

UNITED STATES ARMY
CENTER OF MILITARY HISTORY
INTERVIEW OF
CWO TONY DENICOLA
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TAPE TRANSCRIPTION

P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. KILLBLANE: Interview with CWO Tony DeNicola, 24 July 2001. Okay, would you start out and tell me when you got to Vietnam?

CWO DENICOLA: I got there in June of '67.

MR. KILLBLANE: June of '67?

CWO DENICOLA: Yes

MR. KILLBLANE: Okay, and you were with the 159th [Transportation Battalion]?

CWO DENICOLA: Yes, I landed at Tan Son Nhut, stayed at Bien Hoa for a week, and then moved up to Qui Nhon where I was assigned to the 159th. Colonel Thatcher was battalion commander at that time but he was ready to rotate. A few weeks later, he left and Colonel[Charles] Sunder came in, and he was battalion commander for the remainder of my time there.

We stayed in Qui Nhon until just after the Tet Offensive of '68 when we shipped out, via a Navy LSD, up to Wunder Beach, We hit the beach up there a couple of days later and that is where I spent the rest of my first tour. I was the Battalion Marine Maintenance Officer in Qui Nhon but when I got up to Wunder Beach, we didn't have as much floating equipment as we had in Qui Nhon so Colonel Sunder assigned me as the Maintenance Officer of the BARC Company (Provisional). I was also assigned

as the Detachment Commander of the 554th BARC Detachment, a detachment attached to the BARC Company. The Company Commander was the Commanding Officer of the BARC Company (Provisional) and a Detachment Commander of one of the detachments. The Executive Officer was the Detachment Commander of the other detachment. The BARC Company (Provisional) was made up of three detachments. That is how we were organized in the BARC outfit.

MR. KILLBLANE: So why did he move you to the BARC Company?

CWO DENICOLA: Well, because when we were in Qui Nhon, I had two companies of Mike boats [LCM], four LCUs, and I think we had some LARC 5's there but I really can't remember. We had a lot of floating equipment such as the 60-ton and 100-ton floating cranes. We had a floating refrigeration barge and a POL barge. Anyway, we had a lot of floating equipment so the battalion needed a marine maintenance officer. I was in the battalion S4 shop. I worked for a guy named Jack McCutchin, who was the Assistant [S]Four. I was the marine maintenance officer, and a guy named Jerry Vaughn was the wheeled vehicle maintenance officer. He passed away when I was over there during my second tour. He was from the western part of Virginia.

After we moved up North, we didn't have near the floating equipment. We had the BARCs and we had some LARCs that had come over from Okinawa. I believe that's where they came from.

MR. KILLBLANE: I think, Thailand?

CWO DENICOLA: Yes, you're right, Thailand. I believe those were LARC 15's. So not having the requirement for a marine maintenance officer at the battalion level, Colonel Sunder felt it was more necessary to move me to the BARC Company. My main concern at that time was the BARCs because we were having a lot of maintenance problems with them. So he just said, "You go over there and be the maintenance officer of the BARC Company and detachment commander of the 554th." So that's how I ended up over there.

MR. KILLBLANE: Oh, okay, dual-hatted. All right, what was the 159th like when you arrived there?

CWO DENICOLA: It was a good outfit, a lot of spirit and just a nice group of people to be working with. There was a big turnover just about the time I got there because people were rotating out and all the new ones were rotating in.

So within a month, I would say the whole battalion changed over, I guess four to six weeks. We had a new S4, new assistant S4. The S3 was new. The S2, the S1 all changed over. So it was really kind of a nice situation in that we were all acclimating to being in Vietnam and we were all growing together during this experience.

So we all kind of really grew tight. We got really tight to the point that when we came back from that tour, between my first and second tour in Vietnam, we had a reunion over at Fort Story.

And then the following year, we had a big picnic out at Newport News Park. Even some of the Marines that were attached to us at Wunder Beach showed up for that one. We had a Marine POL [Petroleum-Oil-Lubricants] detachment attached to us. A First Lieutenant named Neal Crane was the CO [Commanding Officer] of that unit for awhile.

We were really a close, close group of guys. We all got along well with each other. When we got up to the beach, of course, you're going into an area that's been inhabited by the locals and you don't know what to expect. I don't know whether you have had an opportunity to read Colonel Sunder's diary. It's pretty interesting.

MR. KILLBLANE: Not just yet.

CWO DENICOLA: I think his diary covers the first seventeen to twenty days on the beach, something like that. I have a copy of it and I'm going to start taking excerpts out of it for subsequent newsletters. It's really interesting. As I read through that thing it brought back a lot of memories, some funny some nice.

I remember the night before we hit the beach. We arrived at a position just off the beach about mid-afternoon, I would say. Colonel Sunder had made the decision that if we didn't get in early, we weren't going to hit the beach until the next day because he wanted to have a lot of light for everybody to get in there and dig in. It was a beautiful sun-shiny day and everybody was saying, "Oh, this is great. We'll be able to get in on the beach and dig in, in the morning."

Well, about 2:00 in the morning, it started to rain. And I think it rained for a month-and-a-half after that. It seemed like it never stopped. We hit the beach the next morning. Everybody and

everything was wet. I don't think anybody had anything dry left. Even stuff in our footlockers was damp, not wet but damp.

That first day we all dug in and some of us slept in bunkers that were no more than shallow holes. We used PSP for a roof and spread ponchos over it trying to keep dry but it was impossible. We got a little ingenious after that. We took CONEX containers and made hooches out of them.

MR. KILLBLANE: Those things get hot, don't they?

CWO DENICOLA: Well, I'll tell you, the way we did it, they didn't because myself and three of the lieutenants got two CONEX containers, the full CONEX containers, and put them facing each other about ten feet apart. Then we took a half CONEX and put it on the side to form an enclosure closed on three sides. Then we just opened all the doors on them to fill in the gaps and we put PSP over the top. We then bulldozed sand up as far up on the sides as we could. After awhile we sandbagged up to the top of the boxes and over the top. It was quite pleasant inside with all the sand over and around us.

You could put two bunks and a dresser in each one of those big CONEX's and we had a fridge [refrigerator] in the half CONEX. We had scrounged up a couple of 60KW generators before we went up north. We took those up with us so we had power up there. We cooked using sterno. When we couldn't get sterno we would take a four-pound block of C4 and cut off a chunk of it and throw it in the sterno can and it would burn nice and hot for you. But that's the way we did most of our cooking.

MR. KILLBLANE: Now, how long was it before you finally got to set up your CONEX's?

CWO DENICOLA: That was about the second or third day because we had to get out of those bunkers. The first night, I remember I was in a bunker that was about this wide and there were five of us in there.

MR. KILLBLANE: It's the width from finger to finger on your arms stretched out.

CWO DENICOLA: There were five of us in there and it was so low that you couldn't sit up. You rolled over and crawled out of a small hole in the side. And it wasn't long enough to stretch out completely. You lay there with your knees drawn up.

And, of course, it was raining but the rain wasn't coming through, but five guys breathing in there caused the condensation to form and drip on you. It was too hot to stay in the sleeping bag, yet, you didn't want that water dripping on you all night. That was a sleepless night. And then right outside -- I mean, from here to the wall there, they set up an 81-millimeter mortar team. So all night, you heard, "Whoom."

MR. KILLBLANE: It's not even fifteen feet away?

CWO DENICOLA: Yes, about fifteen feet. You would hear the rocket leave the tube and then you would lie there and you would count, "One thousand one, one thousand two etc. boom." You would hear it go off. Most of them were flares being fired.

MR. KILLBLANE: Oh, I see.

CWO DENICOLA: So you would hear it pop when it left the tube. Then every once in awhile, you would count, "One thousand one, one thousand two -- thirty," it didn't go off. Those were duds. So that was that first night for me up there on Wunder Beach.

Once we got in those CONEX containers, I stayed there for I guess about a month before Colonel Sunder decided that I needed to be over there with the BARCs full time. That's where I was spending most of my time, anyway.

I was really battalion marine maintenance officer, officer, but the major thing I was working on was the BARCs. So he just put me over there. They needed a detachment commander, anyway, so he put me over there as detachment commander and maintenance officer.

So I moved over to, actually, a nicer bunker. It was a nice big bunker and there were three of us that lived in there, the CO [Commanding Officer], the XO [Executive Officer], and myself. And that's where we stayed the next three months until I rotated. We just kept those BARCs going. We had lost one BARC down at the beach. It was about, I would say, maybe half kilometer outside the northern perimeter.

MR. KILLBLANE: How did you lose it?

CWO DENICOLA: It broached. They were coming in with a load of stuff and they lost it coming in and it broached.

MR. KILLBLANE: Why? What were they doing to cause them to broach?

CWO DENICOLA: I don't know whether they lost engines or what. I really can't remember what the circumstances were or whether it was the surf that just started carrying them up north there a little bit, but they got I would say 500 meters north of the beach and then broached up on the beach. We never could get them off the beach.

MR. KILLBLANE: What do you mean by "broach?"

CWO DENICOLA: It went sideways up on the beach and just got stuck there. It just started having sand pile up on it. There was no getting it off of there after that.

MR. KILLBLANE: So you just left it there?

CWO DENICOLA: We had to leave it there.

MR. KILLBLANE: Oh, okay.

CWO DENICOLA: We got the crew off of it. I don't even really remember the circumstances behind the whole thing. I just remember that the BARC was up there on the beach and you could see it from our perimeter. We did go up there and salvage some parts off of it.

Other than that, I really enjoyed that four months on the beach, better even than my second tour over there. I was engineer on a tanker. So I had a nice air-conditioned stateroom to live in and we just ran fuel up and down the coast. But that four months on the beach, to me, was probably the most memorable part of all my time the two years I was in Vietnam.

MR. KILLBLANE: Why?

CWO DENICOLA: The people, primarily, and the mission. It was a heck of a mission. We moved a lot of cargo over that beach. We did have some good things that we did in Qui Nhon. We opened up a small site up in Duc Pho. I flew up there with Colonel Sunder once or twice to see if we could get an LCU through the cut into the small cove.

Anyway, we went up there and looked at the harbor to see if we could make an operation there. We had a refrigeration barge up there too.

MR. KILLBLANE: Why did you need to set up an operation there?

CWO DENICOLA: To supply the people that were in that area, the infantry. I think the AMERICAL Division was up there at that time. But, again, it's so vague to me.

MR. KILLBLANE: Was that a LOTS [logistics-over-the-shore] operation there?

CWO DENICOLA: No, that was just -- well, yes, in essence, it was because the LCU's were taking stuff into Duc Pho and off-loading there. But I think it was primarily ammunition just to support those troops. So, yes, I would say it was a small LOTS operation, nothing to compare with Wunder Beach though.

Wunder Beach, was set up with the causeway for the LSTs and then, after awhile, we even had a short causeway that LCUs could use.

MR. KILLBLANE: Two different causeways?

CWO DENICOLA: They had two causeways for awhile. The short one was not very long. I think it was maybe only 100 feet.

MR. KILLBLANE: Who set that one up?

CWO DENICOLA: I think the Seabees did. Then there was a sandbar where the boats, LCMs and LCUs, really couldn't get past to get onto the beach. We had some come in but they would always ground out on that sandbar. So I'm not sure whether it was the Seabees or who, but they strung a bunch of primacord down this sandbar and they tried to blow the sandbar, but it built right back up again. It was an unsuccessful attempt to make a landing-friendly beach for landing craft. So we just ended up just using the causeways, primarily, and of course, the BARCs and the LARCs.

MR. KILLBLANE: How did you guys get the name, "Sunder's Wunders?"

CWO DENICOLA: Well, when we were down in Qui Nhon, some of the guys got to know our reputation and they would say, "You guys can do anything. How do you guys accomplish some of the things you accomplish?" Of course some of it was by hook and by crook, you know. I don't know all the particulars on some of them but I know some of them were a little on the shaky side.

But we were able to do just what had to be done and we would keep boats going and the cargo moving. We kept rolling equipment going in various and sundry ways. But the term just sort of picked up. So within two or three months, all of our jeeps had "SUNDERS WUNDERS" on the front of them. And of course, Colonel Sunder's jeep had, "SUNDER HIMSELF." There's a funny little story about Qui Nhon. Hill 131 was right across the bay from our operations tower and we had a quad 40MM battery up on top of that hill. Just below the hill to the north was Marketime, which was a Navy base and they had a squadron of swift boats there. We were always competing with the Navy in any way we could.

The Army-Navy game came up that year so we put up a big sign up on Hill 131, facing down to Marketime that said, "Go Army. Beat Navy. And it was signed SUNDERS WUNDERS. That year Army blew it really bad and lost the game. The next morning, the CO of the Navy base had a sign facing over to our operations tower and it read, "Army Blunders While Sunder Wonders."

I mentioned that to Charlie and he said, "I don't remember that." I don't suppose He would want to remember that. But we had a nice club there in Qui Nhon and had a lot of good times there. We worked a twelve-hour day there. We worked twelve on and twelve off. We worked 7:00 to 7:00. When we got back to the Q [quarters] that evening, we partied the rest of the night until we crashed and then would get up the next morning and do it again.

MR. KILLBLANE: Let me ask you. One of the things I find about transporters is that they're just so damned busy, they really don't seem to have time for rituals or traditions like, say, the infantry. Was there anything that you guys had started while you were over there or carried on?

CWO DENICOLA: Not that I could specifically think of.

MR. KILLBLANE: All right, now, you're heading North. Now, do you remember Colonel Sunder giving you a speech or anything to get you guys geared up for what you were about to do?

CWO DENICOLA: Oh, we had a staff meeting, our traditional staff meeting. We had a staff meeting once a week, as I recall. I may have missed some of this because I was headed for R&R [rest and recuperation]. I happened to be in Saigon when the Tet Offensive [of 1968] action was started so I was out of the country and then back in a week later. I think it was the next day or two when we moved out for up North.

MR. KILLBLANE: So you weren't with the 159th when they got the word that they were going to do the LOTS operation?

CWO DENICOLA: Yes, I was there when we got the word but I was gone for a week just prior to our actual move. I knew we were going to move as soon as I got back from R&R.

MR. KILLBLANE: Why is that?

CWO DENICOLA: Pardon me?

MR. KILLBLANE: Why did you know you were going to move?

CWO DENICOLA: Because it was already out in the staff meetings that we were going to head North, that the battalion was going to move North. As a matter of fact, that's when we went out to the valley, to the depot, and scrounged up those generators. So we had stuff all staged ready to load onto the ships.

MR. KILLBLANE: Then you went on R&R?

CWO DENICOLA: Then I went on R&R, got back from R&R, and like I say, within a day or two after I got back from R&R, we were loading out and heading North.

MR. KILLBLANE: So what did it feel like to be running beach operations at Qui Nhon and all of a sudden, someone says, "You're going to go up North and stab a beach or appear into an open beach?"

CWO DENICOLA: To me, it was kind of exciting because, I said, "Hey, let's do something different." I had been there eight months, running around Qui Nhon, off-loading boats, keeping boats running and running coast-wise up to Duc Pho. We ran a lot of LCMS up there. And when they said, "We're going to move," I said, "This is really going to be interesting. I'm going to get up North and see something different and not be under the scrutiny of 5th Term [Terminal Command] and 1st Log [Logistics Command] and all those guys that are over there in Qui Nhon that are kind of watching you all the time."

And there was another terminal service battalion there in Qui Nhon, also. So there was always a little competition there, too, about who was the best. I think that's probably part of where we got the "SUNDERS WUNDERS". But I really looked forward to the move up North, -- it was an exciting and interesting time for me.

MR. KILLBLANE: What was it like your first night on the beach, other than being sleepless because of the rain? I mean, all of a sudden, you are now in enemy territory.

CWO DENICOLA: Yeah, and we were. We weren't too far away from harm's way at any time, I would suspect. I think at that age, I was not quite 33 years old. You still kind of feel invincible, nothing's going to happen to you.

As far as worrying or being concerned, I don't think it ever entered my mind and I don't think it probably entered the minds of most of the people there. We knew we had infantry with us, albeit, it was one company I believe I found out later. I think we were supposed to have two companies with us to start with, anyway, it was one.

But we supplemented the infantry guys with some of our guys as perimeter guards. My first day as duty officer, I went out and checked the perimeter in the morning. And one of the infantrymen was going around with me, "Watch where you step here." I looked down and here's a mine over here, but they were all pinned so that they couldn't go off but, still, you didn't want to step on a trip wire. Sure enough, I stepped on a trip wire for a flare and it went off.

But that gave you a real sense of security to see how deep this perimeter actually was when you got out there on the perimeter and did an inspection. After that, I never really thought about it. And then the other time shortly after we got there, we took some rockets at the beach. But, again, I was gone.

Colonel Sunder had sent me down to Da Nang for something. I don't remember what it was, but I was coming back on a Navy ship. There was kind of a funny story with that. The other three lieutenants, the three lieutenants and myself were living in these CONEX containers. I kept on trying to get them to fill sand bags to sand bag the rest of the exposed portions of the CONEX containers. I'm ten years older than most of these guys. "Come on, we've got to get these sand bags filled up."

We're filling sandbags and they would spend about fifteen minutes filling sandbags and they would say, "Oh, that's enough for tonight. Let's go drink beer." So the sandbags always got put on the back burner. We were where we bulldozed the sand up so far, and then from there on up, we were going to sandbag the sides and the top.

Well, I mean, we were probably chest high when I went down to Da Nang and two days later, I got back and everything was sandbagged and I didn't have to help, because they got hit during that time.

MR. KILLBLANE: Okay, is that the only time you were hit while you were there?

CWO DENICOLA: Yes, I believe that was the only one.

MR. KILLBLANE: Now, that's the bunker that you had built before you took over the BARC detachment?

CWO DENICOLA: Yes, the CONEX containers before I went over to the BARC detachment.

MR. KILLBLANE: Okay, were there any other interesting experiences while you were at Wunder Beach?

CWO DENICOLA: No. I guess Jerry Vaughan had a story he told when he came back. He had gone into Quang Tri from the beach because he had to make a run in. When he came back and said, "Man, I don't believe this." I said, "What?" He said, "We drove into Quang Tri and drove back, and after we got back we found out we had driven over an anti tank mine on the way into Quang Tri."

Well, the engineers swept the road every morning before they would open the road to take trucks in. Jerry said on the way back, he found out that after the convoys had gone in, on his way back, he sees them out there sweeping the road again and they found an anti-tank mine that they had gone over, apparently, but fortunately, none of the trucks hit it.

MR. KILLBLANE: Okay, how did you guys get the name, "Wunder Beach?"

CWO DENICOLA: From Sunder's Wunders.

MR. KILLBLANE: Did that come in immediately or is that something they picked up with time? Or did you guys start calling yourselves that or did others start calling you that?

CWO DENICOLA: Others started. I don't know whether we started calling ourselves that or whether somebody said, maybe with a little sarcasm, "Oh, you're Sunder's Wunders," or something to that effect. I'm not sure how it got started. But I think Wunder Beach initially was called --

MR. KILLBLANE: Utah Beach.

CWO DENICOLA: Yes, yes, Utah Beach. And someone said, "No, we're not going to do that. We're not going to take away from what happened in World War II and try to bring it to this generation." And that may have been Colonel Sunder. I can't remember who it was. But, anyway, the name, "Wunder Beach," was the next thing that we started calling it. And I don't know whether that officially became the name of the beach or I guess it did. That's the way it was.

MR. KILLBLANE: So how did you guys feel? Now, there were a lot of pessimists that didn't think you would handle more than 300 short tons a day. And the requirement was 1,000 short tons a day to be able to conduct that offensive to break the siege at Khe Sanh. You guys, in some cases, exceeded it to the point of fulfilling half the requirement for the I Corp area. How were you guys able to do that? Is there anything you can think of that contributed to that?

CWO DENICOLA: I think it was just the desire to do as much as we could to complete the mission. And I don't think there was no thought -- and, again, I'm speaking from a maintenance officer's standpoint, there was no thought in my mind that we were going to out-do a quota. Let's just give them all we can. And I think everyone there had the idea of let's do all we can to make this a successful operation.

MR. KILLBLANE: Now, while you were up there conducting LOTS operations, what kind of problems did you encounter and unique ways to come up with solutions that may have been different from some of the problems you had down doing beach operations at Qui Nhon?

CWO DENICOLA: Well, in Qui Nhon, we had a better line of support in that we could call Okinawa and have stuff sent in. There was the case of the 60-ton crane on the rocks at Qui Nhon that was there when we got there. We had a casualty while I was there and the 60-ton, we had a 100-ton and 60-ton crane. But the 60-ton was loading an M-60 into a Mike [LCM] boat.

MR. KILLBLANE: They had M-48s and M-60s. You probably had the M-48.

CWO DENICOLA: It might have been an M-48. But anyway, they were loading it into an LCM and it fell about fifty or sixty feet into the boat. The crane lost control of it, is what happened.

So we had some problems with the crane and had to get some repairs done. And one of the parts we needed was on that crane on the rocks. So me and Spec-5 [Specialist-5] Jeff Lord went with an EOD [explosive ordnance demolition] captain and a sergeant went over and landed on the leper colony beach and climbed through the rocks. And then Jeff and the other two swam over to the crane and got parts off of it.

But we didn't have that option up North. We didn't have an option of going someplace else to get parts. The biggest problem we had was parts support. With the BARCs, there's an engine on each wheel. They have four engines, you have an over-running clutch between the two engines on either side so that one engine doesn't drive the other one.

We had a lot of problems with those over-running clutches. We just tried to rebuild them as best we could because we couldn't get new ones. That was one of the problems we had. I guess the other problems were just basic driveline problems and engine problems. Nothing specific that I can come up with.

MR. KILLBLANE: So how many BARCs did you have running at any one time?

CWO DENICOLA: Usually, ten or twelve. Each detachment had four. There were twelve, altogether. I don't know whether the one up on the beach was one of our twelve or whether that was -- or another one was brought over to replace that. But there were four per detachment for a total of twelve. I think we probably had ten or eleven running at all times and a lot of times, twelve.

MR. KILLBLANE: Were you cannibalizing to keep others running?

CWO DENICOLA: Well, we couldn't really afford to because we needed all of them that we could get.

MR. KILLBLANE: So how was the supply system as far as getting parts needed?

CWO DENICOLA: It was difficult. We had some supplies that we had taken up there with us. But a lot of it was just band-aid approach. You just keep them running any way you could. I know I had used some stuff to help the Marines. They had a piece of equipment that had a little 2-71, the same, basically, the same engine as the BARCs have, only instead of a six-cylinder, it was a two-cylinder.

MR. KILLBLANE: What's a 2-71?

CWO DENICOLA: It's a two-cylinder engine instead of a six-cylinder. The BARCs had four 6-71s on them. It's six cylinders, 71 cubic inches per cylinder is what they were. And the BARCs had one on each wheel. And this piece of equipment they had, and I don't even remember what the equipment was but it had a little two-cylinder 71 series engine on it.

I remember having to go over there and I worked on their piece of equipment one time and got it running, and they never had any more problems with it. But really, we just kept them running in any way that we could. Up until the time that I left there, I think we had a pretty good record of keeping probably ten of them going almost all the time. I don't really remember having too many deadlined at any one time.

MR. KILLBLANE: Were there any methods of, like, discharging that differed from Wunder Beach from how you did in Qui Nhon?

CWO DENICOLA: Well, they built a sand cement road from the beach all the way back to the depot because, initially, the BARCs were off-loading and, of course, they have big wheels and they can get through that soft sand. But it was a little more tenacious than getting up on that sand cement road. Once the engineering battalion built that road, I mean, it was a snap. They would just hop up on that road and they would get back to the depot.

MR. KILLBLANE: How far did that sand cement road go to the beach?

CWO DENICOLA: I want to say it was probably 300 yards off the beach, maybe 200. I would say 200 to 300, somewhere in that range, from where they came out of the water, up the beach, and into the soft sand. The depot was back about 1,000 yards off the beach.

MR. KILLBLANE: Now, were there any other differences in the way you discharged from ship to shore?

CWO DENICOLA: Yes, because we were using primarily BARCs and LARCs up North. In Qui Nhon, we used a lot of LCMs. We had two medium boat companies.

MR. KILLBLANE: I thought you had the BARC Company down there in Qui Nhon, also?

CWO DENICOLA: Yes, but we -- and, again, I wasn't really involved with it so I don't know that much about it other than the fact that we did have the BARCs because they were right down from the BOQ. But I really didn't have much to do with them in Qui Nhon. They handled all their own maintenance and everything at that time. I would go down there on occasion. But my main concern in Qui Nhon was LCMs, LCUs, floating cranes, the POL [Petroleum-Oil-Lubricants] barge and the refrigeration barge.

MR. KILLBLANE: I'm just curious, the Mike [LCM] boats and the U-boats [LCU] belong to which companies?

CWO DENICOLA: The 1098th.

MR. KILLBLANE: There was a 1099th down there, too.

CWO DENICOLA: The 1099th and the 544th.

MR. KILLBLANE: Yes, the 1099th and the 544th.

CWO DENICOLA: Yes, the 1099th and the 544th.

MR. KILLBLANE: And were you guys there when the U-boat took the wrong turn into Cambodia?

CWO DENICOLA: I heard something about that but I don't remember anything about it.

MR. KILLBLANE: Okay, we'll move on.

CWO DENICOLA: I was there when one of the LCMs blew up in Qui Nhon.

MR. KILLBLANE: That's right, Colonel Sunder told me about that. Can you explain that?

CWO DENICOLA: Yes, they dropped the load of bombs. The load free fell into the tank deck on the LCM and started a fire, first. And a couple of guys jumped off and then it blew up and killed one or two guys.

MR. KILLBLANE: Now, as you stayed at Wunder Beach longer, you made improvements to your living conditions. Could you describe some of those?

CWO DENICOLA: At Wunder Beach?

MR. KILLBLANE: Yes at Wunder Beach?

CWO DENICOLA: Well, at first, we didn't have a place to take a shower. You just washed out of a pan. But after a few weeks, we took the bulldozer. There was a little stream that ran down through the beach into the sea and it was fresh water. So we kind of dug it out with the bulldozer and made a big pit. So we started taking baths in there.

But I only took about five or six in there until one time I got in there and I'm taking a bath, and I come out and I've got leaches all over me. I said that's it, I could do without that.

And then shortly after that, we had an S&S [Service and Support] Company that came in and they had CONEX containers with shower-heads in them. And you would go in there and take a shower in a CONEX container. We just set them up on the beach, had a water buffalo sitting next to it.

And then they had one sitting on top. I guess that's the one that we would fill up with water. I believe they had some. Again, the arrangement I'm not sure of but you could take a shower there.

MR. KILLBLANE: Those were improvised or were those prefabricated.

CWO DENICOLA: No, those came from the S&S Company and I guess they improvised them. But that was one of the nice things that we had, finally. All of our water came out of the 400-gallon water buffaloes for a long time and then we got a water purifying team up there with their equipment. They set that up on a stream, that same stream we were bathing in, just a little further upstream and set up there. We had plenty of fresh water after that.

MR. KILLBLANE: What about ice? Ice and ice cream? Think you've got a refrigeration unit there?

CWO DENICOLA: We always had plenty of cold beers. Well, we had little refrigerators in the different hooches. But ice? I think we had an ice machine in the club. We built a club. The BARC Company had built a club on the beach and I think there may have been an ice machine in there.

MR. KILLBLANE: Now, what did you build the club out of and how soon did you build it?

CWO DENICOLA: That, I guess it must have been within a couple of months after we got up there. I recall it just being up there. All of a sudden, there was this club there. I believe when I moved over to the BARC Company, that club was either already in progress or complete.

MR. KILLBLANE: What did they construct it out of?

CWO DENICOLA: It was just wood, plywood, and I guess it had a wooden floor in it, though. I remember just going in there on occasion. You could buy a case of beer and a case of Cokes for the same price, \$2.40.

I don't recall an excessive amount of drinking up there other than just a guy likes to go and have an ice-cold beer after working all day on the beach. That's about it.

MR. KILLBLANE: Did you run 24-hour operations on the beach or 12?

CWO DENICOLA: No, I think we ran some night operations because if I recall, we had floodlighting out there. But I really couldn't say specifically that we did or didn't. It seemed like we were moving cargo all the time. Whether it was from a deep-draft ship or LST up against the causeway, it seemed like we always had something going there.

MR. KILLBLANE: Did each unit have its own club or was there just one club?

CWO DENICOLA: No, there was just that one that I recall.

MR. KILLBLANE: Okay, everybody came to visit it?

CWO DENICOLA: Yes, as a matter of fact, even the infantry would come down there. The infantry kind of used us as an R&R center because when they came back for perimeter service, they were just coming out of the field. So they were allowed to use our club.

One instance I remember is a young kid came up and they could only buy two cans of beer at the time. But he wanted to take some beer back to his buddies so he asked me if I would go in there and buy him a case of beer. I knew that he was probably being relatively honest about it so I went in and got him a case of beer.

But those infantrymen, when you look at those guys, you had to have a soft spot in your heart for them because you knew the way they were living compared to the way we were living. Sometimes, they were lucky to have a change of socks.

MR. KILLBLANE: What about VIPs? Did you have a lot of those there?

CWO DENICOLA: We had quite a few there and, specifically, one time I think I counted eighteen or twenty stars up there all at once. I think [General William C.] Westmoreland was there, [General Creighton] Abrams came with him, and there were a couple Marine Corps generals. I mean, there were eighteen to twenty stars on that beach all at once.

Hueys just started coming in, landing on the beach, and they were all in a row down there. These generals started pouring out. We had a couple of occasions where we had some other dignitaries.

MR. KILLBLANE: How did that influence your operations? Many times, everybody else in Vietnam was jumping out their butts to put on a dog-and-pony show for them. What about you guys?

CWO DENICOLA: I guess we might have been a little cocky in the sense that we weren't going to be impressed by these dignitaries. But we kind of stood around and watched them come in. I don't think we went out of our way to dress anything up or do anything special. We just carried on, carrying on.

MR. KILLBLANE: Do you remember erecting any signs while you were there identifying Wunder Beach or who you guys were?

CWO DENICOLA: I don't recall anything.

MR. KILLBLANE: Well, that's about all I have. Is there anything you think you could add to this or you want to say?

CWO DENICOLA: No, I guess in my twenty-one years in the military, there's two units that I still stay in touch with. This is the one that I had the closest contact with.

MR. KILLBLANE: Why?

CWO DENICOLA: Because of the people. We were just so close at that time. I would like to see us get closer together. We kind of split apart. And Colonel Sunder was a soldier's colonel. He

loved his men and his men loved him. I had retired and I had moved to Louisville, Kentucky. I retired right from Fort Eustis, here.

It was about twelve or thirteen years ago that I had lost contact with Colonel Sunder and everybody else in the 159th, for that matter. And all of a sudden, I got a phone call one evening down in Florida. I was living in Florida at this time. My wife answered the phone and said, "It must be a salesman. He asked for Mr. DeNicola."

So I picked up the phone and he said, "This is Colonel Sunder." Or he said, "Charlie Sunder." I said, "Sunder?" He said, "Yeah." He said, "I've been looking all over for you." And he said, "Finally, I was looking through some old papers and I found an old address for you in Louisville, Kentucky."

So he said, "I called the operator in Louisville. She gave me the phone number of the only DeNicola," which was my son, James. He called him and he said, "Yeah, that's my dad," and told him where I was. I said, "How many colonels in the United States Army would take the time to search out some Warrant Officer? Not many, as far as I'm concerned."

And that means something. It means that he cared about his people, as far as I'm concerned.

MR. KILLBLANE: Okay, thank you.