

## MEMORANDUM FOR RECORD

Subject: Interview with Chief Warrant Officer (CWO) 4 Marcellus Karrigan on USNS Corpus Christi Bay

Following is an edited transcript of an interview conducted with Chief Warrant Officer (CWO) 4 Marcellus Karrigan and SP4 Richard Smith on 19 June 1999 by Dr. James W. Williams, Aviation Branch Historian, at Fort Rucker, AL. Enclosed is an extract from a privately-maintained website that gives details about the Albemarle/Corpus Christi Bay.

## [BEGINNING OF TRANSCRIPT]

Marcellus Karrigan: I retired from the Army after 26-1/2 years as a CW4. My entry into Army Aviation came in 1954 at Gary Air Force Base (AFB), where the Air Force trained mechanics. In 1956 I came to Fort Rucker for training on all of the helicopters in the inventory at that time. Subsequently, after 14 years in the service, I got a direct commission as a warrant officer. I went to Vietnam and jointed the 121st Aviation Company at Soc Trang, with the 80th Transportation Detachment. We did the field maintenance for the unit. That was from 1964 to mid-1965. During that one year there I was a nonrated Aviation warrant. Occasionally I'd be in flight status as a crew member. I was always around there to be on test flights. That was part of my job. The time in Vietnam was spent -- we'd have maybe two operations per week. Our maintenance team, which usually consisted of five of us, would go to the stagefield, wherever that was. If an aircraft went down, if we knew what was wrong with it, we'd fly someone out with a part to repair it as long as we had security. If the aircraft couldn't be fixed, everything supposedly had to be removed by dark. Either you had to cut it up or call for an H-37 to rig it and bring it back to Soc Trang. The other part of my job: If the airmobile company wasn't available -- say, if the whole company went out on a major operation -- I'd be commander of the airfield. There were some thirty bunkers. I'd just shut it down. We were most vulnerable 30 minutes or so after those helicopters left. They'd be running out of fuel. I always figured the enemy was just as smart as we were and would figure that out too. We had a very professional mechanics. Of about 80 people we had, the experience level averaged about 7-1/2 years. Most of them were Regular Army. You had none of the problems you had later. My next assignment, the average in the platoon was 18 months. My Aviation career was one of the most rewarding things I've ever done. It was a challenge and held you to a standard, because people depend on you. I need to clarify: the 80th and 121st became part of the Delta Battalion (Provisional) in 1970. They separated from the 145th and became part of the 13th Aviation Battalion. The 121st and 80th were originally part of the 93rd and 80th, which came from Fort Devens, Massachusetts, during the infancy of Vietnam.

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Interviewer: You mentioned that the first people had about 7 years experience and the second had about 18 months?

Karrigan: That's right. My second tour was aboard the USNS Corpus Christi Bay. That was 1967-68. I was brought back. I was an enlisted man at Corpus Christi when I got my appointment in the depot. The project officer called me back after my tour in Vietnam and said you're going to the 1st Cavalry Division (1CD) or someplace. Why don't you come back on the project? We had started off searching for, like the USS Bunker Hill aircraft carrier to convert to a maintenance ship. We'd crawled through all sorts of ships. Finally we wound up with the Albemarle, which was a seaplane tender. We'd do all the designs and make the shops we wanted to put in there. They'd build a mold and figure the funding. That's what finally went to sea. I came back and went onboard the Corpus Christi on the second change out. The battalion changed out over a three-month period. That was because in some shops you only had two people – for example, fuel controls. They split everybody up so you would have a good integration of new people. Very rewarding. Test cell was another one where I only had two operators. We didn't lose any continuity. The first crew didn't have that benefit. They were the pioneers with the sea trials and all the problems within the ship. This didn't work and that didn't work. One high point was that my test cells put 365 engines back into combat. We didn't overhaul them. We found out what was wrong with them by failure codes. That was the most logical thing that we could fix. There's no reward in spending months, running back and forth, fixing an engine. Ship that back to Continental United States (CONUS) and let the civilians do that. We'd pick engines that the failure codes led us to believe we could quickly repair and send back out to a unit. That was the philosophy – a lot like triage in casualties.

Interviewer: Were you involved in selection of the Albemarle?

Karrigan: I was part of the project team. We'd look at what all we were going to have – a plating shop, test cells, hydraulics shop, nondestructive testing, avionics, armament, test cells for transmissions, 4290 gearbox on the UH-1 Iroquois (Huey). I had a bearing shop where we'd overhaul CH-47 Chinook swash plates. We had heat-treating. We'd make some parts that had a lot of sand erosion. We were able to chrome-plate some parts. We could build up the chrome on the spindles and machine it down. It would take 73 days, for example, for an engine from the time you put it in the can to ship until you received it back in Vietnam from Corpus Christi Army Depot (CCAD). If I could bring in and put out an engine a day. I believe someone told me once that that engine shop saved the Government \$32 million. We had a C-133 (?) that would come from Corpus Christi once each week to bring us parts, along with new helicopters. It'd take battle-damaged helicopters back and our returnables. We had a liaison person in Saigon who'd help coordinate all that. That was one of the biggest challenges of my life.

Interviewer: You said people looked at several ships before settling on the Albermarle.

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Karrigan: It was a question of pre-drydock assessment of what it would take to put it back into service, how much funding the Pentagon would give for doing this, and then selling the idea that there'd eventually be five ships. Ideally, if we'd've had a surplus tanker and worked with it as they did hospital ships – if we'd had that money in the beginning – we could've done so much. We could had fixtures on board so that if you had a tailboom blown off, fuselage alignment, and many other things to do. The purpose of the ship, though, was a stopgap, to keep people on shore going until the other logistics picks up on it. . The model of the ship that they have at the Transportation Museum was one we built in the model shop. You went through all the phases – you had a foundry. You had to start with a mold, then make a sand cast. We had a fiberglass shop for doing panels and things like that. We did it by scale. You didn't have computers. These guys were old artists who could do that. They'd suck things down with a vacuum, turn it upside down, and started putting the decks in it. Then we could start figuring out what it'd look like inside. So that model was actually part of the process of redesigning the ship. Then it went into drydock. I left the project and went to Vietnam. I was gone during the drydock, equipping it, and putting it to sea. I was fortunate to be at Fort Eustis during the time, because they usually diverted the top one or two people from a class of Engine or Power Train to Corpus Christi for their first assignment. Then I showed up, and here was what we were going to do. There was a Colonel Sullivan, who was an Aviator, in charge of that project, which was called Flat Top at that time. When I go to the Army Military History Institute up in Carlisle, the 1st Transportation Corps Battalion, which was the ship, has no history. Nothing. It was assigned to the 34th Group. If they had historians, they just sucked up on all that stuff we did. The Corpus Christi, unless somebody's done it someplace, is just sunk. If somebody from the Transportation Museum is interested, they can come to me and I'll be glad to give them of copy of the Corpus Christi Bay book that I have. It was spiral-bound, made up. I have slide pictures of my engine shop and all that stuff. We're getting close to some deterioration after all these years. We went into drydock in Japan while I was on there. We cut a hole in the side of the ship and put in bigger evaporators so we could get more fresh water. The JP-4 tanks had fungus in them, so we had to get them cleaned. .

[END OF DISCUSSION]

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James W. Williams  
Aviation Branch Historian

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**AV-5 Albemarle / ARVH-1 Corpus Christi Bay**

<http://www.navsourc.org/archives/09/4105.htm>

**Curtiss Class Seaplane Tender:**

- Laid down, 12 June 1939, at New York Shipbuilding Corp., Camden, N.J.
- Launched, 13 July 1940
- Commissioned **USS Albemarle (AV-5)**, 20 December 1940
- Decommissioned, 14 August 1950
- Laid up in the Atlantic Reserve Fleet, New York Group, Brooklyn
- Recommissioned, 2 October 1957
- Decommissioned, 21 October 1960
- Laid up in the Atlantic Reserve Fleet, Norfolk Group
- Struck from the Naval Register, 1 September 1962
- Custody transferred to the Maritime Administration, for lay up in the National Defense Reserve Fleet, James River, Fort Eustis, VA.
- Reinstated on the Naval Register, 27 March 1965
- Converted to an *Aircraft Repair Ship, Helicopter* at Charleston Naval Shipyard, Charleston S.C.
- Placed in service as **USNS Corpus Christi Bay (T-ARVH-1)** in January 1966 under the control of the *Military Sealift Command* (MSC)
- Placed out of-service in 1973
- Returned to the Maritime Administration for lay up in the National Defense Reserve Fleet, Corpus Christi, TX.
- Struck from the Naval Register, 31 December 1974
- Final Disposition, sold for scrapping, 17 July 1975, to Brownsville Steel and Salvage Inc

**Specifications:**

**Displacement** 8,671 t.

**Length** 527' 4"

**Beam** 69' 3"

**Draft** 21' 11"

**Speed** 20 kts.

**Complement**

(AV-5) 1,195

(ARVH-1) 128 civilian, 308 Army Technicians

**Armament**

(AV), four single 5"/38 gun mounts, four quad 40mm gun mounts, added during WWII, two dual 40mm gun mounts, twelve 20mm gun mounts

(ARVH) none

**Propulsion** geared turbines, two shafts