

Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

PATRICK O. FINNERTY

Navy Corpsman attached to the 8th Marine Division, 2nd Infantry Battalion,  
Vietnam War

2003

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**Finnerty, Patrick O.** Oral History Interview, 2003.

User Copy: 2 sound cassettes (ca. 57 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 2 sound cassettes (ca. 57 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

**Abstract:**

Finnerty, a Middleton, Wisconsin resident, discusses his experiences as a Navy corpsman, attached to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the 5<sup>th</sup> Marine Division, in the Vietnam War and his experiences upon returning home. He tells of seeing news about the war every night, his graduation from Sheboygan High School, attendance at a technical school in Sheboygan, and losing his student deferment due to poor grades. Finnerty enlisted in the Navy after he received his draft notice. He attended training at Great Lakes Naval Training Station (Illinois) for about thirteen weeks and claims, “the day that we all got our head shaved was the most equalizing day I’ve ever experienced in my life, because all of a sudden everybody was on the same playing field and all the guys, they all looked alike.” Finnerty says that his training consisted mostly of tying knots, ship board duties, swimming, using his uniform (with pieces intended to be emergency life preservers), and standing guard with a rifle. He recalls that hospital corpsman school took about twenty-two weeks and that his first assignment was to the USS Vulcan in Norfolk (Virginia). He then attended hospital corpsman field training at Camp Lejeune (North Carolina), where he learned how to use a 45-caliber weapon instead of a rifle. Finnerty states that he was then stationed on the USS Sanctuary, a hospital ship off the coast of Vietnam near Da Nang, where he would broadcast news every night brought to him via teletype. He describes boredom on the ship at other times and watching helicopters come in and out and visiting with injured soldiers. Finnerty then states that he was assigned to the 5<sup>th</sup> Marine headquarters in Da Nang and was sent to “The Tomb.” He was assigned to a platoon and participated in patrols looking for North Vietnamese with help from the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam). Finnerty remembers searching villages and talking to people who seemed nice, but then would attack at night. He says that booby traps were the biggest concern and most of these were box mines made out of gun powder. Finnerty explains that a major concern was legs and feet being injured. He spent two years in the same platoon as a medic. Finnerty says that they returned to base camp about every three weeks and he remembers experiencing a divide between races. He describes officers as competent and well-trained, but reluctant to get close to conflicts. Finnerty discusses the composition of the platoon, the weapons they carried, (including LAU rockets), ammunition, and air support from the Marines, Navy and South Vietnamese. He goes into detail about day and night patrols, the number of medics available, and what it was like walking through rice paddies. He mentions immersion foot and leeches, dirty clothes, and eating mostly c-rations. Finnerty remembers being able to trade c-rations with the Vietnamese for liquor while at base camp. At one point he suffered from stomach problems and was sent back to the USS Sanctuary where he enjoyed some R & R. Finnerty describes the areas his company was responsible for patrolling, “The Bridge,” “The Road,” and “The Outpost.” The squads would engage in “Snoop and Poop” south of Da Nang, watching for North Vietnamese planting mines. Finnerty explains that he could have gone home in November of 1969, but volunteered to stay longer because of a lack of corpsmen. While describing his feeling

on the war he states, "I was doing something to stop the threat of Communism, and that turned out to be a big joke. I found out that the whole war was unnecessary..." He was later offered a promotion to stay on and turned it down, returning to California. He shortly returned to Wisconsin and attended the University of Wisconsin-Parkside on the GI Bill. Finnerty remembers that he had several negative experiences with people having poor impressions of him because he participated in the Vietnam War. These people included veterans from the Racine and Middleton, Wisconsin VFW posts. He was able to join the Middleton post in the early 1990's without being hassled.

Transcribed by Becky Berhow, Wisconsin Court Reporter, 2007.  
Transcription checked and edited by Channing Welch, 2008.  
Abstract written by Christina M. Ballard, 2008

**Interview:**

Kurtz: Now, the machine is working I think. But today is February -- I mean, March 1st, 2003 and I'm interviewing Pat Finnerty of Middleton, Wisconsin. Pat, could you tell us when you were born and where?

Finnerty: I was born December 6th of 1947 in Green Bay, Wisconsin.

Kurtz: Okay. And where were you raised?

Finnerty: I was raised just for a short time in Green Bay. Then my family moved to Fond du Lac and I lived in Fond du Lac until I was in junior high school, through junior high school. When I started senior high school, my family moved to Sheboygan and that's where I went to high school.

Kurtz: Okay. What year did you graduate from Sheboygan High School?

Finnerty: 1966 from Sheboygan North High.

Kurtz: And did you have any inkling about the Vietnam War when you were in high school?

Finnerty: Oh, absolutely. It was on the news every night on television and the newspapers were also always full of articles about it because, you know, that was 1966, the year I graduated, and at that time things were pretty hectic in Vietnam.

Kurtz: Right, and you -- what did you do then when you got out of high school?

Finnerty: Then I went to a technical school in Sheboygan.

Kurtz: Did you have a student deferment when you went to technical school?

Finnerty: I did for a while, but I was more interested in having fun than going to school and I didn't have the best grades and my grade point average wasn't high enough. So I was -- I got a draft notice and instead of being drafted and going into the Army or the Marine Corps, I enlisted in the U.S. Navy.

Kurtz: Okay. So when did you get the draft notice?

Finnerty: That must have been -- oh, I'm going to say approximately in July of 60 -- no, excuse me, it would have been probably April of '67.

Kurtz: Okay. And you had enough time to make an enlistment decision before you got actually called to the draft?

Finnerty: Yes, I did.

Kurtz: Okay. And you enlisted in the Navy and for how long?

Finnerty: Four years. I enlisted in the Navy for four years.

Kurtz: Okay. And did they make any representations about what kind of training you would get?

Finnerty: No. They really didn't. I wasn't promised anything. At that time they had what they call the 120 day delay program. I thought I would be getting out of the Navy 120 days earlier than I was supposed to, but that wasn't the case. But no, to answer your question about training, no, I was not guaranteed any specific training.

Kurtz: Where did you go then? You reported to the Navy in July of '67, is that correct?

Finnerty: That's correct.

Kurtz: And where did you go?

Finnerty: Great Lakes Naval Training Station in Great Lakes, Illinois.

Kurtz: Okay. And how long were you there?

Finnerty: Boot camp at that time was either 12 or 13 weeks.

Kurtz: And is there anything that stands out in your time there at Great Lakes, like relationship with the training officers, peers or people ---

Finnerty: One thing that stood out to me the most when I went in the service, of course, there was a bus of a couple hundred other guys going into the same day I did, and there were a lot of oh, for the lack of a better term, city slickers from New York and some of the big cities and all their big fancy hair-dos and this big macho look about them and the day that we all got our head shaved was the most equalizing day I've ever experienced in my life, because all of a sudden everybody was on the same playing field and all the guys, they all looked alike.

Kurtz: Okay. And what type of training did you receive at this Navy boot camp?

Finnerty: Well, boot camp was just a basic Navy -- Navy training as far as Navy, Navy terms, terminology, officer ranking, enlisted rankings and the names of them. Navy spends a lot of time teaching you how to tie knots, believe it or not, and ship board things. Things that would apply to every enlisted man in the Navy no matter what field of training you went in, there were still basic things you had to know. You had to learn how to swim. You had to learn how to use your Navy uniform, which is designed -- all the pieces are designed to be some type of life preserver. They'd throw you in a pool and teach you how to do those things. Then basic idiotic stuff. You'd have to

stand guard with your rifle at a garbage dumpster. It was nothing more than to teach you discipline.

Kurtz: Did you have any weapons training and physical training as part of this too?

Finnerty: No, we didn't. No. That's not -- I did have weapons training, but not at that time, not in boot camp.

Kurtz: Okay. Okay. So did you meet anybody in boot camp that you saw later in your military career, later in your life after military?

Finnerty: Yes. I met one fellow from New York City and to this day he and I are still good friends. We visit. My wife and I visit he and his wife. In fact, we're getting together with them some time maybe at the end of this year or next year we're going to meet them in Las Vegas. So I have maintained one very close friendship from my military days.

Kurtz: Okay. And that person was it just boot camp or were you with him other places in your --

Finnerty: Well, it started in boot camp, but then the school that I went to after boot camp and the school that he went to after boot camp were two different schools, but they were both located at Great Lakes Naval Training Station. So we saw each other even after boot camp.

Kurtz: Okay. So you went to -- your next training after boot camp was at Great Lakes, What was that?

Finnerty: Hospital corpsman school.

Kurtz: Is that something you volunteered for?

Finnerty: No. It was -- it was -- I was selected for it. It was not a volunteer situation.

Kurtz: Okay. And how long was that?

Finnerty: 6 -- that was about 22 weeks approximately.

Kurtz: And so they taught you basic skills, basic first aid and trauma skills there, is that correct?

Finnerty: Yes. Correct.

Kurtz: Did you get any practical training, like in emergency rooms or anything?

Finnerty: Yeah, plus we had to -- part of that training we had to spend time working at the

Great Lakes Naval Hospital.

Kurtz: Okay. After you completed that schooling, which would put you probably around the first of the year 1968, is that accurate or --

Finnerty: Yeah, that sounds about right.

Kurtz: What was your first duty assignment?

Finnerty: My first duty assignment was aboard the USS Vulcan, a ship in Norfolk, Virginia.

Kurtz: Okay. And what kind of a ship was that?

Finnerty: That was a repair ship that was welded to the dock and never went anyplace, but other ships that had mechanical problems would dock right next to it and then the repairmen on the USS Vulcan would work on other ships.

Kurtz: Okay. What kind -- what was your typical duty day on the Vulcan?

Finnerty: I worked in the sick bay, and every morning was sick call and the guys that would come in and I'd work along -- depending on what their problem was, sometimes I would take care of it myself, other times I'd work hand in hand with the doctor, or the doctor would see to people and evaluate them and then tell us what to do and how to handle it or what prescription the man needed or what had to be done or change a dressing or whatever.

Kurtz: So how long were you on the Vulcan?

Finnerty: Six -- about five months.

Kurtz: Five months. And how many doctors were on --

Finnerty: There was just one, one doctor and one dentist.

Kurtz: Okay. And how many people were they responsible for, roughly.

Finnerty: There must --- there was myself, two other -- two other enlisted corpsman and one Navy chief.

Kurtz: Okay. After you -- your five months, which puts it roughly May of '68 or thereabouts June or May of '68, what was your next duty assignment?

Finnerty: Then I was -- a lot of people don't realize is the Marine Corps is the land branch of the Navy, and the Marine Corps does not train any of it's own medical people. They all come from the Navy. So I was then transferred to what's called FMF the Fleet

Marine Force and then I had to go to Camp Lejeune, North Carolina for hospital corpsman field training.

Kurtz: And so --- you went to Camp Lejeune in North Carolina and how -- did you go on leave before you went there or --

Finnerty: No. I went directly from Norfolk to there.

Kurtz: And how long was that training?

Finnerty: That was about 7 or 8 weeks approximately.

Kurtz: How do you spell Lejeune, do you remember?

Finnerty: It's L A, capital J U N E.

Kurtz: Okay. And so I've forgot how many weeks did you say that training was?

Finnerty: If I remember correctly, I want to say 6 or 7 weeks.

Kurtz: And how did that training differ from the training you got at Great Lakes?

Finnerty: Well, this training was all about -- first of all about the Marine Corps, and then that's where we got into field training for field dressing a rifle, most of the time was spent on a 45 caliber because that's what corpsman carry, 45 instead of a rifle. So there was a lot of training like that and then some of the stuff that the Marines do. The, you know, how to lay down on your belly and crawl and all those other things that Marine Corps infantrymen do. We had to -- we had a short, brief course, a crash course you might say in being a field Marine.

Kurtz: Okay. So was it roughly like basic training or --

Finnerty: Yes.

Kurtz: So --

Finnerty: It was pretty much like basic Marine Corps basic training.

Kurtz: Right. So they wanted to correct all the things that the Navy did wrong, is that right?

Finnerty: That's about right.

Kurtz: So after you completed that training, which would put us around July of 68, what happened to you?



Finnerty: That's when I got shipped to the USS Sanctuary, a hospital ship off the coast of Vietnam.

Kurtz: Did you -- before you got there did you go home on leave before you went to --

Finnerty: Yes.

Kurtz: So -- and how long was that?

Finnerty: How long was I on leave?

Kurtz: Yeah?

Finnerty: Oh, about two weeks

Kurtz: Is there anything that sticks out in your mind about the two weeks leave that you spent back in Wisconsin I assume?

Finnerty: Well, not really because I thought I was going to this USS Sanctuary hospital ship and that was going to be my tour of duty in Vietnam, so I wasn't really too concerned about it.

Kurtz: Okay. And so when you completed your leave, how did you get to the ship?

Finnerty: Let's see, I went -- I had to go to Cal -- no, came home through California, I went to California. I have an aunt and uncle that lived there and I stayed there with them for a few days and then I went to San Bernardino, California, where we got on a plane. We flew from there to Hawaii and then Hawaii directly to Vietnam.

Kurtz: Okay. And where did you land in Vietnam?

Finnerty: In Da Nang.

Kurtz: In Da Nang?

Finnerty: Uh-hum. (Affirmative)

Kurtz: And what was your first impressions when you flew into Da Nang?

Finnerty: Really there was no signs there of a war. You just thought you were in another big city.

Kurtz: Uh-hum. (Affirmative)

Finnerty: There's big buildings and cars and people and you thought, you know, there's a war here? Where is it?

Kurtz: Did you land at the military air base? Were there jets, military jets operating in and out of that?

Finnerty: No. These were all commercial jets that were flying troops in and out.

Kurtz: Okay. So you didn't land at the military air field?

Finnerty: No. I don't -- I don't think it was.

Kurtz: Okay. Okay. So when you got in country what happened?

Finnerty: Well, nothing because then I was immediately taken and got on a helicopter and flown out to the hospital ship. So I only spent a matter of hours there.

Kurtz: Okay. So you didn't do any in-processing or --

Finnerty: No.

Kurtz: Or whatever in the transit barracks or anything like that?

Finnerty: No.

Kurtz: Okay. And you were heloed to the ship, and what was your -- was the ship was operating off ---

Finnerty: Off the coast, traveled up and down the coast of Vietnam.

Kurtz: And so what kind of entry -- what kind of in-processing did you have there?

Finnerty: Really nothing. Nothing any different than it was when I was sent to the USS Vulcan, just getting on another ship is all. Again there was no thought of geez, there's a war going on, didn't realize that, of course, until you got into the ship and into the hospital part of it and saw all the wounded people, the GIs.

Kurtz: How many wounded people could this ship handle?

Finnerty: I think it held around 100, about 100 bed hospital.

Kurtz: Okay, and so what were your duties on this ship?

Finnerty: Believe it or not the ship has its own television station. They broadcast at 5 o'clock every night. They would broadcast the news and there's myself and one other guy and we have a teletype machine, we got the news off the teletype and we sat down and processed that to put together a broadcast and then he and I broadcast the news every night from the ship.

Kurtz: How long did you do that?

Finnerty: About three months. So none -- at that point none of my medical training was even being used.

Kurtz: Okay. So you didn't do any actual medical work the first three months that you were on the ship?

Finnerty: Correct.

Kurtz: Okay. And what was your typical duty day like on the ship?

Finnerty: It was really actually kind of boring. There wasn't enough to do. Just -- as I said, we'd get the news off the teletype machine and sit down and process it. The rest of the time we walked around. We sat and visited and we went -- visit anybody you might know that was stationed on the ship, and that was it. It was a real boring day.

Kurtz: Okay.

Finnerty: Watch the helicopters come in and, of course, the ship had a helipad, watch the helicopters come in and watch them either loading or unloading sick and wounded GIs.

Kurtz: And so when they took people off of the ship, where -- did they go back to duty or to hospitals in Japan or --

Finnerty: Could have been either. Either back, they're fit enough to go back to duty or they weren't fit enough and they were being sent home.

Kurtz: Okay. So what happened after -- so this would put us roughly in October of '68 or thereabouts, am I right?

Finnerty: Uh- hum. Right.

Kurtz: And what happened then after you were a newsman for three months?

Finnerty: Then I got my orders that I was going off the ship and I was going in-country.

Kurtz: Was this a typical way of bringing corpsmen in to put them on a ship like this or was it --

Finnerty: Yeah, they always had some on the ship so when they were needed they were there. In case they were really needed badly they could get a --- have one, have help right away. They didn't have to wait for more of them to come from the United States.

Kurtz: Okay. So how did you get off of the ship and where did you go when you --

Finnerty: Helicoptered back into Da Nang. Was there for I think about two days and stayed in a barracks in a building with cots, hot meals, hot showers and I thought, geeze, this isn't so bad. Then shortly after that we got on a helicopter and flown out to a base camp and then I said well, I guess there really is a war going on around here somewhere because the living conditions at this base camp weren't as nice as Da Nang, but they weren't real bad either.

Kurtz: Do you remember the name of that base camp?

Finnerty: No, I don't.

Kurtz: Okay. But I assume it's in the immediate Da Nang area?

Finnerty: Yeah, it was just south of Da Nang.

Kurtz: Okay. And was that the 5th Marine headquarters or --

Finnerty: Yes. Then after I got to that base camp, then I got broken down even further and I got sent out to -- up to the tomb and then I really knew I was in country.

Kurtz: Okay. And what were your impressions about the climate, smells, and all of that?

Finnerty: Yeah, it wasn't -- it wasn't bad. Yeah, there were some smells. I wouldn't say it was real bad, but now that you got that far out into the field, there was just more -- more concern for your life. You knew there was a war going on and the next few days after that I was out on patrol with a Marine battalion.

Kurtz: Okay. So when you -- if I can get this straight, what happened here, you flew from this replacement thing to the 5th Marine division headquarters, then you were assigned to the specific platoon and taken out to where that platoon was?

Finnerty: Yes.

Kurtz: And how did you get there?

Finnerty: By truck.

Kurtz: By truck. So they were in a fixed position, a base camp?

Finnerty: Yeah. They had a -- yes, they had -- there's a base camp there that we operated out of. They had little bunkers that you slept in that were all sandbagged over the top of your head, and then we'd go on patrols out of that camp.

Kurtz: Okay. Did you replace somebody who rotated out or do you know who you --

- Finnerty: I don't know, no. I guess I did replace somebody. He was just rotated out. It was time for him to go home.
- Kurtz: Okay. That person had been there a full tour?
- Finnerty: Yeah, to the best of my knowledge, yes.
- Kurtz: So how long when you got here roughly in October of '68, how long did you have to go in your Vietnam tour yet?
- Finnerty: I didn't leave there 'til October of 1970.
- Kurtz: Okay. So you stayed there for a year and a half?
- Finnerty: Yep.
- Kurtz: --- two years. Two years would be right. Okay. My math is really bad. We'll get to how come you were there longer than 13 months in a minute. Okay, what -- could you explain, you know, a typical duty day in this platoon?
- Finnerty: Yeah. Our job was to go out on patrols, sometimes patrol during the day, sometimes nights. And we probably go out about 7 in the morning with a platoon and we had certain assignments every day, certain areas we were supposed to patrol and look for North Vietnamese, try to find out anything if we could from little villages that we might go through on a day. Talk to the people. We also had somebody with us that could speak Vietnamese and would talk to the people.
- Kurtz: Were these ARVN officers or are they --
- Finnerty: Yeah, they were ARVN's.
- Kurtz: Okay. Did you have much contact with the Vietnamese people?
- Finnerty: Yeah, we did because we'd see them, yeah. We'd be walking through their rice paddies or through their little, you know, we'd get to a place where they had little huts, we'd search those, see if we could find anything because these people were farmers by day and they were saboteurs at night.
- Kurtz: Okay. Do you have any stories about people that you recognized that were subsequently found on like your wire at night or something like that when they tried to attack or zappers coming in or something like that?
- Finnerty: No, nobody that I ever really recognized. But it was just common knowledge that that's what these people were doing at night. They'd be out and they'd want to find out where your perimeter was, how close they could get to you, and they

wouldn't be around very long, they'd be gone. But they were the same people that were out during the day with their ox and out in their rice paddies smiling at you and say what a nice GI you are and then of course, they were trying to stab you in the back at night.

Kurtz: When you were out on these patrols, were you sniped at frequently or had any problems?

Finnerty: Oh, yeah. Yep. Yes, we were. The thing that -- our biggest problem we had in the part of the country I was in is that these Vietnamese people are absolute experts at booby traps, and that was our biggest concern. They go through a lot of kinds of different booby traps and you had to be very careful and you had to know what to look for and how to spot them and then how to --- there'd be -- somebody in the platoon or one of the Marines that would disarm them. But that was our biggest concern is booby traps 'cause the Vietnamese are experts at building them.

Kurtz: And were these booby traps made out of recycled American ammunition and munitions and stuff?

Finnerty: Yeah, they were. Most of them were box mines that were made out of gun powder.

Kurtz: And did you take many casualties from these booby traps?

Finnerty: Yeah, we did. Them being the experts they are at these traps. They did the job that they were intended to do and they dismembered and crippled a lot of GIs.

Kurtz: And what was the SOP if you were out on a patrol and somebody tripped a booby trap?

Finnerty: Well, you just treat them accordingly. I mean, there was a lot of -- a lot of legs and feet blown off.

Kurtz: And so what, would you do the initial treatment and then call a helicopter in for dustoff ---

Finnerty: Right. Do the initial treatment the best that we could, tourniquets or whatever and bandages, start an IV in them and then wait for a helicopter to come and get them.

Kurtz: Was the experience that the helicopters got there pretty quickly?

Finnerty: Just depends. I would say most of the time, yes, but not always.

Kurtz: Was weather during the rainy season, was it more of a problem with the weather and stuff like that?

Finnerty: Yeah. Yes, it was. The weather was a -- during the rainy season, during the

monsoons it created problems because sometimes it'd be raining so bad that the pilots wouldn't want to fly.

Kurtz: What was the pilots' attitudes towards coming into hot LZs, or with the dust off?

Finnerty: Oh, they were probably just as afraid as you were because they're a big moving target in the sky and could easily be shot down and sometimes they were. You didn't see a lot of helicopters get shot down, but on occasion there was a couple of them that did. So they wanted to get there and get out as fast as they possibly could and they didn't take a lot of time and if you picked up a stretcher and put it in the back, and by the time you're going to get out the back, to get back on ground, you might have been four or five feet off the ground and you had to jump.

Kurtz: Okay. So how long were you a platoon medic?

Finnerty: For the rest of my tour.

Kurtz: So you were there from October of '68 through October '70, so two full years as a platoon medic?

Finnerty: Yep.

Kurtz: In the same platoon the whole time?

Finnerty: Yes, I was.

Kurtz: Did you go on an R and R?

Finnerty: No, I didn't. I had the opportunity and I didn't because I thought that if I got out, left the country that I wasn't sure if I'd go back.

Kurtz: Boy, isn't that the truth. I shouldn't be saying that. What was your relationship you had with the infantrymen, the NCOs and the officers?

Finnerty: It was -- it was a good relationship. Unfortunately, when you got back to the base camp, you'd get back every maybe two weeks to get some clean clothes and shower and a hot meal. You could tell there was a divide between blacks and whites, which was unfortunate but there was. The new young -- the new young officers coming in country were -- they were concerned and real understanding and wanted to be compassionate because there was a lot of cases of officers getting shot or hand grenades thrown in their tents or things like that because of the way they treated some people. So they were -- at that time they were -- they were good to you. They knew they better be.

Kurtz: Were the officers fairly competent and well-trained? I mean, did they know what to do in combat situations?

Finnerty: You know, I would say yes, they are, but you could come in a situation where anybody, whether it's an officer or enlisted man in a combat situation doesn't make any difference what -- if they're wearing bars or not, everybody's going to act differently, everybody has different feelings and emotions and didn't make any difference if they were an officer or enlisted.

Kurtz: But on the whole they didn't do anything in your experience where they did something criminally stupid that people in trouble or --

Finnerty: No, not that I recall. I never experienced anything that -- where an officer made a bad decision that might have cost somebody his life. I know some of the upper, old crusty, excuse me, gunnery sergeants and things they didn't have a lot of feeling or compassion for the new young enlisted men.

Kurtz: I want to turn --

**[End of Tape 1, Side A]**

**[Side B: Aprox. 1.5 min. gap at start of Side B before interview resumes.]**

Kurtz: When we stopped the tape, Pat, you were talking about gunnery sergeants. Is there anything more that you'd like to talk about them?

Finnerty: Well, they --- as I said, they were all lifers as they were called. They'd been in for twenty plus years, and they were pretty hard, calloused old guys, and they didn't care much about the young guys because these guys never -- they didn't have to do anything. They were always back in rear areas where they knew they would be safe and sound, and they never got into combat situations at this point by --- that I was there. I guess in earlier years they had, but when I was there, no, that was not the case. They were always safe and sound, sitting back in their little areas.

Kurtz: What was the typical strength of the platoon that you were in?

Finnerty: Well, there was the point man, the radio man, a sergeant ---

Kurtz: Was there a lieutenant?

Finnerty: We had a lieutenant. But we never went on the patrols, and then there were others, of course: a machine gunner, guy that carried a machine gun. What else?

Kurtz: Did you take M-79's on?

Finnerty: Those --- what was it? Everybody -- I shouldn't say everybody, I had a 45, everybody else carried an M-16. Oh, we always had a- one guy carried a LAU rocket---



Kurtz: What is a LAU rocket used for?

Finnerty: It's set on your shoulder, and it fires a rocket. You could use it to shoot at a, oh, a vehicle, or a ---

Kurtz: Bunker?

Finnerty: Bunker, yeah. Then we also had a ---

Kurtz: That's a disposable weapon, too, right?

Finnerty: Right. Once it's fired it's done. Then we also had a mortar man with a mortar tube.

Kurtz: What was a 60mm or a 81?

Finnerty: 60.

Kurtz: Okay, and how many rounds did they typically take out?

Finnerty: Everybody carried one of the rounds, and then one guy had to carry the base plate. He carried about a half dozen rounds, and then the mortar man himself carried another half a dozen or so.

Kurtz: How much machine gun ammunition did you take with you?

Finnerty: Oh, they'd take a box. They'd carry a box and then the guy would wear some of the bands around, over his shoulders.

Kurtz: Did you ever get into situations where that wasn't enough ammunition?

Finnerty: Ah, no, we really didn't because we did get into bad situations – and if we started getting low they would always call for air support.

Kurtz: Okay, now did you – that was the sergeant's job to call for air support then. Was that right?

Finnerty: Right.

Kurtz: And were you supported by Marine or aircraft, South Vietnamese aircraft or Navy aircraft, or ---

Finnerty: Could have been either ---

Kurtz: All ---

Finnerty: All the above.

Kurtz: Okay, and what kind of planes – were they prop jet driven or jet driven planes that –

Finnerty: No, they were – when we got air support most of the time it was helicopter gunships.

Kurtz: Okay. So it was more gunships, and were those the Hueys?

Finnerty: Yes, Huey Gunships.

Kurtz: Now the Marines had those Huey Gunships, or did they still have those H-34's?

Finnerty: They had both.

Kurtz: Okay, and did they have the Cobras when you were there?

Finnerty: Yes, they did.

Kurtz: Okay. You said that the lieutenant never went out on patrols. Now, I assume when they went on platoon size patrols you would go.

Finnerty: Yes.

Kurtz: Did you have many nights that you had to go out on patrol?

Finnerty: Yeah, usually we had different squads and we would rotate. For about three or four days you'd be on day patrols and for three or four days you'd be on night patrols.

Kurtz: And how many medics were in your platoon?

Finnerty: There was one with every squad, so ---

Kurtz: How many platoons were in, or how many squads in the platoon?

Finnerty: Four, I think.

Kurtz: Okay, 'cause the Marines and the Army are a little different ---

Finnerty: The Army had three, for the most part, and a weapons squad, you know, which is a little different.

Kurtz: Were you up pretty close to full strength on medics most of the time?

Finnerty: Yeah, we only lost one while I was there. So we were always – but after we lost that one I had to go out every day until we got a replacement. So it was about three

weeks, three or four weeks, that I had to go every day of the week, seven days a week.

Kurtz: How far did you go on a typical patrol?

Finnerty: Oh, I would say – then the term we’d use was “clicks”. And I don’t remember --- can’t --- anticipate --- if you knew what clicks to miles, but I would say we’d go a good ten miles.

Kurtz: Would it be circular or in and out different ways?

Finnerty: Could, yeah, it was always different. It was never the same. You never – you always had to vary what you did because you never wanted to establish a pattern.

Kurtz: Did you operate on roads and trails, or how did you cross the countryside?

Finnerty: Sometimes roads, gravel roads, but most of the time it was just through the countryside, right through the rice paddies.

Kurtz: And what were your impressions in walking through a rice paddy?

Finnerty: That I’d never eat that crop again.

Kurtz: And was it different going through a rice paddy during dry season and rainy season?

Finnerty: Oh, yeah, it was – usually the water was up to below your knees, but in the rainy season a lot of times it covered up to your waist.

Kurtz: Did you have problems with Immersion Foot and – leeches?

Finnerty: Yeah, a lot of that, a lot of bad feet because of the constant exposure to being wet ‘cause you would – the typical week you’d go on patrol and by ten o’clock in the morning you’re soaking wet from perspiration ‘cause of the heat, and you’d go back, and that night you’d sleep in those – had to sleep in those same clothes. You’d get up the next morning and start allover again in the same clothes, and, you know, by about the fourth day everybody was pretty ripe, and then every fifth or sixth day – I think it was every sixth day they’d fly out clean clothes for you.

Kurtz: Did they fit? Were they your clothes or were they just out of a pool?

Finnerty: No, just out of a pool.

Kurtz: How often were you able to change socks?

- Finnerty: Well everybody – I shouldn't say everybody, but most of the guys had socks from home so they could rotate 'em.
- Kurtz: The military didn't provide you enough socks ---
- Finnerty: No ---
- Kurtz: --- in other words. What kind of headgear did you wear?
- Finnerty: Just a standard helmet.
- Kurtz: Standard helmets. What was your impression of the heat when you're on these operations? I mean, was it hot, real hot, or ---
- Finnerty: Yeah, it was hot. It was very hot. I'll say one thing that I was never in more better physical condition than I was then in my life. I think I was normally about 180 pounds, 190, and while I was there I think I was about 150.
- Kurtz: 150. What kind of food did you have, both in the field and when you were back at the base camp?
- Finnerty: C-Rations. Now, when you got to go – yeah, it was C- Rations, but when you got to go back to the base camp every few weeks you had – you could get a hot meal, but otherwise it was just C-Rations.
- Kurtz: C-Rations. Did you have a favorite and a least favorite in C-Rations?
- Finnerty: Yeah, the ham and lima beans were terrible.
- Kurtz: Yup.
- Finnerty: (laughs) I liked the pork.
- Kurtz: What about wieners and beans?
- Finnerty: Wieners and beans were not real popular either, (Kurtz laughs) but fortunately you found – there was always somebody that liked something and we'd always trade among ourselves. So it wasn't a problem. You got to be – after awhile you got to be a pretty good cook with C-Rations, heating them up, and melting the cheese and pouring it into the meat and ---
- Kurtz: Did you use any condiments like Tabasco Sauce or anything like that ---
- Finnerty: Ah, no, no we didn't. No, we did not. Couple – every so often we'd get a can of dehydrated shrimp and we'd make a little wire basket and try to cook 'em and so they'd get 'em hot, but they were the kind, you know, just added water to 'em. Once in a while we'd get dehydrated potatoes.

Kurtz: Did you get any beer or pop while you were in the field?

Finnerty: No, not in the field, but when you were back at the base camp you could trade with Vietnamese people. You could trade a case of C-Rations for a bottle of liquor.

Kurtz: Do you remember the name of the beer?

Finnerty: Budweiser.

Kurtz: Budweiser. So you didn't – you weren't trading for local beers like \_\_\_\_ (??) 33?

Finnerty: Ah, no. It was all our own American beer.

Kurtz: That they probably stole off the dock.

Finnerty: Right.

Kurtz: Did you have any In-Country R and R's?

Finnerty: Yeah, I went back to the – well, I got sick. I had a ---

**[Pause On Tape, Approx. 7 Seconds]**

Kurtz: --- about R and R and then you said something about getting sick.

Finnerty: Ah, yeah, I developed some stomach problems. So I was flown out to, back out to this USS Sanctuary, the ship I'd been on. At this point I'd not had an R and R. I was eligible for one, and I talked to an officer I knew on the ship, and he said "I'll take care of things" 'cause I was able to go back to my outfit. He said "Well, I'll enable you to stay here another four or five days for a little R and R here on the ship." So he fixed me up with that so I stayed there- I think I was there for about nine or ten days. So I might say I had a shipboard R and R.

KURTZ: Did this illness have anything to do with the water or the environmental conditions in Vietnam?

Finnerty: Yeah, they think it was – they never did figure out 100 per cent what it was. They said it could have been – part of it could have been nerves, could have been dysentery. It could have been a combination of things. So---

Kurtz: Okay. So then you went back to your unit ---

Finnerty: Yes.

Kurtz: I assume that you hop scotched back the same way that when you went to this unit.

Finnerty: Right.

Kurtz: And had anything changed in the period of time that you'd been gone, couple weeks or so?

Finnerty: Ah, no. Everything was the same. There was a couple new faces here and there. Some people had rotated out, but otherwise everything was the same.

Kurtz: Did you have any contact with the company commander?

Finnerty: No.

Kurtz: So it was pretty much run by the sergeants and the lieutenant once in awhile. Was that--

Finnerty: Yup, that's right.

Kurtz: Did anything change over the period of time you were in Vietnam as far as your duty or location?

Finnerty: Yeah, our location changed. Our company was responsible for three different areas. One place was called "The Bridge". One was called "The Road" and the other place was called "The Outpost." Those were – you rotated to those three places. Your whole squad at a time rotated to those three places, but then you just went on patrols out of those places. When you were on "The Road" then every morning they'd have to go along a certain section of the road they were responsible for with minesweepers, and then we'd for – you know to see if they'd come in and planted many mines in the roads during the night, and then we had to patrol, oh, about 150 yards either side of the road. So watching for them trying to get to the road to plant mines or different things. On night patrols you'd get into, down in the gully you might say, on the side of road watching for North Vietnamese that might come to plant booby traps or to mine the road.

Kurtz: Did you have many incidents at night where you made contact with the enemy?

Finnerty: No, we really didn't. And I'll tell you why. A lot of the sergeants that were in charge – if our patrol – we were assigned to go 200 yards off the road, and we'd, you know, "Snoop and Poop". And a lot of the sergeants, they didn't want to do that. So they'd just – we'd go out and get to the side of the road, get down in the gully and just spend the whole night there because they were afraid to go any further.

Kurtz: Okay. So you were just right on the road \_\_\_\_\_(??) highway \_\_\_\_\_(??)

Finnerty: Sometimes. Depending upon what sergeant you had, yeah.

- Kurtz: Were there any differences in casualties or the danger of staying right by the road or going 200 yards away from the road in your impression?
- Finnerty: There could have been because if somebody – nobody knew that you were there, that you weren't where they thought – you were not in the position you were supposed to be in – so when that happens there's always a possibility of something happening because you're not where you're supposed to be.
- Kurtz: As far as artillery and air strikes ---
- Finnerty: Right.
- Kurtz: And stuff like that.
- Finnerty: Yup.
- Kurtz: Did you travel much on the top of rice paddy dikes?
- Finnerty: No, we stayed off of those.
- Kurtz: What was the reason for that?
- Finnerty: They'd be booby trapped.
- Kurtz: Okay. Was the country that you were in basically rice, or were there other types of farming?
- Finnerty: Basically rice paddies. I was just a little south of Da Nang.
- Kurtz: How far away from the South China Sea were you?
- Finnerty: I don't know. I would guess it had to be – we were probably in the middle of the country, so, I don't know. Where is that? Country across – I know it's long and narrow.
- Kurtz: It's not very wide. So you're maybe – it's 40, 50 miles ---
- Finnerty: 40, 50 miles ---
- Kurtz: Yeah, so. Did you make any friendships in the time that you were in Vietnam that carried over?
- Finnerty: No. Well, I did have one friend. He got hurt. He was from Chicago, and he was sent back to the Great Lakes Naval, to the hospital at Great Lakes. My mother and dad went to visit him once. But any friendships that I've maintained no, there haven't been any.

- Kurtz: So when it came time, like November of '69, you could have gone home based on a regular tour. Is that accurate?
- Finnerty: Ah, no. I was supposed to have been able to go, but then at that time they needed corpsmen. They didn't have enough of them. They needed more of them. And I volunteered to stay a little longer.
- Kurtz: Did you get any consideration for getting out of the Navy any earlier by volunteering?
- Finnerty: No, I didn't. They said the "We might be able to," but nothin', any – I knew well enough that wouldn't hold any water.
- Kurtz: So you ended up being there another eleven months or so. Do you want to share with us how come you stayed that long?
- Finnerty: Well, I was a naïve young kid from Sheboygan, Wisconsin that really that I was doing something to stop the threat of Communism, and that turned out to be a big joke. I found out that the whole war was unnecessary, could have been over with in six months if they wanted to really fight it, but there were so many things that were so wrong. It was so political. For example, we were not supposed to go out on patrol or do anything aggressive on any Vietnamese holiday. Well, the Vietnamese themselves could have cared less if it was their holiday or not. It didn't stop them from doing anything, but nonetheless we had to sit still and observe their holiday, but they didn't even observe it themselves. So it was all political.
- Kurtz: What happened to you in Tet of '68? Was your unit involved?
- Finnerty: No.
- Kurtz: Did you have disillusionment with the war outcome after you left the military, or was it because of you experience dealing with the South Vietnamese people or the Marine Corps or whatever?
- Finnerty: It was just my own eye opening experiences that I had. The longer I was there the more things that happened and went on that you learned were asinine and were totally politically motivated. So you know what you thought you were really doing or trying to do didn't really matter.
- Kurtz: You were clearly on the front lines. What percentage of the Marines that you were familiar with were, like the division you were in, were doing what you were doing on a regular basis and others that were never out?



- Finnerty: Well, see we were so far out and so remote that I never saw what was going on in the rear, so to speak, 'cause we were out in the middle of nowhere, and that's where we stayed.
- Kurtz: So you never really got back like to Da Nang or to ---
- Finnerty: No.
- Kurtz: Some big base camp or ---
- Finnerty: We got back to a small base camp every few weeks, about every three weeks, where you could get a shave and a hot shower and a hot meal, but even in those base camps you slept in a tent on a cot and ---
- Kurtz: As opposed ---
- Finnerty: As opposed to sleeping on the ground, but that was as good as it got. You never saw what was going on in the real rear areas, so to speak.
- Kurtz: Did you have problems with snakes and insects and stuff like that?
- Finnerty: Not too much of a problem with snakes, but with insects and leeches, lot of leeches.
- Kurtz: Could you share how you got rid of leeches?
- Finnerty: With a match. Just burn 'em off, burn 'em off.
- Kurtz: Is there anything more about the in-country experience that you'd like to share with us?
- Finnerty: I guess, no, not anything really to share with you about an in-country experience, but just to, I guess, to reiterate that you found out later and you learned how unnecessary the whole thing was.
- Kurtz: Okay. I'd like to pursue that a little bit. In October of '70 – you record here shows you got out of the military.
- Finnerty: Yup.
- Kurtz: Could you recount those events that when you left the field, you know, how you out-processed out of Vietnam and then where you went when you left Vietnam?
- Finnerty: Yeah, when it was time for me to go home I went back to a nice base camp in the rear, so to speak. I was there for about three days and got nice clean clothes and hot showers every day and warm meal three times a day. That's when they offered me a promotion if I would stay a little longer.

Kurtz: In-country?

Finnerty: \_\_\_\_\_(??)

Kurtz: Okay.

Finnerty: And at that time I'd been there long enough. I said no.

Kurtz: Were you eligible to leave the service when you were ---

Finnerty: Yeah, they cut – for stayin' longer they let me – when I got – they told me when I got back to California that I could get out if I wanted to, and that's what I did.

Kurtz: So how did you get from Vietnam to California? On a ship?

Finnerty: No, same way on a commercial jet.

Kurtz: Out of Da Nang.

Finnerty: Out of Da Nang. Right.

Kurtz: And you flew to California, and what happened?

Finnerty: Actually, when I came home, we came home a different route. We stopped in Alaska ---

Kurtz: Okay.

Finnerty: And refueled in Alaska, and then we flew down to California.

Kurtz: Okay, and then were you given a pitch to re-enlist at that point or ---

Finnerty: Yeah, they hit me again. Offered me a promotion again if I would stay. They said I could select my duty station, any place I wanted to go if I would stay in the service, and I just had enough, and I said no.

Kurtz: What would have been the promotion to? What rank?

Finnerty: E- 5.

Kurtz: E-5, and would you have – then offering you the really same thing as a medic, E-5?

Finnerty: Right.

Kurtz: Is there a difference in the duty for E-5 medic than what you did before?

Finnerty: Well, it's like a lot of the other things, whether you're in the Navy or in the Marine Corps, the higher your rank the less you do.

Kurtz: It would have been a better deal.

Finnerty: Yes.

Kurtz: So when you got out of the military in October of '70, what happened to you?

Finnerty: I got out in California, and I stayed again with my aunt and uncle for awhile. I stayed there, I don't know about, I think I stayed over, almost three weeks. My parents were upset that I wasn't coming right home, but I stayed there and had a good time, and had some fun. Then I came back to Wisconsin.

Kurtz: Were you given any counseling or anything by the military, you know, when you left, or did they just throw you out ---

Finnerty: No ---

Kurtz: --- just threw out the door ---

Finnerty: Yup. Got the money I had coming 'cause I saved a lot of money when I was in Vietnam.

Kurtz: Doesn't sound like you could spend much where you were.

Finnerty: No place to spend it. So I saved a lot of money, and I got the money I had coming, and out the door I went, and bought myself a couple of new suits and some nice civilian clothes.

Kurtz: Did you buy a car?

Finnerty: Ah, no, I didn't.

Kurtz: That's kind of funny, you being as car salesman for a good part of your life.

Finnerty: I bought a car -- well, I did later on when I got back. Then I went to college and I bought a car ---

Kurtz: Did you have the GI Bill?

Finnerty: Yeah, I went to college under the GI Bill.

Kurtz: Was that Satisfactory? I mean, did you get ---

Finnerty: Oh, yeah, I was living good. I was living at home, collecting the GI Bill, plus collecting unemployment. So I, - back in those days I had, I don't know, about \$600 a month income living at home, and that was alright for a kid going to college.

Kurtz: A lot of money. When you – did you have any impressions about the war, because you got back when the war still was fairly hot back here. There was protesting. Did you have any feelings about that?

Finnerty: Yeah, I did. When I got back, when I went to college – at that point my family had moved to Racine, Wisconsin. So, I got back, and I lived at home. I enrolled at Parkside University. At that time Parkside had three campuses. There was one in Racine, one in Kenosha, and one half way between. They didn't have the big campus, on campus they have now. I went to the Racine campus which is right on the lake, beautiful campus, and right across the street from it was the local, the Racine VFW.

Kurtz: I'm going to stop the tape now.

**[End of Tape 1, Side B]**

Kurtz --- 2, with Pat Finnerty, March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2003, and we were talking the VFW post in Racine, Wisconsin when we had to change tapes. So, if Pat you could share with us your experience there.

Finnerty: Well, yeah, the VFW post in Racine was directly across the street from UW-Racine campus. So I thought, well, heck, I'm this close every day I should join the VFW So I went across the street one day and got one of their forms from 'em and I joined. Sent me a card, and during the -- post was open during the day, there weren't many people around at all, but it was open during the day and they had a library room there and I used to go over there to the VFW and go to that library room and study. Until after a couple of times the people would come through and ask who I was or what was I doing there or what's this kid doing here, and said, "Well, he's a Vietnam veteran, he's eligible to be here and they said "No, he's not eligible to be here." Vietnam wasn't a war, for God's sake, it was a police action" and after hearing that comment made very obvious to me or made loud enough so they were sure I heard it, I left and never went back over there. So and then there were other things. I was in a speech class and one day we had to give an impromptu speech and I stood up and I gave a talk about an experience that I had in Vietnam. Well, hell, I was at this time, I'm 21 years old I guess and I'm a freshman with a bunch of 18 year olds and they looked at me like I was from the moon and a Vietnam veteran, what do you mean you're proud of being a Vietnam veteran, for God's sakes. That was a terrible war and we never should have been there and everything at that point was still anti-war and being a Vietnam veteran, you were better off to just keep your mouth shut and not even tell anybody that you were one.

Kurtz: Did that translate just in your life other than in school and the Veteran's post? I

mean, did you have any feeling about being a veteran status as being a negative or --

Finnerty: Well, I didn't myself think of it as a negative thing, by any means. But it was certainly obvious to a lot of other people that it was a negative thing.

Kurtz: So did this ever change? You know, we're talking about here in the early '70s when you went to school. Did you see any change in this attitude?

Finnerty: No. No, I never did during -- I did not.

Kurtz: Were you ever tempted to go to the wall when it was dedicated or participate in any --

Finnerty: No.

Kurtz: -- veteran activities?

Finnerty: No, I did not. I had too many bad memories, not good ones.

Kurtz: When did you become active in Veteran's affairs again, if ever?

Finnerty: Well, I joined the VFW post here in Middleton in about 19 -- let's see, that would have been in the early '80s. I joined the post in Middleton. Myself and another guy we joined together and we went to a couple meetings and we got the same thing there that I'd experienced in Racine that well, from, and this came from World War II veterans and God love them, they paid their dues, but they also were of the opinion that Vietnam wasn't any war. It was a hell, it was a police action, and you could hear comments behind your back and just loud enough so they were sure that you heard them that these World War II guys didn't think Vietnam veterans deserved to belong to the VFW and they made it obvious. So after a couple of meetings, I never went back until about 1990 -- oh, let's see, must have been about '90 -- when did you join?

Kurtz: '95.

Finnerty: '95, so it must have been about 1991 or 2.

Kurtz: And was their greeting any different then?

Finnerty: Yeah, it was, because by that time -- by then the post had recruited more Vietnam veterans so there was more of them there. You had somebody else to share some time with and converse with and then by that time the World War II guys, I guess for the most part, started to accept it a little more than they had previously. There were still some that -- and there still are some to this day that still have an attitude that Vietnam wasn't a real war.

Kurtz: Is there anything else that you'd like to share with us about your experience in the military or in veteran affairs or society in general?

Finnerty: I think it's too bad that we had to have an experience like September 11th. to see people start flying the flag again.

Kurtz: Okay. Anything else, Pat?

Finnerty: No. That's it.

Kurtz: Thank you.

**[End of Interview]**