

**Dale Richard Wells, SP5
U.S. Army 1966-1969
Veteran**

**Interviewed by
-Mike Schenk**

I enlisted in the US Army after high school, on my eighteenth birthday, to become an X-ray technician. I was sworn in, in Syracuse then sent to Ft. Dix, New Jersey for a few days, then to Ft. Campbell, Kentucky for basic training. X-ray tech school was at the Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, Texas. After completing X-Ray training I was sent to Medical Corpsman/Combat Medic training, as Combat Medics were in great demand. I never worked a day in X-Ray.

My first assignment was to Wm. Beaumont Gen. Hospital in El Paso, Texas. I worked on an orthopedic ward which housed returning veterans with amputations or serious body disfigurements. After six months I was reassigned to Ft. Wm. Davis in the Panama Canal Zone. There I worked in a Battalion Aid Station with assignments as a field medic with the Jungle Operations Committee, a three week jungle warfare training for ROTC/OCS officers. Six months in Panama then I received orders for Vietnam as an infantry, combat medic. I had a 30 day leave at home in Ogdensburg, NY before departing for Oakland, California for processing. My parents Art and Agnes Wells drove me to the small airport in Ogdensburg. It was before dawn on a cold, rainy October morning. They walked me out to the plane and we said our good-byes. I watched them from the plane and wondered if we'd ever see each other again. Years later when I heard Willie Nelson sing "Blue eyes crying in the rain" I thought of my poor Mother that day.

The flight from California was long nearly 24 hours in all. We landed in Hawaii then the Philippines for refueling. I was in Long Binh for a few days before heading north to Chu Lai. I was assigned to the Americal Division's 198th Infantry Brigade. After two weeks in a rear base camp, my turn came early one morning (4 am). I was awaked by the 1st Sgt. who said "Wells you're going out to Delta Company this morning, they lost some guys yesterday. Pack up your foot locker and take it to supply, get three days rations from supply and be at the pad (helipad) at daybreak, you're on the first chopper out. "Five minutes after jumping out of helicopter I was running through a rice paddy to get to my first wounded soldier. Delta Company was in the middle of a firefight when I got there. I was lucky that day and for many more to come. I made mistakes like, running out in front of our machine gunner. Luckily he saw me coming and stopped firing, boy was he mad at me and we hadn't met yet. I learned to know which direction the incoming and outgoing fire was coming from before running out. This was my life for nine months.

Sleeping on the ground, in the rain, fighting off leeches-constantly, cold c-rations, walking 30 ft. apart through the muddy, leech and snake infested, dense jungle all day. One week out then, one week on a landing zone where we took cold showers, had occasionally a hot meal, wrote letters, played cards, slept off the ground in bunkers, took guard duty on the bunker line or in my case, radio watch one hour during the night. We were all just kids in Vietnam, most 19-20 yrs. old like me. On the LZ we could talk and stand near one another. You felt isolated in the field walking 30Ft. A part, where little talking was done, mostly hand signals. A mortar would come in from time to time, but life on the LZ was still better than on patrol in the field. My job was to get to the wounded quickly, give first aid and get them to a safe place where a dust off could pick them up. I was 19, weighed 135lbs. but, strong for my size. I learned my job well and was greatly respected by the men. I treated they're various ailments and could send them back to a hospital if they were sick. Malaria and dysentery were common. They took good care of the medic because they knew I was there best hope if they were hit. When supplies came they made sure I had my brand of cigarettes and the pound cake I liked. I was embarrassed when they gave me stuff and couldn't look them in the eye. They counted on me so much. Often the sniper who wounded someone kept his sights right there because he knew someone would come to help. I was often shot at while giving aid. I was just that lucky. If we had KIA's that we couldn't get out until morning, the bodies were placed beside where I slept, or tried to sleep. Those were the bad days, losing someone that you'd gotten to know. I thought every day was my last but, it never came. We saw lots of action and had some hard times but, I survived.

Some odd things happened to me. One night on radio watch a Viet Cong somehow got through our perimeter and walked up to me. Everyone that saw him walk through and even I thought, he was our translator "Tron". I kept repeating quietly "Tron what do you want?" he didn't answer, I saw his rifle in the pale moon light. When he realized where he was he started to run but, we caught him. His rifle was loaded too. Again I was lucky. Another night on radio watch I was guarding two POWs. They were tied together near the radio. At 2-3 am one of them got his hands free and lit a lighter that he had managed to keep in his pocket. He was trying to signal others of his position I suppose but, it scared the hell out of me when it lit up the jungle. I yelled and everyone woke up. On one rainy, bleak day a chopper landed to re-supply us and as a surprise brought our mail bag. I got one piece of mail that had been forwarded from my bank. I had set up a savings account, with the help of my Mother, at a small bank in Ogdensburg. We had no use for money in Vietnam. One officer would pay you with Military Payment Certificates and the next would sell you Postal Money Orders and give you an envelope to mail it. Postage was free. The bank was giving everyone with a savings account something new called a credit card. I had gotten my first Bank of America card with a \$300 limit and it said that it was good anywhere in the world. I stood there looking up at the rain coming through the canopy and couldn't believe my good fortune. My Mother sent me cherry Kool-Aid that I put in my canteens to offset the taste of the iodine tablets we used to purify the water. She also sent cans of tuna fish, my favorite, I saved them for Sunday I

don't know why. I got to go on R & R for one glorious week in Sydney, Australia. I had ear infections often in the tropics. As a medic I could get antibiotics supplied to me so I treated myself. In August of 1969 I was evacuated to Yokohama, Japan to repair my perforated eardrums. During the trip from Chu Lai to DaNang to catch the plane to Japan I came across someone who lived in Heuvelton, few miles from me, small world. On the plane for Japan I found my Army records under my pillow. I was nosy and started reading, I discovered that I had been awarded a Silver Star for gallantry in action. I didn't know anything about it. I was proud of them saying that I was responsible for saving the lives of dozens of wounded and I received valor awards for just doing my job. I spent six weeks in the hospital in Japan. A skin graft to close the hole in my eardrum. At that point I had only six weeks left in my hitch so I was sent back to Oakland for discharge. The only advice they gave us in Oakland was "go home and act like nothing happened". I tried that for a long time. That's why I've never spoken about Vietnam until now and I really just glazed over it. Some stories are just too painful to talk about. My eight year old grandson looked up my valor awards on the internet and read them to me over the phone. My grandson's are inquisitive and ask me about my experiences that's why I am talking about this now.