

**Ron German
Veteran**

**Kate Castler
Interviewer**

**Interviewed on February 9th 2012
Veteran History Club of Perry Jr High School
New Hartford, New York**

Q: Could you start by telling us your name?

RG: Ron German, Junior.

Q: Your branch of service?

RG: United States Army Reserves.

Q: What was the date that you entered?

RG: October 22nd 1989 is when I signed up, and in February I was sent to Fort Bliss in El Paso, Texas.

Q: When were you discharged?

RG: 1996, October.

Q: Where were you born?

RG: I was born in Williamsport, Pennsylvania

Q: When were you born?

RG: I was born July 2nd 1965

Q: What was your education before service?

RG: I got my bachelor's degree before I went in, so I was able to be an E-3.

Q: Why did you join?

RG: It was always an ambition of mine to serve the country. My grandfathers were in World War II and my father was in the Army in Germany right before the Vietnam War. It was like a patriotic duty.

Q: What was your basic training?

RG: It was eight weeks in El Paso Texas. Very dry. You don't realize how dry it is until your boots start to have white salt deposits all over them. It's a very arid...desert type of scene in El Paso...very nice. It was eight weeks of army training.

RG [continued]: They'd try and break you down from your civilian kind of life and then build you back up what they would call the army way...with people yelling at you a lot. [Laughter]

Q: Did anything interesting happen during your basic training?

RG: A lot, yes. The first thing that comes to mind is something that's kind of serious, but it ended up being funny.

Two people got into a fistfight. One person was from New York City, and the other from Los Angeles California. They had a disagreement and they started to push each other and wrestle. That's a very bad thing to do in the army, because each one of those soldiers are property of the government. They take that very seriously. They broke up the fight, and as punishment the whole, entire, next day, they had to hold hands. [Laughter]

As they stood in line to eat their chow, as they had to do different exercises, they had to hold hands the entire day. I don't know if they were trying to squeeze the other's hand, but that was a very funny thing to see. As you could imagine, they became friends. You usually become friends with the person you hold hands with. [Laughter]

Q: Where did you serve?

RG: After my training was done? I was in the Pittsburgh area. Later I moved to South of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. I was placed into the 452nd general hospital. There was a battalion there and I was a medic. I was trained as a medic there.

Q: What did you do, or what type of things would happen at the hospital?

RG: Because I was a reservist, I was activated later for a short time in Italy during Desert Storm. I was doing a civilian-type work as an emergency room technologist. I was doing blood pressures, EKG, the 12 lead things that you put on people's bodies to get the measurements of the of the heart rate.

I was doing all kind of EMT things. I was I was above an EMT because we were trained to start IVs and to draw blood, but I was below a paramedic because I wasn't trained in intubation or giving medication.

As an army medic I was in between an EMT and a paramedic.

Q: What was your rank and title?

RG: Like I said I started as an E3 because of my bachelor's degree. All that actually means is I had a higher rank, a little more pay, and a little more responsibility. Two years later I was given the rank of E4, which is a specialist. I did six years of active reserve, then two years inactive reserve where you really don't do a whole lot unless there's a conflict. I ended up being an e4 by the time I was done.

Q: What were your daily duties?

RG: In basic training you were just doing everything they say. Then there was ten weeks at Fort Sam Houston, it's a really nice area in Texas. It was more like college, where you weren't yelled at as much. You would do your classroom, then your normal duties, and then you kind of had free time. As far as what they called drill, is when I was on the army clock.

If you want to talk about that later when I was activated in Vicenza Italy, northern Italy, that's when I was active duty. That was all kinds of different Hospital duties that I had as a medic. In surgery you have a sterile field where you're supposed to be all washed up and have no germs. Those in the sterile field could not turn around because their backs were not sterile. I was what's called a circulatory nurse, I would throw things into the sterile field, like sutures and instruments and things for the surgeons and the doctors that could not turn leave the field.

I did a lot of that in Italy due to the injuries that soldiers would face on the field. Like from claymore mines and other shrapnel they were trying to take out. They would fly them from Saudi Arabia to Italy or Germany before they went back to United States, so I did a lot of [operating room] O.R. kind of stuff as well as doing whatever nurses would want me to. If you were in the field, of course you wouldn't want to use your abilities because that would mean someone's really hurt, but I was trained as a combat medic and that would mean taking care of a person that was just injured out in the field and get them out of there safely to go to the hospital.

Q: Was there a list of what you had to do?

RG: Yes, there was a standard operating procedure, SOP, there's a lot of acronyms in the army or military. Three letters will say something, but stand for something. There was definitely a list that you had. There's a chain of command, where there's someone over, and someone over them, and someone them, and it keeps going all up to the top. There were [registered nurse] RN's, nurses that were called 91 Bravo's.

I was a 91 alpha or 91-A which was a combat medic. I had to follow the directions and the orders of people that were over me. There was definitely a list of things to do.

Q: Did anything unique happen when you were a combat medic?

RG: During Desert Storm, when I was in Vicenza, Italy, we took over an army military base for the soldiers that were active duty so they could go to Saudi Arabia. There were times a soldier would be hurt badly. He'd be stabilized out in the field, then sent over to us. I remember there were certain operations that needed to be done quickly. It was very serious and you were hoping for the best, but that's one thing about a war. Everybody has a role on the team.

RG [continued]: Kind of like a sports team, where even the one in charge of the players' water is really important even if they're not out there on the field. Our job was to take care of what's called the soldiers' dependents. If it was a woman soldier, we had to take care of her husband and her children. If they had medical problems, they would go to the Vicenza hospital in Italy. If it was a male soldier and his wife or children had problems, they would come to the hospital.

Q: What was your commanding officer like?

RG: There's different levels in basic training, so we only heard of this person by name. We never met them because we weren't allowed to do much. He had a speech when we first got there, but we were getting yelled at all day and there was a lot of crying from people. [Laughter]

I'm glad that I was like twenty-two-years old, because I had already graduated with a bachelor's degree. I wasn't as scared as the eighteen-year-old that was crying beside me. They would yell right in your face, but they were trying to prepare you. They wanted to make sure you could still do your duty even in chaos. They'd try and make it as miserable as possible.

All I remember from what's called the first sergeant, who is the highest-ranking enlisted person in the area or on the compound. That person was very friendly. I wished that person was my trainer because he spoke far kinder than the other guys, but everybody was doing their job.

Q: Did you have any friends in the service?

RG: Absolutely. Other people probably talked about this camaraderie, a definite joining of friendships in the military. I mentioned the kid from New York, [who fought] the kid from Los Angeles. They became really good friends.

After your basic training you're sent to AIT, or Advanced Individual Training. It's where you learn to do what you're actually going to do, and in our case we were medics. There was a friend of ours that went into a war situation from our basic training. One of our friends whose services I didn't get to attend, was killed in Operation Just Cause. It was a very small, not talked about kind of thing over in Panama. From what I heard, a soldier was hurt and our friend was administering an IV. Our friend, his name was [Al Cola?] and we would call him alcohol because the drill sergeant couldn't say his name. Mostly everybody has nicknames in the military. He [Alcohol] was actually shot and killed giving this soldier an IV because he was up too high. That really hurt a lot. It's kind of like college, where you develop lifelong friends. It's just the same with the military, pretty much friends forever.

Q: Going back to nicknames, did you have a nickname?

RG: I was from Pennsylvania and I rooted for the Pittsburgh Steelers. At one time I was actually skinny, and I liked to catch passes. [Laughter] I was fast, and there was a guy on the Pittsburgh Steelers, number 88.

RG [continued]: His name was Lynn Swann, so they called me Swanny Ron German, or just Swanny.

Q: Do you still keep in contact with your friends?

RG: It was in 1996 when I was honorably discharged. The drill sergeant that yelled at me most severely, he was the one that I've kept in contact with. It was about three years ago when I last contacted Sergeant Lafountain. He was an Airborne Ranger in the Vietnam War. When I was becoming a medic, a lot of my instructors were combat veterans from the Vietnam War. As veteran combat medics whenever they said something it was interesting and important. They would say this is how you do it when there's a firefight. When there's bullets flying all over, this is what you should do. You'd remember that because of what they went through.

Q: Do you know how many of them are still alive?

RG: All of them except for the one from Operation Just Cause.

Q: What did you eat on base?

RG: I don't even remember. [Laughter] No, I'm just kidding, but you really only had so many minutes to eat. You didn't have ten or fifteen, it was like four or five. You couldn't talk, you had to rush and eat so fast, and there was no sugar. Sometimes I get headaches from coffee, or I drink a Coca-Cola or eat cookies. You couldn't have any of that there, and it's funny that I didn't have one headache for eight weeks. I was so healthy there. The guys that went in with me that were obese, they came out looking like aerobics instructors. Everybody looked their best because we ate very well, but we ate very fast. They had to have more time to yell at us.

Q: Was there anything else interesting about base? Your sleeping quarters?

RG: Yes. In basic training, but not so much AIT, they were called bays. [Gestures with hands] There was like, a bed, a bed, a bed, a bed, and you had a little place to put your uniform and stuff.

I never made my bed. Several people including myself slept on top of their bed sheets, because you had only so many minutes to get up and get ready. They would yell while woke up and did all your things before going out to formation. Everything happened so fast that I didn't have time to make my bed. I made it really good, one time, and then slept on top of it. All I had to do was pull it to make it really straight, because they would drop a quarter on it or something and it would have to bounce. I didn't mess around with that.

Another thing in our building that we did, is we always kept the windows open even if it was freezing. I never could figure out why until later, but they didn't want all of us getting sick so they had this constant air flow.

RG [continued]: We were actually very healthy. We didn't have a whole lot of problems, even though we were freezing to death. [Laughter] Not really, but it was cold.

Q: You said you went to Italy, did you get to see the sights?

RG: I was so lucky that I could. One weekend that we had a pass, where you could actually leave and not to get in trouble.

I had a chance to go to Switzerland or Germany, but that was north. Instead we went South, to Rome. I have a very strong Christian heritage, so I had to go to Rome. We took a “el tren” or, a train. It was eight hours on a train, which I didn't think was possible. We got to see signs for places, like Bologna.

I went to Venice which was a little dirtier than I expected. It was kind of dumpy. It was still Venice, you know. It wasn't really romantic because I just had my friend, so, uh. [Laughter] It was neat to see everybody else, like with their wife or husband or boyfriend or girlfriend, but we had each other. We didn't want to touch each other. [Laughter]

We got to go on the gondola, we had a boat ride with the guy singing. My friend dared the guy to sing, so he started to. I think we tipped him three dollars.

We went to the beaches which are, very interesting. They have a swimming suit problem there. [Laughter] Other than that, it was it was very interesting to get used to.

In Rome was the Sistine Chapel, St. Peter's Cathedral, amazing things that human beings did, that are still there. I was definitely worth the trip. I'm very glad I got a weekend pass.

Q: Going back to your squad, did you have any mascots or pets or anything?

RG: We did have a mascot. It sounds really cool. I'm so glad because others were kind of dumb sounding. We got it during basic training, but I'm not sure where it came from or who made it up. We in the first Platoon were called the Dogs of War. That a lot better than centipedes, or something. [Laughter] I still have some pictures with our painted mascot, it was like some bulldog.

Q: While you were serving, was there a unique situation?

RG: The only thing that scared me, medically speaking, was the occasion that somebody was dying and I would need to get a blood pressure really fast. One time I couldn't get it. I was doing everything right, but his heartbeat was so shallow and there was no reading to take. I got yelled at by the doctor, but when he took the blood pressure and he didn't get one he understood. I was glad I wasn't doing anything wrong. The good thing is we were able to help this person recover.

RG [continued]: I did my reserve weekends at St. Mary's in Racine Wisconsin. I actually became a CPR instructor, which you have to take a course through the Red Cross every year to be certified. I was able to certify people and make sure they were doing it correctly. What was really cool is I would be the one to recertify the doctors every year. I would always tease them and say, "I'm sorry, you're doing it incorrectly, could you move a little to the left?" I was really good at starting IV's and I was also a CPR instructor, so they would always have me do that stuff. I was always careful to do it right.

Q: Did you have a role model?

RG: Absolutely. Sergeant Lafountain, whom I mentioned before, was somebody that I really looked up to. He was one of three drill sergeants. There was one that was in charge of the whole first platoon, our platoon, the Dogs of War. He was in charge of everything, and then there was two other guys under him. Lafountain never yelled as much because he was in charge and didn't have to, but he made the other guys under him go crazy. In the in the army or military there's what's called a platoon, and in our platoon we had four squad, maybe nine or ten guys in each squad. Each squad had a what you call squad leader, but the whole platoon would have what's called the platoon guide and Lafountain picked me for that for our basic training. It's not a real big thing, but every time the drill sergeant would yell out a command, the platoon guide would stand beside the platoon repeat what was said, and then the squad leaders would make them do it. It's kind of like the in-between man, the go-to guy. Even though it was still training, you'd never ask to do that, you'd just get picked. I think the only reason I got picked is because I was a little older, where I was 22 and they were 18 or so. Everything they did for the first three days I was so scared, because I grew up in a nice family I never got yelled at like they did. I wasn't used to that, so I was terrified. They would call you by your last name, "German get over here!" and then I'd run as fast as I could and say "Yes drill sergeant!"

They would say, "go to this building, pick out this thing, get over here, and you have 30 seconds, go!" [I'd say] "Yes drill sergeant" and I would run and I would just be so fast and effective, and I think that's why I was picked. Over the eight weeks I was in his office a lot, so I got a chance to know him better than the other soldiers. I was glad for that.

Q: When did you know that you were leaving your area?

RG: As a reservist it was very interesting. We would meet once a month at the main hospital building. We got a phone call during Desert Storm when it first came in, saying there was a chance we would be activated. I didn't know if I was going to Kuwait or where I was going to go.

RG [continued]: It's a little funny in a way, but it wasn't funny then. If you got a phone call that was from the 452nd General Hospital, this is sergeant so and so, it was almost like a spy movie.

They identified themselves as being from the 452nd General Hospital and gave their rank, like sergeant and their name. All they would say was "grazing cattle." If they said grazing cattle, that was an alert. We couldn't go further than I think fifty miles or thirty miles. If we got a phone call that said "Raging Bull" that means we were going to leave and go to the Chicago airport. We were close to Milwaukee so I can't recall if it was Milwaukee or Chicago airport. We left at O'Hare Airport. If we heard raging bull, then that means within 24 hours we're leaving and had to get all our stuff ready.

I got a couple phone calls with grazing cattle, so it wasn't a real big thing. I had a new born baby, my oldest son. It wasn't a big deal until we got the phone call that was Raging Bull. We still didn't know where we were going, so we had to pack all our stuff. We had to have our military ID, our social security number, and because we were in the military, we didn't need a passport.

We went on a Pan Am. They are like a regular civilian flight plus the military. We went to LaGuardia [airport], and then from LaGuardia it was like an eight-hour flight across the ocean to Rome, Italy. That's when we knew we were going to Italy, but I wasn't sure why we're going to Italy if the war was in Kuwait. That was when we were told we're taking over a base so the other soldiers would go to You just waited to hear what you were told to do.

There was one guy who forgot his ID and I don't ever know what happened to that person. I think he was dishonorably discharged or something because of disciplinary problems. You have to do everything they say.

Q: How did it feel leaving your family?

G: That was very sad, because my only son at the time was like six months old. It was very sad to say goodbye to him because we didn't know how long it was going to be. My wife was a little sad, but it would have been different if we were going to the deserts of Kuwait with a bunch of soldiers that I had to make sure were healthy and kept alive. That would have been far more severe, but it was better to know that I was going to Italy.

I was about a month that I was gone, and when I came back I was going a little bit above the speed limit and got pulled over by the police.

You had to have your hair really short, and you can almost tell I was like in the military. He asked where I was coming from, and when I told him he understood. He appreciated that I was a soldier and that I was trying to get home, but he said I still had to listen to him. He was very kind and didn't give me a ticket, so I had to crawl home like a turtle.

RG [continued]: My son cried when he saw me, I think it was my hair [being shaved off]. He got better after a while.

Q: How old was he when you came back?

RG: Just one month older, he was like seven months old. I was in Italy for only a month, but he still acted like he didn't know me because of my haircut.

Q: How did you find out you were going to leave Italy?

RG: My platoon sergeant, like the ranking I mentioned earlier, our Platoon Sergeant told us that we would be leaving the 452nd general hospital because another group was going to take over. The active duty soldiers were still in Kuwait and that was hard on them.

Like I said the military is one big team where everybody does their own thing.

Q: What was your last day like?

RG: My last day, I was glad to do two things. I was glad to be there to help out because when you're a soldier you're always very patriotic, proud to be an American and very thankful. You do whatever you can for the most part. I also was very excited to go back home. At that time we lived in Wisconsin, so I was very glad to get back to Wisconsin and see everybody.

Q: What was it like on the day you got home?

RG: Like I said I was a little too eager to get back so-

[Interview terminates]