

# Profile

# Dr. Pete Farmer

## Executive coach draws on wealth of experience as a doctor abroad and as a former volunteer cop

By Arthur Lightbourn

Five years ago, Dr. Pete Farmer's life took a totally unexpected turn.

He was attempting to install a television antenna atop his Rancho Santa Fe home, when he fell off a ladder and shattered his foot.

Farmer had been an emergency medicine doctor all of his professional life. As a Navy doctor in Vietnam and Japan. As senior medical officer of the Apollo 13 shipboard recovery team. Later as a civilian medical volunteer in Pakistan, training Afghan mujahideen (freedom fighters) to become medics. And in emergency rooms in San Francisco and San Diego County.

But emergency room docs have to be able to stand while performing their life-saving ER procedures.

"I thought at first I might be off for maybe three months," the 60-year-old Farmer recalled.

But the damage was more severe than first realized.

Seven subsequent surgeries were required to repair five fractures and two dislocated joints in his right foot.

Working in the ER became impossible.

Of Scottish ancestry which he credits for his stubborn streak, Farmer determined he wouldn't let the accident get him down.

It might mean changes in his life, but that was OK.

Change and the willingness to adapt were no strangers to Farmer. They had been part of his belief system ever since high school when his Jesuit teachers directed him from the path of teenage rebelliousness to a life of more constructive action.

"The Jesuits," he says, "saved my life."

Shortly after the accident, with his foot propped up and

numbed with ice packs, he reexamined his life. It had always been a life filled with action. He loved to scuba dive, sky dive, climb mountains, run triathlons, and ride motorcycles. He was a founding partner of the Tri-City Emergency Medical Group. And for several years in Oceanside, he had been a volunteer cop. He's a man who believes you can find time for anything you really want to do.

But there was something else that seemed a natural part of him.

He loved helping people. Not only medically, but in other ways as well. One of his favorite quotes is Johann Goethe's: "Treat people as if they were what they ought to be and you help them become what they are capable of becoming."

Besides teaching emergency medicine throughout his career, Farmer occasionally ventured into teaching other subjects, including stress and time management to nurses as part of the U.S. State Department Embassy Education Program in Germany and Hawaii in 1984.

Friends suggested to Farmer

*'Playing hard  
in life has been  
my style.'*

that he would be a natural as a coach. He had, in fact, been coaching people all his life. Why not do it professionally?

Why not, indeed, he thought.

"I was looking for something I could do on the phone," he said, "and didn't have to be physically active to do it."

Three months after his accident, Farmer began accepting clients, executives who wanted to become better communicators, bet-

ter bosses, and more effective competitors. He called his company the Performance Dynamics Center. He doesn't advertise. His clients, now located all over the country, find him by word-of-mouth referrals. At first he worked out of his home. And now he has an office in the Fairbanks Village Plaza.

He refers to himself as a "warrior coach."

"The mission of 'warrior coaching,'" he said, "is to enable people in an organization to aggressively adapt, with ease and exhilaration, more rapidly than their competition. No longer afraid of change, people will begin to have fun as they adapt at an ever-more-effective rate. I call this 'peace and agility in the midst of the fray.'"

Farmer was born and raised in Detroit, Michigan — where he attended the Jesuit-run University of Detroit High School and subsequently Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where he earned his bachelor of science degree and later, in 1968, his medical degree.

He was the first person in his family to attend university.

His dad had emigrated from Glasgow, Scotland, quit school in the eighth grade to support his family, and eventually opened an insurance agency.

Farmer was the eldest in a family of three brothers.

Like many young doctors during the Vietnam War, Farmer was conscripted to serve in the Navy. He had a deferment to pursue a residency in orthopedic surgery, but when he turned down the residency, intending instead to go into heart surgery, he got the call to active duty via a telephone call.

"Lieutenant Farmer?" they asked.

"I said there's no Lieutenant Farmer here."

"And they said, 'Doctor Farmer?'"

"I said, 'Yeah.' Two weeks later I was in Vietnam."

No Officers Training School. Nothing. "They had forgotten to replace a guy on a ship over there." And he was a doctor, so....

He was initially placed in charge of 180-bed hospital unit on the helicopter carrier U.S.S. Iwo Jima in Da Nang with a staff of 11 doctors, 65 corpsmen and "a great Navy Chief who taught me a lot about leadership and managing people."

His unit treated up to 200 U.S. and South Korean Marine casualties per day.

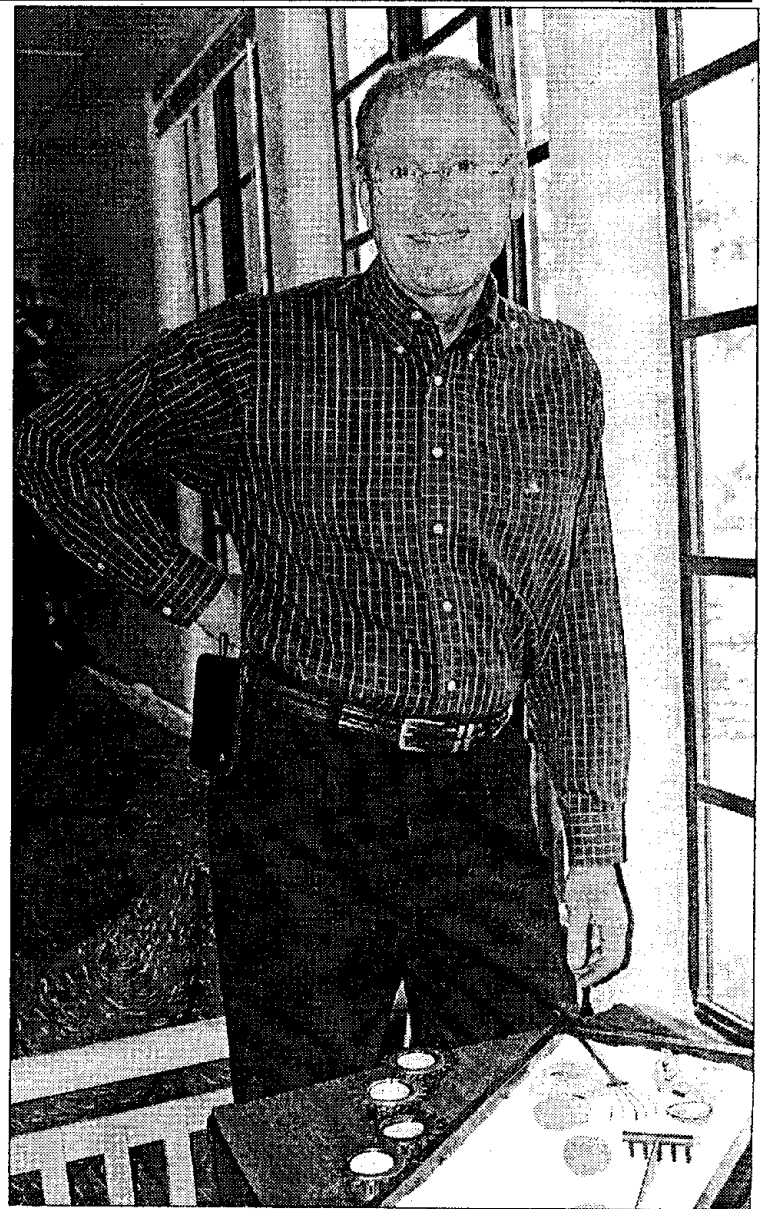
Also on that same ship, he was the senior medical officer in charge of the Apollo 13 recovery when the crippled spacecraft with its three astronauts splashed down safely in the Pacific on April 17, 1970.

After his initial tour, he elected to remain in the Navy, working in emergency rooms in Japan for a year, and training in jungle survival, submarine and diving medicine. He was assigned to a special warfare submarine and sent back to northern Vietnam with Navy Seal teams.

When he got out of the service in 1973, he and two physician partners founded the Tri-City Emergency Medical Group at Tri-City Medical Center in Oceanside.

Simultaneously, from 1975 to 1985, the 6 ft. 1 in., 180-pound Farmer chalked up 20 to 80 hours a month as a volunteer cop in Oceanside.

"I wanted to do something about the crime situation," he said, "and I wanted to see what it was like being a cop. When you see



Dr. Pete Farmer at his office in Fairbanks Ranch.  
Photo/Carla Van Wagoner

cops behaving the way they do, why do they do that? It gets clear when you're out there on the street...Good people spit on you...It's very tough. I got an insight into what real heroes they are."

During his 10 years as a volunteer patrolman, he got into his share of fights. "I never lost a fight," he said, with a touch of pride, "even though I was fighting guys 20 years younger than I was. But the difference is they were fighting to avoid being arrested and I was fighting for my life. I was more motivated."

He recalled the day he responded to a call to check out a man and woman who were reportedly fighting on a street corner. When he got to the scene, kids told him the couple "had gone behind that building."

Farmer sprinted to the rear of the building and discovered, "This guy, who turned out to be 23, had ripped a 16-year-old girl's clothes off and he was raping her. I was able to stop him before he did it. It made all those 80 hours a month worthwhile."

In 1985, Farmer divorced, remarried and moved to San Francisco, where he worked in hospitals, and taught emergency medicine at the Letterman Army Medical Center and UC San Francisco.

One day, he recalls, he was watching the news on TV with his eldest daughter and his then 14-month-old son, when he saw a report on Afghanistan about booby-trapped "toy bombs" being air-dropped by the Russians into areas where they would be found by children of farmers who were growing food for the Afghan fighters.

"There was just enough explosive in them to damage a kid's hands," he said. Their families would have to stop farming and leave the country in search of medical help.

"My daughter said, 'Dad, somebody should do something

about that.'"

Farmer agreed and volunteered his services to the International Medical Corps in Peshawar, Pakistan, where for a month in 1987 he helped train fighters under Ahmed Shah Masoud to become medics in Afghanistan's struggle with the Russians. (Masoud later became commander of the Northern Alliance in the fight against the Taliban and was assassinated two days before the 9/11 attacks.)

In 1991, Farmer returned to Southern California, to be closer to his eldest daughter, Anadara. The Farmers lived initially in Carlsbad and moved to Rancho Santa Fe six years ago.

At the time of his accident, Farmer was an emergency physician at the Alvarado Medical Center.

In the coaching field, Farmer drew on his life experiences supplemented with additional training at Coach University, with the Professional Coaches and Mentors Association, and with the Hay Group in Boston.

When he's not at his office or at home with his family, Farmer whizzes around on his Ducati sport touring motorcycle, frequently heading for the Willow Springs Raceway in the high desert where he can let it rip. He admits he gets his kicks riding "hard and fast."

"Playing hard in life," he said, "has been my style."

Although he no longer practices medicine, Farmer still projects the manner of a physician who cares about his patients. In all his years as a doctor, he said, he never got tired of it. "But," he added, "I really enjoy what I'm doing now, so I don't miss it from that perspective."

Besides, he said, emergency medicine and coaching have striking similarities. "Emergency medicine requires rapidly developing trust with patients while rapidly developing a clinical diagnosis and

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### Quick Facts

**Name:** Pete Farmer, M.D.

**Distinction:** Executive coach, founder and president of the Performance Dynamics Center in Rancho Santa Fe. Served as a Navy doctor in Vietnam and Japan. Was an emergency room physician in San Francisco and San Diego. Was a volunteer cop for 10 years in Oceanside. And trained Afghan fighters to become medics.

**Resident of:** Rancho Santa Fe since 1996.

**Family:** Married for 17 years to his wife, Kathy, a community activist and president of FAME, the Foundation to Advance Music Education. Son, Kyle, 16; daughter, Megan, 15, both students at Torrey Pines High School; and daughter by a previous marriage, Anadara, 24, an entertainer in New York City.

**Education:** Bachelor of science degree (1964) from Marquette University and M.D. from Marquette School of Medicine in 1968.

**Favorite Author:** Mystery writer John D. MacDonald.

**Favorite Music:** "I like all music, especially country music."

**Favorite Singer:** His daughter, Anadara Farmer.

**Favorite Getaway:** Yosemite Valley.

**Favorite Place:** "At home with the kids."

**Favorite Foods:** Indian.

**Favorite Movie:** "Braveheart."

**Hobby:** Motorcycling.

**Childhood Hero:** Cowboy movie star, Hopalong Cassidy, (aka William Boyd), "because of his sense of humor and his commitment to fair play...In his time, he was bigger than the Beatles."

**Philosophy:** "Never give up. Break free. Learn something new. Collaborate. And enjoy the journey."

# FARMER

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resolution." His approach to coaching is much the same.

He works collaboratively with his clients, he said.

"That's one of the best things about coaching," he said. "We learn from each other. It's always a two-way street."

He works with CEOs and upper level management.

"Those are the people who can make something happen...I work with great people. I don't take a client unless...I trust and respect them."

"The results," he said, "will be as unique as the person. What gets produced in coaching will be a function of the gap between where a person is now, where they want to get to and their willingness to do the necessary work.

"A common example is shifting from 'flying off the handle' at 'the morons' in the company to redirecting their passions as a resource that produces a better product with less effort and increased profit.

"In a very short time, you get a clear picture of your strengths, weaknesses, emotional competencies and passions in life," he said. "Furthermore, you'll define your distinctive contribution to the teams in your life, whether at work, with your family, or in your community — giving you the wisdom to make better choices and take action in the right way at the right time."

For his clients, he stresses: "Getting to know yourself, what's important to you and what are you really doing here, what do you want to accomplish?"

Too many people, he said, walk around with the weight of the world on their backs. "What their future looks like is the same as their past...and that limits what they can do."

The trick is, he said, "to give up any of those limitations that are keeping you from really accom-

plishing what it is that's important to you."

Another factor, he said, is the ability "to manage the overwhelming complexity, pace and mass of today's workload. Our work habits were not designed for the 21st century. What's needed is not time management. It's work management."

He is currently offering his clients two-day Mission Control Productivity Workshops. In addition, he offers a free 45-minute talk to companies, church groups, community and service organizations on "Ten Work Habits That Put the Brakes on Your Productivity." To book, call (858) 756-2277.

Asked if there was any unfulfilled ambitions in his life, he said he would have loved to have been an astronaut. "That would have been a real kick."

"But," he added, "when you think about it, we're all astronauts on this planet, getting a free trip around the sun every year."

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# VOLUNTEERS

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eager young toddlers. It's a rewarding experience, and the only hazard involved is the danger of becoming adored by 3-to-5 year olds. If it has been awhile since you read to your kids, we provide gentle and really fun training that doesn't take long and gives you a chance to meet other Gabbies.

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