

**Patrick William Welch
Vietnam Veteran**

**Mike Russert
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Interviewers**

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Q: Could you give me your full name, date of birth, and place of birth please?

PW: Patrick William Welch June 23rd, 1947 Buffalo, New York.

Q: What was your educational background prior to entering service?

PW: I had completed my sophomore year of high school when they escorted me out the door.

Q: Where did you go to high school?

PW: I went to Kenmore East.

Q: Why were you escorted out the door?

PW: My father had died when I was fifteen in accident and I became very mad at a lot of people, and a lot of the world, and I didn't pay very much attention to school, so I was subsequently asked to leave high school.

Q: Did you enlist, or were you drafted?

PW: I enlisted on my seventeenth birthday.

Q: Did you have someone's permission?

PW: Yes, my mother signed my papers that day.

Q: And you went into the Army?

PW: Marine Corps. I was in Paris Island five days later.

Q: So, that's where you went for boot camp?

PW: Boot camp. Yes.

Q: What was that like?

PW: It was just about everything I had expected. I had five uncles who were in the Marine Corps in World War II. An uncle who was in the Army during World War II, and my father was in the Navy Submarine Service. Being in the Marine Corps was something I had wanted to do since I was five years old. So, I was right where I wanted to be.

Q: Did you regret it at all when you got down there?

PW: Not one minute. Not one.

Q: How long were you on Paris Island?

PW: Four months.

Q: Where did you go from there?

PW: After that I went to Camp Geiger which was in North Carolina for advanced infantry training for a month.

Q: What was advanced training like? Did you become a specialist?

PW: Specialist with an MOS of 0311 which was an infantry rifleman. Learning all the things about being a foot soldier. The Marine Corps was about tactics, operations, and living in the field. Everything related to ground operations.

Q: It being '64 were you using the M14 or M16?

PW: M14. M14 in boot camp, but then we got up to Camp Geiger for AIT we were using M1's until we got to the fleet, then we got M14's again.

Q: After you left the advanced infantry training where did you go?

PW: Came home for a month on leave, and then I was sent to Camp Pendleton to the First Battalion First Marines of the First Marine Division.

Q: How long were you there?

PW: From December '64 until March, then I was deployed with the Third Marine Division in Vietnam in March of '65.

Q: So, you went over by ship?

PW: Yes.

Q: How long did that take?

PW: About seventeen days.

Q: Whereabouts did you land?

PW: In Da Nang.

Q: What were your first impressions when you entered Vietnam?

PW: Very, very hot. We arrived there in March heading into the summer season. Hot and humid. The impressions, very pretty place. It was nice, lush and green in early '65. Not too much had been destroyed at that point in the vegetation area.

Q: Did you proceed north?

PW: No, our initial deployment was air defense around the Da Nang Airbase. We were there for several weeks. Then we deployed out further into forward operating bases to go out and start doing some search and destroy.

Q: What was daily life like for you?

PW: Didn't sleep much. During the day, we didn't have a lot of activity initially. It was just preparing our defensive positions, going out doing patrolling, mingling with the locals in the villages, the Soda Pop Kids, and everything else coming around our base

camp. At night if we weren't on perimeter guard duty, we were out on patrols doing ambushes in the evening.

Q: When was the first time you came under fire?

PW: Early April we were engaged in some mortaring of our position, then some more night time attacks, repelling the attacks and then later during that time going out on ambushing is the first time I experienced that endeavor in the real world.

Q: How did you feel about the M14?

PW: It was a great weapon, just heavy, and you know the load you carry because of the 7.62 millimeter rounds and a standard combat load is about a hundred rounds so with the magazine, you would have six total. One magazine in the rifle and five more 20 round magazines which wasn't a lot, and you ended up carrying bandoliers for replenishment of those. It was a good weapon but it wasn't compact enough for us to go through and utilize it in the jungle because of its length.

Q: Was that strictly semi-auto or did it have full auto capability?

PW: Well, we had restrictions. At that point in time, by then I was a squad leader so I had twelve Marines under my command. We were made up of 3 fire teams and each fire team had one automatic M14. The rest of them were all semi-automatic, but I didn't like that for ambushes because in an ambush you want to get maximum firepower into the kill zone, so I was scouring around trying to find some selector switches and came across a CB who had a whole pocket full of them. In the Marine Corps, you couldn't get selector switches but this CB had a pocket full of them. So, I bought enough selector switches for my whole squad. They were checking us before we went out on ambush so everyone would have what they're supposed to have and once we got outside the wire we'd stop we'd flip, everyone would put a selector switch on. We'd go out on our ambush so that everybody would have maximum firepower and then in the morning before we went back in again we would take the selector switches off and go back in, because they would check us every time we went out, and every time we went back in.

Q: Did you ever have any mechanical problems with the weapon out in the field?

PW: No. It was very reliable. You could get sand in it, you could get water in it, but it would always fire.

Q: What were the relationships like in your unit?

PW: Well our unit was very good. In early '65 everybody was a volunteer in the Marine Corps. So, we had all wanted to be in the Marine Corps, but everybody didn't necessarily want to be in Vietnam, but we were doing the job, there was good comradery, good esprit de corps everybody was watching out for each other. Mine was a little unique because at that point I was the youngest marine, and as far as I know the youngest American in Vietnam at that time. And I was an E-4 Corporal at that time with a squad of Marines all of whom were anywhere from two to four years older than me. It was an interesting time of my life. I probably made more decisions in that time that turned life and death than I have the rest of my life. I grew up very quickly.

Q: How do you think the others though about you being so young? Were there any problems at all?

PW: No, not really because I was the most studious, I was the most gung ho. I was going to be a lifer. None of them were going to be lifers, so they all figured all right let the kid be the lifer that he wants to be so long as I didn't lose anybody because of bad mistakes then there were no issues.

Q: How did you feel about the Officers over you?

PW: We had some good second lieutenants and we had some poor ones. We had a good company commander. Our Executive Officer was a bit of a jerk; he had come to the infantry company from playing football with the Quantico Marine Team and had never been in a line company so he was not very well respected, but our Senior NCO's were very well respected and we had one Second Lieutenant in our company who was extremely well respected.

Q: What were your relationships like with the local people?

PW: Well for the most part relationships were good as you could determine during the day, but in the evening, it was hard to tell what the relationships were. During the day, we would meet and greet people, some young kids who sold us soda pop during the day, then at night we would get attacked. The next morning, we would find them in the wire and the Soda Pop Kid would have a little piece of paper highlighting where all the machine guns were, and where the mortars were and everything else so when they attacked us at night they knew what positions they were going to go after first so you know tactically we had learned that once it got dark we would have to move things around because we had these people mingling with us all the time. So, we moved the heavy weapons platoon their placements around it at dusk so hopefully that was to our advantage when they got back.

Q: Did you ever encounter the NVA or was it strictly VC at that point?

PW: At that point it was all VC, we got engaged in Operation Starlight in august of '65 which was the largest combat offensive in Vietnam at that time. I did not encounter any NVA, I'm certain there were some there as advisors but our operation in Starlight was against Viet Cong forces.

Q: How well were the Viet Cong equipped?

PW: They were equipped with old weapons. Their tactics of guerilla warfare most of the time were not stand and fight, they would turn around a lot of the times you didn't ever see anybody from the spider holes that they were in and you didn't count their casualties, you wouldn't see anybody a lot of the times so their tactics were the typical guerilla warfare, they knew that they couldn't stand up and fight with us because they're small units so they would pop up they'd fire a few shots, throw a few hand grenades then they'd disappear into the tunnels or into the jungle.

Q: What about booby traps and Punji Pits?

PW: It was extensive. You stayed off main trails for the most part because that's where they would set all the booby traps and so on. That's what ultimately got me was a booby trap and I got wounded. But you know it was the Punji Pits again early on our boots

didn't have any of the steel soles that they brought in later to help against the foot Punji Pits there were some people who fell into larger ones, and ultimately died. The booby traps were very extensive, and a lot of the booby traps were made of our own materials. They would take empty ration cans and put explosives into them and set up trip wires to detonate them and so on. So, they were very adaptable, the Vietnamese had been being invaded since 900 B.C. the Chinese, and all other types of people. So, they were well accustomed with having to fight people coming into their country.

Q: Did you ever have any illnesses at all?

PW: No. Not while I was there.

Q: Do you want to tell us about your wound?

PW: On the eighteenth of September 1965 in the morning of that day, I had come back with my squad from an overnight ambush and it was a call that came in from a unit that was on a daytime patrol that was under heavy fire, that requested help, and I had volunteered my squad to go with another officer who wasn't my Platoon Commander. My squad wasn't very happy with me, but there were fellow Marines out there who needed help so I volunteered to go and we were going towards the ambush site and we came through a village that village there was nobody in there and there were no animals around, so we predicted that we were going to get hit very soon because the locals were all gone. We detected movement in one of the huts, one of my fire teams and I went over there and we caught a VC trying to go down into one of the tunnels in the huts and as we started to handcuff him, the platoon commander took off because he had heard fire and he was going to go help his men, and I sent two of my fire teams with him because we were delayed about thirty to forty-five second while we tied up this Viet Cong suspect and then we went to join in the fire fight and as we came through the village we saw the Lieutenant leading get shot and go down. We took cover, we put suppressive fire down on the enemy, and when there was a lull in the firing, our Corpsman jumped out to get the Lieutenant and he got shot. Heavy fire ensued again. Fire broke down, I was calling air strikes and artillery strikes to help suppress the fire. When there was a break in the engagement, I got up to go out and help them and I tripped off a Bouncing Betty. Came up out of the ground twelve to eighteen inches and it just exploded. Well it just tore me apart from the waist down. We continued in a firefight for what seemed like hours but was probably on a half to an hour. Medivacs tried to get in several times but had to fly off because of the intense ground fire. Then they finally got in to get us out and the lieutenant and the corpsman were dead and I was wounded. That was the end of my Marine Corps career. I spent about the next two years, one year in a naval hospital, and another year in a VA hospital in Buffalo where they put me back together.

Q: Now when you were first wounded and medevac'd out where did you go at that point?

PW: I went to a battlefield hospital. Mass unit type of engagement. Then I went to the Philippines, Clark Air Base, then ultimately back to Saint Albans Naval Hospital in New York. I don't remember all the stops along the way because I was well doped out, getting a shot of Demurral every four hours and I didn't really know where I was except I knew that I was going from one airplane to another from time to time on a stretcher. I spent a

year Saint Albans. The twenty-four months I was hospitalized I spent fourteen months on my back, and ten months learning how to walk and move around again

Q: How do you think you were cared for in those hospitals?

PW: Well my care I feel was excellent, particularly in the Naval Hospital. There was another fella who came back on the same flight I did back to Saint Albans, and we had similar injuries. The head of orthopedics took him and amputated his leg. The younger assistant of orthopedics took me and saved my leg. He put me in traction in a body cast. I had about four inches of my femur that were just disintegrated and his method of healing me, they couldn't do grafts and they couldn't do steel rods with me because I was so badly infected so he just put me in traction and let the calcium deposits build up from each end of the femur until they merged. That took about fourteen months and that's how I walk now. I walk on re-calcified femur. From the knee down my leg is dead. I have no feeling, no movement. The shrapnel cut the sciatic nerve in my leg so, I still have it. If they had amputated my leg the recovery would have been quicker than keeping the leg. I guess maybe I was a medical guinea pig. He figured I was young enough that the body would regenerate what it needed to regenerate. So, that's the course that he took.

Q: How long were you in the country before that happened?

PW: Six months.

Q: Do you have any lingering problems with this at all?

PW: Well the leg is three quarters of an inch shorter than my other leg. I have what's called sciatic nerve palsy. There's no feeling, there's no movement. I still have a lot of pain. I still have a lot of shrapnel in my leg. I was in the VA two months ago for a checkup and they took an x-ray and you can see all the pieces of shrapnel still in my leg forty-two years later. Then I had subsequent issues. I came down with prostate cancer because of Agent Orange. I had to have a prostatectomy, I've come down with diabetes because of Agent Orange so in 2000, thirty-five years after I left Vietnam I was diagnosed with prostate cancer, then in 2002 I was diagnosed with diabetes. So, some people say to me, "Can't you ever forget Vietnam?" I reply with, Well Vietnam can't forget me. It just seems to be my generation of those who served in countries experiencing these effects that just seem to be eating our bodies alive. There's one result of Agent Orange, a disease called CLL, chronic lymphatic lymphocytic leukemia and I know several people who have it and it's another result of Agent Orange. Ed Bradley the CBS 60 Minutes Correspondent, that's what he died of a few months ago. So, we all still suffer the lingering effects of our service, many of them fatal.

Q: When were you discharged?

PW: September of 1967 was when I was discharged officially. I was given a medical discharge.

Q: Did you ever make use of the G.I. Bill at all?

PW: Yes, I did. When I was laying in the naval hospital I realized I was a high school dropout and a cripple and that I was going to have to do something. So, I took the GED test when I was in the naval hospital and then when I came back to the VA hospital I

applied for colleges, and was accepted to Niagara Community College and I went on to UB from there.

Q: What kind of work did you do after your service?

PW: Well when the VA gave me tests, the tests revealed that I should be an accountant. I looked at the tester and asked, "What the hell is an accountant?" they explained to me that an accountant is somebody who sits behind a desk and balances debits and credits and did all this stuff, and with my injuries I needed to have a desk job so I thought accounting sounded good so that's what I went to university for and I got a degree in business administration with an emphasis in accounting. Then I went to work, and I had a hard time getting a job because there were a lot of companies that would not hire me because I was a Vietnam veteran. Then I finally ran into a locally founded company called Service Systems which was founded by a couple guys from Buffalo, and the director of human resources happened to be an Army veteran from Korea and he decided he was going to take a chance on this crippled young Vietnam veteran and they gave me a job. I spent many good years there. I started out as a junior accountant and when I left I had held two of the three assistant controller positions that they had in that company. Then I moved to Florida and got a job as a hotel controller in Nassau. Paradise Island Resort and Casino, I went down there for a couple of years and worked as the controller for that hotel. Then I came back to Buffalo and wound up working as a director of administration doing all the accounting and then became director of operations running the hotels. Then I got into an ownership position with a local hotel and restaurant equipment supply company. Then twenty-two years ago myself and three guys that I used to work with at Services founded our own company which I'm still in now. We provide software for the hotel industry and we built it from nothing but an idea in 1985, and now we have over six hundred clients in over forty-five countries around the world. It's been an interesting progression since those days laying in the hospital.

Q: Do you belong to any veteran's organizations at all?

PW: Yes, I do now. I didn't for a lot of years. There was a period where civilians and the traditional veteran's organizations didn't want anything to do with Vietnam veterans so there was a group of people down in Washington who formed the Vietnam Veterans of America. I became involved in that organization in 1989 and I have been involved ever since. I currently serve as President. I'm in my fifth year, going into my sixth year as President, not consecutive years. Seventeen years I've been a member of the VA. I've been a President six of those seventeen with a local chapter. I'm at the state level, and at the national level as Vice Chairman of the Government Affairs Committee. I'm at the national level, and in this July, I'm running for national office of the Vietnam Veterans of America.

Q: Did you stay in contact with anyone that was in the service with you?

PW: No. It's one of those things that you've probably heard before. You meet some people, you go through life threatening existence for a short period of time, and then you don't ever see them again. But I know from people, who have seen people that have not seen in many years that they gather together again it's like they were never apart because of the bond that's developed in those situations, but I have not ever seen anybody that I've served with.

Q: Do you ever watch any of the movies, or read any books on Vietnam?

PW: Yes, I still do because one of the things that we are involved in is an educational program. We go out to high schools and colleges talking about Vietnam and what our experiences were like. So, I like to keep up as much as possible on what some things are said about it, good or bad. I think from our perspective we're so engaged in it, and it is the fact that if you look in the American history books today that we're using in high schools and devote about quarter to a half a page on Vietnam. I think it's sad that the longest and the most divisive war, besides the Civil War in our country's history that that's the most people devote to it. A lot of things that happen in this country today, happen because of lessons learned by people in Vietnam. I just think it's a travesty that there is not more time given to that.

Q: How did you feel about the anti-war movement?

PW: Well I have always been against the anti-war movement, but I think that everybody is entitled to their position on it. That's why we live in this country, and that's why we fight for this country. I don't think it assists the troops that are in the field, and I think over the years as we fight more sophisticated enemies with the communications in the world today, all it does is give them more resolve to stay their course because as America gets bloodied, it's political leaders and its citizens are apt to say we need to get out, rather than to complete the mission. I look at Vietnam and I try to take a positive view of it, and the way that I have looked at it is the fact that 58,300 plus died in Vietnam, and over 100,000 who have died since then who have died from Vietnam related injuries didn't die in vain because I look at our wall and look at the Berlin Wall and the view I try to take and push onto people is the fact that prior to Vietnam third world countries were falling in great numbers to the Soviet Doctrine of Communism. After Vietnam, there were only one or two who fell to the Soviet Doctrine. In 1989 fourteen years after Vietnam ended the Berlin Wall came down and the Soviet Union was gone. So, I like to look at that aspect of history and see that their deaths did have a purpose because it helped to end the Cold War because the Soviet Union was destroyed. Not militarily, but internally it just fell apart.

Q: How did the war personally affect your life?

PW: Well I look at a lot of my peers in business and see how they react to adversary, and many of them fly off the handle they go into rages they have a lot of problems with it. I have been pretty much able to maintain a coolness, and that sometimes irritates them. I explain to them what's going on here in business isn't life and death, it's just business and there are good aspects to it, and there are bad aspects to it. As a seventeen or eighteen-year-old kid, I made more life and death decisions in a day than these people will ever make in their lifetimes. It has given me a different perspective on life. It makes me appreciate life much more and live it to the fullest and realize there's a lot of things you have no control over. Just do the best you can as person, as a parent, as a spouse and work to help as many people as you can. That's part of my drive with the veterans' community and sometimes things my wife doesn't understand why I do so much with the veterans, and it's partly guilt because I survived and other people didn't. And it's partly because I can't help those who we lost, but maybe I can help my fellow comrades who came home and maybe didn't have it as good as I did and need

assistance, and that's what drives me to be so involved in the veterans' advocacy, and a little disdain for the politicians who for years and years continue to send young men and women off to war and when they come home all the sudden don't want to take care of them. Every person who takes the oath of serving the military deserves to get the proper medical care for the mental and physical wounds they incurred in the service in this country. As the number of veterans in congress continues to fall there seems to be less resolve to make sure that happens even with what's going on today. So, I am going to continue the fight until I take my last breath that America's veterans are taken care of.