

U.S. NAVY MEDICAL DEPARTMENT ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL HISTORY WITH CORP (ret.) PETER BINGHEIMER, USMC

CONDUCTED BY
JAN K. HERMAN, HISTORIAN, BUMED

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TELEPHONIC INTERVIEW

OFFICE OF MEDICAL HISTORY
BUREAU OF MEDICINE AND SURGERY
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Telephone interview with former Corporal Peter Bingheimer, Company H, Third Battalion, 7th Marines. Wounded in action, Korea. Conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian, Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, 1 July 2002.

Where are you from originally?

I was born in Buffalo, NY.

When did you join the Marines?

On July 18th, 1949. My first duty station after Parris Island was the Naval Air Test Center at Patuxent River, MD. When the Korean War broke out we had a guard company of 55 men at Patuxent River. Fifty of them went west to FMF Pacific and I ended up at Quantico for a couple of months. In November of '50 I went to Henderson Hall. I was with the guard company there. We worked the base and we had a post at the Pentagon.

When did you learn that you were going to Korea?

That's a funny thing. I was in the guard company at Henderson Hall. They had a bowling alley there. The guy who ran the bowling alley was a guy named Rodriguez who spoke fluent Spanish. They needed somebody at the embassy in Asunción, Paraguay. This guy put in for it and got it right away. So there was nobody to run the bowling alley. I had grown up in bowling alleys and pool halls so I told the special services officer about my experience. They couldn't find anybody else so they gave me the job. I was there from '51 to '52. The first part of April of '52 they wanted me to take over the swimming pool until Labor Day. I figured it was time to do something for my country. So, like a dope, I put in for Korea and I got it.

How did you get over there?

I went to Camp Pendleton for advanced infantry training in June of '52. We left San Diego in July and arrived in Korea in August. I was assigned to a company in the 7th Marines and got shot at every day until I left there in October of that year.

You were shot at every day?

Artillery fire. After they sat down to talk truce, there was nothing but artillery fire, mortars, and sniper fire.

When you got to Korea, where did they send you?

We debarked at Inchon and they took us on trucks up to our units up at the 38th Parallel. We were integrated into one of the units up there. I happened to come up with How Company, 3rd Battalion, 7th Marines with an outstanding combat record at the Chosin Reservoir.

As a rifleman?

Yes. I was a corporal at the time so I was in line to take over a squad when I got there.

And you say you were being shot at every day by artillery.

The Chinese would think nothing about dropping a couple of thousand rounds on top of us every day and every night.

Were you in bunkers?

We were in trench lines and bunkers.

Were you on the east or the west end of the Parallel.

The west side, about 3 miles from Panmunjom. There was a very important main outpost there called "The Hook." It was heavily defended because it was the invasion route from the north into Seoul. We had outposts about a thousand yards in front of it. And every 2 days they would change the personnel on those outposts because they were getting killed and wounded so fast.

Did you end up replacing some of those people?

Yes I did. The name of the outpost about 2,000 yards in front of the Hook was called "Outpost Frisco." It was constantly being probed and blasted with artillery. The outpost was in control of UN forces and the object of the Chinese and us was to try and get a prisoner. But all we ended up doing was killing each other.

So if you had a patrol, you'd go out at night and try to get a prisoner?

Yes.

Were you ever able to do that?

No. Not when I was there. As soon as the shooting started, everyone would end up either wounded or dead. There were minefields and booby traps of all kinds. It was high anxiety, believe me.

You ended up getting injured yourself. How did that happen?

October the 6th is the Chinese moon festival. It's an annual thing. They decided to celebrate by taking our outpost. All the outposts along the line were attacked that night.

What do you remember about that night?

I can remember everything and that's one of my problems. As soon as the sun went down, it became pitch-black. The moon didn't come out 'til 2 in the morning or so. Around 9 it was pitch-black. And

all of a sudden, they must have thrown about a thousand rounds of artillery on top of us. Then they came at us screaming. We figured there were about 300 of them. There were 29 of us on the hill at the time. Their artillery smashed a lot of the barbed wire and they got through. From then on it was unbelievable. It was hand-to-hand fighting blasting away at everybody. Everywhere you looked, there were killed and wounded. It was madness! They were throwing concussion grenades into our trench line. Chinese concussion grenades are designed to stun a person--knock them down--so they could take a prisoner. But if they get close enough, they can kill you. Well, they were throwing them in there. I grabbed two of them and threw them back. The third one went off in my hand and knocked me back quite a ways. Then the fighting really started.

Is that how you injured your fingers?

Two and the tip of another were blown off. I couldn't stop to monkey with them. I had to find another weapon and start spraying those Chinese. That's the way it was.

I grabbed a burp gun from one of the dead Chinese and started spraying them. They started going down. I didn't even know how to work the goddamn thing but I learned in about 5 seconds.

Where was your M1 at this point?

The artillery bombardment had loaded it with so much dirt that it wouldn't function. That was one of the problems over there. When these World War II weapons got dirt in them they would misfire.

So the burp gun was the only thing you had?

That and anything I could pick up and throw at them. They had bayonets and everything else going. One guy stepped on my head and all over me. Another time I looked up and there was a Chinese about 30 feet down the line who opened up on me and hit me right in the chest with his burp gun. But my flak jacket stopped any of the slugs from penetrating. I still have five marks on my ribs where they were cracked.

This went on for about 25 minutes or so. We all ended up in a bunker trying to protect ourselves. When you were overrun like that, and if you had a radio, you could communicate back to the main line. They had a system called "box us in." They would throw 105s, 155s, and 8-inch shells on top of the hill. The shells had proximity fuses so they would explode in the air. We would be in that bunker hunkered down and they would just throw hundreds and hundreds of rounds of this stuff on top of us and it was very effective in chopping up the Chinese. It just made spaghetti of them.

But the Chinese were still coming up there. One of them came into the bunker and sprayed us. That's where I got that slug in my

back. I showed you the x-ray. It's a 7.62mm burp gun slug. It's been in my back since October 6th '52. I got 11 different wounds from 11 different missiles. And there are some still in there. We also counted 52 pieces of shrapnel besides that.

How did you survive in the bunker with that Chinese guy shooting at you?

Well, he walked away and then the barrage started again. And that was the end of the Chinese. Their troops were on top of the outpost and that proximity fused stuff just tore them to pieces.

You know, I thought the whole thing was foolish. And so did the British. They said, if you're going to hold a hill, you should put enough people on it and back them up and hold it instead of getting people killed every day. But that was the decision back in Division. They held Outpost Frisco for quite a few months and took all those casualties and then Division said, "We don't need the thing anyway," and they gave it to the Chinese. It's still in communist hands today. And all those men died and were wounded up there. How many hills were there like that in Korea where these damned decisions were made?

How did you get rescued from that mess?

Dawn came, the Chinese got a few prisoners, and they started withdrawing to the rear. When it got a little bit lighter, our F-4U Corsairs came over the outpost and started strafing it when they saw some Chinese activity there. When the sun came, there was an eerie quiet. I guess why that's why they call Korea "The land of the morning calm."

Then we heard voices talking in English in the background. They were people from Item Company. Somebody dragged me out of there and managed to get me to the reverse side of the next hill. From then on it was a trip to a helicopter. They took me to another place and transferred me to a bigger helicopter, which flew me to the USS *Repose* out in Inchon Harbor. I'll never forget what happened when they transferred me from the helicopter stretcher to the *Repose* stretcher. I apparently had a fragmentation grenade in my back pocket and it fell out onto the deck. Everybody scattered. Someone finally picked it up and threw it in the ocean.

Where did they take you then?

I went down to a ward and someone examined me. I was exhausted. I remember waking up and found myself in a smaller ward with a bunch of Korean marines. So when I woke up and saw nothing but slanted eyes, I thought I was a prisoner of war.

Then they put me in another ward and examined me again. I had an operation on my hand that day. After 4 days, we sailed to Yokosuka

and I went to the naval hospital there. Eventually, I was air-evaced to Midway, then to Tripler General in Hawaii, Oak Knoll in Oakland, CA, then Andrews Air Force Base, and then Bethesda. I stayed there from the first of November until April of '53 when I was separated.

I suppose they were taking metal out of your body from the time you landed on the *Repose*.

Both my eardrums were blown out and I could hardly hear anything.

Did the nurses and doctors treat you well?

It was like being in heaven compared to where we were. I never realized that those nurses were working 14, 16, 18 hours a day. I can imagine what they went through.

What did they do for you at Bethesda?

They performed a few operations on my hand to see if they could restructure it and offer me a better grip. They fused my little finger on my left hand. And they worked on my eardrums. One eardrum grew back. The other one didn't. I had that one taken care of when I got out. They did a lot of minor things--working on my back and neck. The people in the maxillofacial division in the dental clinic made me a cosmetic hand. They created a set of fingers that I could put over my hand so it would look like I didn't lose any fingers. I still have it today. It was an experiment to see what could be done.

This was your left hand?

Yes.

So you had picked up that grenade with your left hand?

Yes.

Are you left-handed?

No. I'm right-handed. I had a burp gun in my right hand and was throwing the grenades back with my left. The other guys were doing the same thing.

Did they take the other shrapnel out of your body?

Yes. They didn't get it all out. Because the joints of my thumb and other fingers are quite delicate, they didn't want to mess with it. So they left the little pieces where they were. They took the bigger stuff out of my neck and back.

You showed me that x-ray showing the slug that's still near your spine.

It's in the third lumbar.

Does it ever bother you?

Only when I think about it. It hasn't really bothered me so far but it's a precarious situation. If I ever got hit hard back there, I don't know what would happen to me. I might end up a paraplegic.

You had better stay off the football field.

I did play baseball and softball after I got back.

So you were medically discharged?

Yes. On April 30, '53 I said goodbye to Bethesda and they took me in a Navy vehicle over to the old Naval Gun Factory at the Washington Navy Yard where they processed me, and I was out.

What did you do then?

I took the bus home to Buffalo, looked around, and tried to readjust. I had a tough time. I went to the VA Hospital in Buffalo and they worked on me for about 5 months there. They did a couple of more operations on my hand. Then I packed up and went LA for a year and lived with a friend of mine. I got more therapy treatments on my hand at the Wadsworth VA Medical Center.

Did you find a job?

A bunch of jobs, and then got into alcohol bad because I didn't know what I was suffering from.

Were you starting to have the bad dreams?

Yes, and the alcohol was a self-medicating thing. I know that now but I didn't then.

Was it the same dream being in that bunker with the Chinese running around?

Yes. But it's more infrequent now because I talk about it more now. But I still have it every once in a while. I get the smell of cordite. All of a sudden, I'll wake up at night and smell that stuff. It's burned into my brain and I can't get rid of it.

I kicked around and had all kinds of jobs. Then in '56 I went to the University of Buffalo for a few years. Then I got sick--a thyroid condition. I was alone. I didn't have a family. My parents were dead. So I hooked up with the Federal Government. I had part-time jobs with the Internal Revenue, the Post Office, Customs. Finally I ended up with the Immigration Service. I did 26 years as an immigration officer.

And you retired from there?

Yes. I retired on August 30, 1986. Not because I wanted to, but because I had a sick wife and she needed to be hospitalized in a nursing home. And I couldn't afford it, so I had to quit working and took care of her at home.

What do you do now?

I don't have any rigorous schedule. I go to PTSD meetings at the Vet's hospital in Batavia. There's a special Korean group that comes from all over western New York every other Wednesday. I bowl. I get out and meet people.

Do you find that the PTSD group has been very helpful?

Oh, yes. It changed my life. I was almost a recluse all those years. There are still some fellas who are in bad shape from that. They're all Korean veterans. One hasn't been out of his house for 14 months. He used to come to the meetings but doesn't anymore. There's another guy who goes out in the woods in the middle of winter for 3 or 4 days. Then there's another guy down in the Southern Tier of New York. He has two houses and a family. He lives in one house by himself and only goes over to see his family at dinnertime. He stands by the other house as though he's on watch on the front line over in Korea.

When did you seek help for your PTSD?

They formed a class in April of '91 at the Vet's hospital in Batavia, about 35 miles east of here. It was strictly for Korean veterans and then we started having a lot of success and guys started coming around. All of a sudden, the Vietnam guys formed one and they are the majority there. They have an inpatient ward where the guys who are really upset come in for 28 days and get a combination of therapy and drugs. They have their meeting once or twice a week.

Are these small group sessions where you talk about the situation? How do they do that?

That's how we started. At the first meeting, we had to try to relate what happened the day we got hit. That was tough but everybody got through it. Then we had a psychiatric social worker and a psychiatrist on the thing, and then they tried to match up the patient with the available drugs that might be helpful. Since '91, I've been on a drug called Clonazepam. It's a combination of an anti-spasmodic for the shakes. It's a muscle relaxer and a mild tranquilizer. It's a miracle drug for me. For the 20 years after I got home I wouldn't go up in an airplane. After I got on that stuff I flew down to Washington for the ground breaking ceremony of the Korean Memorial in June of '92. And the next year I flew all the way to Korea.

What was that like?

I thought I could put a little closure on things but there's no such thing as closure. When I got there it was a completely different country. When we left, the hills were just bare; there weren't any trees on them. They were blown to bits by artillery and napalm. Today it's just beautiful. Forty years of growth of trees and bushes. It's really a beautiful country. I was amazed at how the people treated us. I've never been treated in this country the way I was treated in Korea. They treated me like a king. I was there 6 days and stayed in the finest hotels. The cities are all new because we blew them apart. Seoul has 11 million people, 4 ½ million automobiles. They have 19 bridges over the Han River. They have every bank in the world there. They have 70-story skyscrapers, and, of course, the ubiquitous McDonalds. Every day they took us on a tour of one part of the country. Lunches and dinners were all on them. One day they took us to a tower along the Han River. On the 70th floor there was a restaurant. They gave us filet mignon for lunch. Everywhere the people would just walk up to you and shake your hand and say "Thank you for coming over." If you ordered a drink in any of the hotel bars, you could stay all night and they'd never let you pay for anything.

I've talked to other veterans and asked them if, all these years later, they still think about what happened back during the Korean War and whether they thought it was all worth it?

I went there because my buddies had been killed and I wanted to go over and avenge their deaths. What the United Nations did there is what the League of Nations should have been doing in the 20s and 30s. They could have stopped Hitler and Mussolini right from the beginning if they had showed a little force. With Korea, somebody decided to follow the ancient Greek principle that free people should be defended. And that's what we did. We stopped the communists from taking over a democratic country. We did the right thing. Today, Korea is the ninth largest economy in the world and a great ally. So from that standpoint, it was worth it.

It's been almost 50 years since you were fighting there and you say the rest of your life was affected by what happened there.

I've never been able to utilize my potential because of the anxiety problem.

What was it like for you to come to the Korean War nurses lunch the other day?

I had been to the one the year before so I knew what to expect

and I knew who I would see there. Those nurses were the low man on the totem pole. No one gave them any credit or even mentioned them until Commander [Frances] Omori wrote that book a few years ago.