

A Doctor's Experience: General Ronald Blanck in Vietnam



Capt. Blanck conducts a medical exam in Vietnam.

October 1968 marked the beginning of a transformative journey for Capt. Ronald Blanck, a freshly minted doctor thrust into the heart of the Vietnam War. After completing basic training at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, Blanck flew into Long Binh and was assigned to the 5th of the 22nd Artillery Battalion in An Khê. His initial days in Vietnam were a whirlwind of confusion and adaptation, setting the stage for a career defined by both exemplary military and medical service.

“I had only been in the Army five weeks,” Blanck recalls, “and while I had some preparation for the military culture, I had no idea what they were talking about because I didn’t have that kind of preparation.” He volunteered for Forward Observer School, where he unexpectedly became proficient in laying artillery

fire—a skill outside the typical purview of a surgeon. His ability to quickly master necessary skills laid the groundwork for his future as a brilliant military officer and physician.

The 5th of the 22nd Artillery Battalion was a sprawling unit with several artillery batteries scattered throughout II Corps. Blanck’s role as the battalion surgeon was multifaceted, involving regular visits to various batteries to ensure soldiers’ health, from updating immunizations to distributing malaria pills. He also extended his care to nearby units, including special forces teams stationed at Duc Lap on the Cambodian border.

Blanck’s recollection of Christmas 1968 in Duc Lap is particularly vivid. “Headquarters sent in a plane painted with Santa Claus on the nose. They couldn’t stay because they would receive mortar fire. The jumpmaster kicked out the box of Christmas gifts, and I was privileged to get a yo-yo,” he reminisces.

Beyond his duties within the battalion, Blanck participated in medical civil affairs outreach programs, providing care to Vietnamese villagers. Armed with medical supplies and protected by soldiers, he treated infections, dressed wounds, and distributed antibiotics in open-air clinics. He also supported a local school, receiving supplies from his parents’ church in the United States to aid in the education of Vietnamese children.

Combat, while sporadic, was an ever-present threat. Blanck’s compound housed formidable artillery—8-inch and 175mm guns—and he frequently traveled by Huey helicopters, often to areas recently bombed by the U.S. Air Force. He recalls two harrowing helicopter incidents: a hard landing due to lost oil pressure and an onboard fire, neither caused by enemy action.

Blanck’s initial fascination with Vietnam—its culture, people, and landscapes—was tempered by the harsh realities of war. He describes a poignant moment at the An Khê District Hospital, which was struck by Viet Cong artillery fire intended for the district headquarters. Many patients were killed, and Blanck himself briefly lost consciousness.

While his primary responsibilities rarely involved treating trauma, Blanck did encounter the widespread issue of substance use among soldiers. Alcohol was the predominant vice, with marijuana also present. Heroin, although not pervasive in his battalion, became a significant issue later. Blanck’s subsequent work at Walter Reed Army Medical Center deepened his understanding of heroin’s effects, particularly heroin pulmonary edema, a condition he studied extensively.

It was during this time that he met his colleague, Norman Ream. Dr. Ream spearheaded data collection on heroin use in Vietnam, which revealed troubling trends. Ream's meticulous documentation highlighted a stratified pattern of use, with younger, junior-ranked soldiers most affected. His findings informed the development of drug detection and treatment protocols, underscoring the need for a compassionate, disease-focused approach to addiction.

Blanck and Ream then collaborated to consolidate and define further the scope of the heroin epidemic in Vietnam based on Ream's collected data, and their efforts are documented in the forthcoming Borden Institute book, *Drug Abuse in Vietnam: The Heroin Epidemic*. The book is the third volume in the Internal Medicine in Vietnam series and begins with a history of drug use in the military, dating back as far as the Civil War. It further delves into the heroin epidemic in Vietnam and the Army Medical Department's response, detailing how the epidemic shaped policies that exist to this day.

Reflecting on the heroin problem, Blanck asserts, "Heroin use must be viewed as a disease, not a criminal activity. If we approach the heroin use problem as a disease, we will be much more successful."

The Borden Institute, a part of the U.S. Army Medical Center of Excellence, Fort Sam Houston, Texas, is a premier medical publishing unit that produces comprehensive and authoritative texts on military medicine. Established to preserve the rich history and advancements in military medical practice, it serves as a critical resource for military medical professionals and researchers. More information can be found at <https://medcoe.army.mil/borden>

Lieutenant General Ronald R. Blanck, DO, retired in 2000, and last served as the 39th Surgeon General of the U.S. Army and commander of the U.S. Army Medical Command. Dr. Colonel Norman W. Ream, MD, retired in 1995, and last served as Consultant for Academic Affairs to the Surgeon General of the U.S. Army. Sadly, Dr. Ream passed away in 2016. He is interred in Arlington National Cemetery.



Capt. Blanck outside a medical aid station in Vietnam.