

## **Rear Admiral Jerry Kelley, M.D., '76: Native Texan Builds Successful Career as a Sailor and Surgeon**



Growing up in Corpus Christi with a father and an uncle who served in the U.S. Navy, it's not surprising that Rear Admiral Jerry R. Kelley, M.D. '76 dreamed of sailing as a child. But even as the young boy imagined himself at the helm of a large naval vessel, he was also developing a keen interest in taking care of people. Many years later, Kelley—who serves as Deputy Commander, Navy Medicine Support Command—has built a successful career that continues to feed both of his childhood passions.

In the early 1960s, Kelley's family moved to San Antonio, where he attended John Marshall High School. After graduating “number one in the bottom fourth” of his class, he began his college studies at San Antonio Community College (SACC) while working part time as a surgical orderly at Methodist Hospital.

“At that time, there was not much developed in that part of San Antonio other than the hospital,” he recounted. “I was content to mop the floors, set schedules, and perform any of the other jobs that needed doing. I remember taking home the catalogue of surgical instruments, which I memorized in short order.” During his stint at Methodist, Kelley convinced the nurses to let him scrub for several minor surgeries. Thus was born his love for surgery.

When technicians at Robert B. Green Hospital went on strike in the mid-1960s, Kelley seized an opportunity to advance his medical career. “I called the operating room supervisor to apply for a scrub technician position,” he said. “I told her I had extensive operating experience, which was stretching the truth a little bit. I got hired sight unseen and was only able to pull it off thanks to the help of a nurse named Mamie O'Mara. She saw through me right away, but supported my efforts because she thought I had moxie.”

Around this time, the original surgery faculty at the School of Medicine began to arrive in town, including such legendary figures as Jim Story, Anatolio Cruz, J. Bradley Aust, Arthur McFee, and Leo Cuello. Kelley got to know many of them by working as a scrub technician for their surgical procedures. “When Dr. Cuello performed his first aortic valve replacement, assisted by Dr. Cruz, I scrubbed the case,” he noted.

These experiences stoked Kelley's desire to become a surgeon, so he transferred from SACC to Southwest Texas State University (now Texas State University) and got “serious” about his studies.

“I was fortunate to study under Dr. Sidney Edwards at Southwest Texas,” he said. “Dr. Edwards was a former enlisted Marine who had gone back to school and earned his Ph.D. in anatomy. He taught comparative anatomy and could lecture while drawing with both hands the most amazing anatomical sketches on the chalkboard.” (Years later, Edwards would pay Kelley the highest compliment a mentor can give to a former student when he allowed the surgery resident to operate on him.)

Upon earning his bachelor’s degree in 1971, Kelley applied and was accepted to the Health Science Center’s School of Medicine. During medical school, he began to develop a special interest in cardiothoracic surgery, thanks to the influence of professors J. Kent Trinkle, Waid Rogers, David Root, and Kenneth Sirinek. “At that time, cardiothoracic surgery was relatively new,” Kelley said. “It was a challenging field that was witnessing exciting breakthroughs such as coronary bypasses and valve repairs.”

In addition to what he learned from professors in class and on rotations, Kelley recalled the positive influence of his classmates. “We had a great group of people in our class, and our sense of camaraderie was strong. We worked very hard and learned a lot, but we also found time to have fun.”

As for the single most important thing he learned in medical school? “How to *find* the right answer,” he said without hesitation. “The School of Medicine gave me good basic knowledge of medicine. But more importantly, it taught me to recognize everything I didn’t know as well as how to go out and find answers to those questions.”

After earning his medical degree in 1976, Kelley completed his general and cardiothoracic surgery training at Bexar County Hospital and Audie Murphy Veterans Administration Hospital in 1983. He then embarked on a career in private practice as a cardiothoracic surgeon.

Eight years later his childhood dream of going to sea, coupled with a desire to serve his country, led Kelley to enter the U.S. Navy as a direct commissioned lieutenant commander in 1991. Thus began a medical career of service to his nation that has spanned two decades and taken him around the world.

One of the highlights from Kelley’s naval career involved a trip on board an aircraft carrier with his father. “We were returning from a mission in Australia, and I had the privilege of taking my father on a ‘Tiger Cruise’ from Pearl Harbor to San Diego. That’s a portion of a trip where family members and dependents are allowed to travel on board. During World War II, my father was a low-ranking enlisted sailor in the Navy. He served in the Pacific on an LSM, which is basically a floating bathtub. He always wanted to sail on a big ship. I was a Commander at the

time, so I was able to take him up to the officer's brow, where he'd never dreamed of standing. I will never forget the look in his eyes as we set sail."

After being promoted to Captain in 1998, Kelley experienced his most rewarding military assignment in 2003. As Commanding Officer of the 500-bed Fleet Hospital Dallas, he led the first humanitarian aid mission in Africa ever conducted by a U.S. Naval Reserve unit. The four-week assignment presented Kelley with significant leadership challenges, from managing the logistics of transporting equipment and troops halfway around the world to keeping the unit focused on its core objectives. "Because we were only able to spend a day in most villages—seeing upwards of 1,000 patients a day—I had to remind my people that we were not going to solve all of the problems the Ghanaians were facing. We weren't there to make sweeping social or cultural changes. Rather, we were there to treat basic medical problems—to pull teeth, to provide glasses, to treat wounds—and in doing so, to make their lives better and improve U.S. relations with Ghana."

Kelley has also had the opportunity to work with the U.S. Marine Corps, with assignments that have included Battalion Surgeon 4<sup>th</sup> Reconnaissance Battalion, Assistant Division Surgeon 4<sup>th</sup> Marine Division, and Liaison Officer for Reserve Affairs to The Medical Officer of the Marine Corps. "Serving with a RECON unit was like being in a candy store for grown-ups," he said. "Those are the guys who eat bugs and snakes, whatever it takes to stay alive. I learned water skills as well as how to blow things up using weapons like C4 plastic explosives." In addition to his current position in the U.S. Navy, he serves as the Deputy Medical Officer of The Marine Corps-Reserve.

Kelley believes his experiences in the military have ultimately made him a better doctor. "I have operated on aircraft carriers and in a variety of other settings," he noted. "Many times, you have fewer resources at your disposal than you would find in a civilian operating room. So I have learned to be more resourceful. You learn to figure out how to make do with what you have and still deliver the highest quality of care. The military has also given me organizational and leadership skills that enabled me to start several heart surgery programs in San Antonio."

When asked about the future of medicine in the military, Kelley notes several critical challenges facing the U.S. Armed Services. "We need to answer the fundamental question of how we will take care of our severely wounded men and women as well as their families," he said. "With the advent of body armor, our soldiers are surviving injuries that, in the past, would have killed them. As a result, military physicians are treating injuries we haven't seen before, including more instances of severe head trauma and multiple limb amputations. In addition to keeping

soldiers alive immediately following their injuries, we have to figure out how to provide them with the long-term care they deserve as they deal with post-traumatic stress and brain injuries while transitioning back to their civilian lives.”

Kelley stated that the Audie Murphy VA Hospital is one of the model centers that will play a key role in this effort. “They will soon be getting a polytrauma unit that will be unsurpassed in the country,” he said.

He also noted that suicide prevention is another critical issue facing the military that must be addressed more effectively and proactively. “We are dedicating tremendous resources to solve this issue, trying to figure out how we can better monitor and recognize psychological injuries before they result in a soldier taking his own life.” (Professors at the Health Science Center, including Alan Peterson, Ph.D. and Craig Bryan, Psy.D., are collaborating with the Department of Defense, the Army, and the Marine Corps on a number of related studies designed to more effectively treat posttraumatic stress disorder and prevent suicides through early interventions.)

When asked about the future of San Antonio’s military medical operations, Kelley remarked on the potential for unprecedented collaboration with the Health Science Center.

“The U.S. Armed Services will continue to rely heavily upon civilian training to develop its medical expertise. As part of the Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission (BRAC) report released in 2005, the military selected Fort Sam Houston as a key resource. In the coming years, it will be home to the world’s largest military medical education training center. This will bring to town an unprecedented number of military personnel looking to acquire the full range of medical training. The efficiencies and expertise of civilian medical personnel in town will combine with those of the military to produce the very best physicians and healthcare professionals in the world. And the Health Science Center will play a vital role in all this.”

As for any students who are considering a career in the U.S. Armed Forces, Kelley shared his thoughts on serving in the Navy. “There’s nothing quite like being aboard an aircraft carrier,” he said. “It’s a sovereign territory wielding 90,000 tons of diplomacy. You can show up with about five acres of flight deck off any coast in the world and make a statement. There’s no other service that can do that. I’ll never forget the time we were out in the middle of the Coral Sea at night, with everything on deck blacked out. I looked up at the stars...and it was truly an unbelievable experience.”