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Chaney '45: A Legacy of Helping Others

by Rich Griset, Contributing Writer

To understand the story of Verne Chaney '45, M.D. – war hero and crusader for the health of the less fortunate – you must first understand the story of Thomas Dooley.

Voted by Americans as the third most esteemed man in the world at the time of his death in 1961, Dooley established clinics and hospitals in third-world countries, raising money and awareness for those who were suffering.

It was at the height of Dooley's celebrity that he met Chaney while at a speaking engagement in San Francisco, California. Dooley convinced the Virginia Military Institute alumnus to embark on medical missions in Southeast Asia.

"I was inspired by him. He was a remarkable person," said Chaney, now 91 years old. Chaney worked alongside Dooley in Laos and Vietnam through Dooley's charity, Medical International Cooperation. "He was a very charismatic guy – a

great speaker – and he raised a lot of money for his programs."

When Dooley died suddenly of cancer at the age of 34, MEDICO asked Chaney to take over Dooley's work, and he accepted. Chaney later founded the Dooley Foundation – now Dooley Intermed International – to continue the mission of providing medical services to third-world countries.

But before any of this, Chaney enlisted in the U.S. Army at the beginning of World War II. After serving at Fort Meade, Maryland, Chaney attended the Virginia Military Institute, graduating at the top of the Class of '45. Following graduation, Chaney enrolled in Johns Hopkins Medical School.

One day after the Korean War broke out, June 25, 1950, Chaney resigned his position as resident in surgery at the Johns Hopkins Hospital to volunteer with the Army Medical Corps. He was assigned to a Mobile Army Surgical Hospital in Korea, 2nd Infantry Division, 23rd Regiment.

During the Battle of Heartbreak Ridge, Chaney,



Chaney '45

a captain, inched through a minefield by poking the ground with a bayonet to save a wounded corpsman. Another mine exploded, wounding Chaney and the corpsman. "Another medic was trapped by a mine, and I was trying to get him out of it," Chaney explained. "I was wounded in doing it, but that's all right."

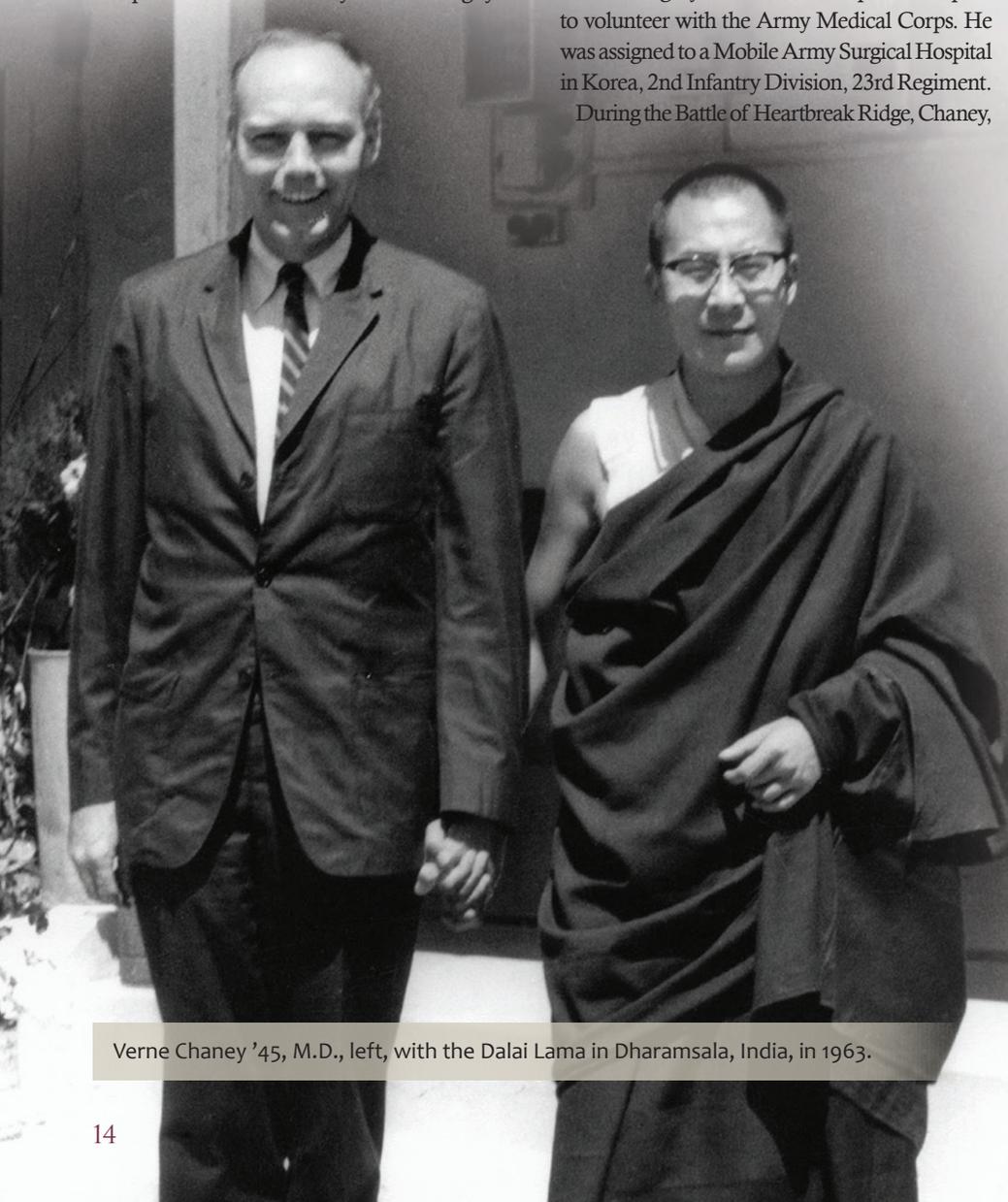
For his heroic actions, Chaney received the Silver Star, the Purple Heart, the Bronze Star and the French Croix de Guerre, making him one of the highest decorated doctors in the Korean War.

After the war, Chaney volunteered to work as chief of surgery at Hospital Albert Schweitzer in Haiti. At the time Haiti was in the midst of a revolution, and Chaney was awarded a commendation for his humanitarian work from the State Department and by the U.S. Ambassador to Haiti. "I was very impressed with Dr. Schweitzer, as you might expect," said Chaney, who later traveled with Schweitzer in Africa.

Following his work in Haiti, Chaney began a lucrative private practice in Monterey, California, but he gave it up to conduct humanitarian work in third-world countries.

"I liked traveling," explained Chaney, who often didn't take a salary so that more money could help the needy. "I liked working in undeveloped countries, and I liked starting programs in countries that don't have facilities or staff. We trained people locally; I did some surgery myself, and we brought in medical technicians."

His work with the Dooley Foundation – of which he served as president for 52 years – took



Verne Chaney '45, M.D., left, with the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, India, in 1963.

him to Laos, Nepal, Vietnam, Hong Kong, Thailand, India, Niger, Pakistan and Mongolia. When the Tibetans were driven out of China, the Dooley Foundation was the first foreign nonprofit to visit them in India, summoned at the request of the Dalai Lama.

In addition to direct medical assistance, the Dooley Foundation trained local nurses and physical therapists in medical techniques. The foundation also helped modernize medical facilities overseas and brought in supplies and medicine.

The efforts of Dooley Intermed have been the subject of two documentaries, and a third is planned to film in Nepal.

Now retired, Chaney's work is continued by Dooley Intermed. For 54 years, the nonprofit has provided aid to the sick and helped prevent illness in those who are well.

In recognition of Chaney's more than half a century of helping improve the lives of underprivileged people around the globe, the Explorers Club awarded Chaney the first-ever Sir Edmund Hillary Humanitarian Award in 2009.

Scott Hamilton, Explorer Club member and current president of Dooley Intermed International, said Chaney is an American hero, referencing his exploits in Korea.

"It's like out of a John Wayne movie, working his way through a minefield with a bayonet trying to rescue three of his medics," stated Hamilton. Even later in his career, Hamilton expressed that Chaney was still willing to sacrifice himself for others, recalling a story about



Chaney, right, with Danny Kaye, left, and Shirley MacLaine in the early 1960s. At the time, MacLaine was a member of the Dooley Intermed International Board of Directors.

All photos courtesy Dooley Intermed International.



Chaney, left, with Tony Bennett, center, and Zero Mostel at a Splendid American Award Dinner in the early 1960s.

a child who was drowning in Central America.

"Verne, without a moment's hesitation, dove into this river and hauled the kid out," Hamilton explained. "I'm sure there [are] other stories like that. He's just a modest guy and doesn't talk about it."

Presently, Dooley Intermed is supporting a clinic between Honduras and Nicaragua, teaching illiterate women crafts in Thailand so they can support themselves. They recently helped build an orphanage in Nepal and continue to go to remote areas of the world performing eye surgeries and distributing glasses. The nonprofit also has plans to visit Nepal in the future to treat between 1,500 and 1,800 people.

For a man who has devoted his life to helping tens of thousands of people live healthier lives, this is the perfect legacy.

"Verne always wanted to go to the most distant places, to the poorest people, to the most oppressed – to go to places where other people can't go or won't go to provide care," explained Hamilton. "I think that's what made him different, and what made Dooley different."