

Transcript: Henry Saltsman

Good morning. Today is Monday, August 22, 2011. My name is James Crabtree. This morning I'll be interviewing Mr. Henry Saltsman. This interview is being conducted by telephone. I'm at the General Land Office building in Austin, Texas, and Mr. Saltsman is at his residence in Eastland, Texas. This interview is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank you for taking the time to talk to us today. It's an honor for us. The first question we always start off with is please tell us a little bit about your boyhood and your life before you went into the military.

Henry Saltsman: All right sir. Well, I was adopted when I was six weeks old, from Bronx, New York. I went to work up on a farm in upstate New York with my older brother and sisters. We were at this farm for 18 years under very strict discipline. It was a dairy farm and we were required to get up around three o'clock and get everything done before we went to school in the morning. It was, like I said, a very strict disciplinarian-type environment. We resented it as children but I see no harm now that I have acquired a little wisdom.

Was this a farm that was run by the state?

Henry Saltsman: No sir. I wasn't adopted, we were just moved up there. It was not a state-run farm. It was a privately owned farm. A little over 300 acres. The three of us ran it. My father, although he was a Lutheran minister, had a real severe drinking problem and he wasn't able to do a lot to help. So we had a very difficult childhood and it wasn't, at this point I can honestly say, it wasn't all that bad because from what I learned on the farm and the discipline that I got on the farm, I did very well in the service. That did help me. In January of '67, I joined the Navy.

Were you drafted or did you volunteer?

Henry Saltsman: I volunteered.

Volunteered. Yeah. What was it that attracted you to the Navy?

Henry Saltsman: I have one illogical reason. I did not want to get drafted because I knew I would go to Vietnam. I joined the Navy because I had a pretty good I.Q. and they had some need for medical corpsmen and I got my medical corps school and additional two years of medical schooling while I was in Great Lakes. The Navy didn't promise me I wasn't going to Vietnam, but the situation escalated in '68 and most of us all went to Vietnam anyway.

What was it that made you choose to be a corpsman?

Henry Saltsman: I had two or three opportunities to go to different schools. I have a thing for helping people. I felt like I could be of assistance in terms of field medicine, and they told me I had a high I.Q. I don't know what that meant but I was in Vietnam anyway.

So you enlisted in January of '67. Where did they send you for your basic training? Did you go to Great Lakes?

Henry Saltsman: Yes sir. I went to Great Lakes and then I went to medical school right there in Great Lakes. I took extra courses while I was there through the University of Pennsylvania in

Susquehanna. At Susquehanna, at Selinsgrove, excuse me, Pennsylvania. I used that in addition to the medical school and ranked schooling for petty officer at that time.

How long was your corpsman's course?

Henry Saltsman: Hospital corps school lasted from January to August of '67.

That's a pretty long school.

Henry Saltsman: Right. Well, I volunteered for additional training. That's why it took so long. Then they sent me to field medical school in Camp Lejeune with the Marines. That was from August of '67 to September of '67. So all that was field medical school.

Do you think it helped you prepare pretty well for what you were going to eventually face?

Henry Saltsman: At the time I didn't know. But I knew I needed to learn more about traumatic amputations and tying off bleeders and minor surgery and tracheotomies, and things like that. So it did prepare me for that. Later on, I spent two months down in South America after I got through with corps school for prisoner of war training. That was not a very exciting thing for me but I managed to get through it all right. Then they assigned me with the 1st Marine Division.

That was located at Camp Pendleton?

Henry Saltsman: Well, in Camp Pendleton, I was with the 3rd. But at the time, they needed corpsmen in the 1st Marine Division, so there was a bunch of us that were reassigned to the 1st Marines in Camp Pendleton.

Camp Pendleton. Yes. What was that like for you as a young man and a new corpsman? What was it like hitting the fleet for the first time and being assigned to a unit?

Henry Saltsman: I had some difficulty with adjustment. I felt like I was being thrust into something that I wasn't totally prepared for. As it turns out, my first years of medical school were not as applicable as the field medical school that I got with the Marines. So I pretty much had to readjust my thinking process and I didn't get stationed into a battalion aid station or anything or any kind of a backup H&S company or anything like that where I could utilize my other training. But the field medical training was, at that point, a primary schooling.

So you arrived to the 1st Marine Division in Camp Pendleton in 1968?

Henry Saltsman: Yes sir.

At that point, I imagine you were probably pretty closely following what was going on in Vietnam.

Henry Saltsman: Yes we were. Yes we were. I was told by my commander that each corpsman was to pick up a unit. They would assign us a unit and we would be staged out to Vietnam. We went into Okinawa with our units first and we got more or less familiarized with each other.

What unit were you assigned to?

Henry Saltsman: I was assigned to the 1st Engineer Battalion. Combat engineer.

CEB?

Henry Saltsman: We got acclimated with each other and got to know each other a little bit in Okinawa. And then they sent us in country.

When did you arrive in Vietnam?

Henry Saltsman: In 1968, approximately July. I don't have that date. But it was July of '68 and we were receiving incoming fire in Da Nang when we landed.

What were your first thoughts?

Henry Saltsman: I was scared to death. And I gotta be honest with you. I stayed scared for the next two and a half years while I was in Vietnam. It was very traumatic for me.

I'm sure. Especially as a corpsman. As some people know, most people should know that when somebody's wounded, they yell for a corpsman up and everybody has to run to the sound of the guns and to the carnage and that sort of thing.

Henry Saltsman: That's right. And I did not hesitate to do that. My job was very clearly defined to me and I was to take care of my Marines. And my Marines, in turn, would take care of me. But I got hurt a couple of times because I would put myself between the fire and the downed Marine. Those kinds of things are all part of the job.

Sure. When you were with 1st CEB, did you go out with them on patrols and things of that sort?

Henry Saltsman: Yes. Yes I did. I went out on patrols. I was the first one picked and sometimes I volunteered. I would go out and my very first injury was on the road from Da Nang into An Hoa and from An Hoa into Marble Mountain, and I stepped in the booby trap. I have a plastic knee, but the Good Lord was with me. The grenades that were in the bottom of the booby trap did not go off. I got out of it with a real bad infection in my knee and they had to replace part of my knee. But that was my first experience.

Tell us a little bit about what the Marines were like that you served with. I think everybody has the impression of these guys as being young and being draftees and that sort of thing. What were the men like that you knew?

Henry Saltsman: Well, you know, they may have well been young and a little wild. But after they went through their boot camp, and after they went through prisoner of war training, they had a realistic picture of what was expected of them. When I was with the units that I worked with, they were very professional in the field, they were very dedicated to the job that they had to do. Of course they were all scared like I was, but my main objection was that when we would get ambushed or when we would receive incoming fire, they would just go berserk. Everything was kill in the immediate vicinity. The M60s would go off and not quit. The M16s would go off and it would be a massive firefight. But they got the enemy. That was one of the things that was their objective.

Did you get to befriend any of the Marines or become pretty close to any of them or did you kind of have an approach that you wanted not to get too close to them because it would make it harder for you to do your job?

Henry Saltsman: Well, I had that in mind, to be honest with you, but it didn't work. Because there were some that had emotional problems and they came to me. They were some that had problems at home that they would come to me and talk to me about. As a result of that, I did get pretty close to some. But it hurt me in the end because when they got killed I was torn up inside. It was just very hard for me to get over it. I put it in the context but it was very, very hard for me to get over.

Speaking of those that had issues and stuff with family and things, did you have a wife or a girlfriend back home or were you single at that time?

Henry Saltsman: I had a girlfriend. I wasn't married. I didn't want to get married because of what could happen.

Sure. Were you able to write to her pretty frequently or hear news from her?

Henry Saltsman: Well, when I got in out of the bush, sometimes we'd be out for a week or so, and when I got in out of the bush, they'd be maybe a letter or two there waiting for me. But I wasn't as diligent about writing her as I would have liked to have been because I simply did not have the time. There were a lot of preparation things I had to do. There was injured to be taken care of and get medevac'd out. And then we'd go out again. And we'd stay out at night.

Would you often be the only corpsman on the patrol?

Henry Saltsman: Absolutely. Yes I was.

To give our listeners an idea, you'd be the corpsman, and you'd be with how many other Marines?

Henry Saltsman: Usually eight to 12. Eight to 12 Marines in my care. If we would run on to another patrol, then there would be two of us and we could exchange facts and get information from each other and all that sort of thing. Because sometimes, if we would run into another patrol, some of the men who couldn't take it out in the field would go back. And I would be reinforced with some of the other Marines that were on that other patrol.

You said you were over there for about two and half years? Straight?

Henry Saltsman: Yes sir. My tour was one year. But I wound up staying there for two years, five months, and 14 days.

Tell us about what made you end up staying longer.

Henry Saltsman: Well, there was a unit of Green Berets and a unit of recon Marines that were operating in the approximate vicinity that we were in. I got involved with some of the recon Marines and they had ROK Marines with them. We went into Laos and Cambodia as insurgents with the CIA. I did not get back at any particular time. We had instructions, villages to destroy, and a lot of Marines got hurt. It was my job, of course, to take care of them. I've sent more Marines back that were alive because of what I did than I killed.

Yeah, that's got to be a rewarding feeling to help save those lives.

Henry Saltsman: Well, it is to that extent. It is to that extent. But I didn't sign on to kill. I signed on to protect, and there were times when we were in ambushes and I didn't have a choice.

Sure.

Henry Saltsman: I had to do my part. And it went against the grain to be honest with ya.

During that two and a half year time, did you ever have a chance to take R&R and get away at all?

Henry Saltsman: Oh, yeah, yes I did, yes I did. On my first year, I went to Hawaii, and they flew my girlfriend over there and I did have a week.

A week. Was that pretty difficult, to be in a situation where you've been over there in that combat, you come back for a week to regular civilian world knowing that you're going to have to go back again?

Henry Saltsman: Oh, it was terrible. It was a terrible feeling in the gut, in my gut. I tried to make the best of the time that I had but inside, inside it really hurt.

Sure, I can only imagine that it had to have been really difficult to be in that spot.

Henry Saltsman: It was, extremely.

That was the first year. Did the second year you do the same thing?

Henry Saltsman: No, I didn't get R&R the second year. We were in country and that was during the Tet of '68 and '69, and I was in the bush. I never saw my rear echelon for over a year.

Wow.

Henry Saltsman: And I was, that's where I got wounded. I got shot in the shoulder, and I got shrapnel in my back, and I got the Purple Hearts then too. I have two of 'em, and they gave me the Silver Star for valor. And I earned it.

Yes sir.

Henry Saltsman: I really earned it.

Would you perhaps share with us a little bit about that day?

Henry Saltsman: Well, we were in the jungle and it was coming nightfall.

This is with CEB?

Henry Saltsman: Yeah. It was coming nightfall and we set up our perimeter and we were inside our perimeter just kinda talking real low. A few Marines were smoking cigarettes, and about one or two in the morning, some of the Marines . . . You gotta know that a lot of 'em used marijuana. And some of the Marines were pretty screwed up. And we couldn't get 'em up because we heard motion outside. What happened was the NVA turned our Claymore mines around on us and

didn't trip the wires until they had all the Claymores turned in on us. And then they rattled the bushes and we tripped the Claymores. It wiped out everybody except three of us.

Out of how many?

Henry Saltsman: Eleven.

Eleven-man squad.

Henry Saltsman: Right. It killed everybody but three of us. I was wounded and two other Marines were wounded. I took care of those two Marines but they were gonna overrun us. So I picked up an M16 and started on the west flank, and they were comin'. There was a bunch of 'em. I turned loose with that M16, the two wounded Marines did what they could do. They were firing too. One of them picked up the M60 and . . . This is not easy for me.

Yes sir. No, I understand. If you need to take a break, let me know, or if you'd rather not talk about it but . . .

Henry Saltsman: Anyway, we kept shootin' and we did what we could, and the rest of 'em went away. I don't know why but they didn't kill us.

Were you able to get on the radio at that point, call for help?

Henry Saltsman: Yeah, I got on the radio. I called in some Huey Gunships and some medevacs, and it took 'em about an hour to get there. And they started helping. The Huey Gunship saturated the area with fire, and they circled while the medevacs came in. They got the Marines that were hurt, and then they started loading the dead ones, and then I got on and they were receiving fire and they were gettin' incoming fire too. And I got in the 50-caliber gun seat and I just fired 'cause I couldn't see 'em. And I just fired and we got out of there. We were all hit. The copters were hit, and the two that I helped up gave me a commendation.

Did you ever think that you were going to receive an award of that sort? I'm sure that's the last thing that was in your mind.

Henry Saltsman: No, no. I didn't want one. I was doing my job. Oh, God.

Well, sir, I know it's really hard for you to talk about but I think for people listening to this potentially years from now, it helps them maybe understand a little bit about your service and sacrifice for our nation. And I think it's a little bit different when people hear it coming from someone like yourself who was there than if they just read it in a textbook or saw Hollywood try to dramatize it. And we appreciate you talking to us about it. Just to kind of shift the scene a little bit then, you're evacuated, you're medevac'd out, and you're wounded.

Henry Saltsman: I went to the hospital ship. I went to the Repose and I was out there.

How long were you out there for? Did it take a while for you to get healed up?

Henry Saltsman: Oh, it took about five weeks, and I was, I volunteered to go back in.

They keep you on the hospital ship that entire time?

Henry Saltsman: Yes, 'cause I didn't want to go anywhere.

So you refused to be sent home?

Henry Saltsman: Yeah. Then I went back in country. I wanted to get back with my unit. They were still in Laos, and they wouldn't let me go, so I stayed with another unit of the 1st Marines, I don't know, I think it was 27 or 17, I don't remember, until they came back out of, back in country where they belonged. And then we went into the jungles and we were to wipe out villages. And I had to shoot boys and women, and I didn't want to do that even.

Sure. Was there ever a point that you felt like you just needed to get back home, that this was all just been going on too long for you?

Henry Saltsman: No. I didn't wanna do that 'cause I didn't want anybody to think that I couldn't handle it.

During all this time, did you have anyone that you could talk to or confide in like a fellow corpsman in your unit or, you know, a senior chief or . . .?

Henry Saltsman: Yes, I did. I talked to the lieutenant a couple times.

What did they tell you?

Henry Saltsman: He told me he'd send me out if I wanted to go but I told him no. Anyway, I'll be all right.

Yes sir. And then in 1970, you finally came back to the States, is that right?

Henry Saltsman: In November of '70, I was in my pajamas in the jungle with the others, and we were going to the top of a hill, and I forgot the name of the hill, and we got up there and the NVA was down in the jungle around us, and they started coming up the hill and there was enough Marines, and all of us chased 'em back down. And the next day a helicopter came up and made me come out.

Was it on orders from one of your commanding officers or someone along those lines?

Henry Saltsman: I don't know. I don't know where or why.

But they just said, "Hey, that's it. You've been there long enough."

Henry Saltsman: They took me out. But anyway that was the limit.

How long was it at that point before you were able to actually get back to the United States?

Henry Saltsman: It was two weeks. They did a debriefing in Da Nang, and then when I got back to Long Beach, they did a debriefing there for a couple months before I could go home.

And what was that like? Did you go ahead, did you get out of the Navy at that point or did you try to stay in?

Henry Saltsman: I was within three months of my EOS, my end of the service, so they let me go three months early. And then I went into the Reserves for two years, and I was inactive.

Did you go back to New York?

Henry Saltsman: No. No, I, in the meantime, had lost my girlfriend. I had no reason to go back.

Obviously, personally you had gone through a lot during that time in Vietnam, but when you came back, did you feel like a lot of America had changed compared to what it was like when you left in '67.

Henry Saltsman: Oh, I got treated terrible. I got treated terrible. They cussed at me when I got off the plane. Told me I was a child killer.

These were just protesters in the airport?

Henry Saltsman: Yeah.

Was that in San Francisco or Los Angeles?

Henry Saltsman: That was in Long Beach.

Long Beach, okay. Because there used to be a big naval base there in Long Beach, right?

Henry Saltsman: Yeah, I know it's gone now.

So then at that point, when you get out of the Navy, you stayed in inactive Reserves for a couple years. Did you go back to school or did you get a job or did you do anything in medicine?

Henry Saltsman: I went to school. I got my BA in business administration through USAFI.

Was that difficult for you to make that transition back into civilian . . .

Henry Saltsman: Oh, God, yeah. It was terrible. It was terrible.

Now you had mentioned earlier in this interview that you had a couple siblings. Is that right?

Henry Saltsman: Yeah, I got two boys. I got remarried in July of '86.

But I'm . . . siblings, you had two, did you have brothers and sisters?

Henry Saltsman: Oh yeah, I had a brother and a sister.

And were they older than you?

Henry Saltsman: My brother was older. He went in Germany. And my sister was older, and she ran away and got married.

Were you able to talk to them at all when you got back home?

Henry Saltsman: Yes, I did. Yes, I did. My brother, I talked a lot to him.

Did that help you?

Henry Saltsman: But it didn't seem to sink in.

Didn't sink in, yeah. Did you stay in California?

Henry Saltsman: I moved all over.

When did you finally end up in Texas? What brought you to Texas?

Henry Saltsman: My sister.

Your sister.

Henry Saltsman: Yeah, my marriage broke up in California. I was there for 25 years. She found her a boyfriend on the Internet. I have a lot wrong with me. I got into that Agent Orange, and I got diabetes, real bad complications. I got Parkinson's. I've had two heart attacks, and high cholesterol, all that crap. And I go to the VA a lot.

What VA do you use? What's nearest to you?

Henry Saltsman: Temple.

Temple, okay. That's good.

Henry Saltsman: Brownwood and Temple. And I guess my wife got tired of taking care of me, and we had two kids. I call 'em every day.

How old are they?

Henry Saltsman: One is 17, and the other is 12.

Seventeen and 12, yes sir.

Henry Saltsman: And I miss 'em so bad.

Sure, I can understand. Well, I'm sure, sir, that if they don't realize it today, one day they'll look back and they'll truly appreciate what you did for this nation in the situation that I think most people can never, unless they've been there, they can't really understand what that's like.

Henry Saltsman: I never told 'em.

Well, maybe one day when they're ready, they can perhaps listen to this interview and gain an insight into, you know, where you served and what you did to help save lives, and I think that's a real tribute, speaks volumes for who you are. There are so few people that have ever done anything like that. And as a Marine myself and somebody that's been in combat zone, I know how important it is for a corpsman, and that's the toughest job on the battlefield. And I think I mentioned to you before we scheduled this interview, one of my best friends was a Navy corpsman in Iraq, and that's just very admirable, the fact that you volunteered to, first of all, to go into the service and then to be a corpsman and then the number of years that you served over there. I don't think anybody, unless they've been there, has any idea what that's like. This program is all about trying to record these interviews and these stories for posterity so that future generations can kind of have an understanding of what it's like to have served. We have

archives here at the Land Office that go back to Stephen F. Austin's original register, it's called the registro, that he kept in his own hand of all the original settlers that came to Texas. And we have the land grant that David Crockett's widow received after he was killed at the Alamo. So we have all these items that go back hundreds of years. And our goal with these interviews is to save these and preserve them so hopefully hundreds of years from now, people can listen to these interviews just as they come in today to research maps and historical items of Texas so that we have this history that is being kept. And, you know, we interview all veterans of all ages and branches of service and the only requirement is that they be in Texas now, that's it. So we've been able to try to add these stories and your interview is one more of those stories that comes together kind of like a patchwork quilt so that hopefully your children or grandchildren or even people hundreds of years from now hopefully can listen to this interview. It's one thing to read it in a book or see a documentary or Hollywood's version of whatever they're putting out, but to hear it from the veterans themselves in their own words, their own thoughts, I think it adds an insight that you can't get otherwise.

Henry Saltsman: I've forgotten a lot. I know that I put together a whole lot more people than I took apart.

Well, that's really a blessing that you were there for those men.

Henry Saltsman: I have problems though.

Sure.

Henry Saltsman: I still have PTSD every once in a while, and I just ask God for forgiveness.

I don't think there's anything that you need to feel bad about. I think you served your country in a way that few can understand. I know those Marines, I'm sure there's countless people that every day owe you a debt of gratitude that don't even know it. Any number of those Marines whose lives you helped save, that came back home and had children and grandchildren, that sort of thing. They have no idea that, you know, the role you played in that. So that's something you can always be proud of.

Henry Saltsman: Well, I appreciate talking with you.

Yes sir. I appreciate you taking the time just to share with us, you know, your story because I've interviewed and this program has interviewed veterans from World War II to Iraq and Afghanistan, all branches of service. We've interviewed those that have served in peace time, those that have served in combat, those that have been on the front lines, those that have been, you know, never left the United States. So, we've interviewed all of them and this program is here to salute every veteran for their service. Commissioner Patterson is a Marine Vietnam veteran himself, and I know that he appreciates your service and sacrifice as does everybody here at the Land Office and Veterans Land Board. Hopefully your sharing this story with us helps you maybe in a small way, just in knowing that your story is going to be saved and preserved.

Henry Saltsman: I'm trying.

Yes sir. I know that it can be difficult, but I think the VA, if you're going to the VA, sir, that's a good place with the counselors they have there and some of the folks that can help. I know it's a big, can be kind of a big bureaucracy at times but I do know from the times I've been to the VA, there's people there that really truly care about helping veterans.

Henry Saltsman: Yes they do. Yes they do. All right, well, I appreciate you so much. I'm glad you took a minute to talk to me.

Absolutely. And you've got my number so anytime feel free to give me a call. Like I mentioned before we started the interview, in a couple weeks we're going to be sending you copies of this interview on CDs along with a pretty nice letter and certificate from Commissioner Patterson that comes in a commemorative binder. And then if you have any photographs or anything that you would want us to save . . .

Henry Saltsman: I do have photographs.

Yes sir. Feel free, and I'll put my card with all the stuff we're sending. I'm going to put my card in there with it. You can feel free to email me any photos you want or you can send them, mail them to me and we can scan them and then return them back to you. We love to get pictures. Those are always . . . They say a picture is worth a thousand words, and we always love to have photographs along with the interview if possible.

Henry Saltsman: All right.

Well, sir, again, I appreciate your service for our country, and as a Marine I definitely want to tell you Semper Fidelis.

Henry Saltsman: Well, Semper Fi.

Yes sir. All right, take care and hope to hear from you again soon.

Henry Saltsman: All right, Mr. Crabtree.

Yes sir. Take care.

Henry Saltsman: All right, I will. Bye.