

U.S. NAVY MEDICAL DEPARTMENT ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL HISTORY WITH SGT (ret.) GARRISON GIGG, USMC

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Telephone interview with Marine Gunnery Sergeant Garrison O. Gigg, 2nd Platoon "C" Company attached to the 1st Engineer Battalion, First Marines. Present at Chosin Reservoir Campaign.

I've interviewed a number of Korean War Medical Department veterans who have told me how it was treating you guys in conditions with the temperature down where it was, and having to take syrettes of morphine and keep them in their mouths.

That's a fact. I don't know how these guys managed to do what they did under those conditions. I had one corpsmen tell me that one of things that really helped was the fact that it was so cold, that it slowed down the metabolism and actually slowed down the bleeding and made the blood clot a lot quicker. And that saved a lot of lives.

The last time we talked, you had mentioned how difficult it was to try to fight in that situation. You had the mittens with the trigger finger free. What about the head gear?

We had caps with a little bill and ear flaps you could tie down under your chin. It was fleece-lined and Marine Corps green. Over that you wore your helmet or your parka and your helmet on top of that. The problem with the wearing of the hat and even the parka was that if you were in a firefight or running a ridge or whatever you were doing, you needed to be able to correspond with whoever was next to you. And in some cases, the snow was so bad that you couldn't see. So you had to go by voice command. You also needed to hear if someone was trying to sneak up on you. You could hear the snow crunch. We used to put out the old concertina wire with cans and stuff on it. If someone tried to come through the wire, they'd make some noise. But with that hat on with the ear muffs tied down and the parka tied down over your ears, it was difficult to hear, so you had to undo those. And when you did that it exposed your ears to frostbite. A lot of the frostbite cases are having problems now. I'm having problems with both of my ears from frostbite.

What are the symptoms?

Drying skin, rotting, cracking, basically lack of circulation. With my feet, I've lost three toenails on one foot and half a big toe, and the big toenail on the other foot. They're always cracked and blistering. It's just poor circulation. The older you get, apparently the frostbite does something to the capillaries and smaller vessels in your feet. As time wears on they get worse and worse until you have no circulation, and eventually they drop off. It's almost like getting gangrene. We have a fellow that heads our "Chosin Few" cold injury committee who now walks around in specially

made shoes. His feet are probably 5 inches long. The rest has just rotted away. They've had to cut away parts of the foot and he's had multiple surgeries over the years.

What about your feet?

My feet had frostbite too but not as bad as some. I'm very very fortunate. I'm just now starting to have some problems. It really started about 15 years ago and now it's getting progressively worse. Some days are worse than others.

Do you feel tingling?

No. That's the problem. You lose sensation in your feet. I guess they do tingle too when the circulation stops and you start walking or rubbing your feet and get it going again. The tingling starts when the circulation starts to come back. Basically, you lose sensation because the skin is dying. But my ears were the worst.

Could you describe the so-called shoe pacs you had to wear?

They were all rubber and were black. You've seen Mickey Mouse wearing his boots? That's about what they looked like. In fact, they called them Mickey Mouse boots. They were uninsulated rubber, if I recall. They had what you called a shoe pac. It was a felt inner sole. You had two pair of those. You kept one next to your body trying to keep them dry or to dry them out after they got wet. And the other pair you kept in your boots. The whole idea for these boots was to keep your feet warm. As long as you were walking it was great. The shoes worked perfectly well. As a matter of fact, they worked so well that your feet would perspire and actually made water. The felt pads then soaked up that perspiration. And then when you stopped, you found that the rubber did not repel any cold so the water in the shoe pacs froze inside the boot. You usually wore two pairs of socks, sometimes three, whatever you had. They'd be wet and freeze. Then the socks would freeze to your skin. When you went to take your boots off you'd take the skin off with it.

So the term shoe pac was not the boot itself but it was the felt liner.

I'm pretty positive that's what they called the felt liner.

What do you remember about the rest of the clothing you were issued for winter? Let's say you are standing there in your skivvies. What would you have put on?

If you were going to start from scratch and go from the skin out, you had your Marine Corps issue skivvies--shorts and tee shirt.

Boxer shorts?

Right. Then if you had long underwear--long johns--some guys had them, some didn't. It depended upon whether they were replacements coming in or . . . The majority of us that came in at Wonsan didn't have the long underwear. Over a period of time we managed to scrounge up some. I remember having a pair but I don't ever remember changing my underwear for 10 or 12 days from when the Chinese hit us at Chosin until we got back down aboard ship and took a shower. You wore the skivvies and then the long johns if you had them. If you had a winter shirt--your greens--you wore that. Then you wore your heavy green trousers, if you had them. If not, you wore your dungaree trousers. And if you had those you wore those besides the green trousers. Then you wore any sweatshirts or anything you had on the top. With the parkas, they issued a pair of what they called cold weather pants. They were windproof. Then you put that over the top of everything else you had on. Then you wore the parka, which was about knee-length. If you got your own size you were lucky. If you didn't, you took what was available.

Was the parka lined?

It was not fleece-lined but had a carpeting kind of material. They called it a fur lining but it was more knappy than real fluffy. You can get some jackets like that today. L.L. Bean sells them. The parka had buttons and a belt. Then you wore your helmet and gloves with wool liners on the inside. Those were separate. You put the wool liners on and then the outer glove which was made of a kind of canvas and leather. The top part was like a boat canvas and the palms were like a work glove an electrician or a lumberjack might wear. It was not real heavy leather but a supple leather. Both hands had the trigger finger built into it and each hand had a thumb.

Was the trigger finger just an opening in the glove?

No. It was part of the glove. It was like a regular five-finger glove. The rest was a mitten. The top part was cloth and the palm of the glove was leather. But when you put that on and tried to get it through the trigger guard it was sometimes extremely difficult. A lot of the guys used to cut that part of the glove off so they could get the trigger finger through the trigger guard.

But then the finger was bare to the elements and would probably freeze to the trigger.

That happened.

Like sticking your finger in the icebox.

It was like sticking your tongue on a light pole in the winter.

When did you suffer your first frostbite?

I don't know. Let's talk about the infantry guys in the line companies who were running the ridges. They were constantly on the move with the sweat and the cold. We had a couple of Marines in the foxhole next to us. A corpsman hollered for litter bearers. I crawled out of my hole and went over and a couple of other guys went over and lugged these guys out and their feet were black. You knew it right away. You could see it when it freezes, especially when it's 3 or 4 days old. These guys had come down off the ridges and they were out there sweeping the ridges and we were further on down the mountain protecting the convoy--the line of march and the MSR, the main supply route. I didn't realize I had a problem until I got back down to the Bean Patch and my feet started to hurt and the skin started to peel and crack.

This was down at Masan?

Yes. This was 2 weeks after.

So, you didn't require evacuation.

Oh, no. I walked all the way out. My foot problems didn't start until about 15 years ago when my feet started to go bad and then the ears. My ears are starting to point like a Martian or something. They're not black but they are exceedingly brown.

Did you suffer anything else besides your feet and your ears?

No. I didn't.

And there was the problem of the weapons themselves freezing up.

Well, we learned real quickly that you couldn't use Lubriplate, you couldn't use oil. You had to completely dry off the weapon. There could be absolutely no oil or anything because the oil would instantly freeze and the Lubriplate would make it even worse. It would freeze and get thick. Then you had to take your Kabar or bayonet and try to scrape it off the bolt to get it to function. The bolt and everything had to be dry. The artillery had a heck of a problem. Normally, when they would fire, the guns would recoil and go back into battery ready for another shell in a matter of a second. And a good crew could get off 15, 20, or 25 rounds a minute. But the cold weather was so bad on the artillery that when they would fire it sometimes took 5 minutes or longer for the gun to come back into battery so they could load another round. As a result, we lost 65 to 70 percent of our firepower from the artillery.

And, of course, the carbine was almost useless.

I had a carbine when I came ashore. That was my issue. The first firefight we got into, about every third round in that sucker jammed. When I found an M1 lying next to a dead Marine I picked it up and left my carbine there. I carried that M1 the rest of the time.

Let's go back to the cold weather for a minute.

I can tell you one little story about the cold weather and what it did to you. You'd have a heck of a hard time eating. Your C-rations were frozen and the only way you could possibly get them warm was if you were lucky enough to have a bulldozer, a truck, or a jeep nearby. You put the C-ration can on the engine block so it would thaw. And then when you'd open the can, it might be partially thawed or it might not be. You'd then scrape away what was thawed and eat that and then thaw it out some more and then eat that. So you were constantly eating frozen food that was probably frozen and re-thawed God knows how many times before you got through the can. We had no purification systems with us so the only water we had was drinking melted snow or simply eating the snow. It was probably full of e-coli and botulism and salmonella or whatever. A lot of guys, including me, had a very bad case of what I called stomach-rot. Imagine you've got diarrhea and you've got all these clothes on. You're in a foxhole and the head is some boulders some 4 or 5 meters behind your foxhole.

This one night we were in an area that had some trees down and therefore we had some cover. As soon as you picked your head out of the foxhole the Chinese were going to shoot at you. So you unbuttoned all your clothes and got ready to go down to the head and then you made a dash for it. When you got there, you dropped your drawers, did your business, and reached for your C-ration toilet paper. By the time you got the toilet paper, you had nothing but frozen dingle berries. You pulled up your pants and went back up to the foxhole. In about 15 minutes, your body heat would melt the feces that you had left and you came out of there with ulcers on your rear end and you smelled something terrible. But, of course, it was so damned cold, you couldn't smell anything anyhow. A lot of people walked down that mountain range with ulcerated rear ends from the cold. And that's not fiction; that's fact.

These are the little unpleasant details that no one ever hears about. You hear about the bullet wounds, the stomach problems, the dysentery, but you never hear about the everyday nuts and bolts of living.

When I look back at it today, the sad part is that I try to

remember what it was like and it's difficult. I don't remember shaving from the time we left Wonsan and started up to Sudong where we started running into our first Chinese about the end of October. We were still operating in the Wonsan area and hadn't yet even started up towards Hungnam. The weather there was like Indian summer in northern Michigan. All you needed was your field jacket at night to keep the chill off. The days were real pleasant because we were down near the water. But as we started moving north it started getting colder at night, and colder and colder. I cannot remember having any way of shaving or cleaning myself or doing anything from the time we first got hit until we got aboard ship. And when we got there they started feeding us as soon as we got aboard. I don't even remember that first shower. I don't know what happened to my clothes. I'm sitting here in my bedroom now looking at a picture on the wall of a very good friend of mine who lives in Alabama, and our Korean interpreter. I look healthy and chubby and have clean clothes on. This was down in what we called the Bean Patch down in Masan after we left Chosin to resupply and get our replacements in before we started back up again.

Were you ever wounded?

Yes. At Seoul and then in March and April of '51.

What happened in Seoul?

Back in those days they had what they called engineer tank infantry assault. The engineers would go out and we'd clear the road of mines. We'd check the bridges before the tanks went up, and after we gave the okay, the tanks would come up and start peppering away and moving on down the road. In a lot of cases we used to ride in the bow gunner's seat in the tank looking through the viewing ports for any depressions or mounds in the road that might indicate a mine. We'd then pop out of the hatch and probe that area for a mine and then we'd crawl back into the hatch and keep on moving. The infantry would then come up right after the tanks. They called this engineer tank infantry assault.

Seoul was a house by house type of urban warfare that the Marine Corps is heavily into now. But back then it was just like clearing a town no worse or no better than the Army was doing during World War II going through France after D-Day. You'd run into a village and then have to clear it house by house. And that's what Seoul was except that there the North Koreans had barricaded the streets with rice bags and they had anti tank guns and machine guns set up behind these barricades. What we did was to clear the house up to the barricade then you'd have to clear the barricade and then continue down the road.

We were working on our second or third barricade this day and I don't really know what happened. I just know that a shell exploded and the next thing I know I'm laying there and can't see with blood all over the place. I thought, "Well, I'm dead." Somebody hollered "Corpsman" and he was right there in a matter of seconds and he started dragging me off the street. When I was hit I left my M1 laying out in the middle of the street. When the corpsman was dragging me in I kept hollering, "Goddamit I gotta go out there and get my rifle. Go back out and get my rifle, doc."

He said, "You sonofabitch, I hauled your ass in here; I am not going back out for your damn rifle!" (The corpsman was Russell O'Day. He lives outside of Atlanta.)

The next thing I knew I woke up and was in a battalion aid station. It wasn't until 46 years later when I met him again that the corpsman told me exactly what happened. All I know is that I owe him what life I have. We both laugh about it all now.

This was after Inchon when you took Seoul the first time?

Yes. Right after Inchon. That corpsman lives near Atlanta.

What's his name?

Russell O'Day.

When you were What happened to you after you were taken to the battalion aid station?

I was there about 2 or 3 days and then I went right back up with my unit.

What kind of wound did you suffer?

Lacerations above the left eye caused by shrapnel.

I've talked to a lot of Marines over the years and they really love their docs.

God put saviors on this earth. And for the Marine Corps the Navy corpsman is that savior. I saw corpsmen get up under fire with complete disregard for themselves. Every one of those guys should have gotten the Medal of Honor, every single one of them.

I guess you have a lot of bad memories of that time at Chosin.

We had a lot of dead at Yudam-ni, Hagaru, and at Koto-ri. We were getting near the tail end and were attacking towards the sea. The vehicles were loaded with wounded and there was not room for all of the dead. And the Marine Corps always says you take your wounded and your dead with you. At Hagaru and Koto-ri that was impossible. The worst thing was witnessing the digging of a mass grave there at

Hagaru. We used explosives to try to soften up the ground but we just couldn't do it. It was so damned hard. We welded teeth on the dozer blades and, in combination with explosives, we tried to soften up the ground. There were some huts in that area where there had been fires and the ground was soft underneath. We bulldozed the huts down and eventually got the graves dug. We buried 200 Marines and Royal Marines from 41 Independent Commando in that grave. Then at Koto-ri we dug a light air strip so C-47s could come in. The first day we had that strip operational 700 wounded were evacuated. At Koto-ri we dug another grave and left 125 more bodies there. That's the stuff that haunts you and you can never get rid of it.

There's so much you don't remember and then somebody says something to you and you say, "Oh God, I remember that!" The ideal situation is when you have four or five people. One guy will remember something and he'll start talking and then the next guy will say, "Oh, I remember that."

Do you think this happens because some of it was so horrible you just put it out of your mind?

Yes. It's hard to sit down and tell one of your kids or your wife or a close friend what it was like but when you get together with the guys periodically, a lot of stuff comes out and you feel a little better about it. I took a trip to Korea 2 years ago and it was a hell of a release for me. I really felt good about it. When I saw the young kids running around fat and chubby-faced, it made me realize that what we did was really worthwhile. And when you look back 50 years ago these kids were skinny and dying in their mothers' arms with no food and we were feeding them whatever we had. You go over there today and it's just amazing to see how their economy has grown and how the cities have grown. So you feel good about things like that.