

**David Charles Bennett  
Narrator**

**Rebekah Havens  
Elaina Clickman  
Interviewers**

**Interviewed on June 5, 2009  
Richmond Springs Central School**

David C. Bennett     DB  
Rebekah Havens     RH  
Elaina Clickman     EC

**RH:** This interview is being conducted here at Richmond Springs Central school. Our interviewee is Mr. David Bennett, his branch of service was the United States Marine Corps. He entered the service on March 15, 1965 and was discharged on March 12, 1969. Today's date is June 5, 2009 and the time is about 9:15. The interviewers are Elaina Clickman and Rebekah Havens.

**EC:** What is your full name?

**DB:** David Charles Bennett

**RH:** When were you born?

**DB:** March 13, 1948

**RH:** And where were you born?

**DB:** I was born in Norwood, Massachusetts.

**RH:** What was your pre-war education?

**DB:** I left high school in my Junior year.

**RH:** What was your pre-war occupation?

**DB:** I was a student.

**RH:** What made you decide to enter the service?

**DB:** War in the schools. [Unclear] [Laughs]

**RH:** What do you remember most about entering?

**DB:** Boot Camp. Yes, and yellow footprints that you had to stand on, with the drill instructor hollering things that I couldn't even understand. Very confusing.

**RH:** Now you were in the Marine Corps, why did you choose that branch?

**DB:** I had always wanted to be in the Marine Corps, ever since I was seven or eight years old. To me it was the best military out of all of them. And I wanted to be in the best.

**RH:** Were you satisfied with that choice?

**DB:** Oh, yes. To this day

**RH:** Where was your basic training located?

**DB:** The Marine Corps Recruiting Depot in San Diego, California.

**RH:** How was this experience for you?

**DB:** [Laughs] It was terrifying at times. But after it was all over, I had a new sense of self pride, that I had actually accomplished something and stuck to it. And it gave me a new identity and a new feeling.

**RH:** What do you remember about basic training and life before the war?

**DB:** I . . . [shakes head]

**RH:** What do you remember about basic training and life before the war?

**DB:** Mostly the physical training, the obstacle courses and stuff like that. And [unclear] drills.

**RH:** Was your training the same or similar to what you actually did?

**DB:** What I thought it would be?

**RH:** Well, what you actually did in the service. Actual duties.

**DB:** Ah, the training I got, well I went to an aviation school, but boot camp doesn't prepare you for that. Infantry training regiment, every marine gets that, because number one you are a rifleman, no matter what your job is. Whether you are in the air-wing, drive a truck, cook, whatever, the first thing you learn is how to be an infantryman.

**RH:** You wrote down that your duties included helicopter mechanics, crew chief and rifleman. Which was the worst job?

**DB:** I didn't find any of them to be the worst. I used to enjoy flying. Now I'm scared of heights. I knew as a Marine, I would always be a rifleman, no matter what happened. If the helicopter was shot down, I was automatically a rifleman.

**RH:** What was it like in the helicopter?

**DB:** Noisy. It vibrated a lot, but I felt comfortable with that, because you knew that the aircraft, number one, was still flying and I had confidence in the pilots. But the helicopter vibrated a lot depending on what maneuvers you had to make, or to get into certain places, or whatever. Yeah, but it was pretty noisy, even with the helmet on. But it's, like I say, if I fly a commercial airline now, I have to sit in the back to feel it. Otherwise, if it's smooth and everything, it bothers me, I have to look out the windows.

**RH:** What battles did you take part in?

**DB:** Ah, Vietnam was a battle. I flew 343 combat missions and it depended on where you went. Some days you got shot at and some days, sometimes weeks on end and you never take fire, then all of a sudden you take fire everywhere you went. So each time I landed, it could have been a battle. Each time I took off it could have been a battle. It wasn't one set battle for us, in helicopters. It was Vietnam itself.

**RH:** What was it like on foreign land?

**DB:** It was different. The country had a different smell, it was humid all the time. Monsoon season it rained every day, storm clouds. Where I was at, up in [unclear], I recall we didn't get to interact with people. The only time I could interact with the people was if we landed in a field or we had workers who came on base to do certain chores, like washer-women, [unclear], things like that. And that was the closest I got to them, but otherwise I didn't spend much time on the ground. If I did, I was on base. Either working on the helicopter or they gave us time-off or stuff like that. I didn't interact with the people, I was there in the Marines.

**RH:** What kind of equipment did you use while in battle?

**DB:** Well, the basic weapon on the helicopter was an M-16 machine gun. The stuff we used to fix it were just basic hand tools. If I had to go out on ambush patrols or whatever, I carried an M-14 rifle and as a crewman, I also carried a 48 pistol. But my basic weapon for a while, for every Marine, was a rifle, but on the helicopters we carried two M-16 machine guns, one for myself and one for the gunner.

**RH:** Was the equipment you used better than that of the enemy?

**DB:** Well, in some cases. . .they didn't have helicopters, they didn't bring helicopters in, so. I don't know, the weapons they used were as good as ours and in some cases they were better. But I thought that the equipment we were supplied with was top-notch. I mean aircrews wore body armor, which was like a breastplate that covered down to your stomach and up to your neck and your sides were covered from back and front. And you could get hit in that with bullets, and the bullets would barely penetrate. It was very heavy, it was about that thick [motions about 2 inches, with thumb and forefinger]. Made of fiberglass and stuff. But that was pretty good stuff to have.

**RH:** Were you wounded in any of the missions?

**DB:** No. No, I was not.

**RH:** Were there a lot of people sent on these missions?

**DB:** Pardon?

**RH:** Were there a lot of people sent on these missions?

**DB:** Usually, we flew in two plane sections. We had the lead helicopter which would do most of the work, almost all of the work. And the other helicopter that flew with you was there in case you got shot down, or the zone that you were going in to. . .if you were going in for medevac's, if it had more medevac's than you could carry the other helicopter could come in behind you. If we had to resupply a place where there was a battle going on, or people were taking a lot of stuff to resupply, the other helicopter would be with you, But normally that's the way we flew. Two plane sections, or four plane, and then there was two sections where one section would do one mission and the other go off on another mission. But mostly that was the way we flew.

**RH:** You wrote that when you were first under fire you were scared when it was over. Did these feelings happen every time, or did you eventually get used to it?

**DB:** I was scared every time I went out. But there were times when you knew exactly where you were going. If the pilot had told you, like at night time, the only time we went out at night was if it was an emergency medevac. And we knew then, that, wherever we were going, it had already taken fire. So you were prepared for that. We flew with our armor on all the time, except if we were going over the ocean, then we could take it off and put [unclear] on. But yeah, I was scared, but at the age I was, I didn't really let it do anything to me. I used to do a lot of dumb things, like sit in the door of the helicopter and the pilot would turn it sideways, and I would just be looking at the ground, no safety restraint or anything on. But I was 20 years old, ten feet tall and bullet proof. Nothing bothered me.

**RH:** Had you gone in the service expecting this?

**DB:** When I went in in 1965, Americans were still in an advisory role, and then about half way through boot camp was when Marines were landed in Da Nang. Right then, we knew that most of us would be there. We would end up, you know. So when I joined, when my mother and father signed the papers, it was just advisory personnel. If there had been a war then, I don't think my mother would have signed the papers. She would not have granted me permission to go.

**RH:** Did you receive any medals or honors?

**DB:** Seventeen air medals, twenty mission medals, combat aircrew wings, nothing really out of the ordinary. Nothing [unclear], whatever, never wounded, so.

**RH:** How did you keep in touch with those at home?

**DB:** By letters. I wrote as much as I could, but at that time I wasn't really a letter writer, and my mother knew that. I was more concerned about my mother than anybody. Because if something did happen, they would send an officer to where she lived, inform her that something had happened and she would pass out or have a heart attack by the time they got to the door. And I didn't want that.

**RH:** What was the food like?

**DB:** Most of the time, since I was in the air-wing, we had a mess hall. The food was alright, it was not bad. Other than that, we ate sea rations out of cans. Sometimes the sea rations were better than the stuff in the mess hall. So I always kept a case of sea rations in my helicopter just in case we were out in the boonies, or somewhere like that, you could always have something while you were flying.

**RH:** Was it hard to sleep at night?

**DB:** Ah, well, some nights yeah. [Laughs]. All in all, it was twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. We were close to the flight line, so we could hear helicopters taking off and this and that. But after you had been on an operation for about seventy-two hours, you don't have any choice to sleep, during that time you would grab sleep when you could grab it. I used to be able to stand at an angle, while my gunner was fueling my helicopter, fold my arms, lean, and go to sleep for as long as it took to fuel the helicopter. That was about [laughs]

**RH:** What was your most memorable experience with flying?

**DB:** Getting shot at the first time. Scared the hell out of me. They shot at us with a fifty-caliber machine gun and the traces looked like beer cans that were on fire. And I thought, wow, that's pretty neat, until a couple of them hit the helicopter and I realized I think they are shooting at us. But yeah, that scared the hell out of me.

**RH:** What person do you remember the most from [unclear] and why?

**DB:** Captain, I don't remember his name, but we used to call him rootin-tootin-hootin. This guy strapped the helicopter on when he got in there, whenever I flew with him I knew, no matter what maneuver he did, no problem. A couple of pilots scared me, just the way they flew. But this guy could out fly anybody I had ever seen, and I had experience flying before I got to Vietnam. I had a lot of flight time when I was in the States. Yeah, the Captain.

**RH:** Was everyday life the same?

**DB:** No, not really. When we were doing missions, every mission was different. I mean, you do a resupply, or whatever, that part about it is the same. But, if you are doing it right on the ground, that's one thing, after going out on the mountain tops, putting one landing gear tire on a rock, and the other one is out hanging in the breeze, and you kick all your stuff, all your sea rations and everything out the door, and then you fall off the mountain, that's pretty scary. But that was the only way we could pick up enough speed and fly.

**RH:** How did you feel about the war during your time of service?

**DB:** I thought we were justified, but I think everybody that has been in combat finally realizes that you are there for the guy next to you. I was there because the Marines on the ground needed the support that I could give them—medevac's, resupply, bringing them water, ammo, whatever—That's why I was there. That was my duty, that's what I was trained to do. What the politicians and the political aspects of it, I had not a clue. I didn't know.

**RH:** Was there anything unusual about any of your duties?

**DB:** [Laughs] yeah, yeah. One mission I did, the Marine Corps' birthday is November tenth. On November tenth, the mission we had that day was to take birthday cakes to the grunts out in the hills. And the pilots and I laughed about it. And I told the pilots this is one hell of a deal, something happens, they screw up, they write home to our mothers: your son was killed while delivering birthday cakes. You know, like a bakery truck. But yeah, that was a very unusual mission.

**RH:** What were your opinions about the war after you left?

**DB:** Well, when they pulled out everybody, I wasn't in favor of it, I wasn't in favor of turning tail and running. Especially when the North Vietnamese started coming down through Highcourt [unclear], where I flew. Then I thought about all the Marines that I had hauled out of there, dead and wounded, and all of a sudden all that ground was given up. I didn't go along with the decision. I really didn't, to this day I don't go along with that decision.

**RH:** What did you do when you returned home?

**DB:** [Laughs] Slept a lot. I had missed a lot of sleep. When I returned home I only had seven days left on my enlistment, so I was due to get out. When I got out, I wasn't even legal to drink beer. I got out a day before my twenty-first birthday. My mother asked me if I wanted to celebrate, and I said "sure". So she had to go buy me a six pack of beer.

**RH:** Did you learn anything during your time of service that made an impact on your life after you returned?

**DB:** Pride, pride and never give up. Once you commit to something, you don't back away from it. There is no thing as doing a job half way. You do the whole thing. You do the job the way it is supposed to be done. I see a lot of people, in the years I have worked out in civilian life, one guy will be busting his ass and another will be sitting on his ass. The guy busting his ass, he gets a raise, and the other guy gets a raise too, and he didn't do nothing. When I was overseas, in the military, in the Marines in Vietnam, somebody did a half assed job, you kicked him in the ass. Because doing a half-assed job, that guy could get a lot of people killed. They only get away with it once. But out in the civilian life, I do that, I might lose my job. But, I don't know, sometimes that's hurt me in a way, because I look at people in a cynical manner. But not everybody has had the training I had, or the commitments I've had, so I tend to let it slide a little bit, not a whole lot. [laughs]. Not a whole lot.

**RH:** Was there anything you wish that you could have done differently?

**DB:** Stayed in the Marines. I look back at it now, and when it was time to re-enlist, they made some good offers. But hindsight is twenty-twenty. I joined at seventeen, so I didn't have a prom. Part of my, I don't know, adolescent years were spent in the Marines. When I got out, I wanted to click my heels up, have a good time. But, looking back on it, if I had a chance to do it over again, I would have stayed in.

**RH:** Did you become involved in any veterans organizations?

**DB:** oh yeah. I belong to the American Legion, VFW, Marine Corps league, and I also belong to a Vietnam Helicopter Pilots and Aircrew Association. I've got [unclear] with both feet in.

**RH:** Have you kept in touch with anyone you met while on tours?

**DB:** Through the Marine Corps Helicopter Pilots and Aircrew Association, I have gone to one reunion. And I met a lot of people that I was with in country and a lot of people I went to school with, but I don't really keep in touch with people.

**RH:** How did the military change your life?

**DB:** [laughs] Took me from a little snot nosed kid to being, accepting responsibility and being a part of something bigger than me. It's like when you first get to boot camp you are a mob, you don't know how to launch, you don't know how to do anything. But by the time you are done, you are like one entity. You are given a command, and it's impressive because the whole unit responds to that command. I don't know, its hard to describe. It's just like a pride and sense of belonging.

**RH:** Does the time you spent in the military often come up in your thoughts?

**DB:** Oh yes. It comes up in my thoughts, quite a bit. Sometimes when I don't want it to, in the middle of the night. Yeah, I still. . .I take pride in the fact that I was in the Marines, and I don't care if anybody knows it, no matter [unclear, quiet]

**RH:** When do you think about it the most?

**DB:** You know, when things start bothering me, or I feel like I want to give up, or something like that. I don't know, I guess it's like going, when things start to overwhelm me. Thinking back, it helps. It's not going to cure it, but it does help. Stick to it, keep going [unclear]. It's too late now, that's about it.

**RH:** Thank you very much

**DB:** Thank you

### **Pictures:**

**DB:** This was taken at Camp Pendleton, after boot camp. All Marines go through what is called infantry training regiment, ITR, I was seventeen when that was taken. That's me there. This is the type of helicopter I flew in, a UH-34D, a piston engine helicopter with the engine mounted backwards at an angle, so when you open these two doors here, all of the components that you change and everything were right in the back. And this is a piece of boiler plate, armor for the oil cooler. This is me at age twenty, with body armor on, and this is the seat I sat in, and I sat with my back towards the front of the helicopter and the pilot sat above me, so I would have been right in there.



**DB:** There are different squadrons that I belonged to. In Vietnam, my parent outfit was the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Airborne Wing. I flew with HMM-363, which means Helicopter Marine Medium 363, they called us the Lucky Red Lions. I don't know why, sometimes were weren't so lucky. After the squadron broke up, I ended up in H&MS-36, which stands for Headquarters and Maintenance Squadron-36. They did a lot of the heavy maintenance on the helicopters. There was a helicopter that got shot up where a squadron couldn't take care of it, the H&MS would take care of it. I was aboard this helicopter carrier for thirty days. It's an old, converted Korean War era carrier. Now they have the new type helicopter carriers.

**DB:** These are the ribbons or awards I had. National Defense, Vietnamese service, I'm supposed to have a star in there but I didn't put it in, Vietnamese Campaign, good conduct ribbon, I'm not sure why they gave me that. And this is the Air Medal, in this ribbon, I'm supposed to have the numerals seventeen, for seventeen wars at twenty missions each. And these are my combat wings, you had to have twenty missions to get three stars [music overlay on tape]. This is something I wore on my flight suit to identify me