

**My name is Fran Prokop and I am here interviewing Kenneth Nowakowski, who is a friend of mine. Ken is a Marine Corps veteran of the Viet Nam Conflict. He heard about the Veteran's History Project through me, and he has kindly consented to give an interview about his experiences during his military service. Here is his story:**

**Ken, when and where were you born?**

I was born in Chicago, Illinois; May 19, 1939.

**How about your family – parents and grandparents -- what did your parents do?**

My dad was a machinist and my mom was just a housewife.

**Did you have any sisters or brothers who were in the military?**

My – I have a brother two years old than me that went in the Army as a six-month Reservist.

**How did you enter the service – did you enlist or were you drafted?**

Well, I enlisted for four years in the Marines.

**Where did you actually enlist – at what office?**

I enlisted in downtown Chicago.

**How did you get to your first duty station - how did you actually, physically get there?**

Okay, they flew us from Chicago to San Diego.

**What camp was that?**

All right, we were at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot in San Diego. That was where we did basic training for twelve weeks.

**And what did your basic training involve – could you describe a typical day of basic training activity?**

Sure –

**What time did you get up and –**

All right. We'd get up at five in the morning; clean up, do breakfast – breakfast was like, maybe 20 minutes.

**How did you like the food –**

The food was fine; I had no problem with the food. It was as good as what I had at home, really. Then, after breakfast, you'd do your PT –

**What's PT?**

Physical training – calisthenics, that's what it is. Then you'd do a lot of close order personal drill where you did a lot of marching, learning that, and then you'd do the – learn about the M-1 – 'cuz that's the weapon of choice when I was in –

**Right –**

And, uh, then some days you'd do the obstacle course; some days there'd be hand-to-hand combat. And what I detested most was the bayonet training with pugil sticks – I hated that.

**What kind of sticks did you call them?**

Pugil – p-u-g-i-l.

**I never heard that.**

Terrible – and well, the big thing is, when we were in boot camp, all we got to eat was, at the mess hall. But we never went anywhere where you could get soda, candy – completely –

**Really? And they had no machines that you could buy things at?**

Absolutely not.

**Really?**

For the 12 weeks, I mean, I didn't have a Pepsi for 12 weeks and I went crazy. But, yeah, you weren't allowed to have any of that stuff.

**I wonder why? I don't think that's true today.**

I don't know but when I was in it was very much true..

**That was just basic training.**

That was just basic training, and basic training physically wasn't very hard at all.

But it was very challenging mentally, because they tried to break you down, and

**They want you to obey – follow orders.**

Yep, you learn discipline. The big thing is, the close order drill and everything, it's to promote discipline. And I've heard many times that the Marines have the strongest discipline, and I believe it's true to this very day.

**I believe so. Was there classroom learning interspersed with activities?**

Well, sure, you have classroom learning to learn about the various weapons and like the M-1; then you'd learn about other weapons. You'd get to throw a few hand grenades, uh, fire bazooka, fire machine guns, and just learn the military life. But most everything was – you learn by doing. And I think after about the first two, three weeks of basic training, I got pneumonia so I was hospitalized for a month.

**On base there?**

No, they sent me to the San Diego Naval Hospital in San Diego and I was there for 30 days.

**Oh, really.**

Then when I came back I had to finish up boot camp.

**Right. You had to finish with a different group of guys.**

Yeah, my guys were done.

**So you did that.**

Yeah.

**How did you, in general, find military life – how did you acclimate yourself**

I acclimated very well.

**No problem.**

I didn't see it as any type of problem. The guys who had a problem with authority, they had problems. But I – I learned a lot from them.

**And why did you choose that specific branch of service?**

Well, I guess when I was a little kid, WWII had just ended, I was six years old. And there were a lot of war movies going on; and after reflecting on it for awhile one of my favorite movies was "Guadalcanal Diary" and it was all about the Marines and I said well, I think I want to do that. And ever since I was a little kid I said I'll do that. So when I was 18 I went in the service. And that's how I chose the Marines.

**Did you receive any specialized training – if not there then later on?**

Yeah, I received training – I was a radio operator; I learned the Morse Code.

**When you finished your 12 weeks at San Diego, what was the name of that base – just San Diego –**

Marine Corps Recruit Depot – MCRD – AT San Diego.

**So when you finished your 12 weeks there, then where did you go?**

After there I think we did two or three weeks of what is called Advance Infantry Training, and we did that at Camp Pendleton in California. After that I went back to San Diego for Communications School, and I learned how to be a radio operator.

**How long was Communications School?**

It was about a month.

**And during that time you learned –**

Learned the Morse Code and how to operate radios; how to set up radios –

**Like a ham operator?**

Yeah.

**So after the one month of training –**

After the one month training they stationed me at 29 Palms, California.

**It's still there.**

Yes, it's still there. As a matter of fact I just talked to a kid that's stationed there.

**And what were your duties while you were at 29 Palms?**

All right, what we would do, we would go out in the field, which is in the middle of the desert, and we'd set up what they call radio nets. And you'd operate a radio with two other guys and be in contact with another group. They'd bring you messages – you'd sent messages back and forth.

**Practice –**

Yeah.

**Was that your main duty while you were there?**

That was my main duty.

**And how long were you at 29 Palms?**

I was t here roughly 20 months.

**And did anything change while you were there? Did your duties change or what happened?**

No, I was a radio operator; it stayed the same. We were in the desert; we did a lot of training in the desert. Then I got transferred, I went to Hawaii.

**Okay.**

And I was at Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii; I was stationed in the air wing.

**What base was that?**

Kaneohe Bay.

**And what were your duties there?**

Again, I'm still a radio operator.

**Do you have dates for that?**

Sure. I went in 1959 –

**We didn't establish when you actually entered the service.**

I started in the service in 1957; so from '57 to '59 I was in California. From '59 -- the summer of '59 to about March of '61, I was stationed in Hawaii. And again we operated radios and did some radar things.

**Surveillance or –**

Yeah, surveillance. When the planes in our group would be flying, we'd maintain radio contact with them. We'd monitor flights, of course, from the base; and we'd be talking to some of the pilots, this and that – that was what we did in Hawaii.

**And what else did you do there?**

While we were there we built a road up a mountain.

**Really?**

And we built a tram system so nobody would have to hike up that mountain. We built a tram so you could take a little tram car all the way up to the top of the mountain without --

**Were there SeaBees in your unit?**

No, no, just the Marine did this.

**How did that come about? Did you have to get permission or did you just do it?**

Well, oh, no, we just didn't do it. You know, one of the officers said it's a long haul up that; we want you guys to build a road. So they sent guys who thought they knew what they were doing. We built a road and we built a tram line. It took us a whole summer to do that.

**So you did a lot of building –**

Yeah.

**How did you get to Hawaii – did you fly there?**

Yeah.

**What are the circumstances leading to your travel to Viet Nam? You mentioned that to me before.**

All right. In 1961 our unit was going to California for maneuvers, and then I was going to go home and get discharged because I had little over a month to go. And then, after being at sea for two or three days, our ship turned around and they told us we're going to Viet Nam.

**Why were you at sea? You were taking a ship back to California?**

Yeah, we were taking a ship back to California. So we're aboard ship and they said well, we're gonna be going to Viet Name. So they had everybody – we had to write a letter home stating that we're at sea, we're being deployed but we couldn't say where we were going. And, of course, when we sent the letters, we couldn't seal the letters, and somebody went through the letters to make sure nobody knew where we were going.

And then on the way there, we crossed the International Date Line; so the day before we crossed was Easter Sunday, 1961, and all these tough guys that thought they were going to war, we had an ecumenical service, non-denominational – everybody aboard that ship was – went to that service.

**I bet.**

I mean, they were all scared. And then, the very next day was Easter Sunday all over again, so we did the very same thing all over again. And everybody – everybody went to the service again –

**Right, right.**

So you pick up a day, and when you come back you lose the day.

**Right, uh-huh.**

So then we went to – we stopped in Okinawa to pick up ammunition there – ammunition and food – so somebody had the idea that we were gonna spend one day – we were practicing amphibious assaults. And we left our ship, you know, you go down a cargo net into the little LST, and it takes you to the beach and the gate drops and you hit the beach. We did that three times in one day. And I'm beat up – I'm tired, and on the third time when they dropped the gate, we were 100 yards from shore. And the guy next to me was carrying a BAR, which is an automatic rifle, weighs about 20 pounds, and he stepped in a hole and he disappeared. So his ammunition carrier is always right next to the BAR guy. So we bent down in the water and we found him – we picked him up and then we get to the beach – he was fine – and I stopped – there were tanks up there. Some guy hollered at me, "Marine, get your ass off my tank." And I looked at him – it was a boyhood friend of mine!

**Wow!**

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And after four years of service I saw him for ten minutes on the beach with thousands of guys there.

**Oh, my gosh.**

So we talked for ten minutes and that was it.

**Isn't that unusual!!**

Yep. Then, we got back on board ship and we continued the trip, and I don't know if it was Thailand or wherever we got to, and I was thinking I was gonna re-enlist because we were going to war. Then friends of mine told me, you know, we're only going as advisors, probably. There's no sense; there's nothing happening.

**Yeah, this is in 1961.**

Yeah. So we got a directive from the Pentagon – anybody with under 45 days to go, they're gonna send home – over 45 days got extended for a year.

**Oh.**

So I had 32 – 31 days by that time; so they sent me home.

**And the rest of the unit stayed there?**

Oh, yeah.

**So they actually – well, there was no combat at that time; like you said they were in the capacity as advisors.**

Yeah, but they were still being shot at.

**They were, huh?**

Absolutely.

**While you were there were you being shot at too?**

I never got my feet dry; my feet stayed wet.

**Really.**

I mean – 'cuz they sent me – they sent the short timers home immediately. So before they set anything up, we were gone. And friends of mine that stayed there, yeah; some guys –there were shots being fired there.

I flew back to Treasure Island in San Francisco and I got discharged from Treasure Island -- so I literally spent four years. I didn't get any early out or anything.

**You were in the service for four years; that was your term of enlistment.**



That's correct.

**Okay, so you never saw actual active duty but while you were there how did you stay in touch with friends and family back home?**

Well, because I was a radio operator, I contacted – we had a couple of contacts with ham operators in Michigan. So I was able to contact them free of charge then they would call my home, and my mother and the people I called would be charged from Michigan to Chicago – you know, they'd reverse the charges and we could talk. But that's the way we communicated.

**So you really didn't do letters and things like that?**

Oh, yeah, I sent a lot of letters, absolutely.

**And you received mail?**

Oh, yeah.

**How about friendships formed and camaraderie of service – the men you met while you were in the service; do you still keep in touch?**

It's truly unbelievable, yes. You know, you form friendships in that period of time that are unlike any other –

**That last a lifetime too –**

It's really close. I'm sure if those guy, some of those guys you were close with, they call you, you'd stop what you were doing and help them.

**I'm sure you would.**

I mean one of the guys just died last year and we were all at his funeral. And it's said, and I got a friend of mine, as a matter of fact Wally's younger brother, he was at the funeral, and he was a tunnel rat during Viet Nam, 'cuz he was younger

**A tunnel rat?**

A tunnel rat – that means he'd go down in the tunnels and – you had to be a tough guy to do that, and here he was at his brother's funeral, sucking oxygen through a tube and everything – and a little tiny old man. That's sorta hard to take.

**Yeah, that's sad; it is.**

But, one thing, now I have a grandson that's in the Air Force and just graduated from boot camp. And of course wherever I go I wear my Marine Corps cap; it starts a lot of conversations. But more so with the Marines than with any other branch of service. A guy'll walk up to you and say "Semper Fi, Marine." And then you sit and talk – my daughter couldn't get over the fact that there were guys coming up to me and talking. She said, "How does Dad know so many guys?" I said, no, it's just from that (the cap) – and we go on vacation and people stop me all the time.

**Yeah.**

They want to know where you were stationed, what year you were in.

**My husband was a Marine. I know that feeling. While you were in the service what were your recreational or off-duty pursuits? What did you do off duty?**

Oh, involved in a lot of sports. When I was in Hawaii I was in the Hawaii Swimming Team. I did scuba diving while I was out there; played baseball; played football, but my main interest was the swimming. I did a lot of swimming.

**A lot of guys, if they're on a ship, all they can do is play cards, watch movies --**

Yeah, if you're on board ship you can't do anything.

**So you had activities. So you returned home – you just flew back –**

Yeah, 'cuz I came back as an individual. And they flew us, the few guys that were short timers, they fly you to Treasure Island in San Francisco, and then from there you wait two or three days and they let you go from there and then you fly home.

**That's quick, yeah. So how was your readjustment to civilian life**

It was not a problem, but, in 1962 we had the Bay of Pigs with Kennedy, and at that time I thought of going back in. So I went to see a recruiter and I had just gotten married in May of '62, so in September of '62 I was talking to the recruiter a few times, and they let me know that if I went back in I wouldn't have to go to boot camp; I'd go back in as a sergeant and I was very much interested. And then by March of April, my wife was pregnant, so that ended that. So I didn't – but I could have gone back in and made that a career. I enjoyed the service.

**I didn't ask you what you were doing before you went into the service.**

Well, I had a job working in a factory.

### **And did you go back to that job after you returned?**

No, I went and – I worked in a bank for three or four years – and then I became a State Farm Agent for 35 years until I retired. But the one thing I learned in the service was strong discipline, and I think what I learned in the Marines is the main reason I was a success in my personal life – because you learn discipline, you learn integrity in that whatever you say you keep your word. Your word is your bond and people believe what you say. They know if you say you're gonna do this, it's gonna get done. And you don't quit on things; you just do it until it's finished. There's no starting it and then leaving it go, and I believe that's the biggest thing I got out of the service --especially the Marine Corps.

As a matter of fact, I remember a time, friend of mine was stationed at March Air Force Base and I went to visit him at March Air Force Base. It was lunch time and he says well, we're going to have lunch; they're going to the mess hall. I said I want to see the mess sergeant, you know. He says you don't have to; you just go in there. I said I can't do that. So I went and I saw the mess sergeant and I told him who I was and I want to eat lunch there. And he gave me – he gave the Marine Corps a great compliment; he said "That's what I like about the Marines. You guys have great respect for the service. Anybody else, they come in here, they go right through. So he says, I want you to know anytime you're on this base, you can eat in my chow hall. You just give them my name and say I said it was okay." That is one thing that was recognized at that time throughout the services – the Marines commanded more respect than any other branch.

### **So that's one of your life lessons learned from the military – respect and discipline.**

Oh, there's no question; no question. And punctuality, you go somewhere, always on time, but I think the number one thing I learned was discipline. It's just amazing how, you know, I'd say this is what I have to do, and if I want to do something else that day, I'd say no, I can't do that, I gotta finish this first, and then I can do that. Notice, a lot of people, I don't care what they're doing, they can be swayed easily to do something else.

### **Right. Now, how about membership in veterans' organizations?**

No, I'm not a member of any veterans' organization. I'll tell you, what makes me feel bad, although I was overseas for 18 months I was in Hawaii – then on a ship for 30 days going to Viet Nam, I'm not eligible for the VFW.

### **I know, I thought they changed those rules.**

No., they didn't. And, well, just now, because of my age and the way things are today, I wanted to go to the – what is it – the VA – see what I'm eligible for as far

as medical benefits,, they said none. I make too much money. I can't get any – you know, if I wanted to go get medication or something, they said I can't get anything.

**It's too late; see, now it's means testing. If you would have gone right after the service –**

I would have been fine.

**Right, you would have been; but many men didn't do that, they let it go and now when they go for it, it's not there.**

Yep, right.

**I understand that. I don't think it's right, but –**

Well, the rules are the rules.

**So have you had much contact with fellow veterans over the years?**

Yeah, I have. I've had a few guys, you talk to them and see how things are going with them, you know, it's quite nice.

**Do you have any kind of reunions or anything?**

No, no, I don't.

**Just see them as you meet each other.**

Yep.

**So how do you think your military experience has affected your life?**

Well, if it wasn't for my time in the Marines, I don't think I would be a successful salesman like I was with State Farm. Another good story, I told you I learned discipline and stuff – as a new State Farm Agent I was doing what I'm supposed to do. On Sunday mornings I would get these pamphlets and stick them in door handles in a parking lot. I'd find one during the week and I'd do that. Well, I remember one November, I wanted to watch the Bears, and it was cold out. So I flagged like half the parking lot and I'm freezing and I said well, it's time for the Bears, I'm gonna go. I drove two blocks, turned around, said I can't do this. I came back, all right and I finished the second half. Well, by the end of that week I got a call from a guy who was the president of the Mexican Chamber of Commerce for the City of Chicago. I dropped my card on his door handle so he called me and I met with him for lunch. And the result of that, they gave me on a Friday, office space and an interpreter and I used their office and that contact got

me 200 or 300 Mexican people. And what I will never know was did I drop my card to him in the morning or after I came back.

**Right.**

So I will never know that. But now people say that's lucky, right, but it's the result of good work –

**Your hard work, right. You make your own luck.**

You know what, you gotta do what you gotta do. And there aren't shortcuts; there really aren't. You pay the price and you do it.

**Right.**

And, you know, I was just happy with my whole situation with the service. I have nothing bad to say about it. For me it was great.

**Well I find that men who have enlisted, generally, feel that way because they went there voluntarily. Some of the guys who were drafted don't always feel that way.**

Oh, absolutely, or the guys that went in, you know, six month reservist; they went in for six months just so they wouldn't get drafted and go in. I always wanted to go in the service so for me it was a very good experience. And I was very lucky that I didn't go to war. You know, the timing wasn't right so I just got very lucky. I beat the war by days because had that happened when it did, I would have stayed in the service; there was no question. I was ready and I would have been a lifer. But it didn't work out that way; that's the way life works out.

**Did you get any kind of awards or medals or anything?**

No, just good conduct medal and all, but – well, I got an award once - we had an inspecting general coming to our outfit in Hawaii and they say, I had what is called a Mark 32 Van, and I had to keep it neat – it was a van, and there was a radio in there -- well, they said the guy who had the nicest vehicle is going to get a free ride in the jet; the colonel's gonna take him up. And I really wanted it. So what I did, I cleaned my vehicle; I painted the tires with black rubber paint; all the knobs on my van I painted like a reddish color. I mean it sparkled; I polished it, and I won. So the CO said it's really great – it was impressive – but he says, you gotta get rid of that gypsy war wagon and get it back the way it was issued to you – undo everything I did. And then I never got to go up in the plane because that's when we had to go to – we left – so, but nice story.

**Yeah, right, right. Well, good is there anything else you want to say.**

Not at all.

**Well, I thank you very much for this interview and thank you especially for your service to our country.**

Well, you're welcome.

**Thanks, Ken.**

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