

MSgt. Barney Espinoza Jr. HMM-263 S-3 SNCOIC/part-time Sea Knight gunner Snapshots From Vietnam

Books I & II, American Heroes: Grunts, Pilots & "Docs"

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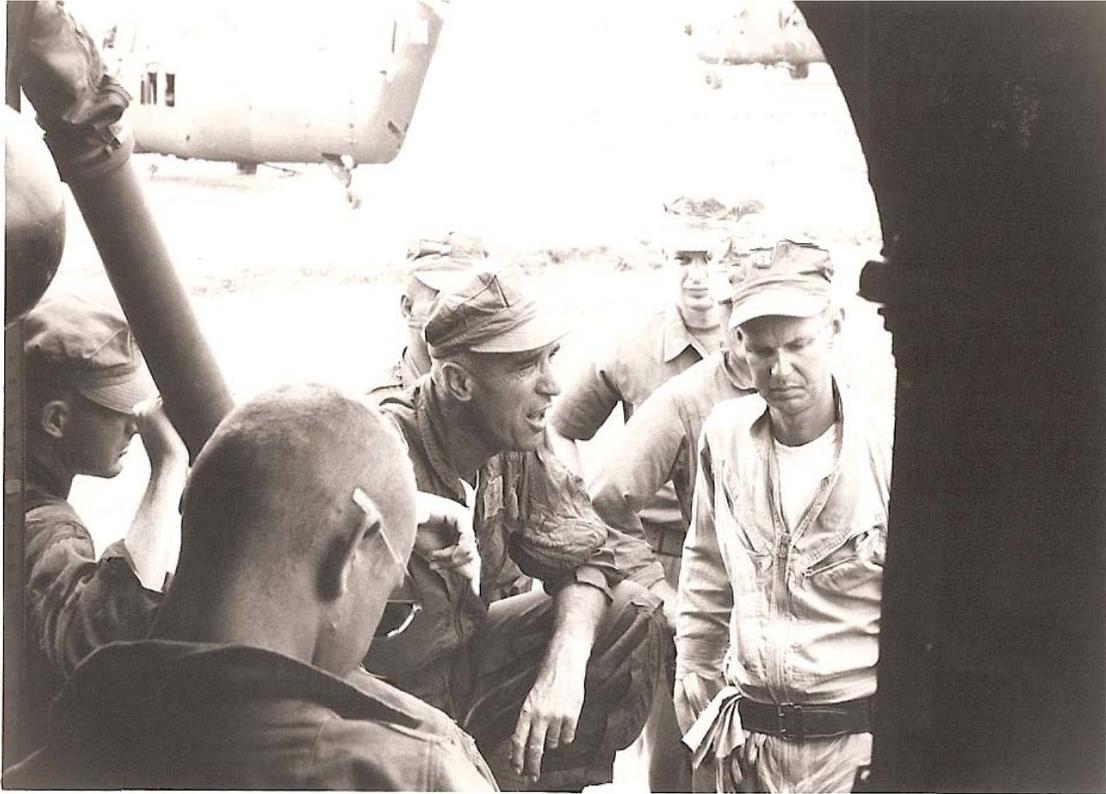
HMM-263 Peachbush officers posed for this photo sometime the early part of 1970. The photo was run by several pilots from that era and this is tentatively what they came up with: first row, L-R, 1stLt. Jim Wzorek, 1stLt. Bill Nystul (KIA during the evacuation of Saigon April 29, 1975), Maj. Jimmy Creech--XO and S-3, 1stLt. R.W. Watkins, behind Watkins is thought to be 1stLt. Kay Kazu Kimura, who was KIA at Hai Van Pass March 7, 1970, 1stLt. Barry Land, 1stLt. Bill Kempffer; 2nd row, standing, 1stLt. Marty Devasier, 1stLt. Rick Kunkel, USN Lt. Thomas S. Davis--flight surgeon, Maj. R.F. Machado--S-3 after Creech, Lt.Col. Walt Ledbetter--HMM-263 CO, 1stLt. Jessie B. Ruby, Unk, 1stLt. Erling Rolfson (with his hand on his cap), 1stLt. Dwight Reynolds (under .50 caliber),

Continued Below:

Maj. Pete E. Benet--HMM-263 XO after Creech, 1st.Lt. Bryan O'Neal, 1stLt. Edward N. Gephart (blue cap), 1stLt. Al Boyce, 1stLt. Paul B. Sniffin, 1stLt. Rick Glenzer (looking over Sniffin's right shoulder), 1stLt. Bobby Miller, 1stLt. Paul Parker (at parade rest, Ledbetter's copilot on crew chief PFC Mike Clausen's MOH mission); back row, standing, 1stLt. Pete Mazurak, Capt. Don Frost, 1stLt. Jim O'Brien, 1stLt. Richard W. Farkas (in front of aircraft window), 1stLt. Mike Holland (blue cap), 1stLt. Dave Nutter, 1stLt. Roy Delotelle, Unk. (Photo by SSgt. Barney Espinoza Jr., MSgt., USMC Ret., HMM-263 S-3 SNCOIC/part-time Sea Knight gunner)



A wounded Marine is carried aboard an HMM-263 Peachbush medevac Sea Knight by his two fellow Marines. A pressure bandage appears to be secured to his left ankle area. Note the Marines toting the injured man are wearing helmets and flak jackets in the bush as per 1st Marine Division orders. The crew chief or, perhaps a "Flyin' Doc" (Navy Corpsman), waits at the back ramp for the injured Marine to be brought aboard. The Sea Knight will carry the casualty to 1st Medical Battalion Hospital at Da Nang where he will be given excellent medical care at the well staffed trauma center. (Photo by SSgt. Barney Espinoza Jr., MSgt., USMC Ret., HMM-263 S-3 SNCOIC/part-time Sea Knight gunner)



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HMM-364 Purple Fox CO Lt.Col. Dan Summerville briefs his pilots at Dong Ha during *Operation Hastings* in 1966. Pilot in light flight suit, cap, to the CO's left front is Capt. C.D. Riordan. "Our logo was a purple character of a laughing fox in a white circle with our motto: Give A Shit. We originated it and established one hell of a war record. The current Purple Fox squadron doesn't display the "Give A Shit" logo. I guess it's too politically incorrect, the enemy might object," noted Espinoza. During *Operation Hastings*, The Purple Fox flew the UH-34 Seahorse. "Our old groups swear by the UH-34. It was a real rugged bird. We used to bring them in with the whole main strut and wheel missing or the rear wheel broken. It would be landed on top of a small utility flat bed trailer with sandbags so the bird could land on top without damage, but we saved it. (Photo by SSgt. Barney Espinoza Jr., MSgt., USMC Ret., HMM-263 S-3 SNCOIC/ part-time Sea Knight gunner)



Sandbags protect the hooches the pilots and crewmen call home in between flights out of Marble Mountain Air Facility in Da Nang in December 1969. (Photo by SSgt. Barney Espinoza Jr., MSgt., USMC Ret., HMM-263 S-3 SNCOIC/part-time Sea Knight gunner)



Peachbush HMM-263 crew chief Cpl. Tom "Nifty" Nash, 20, of Philadelphia, PA shows some ingenuity to heat his scrambled eggs C-rations by the exhaust of his Sea Knight's Auxiliary Power Plant, a small turbine engine that supplies electric and hydraulic power to the aircraft and is used to supply the power to start the two main turbines. Two holes are punched in the can otherwise the heated can would explode. Nash is using a spreader bar used to hold the cargo ramps at the correct distance when loading cargo. Beats the hell out of the way we grunts heated our meals...with an eye-stinging lit heat tab provided in the C-ration box. (Photo by SSgt. Barney Espinoza Jr., MSgt., USMC Ret., HMM-263 S-3 SNCOIC/part-time Sea Knight gunner)



Posing outside a UH-34 Seahorse during a C-rations break at Dong Hong awaiting their next assignment as part of *Operation Hastings* in 1966 are, L-R, Cpl. Frank Lopez, crew chief; Sgt. Barney Espinoza, gunner; and Cpl. Herb W. Linson, crew chief. (Photo by SSgt. Barney Espinoza Jr., MSgt., USMC Ret., HMM-263 S-3 SNCOIC/part-time Sea Knight gunner)



The U.S. Navy Hospital Ship *Sanctuary* looms ahead as Espinoza leans out his gunner's window on the port side of the HMM-263 Sea Knight to snap this

classic photo. The Sea Knight delivers a medevac to the landing pad of the ship sometime in 1970. The *USS Sanctuary* and *USS Repose* served as offshore trauma hospitals during the Vietnam War. (Photo by SSgt. Barney Espinoza Jr., MSgt., USMC Ret., HMM-263 S-3 SNCOIC/part-time Sea Knight gunner)



A Recon team, possibly 1st Force Recon, boards a Sea Knight for an insert mission at Marble Mountain Air Facility. At least three of the men are wearing floppy bush hats denoting a Recon team. (Photo by SSgt. Barney Espinoza Jr., MSgt., USMC Ret., HMM-263 S-3 SNCOIC/part-time Sea Knight gunner)



Same Recon team as previous photo settles in for their ride to their insertion point. The Marine at left with head band has broken up the straight lines of his M-16 rifle with green tape and holds two M-16 magazines in his left gloved hand. (Photo by SSgt. Barney Espinoza Jr., MSgt., USMC Ret., HMM-263 S-3 SNCOIC/part-time Sea Knight gunner)



An HMM-263 Sea Knight picks up a Marine casualty at this remote Marine position in March 1970, according to Espinoza. Note the heavily sandbagged positions with slit openings to fire out of on high ground. The Marines in the perimeter seem intent on checking out either the men coming off the bird or one of their comrades being medevacked...or both. (Photo by SSgt. Barney Espinoza Jr., MSgt., USMC Ret., HMM-263 S-3 SNCOIC/part-time Sea Knight gunner)



A Marine squad loads into an HMM-263 Peachbush Sea Knight out in the boonies. SSgt. Espinoza snapped these photos out his gunner's window as his helicopter is most likely filling up with Marines as well. (Photo by SSgt. Barney Espinoza Jr., MSgt., USMC Ret., HMM-263 S-3 SNCOIC/part-time Sea Knight gunner)



HMM-263 Peachbush pilots waiting on standby for orders to launch out on a troop lift at LZ Baldy. They are, L-R, 1stLt.s Skip Epperly, John Muir, Bill Gresslin and Jerry Martin, standing with camera around his neck. (Photo by SSgt. Barney Espinoza Jr., MSgt., USMC Ret., HMM-263 S-3 SNCOIC/part-time Sea Knight gunner)



SSgt. Espinoza poses behind his lethal .50 caliber machine gun aboard an HMM-263 Peachbush Sea Knight in 1970. For emergencies he also has a .45 caliber pistol on his right hip. an (Photo by SSgt. Barney Espinoza Jr., MSgt., USMC Ret., HMM-263 S-3 SNCOIC/part-time Sea Knight gunner)

MSgt. Barney Espinoza Jr.'s Biography

I was born April 18,1939, and attended public schools in Austin, Texas. I am about 4th generation Texan. My earliest generation might have been Texans, but it was probably during the time when Texas was a part of Mexico. I, however, don't recognize or claim any connection to Mexico. I have served America in the defense of our American flag and I have no loyalty to any other country.

In 1955, just before my 16th birthday, I joined the Texas National Guard. After my first 2 week summer training at Ft. Hood, Texas, I volunteered to go on active duty for the purpose of attending the regular Army Basic Training at Camp Chaffee, Arkansas, then returned to my home unit again. I successfully completed the basic training and although it was an eye-opener, I enjoyed the experience.

In 1956 after the annual 2 weeks of training at Ft. Hood, I again volunteered to go on active duty for advance training, at Ft. (the designation had changed from Camp to Ft.) Hood, for 8 weeks, and upon completion, I returned home again.

After 2 years, some of my buddies had joined the Marine Corps Reserve here in Austin, so they encouraged me to join telling me about the Marines, which sounded very appealing to me. I decided to join, but naively thought that I could just transfer from the National Guard to the Marine Reserve. The Marines were very interested in enlisting me and were amazed that I had 2 years of service at age 17, which they had no problem with, but they did tell me they would enlist me if I could bring them some discharge documentation from the National Guard. Equally naively, I just approached the National Guard Battalion Sergeant Major and asked him for the discharge.

In those days there was a Selective Service obligation of 8 years, so the Sergeant Major asked me how many years my contract was for and I responded it was for 8 years, to which he followed by asking me how many years I had served and I responded it was 2 years. The Sergeant Major instructed me to come back in 6 years.

I was not to be discouraged, so I returned to the Marine Reserve active duty staff and they quickly got involved and within a month I had my discharge from the National Guard. The Marines enlisted me in the reserve in 1957 and I was assigned to a rifle company. I particularly enjoyed the 2 weeks for training each year at Camp Pendleton, California for 2 years. After 2 years and upon graduating from Wm. B. Travis High School in Austin, I departed for Marine boot camp in San Diego, California.

I arrived at boot camp in 1959 and already had a "hash mark" due to my service and a PFC to boot. Of course I was not allowed to wear my rank or hash mark until graduation.

I was confident that I wouldn't have any problems in boot camp, after all, I had already gone through the Army's basic. I expected the Marine training would be tougher, but not a problem...I was shocked! When the receiving DIs started punching, kicking, and cussing at us individually (something the Army never did), I became a believer.

I didn't have a problem in any part of boot camp and was even top shooter on the range and was rewarded by having my senior Drill Instructor carry my marching pack on our hike back to the base. The range was located a few miles north of San Diego. It was a tent base called Camp Matthews.

After graduation from recruit training, I remained at Camp Pendleton and assigned to a rifle company for training, which I enjoyed, but I was anxious to go to an overseas assignment, but there was no hope in the near future.

Once while we were in the field working with helicopters during a waiting period when the aircraft shut down and we were able to mingle with the crew, I was impressed with these knowledgeable crew members, who were so approachable. After talking to them, I learned I could apply for training in aviation, so I decided to do so.

After a few months and some tests, I was accepted to the Aviation Familiarization Course, at Naval Air Station Memphis, Tennessee. I reported to the Marine Aviation Detachment there in early 1960, and after many more tests, I made the cut for the Aviation Operations and Engineering Course.

Upon graduation from the school, I was assigned to VMCJ-3, an aerial photo and electronic reconnaissance, squadron, Marine Corps Air Station, El Toro, California, arriving there in the summer of 1960.

I thoroughly enjoyed my duties in the aviation department (S-3), it was the hub for everything the squadron was involved in and I was in the middle of it all and had my first and life-lasting role models of my life. I happily still keep in contact with some of them. Some of these role models had glorious careers and retired as generals, from Brigadiers to 3 stars and I feel very lucky that I had them to learn from.

It was a new adventure for me which I enjoyed very much since the squadron was always training at various geographical locations around the country, and aboard ships, in preparation as a cadre for rotation to Japan.

In 1962, the squadron arrived in Iwakuni, Japan where we became VMCJ-1. It was my first experience in an overseas assignment and I loved it. We continued to deploy, in sections, to other places in Japan, Okinawa, South Korea, Philippines, Taiwan and aboard aircraft carriers. We usually deployed for a month at a time.

At the end of our 13-month assignment, and in the last year of my initial 4 year enlistment, I decided that I had enjoyed my 13 month tour, and that if I left the Corps then, I would probably never get to do it again, so I re-enlisted for 6 more years.

I returned to the United States and was assigned to the Marine Helicopter Base, Santa Ana, California, in late 1963 where I worked in the Base Operations department, in the Flight Clearance section. It was shift work, and due to a shortage of people, we were working 24 hours on and 24 hours off which was not a morale booster but I endured.

In the summer of 1965 the entire Marine Air Group-36 was embarked on the *USS Princeton*, a helo carrier at Long Beach, California, and 20 days later we were landed in a remote, uninhabited place called Ky Ha, South Vietnam. There was absolutely no hint of habitation anywhere. We were located about 2 miles north of what later became Chu Lai.

For many months, our living conditions were extremely primitive--little shelter from the torrential rains with just pup tents, no showers for awhile, no opportunity to replace our ripped and torn clothes, no washing facilities for clothes, no hot food, only C-Rations out of a steel can, mostly without heating and even our drinking water was rationed. Fortunately, as the months went by, our living conditions improved.

Initially, I was assigned to many work details, I was a sergeant by this time, but everyone worked laying steel matting two 900x600 foot parking aprons for the helos and connecting taxiways, by hand. Unloading supplies from merchant ships, digging bunkers, trenches, defensive positions, laying barbed wire, including assignment to the Provisional Rifle Company.

After a few months, in 1965, I was assigned as Operations Chief for the S-3, in HMM-364, The Purple Foxes, and I immediately volunteered to fly as a gunner in the UH-34D, Sikorsky. Anyone foolish enough to volunteer to fly as a gunner, is very welcomed and I was thrilled to be where the action was. I still had my responsibilities in the S-3, so it left little other time for me and we worked just about

24/7. I flew a few hundred missions until it was time for the squadron to break-up and return to the States to receive the new CH-46Ds Sea Knights by Boeing. I returned to the United States after serving over 13 months in Vietnam.

I arrived at the Marine Air Base, Beaufort, South Carolina in late 1966, assigned to VMFA-312, an F4 Phantoms squadron, as Operations Chief, I was now a staff sergeant.

After one year, I received orders to MCAS Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii, for 3 years. I was married by then, with two young children and I was happy with the assignment, but I let it be known that I would like to go back to Vietnam, but for assignment to helicopters. I was assigned to the Airfield Operations department, which was a good assignment involving the management of the airport.

In late 1969 I received orders to return to Vietnam cutting my normally 3 year assignment to about 20 months. I was lucky in that I was able to request surface transportation and it was granted, so we sailed on the Matson liner, the SS *Lauralene*, for a nice cruise of 5 days and 5 nights to San Francisco, California. We flew home to Austin where my family would remain until I returned from Vietnam.

After a short leave, I reported to Travis AFB, California for additional transportation to Vietnam. I arrived in Vietnam in December 1969, and since I had made prior arrangement, I was assigned to the Marine helicopter squadron, HMM-263, as Operations Chief, at the Marine's Marble Mountain Air Facility.

I immediately volunteered to fly as a gunner in the CH46D, which carries a crew of two pilots, one crew chief and two gunners manning .50 caliber machine guns.

The living conditions had greatly improved, but the work was almost 24/7, especially for me as I flew between 5 and 7 days a week, and was gone from my office for about 9 to 13 hours each day and at least two nights a week for night medevacs, the mission which is most dreaded although we flew medevacs numerous times per day, but still had hours of work waiting for me in the S-3 office. Sometimes my nights were long, too, and I would not bother walking to my hootch so I would just lay on the floor next to my desk and get some sleep before having to launch again about 5 a.m. I had no real time off and there was no place to go or to buy much except a few beers.

Out of the 13 hours of my flying day, we actually flew about 5-9 hours, which included 25 take-offs and landings or more. The mission consisted of landing Marines, Vietnamese or South Korean troops in areas where the enemy was found or extracting them from those areas, resupplying them, carrying out the dead and wounded, inserting Marine Recon teams into mountainous areas. Sometimes we had to extract people from very small landing zones surrounded by trees over 125 feet tall, which could barely accommodate a helicopter with blades about 80 feet in diameter. When it was at night, and everyone in the world is shooting at the helo, it could be the worst nightmare come true and whenever we had medevac duty, we might do it ten times a night.

We encountered a lot of enemy fire during some missions and sometimes we would have to return to base with a damaged bird and switch to another in order to continue the mission.

After 12 months, I departed Vietnam for my last time on December 7, 1970. I had wanted to go to Vietnam the first time, and the second time, but now I was

exhausted, and fed up with the new Rules of Engagement which had the effect of restricting our efforts of ever winning that war. I hated the thought of returning to that war but I would have if I had to. I was willing to go to any war anywhere, but I was just tired of that one. Fortunately for me, I didn't have to go again.

By the time I finished my second tour of flying as a gunner, I had accrued over 700 combat missions, and earned 35 Air Medals, 4 Single Mission Air Medals, the Navy Commendation Medal with Combat "V", the Marine Combat Action Ribbon, Navy Unit Commendation, Marine Unit Commendation, Presidential Unit Commendation, 2 Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry, the Vietnam Service Medal with stars for 7 offensive periods of the war, and a sprinkling of other awards, including a Rescue Award from the Boeing Company.

I reported to the Marine Air Station, New River, North Carolina in January 1971, and was assigned as Operations Chief for Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron, HMH-461, a "heavy hauler," CH-53 helicopter squadron. As soon as I arrived at New River, I wanted to see about deploying with the Marine Expeditionary Forces to the Mediterranean. I had always wanted to go to Europe, and now I had a chance. At this point in my career, I had spent years in the Far East, Southeast Asia and as far as Australia, many of the oceans and South Pacific, but had not been to Europe and I wanted to go there.

I was not allowed to transfer until I had a year in the unit, but by the end of the year, I was transferred to HMM-261 which was preparing to deploy. In February of 1972, the squadron embarked aboard the *USS Guadalcanal* at Morehead City, North Carolina, and we sailed.

After about a month, our first stop was in Rota, Spain for a few days. Our homeport was Athens Greece, where we would spend a few days periodically, and then sail for some days conducting training operations with the infantry aboard our Task Force ships for a few days, then return to a port, either in Southern France, Italy, Turkey, Athens and other great places. I thoroughly enjoyed the 6 month cruise. I was promoted to Gunny and returned to our home base in North Carolina.

Shortly after arriving back from the cruise, I was called by the Group Headquarters and informed I had orders to Okinawa, which I couldn't understand because a Marine is usually allowed 2 years between overseas assignments and I had not had my 2 years yet since I had spent the last 6 months in the Med.

I was quickly told that this assignment was different. It was to be accompanied, with dependents, something I had not heard of but it had not been the policy of the Marine Corps until recently. I was happy with that, and looked forward to the assignment in Okinawa, a place I had been to multiple times.

We arrived in Okinawa late in 1972, and I was assigned as the Airfield Operations Chief, again involving the coordination, and management of airfield operations..

My kids were enrolled in Department of Defense schools and we took advantage of space available flights to go to South Korea, Taiwan, Japan, the Philippines and Thailand.

In our last "farewell" trip in late April 1975, we landed in Bangkok, Thailand and were quickly informed that we would not be allowed to fly space available unless we were on official business because North Vietnam had just invaded South

Vietnam. The Thai borders were restricted, their airlines were slowed so that there was a 2 or 3 week waiting list. I immediately decided as to what would be required for me to be on an official status.

My story would be that I was stationed at Subic Bay in the Philippines. After 10 days of relaxation, I presented my leave orders at the Air Force Base in Utapao, 100 miles from Bangkok.

The local people working for the Air Force were totally confused with my Marine orders, jargon and acronyms. I played on that and when they questioned that the orders were issued in Okinawa, I told them I was part of the Marine detachment aboard the *USS Okinawa* and my home port was in Subic. They bought that, but then I added that my family, who were listed on the leave orders, were living in Subic Bay also and they had to get home. We were all issued boarding passes for the next flight from Utapao to Manila. Once in Manila, Clark Air Force Base, I knew there would be no problem for us to get a flight to Okinawa, which we did.

We left Okinawa in September 1975 and was next assigned to the Marine Air Group 37, as the Group Operations Chief, which had owned the C-130s squadron. The unit was heavily involved in supporting other jet squadrons moving across the Pacific to Japan, with fueling and support services for all personnel and aircraft along the way. I coordinated and worked on obtaining clearances for certain areas of air space. We island hopped, stopping for days in Hawaii, Wake, Guam, Japan and Okinawa. The round trips took about 30 days. I was promoted to master sergeant.

At the end of the year I received orders for assignment, once again, to Kaneohe Marine Base. I reported there in September 1976, as the Marine Air Group 24 Operations Chief. The Group had a number of squadrons, both fixed winged and helos, It was a very pleasant assignment and my kids who were now in junior high and high school reconnected with their old friends from elementary years when we had previously been there. My daughter graduated there in 1978.

In my last year I somehow found that I was going to be on the promotion list for master gunnery sergeant, my last promotion, however, it is the Marine policy that if I were to accept the promotion, I would have to commit myself to 2 more years. At this point in my career, I felt I had been to all the geographical locations, held all levels of responsibility, and was already beginning to repeat bases and duties. Although I still loved and enjoyed the Marine Corps, I felt that it would be a good time to retire because I had already earned a Bachelor of Professional Aeronautics (aviation management degree), had started work on post graduate studies and intended to start a new civilian career, although at the time I didn't know what. I had about 25 years of service and I was 40 years old, so I felt the need to get started on that second career. I retired in September 1979 and was honored with a wonderful parade and ceremony.

My family and I, minus my daughter who chose to stay among her friends in Hawaii, returned to Austin, Texas where we had bought a house. I found employment with the State Comptroller of Public Accounts, headed by a very powerful, consummate politician, who later would become Lieutenant Governor under G. W. Bush.

I worked as head of various sections and departments and had a good relationship with my boss for a number of years. I became his liaison to all the courts in Texas, which evolved into a great experience and knowledge of the court system, all the agencies involved and the laws which relate to the State Comptroller.

Shortly before my boss became Lieutenant Governor, I was informed that a small city just south of Austin was seeking a judge to help establish a municipal court. I had no experience in court procedures, but I was experienced in court administration and agencies involved and especially laws pertaining to their collection of monies and their disbursement. I was appointed by the city council, mayor and city manager as their Municipal Judge in 1987. Along with two other judges, we established the court, and I attended the training school for municipal judges to prepare me for my new duties.

Within a year of my appointment, as a Municipal Judge, I was notified by a judge that his city, on the northern outskirts of Austin, was losing one of their five judges and they were seeking a replacement. It was a larger city, so I decided to apply for the position there. I was hired on the spot and went to work.

For a few months I worked part time in the original city and full time in the new one until I decided it was too much of a load so I resigned from the original one and continued with the new city.

After a few years, I decided that I preferred to continue working on my state retirement so I again worked for the state, but continued as a weekend, part time, Judge. After a few years of that, I finally retired from the judge's position and continued to work for the state until I was able to retire for a second time by the time I was 58.

My retirement has been very relaxing. My wife (of 16 years) and I enjoy traveling within the continent, to Hawaii where my son and daughter live, and to Europe. I also enjoy working on my two acres in a small community just a few miles from my native Austin.

I have also participated in filming of various movies, which are frequently filmed around the Austin area. I have enjoyed the work, but I can select which ones I want to participate in, mostly some rugged cop shooting role, the *The Alamo* (2003), doing the battle scenes at the Alamo and the San Jacinto scenes, as an FBI agent, as a detective, as a mobster, as an academic, etc.

I have traveled a long road but it has been totally satisfying to me. I have had my adventures--the dangers, the bonding with wonderful Marine friends, varied experiences and various levels of responsibility. I have accomplished many things which, had it not been for the confidence I developed in the Marine Corps, I might not have even attempted to do some things, I give all credit to the Marine Corps for all the successes in my life.