

U.S. NAVY MEDICAL DEPARTMENT ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL HISTORY WITH PHARMACIST'S MATE (ret.)
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3 APRIL 2000
TELEPHONIC INTERVIEW

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

Interview with Joseph Brennan, 6th Naval Beach Battalion, hospital corpsman present at Omaha Beach, 6 June 1944.

Where did you grow up?

In Brooklyn, Bay Ridge.

When did you join the Navy?

Right after I got out of high school--February 14, 1943.

Where did you go after that?

Samson, New York.

What do you remember about that experience?

It was interesting. I had never been to anything like that in my life. It was all new to me. The interesting thing was we finished our boot training and they gave us 4 days boot leave because men were urgently needed. Then when I got back I sat around the outgoing unit for 2 ½ months. I had volunteered for the Armed Guard.

On the Liberty Ships?

Yes. There was an Armed Guard Center right near where I lived. But they sent me to the Hospital Corps School in Norfolk, VA. I went through about 3 months at the school. And then they sent me to the Naval Hospital in Annapolis, and I was there about 3 months, doing ward duty and stuff, you know, taking blood pressure and things. And one day at Saturday morning muster, they asked for volunteers so I volunteered.

You didn't know what for, though?

No. But the strange thing is they said, "Sorry, all the volunteers have been chosen." They were fellows to be the medics with the Marines. The following week they said, "Many of you volunteered last week so we presume you're volunteering now." And we got these crazy orders to report to the 6th Naval component of an Army engineering group and that's when the fun began. They shipped us down to Camp Bradford, VA, and it was interesting. The bus left us off at the gate to this huge Navy base and all you saw was a road disappearing through the trees into the distance.

So we grabbed our sea bags and started down the road. And when we were just getting near the base, we saw this tent area separate from everything else and fellows walking around in green coveralls, paratrooper boots, and white Navy hats. And they carried machine guns, machetes, and all sorts of stuff. We said, "Wow, look at that." We went to the personnel office and they said, "You men are to report to Unit Love, and that was Unit Love."

Unit Love.

Yes. And so they gave us all this equipment--shovels, seal packs, weapons and things. I told them that I was a medic. "I'm not supposed to do this--here." Then we started training at Camp Bradford. Then they sent us down to Fort Pierce, FL.

What kind of training did they give you there at Camp Bradford?

The first day that the full battalion was there, they had us all together on bleachers. And it reminds me of when I saw that movie "Patton," with him up on the stage. There were 400 of us and we were all sitting on these bleachers. They had about five officers on the stage facing us.

And they said, "Men, this unit's being formed for one operation, opening the second front." Now in '43, that was a very far off thing. Then we went down to Fort Pierce, FL, and went on amphibious maneuvers, marches, up and down, mock ups, going along infiltration courses, crawling through the weeds and the brush, getting past Army sentinels.

They took us from there down to West Palm Beach, where they had a Navy gunnery range. We worked on large weapons, mostly 5-inch 38's, and 20 millimeters. They had them just strung out along the coast, and they'd have a plane towing targets.

So we spent a couple of days doing that, filling in as different parts of gun crews, and learning how to use large weapons. Then when we got back to Fort Pierce, they sent us back to Camp Bradford, where we went through weapons classes. We learned how to use Thompson (submachine guns), pistols, and rifles. They also put us through a whole bunch of courses on communications and semaphore, Morse code. Then we went through mine and booby trap school. They gave half the platoon a bunch of booby traps and told us to booby trap an area. And they gave the other half the job of booby-trapping another area. Then they switched us and told us to go through the area we had just booby trapped.

They sent you to the...

Through the areas that were booby-trapped.

Oh, I see.

They just used firing pins, you know. It just sounded like a cap pistol going off. So we got back to where we started before anybody else and we had some booby traps left. And there was the instructor's jeep. Well with our freshman mentality, we booby-trapped his jeep. He comes back and climbs up on the jeep and says, "Men, you know, 50 percent would have been wounded, 20 percent

would have been killed, and blah, blah, blah . . ."

Then I started worrying, sweating. Holy smokes, what's going to happen when this goes off? We'll be restricted to base. So finally, he sits down and puts his foot on the gas pedal and pop. He jumps up like a rocket. And then he says, "See, you never know where you'll find a booby trap." It was a good lesson because that brought him on another part of his talk, that even though you're sappers and people have cleaned out the mines and booby traps, the enemy may sneak back in and re-mine the area.

So sometimes, you didn't have much faith in the areas where there was white tape. You know, they'd run white tape along clear paths in mine fields.

From there we went up to Lido Beach, New York.

Now you hadn't had any medical training at this point except what you got in corps school?

Well, we did dispensary time every so many days. But we really went through the regular training with everybody else.

But no specific medical training at that point?

No.

Not treating mock casualties or anything like that?

No.

And you hadn't seen any medical equipment that you might be using?

No. Well, we had some stretchers down and we never used them. Now and then we'd have some problems on the beach with someone getting run over by trucks and stuff.

I mean at this point, did you know what your role would be in this 6th Beach Battalion?

No. We knew that we'd take care of casualties and get them off the beach as fast as we could.

But that was the limit of your knowledge?

It was just first aid, stop the bleeding and try to get them aboard a landing craft and out to the ships. And that's all anybody did the first few days. We really did nothing except try to stop bleeding and give morphine.

And that's the first thing we did. We'd grabbed the morphine syrette out of their kit and give it to them.

But, anyhow then we went up to New York, to Lido Beach, and they shipped us over to England. We hung around England from mid January

until June 6th, or a few days before that.

You must have felt a little peculiar though. Here you were a Navy unit, attached to the Army, wearing Army clothes, Army helmets, Army gear and everything else.

Yes, Army everything.

How did the Army people treat you?

You know, pretty good. They worked with us, but there was no fraternization or anything. I remember down in Fort Pierce, we would see Army there. And with one of the other fellows, we were coming out of the showers and we're walking across this area to our tents. We just had towels around our waist. And a couple of Army officers went by and they stopped and said, "You didn't salute. "You're supposed to salute an officer." We had to tell them, in the Navy you don't salute unless you have a lid on. We didn't have our lids on.

Your hats, huh?

Yes. I don't why we called them lids, but they got the message. We were treated pretty nicely. I remember we were in Scurlidge Castle Camp; one night we raided the supply tent for the Army mess hall. And we stole what we thought was a gallon can of fruit cocktail. And when we got it back, it was a gallon can of sauerkraut.

Oh , Dr. Borden talks about that in his book doesn't he?

Yes.

Yes, raiding the tents and stuff and thinking you were getting fruit salad, yes.

That was a priority item.

Yes. It was better then the other stuff you were getting to eat probably.

Oh yes. But I think we ate better then the British people did.

Yes, well even in peacetime they don't eat that well.

No, no.

I understand you went to Salcombe?

Yes. We went to Salcombe, and from there to Scurlidge Castle Camp in South Wales.

Scurlidge it was called?

Yes, Scurlidge Castle Camp, right outside of Swansea.

What was going on there?

Well, we were sort of bivouacked there. We'd go out on watches and maneuvers, and a little target practice. But again, we didn't do much medical because, you know, we didn't know where we were going except it would probably be the European theater.

But anyhow, at Scurlidge Castle we did some training and marching, and it kept us in good shape. Then as the invasion time neared, they put us in this restricted area where so many of the fellows who had the maps and everything. We were just like prisoners in there.

You weren't allowed out?

No. But we had a basketball court behind the mess hall and we'd go and play basketball with the cooks and bakers. It was funny, we'd go out in the forest and we'd be throwing our knives and bayonets at a tree. And a British soldier said, "Blimey, what are you doing to the King's trees?"

Mutilating them.

Yes, but the King owned anything that wasn't on private property. But then we went to Slapton Sands from there and went aboard transports and out to the middle of the Channel and then came back. We had an amphibious operation, full scale and full blown, with everything there.

These were like APH's or...

APA's.

APA's, sorry.

We were on the APA-55.

That would have been what, in April?

No, that was just about 2 weeks before D-Day.

Oh, so the big Slapton Sands disaster had already happened--when those LST's were hit by the German E-boats.

Nobody knew about it. We didn't know anything had happened. It was kept such a hush hush thing.

It wasn't even released until about 1980 or something.

Yes. We were all very surprised when we read about it. And then, what was funny is the landing craft I got on was starting to take on water, and the engine wasn't working right. They dropped those things in 12 miles offshore. So it took us about an hour and

a half to get into the beach.

So this is on June the 6th?

No, this was Slapton Sands.

This was for the exercises?

Yes. And then a couple of days later, they put us aboard the transport and started across the Channel.

What ship did you go across the Channel on?

On the *Henrico* (APA- 55). The weather wasn't that good. But the real bad weather didn't hit for about a week.

What day did you start across? Was it the 5th, or the 4th?

We started on the 4th.

On the 4th, and then they called it off for one day.

Yes. And the bigger ships just slowed down. You know, the fellows crossing in the large landing craft, were called back. And we crossed the Channel. We were supposed to land at H hour plus 90 minutes, which would give us the landing craft from the first wave the time to get back to the ship.

We were standing there on the ship and there were no landing craft coming back. I said, "Gee, I wonder what's up." Then when we were supposed to go aboard, there were still no landing craft. And, you know, we had lost most of them all on the first wave.

You lost them all?

Most. Because this was on Easy Red of Omaha Beach.

Yes, the worst part.

Yes. And so then they brought a large LCT alongside, and they loaded us, plus an Army unit on. There were about a hundred men on it, and we headed for shore. As we came close to shore, the battle wagons were still firing over our heads. We just couldn't get ashore. There was no place to land. They didn't have any channels big enough for this thing to go in. Obstacles, knocked out landing craft, tanks, etc. clogged the beach.

So we just sort of cruised back and forth parallel to the beach, about a mile off the beach just seeing smoke and haze, and hearing some gunfire. Finally a command craft came along side, an old P Boat, and they had tents and everything. And they said, what outfit? We said, 6th Beach. And they said, "Follow us."

They found an opening and we went in. But we didn't go in too far because they dropped us in water that was about oh, close to 5

feet deep.

They just lowered the ramp and told you to jump off?

Yep.

And you were all fully loaded?

Yes.

What kind of gear did you carry?

Well, I had a big pack, about 110 pounds of medical equipment. And when I jumped into the water, you could see machine gun bullets splashing all over the place.

In the water?

Oh yes. So I just went right to the bottom. And I think I established a record for staying under water. Then when I got back up they were sweeping a little further down the beach with the machine gun fire. As I came up there was a GI on my left side that was hit. And I said, do you need a hand? He said, "No, help the other fellow." The guy on my right side had been hit.

So I dragged him about 100 yards and got him ashore, and I looked back out at the other fellow and he was getting in worse shape, so I went back in and got him ashore. The tide was starting to come in. We had landed in a very low tide. We had about 500 yards of beach in front of us. And it only took a few hours for that to cover with water so we kept dragging these fellows higher on the beach. By then I had lost contact with all the other men in the outfit.

Were you able to do any first aid on these people, or just drag them out?

I just dragged them in. And then by the time we had the boat in, they were both dead. I presume they had sucking wounds of the chest. They had no obvious facial wounds. When you get a bullet hole in the chest, air gets in, the lungs collapse, and you're in trouble. But then it was just . . . I got up to the shale line and met up with one of the other guys. That was something. We were pinned down--near panicked. Anyone that got up to get across the shale was mowed down. Then suddenly, as if by mass action, there was a charge. Everyone up and forward--Army, Navy, et al. The beach party men turned and headed for the beach.

From the 6th?

Yes. And so we started going on the beach, working on casualties. There were about five of us. We finally got a landing craft willing to wait, and started putting casualties aboard. As

the coxswain was backing off, cranking up his ramp, a shell landed right in the middle of the craft.

In the middle of the landing craft?

Yes. So they were all wasted.

How close were you to that?

The landing craft was about 25 yards out in the water. I don't know why they shot at that thing.

It was starting to get dark, so we headed back up to the shale line. And again, I was just isolated with this one fellow. And we found a path through the minefield going up the side of the bluff, that big bluff overlooking Omaha Beach. We got halfway up that and we were exhausted.

Then we started to dig in there, but it was such hard clay we couldn't even get a hole. We just scratched out a little something. We had no blankets, no nothing. One of the officers had been killed right on the other side of the path.

Did you say path?

A path through the minefield. And so we took his sleeping bag and both of us wiggled down into it and we dropped out for the night. When we woke up it was light and we just looked out across that beach. Oh God, it was something.

There were just casualties all over the place?

It was like a khaki-colored junkyard--equipment, bodies, burned out vehicles, tanks. You name it, they had it there. It was amazing. I started thinking later in the day, this Graves Registration bunch are great. They get all the bodies off the beach because you didn't want bodies to greet the incoming assault troops. They started coming in about 7:30 in the morning.

Was there still gunfire going on?

Oh yes, less, but still machine gun fire, sniper fire, 88's and mortars.

Did you see any of the enemy at that point?

No, they were in holes shooting at us. When you're on the beach you don't see anything. You didn't see anything except what was in your hands and right in front of you. You just function with total tubular vision. You didn't stare; you just looked at what you had to do and did it. And that way you seemed to function without too much panic. They kept us busy. We went along with Doc Guyton, Dick Borden, and myself, cruising along the beach.

Were you walking?

Yes, walking. Well, you had to step over bodies half the time, looking for wounded that were still alive.

If you found somebody, would you try working on them right there?

Yes. Dress them, give him his morphine, try to get a stretcher, and get him to the nearest aid station. By the next morning, they had about 40 patients there. I think Dick Borden especially, was running down to call the coxswain and say, "Just stay 5 minutes, so we can put some casualties aboard, so you can get them back. And some stayed, some didn't. You know, some of the coxswains . . . they didn't even want to go ashore. They were dumping their troops in deep water and backing out.

So you weren't able to convince too many to stay, huh?

No. Because, you know, you still have the 88's going up and down there. And if they saw a landing craft they'd zero in on that. So we just kept moving casualties around the beach, putting on dressings, giving them morphine, and tagging them.

Did you have enough supplies to work with?

No, no. Every guy that landed had a little first aid kit that had a battle dressing, an envelope of sulfa powder, and a morphine syrette. So you'd take that off his belt, dump the sulfa powder into the wound, put the dressing on, and give him the morphine. And that went on much of the day.

This was the second day now?

Yes. And there was still some fire. You know, you could function. You weren't constantly diving behind obstacles. In the meantime, the Beach Battalion got some bulldozers and they were bulldozing away the obstacles.

You still had to look out for mines that were missed by the sappers. And every obstacle, especially the big wooden ones, had Teller mines on the ends of them. So it took them a couple of days to get a lot of those cleared out so you could really get landing craft in easily. By the third day we had a fairly functioning beach.

Where were you? Let's see that was the end of the second day. Where were you then?

Well, we had found a bombed out villa. It was actually just a wall about 6 feet high that ran vertical to the beach. And it was about 30, 40 feet long. So we dug in along that and had our first aid station there.

Then on the second morning, two of the fellows crawled out of their foxholes. A 20mm shell had landed between their heads. And they looked green so we all dug our holes deeper and piled dirt and planks and sandbags, and anything we could find on top of our foxholes.

Now you say these guys were standing together and a shell landed between them?

They were sleeping together. It was at night. All the anti-aircraft stuff that went up from the ships . . . a lot of that landed on the beach. As a matter of fact, CDR Carusi . . .

He was hit with one, wasn't he?

Yes.

So the shell landed between these two guys and didn't explode? Unexploded, right between their heads.

Man, that must have shocked them.

Oh my goodness. I've never seen green faced people, and that was the first time, just pale green looks.

But they were okay?

They were fine, shook up. And then the next day, we didn't have that many casualties on the beach. It was mostly evacuating people. And I remember the beach master telling me to go down with Ed Johnson. We all called him sheriff. You know, he was a real mountain man from South Carolina, a big guy and strong, such a natural.

When he saw a couple of the '88 shells land, he knew where the rest of them were going to land. And when we were going down to get something off a landing craft, they started shelling again. And I said, "Sheriff, let's hit the dirt." And he says, "No, if I'm going to die, I'm going to die doing my duty." It sounded very heroic, but he knew after the first few shells landed that they weren't going to come near us.

He had figured out where the pattern would land.

Yes. That was what was funny about the Germans. They rarely zeroed in on a specific thing. You know, they'd zero in on a spot, but then they'd follow a pattern after that. So he had figured out their pattern. He figured it out the first day. I think Dick Borden in his book commented that he told a couple of the guys to move because they were going to start hitting near them soon.

But after the fourth day the only thing we had to worry about was accidental steps on mines and booby traps, and things like that.

But they were ultimately cleared out.

Did you get up on the bluff at all?

Oh yes. About 8 or 10 days later, it got down to routine policing the beach, and at the airstrip up on the top of the bluff they had to fly the casualties back, so we didn't have to worry about getting them aboard a landing craft.

Were they C-47's or . . .

I don't know what they used. At first, they were using little planes. But then they got bigger ones and I didn't think they got C-47's. They were only what, 20 miles across the Channel?

Yes, it wasn't too far.

So they were able to make a lot of taxi trips. But they had a very wonderful system put in. They had more wounded survive there than I think any battle they had.

I guess the idea was to just get them off the beach.

Yes. Well, that was the worst spot. I remember the 1st Division guys were ashore, and they were all huddled behind obstacles and all. And they were all saying, "Get off the beach. You're going to get killed here."

Yes, they just grabbed for the nearest obstacle and they all gathered together in a group.

Yes. As a matter of fact, in "Saving Private Ryan," my son had seen that. I was just reluctant to go see it in the movies. And he said there was one scene where they were all huddled behind an obstacle. And this guy comes running over and says, "You guys have got to move." He says, "Who are you?" "Navy Beach Battalion, we're going to blow this."

You didn't see the film then?

I saw a video.

What did you think of it? Was it realistic to you?

It was very realistic. I was just glad I didn't see it on a large screen. You know, you're sitting on your couch and your family is around you, you don't get too deeply involved. It's still very hard to talk about it.

Yes, I imagine you never get over that stuff. You could live another hundred years and you'd never get over what you saw that day.

The interesting thing was we never even talked about it or discussed it or said anything for about 40 years. Now all of a sudden

after "Private Ryan," people started talking about it. And they had a reunion from our old outfit that I heard about by word of mouth. I went down there with about 40 guys from the 6th Beach. And you can talk about it with them and not be too emotional. It was amazing.

Yes, but you didn't want to talk about it with your family or any other people like that.

No, no.

And that's true for the veterans I've interviewed. That's how they feel. Even the ones who were in the Pacific. It's the same thing with them. They didn't want to talk about it until 50 years later. And then they suddenly started talking about it again.

. I don't know what happened 50 years later, but there's a lot of talking about it now.

Well, I guess you want to have an opportunity to tell your side of it, you know. You figure, I've come this far, I might as well tell you how -- it's my chance, I'm going to . . .

Well, we had our last week or so on the beach and had a lot of free time so some of us went exploring and wound up in some little French village and had a cup of cider. They didn't have any wine.

How were you greeted by the French?

Very nicely.

They were glad to see you guys.

Yes, especially when they found out we were American Navy.

We left the beach on the 28th and went back to England. A lot of us had some nice souvenirs.

Did you get any?

Any souvenirs we had we put in our seabag and when we got back to the states and got our seabags; most of the souvenirs were missing.

Yes, the good stuff was probably gone.

Yes.

Did you bring anything back with you?

I had a German bayonet, a rifle, and some other things. I forget what they were but they all disappeared. When we came back, they gave us orders for the West Coast and re-grouped us into a new unit. We trained with the replacements and they put us aboard a brand new APA and shipped us out to the South Pacific.

And you weren't part of the 6th Beach Battalion anymore were you?

No, the 6th Beach ceased to be after that operation. There was nothing that functioned in the battalion side. In the South Pacific it worked as a beach party from an APA, a 35-man unit. And you used to secure the beachhead where the troops from your ship landed. So you had four or five APA's. They had four or five sections on the beach where they went in. And each beach party set up their own little beachhead. You didn't have anything like Normandy. At Okinawa they had 4,000 ships.

So you ended up in another operation, Okinawa?

Yes.

When did you get there?

April 1st, 1945.

On the first day.

Yes. That was something.

Was that worse than Normandy?

No, no, actually, you know, going in . . .

Well, going in was easy. They didn't oppose you going in. It was just once you got in when they started on you.

It was nothing. You know, when you put the landing craft in the water, they go out and circle off the bow, then come in, pick up troops, and join another circle. Then you had a whole bunch of landing craft just circling, waiting to pick up troops. And a Japanese shell landed right in the middle of a circle, like the bulls eye of a target.

They missed everybody.

Missed everybody. They just got a little spray. I think in our platoon, one guy was wounded in the foot.

But later on they got you.

Oh, yes. But once the beachhead was secured, we left. We were there 3 days. We were out of there before the kamikazes came, before the typhoon hit. It was wonderful.

Where did you go after that?

To the Philippines, and then from the Philippines to Saipan. Some place along the line we picked up some wounded Jap prisoners. They had them in the forward compartment. So I used to go in and

change their dressings every day. The only ones you caught were really shot up.

Yes, they wouldn't surrender unless they were too wounded to put up any fight.

From there we went to San Francisco and we were combat loading for the final assault on Japan and none of us wanted to do that. Had that invasion happened, we would even have had grandmothers coming at us with bamboo sticks.

Where were you when you heard about the Bomb?

We were about 2 days out of Frisco, and we were tickled.

I bet you were.

We were tickled. I think they did the right thing.

Have you ever been back to Normandy?

Yes.

When was that?

About 4 or 5 years ago.

Did you go to the cemetery?

Yes. I went up to the cemetery.

Up on the bluff?

Yes. There, I gave someone all the names I could remember. Not here, not here, not one of the guys was there. So I said, "Am I crazy or what?" He says, "No." He says, "You know, 60 percent of the bodies have been taken home."

Were taken home?

Yes

And where were they buried here?

When the war ended, you had the right to request the remains of your loved one to be sent home for burial in this country.

Oh, I see.

And if you go through some of the cemeteries in Brooklyn, you'll see big areas of 19-year-Olds. It's interesting. I think the average age of the guy that landed on D-Day was 19.

Yes, they were pretty young. How old were you?

I was saying, "Lord; let me live to be 20." My birthday was

on the 29th and we left the beach on the 28th.

So you made it.

Yes.

What else do you remember about your visit back there?

There was a fellow who was working for the tour people that came and talked about Normandy. And he was at the Normandy Museum there. And he was a big history buff of the Normandy landings. And someone told him I had landed there. And he led me off to the basement of the Normandy Museum, where they had recording stuff. And he said, "Record your thoughts." And I gave some. When we were on the bus back to the hotel, he said, "Joe would you mind telling some of our guests about your landing." I think just talking into that machine 4 or 5 hours earlier had gotten a lot of the memory cooking for me. Fifty years later it was still quite emotionally traumatic.