

U.S. NAVY MEDICAL DEPARTMENT ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL HISTORY WITH SGT. (ret) RICHARD BAIOCCHI

CONDUCTED BY
JAN K. HERMAN, HISTORIAN, BUMED

28 JUNE 2014
TELEPHONIC INTERVIEW

OFFICE OF MEDICAL HISTORY
BUREAU OF MEDICINE AND SURGERY
WASHINGTON, DC

Telephone interview with Sgt. Richard Baiocchi, Co. A, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, 1st Marine Division. Wounded in action, Korea.

Where are you from?

Right here in Hershey, [PA].

When did you join the Marines?

In 1948. Back then, you could join the Marines for 1 year and you could then stay in the inactive reserves for 6 years. So that's what I did. I was then out for 14 months and then they called back all the active reserves at the beginning of the Korean War. Then they needed more men so they called back the inactive reserves. In 1950 I went back in.

When did you go to Korea?

I went in January 1951. I landed in Pusan about the middle of January. That was right after the Chinese just about pushed us all the way out of Korea. They say we only held an area about the size of Connecticut. And that's when we started making our move.

What specialty did you have.

I was a rifleman and also operated a machine gun.

Is that where you met John Fenwick?

Yes. We were behind the lines most of the time. We went on patrols every day. I was on one of those patrols when we were ambushed and I was wounded. We were down in the rice paddies and they were up on top of the mountains.

This was October of '51, and you were up near the 38th parallel again.

We were about 30 miles north of the parallel in North Korea when I got wounded. At that time there was a defensive line all the across Korea from east to west.

What do you remember about the day you were wounded?

I only had about 2 or 3 weeks left in Korea when it happened. I was supposed to be gone from Korea. I just had a feeling that something was going to happen that day we went on patrol. And it did.

When I was talking to Dr. [Howard] Sirak the other day, he remembered that you had been wounded earlier and you had come in to

Easy Med and he treated you. What was that all about?

I was wounded by shrapnel in my right leg.

And he had patched you up.

Yes. And then I went back to the line again.

John Fenwick remembers that the day you went out you had a green lieutenant.

Yes. He was a young lieutenant. We were down in the rice paddies and all of a sudden all hell broke loose. I'm surprised all of us weren't killed. It was really, really bad.

Were they Chinese or North Korean?

They were North Koreans.

Were you nearby when John was wounded?

I was close by and then I was hit in the left arm, right shoulder, and my jaw. I just couldn't comprehend what was going on. In fact, Glen [Snowden] got hit at the same time. I remember him saying that he couldn't help me. He then told me to go back and try to get to some South Koreans who were down there trying to help us out with stretchers. All this time the enemy was shooting at us. They put me on a litter and while I was laying there the North Koreans were still shooting. The helicopter finally came and they flew me back to the field hospital.

John remembered something. I don't know whether you remember this or not. He said that after he was wounded he was lying on a litter and that Doc Snowden couldn't help him because, as you recall, he had been hit. He remembers you taking a syrette of morphine and trying to administer it to him when you were hit. Do you remember that?

Yes. That's probably when I was hit.

How did you know how to administer morphine?

I had never done it before but there's a first time for everything, I guess.

Do you remember the helicopter ride back to the field hospital?

Very faintly. I remember them getting me in the basket on the outside. That was the last I remember. When I got to the field hospital they saved most of my face there.

It was Dr. Sirak that did that. He was like your family physician. You were a regular there.

He really did a good job in saving me.

You must have been in shock at that point?

Yes, I was. I don't even know how long I stayed there in the field hospital. I don't even remember if they sent me to a hospital ship. I could have been on one but I don't remember. From there they flew me to Yokosuka, Japan. I was there between 30 and 60 days. After I left Japan I stopped off in Hawaii at Tripler Army Hospital and stayed there for 2 or 3 days. From there they flew me to Travis Air Force Base in California and I was there for 30 days. From there I made a couple of stops including Lackland Air Force Base, and then an Air Force base in Alabama. I think they just transferred me from one plane to another. From there I flew to Andrews Air Force Base in Washington. They had an ambulance waiting for me and they took me right to Bethesda. The next day they started my treatments. They worked on my arm there but they didn't do all that much with my jaw. That's why they transferred me to Philadelphia.

Your wounds were pretty serious.

I almost lost my left arm. There were seven holes in it.

That must have been a machine gun that got you.

It was a machine gun. They kept pulling bullets out of my arm even after I got to Bethesda. I think they took three of them out there. I also had a wound in my right shoulder and my jaw.

What happened to your jaw?

It was almost off. That's why I took so long in the hospital with all these operations. They took a piece of bone out of my hip and grafted it to my jaw. Then I got an infection in my jaw from that operation, osteomyelitis. They had to reopen it and scrape the bone to get rid of the infection. The wires are still in there. It turned out pretty well though. My jaw was wired up for a long time and all I could eat were liquids. I was on that liquid diet for a couple of months. After they removed the wire I went over to real soft foods.

Was your tongue affected?

No. Thank God.

What about your teeth?

They were all knocked out, except four on top. All my lower teeth were gone. In fact those four are still intact. I don't know how many operations the oral surgeons did but they did a good job. I remember one doctor came up to me and said, "We'll get you fixed

up as good as we can but you know you'll never be the same as you were before." They made a special plate for inside my mouth with teeth attached to it. There was a commander at Philadelphia, an oral surgeon, who was really good. There was also a plastic surgeon there named CDR [] Oakey. They would operate on me and then would let me go home for 30 days. Then I'd go back and have another operation. Then they'd send me home for another 30 days. All told, I had 15 operations between Bethesda and Philadelphia. This totaled almost 2 years--6 months at Bethesda and 18 months at Philadelphia.

When did all that end and your recovery complete?

I was discharged in 1953. The corpsmen and the nurses were fantastic. I was very pleased with the way they all treated me.

Of course, I still have my scars there. But a lot of people have asked me where I was wounded and they don't even notice that I was wounded in the jaw.

How's the function of your jaw now so many years later?

It's doing well. I'm about 15 miles from the Veterans Hospital and I get all my dental work done there.

Can you eat anything?

Just about. I can't eat a tough steak or anything like that. I have to chew my food a lot more than anyone else because of the special plate I have. But I can eat mostly everything.

So they did a masterful job on you.

I think so. But I feel the people in that field hospital were the ones who really saved most of my face. If it hadn't been for them I don't know what would have happened.

That was Dr. Sirak's handiwork.

He sure did a good job, that's for sure.