

U.S. NAVY MEDICAL DEPARTMENT ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL HISTORY WITH CORPORAL (ret.) CHRIS BROWN, USMC

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TELEPHONIC INTERVIEW

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Interview with former Marine Corporal Chris Brown, assigned to Fox Company, 2nd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division. Present at the Battle of Hue.

When did you join the Marines?

I joined in June of '64, went to Vietnam in June of '67, and got back home and out of the Corps in June of '68.

What was your job in the battalion?

I was first squad leader, 2nd Platoon in Fox Company.

What do you recall about going up to Hue?

When I think about Hue, my thoughts always start on the day before we were sent up there. It was January 31, 1968, the day before the Tet holiday was to start. We were operating north of Phu Bai. We were on a large operation and my squad was the lead squad of Fox Company. We were driving the enemy towards the coast. We swept across some rice paddies and we entered a tree line where we immediately came under fire. I had two guys from my point fire team get hit immediately. The first thing that usually happens is everyone hits the deck and then someone yells, "Corpsman Up!" Well here comes the corpsman and he quickly stabilizes the wounded man and confirms that the other is dead. We get the casualties medevaced out and reform.

It was decided at this time that we lost contact so it was head back to Phu Bai (our home base at the time). When we got there we hung out that evening. The next morning, which was February 1st, we were told we were going up to the city of Hue to help out Golf Company which had gone up there and was in some trouble.

Prior to going, a good friend of mine, CPL Christobal Figueroa-Perez from Puerto Rico, received a "Dear John" letter from his wife. He was pretty shook up so I went with him to the chaplain and asked that CPL Figueroa be kept back in the rear and would he help him contact his wife. It was only supposed to be a 1-day deal as we only brought our flak jackets and web gear. He said that he would have to go and that he would deal with it when we got back.

When we landed in Hue, we had actually taken some rounds through the bottom of our helicopter. We landed in some kind of field over by the Perfume River. We then formed up and from there we began what we didn't know at the time would be more than 40 days in Hue.

You had a corpsman, didn't you?

Before we went up, corpsman Mauricio Aparicio left the company. We also had a corpsman by the name of Robert Ahrens. During the few weeks prior to Hue as we did patrols near Phu Bai, Doc Ahrens trained

a Marine, PFC William Henschel. PFC Henschel was a very smart person who agreed to carry the corpsman bag along with being a rifleman. Doc Ahrens taught him some of the basic emergency procedures that should our platoon corpsman need help, he would be able to pitch in.

Prior to heading up to Hue, the 1st Platoon had a corpsman named James Gosselin. I was told he had some problems with someone in 1st Platoon and so just prior to landing, Doc Ahrens and Doc Gosselin switched platoons. I don't remember Doc Gosselin that much as he just joined us. I do remember he was a big guy. So going in, we had Doc Gosselin and Marine Doc Henschel as our corpsmen for 2nd Platoon.

On that first day we were told that our job would be go out into the city and locate some of our MACV personnel that were out there and unable to return to the headquarters. They gave me an Air Force sergeant who was going to show us the way. To start out, we had to go to the corner of Tran Cao Van Street, make a right turn, and go down the block. My squad had the right side and another squad had the left side. As we were moving down, I only had two guys left from my point fire team because I had lost the two guys the day before.

LCPL Gasbarinni, my best fire team leader, always wanted to be in front so his team of LCPL Charles Campbell and himself started out. Then it was me, the Air Force guide, my radioman, the M-79 man, and the rest of the squad.

It was a fairly wide street with trees growing out of dirt cut outs in the sidewalk. They were spaced about every 25 feet. Gasbarinni got to the third tree and was shot in the shoulder. Campbell, who was right behind him, jumped over a 3-foot wall on his right. When the word got back that Gasbarinni was hit, someone yelled, "Corpsman Up!" and up came Doc Gosselin who either answered the call or just did it on his own. We had no security up there so he should not have gone, but that isn't the way corpsmen think. To them it is their job and every second counts. Someone told me that Doc Gosselin was an ex-Army Green Beret and was very gun ho. Most corpsmen were like this. If someone gets hit or is injured they go to them immediately.

Well, he came running up the street and the enemy proceeded to strafe that whole right side of the street. Gosselin was hit and went down about halfway between Gasbarinni and my position. The strafing also killed my radioman and wounded the Air Force guide.

Where were the NVA shooting from?

They were on the left hand side of the street up in buildings.

And they had machine guns?

The fire was coming out pretty quick so it was some sort of machine gun. It may have been their version of our M60. It was also

pretty long range because they fired right along the wall. The wall was about 10 feet high. It dropped down right after that and that's where C.C. went over the wall. It was maybe only about 3 feet high over there. It was one of these decorative walls that protected gardens and property. You could see the bullets hitting the wall. I happened to be up against a tree so I had it between me and the guys who were shooting.

At that point, Doc Stout, the company corpsman, came running up. He got down next to the Air Force guide to help him and someone yelled, "Keep pushing up. Keep pushing up. We need more guys up there to get some security." I was next in line so I just took off up the street in a hail of bullets. They missed me and I jumped over the wall. I was over the wall by Charley Campbell, just short of the tree where Gasbarinni was down.

From that point on that day, that's all I knew because I was pinned down there for a couple of hours until they finally got some tanks to come up and provide a shield so we could get out from behind the wall. During that day, Bill Henschel, the "Marine Doc," was hit in the head. So he was down in that same area where Doc Gosselin was. As we were pulling back using the tanks as shields, we picked up David Collins, my platoon commander's radioman and Marine Doc Henschel and put both of them on the rear of the tank.

You were using the tank for cover?

Yes. To get us out of there.

You weren't on the tank, were you?

No. We were behind it. On the way out of there, the NVA were firing rockets at the tanks and one took a hit. The rocket didn't damage it but it lurched to a stop and Henschel rolled off the back. Then the tank started up again and ran over his foot and crushed it. We all thought he was dead but that shocked him back into being awake. We picked him up and carried him back and to this day he is alive. He's living in a veteran's home up in Cleveland. He remembers carrying that corpsman's unit but he doesn't remember too much about that day.

Anyway, that was pretty much about what happened that day, the 1st of February. So we lost Gosselin and our Marine doc, Henschel. So we were then down quite a bit. I think we lost another doc that day. Later on, about the 10th of February, Doc Morrison was killed. He was killed because he was with the 2nd Platoon CP and they were beside a house. We thought we were going to catch fire and move towards the enemy across this big open football field off to our left but didn't realize that the prison wasn't secure behind us on the right. And the enemy fired down and killed the platoon sergeant,

the radioman, the right guide, and Doc Morrison, all in a row.

Every Veteran's Day, I go down to the Wall with my good friend, Doc Connelly, who lives in Baltimore. I remember the day he joined us. We got two corpsmen that day--Doc Connelly and Doc Reynolds. They were fresh from the States. The day after that [13 February], we got a new guy, [Wayne] Crapse. They placed him in my squad. He was a young kid, 18 years old and just out of high school. At that time we only had three guys plus myself so there were only four of us. He made five. We were pretty much a fire team. I said, "Look, just stay by me." Some other platoon had the lead and we were just kind of following along. As we were going behind these houses and little alleyways, all of a sudden a sniper shoots him in the head. He wasn't with us any more than an hour. The blood was just squirting out of his temple area. We started putting pressure on it and all of a sudden, Doc Connelly came up. And this is the first casualty he has had to work on because he just joined us the day before.

He gave it his whole effort. He tried to start some IVs but was really having a hard time finding a vein. It was pretty much a futile thing. We were trying to hold a bandage on the side of his head to control the bleeding. Even though it was a no-win situation, Doc Connelly just gave it his all.

I think about that today. What a way to start his tour. I remember him trying to do so much at one time. You only have two hands. But we couldn't save the guy. He was dead. But Doc, as all docs are, are just super people. They take it in stride, always looking out for the troops. It was the usual stuff. "How do your feet look? Let me see your socks. You need a new pair of socks. Here's your malaria tablet." That's the usual corpsman type stuff. But they're always ready for that next casualty.

I wish I could relate the story to you of how Doc Connelly and Doc Reynolds got the Bronze Star. Probably the guy who could really tell you the way it happened is Jeff Brown. This happened after Hue. After Hue, we made a few operations. We were in this one area about a month. We called it the "Bowling Alley." It was bridge security for a bridge over Highway 1. That, of course, was a very key road so they had to keep that bridge intact. We were there for about a month. On one of the patrols or sweeps, these two machine gunners tripped a booby trap and it ended up killing them both. Both Doc Connelly and Doc Reynolds disregarded whatever and ran to their aid. Jeff Brown was the platoon sergeant at the time.

In the beginning of December '67, prior to going to Hue, we were setting into an ambush one night. It was going to be a platoon-sized ambush; I think we had about 20 guys out there. We were looking for the guys who were mining the roads at night. It was raining pretty good. One of my guys, a fellow named Miller, tripped a booby trap

and killed himself and wounded about six or seven guys. Doc Aparicio organized a lot of guys to help out. They worked with flashlights doing the best they could. They brought a chopper in and were able to get the wounded aboard. It was one of those old UH-34s. They said they had too much weight and would have to leave the dead body behind. So we did and carried it in the next morning. It was another instance where I can't provide you with specifics because all our memories fade. It was just another example of how corpsmen were heroes. They always did what had to be done. They never thought about themselves. They always thought about us. And that's why to this day, you ask any Marine how they feel about corpsmen and they will get teary-eyed and tell you what great people they are and how they've always looked up to them. I wish I could give you more details.

You've given me some great details and I appreciate you taking the time to do this with me.