

U.S. NAVY MEDICAL DEPARTMENT ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL HISTORY WITH PHARMACIST'S MATE SECOND CLASS
RAYMOND DUFFEE, USN

CONDUCTED BY
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Telephone interview with former PhM2c Raymond Duffee, World War II hospital corpsman. Member of Dog Company, 1st Battalion, 2nd Marines 2nd Marine Division. Present at the Battle of Tarawa. Recipient of the Navy Cross.

Where are you from?

I was born in Sacramento in 1920, and after grade school and high school, went to Sacramento Junior College, then the University of California at Davis. I came to Iowa to go to school. I had to have at least a year's residence in Iowa because everyone was getting out of the service at the time.

My father was in the Navy in World War I. My mother came to California from Ohio. They met during World War I. I have one sister 6 years younger than I who lives in Sacramento.

I met my first wife, who is now deceased, during World War II when I was on the bond tour. We were married and came to Iowa. She passed away in 1976 and I've known Helen, my present wife, since 1947. We've been married now for 15 years. We are still active. I play golf. We go to a ballroom out in the country on a gravel road that has big band sound. We both like to dance.

How did you end up in the Navy?

I went to San Francisco to inquire about what the Navy had to offer. I told them I had a Red Cross first aid certificate and I had worked for a veterinarian when I was going to college. He pulled me out of line and I called my mother that afternoon and told her I wouldn't be home for the weekend because I was in the Navy. March 25, 1942 was the date I enlisted.

How did you become a pharmacist's mate?

I went in as a hospital apprentice second class--HA deuce.

Where was that?

In San Francisco. I then got on the train that night and went to San Diego. I got my hair cut. I had a shower, they issued me some clothes--work shirt, pants, skivvies, socks, and hat--and I started giving shots and taking blood specimens.

Had you been trained to do that?

Well, I had worked for a vet and I had given a lot of shots. Actually, they put us right to work in the dispensary there.

When I finished boot camp, I went to the Naval Hospital San Diego for duty.

So, you had boot camp but not corps school.

I didn't have corps school but did have Field Medical School with the Marines.

But that didn't come yet. You were still in the hospital there at San Diego.

Yes. I was on the ulcer ward, emptying bedpans, giving back rubs, just about anything that needed to be done.

How did you end up with the FMF?

I talked to somebody about volunteering for cruiser duty. And that's where I thought I was going to go. They then sent us out to Camp Elliott. There was a camp just north of Elliott called Linda Vista. It was a tent city right across the road from Miramar. We then went into training doing hikes, going through an obstacle course. I and two of the fellows in my group I had gone to school with ended up in the same battalion.

After we finished our training at Linda Vista we went into a replacement battalion and left San Diego for Noumea, New Caledonia. It took 22 days aboard the NTMS Bleufontaine, a Dutch motor transport. It was a scow! In fact, we almost had a mutiny because of the terrible food. Then the refrigeration went bad and they had to throw away a lot of the food they should have fed to us before.

We arrived at Noumea and set up a camp where the 1st Marines and 2nd Marines were coming back from Guadalcanal. We were sort of a mid-level type of care for them before they went back to their units. We then went on the USS *President Monroe* [AP-104] to Wellington, New Zealand. There, we then got on a train and went up north to Pikoekariki. That was the end of the electric line for the railroad. The New Zealanders took us into their homes and treated us like we were their kids because so many of their soldiers were away fighting in Africa.

The first time we got liberty, they paid us in New Zealand pounds. A pound was worth \$3.29. The first liberty I got, I went to a flower shop and laid a 5 pound note down, which to me was 5 bucks. But it was close to 20. I sent the flowers to 80 Onapu Road. I went out there that afternoon. They had flowers in the front room, the dining room, the kitchen, the bathroom, the back porch. It seems that flowers were dirt-cheap in New Zealand.

I had duty every eleventh day. We had a tremendous amount of malaria. And that was our principal job--taking care of malaria. If their temperature got up to about 104, you sent them to the hospital. Otherwise, you bathed them with water. We didn't have ice but we bathed them in the cold water coming from the top of the mountain. You also gave them atabrine or quinine.

Wasn't the quinine very bitter?

Extremely bitter. Tonic water has quinine in it but the tonic water has been sweetened. The quinine was sent to us in capsules, except that the powder and the capsules came separate. We were then supposed to put them together. The problem was that the high humidity of the tropics turned all the gelatin capsules into gobs. So we'd have to take toilet paper, put the powder in the toilet paper, wrap it up in little bundles, and give them with grapefruit juice. They'd wash it down that way. Sometimes the paper would get caught and wouldn't go down.

They wouldn't put it in their mouths with the paper on it, would they?

Oh, yes. You'd swallow the toilet paper and all. In that way, you'd use the toilet paper as a substitute for the capsule.

Where did you go from the camp in Wellington?

When we finished in New Zealand, we went aboard the USS *Harry Lee* [APA-10]. We did several practice landings off the coast of New Zealand. Usually, there were injuries such as broken arms and legs to treat.

After we finished the training we went to Efate, New Hebrides where we made a practice landing.

Did you know that you were getting ready for some kind of big operation?

Yes. We knew something but where and when we didn't know. After we went back aboard ship at Efate, we went into the harbor and accumulated additional ships for the convoy. A day or two after we left Efate, they told us where we were going. There would be much shelling and it would be a cake walk. We'd go in, land, make a right turn, go up the right end of the island, and camp. And that would be it. Well, it didn't work out that way.

You being a corpsman, what kind of equipment did you carry that the Marines didn't have?

I had two canteens. I also had a cartridge belt, a back pack, a bed roll, a gas mask, two aid kits, and a carbine. Most of the Marines had either an M1, a BAR, or a machine gun. They were going to train me to use a .45 for my protection. After I fired it, they took it away from me and gave me a carbine.

What about your medical equipment? Didn't you have what they called a Unit One?

We had two bags. We had gauze in them. We had 12 morphine

syrettes. I had about 18 or 24. We had slings, 4 x 4s, sulfanilamide and maybe sulfathiazole powder. We had tweezers, hemostats, battle dressings with the tabs on them so you could fasten them. We also has heavy 4 x 4s you could use for chest wounds where you needed a lot of volume. I never gave plasma but some guys who stayed in one place could. I just didn't have the facilities to do it. But in the later campaigns it was quite common to have plasma with the corpsmen. But not on Tarawa.

I have a picture of a corpsman on my wall here in my office. He is carrying one of these kits. It's a brown or khaki color. There's a strap you could hang over your shoulder and a little red cross on the flap.

That sounds like it but I don't remember a red cross. But that's right, we carried the bag over our shoulder. Actually, we carried two bags, one over each shoulder.

I'm trying to picture you getting ready to go ashore at Tarawa. You've got your two aid bags, your carbine. . .
We had a field pack.

What was in the field pack?

I had cigarettes and a lot of socks in mine. When we would go on hikes, I always took a lot of socks and made my people change socks at noon. When your feet sweat and the socks get wet, you get more blisters. Before we'd go on a hike, I'd go to the quartermaster and draw socks and have two or three packages with me.

What did your uniform look like?

I had the same green dungarees and green field jacket and pants that every Marine landing on Tarawa had. We didn't have the modern camouflage. I had a helmet with a camouflage cover on it and a liner.

Do you recall the day you landed on Tarawa?

Yes. I remember it very well. General quarters awakened us early in the morning. But actually, I don't think I slept all night. They let us use fresh water to take showers. Everybody was supposed to take a shower so that you didn't have grime on you if you were wounded and therefore there would be less chance of infection.

Everybody always talks about having steak and eggs for breakfast but we did not. We had SOS and coffee on our ship.

This was the Harry Lee?

Yes.

Had they bombarded the island prior to this?

They were bombarding the island and that was something to see. It was still half dark and half light. You could see the 16-inch shells arch and land on the island. They almost looked like they were going in slow motion. I remember seeing them hit a fuel or ammunition dump. There was a tremendous explosion and fire. A lot of the trees had the tops knocked off. We thought we were going to go in and just turn and bivouac at the north end of the island.

You probably figured that nothing could still be alive on that island after what they were doing to it.

That's right. Except the dugouts they were in had cement and railroad rails. They had coconut logs and then sand before the cement. That absorbed a lot of the shelling.

But you didn't know this until you got ashore.

That's right.

After our breakfast and watching the bombardment, we went down the cargo net to the Higgins boat.

Was it a frightening experience going down that net?

Any time you went down a cargo net, the Higgins boat, being so much smaller, was going up and down while the ship was not affected so much by the waves. So you had to hang on the vertical ropes. You never put your hands on the horizontals or you'd get them stepped on and then you'd fall. Then you have to time yourself to jump as the Higgins boat came up to its peak.

What was your frame of mind at that time? Were you a little apprehensive?

I was scared as hell. Anyone who tells you he's not afraid is either a nut or he's lying. Anytime you know there's a possibility of being killed or severely wounded, you're bound to be afraid. I'm sure that anyone who has ever made a landing will tell you that.

What was the weather like?

We were almost at the Equator so it was hot and humid. We circled for a while and then an Allegator tractor came over to us and we transferred from the Higgins boat. I don't know why they picked us. Then we started in very slowly. Then all of a sudden the Allegators hit a piece of coral and jumped. Then it would slow down again and jump. It was not a smooth ride.

Did you leave any Marines on the Higgins boat or did they all transfer to the Allegator?

There wasn't room for all of us on the Allegators so some of us went that way and the rest went in on the Higgins boat.

Were you taking any incoming fire at this time?

They were firing at us. First of all, they had the pillboxes on the beach. There were machine guns there. I can't tell you for sure on the first day but on the second day there was a hulk of a small ship or boat that had burned out. During the night they sneaked on to that as well as the pier and began firing at the Marines as they were coming in--all three places. Actually, most of the casualties on Tarawa were either in the water or on the beach. Sure there were others. But the big share of casualties occurred in the water and on the beach.

Before we took a short break, we had you on the Allegators going into the beach, hitting the coral, and bouncing up and down. Bullets were hitting the water everywhere.

They were firing machine guns at us. They was also some heavier stuff. Some of the Alligators were hit and just blew up.

As you were coming into the beach, did you think that perhaps the bombardment really hadn't done a very good job?

You always had your doubts. All I can say is, I was scared and I doubted that it was going to be as easy as they said. But whether they had done a good job of bombardment or not, I can't answer that.

From your vantage point on the Allegator, could you see what was going on around you?

No. The Allegator had the cab where the driver and assistant driver were. That stuck up higher in front than where we were. The windshield wasn't bullet proof either because both the driver and assistant were wounded.

How many men were on the Allegator with you?

I would guess about 8 or 10.

And you didn't get a clear view of the beach because you were down below and your view was obstructed by the cab.

I was hunkered down.

Were bullets hitting the vehicle?

They had to be hitting in the front because that's where the driver was.

Were they incapacitated by their wounds?

He got us in. I don't remember whether he was able to get it back out or not. I've tried to remember but I can't.

You didn't have the problem some of the others did. You didn't get hung up on the reef.

No. When we made the transfer from the Higgins boat to the Allegator, we were in so-called deep water.

What do you remember about actually hitting the beach?

The tracks at the front end of the Allegator hit the sea wall. The front end was elevated higher than the back. And, of course, the beach sloped. I remember how narrow the beach was. The coconut logs were maybe four or five logs deep with sand between the logs and there were concrete pillboxes. But the beach, itself was not very wide. From the water to the coconut logs was not a great distance and it was littered with dead Marines. So many of them had been hit by automatic gunfire that they were literally torn apart. I didn't work on them because there was nothing left to work on.

Do you remember the first patient you treated or do they all just blend together?

They melt together as one.

So you left the Allegators and began using your training right away?

When we stopped, the guy yelled, "All out!" and I went out. One of the guys was going over the side when he was hit with machine gun fire. I can't say that there was any firing at me when I got out of the Allegator. I jumped onto the beach and lay down.

When you were on the beach, you could tell how long a person had been there. If they had just gotten there, they were either lying flat or crawling. After they had been there for awhile, they ran stooped over. And after they had been there for quite awhile, they pretty much walked back and forth.

How do you account for that?

I guess they just got used to it. The biggest share of the casualties occurred the first and second day. From then on, there were not a tremendous number of casualties. I have to clarify that. As the unit moved down to the left end of the island, the small end, they were running into a lot of resistance. We really had a lot less resistance when we went to the right--the big end. So there were casualties but nothing like the first two days.

As a corpsman, you had a job to do. Did you focus immediately

on what you had to do or were you concerned about staying low and keeping from getting hit?

When I saw a guy who needed treatment, I went to him. But I hugged the ground because it was a strange area to me. You had to orient yourself at first. You didn't have the ability to really cope with what was happening. You had to adjust yourself to this new environment.

Reading about the battle, a lot of the boats were left high and dry hundreds of yards off the beach and the men had to wade ashore and they were just sitting ducks out there.

That's right. On the second day, the firing was coming from that burned out boat and the dock, and on the beach. The pillboxes were set in such a way so they were in two depths, so to speak. The front pillbox was protected by the one on the right of it and behind and the one on the left behind. That's why when Marines tried to attack a pillbox, so many of them were hit.

Where you fairly stationary or were you wandering around?

I wandered around. The first day I worked the beach and the water. The citation says I saved 15 but I don't know how many. I never counted. Most of the men I rescued were not wounded but had rather succumbed to sheer exhaustion from wading those 600 yards through the water with their equipment. They would become exhausted heading for the beach and then they would just stand there. That's when I went after them.

At least the first time, you must have seen someone marooned out there. How did you know they needed help?

When a guy stood there and just couldn't come anymore, you knew.

If you saw someone doing that, what would you do?

Go out to help him. I might take his rifle. You see, the water was not very deep in the beach area. I'd drag them, carry their equipment, and give them moral support--tell them that they could make it. I'd do anything I could do to get them moving and out of harm's way.

Were any of the men you retrieved wounded?

Some were.

The citation says you rescued 15 men but you say it was less. You probably have no idea how many men you rescued.

No, I don't. I was busy doing this and that and didn't count.

How did you do as far as your medical supplies? Did they hold out very long or did you find that you were running out?

I ran out and didn't know where the aid station was. Irwin Dunlap and Harry Shanker were two pharmacist's mates that sheltered my wounded in a pillbox. They gave me most of their stuff and I resupplied myself from them.

What did you do about water when you were on the island?

I, of course, used up my water. If someone had a wound and there was a bunch of sand or dirt, you used your water to clean it the wound. Or you'd drink some of it.

Did you eventually find the aid station?

No. I never did.

I have read that there were men huddled down against the sea wall afraid to get up because the fire was so heavy.

Any human being is scared and different people react to different circumstances. For me to say that there were a lot of guys hunkered down behind the sea wall . . . You can look at the picture and judge from them better than what I can tell you.

When you were moving around taking care of casualties, you say you ran out of supplies but were able to get more from Shanker and Dunlap.

Yes.

Were you running out of things like morphine syrettes and battle dressings?

Actually, I had quite a few morphine syrettes. I can't tell you if I had 18 or 24. There were 6 in a package, as I remember, but I had put some extras in my aid kit when I worked aboard ship before landing.

Let's say, you saw a Marine down on the ground, wounded. Let's say he had a sucking chest wound. What would be your normal procedure for taking care of him?

First you check to see if he's alive. Actually, I didn't see a lot of chest wounds. Most of my people were hit in the abdomen, some in the buttocks, some in the hands, arms, and legs. You did what you thought was best for that wound. I have to say, we were nowhere near as well trained to handle combat medicine as a Navy corpsman of today. They are far better trained. When the battalion went on a hike, we went on a hike, too. When the battalion made a practice landing, we did. So we didn't have a lot of time to develop skills

the Navy corpsman of today has.

Did you have casualty tags?

If I gave a morphine shot, I then pinned the needle on the syrette into the guy's dungaree jacket.

So you just pierced the cloth with the needle on the morphine syrette so they would know he had been given morphine.

Yes.

I thought the normal procedure was to write an "M" on their forehead.

But I don't know remember having a pen.

Did you ever see any Japanese on the island while you were there?

The only Japanese I saw on that island were dead. I didn't see a live Japanese. Let me clarify that. I saw motion in pillboxes--there was someone in there but it was too dark to make him out.

Where did you spend your nights on Tarawa?

The first night I spent in a shell hole with some other Marines. The second night I spent by myself in another shell hole. The third night we were on the opposite side of the island from the pier. There was a ditch and a coconut tree that had been knocked down and that's where I spent the third night. The fourth night was up at the extreme right end of the island. I think we left on the fifth day.

You say you moved around a bit. What would your territory be? How far did you actually get?

Maybe 125 yards to my right, 100 yards to my left, and probably 75 yards inland was the farthest I got until we went across the island to the other side on the third day.

You must have seen some kind of destruction by that time.

With that heat, the dead were bloated. It was so hot and they had been lying in the sun.

The smell must have been awful.

As pilots flew over, they could smell that island. Now I read this. This is not my memory. I read where some of the pilots could smell the island.

How did you get the casualties from where you took care of them evacuated?

Dunlap and Shanker came and got some of them from me. I saw some Marines with a stretcher and they helped me. I know that bandsmen

were used as stretcher bearers.

How did they get them off the beach out to the ships.

There were several ways. They put some of them on rubber rafts and others they put on the amphibious tractors. By the third day, that little channel beside the pier was available for Higgins boats. It was deep enough for Higgins boats.

So by the third day things had slackened.

On the third day, we had reached the other side of the island so I can't actually tell you how the casualties were evacuated. I wasn't there.

The battle was now over. In the aftermath, what did Tarawa look like?

Do you know what a place looks like after a tornado? The shelling knocked down a lot of palm trees. The anti-tank gun people had knocked the tops of many of the palm trees to get rid of snipers so a lot of the tops of the palm trees were decimated. When we left we didn't go to the beach. We went out on the pier and got into Higgins boats. So I can't really tell you what the beach looked like on the fourth day.

And you went back to the ship?

We went to the USS *William P. Biddle* [APA-8]. Went we got aboard, I was hungry and ran down to the galley and made myself a huge ham sandwich. I ate it too fast and then went up topside and upchucked.

Wasn't that the first meal you had had in a few days?

It was the first meal since I had had breakfast on the first day.

Where did you go once you went aboard the *Biddle*?

We went to Pearl Harbor. I can't tell you how many patients we had aboard. All of the transports were carrying patients. They were taken off at Pearl. From there we went to Hilo and into camp.

Did you participate in any other island landings or was Tarawa the only one?

That was the only one.

I guess you felt lucky to have made it alive.

Yes.

How did you find out that you had earned the Navy Cross?

We were on the big island of Hawaii and someone told me that

I had to put on my best khaki. There was a division review and that they were going to make a presentation to me. Petrie went along and he got his Navy Cross at the same time.

And then at some point you ended up going on a bond tour.

I went on the bond tour. We left San Diego the day President Roosevelt died [12 April 1945] and toured Southern California and Arizona. We had a guy by the name of John Ferris from Gastonia, NC. He had a Silver Star. They kept him. They kept Pat Hogan. Pat Hogan was one of the actors in Our Gang comedy. Larry King was our master of ceremonies. He was Sally Rand's manager. Then we had a guy who flew us in a Lockheed Lodestar. And we had a driver who drive us in a station wagon.

It's been over 60 years since all that happened. Do you think about it much anymore?

My grandson, who is in his second year of law school at Ohio State, volunteered me to speak in the 8th grade of the junior high school. Boone Junior High School spends 2 weeks on World War II every year. Now there are about 18 or 20 people who speak. Instead of just having a history class studying it, the English class will write essays on World War II. The math class will do logistics. So the 8th grade gets 2 weeks of World War II. Now there's a couple from Ames who was in a German concentration camp. There are two or three prisoners of war, one in Burma and one in Germany. There's a Japanese-American lady who was born and raised in California who was alive then and who remembers hearing about Hiroshima and Nagasaki. She, too, lives in Ames and comes and talks.

But getting back to your question. I got involved with the high school and I've also been asked to speak to the Marine Corps League. I have also spoken to the senior's group at the Lutheran Church. Having been on that bond tour has made me more aware of what happened.

I want to thank you for spending time with me this afternoon.