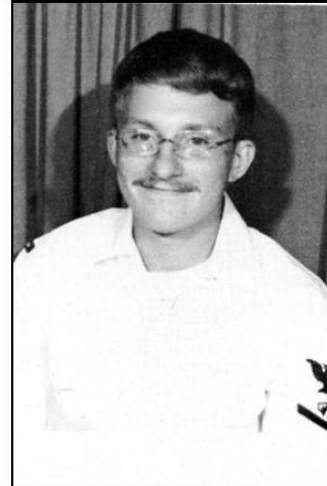


Tommy Shaw
Petty Officer 3rd Class
Disbursing Clerk
U.S. Navy
Hospital Ship Sanctuary AH-17

Da Nang Coast



I wasn't drafted. I was a volunteer. I went to a military academy in my sophomore year and in six and a half months I grew six inches. Normal Midwestern kid. I was a shade tree mechanic. Our heroes were John Wayne and Audie Murphy.

My dad was made a commander in the Navy in 1966. In my senior year in high school, I had my heart broken. So I decided, it was the heart of the Vietnam War, my dad's in the Navy, so I'll just go enlist. If you enlisted, they gave you three months to get your life in order. That was realistic because you might need to.

That fall I enlisted, went into service at Boot Camp in San Diego. The aptitude tests they give you showed that they were having trouble getting volunteers that were of the inclination and intellect that they were looking for. I had fairly good aptitudes in multiple things they were having trouble with. So they decided they really wanted to keep me. I had some allergies and medical issues, I couldn't take certain shots for going overseas, but they said they'd figure it out. They gave me a waiver to get in.

I had just turned eighteen in '67. I ended going up on active duty to Boot Camp, January of 1968, on a day when the windchill in Iowa was about twenty below zero. So I was dressed for that when I got off the plane in San Diego. They screened me for the back seat in a jet. They take you on a test drive first to see if you like it, see how things are. I had vertigo, so the first time they took us up, they go straight up and my head went somewhere else. So back to enlisted washout. They had a couple of places they wanted to send me between radioman and disbursing. They thought, "Well, you can do numbers, so we'll have you handle payroll

and fiscal stuff and the number junk. These guys can't count!"

I went to Navy Disbursing School and at the end of that, I volunteered for Vietnam—not because I wanted to go, because technically I was a noncombatant, not supposed to carry a gun. But if you're got money, they make you carry a forty-five. Eventually, after a couple of duty stations, I was in Taiwan. I had to get certified for an automatic weapon because I had to be backup for payroll runs. The only thing they had for me to get certified on was an old rotary magazine Thompson. Wow! Like during Prohibition. And it was a '20s or '30s Thompson automatic .45 that goes BANG BANG BANG BANG BANG! It was kind of hysterical. They put you in the back of a truck and strap you into a chair and make you look bad, but they tell you, "Be real sure you don't shoot anybody. We don't want an international incident." "What happens if they shoot you?" "That's why we have another guy in there." "Oh, okay." I'm basically the bumper guard.

I volunteered for Vietnam because if you break up with enough girlfriends you just do. When they got my medical records, they said, "Man, you're supposed to get all these shots to go over there, you can't take most of them. Oh, what do we do?" One of the officers who also wanted to keep me in the program said, "Well, I have an idea! Why don't we just send him to someplace that's got medical attention, so whenever something goes wrong, they can fix him?" So, they found duty for me on the USS Sanctuary, AH17.

It was one of two American hospital ships that were over there operating in what they call gray water. The Repose, the other hospital ship, operated

south. We had the DMZ to the Chu Lai peninsula, all the way around Da Nang. My job was disbursement, and they tried to keep me busy for eight hours. When they have eight hours of work for the Navy, it's usually about four hours for anybody that can read and write. I would get my work done, so I did other things. I was a body for a working party, a body to help this or that. One of my other duties was as a radioman. I'm at the back of the helideck relaying information from the radioman who was talking to the incoming helicopter. He tells me that there are X number of passengers, how many of them are ambulatory and how many are on stretchers—twenty-one PACs, eight ambulatory, and eleven litter. That's just so that the hospital side knows what's coming and can start getting ready. We have hundreds of helicopters coming. Every once in a while, if I'm up there and they need a body, they would point at somebody and say, "Hey, we're in trouble here!" And I would help carry litters with guys on them. Four times I ended up going out on a run to do recovery, two of which were fatalities, and—really, I hate to use the term, but they called them Crispy Critters.

We were in visual range of the shore. The hospital ship was like a MASH unit, mobile so it was harder to hit. We almost never got any serious hits because they knew the consequences for going after a medical ship. We were right there, close enough that we could watch what was going on and see things that would happen. The ships had the best surgeons, the most expensive equipment socked away on the ship so it's pretty hard to destroy or steal. We got all the serious cases, people that really needed help because they'd do triage on shore and take care of first aid. A lot of guys never got to our ship because they

weren't hurt bad enough, unless it was a slow day. But we got all the serious stuff because we had the equipment and the surgeons. A few times we'd get sniper fire—there would be a *ping* and a *bing bing bing* and a couple of things would hit the ship. Somebody would make a phone call, and a few helicopters would come in—wow! Would they respond. We had lights down the side on our white ship, so there was no mistaking it. You could see us for miles! If you had the intent, we were the easiest thing out there to hit.

My day job, playing with money, we'd get bricks of it. I had fun with those bricks. It's just paper, until you sit there and think, Wow! That's a lot of money! There would be an entire room full of pallets full of money, a stack all the way up of hundred and twenty dollar bills.

A guy from New Jersey was infamous on our ship for playing poker. In eighteen months before he got out—he was in for two years—he paid off the mortgage on his house and his mom's house just from the guys on the ship. People liked me because I was disbursing their pay and they didn't want me mad at them. Everybody thinks disbursing clerks can change things. They can make a mess of your pay record, but they can't give you money that they won't take back. People kind of threw their money around. A lot of them felt, "We could die tomorrow! So what will we do today?" Things would get crazy.

When I came home, it was not a good experience. I was spit on and once when I was hitch hiking home someone threw an apple at me from a car and knocked me out. Life after Vietnam was not mentally good.



Helicopter Landing on the Sanctuary



**Sanctuary's Radio Room
Landing Helicopter seen in Window**

Norfolk doesn't like sailors, for good reasons at times, but I had good experiences otherwise. Once before I went to Vietnam, I hitchhiked home. I'd never done that in my life. For Thanksgiving I had Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday off. Guys said, "You're crazy if you don't go home!" I said, "I don't know, I don't want to spend the money to fly home for five days." "Nah, just hitchhike. There're three guys there headed out that way, and they'll give you a ride so far." I had ten dollars in my pocket. We went to the Chesapeake Bay bridge tunnel, which goes under the water, and there was a charge of four bucks. He had everybody chip in, so I gave him my ten bucks and I never got it back. So we get out, and we get to the interstate, and he says, "We're going south. Walk up on the shoulder and start hitchhiking." It wasn't too long before I got a ride. It took awhile. When I was up around Pennsylvania somewhere, a highway patrolman stopped me as I was walking along. He said, "You know you're not supposed to be hitchhiking." I said "No, I know. I'm going to Vietnam and I had a chance to come home." He said, "Where are your leave papers? Let me see your leave papers." I didn't have any since I didn't really get a leave. Anyway, he said, "I'll be back in an hour, and if you're still here I might take you in." Thank goodness I wasn't there. I got a ride with a guy, and he must have taken me two or three

hundred miles. He said, "Now, in the next fifteen minutes I'm going to be getting off. And you watch the cars, and if you see a car from Indiana or Ohio, or Illinois, stop them and see if they'll give you a ride." So this car goes by us and pulls up beside us. My guy says, "Roll down your window and ask him for a ride." And he gave me a ride! Then when I got close to the edge of Iowa and Illinois, I got picked up by this family—two kids and a husband and wife. They were going to Omaha, so they said, "We'll go through Des Moines," I said, "Just drop me off there." He said, "Where do you live?" I said, "A little town about twenty miles north." They took me to the house. So it's all been good as far as treatment! In Chicago though, at the airport, I did get spit on. That's always been tough.

It was a good life. When we were on a ship, it might take twenty hours to load three of them in one day. They're loading and unloading for twenty, twenty-two hours. But I always had a clean place to sleep, and usually some hot food. I look back at it and I was glad I did it, but I wouldn't want to do it again.

