

## Honoring Jan Herman

### The Storyteller of Foggy Bottom

**Michael Krentz, MD, MPH**

Independent Author

Independent Consultant, Health Care & Public Health

Norfolk, Virginia

Tel: (202) 997-4757

Email: [mjk@mjkrentz.com](mailto:mjk@mjkrentz.com)

#### *From the Editor*

One of the senior leaders and original co-founders of the Journal is Mr. Jan Herman, MA. Mr. Herman is a most gifted academic historian, film producer/director, and an internationally acclaimed author especially for the life stories of major world leaders in health and human development. He holds an exceptional career of outstanding and unprecedented achievements in all of his fields of specialization including a deep commitment to social justice and human rights. This year is a year of very special celebration for Mr. Herman. This year he celebrates his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday. In essence, this is his “Diamond Year.” And we are celebrating it with him in this special tribute. As such, the article that follows is a deep tribute to this most special friend and fellow journeyer whose personal presence and professional giftedness are a major energy for the Journal’s ultimate mission to promote healthcare as human care.

#### Introduction

*And when my time is up,  
Have I done enough?  
Will they tell my story?*

— Lin-Manuel Miranda  
*HAMILTON*

On March 5, 1979, Jan Herman—whose prior military experience included four years as an Air Force dental technician—crossed 23rd Street from the State Department in Foggy Bottom, DC, and walked up the hill to the U.S. Navy’s Bureau of Medicine (BUMED) to become the editor of their periodical, *U.S. Navy Medicine*. Thus began a thirty-three-year career as the foremost storyteller of the history and culture of Navy Medicine. Generations of Navy leaders, including the eleven Surgeons General he served, benefited from Jan’s unique knowledge and perspective; not only on the history of Navy Medicine, but on its culture and, indeed, its soul.

### Casting Off

One cannot be an accomplished storyteller without first being an effective listener. As Dr. Frederick Burkle affirms, “Those who know Jan recognize that he is a natural listener with the ability to draw out the best of everyone. He is patient, sincere, and able to capture the unusual events that reveal the Navy’s true culture.”

When Jan arrived on that hilltop, he discovered a foreign culture. For the first two months he had to learn a new lexicon: “porthole” not window, “deck” not floor, “head” not latrine, “secure” a building means turn off the lights and lock the door not acquire a mortgage; and so forth. Symptomatic of the essence of Navy Medicine in that era, medical officers considered themselves “doctors first.” Officers at BUMED wore suits and ties except for a once-weekly “uniform day.” Perhaps it was a holdover from the recent Vietnam War when military personnel in uniform invited public derision. Nevertheless, even on uniform days, Jan often heard, “Call me ‘Doctor,’ not ‘Captain.’”

In the post-Vietnam peacetime era, Navy Medicine prioritized hospital care over naval operations. For sure, Navy Medicine continued its role of supporting the operational forces—as it did in World War II, the Korean War, and Vietnam—but one would seldom find a physician assigned full-time to a gray-hull ship. That clinical/operational dichotomy fostered a serious disconnect between Navy Medicine and the Navy line. In Jan’s words, “Line officers perceived physicians as coddled officers whose loyalty was directed more toward their medical profession than to the Navy itself. That doctors rarely wore the uniform seemed to support that perception.”

A series of unfortunate public humiliations further sullied Navy Medicine’s reputation—not only with the line Navy, but with the public. As challenged headquarters often do, BUMED undertook periodic reorganizations that made it difficult for people to do their jobs. A futile transition from BUMED to the Navy Medical Command in the early 1980s further degraded the confidence of those committed to serve Navy Medicine’s mission.

In that troubled milieu, Jan Herman’s listening skills made him a confidant among his fellow staffers. He became the “unofficial chaplain” of BUMED, an available sympathetic sounding board. As Dr. Steven Lomazow attests, “The best adjectives I can think of to describe him are kind, supportive, eternally optimistic, generous, and incredibly knowledgeable, always willing to provide his time and assistance. His eternally optimistic and sunny disposition is a joy to behold. I can think of no other person whose company I have consistently enjoyed being with more.”

One prominent feature of that Foggy Bottom BUMED campus so complemented Jan’s passions for history and science that it would play an important role in his tenure—one that would both shape and be shaped by his unique vision and perspective. Soon after his arrival, Herman became fascinated with the Old Naval Observatory, whose physical location was the site of the original U.S. Naval Observatory. Thanks to that fascination, the obscure history of that facility (at the time noted only by a bronze plaque on the facade) came alive. Jan learned that the science of oceanography was born there; that the discovery of the moons of Mars occurred there; that the boundaries of many Western states were measured from the observatory’s telescopic dome, through which ran the Prime Meridian of the United States; and that four presidents (John Quincy Adams, Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses Grant, and Theodore Roosevelt) visited there. One of his favorite stories told of President Lincoln’s unannounced

visit late one night a month after the Battle of Gettysburg. In vivid terms, Jan would describe how the battle-worn President of the United States peered at the moon through the telescope's refractor, perhaps finding brief respite from the trials of civil war.

Achieving a reputation beyond the confines of Foggy Bottom, Jan's research on the history of the Old Observatory took him to the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, England, where he represented the U.S. Navy at the Longitude Zero Conference that commemorated the centennial of the Greenwich Meridian. In 1983, he co-curated the exhibition, *Lighthouse of the Sky: The U.S. Naval Observatory, 1844-1893*, co-sponsored by the National Academy of Sciences. In 1985, Jan envisioned and led a multidisciplinary process that culminated in the dramatic recreation of the first daguerreotype of the moon made at the Harvard College Observatory in 1851.

Jan Herman's commitment to the history and ideals of the Old Naval Observatory resulted in his 1985 book, *A Hilltop in Foggy Bottom*. As curator of the observatory, he conducted a regular schedule of tours of the facility from the early 1980s to his retirement in 2012, when the Navy abandoned the site.

### Rudder Changes and Steady as She Goes

Several events in the late 1980s and early 1990s drove course corrections for Navy Medicine that would impact BUMED and its people, and solidify Jan Herman's role as resident historian, storyteller, and guardian of corporate memory. The first was a so-called Blue-Ribbon Commission that responded to Navy line questions and concerns about the governance of the Medical Department. This investigation resulted in disestablishment of the Navy Medical Command and resurgence of the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery. On the heels of that historic sea change, a new Surgeon General, VADM James Zimble, took the helm of BUMED to steer it back to its main mission of operational support.

In Jan's words, "I recall the afternoon he (VADM Zimble) showed up in my office accompanied by an aide and a photographer. He had a peculiar request.

'I understand you have the old BUMED sign.'

'Yes, sir. It's down in the basement.'

'Can you get it for me now?'

With a mile-wide grin, I brought the sign upstairs, as requested. And then, with the old sign, he posed in front of the compound where the sign once stood. That iconic photo became the next cover for *Navy Medicine*. BUMED was back!"

Over the next few years, VADM Zimble brought Navy Medicine "back from the brink," and just in time. The first Persian Gulf War in 1990-1991 would soon try his leadership. Overnight, Navy Medicine's operational support role stood front and center, guided by a BUMED Chief whom Jan describes as "the consummate diplomat, salesman, administrator, cheerleader, and all-around competent leader with the personality to match." As the Navy rolled

## Special Tribute

---

into the fight, Jan observed a revitalized BUMED staff working long hours doing their essential jobs, with minimal complaint. “Two hospital ships were to be equipped, manned, and deployed to the Gulf, as well as Fleet Hospitals. Medical personnel had to be contacted—both reserve and active duty—and be deployed. CONUS hospitals, cleared of active duty personnel, had to be backfilled.” Just one of the many astute observations and insights that Jan Herman contributed to the chronicle of Navy Medicine.

Jan would later say that one of the most rewarding aspects of the job was immersing himself in the heritage of Navy Medicine, from the 19th century well into the 20th. This immersion spawned an enduring depository of Navy Medicine’s history, the Oral History Project. That series of recorded interviews began in the mid-1980s with Wheeler B. Lipes, the World War II hospital corpsman who conducted an emergency appendectomy aboard USS *Seadragon* in 1942. Hundreds of subsequent oral histories resulted in six books, an hour-long film, and other documentaries that preserved forever an “Own Voices” perspective on Navy Medicine’s commitment to the operational forces throughout its history.

VADM Harold Koenig, who served as Navy Surgeon General from 1995 to 1998, reminisces about the many visitors that Jan Herman brought to his office in concert with the Oral History project, including annual visits from Admiral Elmo Zumwalt, a champion of the National Bone Marrow registry.

One visitor, Dr. Henry Heimlich, stands out in the memories of both VADM Koenig and Jan Herman. As Jan tells it, “Our scheduled hour-long interview in December 1994 lasted all day, and he invited me to dine with him and his wife at their home that night. I also had the opportunity to introduce him to VADM Harold Koenig in the mid-1990s when Dr. Heimlich came to DC. The three of us spent a very memorable afternoon together in the SG’s office.”

Admiral Koenig provides more detail: “I had my Mess Specialist bring in lunch for the three of us and we spent a couple of hours reminiscing about Dr. Heimlich’s service in the Navy during WW II. He served in North China at a US weather station and got to know some of the members of the Chinese Army in the region, one was General Mao Tse Tung. After the war ended, their friendship continued and Dr. Heimlich made frequent visits back to China to visit his friend all through the period our two countries had no formal diplomatic relations. Dr. Heimlich served as a conduit for flow of information between Mao and our Presidents!”

These are but a few of myriad anecdotes, stories, chronologies, and perspectives that Jan Herman’s Oral History Project accumulated since that first interview three decades ago. The project continues to the present day under the guidance of André Sobocinski, Jan’s former deputy and current successor. André speaks with warmth about his tutelage under Jan’s leadership: “I remember sitting in on those interview sessions, witnessing him masterfully breaking down barriers, and connecting with narrators over the telephone. Jan was always a sympathetic and engaged listener who knew when to ask the right question and when to stop and listen. For Jan, the narrator—those veterans of wars and those trying moments in our history—were the building blocks of our story and it was never a question that our chief mission was to ensure that these individuals and their stories would be remembered. From magazine articles to books to documentary film series, Jan did more than most to preserve and document these essences of naval history.”

### **“Nothing Before Me”**

A blessing and a curse, the standard for career development and professional growth within the military mandates periodic rotation of personnel among various commands and roles. This process encourages acquisition of progressive knowledge and skills across a broad spectrum of experiences in positions of increasing responsibility and authority. The theory has it that men and women arrive at the next level of performance equipped with prerequisites to enable success and further advancement. As a downside, this process requires such brief tenure—especially at higher levels of leadership—that one seldom remains in a position long enough to master or even fathom the depths and nuances contained within the job or its environment. For the most part, one does not occupy a position long enough to develop, on their own, any true sense of the corporate history of a given command or organization. Each successive career opportunity can appear to be a ripe landscape ready for the new leader to plow and make his or her own—as if nothing existed in that place before them.

This dichotomy applies in a unique way to the U.S. Navy, given its worldwide footprint in a plethora of commands ashore and aboard naval ships. Nevertheless, Navy Medicine bears the responsibility to support the operational Navy “at any time, in any place.” Similar challenges exist for Navy Medicine’s support of the U.S. Marine Corps. Imagine a scenario where each successive medical or dental officer, medical planner, nurse, corpsman, and the many other practitioners who constitute the Navy Medical force had to learn anew the environment, requirements, nuances, and cultures of the men and women they serve. Translate that same challenge to the oversight, manning, equipping, and training role of Navy Medicine’s headquarters at BUMED. How would the organization survive without any lessons learned or prior knowledge?

Enter Jan Herman, the quintessential historian, storyteller, and keeper of Navy Medicine’s culture and corporate memory. As Dr. David Winkler puts it, “Because most major commands have no historian assigned, they lack in-house knowledge that can be invaluable to decision making or contributing to command morale/esteem/sense of accomplishment. Jan Herman is an exception in the Navy in that he was able to parlay his editing job with the BUMED Navy Medicine magazine into a full-up history position by demonstrating the value of history within an organization that has a remarkable history story to tell.”

If we believe the ubiquitous aphorisms that information is knowledge and knowledge is power, we should never minimize the value of history and corporate memory to any organization, especially one dedicated to the health, well-being, and operational success of America’s Sailors and Marines. As Jan might put it, to build on valuable concepts and insights, one must know and understand one’s history. Otherwise we are doomed to replicate the mistakes of our predecessors, as if there was “nothing before me.”

Considering Jan’s revitalization of the Old Naval Observatory, his contributions to maritime and astronomical science, his vision in preserving the lessons of prior Navy Medicine stars in the Oral History Project, he has left a legacy of informational power on which future Navy Medical leaders can draw and build. In the eight years since Jan retired from BUMED, military medicine and Navy Medicine have undergone tectonic shifts driven by reactionary national funding priorities and other driving forces. With the rise of the Defense Health Agency, the restructuring of military medicine on grand scale, and the diminished rank of the

## Special Tribute

---

Navy Surgeon General, today's Navy Medical Department differs in form and substance from the one Jan served for thirty-three years. Is the organization better or worse? That depends on how much today's leaders draw on the compendium of history and corporate memory to accomplish the unchanging mission of Navy Medicine, to deliver the highest quality of care to Sailors on the deck plates and Marines on the front lines.

We cannot assume that will happen. Lessons learned often become lessons ignored or forgotten. Those who lead Navy Medicine today do so without the ongoing value of *Navy Medicine*, which is no longer published. It will take deliberate planning and strategic action to keep Navy Medicine from suffering the same fate as the Old Naval Observatory, which now remains vacant with no electrical or water service, a crumbling venerable and historic landmark.

Thanks to Jan Herman's legacy, we do not expect Navy Medicine to suffer a similar fate as that Old Observatory. This man who never wore a Navy uniform, never served aboard a Navy ship, nor with a forward-deployed Marine Corps battalion, has left Navy Medicine an enduring gift: the chronicle of its own stellar history and culture, told not only in publications and documentaries but in the exact words of its past warriors. These valuable assets must endure for as long as the United States Navy exists.

### Awards and Legacy

Jan's expertise and commitment resulted in a host of speaking engagements and other opportunities that not only honored his contributions, but also reflected positive light on Navy Medicine. In the summer of 1992, he represented the Navy Medical Department as guest lecturer for Project Marco Polo, the joint Navy—National Geographic Society expedition to Egypt, the Mediterranean, and Greece. He has also lectured before audiences at the Albert Einstein Planetarium of the National Air and Space Museum, the National Academy of Sciences, the Smithsonian Institution Resident Associate Program, the Explorers Club, and the Historical Society of Washington. In 2002, he was appointed to the adjunct faculty of the International Lincoln Center for American Studies of Louisiana State University, Shreveport. Beginning in 2008, he was one of the central developers and faculty members for the Semper Vi Foundation's Ethics Education Series held often at Smithsonian museums

In 2015 he received the Forrest C. Pogue Award from the Oral History Mid-Atlantic Region (OHMAR) association for his significant contributions to oral history.

A prolific writer and producer, Jan's efforts resulted in the following books and documentaries:

#### Books:

*A Hilltop in Foggy Bottom*, Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, 1985.

*Battle Station Sick Bay: Navy Medicine in World War II*, Naval Institute Press, 1997.

*Frozen in Memory: U.S. Navy Medicine in the Korean War*, Booklocker, 2006.

*Navy Medicine in Vietnam: Oral Histories from Dien Bien Phu to the Fall of Saigon*, McFarland, 2009.

*Murray's Ark and Other Stories*, Booklocker, 2010.

*Navy Medicine in Vietnam: Passage to Freedom to the Fall of Saigon*, Naval History and Heritage Command, 2010.

*The Lucky Few: The Fall of Saigon and the Rescue Mission of the USS Kirk*, Naval Institute Press, 2013.

### Documentaries:

*Navy Medicine at War*, a six-part series about the Navy Medical Department's participation in World War II, Navy Medicine Support Command, Visual Information Directorate, 2010.

*The Lucky Few: The Story of USS Kirk*, Navy Medicine Support Command, Visual Information Directorate, 2010.

*A Hilltop in Foggy Bottom*, Navy Medicine Support Command, Visual Information Directorate, 2011.

### Acknowledgements

The following individuals contributed meaningful and insightful reminiscences and thoughts for this article. A tribute to the fondness in which they hold Jan Herman, there was far more material than could be included in this writing:

- VADM Harold Koenig, Former Surgeon General of the Navy
- Mr. André Sobocinski, current BUMED historian.
- Dr. Frederick Burkle, retired Navy reserve medical officer, former professor of medicine at the University of Hawaii, and a pioneer in global medicine.
- Dr. David Winkler, who teaches history at the U.S. Naval Academy.
- Dr. Steven Lomazow, who practices neurology in New Jersey and is the world's authority on the health of President Franklin Roosevelt.
- Mr. Jan Herman, former BUMED Historian and editor, Navy Medicine.

### Author Note

The insights or views expressed in this monograph are those of the author. They do not reflect official policy or the position of any of the institutions the author serves. The author has no financial conflicts of interest.