

Thomas (Tom) Cole:

A well-traveled Marine

Aviation Ordnance Chief; Master Sergeant (E8)
United States Marine Corps
Vietnam ('72, '73), Iran Rescue ('80), Operations in Korea
Enlisted: 5 May 1969
Retired: 31 August 1992
In Service: 23 Years

Vietnam · International Actions · Cold War · Desert Storm · Afghanistan

An interview with Tom Cole

Interview conducted by Emma Zoulek, Sonoran Trails Middle School

Transcribed and written by Chris L. Hazeltine, VHP Advisor

Thick, with a grey beard and moustache -- and with just a twinkle in his eye. Tom is a very sturdy man, with a little touch of Santa Claus to him; that is, if Santa lived in Arizona, wore turquoise bolo ties, rode a motorcycle, and had the *thousand-yard-stare* of a Marine. He is self-possessed of strength and of that quiet “knowing” that is reminiscent of all Marines.

And, he is quick with a laugh, and quick with a story.

What were you doing before you enlisted?

I was just getting ready to graduate high school in Lakewood, California. Okay, now I originally had come from Chicago, right? But I was what you call an *incorrigible* youth, and my mother and my youth officer decide I needed to leave Chicago and go live with my father in California. But I turned around, and they helped me graduate high school... just below honor roll...I had scholarship for music.

My dad was a Marine, during WWII, you know? And I have a lotta respect, lotta love for my dad. From the time I was about three-years old, that's what I was to do, I wanted to be a Marine. So I graduated high school, you know... I get to live my dream. And I liked it so much, I stuck around for twenty-three years. I really had a good time you know? But, I mean, not all of it is great, you understand? You know, there's times when people are shooting at you and that's not fun. But other than that, you know, it was a good career. I picked the Corps because of my dad, he was in the Marines, and of course I knew about the heritage of the Marine Corps, and the esprit de corps and all that.

Out of my three brothers, two of them were also in the Marine reserve, and then my two sons were in the Marines, and I didn't push 'em that way. They just want to do it themselves. So, they were both Marines. One of them was a grunt in Afghanistan. The

other one has been in twelve years. Now he's gonna make a career of it. I went into the United States Marine Corps, delayed-entry program. May 5th, 1969, and I went into active duty and went to boot camp, July 17, 1969.

How was boot camp?

The drill instructor at boot camp, he gets on the bus, and he said, *'I am drill instructor Staff Sergeant Butler. When I give you the word, you will get off this bus and you will get on the yellow footprints to my left. Anybody that touches this uniform, you're going to die. Move!'* That how that started.

I was in what they call 'Thumpin' Third Battalion, and it's like when you were bad, when the platoon was bad, if one person was bad, and he (the drill instructor) got mad at the platoon, of 80 people, they'd take you out to the 'pit.' Now, what's the pit? Okay, imagine a big sandy area with soft, soft, soft sand, right? And now he (the DI) starts PTing you, you know? You're doing the jumping jacks and the squat thrusts, and you're just sweating profusely 'cause it's July and August, in San Diego, and you're just soaked.

And an airplane, because you're right next to the San Diego airport, flies over and he goes, *'Enemy aircraft! Dive! Bury yourselves!'* So you're throwing sand all over yourself, and you know that fine sand, it gets everywhere, you know? And you're fully dressed, and sweating, and let me tell you, this stuff sticks all over you. So all day long, you're chaffing along and stuff... yeah, that was the pit.

They caught some guy smoking at night, you know, in the hooch, and you're not supposed to do that -- and so they got him outside, had him put three cigarettes in his mouth, light 'em up, and then put a bucket over his head and said *'Smoke 'em, now!'* (Laughs).

Yeah, I got caught, too. I had a bucket on my head. (Laughs). Here's the thing, too, at night...this is a good story... we were sitting there one night, and you start getting, what they call 'salty,' you know? Well, you start getting a little like, *'I can handle this'*... a little, how would you say...over-confident in your abilities. So, one night we're sitting there, and one of the guys, you know, there was four of us, and after ten... you get bedded down at nine; at ten o'clock, you can go to the head, if you need to -- big, emergency head-call -- but you go, and come right back.

But, after a while, you're sitting there, on the footlockers, asking people *'What did you do before you went into the Marine Corps?'* and we had one guy named Jim Mash, who had been... that's right... Mickey Mouse at Disneyland. So, anyway, but the four of us are sitting there, and the door's opening and closing with people going in and out. And this one guy comes in, and we're sitting there, and he says, *'Damn, I'm gonna have a cigarette.'* And we're all like, *'Naw, man, don't do that. We'll all get in trouble for that stuff, don't do that.'* And he goes, *'Naw, man, I'm gonna have a cigarette.'* And we're like, *'Don't be stupid...'* And it's dark, you can't see the faces, right? And he goes

'I'm gonna have this, give me a light.' And he hits the guy next to him, and the guy flicks the lighter on.... It was the drill instructor. (Laughs) *'Get outside, now!'* We did squat-thrusts until midnight. I mean, it was killing us.

At boot camp, the first phase is, um, breaking you down. Totally. Mentally. Physically. They're just tearing you down. I don't care how good of shape you're in; they're going to tear you down. Trust me. The second phase is a stabilization phase, and that's where you're learning things all the time, you're going to class almost all day long, you know? You're going to class on Marine Corps history, customs and procedures, the military uniform. You've got a book that you read, every time you stop somewhere, you pull out the red book and you start reading your general orders, memorizing all of this stuff, right?

So you do that -- and that goes all the way through boot camp -- and then, of course, you get your rifle; you go to the rifle range in phase two; you usually do a week of mess-and-maintenance, you know; where you are actually on mess duty for a week, just part of the training; gives you a little break.

Then you go into phase three, and phase three is where they're building you up. Everything gets better, you know.... well, relatively better, you know? The drill instructors are still saying, *'Come here!'*... you know, it's pretty intense, the Marine Corps boot camp, but you can live through it, you know? I've lived through it; a lot of other people have lived through it.

Do you remember your instructors?

Nobody in the Marine Corps *ever* forgets their drill instructors' names. Okay? We had Gunnery Sergeant Eickels, who happened to be the tallest...he was like six-foot-eight or something, this huge guy. And then we had Staff Sergeant John D. Butler, who was a First-Force RECON Marine... if you know what SOG is (Special Operations Group) the RECON is SOG, today. You know, these are serious people. I mean, you don't mess with these people. Then, we had Sergeant Clapper, who left, and then we had Sergeant Burton, and he left, and then we had Sergeant Martinez, at the end. So, we actually had five, but two of them, at one point or another... Staff Sergeant Burton, he went to the hospital 'cause they were still picking shrapnel out of him, you know, from Vietnam.

Getting through boot camp? Well, I know how I got through it, you know? It's, um, every time I was really in pain... Okay, imagine this....we weren't drilling was well as the drill instructor liked. One time, he took us between the quonset huts...now, we had a rifle that weighed about eleven pounds, right. -- the M14 -- he had us put it on the backs of our hands and squat. And stay there. And then he'd walk through and say, *'If two of you drop your rifles, I'll let the rest of them go.'* (Tom motions with his hand and points to his head, indicating mind games on the DI's part). And you're looking at your buddy going, *'I'll drop, I'll drop.'* *'No, man.'* *'I'll drop, I'll drop.'* And, of course, you know you're not going to drop, all right? But every time it got really tough, my little mantra was, *'You asked for this. You enlisted; you asked to do this, so you're gonna get through*

this, ' you know? And that was kinda my mantra; I just kept telling myself, 'You're gonna get through this.'

Where were you first deployed?

I was in Vietnam from 1972 and 1973, right at the end of the war. I was stationed on Bien Hoa (Vietnam), which is about fifteen or twenty miles northeast of Saigon, and they used to call it Rocket Alley, and it wasn't for the rockets going out; it was 'cause they were shooting rockets at us, three and four hundred at a time, and it's kinda scary you know? We were on the airstrip with our birds, you know, our aircraft, right? We were doing A4-Skyhawks at the time, and we'd load the birds and stuff...our big thing was working 12-18 hours a day, loading bombs and guns and all this other stuff, to support the troops out in the field. I was what they call an aviation ordnance-man, or aviation ordnance chief, later on. What that does is you work on aircraft and you're putting all of the weapons on, from little practice bombs, up through thermonuclear devices. But you also have to know all the electrical systems, you've got to know math-- yeah, it's intense -- but you know, it was a lot of fun. We had a great time. You know, you stay really good shape 'cause you're out there clicking in five-hundred pound bombs.

But occasionally 'Charlie' would come in, right? And when they came in, we had to grab our stuff (Tom mimes a rifle) and be ready to make direct contact with the enemy. If you look at a Marine chevron, you're gonna see what looks like a little 'x'. Those are crossed-emblem rifles, right? What that signifies is first and foremost, every Marines is a rifleman. Period. So if bad things happen, you're expected to pick up a rifle, go do something... well I was a fire-team leader, about three or four times, when they blew up the nap (napalm) dump and they blew up the bomb dump. You know we all put our flak (jackets) on, ran out with M16s and got ready to get down to something.

When you first get there, you think it's really cool, you know, 'cause you watched all those John Wayne movies, you know? But then you get there, and at some point, during an attack, you realize there's a whole country of people out there who are wanting to kill you. And that's kind of unsettling. But then you get to this place where, like me, I was concussed a few times and hit with shrapnel that one time, you...you think of yourself as *dead*, you know? And once you get to that point, you're okay. Everything is fine. All you do is focus on your job, having a beer, playing cards at night. Everything is good, you know? But until that time, you're kind of under this stress... it's there but, you know... it's hard to explain, but yeah, you're worried, I'd guess you'd say. Kinda worried that bad things are gonna happen, but you get to a certain point, you know? And it's just like...once you say *'I'm gone, I'm dead, and it doesn't matter anymore...'* life is good, you're having a good time, you're joking a lot, you know? But you get to that point, it doesn't take long, you know, depending...

There's an old axiom that says *'There's no such thing as an atheist in a fighting hole,'* you know? You get in a fighting hole, you're under fire; everybody prays. One guy was even a conscientious objector, you know? He was a sergeant in the Marine Corps, and he said, *'Man, I don't care what happens, I ain't picking up a gun to shoot*

somebody. ' I said... and everybody had the same thought ... we said, *'We're gonna shoot you, first, and take your weapon.'* (Laughs).

Did you experience any casualties?

There were a few, yes. In fact, I almost wore the bracelet for the guy I knew really well. This guy was really a sweet guy, Ray Lonzo, and, um, what he used do... we supported...the two units I was with...we supported two orphanages over there. And, he'd come up with a shoebox, and we'd be getting our pay, right? And everybody'd throw a couple of bucks in there for the orphans. Well, he had just had his second child, his wife at home had his second child -- just like that week -- and he was taking the shoebox back to drop it off, to put it in the safe, you know, to give to the orphans later? And the first rocket of attack that morning hit three feet from him. You can imagine what happened. He was one of our first casualties.

I got hit in the wrist with some shrapnel during Vietnam, but I declined the Purple Heart, you know? The corpsman asked me if I wanted the Purple Heart and I told him *'No,'* because it was just a small injury, very small, and I told him *'Just stitch it up and let me get back to work.'* I've known a lot of guys in the Army, Navy, and Air Force, as well as the Marine Corps that have done the same thing, turned down the Purple Heart. The Purple Heart is given as an award for those who have been, how would you say -- wounded by the enemy. So, when I... when the guy asked me if I wanted a Purple Heart, all I could picture was a guy in a wheelchair with no legs; he gets the *same* medal. And I didn't feel that in good conscience I could take it from that. That's just me.

Hey, has anybody told any of the stories about tigers over there? (In Vietnam). You get in the deep jungles up north, they have tigers up there. No joke. And there were times when guys were attacked, and they had to fight off the tigers, I mean literally shooting tigers. If you've ever seen a tiger, their shoulders are about four-feet high. They are huge animals! And they weigh about eight-hundred pounds. I mean, they're not something you want to tangle with... and they can go from that back wall to here (Tom points at himself) in the blink of your eye. No joke, I've seen it. Yeah, they had tigers. (Laughs).

I didn't have an encounter over there. No. I've had two friends that had been up north and they had encounters, you know, in their first tour of Vietnam. But there are stories out there of guys encountering tigers, you know, having to fight them off, and such.

How about the last days of the war?

We were on night crew, and it was Dan O'Goss, he had a bunch of Mexican food from his grandmother, in Mexico, and he broke that out and we got a bunch of beers, a little bit of whiskey, and we sat out there drinking the beers and drinking the whisky, because we just gotten off. It was like six in the morning, and we had just gotten off work. And at seven thirty...we got a rocketed. We're like, *'We're having breakfast,'* you know? And the peace treaty went down at eight o'clock, right, so they rocketed us at seven thirty and then, whatever.

After I got done with Vietnam, I was in a place called Alameda, California, it's across the bay from San Francisco. We used to do color guards for the Oakland Raiders, you know, and the "As," -- the Oakland As -- at the time, right? And we did 'em over at the Coliseum. That was a lot of fun, 'cause once we got done doing the color guard, to open it up, we change clothes, they (management) let us back in; we had all free beer and food we wanted, all of it, on the manager, it was great.

What was service like after Vietnam?

You know, I've been to quite a few places, you know? I've been to forty of the fifty states, to Hawaii and Alaska, I've been a Puerto Rico, Canada, Mexico. I've been to Guam, Wake Island, Eniwetok Atoll, Peleliu and Palau. There were lots of operations in Korea.

I used to go down to the Philippines and up to Japan and then into Korea, a lot. I was in Korea working on war plans, a lot, you know, and doing operations up in Korea, quite a bit. I kept telling them, *'I don't have family up there and I don't own land, why do you keep sending me there?'* In fact, I've been all over the country, I mean literally all over South Korea. I was in Osan, Seoul...Osan's the best shopping place; that or Seoul, either one... I was on Pohang, Yecheon, I was in Pusan, on the west coast, and drove to both Kwangju. I've been to Taegu, and driven most of the places I needed to go. They'd give me a truck and say, *'Go over here and inspect this unit'* and I'd drive over there. I enjoyed Seoul; Seoul was great. And Osan was great. But like I said, I've been up to Panmunjom, you know, Inchon, things like that, so... Yeah, I've been to a lot of cool places. Korea's great, I love their food...of course I love food, every place I go, I love their food.

All over the Philippines, during the Philippine coup attempt. The coup attempt was kind of a non-starter; some people started a coup down there, and we went down and, you know, did some stuff, and we were gone. Been to Hong Kong a million times. Thailand. Singapore. Vietnam. Sailed through the Malacca Straits, which is heavy pirate territory, believe it or not. Sailed through the Horn of India. Went to the Iran rescue attempt, off the coast of Iran, when we were trying to do that.

In the Iran rescue attempt, there were, I think, forty or seventy people captured by the Iranians. They were out of our embassy, and we were going to go in and forcibly take them back; but unfortunately they crashed some planes, and it kinda canceled the operation, and we came out, you know, so... there was that.

Then I sailed down to Kenya, Mombasa Kenya. You gotta say it nice -- *Mombasa!* You've gotta put *something* into that....we were down in Mombasa, Kenya for a week. And then we sailed down to Perth and Fremantle, Australia. Then, we sailed back up to the Philippines, by Bali and Lombok, you know, through the Lombok straits.

And then, I was -- how do you say it -- *logistically important* during Desert Storm, right? I was in Hawaii, for Desert Storm, but I was getting phone calls at five in the morning, my time, from them at nine o'clock, their time, and they would give me lists of all the stuff that they needed, you know... bombs, rockets, missiles, guns, rifles, bullets, I mean, all this stuff, you know... food, lots of things, uniforms... and I'd make up lists, and I'd go on this secret '*squirrel*' computer I had, and I would pull stuff from, literally, all over the world: Sigonella, Italy, Korea, the *Dale* out in the middle of the Indian Ocean, I was just pulling all of this stuff, and you had to know how to do that, so I was kind of a major support for them in-country. And I got out right after Desert Storm.

Every place I have been in the world, with the exception of one, every place I've been, and that's quite a bit, I found something I like, you know. And so all of them had something to proffer, to tell me, '*Hey, I like here,*' you know...this is fun. Whether it be the beaches or the food or whatever, I love them. All except one.

And that was Kabul, Afghanistan. I have no need to go back to that place anyway, shape, or form.

What memories do you have?

When we got to Japan, my family and I lived there for three-and-a-half years, in Okinawa, Japan, and that was great! My two sons were born in Okinawa. And, when we got there, we were greeted, we were picked up by the staff, we were driven around, they got us into housing outside of the base, right? So, we lived out in the village for six, seven months, which was great, 'cause we're living in this tatami-matted, shoji-door house, you know? It was a real Japanese house out there. And we got to know the neighbors, you know? I learned to speak pretty good Japanese while I was there; it was a lot of fun.

Anytime you go to a culture, another culture, and this is just generally for everyone, you should learn to say: *please, thank you, excuse me, and where's the bathroom.* (Laughs). The important things, you know, because that way you can get along. And most other people in other countries, they appreciate you taking a moment to try and do that. You know, it's hugely important.

In Korea, 'thank you' is '*gomabseubnidain*' ...the Philippines...I'm trying to remember.... oh, it's '*salamat*' ... '*domo arigato*' in Japan. Of course, we used to say 'domo alligators' and, instead of '*domo arigato,*' we'd say 'don't touch the moustache,' instead of '*doitashimashite.*' (Laughs). You should learn a little bit. And the people love you because you're trying.... so, you go to Mexico and say '*cuánto cuesta*' (how much)...they love it, you know, you're trying to learn their language so you can communicate better. It's good stuff. Mainly in Japan, because I was there three-and-a-half years, I learned quite a bit of Japanese....I can't remember half of it, now.

Let's see...(Tom pulls out several photographs)...up here, you'll see me with a kind of an older guy...I look a little younger there...that man is called Pappy

Boyington. Pappy Boyington is a Medal of Honor recipient, in World War Two, okay? I have a story behind this...I had a friend of mine, he told me how the family of Pappy Boyington donated to the 214 -- his World War II squadron, the *Black Sheep* -- donated the watch and his wings. And so every year, at the Marine Corps Ball, the SEAL wears the watch...yeah, the SEAL wears the watch and the wings are worn by the most junior officer that's come in.

And I say. '*Yeah, I met him one time,*' and he came back and said, '*Oh, Tom...*' I thought *you son-of-a-gun*, so I went and got this picture, put in, and he was like '*Oh my gosh*'...you know, I felt good.

Anyway. This is me right here, dancing in Africa. If you're gonna go someplace, experience the culture, you know, get out there to have some fun.

Now these (photos) are gonna be kind of important, in a little bit. This is Panmunjom, up on the border of North and South Korea, okay? I got a lot more pictures of this, but down the center of these huts, there's a line, right? So, on one side of the hut, it's North Korea, on the other side it's South Korea, okay? This picture, I'm actually in this hut, standing inside North Korea. I'm on the North Korean side of the desk, and those are North Korean guards outside. Now, this building here is twenty-feet deep; if they grab you across that line they're gonna drag you through that twenty-foot building, and you will never... be seen... again. Trust me. Not a good place to go.

And, this is my Colonel and me, and we're being retired by a three-star general, Lieutenant General Moore, who was retired right after us. So, just kinda cool.

Do you still keep in touch?

I'm a touch of my old Colonel all the time. And we have what would be called a *Marine Net*, and we all send out jokes, and tell people what's going on, with people who've passed away, and who's doing well, whose son just may rank in the Marine Corps, and, plus, I've got a friend in San Jose that I've known since '73, when we both came back from Vietnam. I've got a friend that lives in Prescott, up here, and he and I were in the Corps together. He wasn't in Vietnam with me, but you know we're in the Corps together and... there's lots of people... 'Mad' Melvin Mushado, you know, all these colorful names, you know....so yeah, lots of people.

Every once in a while, we get together and shoot the breeze; 'course now it's all talking... it used to be, '*So what do you doing for a living?*' Now, it's like, '*Well, so how many grandchildren do you have?*'

Any other memories?

I did a lot of time on the sea. I have, like fifty-thousand nautical miles on the ocean. That's a lot! Sailed all over the world; it was great. It was marvelous! Not only were we hitting all these countries here and there, and seeing things from all over the

world, not only do we do that, but just being on the ocean, you know? I've seen whales jump out there, I saw that off of Bali. I've seen jellyfish that were like ten-feet around off the coast of Africa.

Also off the equator, we saw the green flash about five times, and it's not like it is in that Johnny Depp movie, okay? It's a real thing, and it's just gorgeous. It's right at sunset, and as the sun comes down on the water, when the top of the sun hits it, this green glow pops up. And it goes *thousand-one, thousand-two, thousand-three...* and it's gone! We saw it five times, and a lot of people who cross the equator never saw it. We felt very blessed on that.

We came out for a sunrise service on Easter morning, one time, there must have been three-hundred dolphin diving off the bow. You get out there, on the equator, and you're seeing the curvature of the earth, you know, the actual curvature of the earth. Beautiful things!

When we crossed in to the Lombok straits, coming out of the Indian Ocean, you could look back and actually see a line separating the Pacific and Indian Ocean. So you see some things that are just incredible. I've seen every color of flying fish that's out there. And they're all iridescent colors, trust me. They're all iridescent; just beautiful. It's incredibly cool. I've swam with sharks, too. (Laughs).

Now, I will say, that later in my career, my last job before I retired was on the Kabul Embassy security forces in Afghanistan. You know, you see these contractor guys with the beards, the sunglasses, and the hat, you know? And they've got all the weapons and all that junk...well, that's what I was doing. It was my last, big hurrah.

Talk about retirement.

Most of the guys I knew in Vietnam, and in the Corps throughout my career, we were kind of the same thought-process, that we figured, you know, we're gonna do this till it's not fun, anymore, and once it's not fun anymore, we're gonna go do something else in life. So, I did it for 23 years; I loved it and enjoyed it, but it just got to the point where it was becoming a pain to me, and I said, *'You know, it's time to go.'*

You've got to remember, you're doing a physical fitness test twice a year, right? You had to run three miles in, I think it was under twenty-six minutes or something, and you had to do sixty sit-ups...er...eighty sit-ups, in sixty-seconds...um...no, two-minutes, eighty sit-ups in two-minutes. And then you had to do your pull-ups and stuff like this. So, you're doing this every six months, and when you get over forty, that gets a little tougher. (Laughs). And, you know, you start gaining weight, just 'cause naturally you're gonna do.

This was '92, so I was almost 42 years old... no, I *was* 42, pardon me... just turned 42. Plus, you've got to go to the range, once a year, you've got to go to the rifle range and the pistol range -- each once a year -- so that's more time. You're always training, you're

always training, and I'm gonna tell you, whether you're working in the corporate-world or your working in the Marine Corps, or any of the services, for that matter, you never stop going to school, you are always going to some kind of a school. Always. You're learning new stuff all the time in there, all the time. It's great.

When did you actually retire?

The actual date was August 31, 1992, that's the actual date on the retirement certificate. Now, I took thirty-days leave or some six-weeks leave before that, 'cause I had a lotta leave left, you know? I had like sixty or forty-five days on the books, so I left mid-July and then what I did is flew back to Yuma from Hawaii. I retired out of Yuma, you know, and then just drove home.

What happened after that?

The Marine Corps gives you a retirement, okay? And they give you medical benefits for life, okay? So you have those two things. But you... to make a living wage, you still have to find a job. So I got a job. First, it was like Texaco because I just needed to have something, right, and then I found a job with Stratus technologies, and I worked with them for fourteen-and-a-half years.

And then I did Scottsdale Insurance Company for five-and-a-half years. And then I decided I needed... I was sixty-three, just about sixty-three, and I decided that I wanted *one more* adventure, and that's when I did the contracting on the Kabul Embassy Security Forces in Afghanistan, I did that till I was sixty-five.

I was making \$6800, net, every two weeks over there. (Laughs). Yeah. Impressive money! 'Course, we had an attack over there every week, you know? In the Marine Corps, I was making fifty-thousand a year, clear, right? As a contractor, I was making \$6800 dollars a month, pardon me, net, every two week; \$6800 net, every two weeks. That's a lot of pennies.

Did you join any veteran organizations?

I'm currently a life member of the VFW, Post 3513, over here in Scottsdale. I'm a member of the Disabled American Veterans, over in Scottsdale; life-member. I'm a member of the American Legion, and...that's it.

I ride a motorcycle all the time so, I'm on the VFW Riders, you know; past director of the Riders. We do bike runs, occasionally. We'll have a Saturday bike run and everybody contributes, you know? Ten bucks and then we'll have, what we call, a poker run, and stuff like this, and we'll get people to donate hamburgers and hot dogs, and we'll sell those, you know? And what we do with all that money, is we put it together and we help out homeless veterans. We help out homeless vets or anybody that's in need. We do this thing every year that's called *The Stand Up*, you know? They tell you '*Stand up for Stand Down.*' So, it's called *The Stand Down*, and we'll find a field

somewhere, and we done this is at a couple of high schools where we could use their football field, and we have barbers come in, volunteer their time, and people donate clothing, and we get all this toiletries and stuff together, and we just make up packages for the homeless vets that come. If they come in and they have a discharge papers, you know, or an ID card and they need help...take it. We have showers set up when we do that, all kinds of stuff...we're always trying to help veterans.

Then I personally help some veterans. I work with a lot of veterans on how to get their benefits under the VA, so I do a lot of studying on that, and working with veterans on that, personally.

How about reunions?

No, I haven't done that in years, you know but, I've got my fiftieth high school reunion coming up fairly soon. Yeah, and think I went to *one* reunion. We had it in Vegas, and you know, this is with a bunch of guys. I was in Cobras, you know, Air Cobras, and loading those up...and years later a bunch of the guys in HMA-369 and 169, which I was the boss in both, we'll say, right? '*We're gonna have reunion.*' and they said '*Okay we're gonna have everybody that can come that we're gonna get on this list.*' It was all sergeants and below. Well, I was the gunnery sergeant, which is a Staff NCO, what they call a non-commissioned officer in charge, and when I came, I expected to see, you know, all the sergeants and below, but a few officers and Staff NCOs, and stuff like that... I was the only one, of higher rank. And I said '*Why...why me?*', and they said, '*Cause you were the only one that took care of us.*' (Laughs). Well that's nice to know... so, that's one reunion I went to that was a lot of fun.

What's the last thing you can say about service?

Well...there's positive and negative stuff, you know? I've been diagnosed with PTSD and you know, your body, because...being in the Corps twenty-three-years, that is a very, very tough life. Not for the faint of heart, and it just tears your body up. I've got a lot of injuries attributed to that, stuff like that, but also it teaches you. I mean, it taught me... learning. Every day is a learning experience. Every...single...day...you gotta learned something. Every day you gotta learn something, right? Take as many courses as you can, use your benefits, go to college, you know? I mean people are screaming about free college...four years in the service, guess what...you get your GI bill, you got free college, you know?

The places I've been, the opportunities I've had, the discipline that I was given by the Marine Corps, you know, is huge. And every service will give you a form of discipline, you know? A lot of positives, tons and tons... 'course I'm kind of a positive person, anyway.

Special Bonus: Tom describes the infamous Shellback Ceremony.

When you cross the equator on a ship, right, you go through what is called a *Shellback Ceremony*. Because you're a '*slimy pollywog*' up until that time, you're initiated into the '*Ancient mysteries of the deep*.' Let's just say, it's not pleasant, but you're glad when it's over. (Laughs). And I've got a tattoo for that, you know, because you wanna take care of business.

It actually starts with the ancient Romans and the Greeks, you know? And what they used to do, is when they crossed the equator, they had to appease the god Neptune. So, they have a ceremony of some kind, and they, you know, burn incense and do some different things, sacrifice food... well this grew into, over the years, this insane thing... and I'll tell you about it if it's okay.

The old *Shellback Ceremony*... first you had a party the night before. And I mean, we had music, we were throwing ice cream at each other down on the hangar deck, and I mean... great food, steak and lobster, you know, for dinner. I mean just a wonderful evening. Well then, everybody starts going to bed...and the fun starts. You got Shellbacks running around, messin' with the Pollywogs---that's what you are before you cross the equator on a ship-- and Pollywogs running around messin' with the Shellbacks, 'cause we know tomorrow morning, we've got the ceremony. Right after breakfast, the chow hall shuts down, and they start calling units. So the units gets up there, and you're sitting there, you got all your clothes inside-out and backwards, okay? If you could imagine?

And you walk up, and you have a summons, you know? And I took my summons up and I hand it to this other guy I knew, this E5, and I said, '*Here you go*.' And all these people are on their hands and knees, right, and he goes, '*Oh, here, put that in your pocket, you might wanna save that...*' and, he took his shillelagh, which is a three-inch fire hose, about three-feet long, with one end taped for a handle, and they wet it down, and they crack you in the butt. (Laughs) It's like....*Whack!* And it's like....*'Whoa!'*

That's the beginning. The elevators is coming down, you know, it's dramatic, you know... the elevator is coming down, and all you hear is *Boom Boom! Ba-Ba-Boom! Ba-Ba-Boom! Boom Boom!* And it's the Shellbacks, slamming their shillelachs on the deck. And then they come out, and they herd you out onto the elevator, and they start shooting you with fire hoses from above, 'cause they wanna wash off that '*slimy*' surface the Pollywogs have. And we got up on the deck and they herd us over to this big tray and it's got a bunch of beans in it. And they said, '*Have breakfast!*' '*No, I had breakfast.*' *Whack!*

So, you put your face in this, and now they come up and they'll smear some on you, and then you go to this next thing, and they got packing material, and they put a beard on you, you know? (Laughs). Then you crawl to the next one, and they got the royal doctor...pardon, the Royal Surgeon, I guess it is, and the Royal Barber, right? Well, you go to the Royal Surgeon, and he'll shoot...*Tabasco*...some place you don't want it to go, but, hey, it *goes* there, and then you go over to the barber, and he'll clip hair off of any part of your body he wants to, right?

And then, you move on, to the Royal Court. Now, the night before, each unit puts a guy up for the '*Bevy of Beauties*' -- this is before they had women on ship -- so, each unit dresses a guy in drag for the '*Bevy of Beauties*,' that are to adorn the senior Shellback the next day.

So they have a beauty contest. Well then, you've got the '*Bevy of Beauties*' on the Royal Court, and I got in-front of Neptune, and he says, '*Kiss Miss Piggy's foot*,' 'cause one guy was dressed as Miss Piggy. So, I bit the guy's toe, and they shillelaghed me, you know? Then I go over, and there's toilets strapped to the deck, with salt water in them, and they said, '*Wash your face!*' So you go in there, like this, with your hands up, and they go *Whack!* '*Not with your hands!*' So you put your face in there and (Tom makes bubble sounds)... and then you go through this thing where they're just *whacking* you, all the way over. And then you get into this one tube, and you squeeze on through this tube, you know? And you come outta that, and *Whack! Whack! Whack! Whack! Whack!*

Then you've got the Royal Undertaker; and you jump in this thing, and you're in this water, garbage water, up to your neck, and they just bang the sides. So, you get out of that, and you crawl over to this other thing, and you get up into this big tub that they've made, that is about five-feet deep in garbage water...nothing that will really hurt you...but, they say, '*Play submarine! Go!*' And, it's like, from here to that wall, and you just swim. When you come out, somebody's gonna get in your face and say, '*What are YOU!*' And you say, '*I'M A SHELLBACK!*' And they say, '*Congratulations. Get out!*'

Now, it's over, and what we did, as we were in the Indian Ocean, of course, and you're on the back deck, and they've got hoses strapped to the deck so you can rinse everything off... and, this is what you do... you strip off your T-shirt and your skivvies, right? 'Cause remember everything's inside-out and backwards, and you throw it over the side. Well, then you look back -- this is during the Cold War --you look back and there's a Russian Troller picking up all the underwear. (Laughs).

And one of my troops says, '*What are they gonna do with that?*' And I said, '*Well, first they're gonna get a list of names, from all the underwear, and then they're gonna take it, wash it, and sell it on the black market in Russia.*' (Laughs).

So anyway, that's your *Shellback Ceremony*. What you do is you get, it's an official record-book entry, page 13 for the Navy; page 11 for the Marines. You get a card, with the ship's orders stamped, you get a certificate that's beautiful; my dad, me, and one of my son's has one, right? We're all Shellbacks. And then, if you're smart (Tom rolls up his sleeve to show tattoo), you get the ship you were on, the date it went down, the place you went down, and you get your little shellback, right. And the reason you do that is because people have been known to '*lose your record book*' for a day (he winks), when you're crossing the equator. Or you forget your card, you know? So, anyway...that's the Shellback. (Laughs). The ancient mysteries of the deep.

It's a pretty cool honor, you know, to be a Shellback. It's really neat. Something unique. An experience. And, today, it's nothing like that. It's not even close to

that. You know, I think they do this (Tom lightly slaps his hand) or something, I don't know. (Laughs).