

An Interview with Ken Green
Vietnam Marine Veteran
By Michele Starkey

There is a plaque that hangs on a wall in the Green household that reads,
“Those were sterling days...and I was desperately young!”
Green would remind me to read those words again at the end of his interview.

Ken Green is Newburgh born and raised, having grown up on Liberty Street in the City of Newburgh. He told us that he started school a year late when he was just six because his parents couldn't decide if he should attend public or private church school. He told us, “In the end, my old man won because I ended up starting school at Liberty Street School in 1953.”

School wouldn't come easily for Green and just two months into high school he decided to call it quits. He would end up attending McQuade in New Windsor in the early 1960's. When he turned 17 years old, he and his best friend, Jack Santaniello, decided it was time to enlist.

Where did you go to enlist?

“In the 1960's, you could enlist at the Post Office. Both Jack and I had already decided we were going to go into the Navy. We went to the Newburgh Post Office where the recruiters had their desks set up and the Navy and Marine recruiter shared an office. We were just 17-year-old skinny kids back then, walking in to serve our country. We never gave the Marines a second thought because whenever we saw a Marine, those guys were bulked up and tough.”

So, you enlisted in the Navy?

“No, we wanted to, but when Jack and I arrived, the Navy recruiter was out to lunch so we sat down in the chairs by his empty desk. The Marine recruiter was across the room and he started talking to us. I guess in the scheme of things those Marine recruiters were hungrier for warm bodies than they were for lunch because the next thing we knew, he was enlisting us in the Marines before the Navy recruiter even returned from lunch.”

What happened next?

“Well, we headed up to Albany for our physicals but my best friend Jack failed his physical. He was one pound too light. Like I told you, we were just a couple of skinny kids. Jack was five-feet-eleven inches tall and weighed just 116 lbs. and I was five-feet-ten inches tall and weighed 114 lbs.”

Jack didn't get to go with you to basic training?

“Oh, he went alright. Like I mentioned, Marine recruiters don't like to miss out on those warm bodies, so he guaranteed us that Jack was going to pass the physical. He even said with certainty, ‘Jack will go!’ When we returned to Albany for another physical we stopped at a diner in Marlboro on the way up. Jack bulked up on bananas and water and by the time we got to Albany, he weighed in one pound over the minimum weight required. Remember, this was 1964 and the Marine draft hadn't begun yet and they were relying on recruits and they didn't want to lose a single one of them.”

Where did you do your basic training?

“We were sent to Parris Island in South Carolina. It was pretty rough the first few days but after awhile, you got used to it. It's interesting that they bring you in during the night

so that you can't see the entrance and you won't know how to get out again. You learn to accept the discipline and eventually the 2-hours-per-day exercise toughens you up. I never knew how to leave the island until one night when I was on guard and saw the headlights coming from the distance. Believe it or not, that entrance/exit for our training depot was right around the corner from my barracks the whole time and I never knew it. I wouldn't have left anyway and by that time, I'd gone from a skinny kid to a bulked up Marine and 114 lbs to a rock-solid 145 lbs."

Basic training at Parris Island transformed you?

"It sure did. When we arrived, we had to shed all of our personal belongings and we were issued one bible. I had been reading a book before I left Newburgh and my mom ended up smuggling the book to me, several pages at a time, stuffed in her letters. I read those pages over and over during the one hour of free time that we were allowed each day. The discipline that was instilled in me during basic training has stayed with me my entire life."

Where did you go after Parris Island?

"I went to Camp Lejeune in North Carolina and that was my home base for the next two years. I became a radio operator for a mortar platoon of an Infantry Battalion in December of 1964. The 3rd Battalion, 6th Marines was an Infantry unit stationed at Camp Lejeune. In the spring of 1965, we began cruising the Caribbean along with an amphibious squadron of the Navy. We referred to it as the 'Gator Navy' and our unit was on call the entire time. We were sent to Santa Domingo to quell a revolution and protect Americans in the Dominican Republic. It was quite an experience for us as we began evacuating civilians from Santa Domingo and bringing them on board the ship. Snipers were firing at us the entire time and it took about a month on that mission."

What next?

"In 1966, my unit spent the summer cruising around the Caribbean and I ended up spending the majority of my time in Puerto Rico driving a forklift around a cold storage locker. It was that fall of '66 when I received my orders to go to Vietnam. It was time for me to go, all of my buddies had already gone and I was ready because it was my turn to serve. I joined up with the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines as a forward observer radio man with Charlie Company and I did that for about six months."

Tell us a little about serving as a radio man in Vietnam.

"My job was to call in fire missions for Charlie Company when things really got hot. I would usually be near the captain and if we needed some mortars on a target he would call for me to put them there."

What was one of the scariest moments?

"It was Easter of 1967 – I call it 'Black Sunday.' My unit was ambushed on patrol after we became lost in the DMZ. The North Vietnamese Army (NVA) herded us toward a horseshoe trench line by dropping mortars behind us. The Marines out in front were trying to clear the trench of the NVA and casualties were piling up fast. I stuck my head up and heard a whizzing sound like 'Pssst' going over my head. I quickly ducked down but like a dumb kid, I stuck my head up again and heard the same sound of streaming air passing me, 'Pssst.' That made me realize, in the midst of all of this gunfire, there is a soldier out there in the jungle who is just trying to kill ME. It suddenly personalized the entire war."

When did you get wounded?

“We were setting up behind Con Thien when we had 152mm rockets incoming on us. One of those rockets landed about ten feet behind my hole and the shrapnel came flying up from behind me and sliced my arm open. After it was over, I walked over to the Corps man and asked him, ‘Hey Doc, does this get me a Purple Heart?’ and he said, ‘Yes, it sure does.’ They bandaged me up and sent me back in.”

Was your family notified of your injury?

“Oh yeah, my mom got a telegram that said something like: ‘Wounded in Action. Returned to Duty.’ That was how I received my Purple Heart. I am not sure of the numbers but something like 50,000 Americans were killed during Vietnam and 150,000 were injured. I was just one of those men.”

When did you come home?

“It was in January of ’68 and about zero degrees when the plane landed at JFK. As I walked across the tarmac, something inside of me almost wanted to get back on the plane and go back to Vietnam. But, I returned to Newburgh and then back to Camp Lejeune and eventually was discharged in November of 1968 after going through ‘Operation transition’ to become a mail carrier. I never wanted to work for the Post Office. After I drank up all of the money that I saved up during my service, I saw an ad for Lloyd’s Appliance Center and I went to work there. After Lloyds, I went to Sears and then to J.T. Washington on Broadway in Newburgh and eventually opened my own appliance business in 1983: Ken Green Appliance Service. I retired in 2011.”

Ken and his wife, Annie, continue to live in the Town of Newburgh where they both enjoy retirement and painting, crafting and dancing. Ken shared with us that his three daughters all married ‘Army guys’ and have blessed them with six grandchildren.