

Imagine a second lieutenant platoon leader and a medical corpsman (Spec 4) for that platoon in a firebase in Vietnam circa 1970 and occasionally in combat, two people the same age who are often side by side and like and respect one another: how do you think they would address one another? The corpsman would say "lieutenant" and "sir"? How often? How would the lieutenant address the corpsman? Would he call him "Corporal" or "Sergeant"? By the way, is "corpsman" the right term for this situation in the Army?

A second lieutenant and his platoon's medical specialist in Vietnam would have had a relationship shaped by **rank**, **Army culture**, and **the intimacy of shared danger**. In 1970, that dynamic had some very consistent patterns.

1. What the medic would call the lieutenant

First, a terminology point: **In the U.S. Army, the correct term is “*medic*,” not “corpsman.”** “Corpsman” is Navy/Marine Corps. In an Army infantry platoon in Vietnam, the medic was usually an SP4 (Specialist 4).

How he'd address the lieutenant:

- “Lieutenant”
- “Sir”
- Occasionally “LT” (pronounced “Ell-Tee”), especially in the field.

How often?

- In formal or semi-formal situations: “Sir” or “Lieutenant.”
- In the field, under fire, or when working closely: “LT” was extremely common.

Even if they were the same age and friendly, the medic would still use rank-appropriate address most of the time. But tone mattered more than the word—soldiers could say “LT” with respect, affection, or exasperation depending on the moment.

2. What the lieutenant would call the medic

A lieutenant would **not** call an SP4 “Corporal” or “Sergeant.” Specialists are not NCOs.

He would typically use:

- “Doc” — by far the most common and culturally significant
- **The medic's last name**
- Occasionally “Specialist” (more formal)

Why “Doc”?

“Doc” was a term of deep respect in infantry units. It didn’t matter that the medic wasn’t an officer or NCO—he was the one who kept people alive. Calling him “Doc” acknowledged that.

Even lieutenants used it, and often with genuine warmth.

3. The relationship dynamic

A platoon leader and his medic were often:

- The same age
- New to Vietnam at the same time
- Side by side on patrols
- Dependent on each other in life-or-death moments

This created a **unique bond**. The lieutenant relied on the medic’s judgment about casualties, triage, and sometimes even tactical decisions related to casualty evacuation. The medic relied on the lieutenant for protection and leadership.

So you’d hear exchanges like:

- “*Doc, how bad is he?*”
- “*LT, we need to move him now.*”
- “*Doc, stay behind me on this one.*”
- “*LT, you’re bleeding—sit down.*”

Rank mattered, but **trust mattered more**.

4. Summary

Correct term: *Army medic* or *combat medic*, not “corpsman.” **Medic** → **Lieutenant:** “Sir,” “Lieutenant,” or “LT.” **Lieutenant** → **Medic:** “Doc” or the soldier’s last name. **Tone:** Respectful but often informal in the field. **Relationship:** Close, cooperative, and shaped by shared danger.