

U.S. NAVY MEDICAL DEPARTMENT ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL HISTORY WITH LCDR (ret.) VICTOR FALK, MC, USN

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TELEPHONIC INTERVIEW

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Telephone interview with Dr. Victor Falk, World War II Navy flight surgeon present at Guadalcanal.

Where did you grow up?

I grew up in the same town I live in now, Stoughton, WI. I was born here in 1915.

Did you always want to be a physician?

My father was and I never thought of doing much else.

Where did you go to school?

The University of Wisconsin. I got my BA and MD there.

When did you join the Navy?

First I did 2 years of hospital work at the city and county hospital in St. Paul and then I was with a hospital in Urbana, IL, where I did a surgical residency. At that time I also registered with the Selective Service. The question was whether I would join the Army or the Navy, not whether I would stay out. The Army didn't appeal to me so I joined the Navy. I applied in 1940 and got my reserve commission in January 1941.

Where was your first assignment?

With the Fleet Marine Force, Second Marine Division in San Diego.

I bet you hadn't bargained on that.

I didn't want to go to an Army camp so I joined the Navy, and was with the Marines for the rest of the war.

When did you become interested in becoming a flight surgeon?

After being assigned to a Marine Artillery battalion for a few months in San Diego, I found that it wasn't very exciting or medically challenging. The first school that came along was aviation medicine so I applied. That was about December 1, 1941. When December 7th came along, my commanding officer said, "You can sure forget about flying; you're stuck with us for the duration." On January 1st my orders for school came through.

Another thing. Earlier, when I came into the Navy, I took the exam for the regular Navy. Ten of us, all reserve officers on active duty, took the exam for the regular Navy. Five passed and five failed.

What kind of exam was it?

First came the physical exam which was pretty thorough. Then there were written and oral exams which covered a wide variety of medical subjects, just like in medical school.

Did you find that you had been well prepared?

There really was no way to study for it, but since I had finished medical school only 2 years before I didn't find it that difficult. Then I was commissioned in the regular Navy.

But you were still with the Marines.

That's right.

What kind of training did you receive at the School of Aviation Medicine in Pensacola?

For the first 2 months we were with aviation cadets going to ground school. Then we got to solo in the primary land plane and seaplane, the old "Yellow Peril." The second 2 months was aviation medicine which was highly academic. When we were finished, it was one of the few times we given the option as to where we wanted to go. It was kind of a strange thing. Everybody in the class who had been with the Marines asked to go back.

What was it that made the Marines so attractive?

They had a spirit and a camaraderie and offered a lot more excitement and adventure than any other outfit.

So following your graduation from the School of Aviation Medicine at Pensacola, you went back with the Marines.

Yes. Back to San Diego. For a short time, I was at 1st Marine Air Headquarters at North Island at Coronado. I then went on leave in August, was home half a day, and then my leave was cancelled. I had to go back to San Diego and was assigned to a Marine dive bomber squadron. Very shortly thereafter, I went overseas with them.

Where did the unit deploy overseas?

We went out on the luxury liner *Lurline* and stopped in Samoa. There were eight or nine of us and we were a bit crowded in a cabin designed for two people in peacetime. But the sad part was that after about 6 weeks, only two out of that group were still alive. When we got to Samoa we transferred to the *Matsonia*, the *Lurline*'s sister ship, and from there we sailed to New Caledonia. There we boarded a Navy transport and sat in the harbor for a few days. Then we set up a camp outside of Noumea, New Caledonia. The understanding was

that the pilots I was with, who had very little experience with dive bombers, were going to have a period of training at Noumea. But they never got it and we ended up going to Guadalcanal just a few days later on the USS *Zeilin* (APA-3).

So they did not get their share of training before they were thrown into the thick of the fight.

And they were not well integrated. They did not go up to Guadalcanal as a squadron. They went a few at a time as transportation became available. It was probably over a period of a month before they all got there.

When did you get there?

It was on October 13th.

What were your first impressions of Guadalcanal?

I no sooner got ashore when my commanding officer told me that we could fly out of there in any direction and find Japanese ships. It was about noon when the Japanese bombers came over with a fighter escort. About an hour or two later there was another strike which hit the airfield and gasoline dump. Shortly thereafter, sporadic artillery fire came from the hills beyond Henderson Field. It was that night when all hell broke loose, and this became the worst day they would ever have. We always referred to that event as "Black Tuesday." My recollections of that night are quite vivid.

As soon as it got dark, I turned in with the senior members of my squadron in our bivouac area between Henderson Field and the beach. I no sooner got settled than someone came to tell me that it was my turn to leave at dawn with a load of casualties from Henderson Field. I had no choice but to go.

Was this evacuation to take place on a C-47?

That's right. To go back to where I had just come from. Anyway, I left and got about halfway there.

The artillery fire continued and then suddenly a Japanese plane dropped some brilliant green flares. Then all hell broke loose. As we learned later, the battleships *Haruna* and *Kongo* began shelling Henderson Field but a lot of the shells fell short and these 14-inch shells burst in the coconut trees right in our bivouac area. I heard later that those ships fired 900 14-inch shells at Henderson Field. Three senior officers in the squadron were killed and another was mortally wounded.

So the bivouac was just tents?

Oh, sure. There was no protection whatsoever but for a foxhole in the ground. I was not in the bivouac when the shelling started, but closer to Henderson Field.

Could you hear the shells coming in?

Sure, they made an awful racket whistling overhead. And at the same time planes were dropping bombs and artillery shells were coming in from the other direction. Most of the planes were hit, our aviation gasoline went up, and ammunition dumps exploded like huge fireworks. I took cover in a foxhole while the ground shook from the bombardment like a continuous earthquake.

How long did this shelling last?

Maybe 2 hours. And then someone came and said they needed help back in the bivouac area I had just left. So I commandeered an ambulance and went back to pick up the casualties so I could take them to the 1st Marine Division hospital at Henderson Field.

I found them on the ground or in a foxhole. One of them was a medical officer, Dr. [LT Henry R.] Ringness. He was paralyzed from the waist down but was still lucid enough to tell me exactly what happened to him. He described a spinal cord injury at such and such level. He was very clinical about it. But he was unaware that a shell fragment had sheared off one of his buttocks. Before I arrived, he had been able to drag himself around and help some of the injured.

I got him on a stretcher and took him to this so-called hospital at Henderson Field.

How many other people did you pick up that night?

Oh, heck, there were only two or three survivors. One was a World War I aviator named CAPT Basil McDuffie. He had been on Guadalcanal less than 24 hours. He broke his leg scrambling for a foxhole. He was our intelligence officer. The rest were all dead, beyond help.

Was the shelling still going on at this point or had it stopped?

There was still aerial bombing and artillery shelling. I can't recall if the naval bombardment was still going on.

So then you took them to the little hospital at Henderson Field. What was the hospital like?

It was the First Marine Division hospital. The very crude wooden structure had been built by the Japanese. Adjacent to the hospital was an underground shelter where we took the casualties

because the shelling was still going on. Even 50 years later, I still have vivid recollections of how dank that place was.

I recall another incident that happened that night. I will never forget it. Our squadron adjutant, who had been very badly wounded, was brought in and I was attempting to start plasma on him. Someone came up behind me and demanded to know what I was doing and who I was. I identified myself and told him what I was doing. He said he was commander so and so and ordered me to stop treating the man. I couldn't believe it. Anyway, the adjutant died.

We left at dawn with a full load of casualties but Dr. Ringness was not among them. He was in not in good enough shape to be evacuated. The patients were stacked about three or four deep. I recall there were about 30 of them plus several war correspondents who wanted to get out of Guadalcanal. And the field was pretty badly cratered by shells. There were only one or two planes that were flyable at that point. Even our plane had a few holes in it.

I guess everyone wanted to get out of there.

I didn't mind leaving.

Did you have any corpsmen helping you on the flight?

No. There were corpsmen at the hospital but not on the plane.

So you were the only medical care on the plane?

That's right.

Where did you fly?

We stopped at Efate in the New Hebrides, where there was a base hospital. After we unloaded the casualties, we went down to Noumea, spent a night there, and then started back to Henderson Field again via Espiritu Santo. I remember we had quite a lot of cargo on that return trip--10 55-gallon drums of aviation gasoline, oxygen tanks, bombs, and two tanks of gasoline that had been installed as auxiliary fuel for over water flights. I sat wedged between these two tanks. As we got ready to depart for Guadalcanal, they told us communications were out there and we would find out who controlled Henderson Field when we attempted to land.

Was there any more action at Henderson Field after that?

From then on there was plenty of action. It was pretty constant but there was no naval shelling for another month, until November, but it was not as bad.

But you had to contend with field artillery and aerial bombing

and "Washing Machine Charlie."

That was a nightly occurrence which disrupted everyone's sleep.

What time would he show up?

Most of the night; he was just a nuisance. He would drop a bomb periodically but he was overhead most of the night. And we were sitting in a hole in the ground being nibbled on by mosquitoes.

Did you have malaria to contend with?

About 75 percent of my squadron had malaria.

How did you treat your patients?

With quinine. Atabrine came along later on. If they were really bad we would evacuate them.

But being a flight surgeon, your main concern was your aviators.

That's right. Eighty of the enlisted men came up on the ship with me. They were key personnel--parachute riggers, ordnance men and so on. The rest of the squadron came later on. The squadron never really functioned as a unit, particularly with the number of commanding officers we had. I think I had eight of them in a couple of months. The pilots who were left were not in very good shape between diarrhea, lack of sleep, and very little food. I talked to our air group commander, a lieutenant colonel, and he said he could not ground the men but if I felt it was medically necessary, I could so. I grounded the whole squadron and it didn't fly again at Guadalcanal.

For the duration?

That's right. And the morale also wasn't very good because every day we'd lose another two pilots. We got down to less than 50 percent. The survivors were not very eager.

Did you stay there long enough to see a turnaround or was it just one long negative experience?

About the time I got these fellows out of there things had started turning around. We got a new squadron of dive bombers, healthy young guys. And the Japanese navy didn't come back. So it never got that bad again. The food didn't improve much but we did have enough gasoline and other supplies.

How long did you stay at Guadalcanal before you moved on?

I got all the pilots out by late in November. I waited a few more days after that and then I left. It was quite strange. Nobody

was giving me orders. For all practical purposes, I was heading the squadron. I was maybe 2 years older than some of the rest of them and they relied on me for everything, whether it was mattresses, food, or whatever.

Where did you go next?

Espiritu Santo with Marine Air Group 11. I got to Australia for a week between Christmas and New Years.

I went back to Guadalcanal in the summer of '43.

Did you go back to Henderson Field?

Yes.

What condition did you find it in?

It like day and night. There was no action there at all. The nights were undisturbed and we didn't lose a single pilot. There were people who came back from more forward areas and got rehabilitation at Guadalcanal.

What did you have to work with in the way of facilities and equipment the first time you were there?

Well, the Seabees had put up two-thirds of a quonset hut for me and I had about 20 cots in there. I could treat malaria and diarrhea but that was about it. Anyone who required anything major, we just put on a plane and got them back to New Hebrides.

I stayed there 2 months. On one occasion I got to fly up to Munda, New Georgia. Things were kind of informal. If I wanted to go somewhere I'd just hop a plane. In the summer of '43 I flew up to New Georgia, dropped a bomb, and came back.

What kind of plane was that?

An SBD. I flew in the tailgunner's seat. Fortunately, nobody shot at me.

When did you operate on the native boy?

That was at Ulithi in 1944.

How did you get to Ulithi?

After I got back to the states in the fall of '43, I was assigned to El Toro Marine Air Station attached to a bomber training unit. Then I was transferred to the Marine Air Station at Santa Barbara and we formed a new Marine air group there. I was the senior medical officer. We left this time from Port Hueneme on a victory ship named the *Dashing Wave*. We stopped at Pearl Harbor on our way out. The

next stop was Ulithi. We went ashore there and set up a tent hospital. Eventually, a good Seabee outfit put us up in quonset huts.

What kind of facility did you have in this little hospital?

We had x-ray, lab, pharmacy, operating room. We had 80 beds. And I had 80 hospital corpsmen and half a dozen dental officers and six or eight doctors. I was senior at that time. We treated everybody who came ashore, whether they were Army, Navy, Marines, whatever.

And what types of things were you seeing at that point?

The only casualties we saw were people who were in transit coming back from the fleet. They would bring them ashore and we would get them on a plane and fly them to Guam. We also saw a lot of diarrhea cases again but no malaria. We had gotten that under control by spraying. Actually, it was quite a healthy situation. There were a few minor injuries and occasionally a crash.

Was there a lot of air training activity?

No. Not training. By that time these fellows were quite experienced. And their job was to protect the fleet anchorage there at Ulithi.

So you were there at Ulithi for the rest of the war?

Yes. I was there for 1 year. There were 5,000 of us on that little island. There were things going on during that time. There was a Navy utility squadron that towed targets for the fleet to shoot at. There was also a patrol wing, the Black Cats, a PBY group.

What are your recollections of the end of the war?

I eventually got orders to Ewa at Hawaii and then I was sent back to the states.

Do you recall hearing about the Bomb?

We didn't hear too much about it. We heard it happened and that the war had ended and that was about it.

Just because the war was over, that probably didn't change your status any because you were regular Navy.

That's right. I couldn't decide whether I wanted to stay in or not. I had asked for a residency in surgery somewhere and I was sent to Corpus Christi Naval Air Station. Then I got duty at Great Lakes in December of '46. I told them I was interested in surgery

and it was one of those perverse situations. I was assigned to the TB ward. At that point I found I could get a surgery residency in Chicago on January 1st. I bypassed the usual channels and called an admiral in Washington and told him I could have a residency in Chicago on January 1st and only on that date if I could get out. He told me he would send a letter to the chief of service there and would have me out in a week. And that's what happened.