

U.S. NAVY MEDICAL DEPARTMENT ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL HISTORY WITH HOSPITAL APPRENTICE FIRST CLASS (ret.)
ROBERT BUSH, USN

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Interview with former HALC Robert Bush, Medal of Honor holder for action at Okinawa.

Where did you grow up?

I was born in Tacoma, WA, and my sister and I were raised by a single parent when it wasn't too popular. My mother was divorced and worked as a registered nurse. We lived in the basement of the Bridge Clinic, a 30-bed hospital in Raymond, WA. We ate whatever food was on the trays that day so the environment was not very family oriented.

I spent those first 5 or 6 years of my early life in boarding schools. My sister and I were at these boarding schools and they weren't a good environment for growing up.

I really had a chip on my shoulder early on. We were very poor, and I didn't like that at all. All the friends I made around the hospital were doctors' sons and they had new bicycles and toys. Of course, it was a struggle for my mother with no support from my father whom she had divorced when I was a baby. The early part of my life was not very heart-warming.

By the time I got to the 8th grade, my mother had remarried. I attended the Willapa Valley High School in Menlo, WA. When I came home from school my mother was still at work. That gave me plenty of opportunity to get in all kinds of trouble.

But I had a coach at school named Ed Tenonski. He took me under his wing and turned me around. After that I didn't get into too much trouble anymore because Tenonski kept me working on the basketball team and the football team.

At age 17, most of the boys in our high school were already in the service and so I elected to join the Navy in my junior year rather than finish school. I figured I would do that when I returned home. That was in October of 1943. On October 4th, my 17th birthday, I was at Farragut, ID, having signed up a little early to do training at boot camp.

After that I went to Hospital Corps school which I selected because of my background. I was pretty comfortable working in that environment and there was a real demand for corpsmen because of the heavy losses out in the Pacific. I think the figure was 94 percent for corpsmen casualties in the Marine Corps at that time.

I finished Corps School with a grade point average of 87. I was pumping hard to get to 90 because then you went from hospital apprentice first class to pharmacist's mate third class and your pay would increase from \$78 to \$96 a month. But I didn't make that and stayed with the \$78. I did make pharmacist's mate third class before

I got out of the service but all the paperwork was not completed so I maintained the hospital apprentice first class on my discharge.

From Corps School I went to Naval Hospital Seattle, WA. The corpsmen would intern there. In those days, they moved you from ward to ward knowing you would be doing a variety of functions and it was a pretty good teaching process. You learned first aid and minor surgery. You got a little bit of the difficult autopsies. You were exposed to nearly everything in the hospital environment.

It was at that point they may have selected the people for the Fleet Marine Force; I don't know. After spending 10 or 12 weeks at the hospital, I was transferred to the Fleet Marine Force at Camp Pendleton, CA.

What were your feelings on hearing you had been assigned to FMF?

I was very happy about it. I felt it would give me an opportunity to do more than I was doing in the naval hospital. I wanted to get out in the field and have a little independence. I looked forward to it. In those days, the independent corpsman was a doctor without a license and you could do just about what you had to do in the field. I never felt that I was at a loss as to what to do in certain conditions.

On my transfer to Camp Pendleton in the summer of '44, I trained in what today is the Field Medical Service School. The training was great. They were trying to put into our minds enough information to be able to do our jobs in the field and the instructors were very dedicated. It certainly wasn't near as polished as it is today. In those days, the theory was the same but we didn't have the high tech things. We didn't have the dummies to practice with that you find today. However, there was enough there to do and we had enough accidents to patch up so we got the message quite loud and clear.

What kind of medical training was it?

It was basically first aid and minor surgery. We had had all the schooling they could pump into us at Corps School and it was trauma training mostly. If you had to encounter illness or disease, the training for those was pretty basic because there was only so much you could do for that.

During each phase of my activity, I had the opportunity to work at sick call, setting some Thompson leg splints, and doing some things that later would become very important.

What about the weapons training?

We were trained in small arms, which was interesting and later became very important. And they actually trained us in every weapon

in small arms that the Marine Corps used at the time. For example, they had the .45, the carbine, the M1. They had a shotgun they called the Reising gun. They had the .45 Thompson submachine gun. They had the Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR) and then they had a bolt action Springfield used for sniping.

I also went to Tent Camp 2 in San Clemente where corpsmen were assigned the job of going out with platoons and doing all the things the Marines were doing. It was an indoctrination into the Marine Corps.

I was there for an extremely long time. I'd go through a company of marines who were going overseas and work with them for 3 to 4 weeks, living in the tents and doing all the things they did--the obstacle course, live ammunition, and all the exposure you needed so you were prepared. The training lasted about 12 to 14 weeks.

It wasn't all Field Medical School because once I got out of that, I was assigned to units on the base and I kept getting new units and doing the same thing over and over again so I got pretty good at it.

Every 4 to 6 weeks everybody would leave but me, including my boss. I thought I must have been doing a helluva good job. They were sending everybody overseas and I was still there. What I didn't know was that it was because I wasn't 18 yet. One day after my 18th birthday I got orders to report for my overseas assignment.

My outfit was called Replacement Draft Number 23 and we went from Camp Pendleton to San Diego, where we shipped out on the *General M.M. Patrick* with 5,000 other troops. We rode that ship out to Hawaii and then on to Australia. It took 18 days before we arrived at Pavuvu in the Russell Islands. There we were reassigned to units. I picked up the artillery, the 11th Regiment of the 1st Marine Division and served there for a short time before I was reassigned to G Company, 2nd Battalion, 5th Regiment, 1st. Marine Division.

In order to train the corpsmen, they would move us from one thing to another so if you had to replace someone you wouldn't go in there cold. For example, we did sick call for a lengthy time in different areas. It might be in a rear echelon area, where we'd set up a tent and have sick call and do all the day-to-day routine things like giving atabrine for malaria.

You had to throw the tablet in their mouth and watch them take it. Atabrine turned them yellow and they didn't like that. The alternative was terrible. I had malaria in my blood for 10 years after I returned home. They could make plasma out of it but they wouldn't use the whole blood until it worked itself out; it eventually went away.

When would that have been?

It was Christmas-New Years of 1944 and January of 1945. We started training as the Marines came back from Peleliu. I first was assigned to the artillery and then to G-2-5 and stayed with them the whole time. We started training at Guadalcanal for what we thought was the invasion of Formosa. They literally had built walls to simulate the landing area. Our unit was the first wave. Everyone coming in would come in behind us so I noticed that every time we went ashore on this training we were the first one in. It didn't look good to me.

Were you still in the artillery unit?

No, I was transferred into the assault unit and I don't know why. Artillery was pretty comfortable. The new unit was called G Company, 2nd Battalion, 5th Regiment of the 1st Marine Division and I stayed with it the whole time. In fact, those were the people who were with me on Okinawa for the 50th anniversary. Nine of the people who fought with me were there.

When you were at Guadalcanal practicing for landings, did you go down the ropes into Higgins boats?

No. By that time they had come up with the armored amphibious tractor and it discharged from the stern rather than the bow. It had a .50 caliber machine gun mounted on the bow so it could clean the beach before you got there. And they could provide fire cover when they got to the beach. We did this training over and over and over again until it came time for the landings.

On February 15th we left on LST-950 for what ended up to be Okinawa. If you remember, Iwo Jima was attacked in February. We went by Iwo Jima when it was being assaulted and I don't know whether that was on purpose or by accident. The ships that were heading for Okinawa came from all points of the compass. By this time, many of the supply ships were literally coming from the U.S., intercepting the convoys, and were therefore in a position to supply the units when they got ashore.

It was quite an armada. I heard a variety of numbers. The largest was 1,700 ships, including the smallest assisting vessels that participated in that invasion. We assembled in the middle of March in some sort of convoy until we got up to Okinawa.

You say your task force went right by Iwo Jima. Did you see anything?

No. We just knew that we were in the vicinity. Geographically, if you're going to Okinawa, you are going to go by

Iwo Jima.

We had a complete briefing as to where we were going about a day before the assault. The night before, our company commander, a COL Richard Breen, told the entire company that we were expendable, but we already knew that. It didn't make for too good an evening.

In the meantime, the kamikazes were doing their thing. We were a small ship so they weren't trying to get us but believe me, I stood on the top deck of that LST and watched one of them 100 feet from us trying to make a turn into a capital ship and one of the guys on our LST knocked him down. His name was Cardwell. He was running a 20mm hand-operated gun that doesn't carry too many rounds. When the Zero was hit I saw the pilot try to open his canopy but he couldn't get it open and down he went. We went through all of that for two or three nights before we went ashore.

The day of the assault, we discharged from the tank deck. I think mine was the fourth amphibious tractor out. I didn't know what the hell I was doing in the front row. When we hit the beach, we were very surprised to lose only one man early that morning. His name was Clyde Peddy and he was, as I understand it, the first casualty on Okinawa.

Were you nearby?

Oh, yes. I worked on him. He had been wounded in the chest by small arms fire.

What kind of equipment did you go ashore with?

I went ashore with the full pack of medical supplies, my .45 pistol, and rations--pretty near everything to survive for a week or 10 days in the event we weren't resupplied. We were pretty well equipped.

We had the capability of fighting with the snooperscope, which was just recently developed prior to that invasion. You could mount it on a light machine gun and snoop at night with infrared and see things moving. You could also mount the scope on a Springfield that had a backpack sniperscope and batteries for power. Enemy soldiers would show up fuzzy and once you got them in your scope, you had them. It took the Japanese a long time to figure that one out.

We also had the rocket ships that could fire ashore and they did a lot of damage.

So, you took care of your first casualty pretty early on?

Yes. Peddy was shot in the left chest with a small caliber Japanese rifle. I thought I had him because he was talking to me but he was just too far gone and I couldn't get him back. He was

lying on his right chest and had drowned in his own blood before I got there. While I was working on him, I came the closest I ever came to being killed next to when I myself got hurt later on. I literally looked down the rifle of a Japanese and he did not fire on me. We had a lot of replacements with us and a lot of marines who were unfamiliar with warfare. They were well trained but it takes a little while before you get to be a veteran out there. A gal had come out of a nearby cave and pulled a Japanese in, we did not fire on her and I think that was because women were looked at differently. I know later in the campaign, we changed pretty radically when we saw women shooting at us. But at that time our group didn't fire on her. When I went after Peddy, the Japanese did not fire at me.

You say you looked up and saw the Japanese?

He was so close, I could tell the caliber of the rifle, maybe as close as 40 yards. And I knew what I was up against. I thought, "I'm in deep trouble now." But after I couldn't do any more for Peddy, I covered him, turned around and walked behind a big rock. And then all hell broke loose. But I didn't even get shot at. I suspect that they didn't fire on me because we hadn't fired on that woman. There's no doubt in my mind that I never came as close to death as I did that morning because they had me and there was no place for me to go. Peddy had a BAR and if I had picked it up, I would have been dead in an instant. And had I gone for my .45 I could never have hit that soldier in the cave. I just walked away. We ended up closing that cave with a satchel charge and kept on going.

Our job was to cut the island in half. On Okinawa, there's a little leg that looks a little like Italy on the far side. That leg was where we were to go and continue the drive across which we did do. We had encounters but nothing too serious. In fact, we had the best duty on Okinawa during the early part of the campaign and the worst duty during the latter part. We learned later that early on there was no organized resistance where we were. We were pumped up, we knew our mission, and we knew we were getting close to the end of the war. The morale was high.

So we went across Okinawa relatively unopposed. There were skirmishes here and there and a limited number of casualties for the first 30 days. Other than being miserable by digging a hole and sleeping in it every night, and not having a bath, things weren't too bad. However having a limited amount of food, our weights went down pretty substantially. I weighed 180 when I went in and 138 when I came out.

During those first 30 days we were moving continually from the

area of the beach down to the south area where on May 1st, all hell broke loose when we, the 5th Regiment, replaced the Army group from the 24th or 27th Division that had been there for some time trying to move ahead with very limited success. So they called on the Marine Corps.

Suddenly we went from a sniper situation to having to confront assaults at night by a limited number of Japanese soldiers or civilians, or whoever they were. There were about 100,000 civilian defense workers that were also armed. Suddenly we were in a full-scale war. From May 1 through June 18th it was an absolute continuous battle. My exposure to all that stopped abruptly on 2 May so I missed all that.

On the morning of 2 May we were assigned the task of securing a relatively low hill which connected in some manner to the China Sea. I'd be surprised if it were 50 feet high to the top. I was in our command post. The company commander was in a rather heated discussion with our platoon sergeant who was suggesting that we get a battle wagon to hit that hill a few times before we went up. He pointed out that it looked like a place where there might be substantial defenses.

Despite the sergeant's concern, the platoon leader made the decision to take a squad to take a look at the hill. My opinion, as humble as it was sitting in the command post that morning, was that it was not a good decision.

As soon as they got to the base of the hill, the Japanese came out of the ground and all hell broke loose. Many of our guys were killed and wounded including the lieutenant who took cover in a shellhole near the base of the hill.

At those days, if someone was wounded out in front of the lines, as a corpsman, you had some important things to consider. If you exposed yourself and they nailed you, the rest of the marines lost their corpsman. So they were not too happy to send you out any more than we were too happy to go out.

But that decision lay with the corpsman, not with the platoon sergeant. I looked where the lieutenant was and said, "Okay, I'll go out there. Give me a guy in front of me and another behind me. We'll bust ass across the field to get to him and I'll see what I can do."

So that's what we did. As we crossed the rice paddy, which was about 100 yards wide, the Japanese started in on us from the top of the hill. They hit both men who were protecting me but I was unhurt. I got to the lieutenant and jumped into the hole with him. It looked like his left shoulder had been hit with a mortar and there was a lot of blood. I immediately noticed that his eyes were dilating and

I knew I was losing him. I put a battle dressing on his shoulder, opened a can of albumin, and put the needle in his vein. I never will forget what he said to me. "There ain't no Nips here Doc."

"Jim, they're all over the place!", I replied. "Just be quiet. They'll hear us. I'll get you out of here." He kept jabbering and I knew he was out of it. After a few moments, I finally shut him up.

In the meantime, I looked on that ridge and was scared to death. I grabbed his carbine and dropped the clip into my left hand. I pushed down on the [follower] to see how many rounds he had left. It was tight so I knew he hadn't fired a single round. I jammed it back in, took the safety off, and set the carbine down alongside of him. As I again reviewed the hill, suddenly a head popped up. On the helmet was the star of the superior private.

I was still holding onto the albumin can. Behind us were our two squads watching all this. They had a light machine gun set up but they didn't dare fire probably for fear of hitting us.

Suddenly, I felt a tug on the can. I let go of it and up jumped the lieutenant out of the hole and across the rice paddy back toward our lines dragging the can behind him. The albumin must of given him a high and he was gone. When he took off, the top of that hill just opened up.

I didn't bother looking back at the lieutenant. I had immediately written him off. I figured this was over with. I grabbed the carbine and, with the help of God, I was able to see the Japanese sticking their heads up. As scared as I was, I knew I had to fight or die. There were no other alternatives. Every time a head came up, I'd drop the carbine just below the protective berm on the hill and send one round out, always considering how much ammo I had left. I figured that a berm as insubstantial as that wasn't going to stop a bullet at that close range. There were 15 rounds in the clip and I had two extras strapped to the stock. That gave me 45 rounds. I'd send out just one or two rounds at a time and when a head wouldn't come back up I knew I was hitting them.

So you knew their position when they raised their heads up. How many yards away were they?

Not very far. I could see the whole thing in that little round peep sight.

When the head went down, you knew the man's position so you would fire at the edge of the berm and you knew the bullet would go through the berm.

Absolutely. I kept that up for awhile; I don't know how long,

probably 2 or 3 minutes. I hadn't kept track of the number of shots I had fired so I put a fresh clip in once when I had an opportunity. Now I had 15 rounds again.

Right about that time the hand grenades started coming in. They knew where I was. As the first one hit, I threw my arm up over my face but my right eye was already gone. The only thing that saved my life was my .45 in the shoulder holster. That's what stopped most of the fragments. I got some in my heart, which are still there, and many, many fragments around my left shoulder. There was also a hell of a big hole under my left arm into my lungs. When I tried to breathe, air was leaking in down there. I knew this was a serious wound. I put a compress over it and then tried to lower my left arm but something in my shoulder was sadly disconnected up there. But I could move my elbow and left hand and was still able to use my weapons.

But you said your right eye was gone.

Gone. I was really in trouble. This all happened so quickly that these are the only things I remember. Other grenades started coming in; one hit my butt, and another my belly but these didn't cause serious damage. However I knew I had to get of there.

There weren't too many options. I didn't dare follow the lieutenant's example and go out in the field. I couldn't go straight up the hill because it was just too steep, especially in my condition. So I grabbed the carbine and headed off to the left of the hill.

So you were flanking their position on the hill.

Yes. The area to the left of the hill wasn't so steep and I found I could ascend the hill from that direction. I fired the carbine until it went empty, then emptied my .45 and threw it away. And that pistol was my pride and joy. When I carried it I thought I was John Dillinger.

I then picked up an M1 laying near a dead marine and kept going.

Didn't the Japanese see what you were doing? Didn't they jump out of their trench and come down the hill after you?

No. They were looking straight ahead down toward the hole where I had been and never did come down from the hill. They were tunneled under the ground. Picture a hole in the ground about so many feet deep and then lateral holes about 3 or 4 feet from the surface. They were in these lateral holes. They had allowed our marines on the scouting mission to go on by and then they came out of the hole and opened fire. White phosphorus going into the hole wouldn't do anything except make a little smoke. It wouldn't burn them at all

because they were in the side of the cave in the laterals. That's what protected them.

The next break I had--and I had quite a few breaks on this thing--was when I went around the hill. Things were really fuzzy because one eye was gone and the other one was a little fuzzy too.

Were the Japanese firing at you the whole time?

No. They didn't know where I was. They quit shooting and were throwing grenades down at an empty hole. When I got around the hill and to the top, their backs were to me. I wondered why they weren't sitting there with guns pointed at me. Why weren't the Japanese looking for me? Well, I learned why 30 years later. There were four marines from the original patrol who had jumped into their hole and drawn their attention. They had been there the whole time but my sniping had diverted the attention of the Japanese. Finally, the marines jumped out of the hole and down a steep part of the hill to get away from the Japanese. One of them was killed in the fall. And that's why their backs were to me. They were looking for the marines and not for me.

The Japanese didn't have a chance in hell. They had their backs to me, four of them lined up like dominoes in a row. I had the element of surprise and I needed all the advantage I could. Just holding that rifle in my condition was a real effort. I walked along that ridge and winged every Japanese I saw. Suddenly I didn't see another soul. I was the only one left standing on the skyline of that hill. And so I left, going right down that hill and kept right on going back the way I came.

So you got them all.

Yup, got em all.

You still had the M1?

Yes. I carried the thing all the way back to our lines where I ran into a guy named Cass, one of our marines. I came to a wall that looked as though it was used to house pigs. It was about 3 feet high and in no way could I get over it. I asked Cass, "Cass, give me a hand here." And he helped me over that thing.

Then Fred Hollier grabbed my left arm and told me he would get me back. Fred took me back and the next thing I remember was a corpsman patching me up. I then got aboard a jeep and headed for what I thought was a battalion aid station. It turned out they took me to an Army medical center because my shoulder holster had "U.S. Army" on it.

When I woke up I told them I was a Navy corpsman. They moved

me to a Navy facility for a day or two and then I went out to the hospital ship USS *Relief*. From there I went to Guam, Pearl Harbor, and then to Oak Knoll Naval Hospital in Oakland. All these moves were by air except from Okinawa to Guam. And at each of these places they patched me up some more.

On July 26, 1945 I was discharged at Oak Knoll Hospital. They pinned a little "Ruptured Duck" on my lapel and gave me a few bucks, and I was on my way home.

On my way out, and on a whim, I inquired about the lieutenant I had gone out to save that day. Was he there at the hospital? Much to my surprise, they told me he was, in a private room. Somehow he had gotten across that rice paddy alive and back to our lines!

I went into his room and said, "I'm the dumb corpsman who went out and got you that morning and I want to tell you about it." And so I laid it on him that he'd made a decision that was incorrect and caused the lives of a lot of people. "I felt you made an incorrect decision and I was standing right by you when you made it. Henceforth, I had to go out and get you. And as far as I'm concerned, you have to live with this."

As I recall, he didn't make any excuses or anything as to what happened. But even as I left his room, I felt bad about having done that. And that's the last time I ever saw him.

How did you get the Medal of Honor?

I got back home and signed up for September classes to get my last year of high school. I was playing football for my old high school and I still wasn't too well at that point. I was living with my mother and just leaving the house when the phone rang. It was James Forrestal, the Secretary of the Navy. He told me I had been selected to receive the Medal of Honor from President Truman the next Wednesday. I told him it was hard for me believe because I had done nothing more than I had been doing the whole time I was over there except this time I had a weapon. He told me someone would be calling me later that day to arrange for transportation. So I told him I would be there.

I asked my mother to go with me because I suspected it would be a pretty nice affair. That was a long way to go for a little guy who had hardly been out of the country except for the war.

My mother said, "Why don't you get married and take your wife? You're going to get married anyway." I said, "Okay." And I did and our honeymoon was that train trip to Washington. And that's 50 years ago this year.

When we got to Washington we met President Truman. He raised everybody's rank one notch. And there were people in that group of

14, who were being decorated at the same time, people like Pappy Boyington, Louis Wilson, and a lot of famous people in the military who had done a lot of things during the early part of the war.

Of course, when Truman raised everyone's rank by Executive Order, he said to me, "You'll be a third class pharmacist's mate."

"No. I'm out of the service." I was still a HALC. I had been recommended for PhM3C but I was out of the service before the paperwork came through.

"Well," he said, "you don't get anything then." That was just like Harry Truman, a great sense of humor.

Two interesting things happened in Washington. I met Admiral Nimitz. It was his welcome home from the Pacific that weekend. We had a big parade and we were with ADM Nimitz the whole time and had a good chance to visit. It was a wonderful memory. His eyes were as blue as the Pacific. He was just a great naval leader.

The other thing was my conversation with the Chief of the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, Ross McIntire. He offered me a deal if I came back in the service. He offered me limited duty because of my eye. I could go through 4 years of college and 3 years of medical school. I thought about it for about a week but decided against it. My interest was the lumber business. I entered this in 1951 and stayed at the same company for 40 years. I co-founded Bayview Lumber Company in Olympia, WA.

Didn't you get a pilot's license at some point?

Oh, yes. I did 25 years in the air. I was the company pilot, all weather and was instrument rated.

How could you do that with just one eye?

Will Rodger's pilot, Wiley Post was a one-eyed pilot. If he could do it, I figured, I could do it. Anyway, I never told anybody I had one eye and nobody ever asked me. There are no restrictions on my pilot's license.

Didn't you become friends with Jimmy Doolittle?

We were very good friends. I hunted with him the last time he hunted. I fished with him the last time he fished. And I rode with him just after the last time he drove. He was probably the greatest man I ever met. He was a master of calculated risk and a real gentleman. I now fish with his son.

The citation for your Medal of Honor says you refused to be evacuated until your patient was?

That's right. I protected his backside as he ran across the field.

I don't think I was a hero by any stretch of the imagination. I was out there doing what I was paid to do and trying to protect a man's life. And I did it with the some very fortunate breaks, good training, and help from God.