

Veteran Finds Lasting Gratification in Highland Beach

John Shoemaker

This is about a Veteran who does not believe he is a hero since he was not a combat soldier. "I am proud to be a Veteran, but am definitely not a hero. I was certainly nowhere near the "tip of the spear", he said. You be the judge as I report his story.

Originally from New Jersey, Rick Greenwald, who lives in the Bel Lido neighborhood, attended Princeton University from which he graduated cum laude in Politics. He went on to medical school at Mt. Sinai in New York and earned recognition as the Class Valedictorian. Following graduation, he began his internship and residency in Internal Medicine at Mount Sinai.

In 1971, the war in Vietnam was ongoing and the military was in chronic need of physicians. Dr. Greenwald volunteered for the "Berry Plan" which fixed a date of service at the completion of residency. In 1974, Captain Greenwald was assigned to Fort Monmouth's Patterson Army Hospital where he worked happily as an Internist in his clinic and as an attending physician in the hospital.

He, his wife Shelley, and their infant son Brian lived a few minutes from the base. Early one evening he was suddenly called to see the commanding Colonel. He was told that he was being sent on a "secret mission". Emergency inoculations for cholera and typhoid, issuance of dog tags, Geneva convention card, and temporary orders followed and by the next morning, Captain Greenwald was transported to his temporary duty assignment attached to a MASH unit stationed at Fort Meade in Maryland. Having never been to basic training (the Army was very short on doctors that year), he was both mystified and somewhat alarmed by the issuance of web gear, ammunition pouches, entrenching tools, and mess kits dispensed by the quartermaster.

Finally, the "secret mission" was revealed as the unit's chartered plane arrive in Hawaii en route to Guam. They were sent there to support "Operation New Life".

In the Spring of 1975, the South Vietnamese government was collapsing. Hundreds of thousands of refugees were fleeing the advancing North Vietnamese as they swept down the coast and into Saigon.

People were desperate to get out. At first, it was mainly high-level officials, the highly educated, wealthy, and U.S. partners who helped us during the war. Then came a flood of others, including families of the Vietnamese military, politicians, Catholics, and others who knew their lives were at stake. Finally, tens of thousands more came who were destitute, desperate boat people rescued after days or weeks on crowded vessels with little or no water, food, or sanitation.

For the next couple of months, in the newly erected tent city constructed by the Seabees at Orote Point, the medical team worked 12-16 hour days providing for the medical needs of the refugees. There were endless lines of patients of all ages and all conditions. There were abscesses, old infected and neglected wounds, gastroenteritis, measles, and life-threatening dehydration in infants and children. In addition to the usual respiratory infections, types of pneumonia, heart disease, breaks, and sprains, there were conditions Rick had read about but never seen—dengue fever, malaria, severe dysentery, Ascaris and other worms, and many more tropical diseases.

The working conditions in the hot tropical climate made life difficult for all. Even so, Rick found the experience "most gratifying". Antibiotics, anti-parasitic medications, hydration measures, and simple surgical and wound care were working wonders. It was a marvelous lesson in the delivery of public

health with an emphasis on the team required to feed and provide housing, clean water, and appropriate sewage facilities for an instantly created “city” in a setting with a climate not unlike South Florida.

Camp Rainbow at Orote Point could handle up to 50,000 refugees providing for medical needs, processing, and transport to resettlement camps in the U.S. It was chaotic and as fast as it was started, it ended. Over 130,000 refugees were treated and managed while the North Vietnamese captured the entire country. The memorable fall of the U.S. Embassy and the “Miss Saigon” helicopter evacuation occurred amid “Operation New Life”.

At Orote Point, the U.S. armed forces had done a masterful job. Rick admitted to being amazed at the capability of the Army and the Navy’s Seabees, impressed by the teamwork, diversity of skill and personalities, and the competence level of so many who could deliver results on short notice on such a massive scale. The logistics and resources brought to bear were truly remarkable.

Returning to Ft. Monmouth as a Major, Rick was assigned to a part-clinical, part-administrative role as head of the E.R. and outpatient clinics. After completing his military obligation in 1976, Rick went to Jackson Memorial Hospital at the University of Miami to complete a Fellowship in Gastroenterology.

Obtaining Board Certification in both Internal Medicine and Gastroenterology Rick and two gastroenterology friends (both military veterans) opened a private medical practice in Boca Raton in 1978. The practice grew to seven physicians and developed an excellent reputation.

After 20 years, looking for new challenges, Rick left the practice to assume the role of “Vice President for Medical Affairs” at Boca Raton Community Hospital, a senior leadership position reporting directly to the CEO. An additional opportunity arose for the hospital when FAU and the University of Miami worked to form a regional campus of the Miami Medical School at FAU. Rick supported the recruitment of the voluntary medical faculty and as a lecturer and course director.

After 11 years, he left the hospital to become an employed Professor of Clinical Biomedical Science at FAU’s Schmidt College of Medicine.

One day, while serving on the Admission Committee (Rick was Chair for the Inaugural FAU class) he interviewed a very capable, talented Vietnamese American candidate with a focused desire to be a doctor. She revealed her parents had left Vietnam and gone through Camp Rainbow, Orote Point, penniless, on their way to a new life in the U.S. For Rick, it was one of those “American Dream” moments. One of those times that makes everything worthwhile.

Rick retired from FAU in 2013, although he continued to actively teach until Covid hit. He remains on committees as the second longest-tenured affiliated faculty professor with his original appointment dating to 1998.

Rick met his wife Shelley in college on a blind date and has been married since 1968. They have 2 sons. Brian lives in Annapolis, has a Ph.D. from George Washington, and is a Professor of History and Director of the Deaf Documentary Center at Gallaudet University. Michael attended the University of Virginia and Duke Law School, resides in Boca Raton, and is a founding partner in a boutique law firm that specializes in consumer protection. Both boys have boats and enjoy taking dad fishing. They are fond of reminding their parents that they are both doctors, one a Ph.D. and one a JD. The Greenwalds have three grandchildren, two boys in Annapolis and a girl in Boca.

Living in Highland Beach for 25 years, the Greenwalds love the ocean, walking to the beach, and the perfectly named Tranquility Drive. They enjoy the sunsets seen from their deck on “Lake Highland Beach” and the dock where they no longer have a boat, but even better have a son who can pick them up and drop them off. Rick and Shelley travel extensively during non-Covid times and always look forward to the next adventure.

While it has been years since he was active on the Boards of Boca Hospital, Hospice By The Sea, or the Palm Beach County Medical Society, Rick continues his efforts to support our community with past membership on our Charter Review Board and current membership on the Financial Advisory Board.

Clearly, he is a hero of Highland Beach.

For more information on Operation New Life

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_New_Life

