In the spring of 1965, Durham native Ken Ferrell was 20 years old and serving as a corpsman on the USS Ashland in the Caribbean. As one of three corpsmen aboard with no doctor present, he helped handle all emergencies on the naval ship, from stitching cuts and treating head injuries to preparing severely ill servicemen for helicopter evacuation.

Ferrell was nearing the end of his tenure in the Navy when he heard that Duke University was launching a two-year pilot program aimed at providing Navy corpsmen the medical training needed to assist doctors as "physician assistants." Ferrell was eager to apply. The next time his ship docked at the Navy base in Norfolk, Virginia, he visited Duke for an interview.

"It sounded perfect," Ferrell says. "I loved the medical field and really liked what I was doing, but I didn't want to make a career of it in the Navy. It was like a dream come true to hear about something like this."

Along with three other young former servicemen, Ferrell entered the first class of the then-experimental physician assistant (PA) program in the
The development of the PA profession changed the way modern medicine was practiced.

FUNDAMENTALLY, THE PA PROGRAM was a product of necessity. After World War II, the U.S. experienced a shortage of general practitioners, as veterans who had served in the military pursued specialization, taking advantage of the GI Bill as well as wartime advances in technology. At the same time, servicemen were returning to civilian life unable to use the medical training they had received in the service.

Dr. Eugene Stead, chair of medicine at Duke University, saw an opportunity: if he could further the corpsmen’s medical training, they could be used to extend the reach of physicians and help make up the shortage.

Stead had seen such an arrangement work before. In the 1940s, an African-American farmhand named Henry Lee “Buddy” Treadwell secured a job at the medical clinic of Dr. Amos Johnson in the tiny town of Garland in Sampson County. At first, Treadwell worked as an orderly; but over time, he began to learn more advanced skills, including how to take X-rays, take blood pressure readings, and suture wounds.

By the late 1950s, Johnson considered Treadwell his assistant and left him in charge when he was away. “The richest man in town would rather have Buddy sew him up than me because he can do it better than I can,” the doctor once said.

Citing the Johnson/Treadwell arrangement as evidence of the program’s potential, Stead developed the two-year pilot program in which Ferrell participated. He realized relatively quick success: Within 10 years, the PA profession had developed resource and curricular guidelines, standards for accreditation, and a national certification process that required candidates to pass an exam and meet continuing-education requirements.

Duke cardiologist Dr. Harvey Kestes, who became chairman of Duke’s Department of Community Health Sciences in 1966, took over the program as Ferrell and his classmates were graduating. “I knew it would be a success from the start, because it worked so well in our own clinics,” Kestes says. “But to have this spread as rapidly as it has over this country, and to have it spreading so rapidly in other countries as it did here, is a very great surprise.”

PHYSICIAN ASSISTANTS HAVE HAD SIGNIFICANT IMPACT, says Dr. Regional D. Carter, historian emeritus of the Physician Assistant History Society. “The development of the PA profession changed the way modern medicine was practiced,” he says. “Before, it was physician and patient; now, it’s a collaborative physician-PA practice.”

While the program initially recruited former service members, it soon began to attract a variety of people, including women and people of color. As ground zero for the PA profession, North Carolina educated the first
FOR HIS PART, FERRELL MOVED FROM PA school into practice with Dr. Howard Screer, a Duke pulmonary and allergy specialist with whom he'd interned. Often seeing 25 to 30 patients in a single day, Screer needed help with tasks that didn't require a medical degree, like new patient intake and drawing blood.

When he started, Ferrell often had to explain what his role was. "It's hard to imagine now, but nobody had ever heard of a physician assistant because nobody had ever been one," he says.

"It didn't take long before they started asking for me, because they knew I could get what they needed," he says.

Christina Cooke is a freelance writer based in Durham.

"BILTMORE COULD BE MADE TO PROVE WHAT AMERICA DID NOT YET UNDERSTAND — THAT TREES COULD BE CUT AND THE FOREST PRESERVED."

Gifford Pinchot, the Father of American Forest Conservation

Fall Open House
Saturday, October 14, 2017

East Carolina University invites you to attend the 2017 Fall Open House. Activities begin at 7:30 a.m. and include the following:

- Take a walking tour of the campus.
- Visit residence halls.
- Learn about student life.
- Browse the Academic and Student Affairs Fair.
- Chat with East Carolina faculty members.

We will also offer special sessions on important topics such as admission requirements, financial aid, options for transfer students, and more.

To register and for more information, please visit:
www.ecu.edu/admissions/openhouse

Can't make it to Open House? We offer campus tours year-round. Schedule yours at www.ecu.edu/admissions.