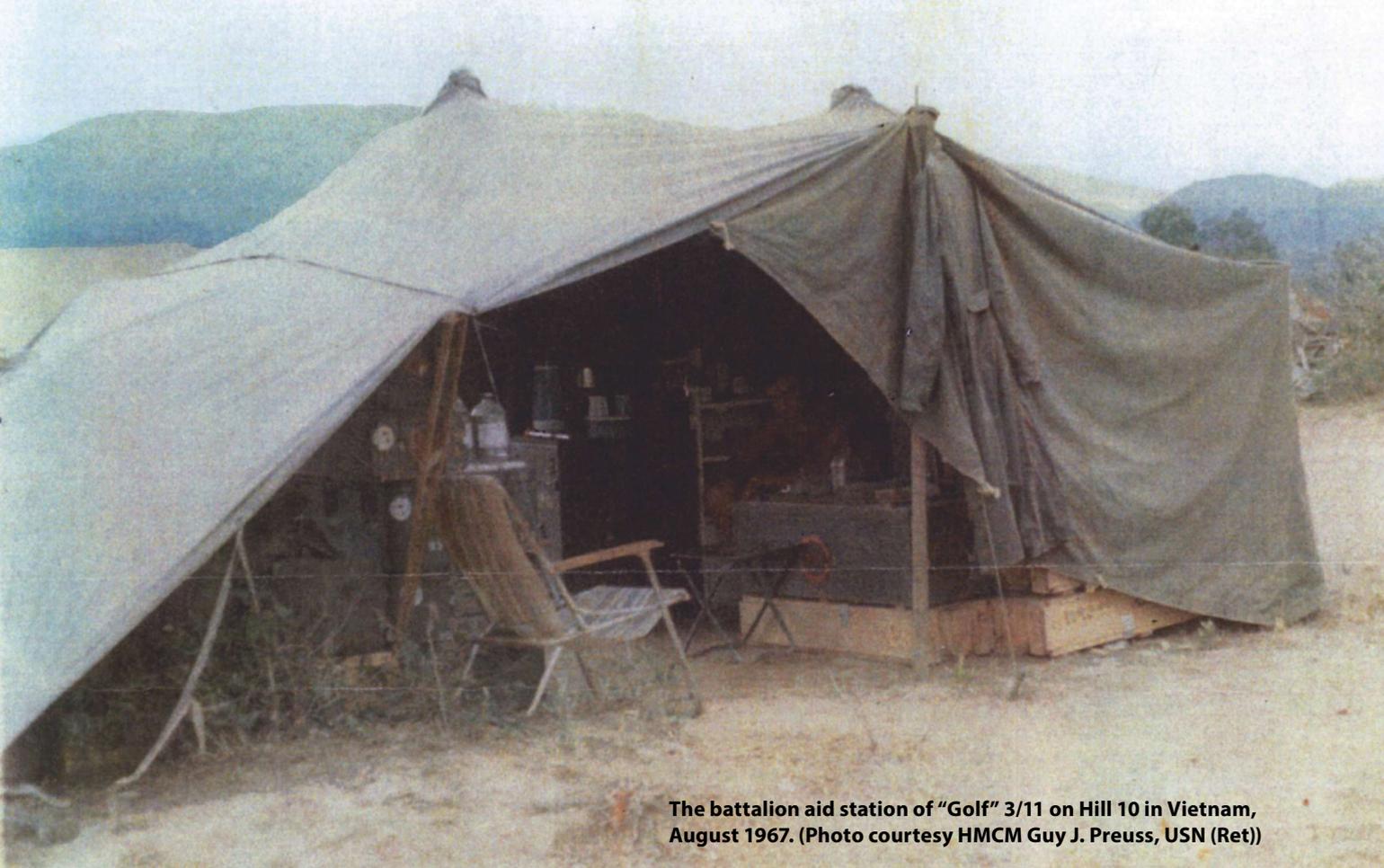
Care was taken not to set more mines off. Help came from somewhere. Medevacs appeared. No one died. The wounded were sent to Chu Lai. We moved out of the minefield onto the fields away from the base of the hill. Doc was tagged, "Eye of an Eagle—Heart of a Lion." As the battery extricated itself from the minefield, it was noted there were scattered signs on sticks in yellow with red letters that said, "MIN" which we assumed meant "mines" in Vietnamese.

Our CP was on flat ground and flooded in heavy rain. One night the rain was so heavy that tarp shelter halves were useless, and Doc ended up getting an ear infection. There's nothing in a "unit one" for that. We requested permission to go to a battalion aid station (BAS) for antibiotics

but were denied. Doc had contacts in Chu Lai where he got penicillin. Doc was now deaf in both ears and had a fever of 102-plus. If you had a problem, you had to write it down.

Doc's next task was to make nice with the farmer whose field we were on because there was a very nice well located there. Doc hauled cases of C-rations to the farmer, and we obtained use of the well. We learned he had a daughter with a 6-month-old baby with maggots crawling around her scalp. We borrowed a jeep and took them to the ARVN BAS on the top of the hill which was a waste of time because the doctor wouldn't see the baby. Doc still had the penicillin pills, so he broke them into eight pieces, crushed them into powder and gave it to the baby. Doc would visit the baby each day and clean the opening on the scalp and get rid of the infection.

The battery did well. The operation was a success. The farmer and his daughter appreciated the care. Doc's hearing returned. If there is an after-action report somewhere, I'd love to read it.



The battalion aid station of "Golf" 3/11 on Hill 10 in Vietnam, August 1967. (Photo courtesy HMCM Guy J. Preuss, USN (Ret))

LAST TESTAMENT
By HM3 Jerome "Jerry" Natt

I am a 90-year-old with normal diseases for my age. The doctors and new drugs seem to be working, so life looks good, but I don't know for how long. All I can say is I have very few regrets. I've been blessed with the best wife and friend, Sandra, one could hope for, two loving daughters, Melissa and Susan, and four granddaughters, Dani, Olivia, Amber and Julia. I have had years of experiences and am now comfortably retired enjoying a peaceful life with my wife of 65 years after having traveled the world.

Back in 1948, when I turned 18, the draft started again. Several of my friends and I joined the 69th Infantry Regiment, "The Fighting 69th," of the New York National Guard, so we would not be drafted into the Army. We went for our two weeks' training at Fort Drum, N.Y.

Upon arriving home, I decided the infantry was not for me, so I enlisted in the Naval Reserve for one-year active duty and six years Reserve. In December of 1948, I was sent to boot camp at Great Lakes Naval Training Station. I arrived with the designation Quartermaster Seaman Recruit. Because I was a Sea

Scout in my early teens and knew Morse code and Semaphore flags, I wanted to be a quartermaster. I was really enjoying the military life and was made guide for my recruit company.

That lasted until graduation from boot camp when my orders were for Medical Corps School, and not to a ship where I would learn to be a quartermaster. I immediately requested a captain's mast and explained the promises the Navy had made to me. What went on from there is another story that I won't bore you with, but suffice it to say I hated being a corpsman.

I finished out my year of active duty in November of 1949 at the Philadelphia Naval Hospital which was the psychiatric hospital for the Navy and Marine Corps. Maybe that experience was why I got along so well with you Marines.

The Korean War broke out in June 1950 and I was recalled in June 1951. I spent a month processing recalled reservists at the Brooklyn Navy Yard and then was transferred to the St. Albans Naval Hospital in Queens, N.Y. The casualties were coming in from Korea, so I got to know some of the Marines. In December 1951, I received orders for the FMF and reported to Camp Pendleton (Camp Delmar). On Jan. 3, 1952, I completed my training as

a field medical tech and advanced infantry training and was shipped aboard USS *General William Wiegel* (AP-119), Military Sea Transportation Service bound for Korea with the 19th replacement draft. We arrived in Korea on April 12, and I was assigned to 2nd Bn, 5th Marines. After hanging around battalion aid until April 15, I got orders to 2nd Platoon, "Easy" Company on OP3. I waited all day for transportation. When we finally arrived at the command post, it was totally dark, but a firefight soon began (see "Korea 1952: Firefight at Outpost 3," in the May 2017 issue of *Leatherneck*). It was a night I would never forget, but wish I could. What happened that night and the rest of my stay in Korea is not really what this is about. It is about the men and boys I served with and how those experiences affected me for the rest of my life.

After OP3, I knew if I was going to survive, I had to keep my mouth shut and listen, watch, and learn. I had some pretty good guys to guide me. The four who come to mind the most are Arty Barbosa, Navy Cross recipient; J.R. Clark, Silver Star recipient; W.P. Johnson, Navy Cross recipient; and most of all, Bobby Bunce, our platoon sergeant. I really liked





“SERVING WITH THE MARINES AS A CORPSMAN WAS ONE OF THE PROUDEST, MOST FORMATIVE AND INSPIRING TIMES OF MY LIFE.”

this guy. He was a Marine’s Marine. A poster boy. I think he spent more than 30 years in the Corps. He was wounded in Peleliu, wounded in Korea and wounded in Vietnam. I told him to get a new job because he wasn’t going to make it in this one.

There were many more. Forgive me if I don’t mention them by name, but time and memory are a problem.

A few days after OP3 when I got back to the company, I was assigned to 2nd Plt and was told to bunk with a fire team of Johnny R. Clark, Willie P. Johnson and two others. I immediately told them that I would take my turn on watch. That seemed to break the ice and I was one of them. It’s not that I was so smart, but I got that advice from either Barbosa or Bunce. I would do anything for them, and they knew it and in return they would be there for me. We never spoke about it but there was that understanding.

We would be on patrol and I would notice one of the men watching me. Someone always had my back; the feeling was awesome. I know Bunce would say they were keeping an eye on me so I wouldn’t get lost. One example was in July, Recon Co was working in our area and lost their corpsman. I was volunteered

to go out with them to try to snatch some prisoners. When they heard I was going that night, they volunteered to go with me. They weren’t allowed to go with me, but that night they got the hell beat out of them on Outpost Yoke. J.R. and Willie Peter and Bunce were all severely wounded and evacuated. A few days later I was advised I was being replaced and assigned to Battalion Med. I asked the doctor if I could stay with the company as I felt I was running out on them. For the first time in my life, I fully understood the responsibility to take care of others. He let me stay but when the new draft came in, he pulled me out and assigned me to the tank company of the 5th Marines.

In early November I got orders to Charlie Med which was the main collecting and clearing company for the entire division. I did mainly triage so I was busy, and it was interesting. That lasted until March 1953 when I was rotated home and discharged. At discharge I was asked if I wanted to reenlist, and I said only if the Navy would guarantee that I would stay in the FMF for the rest of my time. He responded with yes so quickly I knew it was bull. One experience with Navy promises was enough.

In retrospect going to the Navy to get

out of the infantry, becoming a corpsman and going back to the infantry instead of becoming a Quartermaster—the complete opposite of what my goals were—somehow, I wound up on the right path. Being a corpsman made me very proud and I really felt fulfilled as a person. I was big brother at 22 to these 17-, 18- and 19-year-old kids. They learned from me, but I learned so much from them. Never before in my life, did I feel the warmth, respect and inclusion the Marines gave me. Yet I was always on the outside, not being a Marine. I still feel that I am an outsider because I didn’t go to Parris Island or because I was issued white underwear instead of green. Someone once accused me of being a wannabe Marine. I had more time with a rifle company than he had on active duty and I resented his comment, but he was right. Serving with the Marines as a corpsman was one of the proudest, most formative and inspiring times of my life. I would have loved to have been able to say I was a Marine.

Attending E/2/5 reunions over the years I always had the respect of the Marines but was never quite accepted as one of them. Yes, that is my one regret, I was never a Marine. So, from one old wannabe to all you grunts, Semper Fi! 🇺🇸

Left: As shown in this Korean War photo, dedication and courage were common traits displayed by corpsmen, who often risk their own lives to save their Marines. (USMC Photo)

Above: From the left, Walter P. Johnson, John R. Clark, J. Kirkland and Jerome Natt were all assigned to Easy Co, 2nd Bn, 5th Marines in 1952. PFC Walter P. Johnson received the Navy Cross for smothering a grenade with his body to protect others, and PFC John R. Clark received the Silver Star after stopping Chinese forces from reaching a bunker with wounded Marines despite his own wounds. (Photo courtesy HM3 Jerome “Jerry” Natt)