

Veterans interviews – RETURN TO: Judy Allen, Choctaw Historic Projects, PO Box 1210, Durant OK 74702 – judy.allen@choctawnation.com. 580.513.7984.

Interviewed by Glenn Johnson, February 2023

NAME: Kenneth Vargas Birthday: Apr 13, 1966

PHONE: [REDACTED]

ADDRESS: [REDACTED], TX [REDACTED]

In which branch did you enter? US Navy Units: Spain, Fallujah, Iraq, CA

Drafted or Enlisted? Enlisted for first 10 years, then became and Officer, LtCmdr was highest rank.

(If enlisted) Why did you choose that branch? Had considered the Marines, but his Father felt the specialities in the Navy would have better post military options, but he considered the Marines both when enlisted and when becoming an officer, but he felt better suited for the Navy career options.

Years served – from 1985 to 2016

Where attended basic training: San Diego, CA

WHERE DID YOU SERVE

Several places including CA, Iraq, Fallujah, Spain

What was your job while in service? Corpsman for 1st 10 years on the enlisted side, then switched to Civil Engineer Corps once he became an officer.

Special friends you made in service: In Fallujah he was serving with the Marines with the HQ element, and he met a Columbian American named Ruben Chonna who was an ensign, but was very well educated. They both spoke Spanish so bonded well. He also became good friends with Capt Mohr, who mentored him when he worked in dental support in San Francisco.

Any commanding officers that you especially remember?

Admiral Cellon was his boss when he was a new officer, and mentored him well. He listened and explained things well, rather than be hard on him. He taught him how to be fair and reasonable and do his job in a responsible manner. He also had fond memories of Capt Mohr, who was a surgeon that had served in Vietnam, and gave him work and life advice. He even attended his wedding a few years later and they stay in touch.

Were there any animals (work or pet) around the areas you served?

No

If serving overseas, were there any civilians you met or made contact with who you would like to mention making an impact on you or your life?

He worked with a lot of civilians because the construction contracts were implemented by civilian agencies and had positive memories of their understanding of the military and ability to build to military standards.

Was there a point during your service, that you decided the military was, or was not, the right career choice? After Making 03 he had to do a lot of school including grad school, which made life very busy and he questioned if he had time for it. It was a stressful time that made him feel it might be easier on the civilian side, but he stuck it out.

Is there a battle or point during your service that you would like to describe so that future generations can better understand what military life can be – for better or worse?

For anyone interested in civil engineering, he recommends it because young officers are trusted with huge contracts and making decisions that would take years to get to on the civilian side. He agrees its important to pick a speciality that you can use after you get out of the military.

MEDALS AND CITATIONS RECEIVED
GWOT, OIF, Joint Combat

Stories of Service:

1. What or who did you leave behind when you joined the service? (family, child, pet)

He was eager and ready to join, so didn't think in terms of leaving anything behind.

2. How did you get to your initial point of entry? Flew from DFW to San Diego along with 2 other recruits.
3. What type of training or schooling did you have? (Advance Course Warrant Officer Basic, Warrant Officer Advance, Warrant Officer Senior Course, "Boot-strap" Command and General Staff College or equivalent, War College or equivalent (getting a degree-either Bachelors, Masters or PhD).

Boot Camp, "A" school for dental support, Surgery rotation at San Fran, OCS at Pensacola, Civil Engineering School at Port Hueneme, CA.

4. What is your most vivid memory of your time training or in school? What was the best part? What was the worst part? Serving in a combat zone in Fallujah, where he wasn't supposed to go, but his orders changed at the last minute from Guam. They had warnings for incoming mortar shells regularly and his friends helped him through it. He represented his Bn to the Marines in building things to improve their staging area. He is proud that they worked closely with all supported agencies with no turf battles or internal conflict.
5. What was your first assignment after basic training? On the dental side in San Fran as a dental corpsman.
6. Did you receive any specialized training? He continued to receive training throughout his career and was often in night school.
7. Do you recall your instructors? If so, what were they like? At boot camp he remembers his Company Commander, who led by teaching them how to be a sailor, not with fear and screaming.

8. Did you qualify with equipment (vehicles, aircraft, radios, weapons, etc.)?
(If Yes) What was training with that equipment like? Qualified with the pistol and M16 rifle, and the 50 cal, and could also drive several military vehicles and operate their comm equipment.
9. What was the hardest part of training? OCS was rough because you had to do everything yourself, including the classes, taking care of your personal gear, and the challenge of surviving on 4-5 hours of sleep a night. Sleep deprivation was a part of the training.
10. Did you receive any promotions? Could you tell me about them? He started out enlisted and eventually transitioned to being an officer and retired as a LtCmdr.
11. What was the hardest part of the military life-style for you to adapt to? Why do you think it was?

His service was made easier because when he was in Cub Scouts for 3 years, their leaders had prior military experience and used those principles and it prepared him well. One thing he didn't like was peers who wasn't as committed as he felt they should be.

12. What was the easiest part of the military life-style for you to adapt to? Why do you think it was?

His Cub scout experience prepared him and made it easier.

Wartime Service .

1. Where did you serve? Fallujah in 2004, Iraq in 2006.
2. Were you in a combat, combat support, or combat service support role? Or did the war zone make that designation irrelevant? A mixture of combat and combat service support.
3. (If combat/ wartime) How did your combat (wartime) experience change you? It made him grow his faith and he became a better officer and person as a result. The pressure of the situation and the number of things happening at such a pace gave him many life lessons and made him a better person.
4. What kinds of friendships and camaraderie did you form while serving, and with whom?

The Navy has a brotherhood that allowed for quick friendships with a bond that they had each others back.

5. How did you stay in touch with family and friends? Facebook makes it easy and he enjoys reaching out to many of them.
6. What did you do for recreation or when you were off duty? He enjoys outdoor activities such as hunting for deer, ducks and wild hogs, and fished to catch catfish, croppie and bass.
7. Do you recall any particularly humorous or unusual events? At OCS he had an enlisted friend come in to give him his first salute, and that friend (Stan Thompson) joined him when he was in Rota, Spain when returning from the war zone. They had a lot of laughs together.
8. Was there something you did for "good luck?" Yes, he took a pair of underwear from his Dad, and would wear them when on a combat mission.
9. What was the best part of your service experience? The 2 years in a war zone. That's when he grew the most.

Reflections

1. How did your military service experiences affect your life? It's all still a part of his life and he uses the terms and lessons learned on a daily basis. He has to work on not resenting civilians at times.
2. What are some life lessons you learned from your military service? The biggest lesson was that you have to keep on "keeping on" no matter what happens. He admired a Chaplain who would put his life in danger in order to see troops in a war zone and saw how living your faith has to be done no matter what's going on.
3. How has your military service impacted your feelings about war and the military in general? He knows that duty is duty and the military is going to do what is asked, but hopes politicians are competent and doing what needs to be done to avoid war when possible.

Conclusion

Thank you for taking the time to share your recollections of your military service.

1. Is there anything you would like to add that we have not covered in this interview? Every duty station he had offered unique cultural opportunities, and he's glad he took the time to do local things, like Karate in Okinawa, wines in Napa and Spain, and he loved bullfights in Spain. In general his advice was to take advantage of local things when travelling or stationed at different bases.
2. Is there anything else we should talk about that we haven't covered? He had very fond memories of the Navy using him to speak to Native Americans during Native American history events and also to recruit others. He enjoyed representing the Choctaw Nation and telling our history. He was also appreciative of Chief Pyle for writing him a strong letter of recommendation when he applied for OCS. Chief Pyle also did this for his sister when she was applying to medical school.
3. What do you wish more people knew about veterans? That when veterans come back, civilians don't know the hardships they have faced, and a negative experience can impact their mental health. Suicide rates are high and we all need to show appreciation to veterans.

Questions about your non-military life:

Where were you born and who were your parents? Lima Peru, parents were Caesar and Linda Vargas. Linda was 50% Choctaw.

Where did you go to school? Bridgeport, TX, college in S America, and UT Arlington for Undergrad, and UT Austin for Civil Engineering.

What did you do for fun growing up? Lettered 4 years in Tennis, fishing

Did you have brothers and sisters? 1 sister who became an MD, 1 brother who lives near him.

What are some family traditions that have been passed down?

Going to Tushkahomma for the Labor day festival, as well as the Veteran's ceremony, and a Peruvian breakfast dish they still love. His wife's also has brought traditions from her Cuban heritage.

How would you describe yourself? Extroverted, happy go lucky but he sometimes overthinks things, and his Catholic Faith is very important.

How has COVID 19 affected your life? With schools closing he is glad he has been able to be home to help with their schooling and it has allows him to be more involved with his kids that normal.

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