

U.S. NAVY MEDICAL DEPARTMENT ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL HISTORY WITH PHARMACIST'S MATE SECOND CLASS (ret.)
BERYL BONACKER, USN

CONDUCTED BY
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TELEPHONIC INTERVIEW

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Interview with former Pharmacist's Mate Beryl Bonacker, present at Peleliu.

Where are you originally from?

Originally from Iowa, but I came out to Oregon right after the war started and went in the service from Oregon. My folks had sold their dairy farm and moved to Oregon shortly after I did.

When did you decide to join the Navy?

The 20th of April 1943. I took my basic training at Farragut, ID. They were hurting for corpsmen so I went to corps school at Farragut also. While in boot camp at Farragut (Camp Scott), I was hoping to go to cook school and serve aboard ship; that sounded like pretty good duty. The Navy and Marines had other plans for me!

What was that experience like?

That was something else. I went to corps school at Farragut for 6 weeks and then worked in the hospital on the base. I had a month of day duty and a month of night duty. It was during that period of night duty that one of the other corpsmen informed me, "Bonacker, your name is on a Marine Corps draft." I said, "What the hell is the Marine Corps draft?" He told me to look on the bulletin board when I got off duty. Sure enough, my name was on a list to go to Camp Elliott just a few miles north of San Diego to train with the Marines.

Two days later I was on a train for San Diego and trained for 6 more weeks with the Marines out in the field.

Do you remember any of the details of the Camp Elliott experience?

There were a lot of classroom studies but the majority of it was going out in the field with the Marines on patrol. I remember going out in the desert. You crawled under machine gun fire, under fences and barbed wire. I remember jumping off the high board into a swimming pool with full gear on. There was oil on the water which they had set afire. You swam through this. If you couldn't swim, they pulled you out with a hook. If it was the real thing, there sure wasn't a hook.

What happened after Camp Elliott?

When I left Elliott I was put into the 40th Replacement Battalion aboard a converted Dutch refrigerated ship named the Sommeldijk. There were about 70 corpsmen all on the same ship to New Caledonia.

When we arrived there we had more training in the field and from there we went to New Guinea, had some food and supplies taken aboard and then went to Cape Gloucester, New Britain. They had just finished up that campaign. I joined the 1st Marine Division there. That was on May 4, 1943. We then went to an island called Pavuvu in the Russell Islands. That was our rest camp. I helped put that camp together with other corpsmen and marines. It was just an island with a lot of palm trees and coral. The story goes that Palmolive Soap Company owned these palm trees and our government paid Palmolive \$36 for each tree cut down.

While in the camp, I recall giving a lot of shots, mostly boosters. Those were the days before disposables. You had to sterilize the syringes and needles. A corpsman or marine would sit there and file the needle points. After a while they would get a little bur on the end and he'd sit there and file the point and then put it in the sterilizer. I can remember standing there giving shots and not even raising my head. When there was an arm in front of my nose, a syringe was handed me and I'd give a shot. Every so often I'd pull the syringe away and the needle would remain. Pretty soon the marine would come back and ask me if I wanted my needle back. There was just enough bur on the end of the needle that it remained in the patient's arm.

We were there for several weeks and before the Peleliu campaign, we went to Guadalcanal for maneuvers. The "Canal" was about a hundred or so miles from Pavuvu. We went on LCIs and LSTs.

When we got there we practiced amphibious landings. Then we went inland on patrol, crossed streams and rivers, and went through a simulated battle routine. We were getting ready for Peleliu, although we didn't know that at the time.

Then we went back to Pavuvu. We knew we were going somewhere but didn't know where for sure. Then we boarded a ship and headed for Peleliu.

What was the unit you were attached to?

Easy Company, Second Battalion, 5th Marines. I was with them the whole time, up through Okinawa.

When did you find out where you were going?

They let us know on the way there. When we got to Peleliu we could see the Navy dropping bombs and strafing the island. The Navy was bombarding the island and had been doing so for several days prior to our arrival.

What did they tell you to expect when you got ashore?

They figured it would be a real easy beach and it would be a 3- or 4-day campaign at the very most. It was going to be quite simple. Of course, hearing that sort of eased your mind. Little did we know!

How did you get from the ship to shore?

We went down nets over the side and into a landing craft, (LCVPs), then transferred to amtracs to go ashore. It was quite a situation. It wasn't the easiest thing to hoist your body over the side and go down that cargo net into the landing craft but we did it. The guy above you had a way of stepping on your fingers or your head if you didn't move fast enough. Once in the LCVP, you crouched down the best you could without tangling up your gear with the fellow next to you. We went in circles for quite some time before heading to the beach.

What kind of gear were you carrying?

For one thing, we had leggings on; they were miserable. I had a .45 and two clips of .45 ammo. And then being a corpsman, I had two medical kits, one on either hip snapped to my waist and that was quite a bit of weight there. The kits were about 4 inches thick and about a foot long and about 8 or 10 inches wide. You knew what was on the right side and what was on the left side. And then I had a pack on my back along with an entrenching shovel. I don't know what they figured we would do with that. You couldn't dig in coral. That shovel was something I got rid of right away.

Once we were in the boats it was circle up time and wait for orders to go straight to the beach. I forgot to mention the temperature which was hovering around 90 degrees and it wasn't even 9 a.m. yet.

The exhaust fumes from the boat had a way of coming down into the bottom where we were while idling so there was a blue haze hovering around our bodies which already smelled pretty bad. Most of us, if we admitted it, felt woozy; it's a good thing the enemy wasn't fully aware of our condition or he would have taken full advantage sooner than he did.

Were you taking fire from the beach?

We didn't come under fire until we were almost on the beach and then we took some fire from mortars. Some of the landing craft that had turned around and were going back to the ships got hit. Just before we hit the beach there was a Navy Corsair that was dropping napalm. I remember seeing that plane get hit. It exploded in the air. I'm sure that pilot never had a chance.

There were some LCIs on our right. At first we thought one got hit but it really hadn't. It had a gun that was shooting ashore very quickly--boom, boom, boom. There were no trees, rocks, buildings, etc. for protection from anything coming our way. They were lobbing shells in from a distance and most of them were hitting the water behind us as we came closer to the landing.

We were the 11th wave to hit Orange Beach, the beach right opposite the airstrip. But we didn't make it clear in. Our boat got hung up on some coral which prevented us from beaching so we went over the side or out the front gate into about 3 feet of water which was roiled up by the boat's engine. I'm glad it wasn't any deeper than that because there were pieces of coral sticking up out of the water. And since the water was all roiled up, you didn't know what you were stepping in or on. Fellows were falling and tripping.

The beach was comparatively narrow and just ahead was a rise of about 4 feet. If you raised your head, you looked right down a runway. The temperature by this time was around 110 degrees.

The lieutenant in charge of the 2nd platoon had just told the group not to bunch up and that was a tough order to take but with a few choice words he got his message across.

My first so-called casualty was a marine who for better words was swallowing his tongue. Fright had caught up with him and this is the way he reacted. Another corpsman and I pried his mouth open and with gauze wrapped around my two fingers, I got hold of his tongue and straightened out. I comforted him with a few words. He was trying to get up and we had to hold him down so he wouldn't get hit. There was small arms fire hitting the water behind us. I can remember later on in the campaign this marine came up and apologized to me and the other corpsman for his actions which, of course, he couldn't help. Believe me, we were all scared and on edge. We all were taking in a good breath of air and exhaling, which helped for the moment. Many were hyperventilating.

We lay crouched for what seemed like hours. Then we finally got word to move out. One by one we got to our feet and moved forward. Someone or something had stopped the shelling and we moved up on the air strip and finally we were running. I don't remember any casualties from hostile fire going across to the airfield where there were hangers and other buildings. We did have casualties, but it was from guys falling and scraping themselves on coral. I can remember an awful lot of that.

So there were a lot of coral obstacles?

Oh, yes. An awful lot of our casualties were caused by the coral. I remember wrapping a lot of arms, legs, fingers, and knees.

Guys would tear their pants on the coral climbing around. I still have scars on my right arm from coral; I'll always have them.

You then didn't have any casualties to deal with except for the one marine with the tongue situation.

That's the only one I recall at this time. I'm sure there had to be other wounds.

There was no protection running over open ground across the air strip. We could see buildings at the far end of the air strip but it still seemed a long way off yet. When we got to the cement buildings there was a feeling of protection knowing that the day before the Navy had shelled these structures. They were still standing but were pocked with holes and still gave off a smell of sulphur.

We really thought we'd gone far enough for one day, but the higher-ups thought otherwise. After a short rest and readjustment of gear on our backs and hips, we started inland. There was no resistance so far but we could hear small arms fire way ahead. There was a swampy area ahead of us. That's where we got stinking wet, dirty and smelly crawling through stagnant water. We did get some small arms fire but nothing bad.

Our canteens were getting lighter which meant we were getting low on water. And the temperature was running around a hundred degrees and the humidity was in the 90s. As it turned out, we didn't see the water truck until the next afternoon. Somehow we didn't get hungry. I guess it was because we had other things to think about besides our stomachs.

What did you have for food?

We had K-rations. In the K-rations was a little chocolate bar, which was horrible. There was powdered milk which when water was added was luke warm. It was horrible stuff. Then there were eggs in a can, meat in a can and Sterno to heat it with but generally we weren't hungry. When you finally settled down and were safe where you were, then you got hungry. Otherwise, your stomach was secondary. You didn't think about your stomach; you were thinking about staying alive. But you can't go without food very long and fight at the same time. One of the biggest problems we had was trying to get men to eat who wouldn't.

How did you convince them to eat?

I don't remember what our exact words were. I think I said, "We're not going to get anything better, fellas, you might as well eat what you've got." There were always rumors that more K-rations

and C-rations were going to be brought in or something better was coming up to us. I think these rumors did more damage than anything. It made the guys think that something better was on the way. Well something better didn't come along and you had to eat what we had. It wasn't very pleasant.

It was the beginning of the third day before I saw my first sight of death, a Japanese soldier who had probably been killed by either a grenade or fragments from the previous shelling. His body had many wounds and was partially hidden by dirt and coral. It was obvious that the Japanese had retreated taking only their wounded and gear that could be carried on foot

Corpsmen in our unit had all been issued .45 automatic pistols which added to the weight around our waists and somehow I lost mine. A few days later I and others were sent back to the beach for medical supplies and while there I was issued a carbine which still had cosmoline all over it. It had to be cleaned before it could be used. I also got three clips of ammo.

By now, we had extra water brought to us in 5-gallon cans. The water for filling our canteens was taken out of small tank mounted on a two-wheel trailer and pulled by a jeep. These water tanks had been put aboard the troop transports before leaving Pavuvu, possibly a week or two prior to the Peleliu campaign. The tanks hadn't been cleaned properly and so we drank rusty water with an oil taste. It was also luke warm and as I recall, an atabrine was taken with the water.

We corpsmen had to make sure the marines took their atabrine. That was always a tough thing to get these guys to take their atabrine tablet. It was a miserable tablet to take. Even before we got to Peleliu, we used to stand along the company street back on Pavuvu and we'd hand the tablet to them. We found that was the wrong thing to do. We'd get through and walk back to the corpsman's tent and we'd find an atabrine laying here and there. So we learned to toss them into their mouths to make sure they took a drink of water with it. Atabrine was a horrible tablet. It was terribly bitter. I suspect that when the guys first took it the taste turned them off and they would avoid it whenever they could.

Was malaria a serious problem?

Oh, yes. I got a slight case of it myself. I drew 10 percent [disability] for about 2 years after I got out of the service. I didn't see much of it on Peleliu but the rest camp at Pavuvu was loaded with it and that's where most of the men got it when we returned there after the campaign was all over.

When did things begin heating up for you?

About a week after we landed. We were there 31 days all together. You didn't move forward very fast. When you did you went with a patrol. A corpsman would go out with a patrol of about 10 to 12 marines. They always put the corpsman about third from the end. And you had a B.A.R. (Browning Automatic Rifle) man who took up the front and you might have a guy with a Thompson submachine gun toward the back and you had a couple of M1 riflemen behind you. So the corpsman was pretty well protected.

If there was one order you didn't like hearing it was, "It's your turn to go on patrol, Bonny." (Several marines gave me this nickname.) I may not have liked it but I went anyway. Sometimes it was just a routine patrol, but one particular one I went on was more than routine and it had an objective. An aerial survey showed small activity about 2 miles from where we were bivouacked. There appeared to be a small party of men; no large guns could be seen.

We started out with 14 men. A B.A.R. man led the patrol along with a lieutenant and a sergeant with a Thompson submachine guns followed by riflemen with M1s and myself with a carbine, third from the end of the patrol. Behind me was a radioman and bringing up the rear was another rifleman.

We started out talking but with just a few yards down the path, word was passed to shut up and keep our eyes peeled. We stopped about 4 or 500 yards later. Up front we heard a couple of short bursts of rifle fire and took cover behind some small trees or tall brush and waited. Word came back for some reinforcements, which didn't sound good. The radioman called for help and in just a short time help arrived--mortarmen and half a dozen or so others.

The other thing we in the back didn't know was that our B.A.R. man who was leading the group had been killed. He had laid his B.A.R. on a 4- or 5-foot coral ridge to climb over and as he got up over the ridge a sniper got him. He was shot in the head and died instantly. Mortars were set up and firing commenced along with smoke grenades. Small arms fire plus grenades took care of the problem and before four or five of us could go over the coral ridge we took a reverse course and went back to the bivouac area. A grave detail went back to the ridge and brought back the BAR man.

I remember this man very well. He was a very stocky man and always wore his hair very short. He was continually rubbing his stubbled hair. In the rest area back on Pavuvu, where he shared a tent with other marines, he was quite often the topic of conversation, especially when he'd had a little too much jungle juice.

What was jungle juice?

It was alcohol, pear juice, orange juice--all fermented together. At Pavuvu, the cooks had a formula. They put these ingredients together in a 5-gallon can. Then they'd let it sit and ferment for 4 or 5 days after which they would strain it. It was then ready for drinking. You could get high on it just like whiskey or any other liquor. I had tasted jungle juice once but didn't care for it. When we were given bottled beer and Coke back on Pavuvu I always traded my beer for Coke.

Anyway, the man was never mean. Sometimes he would come into the medical tent on all fours and take a bite out of an orange crate where we used to dispose used bandages, etc. He also used his teeth to pick up anyone by their belt, walk away with them, and then drop them on a bunk.

Often he came to the corpsmen's tent to sit and visit with me. He'd say, "Doc, stick close to me when we're out there." I guess I was close to him on that patrol but I couldn't help him that day. I still think about him when I'm writing or talking to someone about those days in the Pacific.

During the 31 days you were on Peleliu did you have other casualties to treat?

Yes. I can recall a guy with a shoulder wound. He had been shot through the right shoulder just through the flesh and he didn't even know he had been hit. I remember putting sulfa on it and bandaging it. The marine was by my left shoulder when he got hit in the right shoulder. If it had been a little more to the right, I would have been hit in my left shoulder. I also recall that one of our corpsmen got hit in the stomach. His name was Kenneth L. Blewitt from Oklahoma. He came overseas with me in the 40th Replacement Battalion. There wasn't a thing we could do for him. He was a smoker and wanted a cigarette. We gave him a cigarette, put him on a litter, and took him to an ambulance which was about a block a way from the aid tent. Before we loaded him aboard, he was gone.

There were an awful lot of flesh wounds. But coral was the main thing. It might sound silly but there were so many fellows hurt by coral. With all the climbing up and down, abrasions and cuts were inevitable. Often mortars and shells would send coral fragments flying in all directions at a zillion miles an hour and cause jagged, horrible wounds. And then the men would get coral poisoning and that was a real mess. Of course, there were a lot of guys who got hit, but what stands out in my mind is the coral damage. It was just tremendous. I took care of more coral wounds than anything else.

What were the symptoms of coral poisoning?

The victim would run a temperature and the wounds would fester very badly. Then we would give them a medication but I don't recall what it was. We had to clean the wounds every day. In most cases a simple scratch wouldn't show up until days later and then it would be infected no matter how minor it was.

What were the sleeping arrangements like at night?

That's hard to describe. There were no trees to speak of or chunks of coral large enough where we could take shelter. You usually slept in a shellhole. We'd occasionally get rain, mostly at night as I recall. You'd cover yourself with your poncho and try to get as comfortable as possible. You laid your head on your pack but you couldn't take your helmet off. They wouldn't let us. And you wanted to take it off so bad. It was so hot under that helmet. A bullet could penetrate the helmet from quite a distance, but it did protect the head from coral.

And, of course, there were no clothes to change into. We had to wear what we had. We all wore those clothes for 31 days. We never took baths of any kind. The only baths we got were out of a helmet and that was to wash your hands and sometimes just your face. We were so filthy I can remember rolling up my sleeves. There was so much dirt and crud on my arms that when I ran my fingernails up my arm, I made furrows. Of course nobody shaved. Some guys perspired more than others. We stunk to high heaven. It was downright miserable. The daily temperature hovered between 95 and 110; night was almost the same because the coral retained the heat until early in the morning. By mid morning the temperature was back up.

Was there danger of Japanese infiltrators at night?

I recall one incident. In one place there were four or five of us corpsmen. Our CO knew there would be a problem that night, a banzai attack. I remember lying petrified in a shellhole with my cocked .45 on my chest. It was extra heavy! (I had lost my .45 early in the campaign but discarded my carbine. Someone had given me another .45 but I don't recall who.) The CO said, "If anyone gets hit, I don't want to hear anyone holler. I don't want to hear 'Doc!', or 'Corpsman!', or anything." He told us to stay down and not to go out and help anybody. We did get attacked that night. They were Imperial Marines, great big guys compared to the average Japanese soldiers. Their canteens weren't wrapped with canvas like ours so when they ran it sounded like a bunch of tin cans that made a terrible noise. You could hear them coming. As soon as a star shell went off, they would stop where they were. But as soon as the light went

out, they started running. I recall one jumping across me in my shellhole. I don't know whether he even saw me. In the morning, we saw about a dozen Imperial Marines dead around our area. It was said they came from Mongolia.

I remember another incident that took place at Peleliu. We'd come upon a large cave opening on one of our patrols. Seeing it from a distance, we assumed there would have to be someone in there. We'd been told prior to the invasion that some of the caves were large enough to hold several troops.

We worked ourselves around to the front of the opening but still under cover and at least 200 yards from it. We fired at the cave entrance, three fellows armed with dynamite worked their way to a peak directly over the entrance. We continued to fire into the cave while the marines above the entrance tied the dynamite to a long piece of line which they would hopefully swing into the cave opening. We stopped firing as they completed their task.

After a few moments, the dynamite went off which sounded like several boxes of dynamite instead of five or six sticks. After a long silence, we rushed to the entrance and tossed several grenades in. Still there was no movement or sounds from within. We cautiously entered and discovered that it was a short cave but quite large in circumference. It was a medical field station with six or eight beds and limited medical field supplies. There was no one in the cave and upon looking around, we were quite sure they had left several hours prior to our arrival. Food that had been heated was now cold. They had left in haste because there were quite a few personal items lying around such as pictures, shoes, slippers, eating utensils, etc.

They had also left several medical instruments behind.

We could not find any other exits. We took souvenirs and stuffed them in our back packs, mainly surgical tools, a folding bone saw, scalpels, a small folding sterilizing tray, etc. These Japanese surgical instruments are now in a museum in Scranton, PA.*

What happened after the 31 days?

They took us off just like they brought us in, on landing craft. We then went back to the Russell Islands--the rest camp in Pavuvu again and we stayed there until Okinawa. We made more trips to Guadalcanal for maneuvers.

*The Japanese surgical instruments I gave to the Marine Corps League in 1989 are now housed in a glass case in the museum. These articles have my name on them and where they came from.

Then you went to Okinawa?

I wasn't really in the Okinawa campaign. I got pneumonia, of all things, out at sea. I made it ashore but they kept me on the beach. I ran a temperature and it kept going up. Finally, they inserted a needle in my lung and extracted 600 cc's of fluid. I stayed there for 2 or 3 days and my temperature hovered around 103 or 104 degrees. They finally evacuated me to the hospital ship, *USS Bountiful*. It was in the harbor there. I remember kamikazes coming in and sinking a DE not too far away. I was in a bed below and I remember the explosion rocking the ship. Guys were falling out of their beds and smoke came in the ventilators. We thought we had been hit but we hadn't.

They took me to the Naval hospital on Guam. Since I was ambulatory and my temperature went down, as a corpsman they put me to work on the ship. All the compartments were full of casualties. I remember the burn cases. There were several dozen. The stench from burned flesh was just horrible. I helped the corpsman bandage these cases. On my separation papers, they have me down as ship's company of the *USS Bountiful*.

What happened after you left the hospital on Guam?

I was put on an LCI loaded to the gunwales with ammunition, and trucks on the upper deck. We were heading back to Okinawa. But by that time, Okinawa was all but secured. I rejoined my outfit there and in about 2 or 3 days Okinawa was all secured. I didn't see a lot of action on Okinawa and was very fortunate.

After the Okinawa campaign ended I went to China for occupation duty. We went to Tientsin then Peking. We were supposed to go to Peking on a train but the communists had blown up the tracks so we ended up going on trucks through little villages. When we got to Peking, my company, Easy Company, stayed in the Austrian legation. When we went on liberty, we had to go in groups of four or five for protection. I remember having dinner at a restaurant. We sat around a big oval table and tasting eggs that were supposedly a hundred years old. We also ate duck and all the trimmings. During the night at the legation, you could hear shots, no doubt, the communists. From Peking we sailed back to Okinawa to pick up marines and corpsmen who were due to get out of the service. We sailed to San Francisco to drop them off and then sailed up the coast to Bremerton. I was mustered out there on February 10, 1946.

I was only there about 7 weeks and then I got orders back to the U.S. I came back to Bremerton and was mustered out there in February 1946.