

U.S. NAVY MEDICAL DEPARTMENT ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL HISTORY WITH BGEN (ret.) MICHAEL DOWNS, USMC

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**Interview with BGEN Michael Downs, USMC (Ret.), then captain and commanding officer of Fox Company, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 5<sup>th</sup> Marines during the Battle of Hué City, February 1968.**

**I thought we'd talk about your experience in Hué.**

I've looked at some material and I'd like to give you a few introductory things and then you can ask me whatever questions you want. To the degree that I can respond, I will.

**That sounds good to me.**

I think that you know that Fox Company was in Hué City from the 1<sup>st</sup> of February of '68 until the 9<sup>th</sup> of March. We had two corpsmen killed while there. One was HM3 James E. Gosselin. He was killed on the 1<sup>st</sup> of February. If you look on the Wall, it will show the 2<sup>nd</sup> of February but I know he died on the 1<sup>st</sup>. Interestingly, he had been in the Special Forces and was a medic with the Army before he came into the Navy. He was an older guy.

The second one was an HM3 by the name of Charles L. Morrison. He was killed on the 6<sup>th</sup> of February.

Of the awards that the company received beyond the Purple Heart, we had 31 personal decorations from the Navy Cross down thru a Navy Achievement: One Navy Cross, 10 Silver Stars, 17 Bronze Stars. Of the corpsmen, HM3 Ahrens and HM3 Scott received the Bronze Star. In addition to those US decorations, the company received 36 Vietnamese Crosses of Gallantry. HM2 Robert J. Stout, who was the company corpsman, received the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry.

There was another interesting character in the company. His name was William Henschel. He was wounded and evacuated on the 1<sup>st</sup>. He was referred to as "Doc" Henschel. And the reason he was, was that he had an interest in this business, we were short corpsmen, and he carried a Unit 1. So he was referred to by his fellow Marines as the Marine doc. He lost part of a leg and was evacuated. He's still alive.

**He had no medical training but just learned by observing?**

He certainly wasn't a corpsman. And to the degree that he had any schooling whatsoever or EMT training, I couldn't answer and I'd be passing on rumor. But I know he carried a Unit 1. I knew that at the time he was wounded and evacuated. We thought he was dead, but as it turned out he lived.

**A highly unusual circumstance.**

Yes, it is. The two individuals I mentioned when we spoke last-Mauricio Aparicio-who was a corpsman in our company, retired as a Navy nurse captain. He is located at 4141 Marine

View Avenue in San Diego, 92113. His phone number is 619 507-1948. He has attended Fox Company reunions so he's still connected to guys in the platoon and squads that he served with.

The other one is a corpsman named Lonny Connelly. He's located at 3907 Wilke Avenue in Baltimore, 21206. His number is 410 485-5528. I happen to know that he visited the Wall on Veterans' Day with a member of the platoon he served with in Vietnam. Connelly got a Bronze Star in Vietnam as well. He didn't get it for Hué City. I presented it to him at a reunion. In fact, the circumstances were something that occurred after I had left the company. But members of the company recommended him for it and it finally came through and I awarded it to him at our reunion in Wisconsin Dells in '94. I had been retired for a couple of years by then.

**I appreciate these leads. I'll get in touch with as many of those folks as I can.**

Doc Aparicio, in that he stayed in the Navy and retired as a nurse captain, would be a good source. As we talked last time, if I were searching to know the maximum amount about what corpsmen did in and around 2/5 during the time frame you're looking at, my source would be Lou Legarie. And I know you've talked to him. He's a great human being and a wonderful storyteller.

Just an aside. He was getting ready to come home in the summer of 1968. I was in the regimental staff then but I bumped into him down at An Hoa. He got orders to the Navy at Coronado. And he told me, "This is unacceptable. I'm not going to California; I'm going to Hawaii. And I'm not working with the Navy. I'm going to work with the Marines." And I thought to myself, "Great words, Chief."

Not long after that, he got a change in his orders. He was going to FMF PAC at Camp H.M. Smith in Hawaii. The commanding general there was a guy who was very interested in Marine sports. Lou played Marine sports and he was the trainer for other teams. General Buse knew him and Lou used it.

There was another thing that happened on those orders. At that time, the travel regulations were screwed up and would only pay for him to go from Vietnam to Hawaii. That's where his travel was. His family, which happened to be in San Diego, got travel from San Diego to Hawaii. He did not get travel to go to San Diego to get his family to bring them to Hawaii. Those travel regs got changed but that was the way it was in 1968 and Lou found that out. And he said, "Well, that is unacceptable. We'll fix that." And once again, I thought to myself, "What the hell's the Chief gonna do in Vietnam to fix that?"

Well, his next modification to his orders was that he was to go to the Field Medical School at Camp Pendleton to conduct some training and classes for them on his way to Hawaii. He not only got paid to travel to California, he got per diem. He's a jewel and one of a kind.

I mentioned a little about Doc Stout. He was really a peace loving guy, just short of a conscientious objector. That's a little strong and I wouldn't want to use that term. But he wasn't big into this whole war thing. And, in part, that's probably why he became a corpsman. He was not a fearless guy and yet he stuck himself out there when he needed to. In fact, he came to me when he was the senior company corpsman and assigned himself to one of the lead platoons because by this stage in Hué, we were short corpsmen due to the number wounded and killed. He believed that that's where he needed to be. So he was going to go to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon. That took a lot of guts because that's not where he wanted to be. I respected him a lot for that and for other things.

And then there was that list of Crosses of Gallantry. That came off a list I recommended. I still have the typed paper that I sent in. I tried to give those to people within the company who had been in leadership positions or had their ass hanging out most often, who had not for whatever reason received a US personal decoration. I listed them in priority order on that list because I didn't know how many were going to get it.

**Who did you submit the list to?**

My battalion commander. Doc Stout was eighth on that list of 35 I sent in. That's as contemporaneous evidence as you need to know that on the 24<sup>th</sup> of March 1968 I thought Doc Stout was pretty good. We've never seen Stout since Vietnam. I don't know anyone who has. Doc Ahrens, who got a Bronze Star, came to one reunion. He's not on our list of addresses so I don't know where he is.

It's tough for us to keep track or to find corpsmen because they were not on our company roster. Corpsmen were part of the med element of H&S company. So when you are getting unit records of Fox Company, you wouldn't find the corpsmen on it. They got assigned to us. So it wasn't as easy to locate some of them. And Stout is one of those who no one has located.

**What are your personal recollections? You got to Hué pretty early during the battle.**

The first Marine unit to enter the city was the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 1<sup>st</sup> Marines. And Golf 2/5 went in there with them. That was Chuck Meadows' company. That was on the 31<sup>st</sup> of January 1968. Our company flew in early in the afternoon of the 1<sup>st</sup> of

February. We were there for the whole of it. Golf Company had had a real heavy engagement on the bridge going across to the Citadel side on the 31<sup>st</sup> and I wasn't there for that.

**That was a pretty bad situation.**

It was very bad and Chuck Meadows was the company commander of Golf Company. I don't know if you ever talked to him.

**No, I haven't, but I've talked to a corpsman from Golf Company who was on the bridge and witnessed firsthand what happened there.**

Let me see if I have an address for Chuck. He's out in Washington State. He retired as a colonel. He was the executive assistant to LTGEN Cheatham in his last job when LTGEN Cheatham retired. Chuck's a good man. He's at 10039 Northeast, South Beach Drive, Bainbridge Island, WA 98110. His number is 206 780-0978. I would say to you that there is not a more influencing and memorable event in Chuck's life than that bridge day. It was a tough, tough day and he didn't get all the help he should have gotten and he lost some folks. I think Chuck could corroborate, and I'd be surprised if he didn't know who that corpsman was.

**I understand that you did all your fighting on the south side of the Perfume River.**

That's where we were. If you've seen a map, heading from MACV compound toward the Phu Cam Canal with the Perfume River being on our right. By the time we got to the canal, it was about the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup>. We got to Province headquarters on the 6<sup>th</sup>. On the other side of the Phu Cam Canal and still on the Phu Bai side of the Perfume, the area was less city and more suburb. That was where Ron Christmas was seriously wounded.

**Did you get to see some of these corpsmen in action while you were out there?**

Of course. When Morrison was killed, I wasn't far from him and that was on the 6<sup>th</sup>. His 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon headquarters was effectively wiped out. The platoon commander was a staff sergeant named Paul Tinson. The platoon guide was killed. The radio operator was killed. Morrison was killed. So there were four out of that platoon headquarters group who were killed by small arms fire that day. It's also a very meaningful day to me because my radio operator was also killed that day--within less than an arm's reach from me.

But to suggest that that group was killed attacking a machine gun or something like that isn't true. They were maneuvering and ended up in the wrong place--a place where enemy

riflemen had a line of fire on them and shot them dead. The shots were coming from the jail, which was behind province headquarters. Golf Company hadn't gotten into the jail yet and we were a little further ahead on the left flank. That's where Fox was. I was trying to maneuver that platoon and they came up on the side of a building and it wasn't a good place to be.

**I understand that most of the physicians were back at MACV headquarters. Did you have any out in the field with you?**

They were not with the company. Even before our battalion was there, there was a small medical facility set up in MACV headquarters. In fact, I think the lead doctor there was an Army major. So we didn't have our battalion doctors with us. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of February, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion headquarters came and that would have been when Legarie got there. I'm not even sure who our battalion doctor was.

Once Legarie got there, they set up a little holding place in a portion of Hué University. There was a piece of ground that was used as an LZ right outside. The casualties were evacuated by helicopter out of that LZ. Although the weather was lousy, that was the only real way of evacuating casualties from Hué City to the medical facilities either down at Phu Bai or, more likely, Danang. My sense is that we did that pretty damn well and did it pretty quickly. I wasn't present but triage went on in the battalion aid station. And while the doctor was obviously the medical guy, the organizer of that operation, you can bet, was Lou Legarie.

**LGEN Cheatham had said that the only Navy physicians he saw were extremely junior and were lieutenants, and that Chief Legarie was really telling them how to conduct their business because he had the experience.**

Legarie just had balls. I know that he held Dr. Tom Viti in highest regards, as did I. Earlier, in November of '67, on an operation that was going on south of An Hoa, some serious casualties were coming in and Dr. Viti arranged and was a participant in what I remember being a surgical shock trauma unit they had set up in a tent at An Hoa. I'm told that he did an open heart massage right there. If you want to ask that specific question, Chief Legarie was there.

Dr. Viti and he were a real team. The other thing that Chief Legarie did and insisted on was thoroughly checking his corpsmen before he sent them down to the companies. If he thought they needed a little seasoning around him for a few days, he ensured that they got it.

These corpsmen lived with our corporals and our lance corporals and our sergeants. You don't have to be around

Marines and corpsmen very long to know what a tight link that is. We Marines feel that that's what we signed up for. But corpsmen signed up to go in the Navy and yet they were there with us. And, of course, where there's fire, there are casualties. And almost always they are where the casualties are. If you took a group of people that had their asses hanging out, more often than not, I would say it was radio operators and corpsmen-radio operators because the enemy's not stupid. They see an antenna, they think command and control. And the corpsmen, because they're rushing to help somebody who has been wounded. I didn't witness Doc Gosselin's death but I wasn't far away and so I know where it was, right in the streets on 1 February and we had a fair number of casualties that day.

**By the way, did you come out of that fight unscathed?**

I got hit on the night of the 2<sup>nd</sup> of February. It wasn't serious. It was either a piece of a B-40 rocket or a piece of the tank I was standing next to that the B-40 rocket hit. It was in my thigh. I was treated in the MACV compound not by one of our folks. And essentially, rather than digging it out, they just gave me a tetanus shot, bandaged it, and I went back to work. So I was a pretty lucky guy. Eventually it worked its way out of my leg.

**How long afterward?**

I don't even know. It's gone now.

**So, you don't even know how big it was.**

No, I don't. It wasn't huge because there wasn't a big entry hole.

I have another recollection. People ask if I ever got shot at. I was in a building and we weren't getting any fire at that moment. I put my head in the window to observe. About 2 inches above my head, a piece of the casing of the window came out as it got hit with small arms fire.

But I was one of the lucky guys. During that period from 1 February to 9 March, our company had 21 Marines killed and 172 additional Purple Hearts. Of those 172, some were the same person more than once. That's why I said Purple Hearts. And, in fact, some of the Purple Hearts could be one of the 21 killed if they had gotten a Purple Heart before they were killed.

We had had two men killed, one on the 30<sup>th</sup> and one on the 31<sup>st</sup>, just before we went into the city. So the number I have from January 30<sup>th</sup> to the 3<sup>rd</sup> of March was 23 men killed and 181 additional wounds in the company. And we went into the city, counting our attachments and Navy corpsmen, 213 Marines and

sailors. And we were pretty solid in numbers and NCO leadership. We used to report to the battalion how many we had each day. I remember when the three companies-Golf, Fox, Hotel-were all in double digits. We had only left with 80 or 90 people before some replacements started flowing in.

**Of all the folks I've talked with who were in Hué City, I've never been able to find anyone who went on the other side of the Perfume and were involved in the Citadel fighting.**

The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 5<sup>th</sup> Marines was operating on the Citadel side. I don't have contact information. The battalion commander is a retired colonel by the name of Robert H. Thompson. His last address was in Fredericksburg, VA. A company commander was a captain by the name of Myron Harrington. He retired as a Marine colonel as well. I believe he lives in Charleston, SC. Harrington got the Navy Cross for the Citadel fighting. He was company commander of Delta Company.

But I wasn't over there. I went back to Vietnam and visited in the summer of '98. Chuck Meadows was with me and I was fortunate enough to be able to go across that bridge with him up the street to the furthest position his company ever got on 31 January and have him recount for me what was going on in his mind that day. That was a great experience.

I don't have any specific tales I can tell you. But I will tell you about Doc Stout. This wasn't in Hué. We were in a hooch. Doc Stout had his pistol out and had it apart cleaning it. We took some incoming fire and the damn lights went out. And there was some fire going on in our perimeter at the same time. And here's Doc with his pistol apart. I remember the gunny put it together for him in the dark so that his pistol was working.

**Well, it's been a lot of years since all that happened. Do you think about it much anymore?**

I don't unless young Marines of today want to talk about something or things like Fallujah go on and references to the Hué City fight come up. You talk to guys who were over in Fallujah and the main thing to understand is that no two experiences are ever alike. The cities are different and the enemy is different. But it's sort of interesting to compare and contrast. I'm very fortunate in the sense that I've never lost a wink of sleep because of anything that went on in Vietnam. The constitution the Lord provided me is such that I don't labor over what could have been. I always did the best I could so I couldn't have done any better than that. So there's no value in second guessing and I don't do that.

**When did you retire from the Marine Corps?**

I retired in 1992. I was the commanding general of Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, NC, when I retired.

**And what's your title now?**

I'm now the Director of Personal and Family Readiness Division. And I've been doing this since 2000. I am at Quantico in Manpower and Reserve Affairs in what's called the Marsh Building, halfway between the chapel and the PX. Among the sections of this Division is the Marine Corps Casualty Section. This Section has responsibility for recording and reporting all Marine casualties, designating units to assist the Casualty Assistance officers who notify and help families with interment arrangements. As you can suspect, with Afghanistan and Iraq, this section has been very busy these last few years. While corpsmen and sailors are the direct responsibility of Navy Casualty officers, the Marine Corps, especially the unit leaders, remain engaged with their corpsmen.

**Did you grow up in Massachusetts?**

I was born and raised on the island of Martha's Vineyard. I still own the family home up there with my brothers and sister.

**Well, general, I want to thank you so much for spending time with me this afternoon.**

I hope it helped you, Jan.