

U.S. NAVY MEDICAL DEPARTMENT ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL HISTORY WITH PHARMACIST'S MATE SECOND CLASS
STANLEY DABROWSKI, USN

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Interview with PhM2c Stanley E. Dabrowski, World War II pharmacist's mate present at Iwo Jima.

You grew up here in New Britain?

Yes. Before I went into the service I was never further away from here than some fishing trips into Vermont with my older brothers.

I got out of high school in June of 1943 and realized that not too far in the future I would be drafted into the service. Not wanting to go into the Army infantry, I decided to join the Navy. After all, they had nice clean sheets and berths, three square meals a day, beautiful big battleships, carriers, destroyers--all the glory of the Navy. That was for me. I enlisted and spent 8 weeks in boot camp at Sampson, NY, right on the shores of one of the Finger Lakes. I was assigned to Company 422, Unit F. We were thrown together with a couple of hundred other young men and introduced to military training and discipline. Having always been the outdoor type, I was very interested in hunting, fishing, trapping, camping, exploring. So, would you believe, I rather enjoyed training, especially the obstacle course and the rifle range. After 8 weeks of training at Sampson, they gave us 7 days leave.

Before we went off on leave, we were allowed to apply for whatever school we wanted. I always had an interest in medicine so I decided the Hospital Corps was for me. I filled out an application for that. When I got back from leave I went to what we called the

OGU, Outgoing Unit for processing, and lo and behold I was selected for Hospital Corps School and sent to the Hospital Corps school at the Naval Hospital at Portsmouth, VA. It was a 6- or 8-week course that emphasized the basics. After that, I reported for duty at the U.S. Naval Hospital in Charleston, SC, where I was assigned to the contagious ward.

And having learned something of medicine, I said, "This is not for me." I was always gowned, masked, and rubber-gloved, and even had disposable sandals. There were many cases of tuberculosis and other diseases. I was very unhappy with that and decided that this was not what I went into the Navy for.

I went to see the chief pharmacist's mate in personnel and asked, "Chief, do you think you could do something for me?" He said, "Of course I could, son, don't worry about it. If you want a transfer, I can get you a transfer." He was a very nice man and very obliging until I realized that my name was on the list for Fleet Marine Forces and that I was to report to Camp Lejeune, NC, to Field Medical Service School. Of course, I had no idea what Fleet Marine Forces were. Fleet Marine. This must be sea duty. It was, but not the kind I expected. Thus started my introduction to the U.S. Marine Corps.

We got off the bus at Camp Lejeune and I looked around and said, "Gee, there's no Navy here. It's all Marine Corps green. Everything is USMC, USMC." Standing there on the asphalt was this

Marine corporal with a Smokey the Bear hat and his duty belt, starched shirt with the creases right down here, very neat. "All right you guys, fall in." He impressed me tremendously and was our D.I. throughout our training.

The first thing we did when we got there was to strip down to our skivvies. They gave us sea bags to send all our blues home. We were no longer in the Navy. Everything from then on was Marine Corps including the dress green uniforms. The insignia was khaki. We didn't even have white underwear; everything was green.

At this time, the Marine Corps was growing by leaps and bounds. When we reported in for service there were already three Marine divisions in the field. Each division was composed of something like 30,000 men so naturally they needed a tremendous number of pharmacist's mates. By 1943, I believe they were already taking conscripts.

Camp Lejeune was an infantry training camp, not only infantry but motor transport, communication, whatever. The Marine Corps is a very closely knit organization of many specialties but the greatest specialty is infantry and amphibious warfare. Our training included all the things that one has to know about field medicine but more importantly than that it was just like going through Marine boot camp--close order drill, infiltration courses with live machine gun fire, crawling under barbed wire, hand to hand combat. We spent 2

weeks on the rifle range--M1 Garand, M1 carbine, .45, machine gun, hand grenades, even a bayonet course, would you believe.¹ This was all part of a big plan and all very important. They had to prepare us for what we were going to face but nobody ever told us what combat was going to be like.

How long was the training at Camp Lejeune?

Eight or ten weeks, I believe. It might have been twelve but I'm not sure. After training at Camp Lejeune, we were assigned to the new 5th Marine Division being formed at Camp Pendleton, CA. So after we graduated from Field Medical Service School, we were put aboard a Pullman train for a 7-day trip to the West Coast. This was quite an adventure. It was my first time away from home seeing the whole country go by. We would leave the train once a day for calisthenics, naturally. Other than that you either sat there and read, napped, or there would be card games, a little bit of crap shooting, or what have you. It was a long troop train. They weren't just transferring medical personnel, but Marines also. When we got to Colorado, before we got to the great divide, they hitched another steam engine onto the huge beast of a steam engine that was already

¹ My experience with firearms and hunting easily qualified me as sharpshooter with the M1 rifle and carbine. Apparently, the range sergeant was impressed with my scores and suggested that with time I would qualify as expert.

pulling us. And then they hitched another one behind to push the train over the divide. The whole thing seemed to be going just by inches and you could hear the chug of those engines straining. Once we got over the divide we traveled through the deserts of Utah and Nevada. I saw my first coyote out there.

We stopped at a place in California called Needles. I recall that it was in the Death Valley area. The trains were not air conditioned in those days. When we got outside the train the temperature was 115 degrees, like a blast of fire in your face. But typical of the Marine Corps, we got out of the train and did calisthenics. They gave us time to wash up. There was a shower down the road. There was a big tank used to fill the boiler on the engine. That's what we got to shower under. The water was cold and very pleasing. Everybody got under there and washed up.

Every time we stopped there was a truckload of sandwiches. They fed us on the train but it was never as you see in the movies with tablecloths and stewards asking you what you wanted. They threw a sandwich and an apple and something we called bug juice at us. Breakfast was a standup type of situation. If you sat down to eat your powdered eggs and toast, or SOS, it was too much like luxury.

But we survived and arrived at Camp Pendleton. I remember coming out of that desert part of California, over a mountain or something, and seeing this lush greenery which was southern

California, just beautiful. We were going through orange groves. This seemed like it was going to be great duty. And it was. Pendleton was a joy. Naturally it was the same old thing, training, training, for whatever we were training for.

We were assigned to Company C of the 5th Medical Battalion of the 5th Marine Division. And as a medical company in a medical battalion, C Company was assigned to an infantry regiment, the 28th Marines. We were the pool of corpsmen that would staff the battalion aid stations or regimental aid stations. And parts of the company would also staff division or regimental hospitals. I was assigned to a 13-man medical collecting team. Our job was selecting casualties that needed attention first.² We were to transfer them to better facilities as soon as possible. We had four stretcher teams assigned to us. The corpsmen were to do the histories, tagging, and administering first aid. The training was fantastic and everyone knew exactly how we were going to do all these things. We did it repeatedly until we could do it in our sleep.

Who was actually doing the training?

We had both Marine Corps and Navy personnel. We had ensigns and pharmacists who were warrant officers, not pharmacist's mates.

² Ours was a sort of triage system of priorities designed to maximize the number of battle survivors.

They were in the Hospital Corps. We were also trained by senior Hospital Corps personnel who were part of the training battalion. They were training us to do the things they had already become proficient in. Many of them were combat veterans from previous engagements like Guadalcanal, Tulagi, Bougainville, even Pelilieu. We were assigned to our infantry units. A medical company consisted of about 98 corpsmen and 6 physicians, 3 surgeons, 2 internists, a dentist, and an administrative warrant officer. We had five chief pharmacist's mates assigned to the medical company. And then down the line, there were a few first class pharmacist's mates, second class, and a lot of HAS [hospital apprentices].

Pendleton was a joy because we were close to the nicest things in Southern California. Los Angeles at the time was a beautiful city. San Diego was great because of the many things that were available there. The beaches were fantastic and then we always had a chance to go down to Mexico--Tijuana, just south of San Diego.

We arrived at Pendleton on February 5th of '44 and assigned to the 28th Marine Regiment which was something I have always been proud of. At the time none of us knew what we were going to achieve in combat. We spent 6 months at Camp Pendleton with intensive training.

Of course, we continued to train, conducting amphibious assaults on the beaches there at Pendleton. The final assault we did was witnessed by a very special individual, the President of the

United States. Roosevelt was there with the Secretary of the Navy, James Forrestal.

Then they gave us a 30-day leave at home. It was mid-summer of '44. After that we reported back Camp Pendleton and almost immediately--on September 19th--we went overseas. I remember very well the ship we went on. It was Liberty ship manned by a civilian crew, SS *John B. Floyd*. I honestly don't recall if we had an escort or not. We went directly to Hilo on the big island of Hawaii.

They were pleasant times. Hilo was a small town with restaurants, a few movie theaters. The people were very pleasant. There wasn't a lot to do there but roam through the parks and sit on the beach. Of course, we were only 18 years old and you couldn't go into a gin mill and buy a drink because we were too young. You could go into a restaurant in Hilo and order a steak and you'd get a steak about three-quarters of an inch thick with fries, and if you wanted, you could get a fried egg on top; this was typical Marine fare. And you got a huge glass of iced tea or pineapple juice; pineapple juice was just flowing out of everywhere in Hawaii. I think at that time, such a meal would cost you about 75 cents. And if you wanted a second steak, it would cost you a half a dollar.

From Hilo we transferred to a narrow gauge railroad, which mainly served sugar cane fields. From there we went to Kamuela and then by truck convoy to Camp Tarawa, which was on the land of the

Parker Ranch, at that time the world's largest cattle ranch. We were surprised to see so many cattle, longhorns, in fact. To get there we went through lush greenery and coconut trees. As we went up onto the plateau we encountered what looked like desert country--prickly pear cactus, stunted growth. This is where we saw the cattle grazing.

Camp Tarawa was the camp the Marines put together after they came back from Tarawa. Each unit had their own area of the camp. We had the area next to the 28th Marines. And then we got into intensive training. And we trained and trained--amphibious exercises along the beaches and infantry assaults. Our job was to set up the aid stations, apply battle dressings, administer medications properly, tag and evacuate the wounded, the whole bit.

The amphibious training was from ship to shore. We were put aboard APAs, attack personnel transports. From there we would be transferred to LSTs. It all depended on what unit you were with. From the LSTs we went right off the ramp into LVTs (landing vehicle tracked). We called them alligators. We learned to go down rope ladders over the side of the ship. The little LCVPs--the Higgins boats--were waiting for us at the bottom. With the swells, it was pretty horrendous. We lost people that way, crushed between the boats and the hull of the ship. There were many accidents.

We made many runs on Maui because Maui had beaches that resembled

the beaches the Marines had assaulted all through the Pacific campaign. The logistics of such an operation were fantastic. You had to set up assault waves. Each wave consisted of so many Higgins boats and what have you. The first three to five waves were LVTs. They were followed by LCVPs. We would land on the beaches and fight our way up. We had naval gunfire behind us and air support. It was very realistic.

One thing always stood out in our minds. We were assigned to the 1st Battalion of the 28th Marines. Every time we went on these so-called field problems--the army called them maneuvers--there was always a hill involved. One battalion would turn to the right, another battalion would go straight across, and another battalion would assault the hill. It wasn't until we saw the first picture of Iwo Jima on our way there that it dawned on us why. That hill was Mt. Suribachi. And the 28th Marines were the conquerors of Mt. Suribachi. My battalion, the 1st, went in and cut the island in two at the very narrow neck the first day of the battle. More on this later.

After we left Honolulu in January of '45 we went to Eniwetok in the Marshalls for a few days of rest and relaxation and refueling, etc. There we transferred to our assigned LSTs. I was assigned to LST-758 which was Coast Guard manned. My medical unit, the collecting section I was with, was assigned to the First Battalion.

We had our final dress rehearsal off Saipan and Tinian on February 12th, I think it was: simulated landings on Tinian, on Saipan and then back aboard ship. We then started steaming toward our destination.

Everybody had ideas as to where we were going. I vaguely recall that when we were in Honolulu, somebody spotted a picture in the Honolulu newspaper of B-17s raiding Iwo Jima and they had a photo of the island with this mountain on it. It wasn't until we were out to sea, when nobody could get off, that we were told officially that our objective was Iwo Jima. That was on February 13th. They broke out maps and models of the island made of rubber or clay. Everything about the island was right there. They showed us our assault beaches where we would land, the airfields, the mountain, the whole bit. They also told us that D-day was February 19th less than a week away, H-hour was 0900.

We were off Iwo Jima on the eve of the 19th but everything was black. We didn't see the island. Reveille was about 3 am. We had the typical breakfast of steak and eggs but not many people ate an awful lot because your heart was up here in your throat. We had no idea what to expect. When we had been briefed on the operation, they told us it would be a 3-day operation. We would be able to knock these people out in 3 days and take the island and then get ready to take the next island which would be Okinawa. "Don't worry, it's

all going to be over in 3 days." Well that didn't seem so bad.

We got down to the tank deck and got aboard our vehicles--the LTVs. Their engines were already running and in spite of huge fans, there were an awful lot of fumes. The engines ran on an aviation grade of gasoline. People started getting sick. When they realized what was happening they shut down some of the engines. But they had to be sure these vehicles would start up and go.

How many men fit into your LTV?

Fourteen men plus equipment. We were taking medical equipment--stretchers, etc. They had a three-man crew, the coxswain and two machine gunners manning .50 calibers.

We got off at 8 am, just drove off the ramp into the sea. We were about a mile off the beach bobbing along with many other ships, mostly LSTs, APAs right behind us, small LCIs, small gunboats with rockets. You could see the smoke and the fire and the fantastic amount of noise and wondered how anything could survive something like that.

We bobbed around while they formed the assault waves. This was very important. You had to get in line. On paper it was a beautiful thing and if you had been up in the air it must have been a thrilling sight. But as soon as we got on that beach everything fell apart. It was just mass confusion. The thing I noticed immediately was the

tremendous amount of noise, concussion, small arms fire, explosions of artillery and mortar shells. As we were coming into the beach, we were under a rolling barrage of the 16-inch guns of the battleships. You could just feel those shells going over your head. Units were scattered and casualties began mounting immediately. My unit landed in the 3rd assault wave at 0907 on Green Beach, right under Suribachi.

Iwo Jima was a volcanic island and the beaches were not sand but volcanic ash. It was very soft. We stepped off and were up in up to our ankles. Of course we were carrying a pack with medical supplies.

Did you have a carbine or sidearm?

I had a carbine and a .45. Unlike the army in Europe, we were armed. That was because of our experience on Guadalcanal. At that time corpsmen still wore Red Cross brassards on their arms and a red cross on their helmets. They were the first ones to be knocked off. The snipers were looking for key personnel. In the Marine Corps, nobody wore any kind of insignia on their helmets or clothes. At Guadalcanal many corpsmen were killed almost immediately. Even in subsequent campaigns corpsmen would be singled out simply because they looked different from others because of the equipment they carried. We carried kits which I didn't like at all because they

marked us as corporals. It was like a lieutenant or a captain carrying a map case as opposed to an infantryman who had only had a rifle and a canteen on his belt. Because of this, we were told to carry sidearms not as offensive weapons but for self-protection.

What did the kits contain?

We had one of these kits on each shoulder suspended from a shoulder yoke. In the left pouch we carried all our battle dressings, sulfa powder, burn dressings. In the right pouch we carried morphine syrettes, tags, iodine pencils, ammonia inhalants, hemostats and scalpels and other assorted equipment.

When we landed the only thing we heard was the incoming, the stuff we were throwing at them. The beaches were relatively quiet but for the intense small arms fire. Occasionally a mortar or artillery shell would land but it seemed as though the Navy had done a good job killing off these people and knocking out their big guns.

But then, about an hour or hour and a half later, almost like clockwork, we started getting hammered with the most intense fire, to most everybody's surprise. We just couldn't believe the kind of fire that began coming down on us--mortars, artillery, rockets, the whole bit. It was so intense and the carnage and the wreckage on the beach was so fantastic, that subsequent waves could not get ashore that afternoon.

Where were you while this was happening?

The beach was very narrow because the winds and the waves had terraced the volcanic ash. There were two or three terraces. Just trying to crawl up this thing was like trying to crawl through buckwheat in a bin. But we had to do it in order to make headway. Casualties were mounting all over the place. I lost a very dear friend right there on the beach, Stan Sanders. He was sewed through by machine gun bullets. It was the most shocking thing you could experience. Here you were talking to the man just a few minutes ago. I ran to him and his eyes were glazed over and he was dead. It was a devastating experience. Everyone was saying, "Move, move, move." And then from everywhere were these pleas, "Corpsman, corpsman!" Casualties mounted tremendously.³

My first casualty was a sergeant with a sucking chest wound. He had taken a machine gun bullet right through the lungs. One of the paramount things we had trained for were sucking chest wounds. You had to do something immediately or else the man would drown in his own blood. We had to close off the wound so he would not get air through the wound. You had to ram this big battle dressing into

³ Japanese artillery, mortar, and rocket fire resulted in exceedingly severe traumatic wounds and traumatic amputations with extensive blood loss and severe shock.

the wound and compress it as much as possible and tie it off. Give him a shot of morphine, write out a tag, and mark him; this was another thing that was very important. You had to put a big "M" on his forehead to indicate that he had already been given morphine. And then someone would have to drag him off the beach. I could not do this. I had to advance with my unit.

As it was, we had to catch up with our units. The Marines were trained to move--to push to reach an objective. They just went and we had to go along with them. My battalion was assaulting across the island into the narrow neck and we were catching all our fire from Suribachi. The people who were entrenched up there could see all over the island. One of things the 28th Regiment was supposed to do was cut Suribachi off from the rest of the island. The infantry did get across to the other side of the island, cutting it in two.

By this time there was some semblance of order. We didn't have an official aid station as such. We chose the deepest shell hole we could find and started taking care of the severely wounded as they were brought in.⁴

The first night on Iwo was a nightmare. We were getting

⁴ Distances from the front line to the battalion aid station were very short due to the difficult terrain and confined battle area. Evacuation of wounded was extremely hazardous. The stretcher bearers were under constant fire. The LVTs and weasels were the only vehicles that could be used to evacuate the severe casualties.

artillery and mortar fire from the mountain, from the other side of the island, and a lot of small arms fire as well.

The first day had been a bright, sunny day, but the second day it started to rain and it was very miserable. We had spent most of our training in the tropics and Iwo Jima was already in the temperate zone and temperatures at night would fall down to 40 or 50 degrees. It was cold, wet, and miserable. All we had were our combat jackets and combat utilities, and one blanket. I didn't use the blanket because we spent most of the night sorting, treating, and evacuating the wounded.

Things slowed down because we had ceased advancing and were in defensive positions. But there was constant harassing fire. We were still under the mountain. It seemed that all night long our ships were covering the island with star shells to illuminate everything and keep the enemy down. You could become mesmerized watching them explode and come down slowly on little parachutes. When they went out it was like pulling a chain; everything got black again.

The battalion aid stations were never very far away from the front line, or at the beginning, from the beach. So evacuating casualties was a short trip. But when we started experiencing heavy casualties, it was almost impossible to comprehend. Because of the heavy artillery and mortar fire there were a lot of traumatic

injuries--traumatic amputations. The first thing you had to do was assess the casualty. "What do I do first?" Almost certainly, they had immediately gone into shock. Combatting shock and hemorrhage were the first priorities. We used tourniquets and hemostats. There were so many cases where there were traumatic amputations--no arm, or both legs. And then there were abdominal injuries--torn out intestinal tracts. Often I was beside myself trying to decide what to do with these people. And surprisingly, sometimes these young men--of course we were all young... would be covered by a poncho and lying on a stretcher. And I'd say, "Hey Mack, how are you doing?" "Pretty good, doc." "What's the problem?" "Oh, my left arm got it." So you'd lift the poncho and you'd see a stump. "My God," you'd think, "he's still lucid and he still can talk." First, I had to tourniquet it, give him morphine. We had these huge battle dressings about the size of an 8 1/2 by 11 page of paper with ties on them. You would sprinkle sulfa powder on the stump, which would almost immediately be washed out by the oozing blood. But you did it nevertheless. And then you'd put the dressing on as tightly as possible. These men--the resolve they had... You'd tag them, get their name and number off their dogtags. You'd put the man's unit down if you could find out what it was because they always took statistics down at the end of the day as to killed and wounded and what units they were from. Our fight was preserving life. You did

all this automatically. It was just so natural to do these things even though you were never, never, never primed for the things you saw. The injuries to these men were traumatic; so were the experiences.⁵

Nevertheless, we did what we had to do and then we got the stretcher teams to get them down to the beach as soon as possible. At that time the regimental aid station was not set up to take care of them. Things were too fluid. The beach was the best place to send them so they could be evacuated offshore.

I believe there were three hospital ships, the *Samaritan* (AH-10), *Bountiful* (AH-9), and the *Solace* (AH-5). They were way off the beach. These cases needed immediate attention. We had hospital LSTs lying 2000 yards offshore. The wounded always went back on Higgins boats or LVTs. But on that first day there was no way Higgins boats could get ashore because of the tremendous amount of wreckage.

The first LST to land on Iwo Jima I think did so on the 21st. The only way we could get the wounded off the beach was with the alligators--the LVTs. With these we could get them to the APAs, assault transports which were equipped with sick bays. It wasn't

⁵ Concussion resulted in a great number of casualties, hearing loss, confusion, and shock. Many men had to be evacuated suffering from combat fatigue. Along with agonizing terror, gruesome sights and trauma, it was enough to try anyone's resolve...like going through the gates of hell.

until later on in the campaign that the hospital ships could come in close to the shore.

As you know, Iwo Jima was not a 3-day affair. I don't think we were at the middle of the second airfield by the third day. The First Battalion of the 28th Marines was by this time put into reserve and the Second Battalion began assaulting Mt. Suribachi. You know the world-renowned photo Joe Rosenthal made of the flag-raising. There were two flag-raising on Iwo Jima. The first was done by the first patrol that went up. They had a small flag brought ashore by the battalion adjutant. They had gone up to scout. It was quite a climb. I recall very well because we were at the bottom of the mountain at the aid station and I saw that team going up. They did meet resistance but then reported that they got to the summit and put up the flag. Of course, everyone cheered because this was the most important piece of real estate they could take. Once they deprived the Japanese of that observation post things down below got a little cooler. However, the battalion commander, I think his name was Chandler Johnson, said, "It's a small flag and it's our flag and some s.o.b. is going to want that as a souvenir." He then sent one of his lieutenants down to the beach to get a bigger flag. The man went down to LST-779 and got a bigger flag. The second outfit that went up Suribachi took this flag. As it was, Joe Rosenthal, an AP photographer went with them and when they got there they found a piece

of pipe, lashed the flag onto it, and the six-man team was hoisting the flag up while Joe Rosenthal just happened to click his camera and immortalized the Marine Corps forever.

There are those revisionists who say that flag-raising was posed. It was not posed at all. Joe Rosenthal took that picture because he was there just at that precise second. And he didn't even realize what he had done. It wasn't until a day or two later when his film was processed that someone said, "Gee, Joe, that was a great picture you took. Was it posed?" And he said, "Yea." He thought they were talking about a group shot of the boys he took after the flag was up. But they were referring to the flag-raising itself. And so to this day there are people who say the shot was posed. So much for the 23rd of February 1945.

After the 23rd the battalion had a few days rest when we got a little reprieve to resupply, collect the wounded, and get some food. We started again toward the north part of the island. We were right beneath Suribachi. We had bisected the island, and the 4th Division was already pushing north from their sector. By this time two regiments of the 3rd Division had been brought in due to the tremendous number of casualties both the 4th and 5th Divisions had suffered by that time. They ran into some very fierce opposition and it got to a point where it was inch by inch, foot by foot rather than yards at a time. The terrain above the airfields was very pocked

with caves, pillboxes, labyrinths of tunnels, and such a crossfire that it was a murderous situation. You can read this in the historic accounts of the battle--Turkey Knob, the Meat Grinder, and Hill 362, the one that will stand out in my mind forever. This is where our regiment was pinned down by murderous fire. The most terrifying and devastating aspect of combat were the mortar barrages. They came straight down on you due to their trajectory and when they registered you were in for a terrible beating. In both instances when I was hit it was due to mortar fire.

Of course, as corpsmen, we advanced with our troops. On the 3rd of March I was administering a unit of serum albumen to a very severely wounded Marine in a shellhole, where we had some semblance of safety. I was about 6 inches above ground with my hand holding the serum albumen bottle, a bottle a bit smaller than a coke can. We gave this to very severely shocked people. Sometimes we used blood plasma if we had it. I caught a piece of hot shrapnel which shattered the bottle and almost took the tip of my finger off. The shock of all that flipped me over while at the same time I lost my helmet and another chunk of shrapnel grazed my scalp. Neither wound was severe enough to take me out of commission. But I did have a helluva headache and one big bandage on my finger. And I just continued my duties. Later on, I was showered with the blast from a phosphorus round and was hit in the left knee. Phosphorous, unless

you get it out, will continue burning. Again, I was lucky enough not to have gotten a wound that put me out of commission. However, I did have the latter wound attended by a surgeon back on the beach. These were my only encounters with wounds. My most traumatic experiences on Iwo Jima occurred in the Hill 362 sector. I was about to get out of a shell hole when I was knocked back down by a mortar round that hit my shoulder pack but did not detonate! It was a dud. It was agonizing terror to try to get out of that hole. To this day I shudder when I think of it. There were other close calls, but this one is etched in my memory forever.

Did you make frequent trips back to the beach?

We made trips almost constantly evacuating the wounded. By the time we had advanced further the battalion aid station was in full operation. Understand that it was always mobile. As the troops moved up, we had to follow, otherwise there would be too big a gap between the line companies and medical help. We evacuated the wounded with the tracked vehicles, the LVTs. You couldn't use trucks; there were no roads. The LVTs could go anywhere just like a tank. And we used another little vehicle we called the weasel, a small tracked vehicle about the size of a jeep. You could do anything with this little thing. We could get two severe casualties on a weasel.

When we had to do it by hand, our stretcher teams were under constant fire. And the stretcher teams were always singled out by the snipers. Frequently, you would hear these things, pft, pft. It didn't register after a while but you were being shot at. In one instance, I had a wounded man not 50 feet away. Some of the Marines told me that he had been there for about a half hour. "Hey doc, go out there and bring him back in." He wasn't moaning; he wasn't doing anything, but you could see movement. So I figured I would go out and take a look at him. I started across this area and right behind me someone said, "Hey doc, where the hell do you think you're going?" I said, "I've got a man out there I have to bring in." He said, "The hell you are. You're in the middle of a mine field. Freeze." Talk about traumatic experiences.

Usually, the engineers would indicate an access path with tape or white streamers. They would probe for the mines with a bayonet and clear the area. Apparently, this hadn't been done yet and I hadn't realized it. I was halfway through so I continued and got my man.

How did you eat in combat?

Mind you, we didn't eat an awful lot in combat. We just didn't have the will to eat. We had K rations--a chocolate bar, hard candy, crackers. The C rations had cans of ham and cheese that constipated

the hell out of you, lima beans and something else. To this day I won't eat lima beans. And Spam--I can't stand the sight of that.

Later on during the battle, we got the 10 in 1 rations, pretty much what they call MREs (meal ready to eat) today. Ten in ones had tins of bacon, beef stew, corned beef, chicken, chocolate pudding--all kinds of great goodies.

My commanding officer, Jens W. Larsen, was a man 56 years of age and very much like a father to all of us. He was not military at all. He volunteered for the Navy. He was a great surgeon.

By this time the division hospitals had been established on the beach or close to the beach. The division hospital was staffed by about 15 physicians and about 75 corpsmen. There were admitting tents, ward tents, surgical tents, three or four operating rooms going constantly.

I also saw the first hospital plane come in from Guam or Saipan on the 3rd or 4th of March. It had a big red cross on it. We were told to deliver a group of severely wounded to the airfield for air evacuation. The first Navy nurse came on this plane [ENS Jane Kendeigh, flight nurse]. In that batch of supplies they brought were cases and cases of whole blood. This blood had just been donated on the West Coast days before. I remember taking a case of this refrigerated blood and putting it aboard a weasel and taking it back to the battalion aid station. The surgeons began using it

immediately. You could see the tremendous response with whole blood as opposed to plasma. You would get color, pink lips again rather than purple. It was fantastically lifesaving and there's no question that the whole blood saved many, many more lives than the plasma or albumen.

Then we began getting air evacuation, and that was very important too. During the battle, better than 2,500 Marines, very severe casualties, were airlifted to the Marianas. The planes were able to accommodate three tiers of stretchers. And I understand that they never lost a patient enroute to those hospitals. Of course, most of the evacuation was done by hospital ship. The *Solace*, the *Bountiful*, and the *Samaritan* were at Iwo Jima. They would come in closer to the beach during the day to pick up casualties. Once they were loaded they would steam back to the Marianas. At night they were 15 to 20 miles offshore fully illuminated.⁶

In retrospect, when you think of Iwo Jima, we lost 6,821 men, mostly Marines, but a good number of Navy people too. I believe 195 corpsmen were killed in action. Better than 600 or so were wounded in action. Two doctors were killed and 15 wounded.

⁶ Hospital LSTs played an important part during the early phases of the battle, receiving casualties and distributing them to APAs and hospital ships.

C Company of the 5th Medical Battalion lost six killed and about 23 wounded. Of the 27 Medals of Honor that were awarded on Iwo Jima, 4 went to corpsmen. Two were posthumous. John Bradley, one of the Suribachi flag-raisers, days later was wounded in both legs and evacuated.

If there's any kind of legacy from Iwo Jima, you have to understand the necessity of taking the island. The first question that comes to people's minds is, Did we really have to do it? Was it worth the kind of casualties we suffered? Was it all necessary? Well, yes. Taking Iwo Jima was a brutal necessity. It was a 1,500-mile one-way trip for the B-29s from Saipan or Tinian to Japan. Many of them were hit by anti-aircraft fire or crippled by other means. Others had mechanical difficulties on the return trip. Many ran out of fuel. If they ditched in the ocean there was a chance that a Catalina, submarine, or a picket ship could pick up the crew. Iwo Jima was there in the middle, halfway between Saipan and Japan.

I remember the first B-29 that landed on Iwo Jima. We were up around Hill 362 which wasn't too far away from Motoyama airfield. It was on March 4th or 5th or thereabouts. It was the first time I saw a B-29. It was fantastically large. It came around circling and you could tell he was in trouble. Apparently he got the OK to land but the back end of the field was still under Japanese fire. He came down in a helluva cloud of dust because the field wasn't

finished; the Seabees were still working on it. He went as far as he had to but taxiing around he was bracketed by mortar fire. However, he was able to get to safety at the Suribachi end of the runway.

I understand when the guys came tumbling out of that plane they kissed the ground and some of the Marines said, "My God, what's the matter with those guys, kissing this hell hole. I want to get on that ship to get the hell out of here with them." I heard later that they asked this crew if they wanted to spend the night and they said no thanks.

Over the summer of '45 as many as 20 B-29s a day made emergency landings on Iwo Jima. Hundreds of B-29s were bombing Japan every day. By the end of the war more than 2,200 of them had landed on Iwo. Was Iwo worthwhile? Understand that if the island wasn't there for these people, probably more than 25,000 airmen would have died.

How long did you stay on the island?

We left on the 26th of March. And that was a tragic day for C Company. The island was secured and the company had been reunited. The 147th Army infantry regiment had come in as garrison troops and taken over from the Marine Corps. The 3rd Marine Division was going to stay behind; the 4th Marine Division was already gone. We were

already on the beach and getting ready to board the USS *Cape Johnson* (APA-172). And then one more of our boys was hit by a sniper right through the temple. By this time, of course, no one wanted to wear his helmet any more so we weren't wearing them. It happened right there on the beach. Guy Siler was his name.

Where was the sniper hiding?

No one knew. Even after the island was secured and the Marine Corps left, the Army garrison forces killed about 6,000 more Japanese. That place was just honeycombed with caves. If you could have looked at Iwo in profile it would have looked like an anthill. Naval gunfire didn't knock out very much. These people just went below decks.

Where did you go after Iwo Jima?

What was left of our division went back to Camp Tarawa on the big island of Hawaii. From April to mid May we were left to regroup mentally and physically. And we were getting our replacements of raw, young people. Mind you, we were ourselves 18 and 19-year-old combat veterans. We were old salts. These kids who were joining our division had dungarees that hadn't even been washed once. And they looked at us with great awe. After all, we had been on Iwo Jima.

That month and a half was like R & R with good food--fresh milk

which we hadn't seen in months, fresh fruit, a sandwich this thick, a hot steak dinner. Once we got to Hawaii we got new equipment and supplies. Many of those who had been hospitalized came back to duty. I remember the first casualty on Iwo that I took care of on the beach, the sergeant I told you about? One day we were sitting around when I heard a voice in the background say, "I'm looking for Doc Dabrowski. Dabrowski, where are you?" I recognized him immediately. He gave me this big bear hug and said, "Doc, I just wanted to thank you for saving my life." Now that one thing was worth Iwo Jima to me. It just does something to you. One of the things you constantly have on your mind--you were up to your elbows in grime, dirt, and blood and you're constantly asking yourself, "Am I doing the right thing? Am I doing enough for them?" How many I saved, I don't know. I don't know to this day. How many of those that I tagged did I save? But that's what we were trained for and that's what we did. When I look back on it, as gruesome as it was, I have a lot of satisfaction knowing that I was part of something that was meaningful. To this day my service with the Marine Corps is a treasured memory.

By mid-May we were back in the saddle training again. Okinawa was going full blast and there was no question about it, we were training for the invasion of Japan--Operation Olympic it was called; it was to be the first phase of the invasion. By this time we had filled out as a fully manned and supplied combat division and we were

ready. We started combat loading just as we had prior to Iwo Jima and practiced amphibious maneuvers. We were going into the island of Kyushu on the first of November. Greater than a million American casualties were anticipated. Thank God the bomb changed all that. In the beginning of August I was on liberty in Hilo when the word came that Japan was going to surrender. That's when we heard about the first atom bomb. We couldn't fathom what it meant. Then they dropped the second one.

The Japanese were not ready to surrender and the bombs were a necessity in order to win that war. I have no remorse about the bomb. If Harry Truman had not made the decision to drop those bombs I would not be sitting here talking to you. I am certain there would not have been a Dabrowski family.

Then you went to Japan for occupation duty.

Yes. We went into Japan on the second of September 1945 to Sasebo Harbor on Kyushu. We walked into the town and it was pretty well devastated by the B-29 raids. We boarded trains at the railroad station. It was a Japanese train run by a Japanese crew. We were kind of uneasy about this because just a few weeks before they were still our mortal enemies.

The streets were completely deserted but for the black-uniformed, unarmed policemen. There were no army or navy

personnel. As we walked the only people we saw were these little kids coming out from the rubble or buildings and waving, behavior typical of innocents. Pretty soon someone would snatch them back in.

We went up to Fukuoka and to the Japanese Imperial Naval Academy. The 28th Marines and the 5th Division as a whole went in as occupation forces in that sector. C Company set up our regimental hospital there at the Naval Academy. I was in the receiving ward. We had a medical ward, a surgical ward, and we did some appendectomies and other minor surgeries. We had more cases of venereal disease than anything else and it became a huge problem despite the fact that this kind of behavior was out of bounds.

The duty was quite good but everything around us was primitive. Japan was a feudal nation and very backward. The stench was unbelievable. It came from night soil so we were forbidden from eating any food or drinking any of the water.

Strangely enough, we were right across the street from a Japanese brewery. Japanese beer, naturally, was rice beer. Of course, as medical corpsmen, we had to go and check it out. Our CO, Dr. Larsen, told us to get a few cases so we could check the beer out in the lab. [laughter] The first thing we checked was alcohol content. It was about 7 percent. We did find it palatable and so we imbibed a bit.

While in Japan, I got a chance to see the destruction at Nagasaki. We were surprised to find Christians in that area. There was a convent and orphanage run by Maryknoll Sisters. I got some photos of the nuns. Most of them were Italian or French with a few Japanese. There were also Jesuits in the area.

Quite frankly, I can't say we accomplished much as occupation forces. We left in the beginning of December and were relieved by an Army division. For the most part, I was happy to get out of there. Such was the World War II odyssey of Stanley E. Dabrowski.

The 5th Marine Division is no more than a memory, but it is a memory that I will carry all my life. It was born of the terrible necessity of war, and it fought its war among the best. I am fiercely proud of my service with the Marine Corps.

One final thought. Every year around the anniversary of Hiroshima one reads about those who lament the decision of President Truman to drop the bomb. It is a well known fact that the decision saved countless lives both American and Japanese and ended the carnage. I would not be here today speaking with you nor would there be a Dabrowski family if Operation Downfall--the invasion of Japan--occurred as scheduled on 1 November 1945.