

U.S. NAVY MEDICAL DEPARTMENT ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL HISTORY WITH PHARMACIST'S MATE ELMER GARDNER, USN

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22 JULY 1999
TELEPHONIC INTERVIEW

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WASHINGTON, DC

Telephone interview with Elmer A. Gardner, World War II pharmacist's mate. Eyewitness to the aftermath of the Nagasaki atomic bombing.

You say you were a pharmacists mate?

Yes, I was a pharmacists mate second class.

When did you join the Navy?

In January of '44.

Where were you stationed?

I was stationed first at Sampson, NY, for boot camp. Then I was at Bainbridge, MD, then St. Alban's Hospital in New York for a short time. After that I went to the Fleet Marine Force down at [Camp] Lejeune.

When was that?

I think that was about April of '44. I'm really not sure.

Were you sent overseas at that time?

Yes, shortly after joining the [Fleet] Marine Force we had training at Lejeune and then I was sent overseas. I was sent first to Guam and then I joined the Second Marine Division.

In Guam?

I think that was in Saipan. Guam was sort of a base station. Then I was transferred to Saipan and that's where I joined the Marines.

That was also in '44?

Yes, that must have been '44, that's right.

Were you involved in any of the landings?

Okinawa. We actually made a fake landing. I think it was on the east side. The main landing occurred on the opposite side.

So your's was a diversion?

We went through a diversion. We actually went off in landing boats, went toward shore and then came back

So you never really landed on the beach?

No.

Probably just to your relief too?

Well, they never told us until we got back into the ship. As far as we knew we were going in.

Were you there during any of the fighting that was going on there?

No, I wasn't.

What happened after you returned to the ship?

Well first we just stayed there for awhile and then sailed around for about a week, and finally came back to Saipan. Actually, during the invasion we had the heaviest fire because the Japanese thought they were really going to land on that side of the island.

Did you landing craft come under fire?

Yes, some. Actually the ships came under fire. Some ships got hit

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So after you sailed around for a week you went back to Saipan?

Right.

And what did you do there?

We just stayed there until the war ended and then went to Japan.

What do you remember about going to Japan? I guess you were on occupation duty at that point?

Yes, when we were on Saipan we used to see the bombers taking off from Tinian heading for Japan. And then we were told something about a big bomb being dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. We didn't

know what it was; we weren't told anything about what kind of bomb, just that it was a huge bomb, and then that the Japanese surrendered. We weren't told where we going when we went onboard ship, other than that we were going to Japan. We weren't told what part of Japan until we got there.

I particularly remember sailing into Nagasaki Harbor because... Let me backtrack a bit. When we had gotten back to Saipan from Okinawa, we were told that we were in training for an invasion of Japan, which I believed was to have taken place in October. Then the war ended in August. We were ready to invade sometime in October. I don't know how I got that date but I know that was in my mind. We eventually were told that when we got to Japan we landed in the same place we were supposed to have invaded.

When we sailed into Nagasaki what was striking to me was how well armed they were. There was a big harbor but with cliffs on either side, which had gun emplacements up and down the cliff. Later I was thinking about that and I realized that had we invaded there it would have been a real disaster because we would have been caught in cross fire between the cliffs. It didn't look like the gun emplacements were ever going to be hit had they bombed or strafed prior to an invasion.

When did you sail into Nagasaki?

Approximately 2 weeks after the end of the war.

About the middle of September of '45?

Early September. I think the war ended...

On the 2nd. The surrender was signed on the 2nd.

Then it would have been in August.

So you actually got there before the surrender ceremony because the war actually ended on the 14th of August.

It may have been before the surrender ceremony.

What kind of a ship were you on when you came in there?

As far as I can recall just a regular transport.

You went right into the harbor?

Right.

Did you moor offshore or did you come into a pier?

I think we came into a pier. I remember getting off and then we had to walk quite a ways. First we went past the bomb site and I remember seeing that.

What do you remember?

It was just sort of awesome. It looked like just a huge area that was just cindered, except there were some twisted steel girders. I later learned that the major part of the bomb had hit, or the bomb had hit primarily a steel factory. And all that was left of it was some twisted steel. But otherwise it looked like something had just burned right to the ground. As far as I could see it was just empty.

Did you see any people?

There were no people there, no. We just couldn't comprehend what kind of bomb had done that. We had never been told anything, and all we knew was that this was some kind of huge bomb. We weren't told anything about the atomic bomb. I've learned since. . . You know, it was in the papers, but we weren't told that.

So when you saw this devastated city, totally, completely leveled, pretty much leveled, you were awestruck I bet.

Yes.

You said what could do this?

We just couldn't figure out what could have happened. Now, that wasn't the whole city. In Nagasaki, I think the bomb hit over this steel plant and to some degree some of the city was protected from the bomb by a large hill. As we kept walking past the initial bomb

site we came into the city. The most striking thing in my memory is that the houses looked to me like wooden shacks but in which the walls had sort of collapsed in. It looked as though the inside had been sucked out by some kind of . . . It was charred and as though it had just been sucked out. We couldn't understand what had happened. We never knew anything about the implosion effects of the bomb. But we just walked past the streets of homes which had just been, not totally wiped out, but looked as though they had been vacuumed out because of the way the walls had collapsed. They were just charred inside.

Did anyone ever get out of line and go over and look at any of these places up close?

No.

You just kept marching along the road?

Just kept marching and looking. The other striking thing was when we got further into the main part of the city where there hadn't been much damage, we were being cheered by the Japanese on our arrival.

Cheered?

Yes, they were along the sidewalk waving at us. I don't know

if they were cheering, but they were very happy to see us.

Were you puzzled by that?

Yes. I later talked to some Japanese, and they were so afraid the Russians were coming in they were thrilled to see to us. They thought they were going to be occupied by the Russians. And despite the bomb and everything else they still were thrilled that the Americans were coming to occupy them.

Did you see any victims of the bomb being treated or anything?

No.

So when you went through the bombed out areas it was literally empty of anything, including people?

Right.

Did you have any dealings with Japanese in the city? Did you talk to any?

Later on I had some, but you know we couldn't really carry on a conversation. It would be just a few words. I never really asked them anything about it.

Where were you going at that time when you were walking through

the city?

We went to a camp or a barracks. I think it was an old Japanese, or a previous Japanese barracks. And that was where we were housed while we were in Nagasaki.

And your job was to be the corpsman to this group of Marines?

Right, I was a corpsman. They patrolled the city as far as I know.

So these were Marines who were patrolling the city.

Later on we were moved on to a place called Kanoya, which I think was south of Nagasaki, south and west, where the division stayed and patrolled that area. I was a corpsman with a patrol that was headed by a lieutenant I think. We went around the island of Kyushu locating ammunition depots and air fields and mapping them.

Did you find a lot of those?

Not a lot, but what we did find were some tunnels.

And you had free access to these areas? There were no Japanese around, although I guess they were pretty well subdued at this point.

They were subdued; they didn't give us any trouble. Nobody knew anything about the war.

But you certainly found a lot of evidence that had we invaded it would have been a bad scene.

It would have be disaster on both sides. That was the one thing that struck me. I remember that no matter what people say... if we had not done anything, if we hadn't dropped the bombs and went on with the invasion, it would have been far worse. We would have lost a tremendous number of men.

How long were you in Japan?

A year. I left in July of '46.

At the time, did you ever have any liberty to go into town or any of the towns?

No. The only town we were at besides Nagasaki was Kanoya. And that was not much.

Was that town also very heavily damaged by the war?

No it wasn't

So there was really very little contact with the local Japanese in either place?

No, there wasn't much at all. Our people dealt pretty well with the Japanese. We didn't have any of the kinds of things you hear

about nowadays, mistreating them or whatever.

Did you provide any kind of medical treatment for those people, or just your own Marines?

Just our own. I've never heard about what the bombed site and the surrounding areas looked like. I assumed from what I've read that this had been the housing? effects had been part of the implosion part of the bombing. But we were never told much about it and I never knew anybody who came into contact with them or whether there had been any radiation effects.

Have you had any bad health effects?

I haven't had any.

So you didn't really go climbing around the areas that had been heavily bombed.

No. Except that we were pretty close when we marched in.

Nobody picked up any debris or anything like that or looked for souvenirs or anything like that?

No.

One of the guys I spoke with was at Nagasaki also, like you.

He brought back some

part of a uniform of a Japanese soldier that he found in the rubble. He said afterward he started thinking about it, Years later he thought about it. He was in good health; he didn't have any problems. I think it may have been a watch or something that he found that was all kind of fused together with something else from the heat. And he brought it back as a souvenir. You guys didn't pick up souvenirs right there?

We didn't have much time because they got us out of there pretty fast. I don't know how he had time to do that.

So you say you walked from the docks where the ship came in ...

And we went straight through the town and out to the barracks on the outside of town. Did he say anything about the Japanese being happy to see us?

He was there for awhile and he said there was some communication between the Japanese. They gave chocolate to the kids and that kind of stuff. They would see kids and they looked hungry and they would give them food. They gave them their K-rations or something. But yes, he said essentially they certainly weren't unhappy to see them. I'm not sure they were cheering but they said...

I shouldn't say cheering, but it was like a happy crowd.

They weren't hostile at all he said.

Which puzzled the hell out of me.

Yes, I imagine so, you had just beaten these people, you expect them to be sullen if nothing else.

I expected them to be shouting... but not happy to see us. That really struck me as unusual.

You left Japan in July of '46, then you got out of the Navy then?

Yes, I did.

You've lived in Brookville ever since?

No, I lived in upstate New York. I went to medical school there. I was in Philadelphia for awhile and then eventually came here.

Did you practice medicine at some point?

Yes, I did.

So I guess your background as being a hospital corpsman came in handy?

That's actually what got me to go into medicine.

Did you have your own practice?

I did. I'm retired. I decided if I had to go back in I'd be a doctor not a corpsman.