U.S. NAVY MEDICAL DEPARTMENT ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL HISTORY WITH LTJG (ret.) DALE GROOM, MC, USNR

CONDUCTED BY
JAN K. HERMAN, HISTORIAN, BUMED

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JACKSONVILLE, FL

OFFICE OF MEDICAL HISTORY
BUREAU OF MEDICINE AND SURGERY
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Telephone interview with LTJG Dale Groom, MC, USNR, World War II physician aboard LST-357 at Normandy.

Where did you grow up?

I grew up in Lakewood, a suburb of Cleveland, OH. I graduated from Hiram College in Ohio and then went to the Medical College of Virginia for my M.D. degree. After that I went to Northwestern University in Chicago for internship in Chicago for internship. We were allowed only 9 months instead of the usual year because of the pressing wartime situation in Europe. Then I entered the Navy on finishing my internship on January 1, 1944, and on January 10th I reported for duty at USNH Great Lakes, IL. Ten days later I was on my way to Lido Beach, NY, for a month of special and unique training.

What do you remember about Lido Beach?

It was just a temporary mini base for the sole purpose of organizing and training medical which were being trained for the invasion of Europe, designated FOXY-29. Our unit was FOXY-29. The base has long since been abandoned. I went back there 2 years ago and found nothing there; it has all been torn down.
and only a vacant lot remains.

You got to Lido Beach in the dead of winter.

Yes, it was a cold winter. I was there 6 weeks.

Did you receive any kind of military training?

No. I didn't really know how to salute or who or when to salute. They didn't give us any of that sort of protocol, assuming. I guess they assumed that our ROTC would have covered that. (Usually we had either slept through ROTC lectures or studied for the next class in medical school). FOXY-29 doctors comprised two doctors and 40 corpsmen. We were to train them on how to do IVs, give plasma, blood, morphine, epinephrine, and those sorts of things. The officers were given Colt .45s and carbines were issued to all enlisted men. I thought that was against the Geneva Convention because all of us were also given Red Cross arm bands. I didn't know you were allowed to be armed if you wore those bands. They must have anticipated that we'd all land on the beach.

Were there other groups at Lido training the same time you were?

I don't remember any other groups. Recently I read that there were some 3,000 personnel in FOXY-29. Training of these units was going on full blast when we got there. After 5 or 6 weeks, my unit

was assigned to an LST in New York. And that's where I boarded LST-293, apparently a new ship, with its crew of 120 under command of a warrant officer.

Was that at the Brooklyn Navy Yard?
Yes.

What did you think when you first saw that ship?
I'd seen pictures of LSTs but had never seen one before and certainly never anticipated living on one.. They gave me a reasonably comfortable cabin with which I felt privileged. I thought I had made a good choice picking the Navy rather than the Army. The skipper, who was a warrant officer, was regarded as an S.O.B. and most everyone heartily disliked him. He seemed especially to have it in for commissioned officers; I don't know why. I looked in his health record and found he already had been given a diagnosis of psychopathology. I couldn't understand why the Navy put him in that position. Fortunately, I wasn't directly under his command; we two MDs and our men were in the category of passengers, not members of his crew. We suffered that bad luck in silence.

How long was it before you sailed?
We sailed immediately, stopping at a Navy base in Rhode Island to pick up equipment, next at the Boston Navy Yard. We were in Boston 3 days allowing my bride to join me ashore. Then we went to Halifax where we joined a 63-ship convoy, most of which were Liberty ships and only a few LSTs. We had an LCT (landing craft, tank) on our deck. Our 7-knot convoy was attacked by a U-boat in the middle of the North Atlantic and our right propeller was knocked out.

Tell me about that incident.
It was in broad daylight. Every day we watched the Liberty ship on our port side. There was a dog on it that we used to feel a kinship to. After a few days we felt we really knew its crew and dog. Then, all of a sudden, we were attacked by a submarine, a U-boat. They must have intended the torpedo for us when they saw the big LCT on our deck. They failed to realize that an LST has a shallow draft; it is flat-bottomed. So they didn't set the depth of their "fish" deep enough, allowing it to strike our propeller but not exploding till it hit the Liberty ship alongside seconds later. It was one hell of an explosion. We were really aghast.

Were you below deck at the time or topside?
I don't remember where I was except when it hit us, it really

jarred things, followed by a persistent vibration of our ship. I went out on deck and saw the Liberty ship, which had a cargo of steel broken in two, going down with no survivors.

The north Atlantic can bare its teeth in March. It gave us quite a storm that lasted 3 days, sufficient to break up a bit of Navy furniture.

I've heard an LST doesn't ride too well in a storm.

No, it doesn't, having a flat bottom. We battled 40-foot seas that looked like mountains to us. Not having a keel, our LST would reach the top of a crest, then slide sideways--a rather sickening sensation to all aboard.

You must have had a lot of seasick crewmembers.

I estimated that 95 percent of them were sick and I couldn't do much to help them. In my sickbay, I had something like dramamine but it wasn't very effective.

How did you fare through all of this?

I did pretty well. My only trouble was that the galley was closed and I had to scrounge up something to eat. I might have felt a little queasy but I was functional. Even most of our old salts were in their sacks.

What kind of medical configuration did you have aboard?

I don't think you could call it a regulation sick bay. There was only enough space to stock a few items for medical emergencies and [to file] the health records of personnel.

So, here you are in mid-ocean just having been through a 3-day storm and you've been torpedoed by a U-boat.

I really can't remember which came first, the storm or the attack, but I have the impression that the attack occurred about half way across. In March the North Atlantic is treacherous. Our "old salts" told me March is the worst month of the year and we really hit it.

Where did you finally land?

We went around North Ireland and on down through the Irish Sea. After going around Lands End and Penzance, we put in at Falmouth in Cornwall. We proceeded up a river there and dumped our LCT in the water with a huge splash.

After that, LST-293 evidently went in for repairs and I never saw or heard of her after that. I've seen references to hundreds

of other LSTs but never to the 293.

All of our medical unit, two doctors and 40 corpsmen, left the ship and we were sent to Fowey, on the English south coast, where we stayed about a week. It was a delightful Cornish village with a beautiful harbor. We were temporarily housed in a spectacular old British estate. There we unfortunately were hit by an epidemic of food poisoning, not unusual in the exigencies of wartime. Following that, we were shipped to Weymouth and assigned to two old LSTs. That's when my friend Dr. Landaal and I were divided into two units, he took half the men to LST-314 and I with my 20 men to LST-357.

So you and Dr. Landaal had been together since Lido Beach.

Actually, we had been together for years, all through medical school. We were close friends. While I interned at Northwestern, he interned at Wisconsin; that was the only time in our medical training we were apart. It was fortuitous that we got the same orders that January, 1944. The photo of him and me in England was taken at Fowey on that old estate.

We got to Weymouth near the end of April and were there in the harbor at least 5 or 6 weeks. These two old LSTs and their crews had been through Salerno, Sicily, and Anzio. Mine had been shot up a bit. There were holes in the bulkheads. These LSTs looked different from the shiny new ones.

About the last week in May, we were informed that we had been selected for a formal visit by certain English dignitaries. And who should it turn out to be but King George VI himself.

How did you hear the king was coming aboard?

After being in Weymouth a month or so, with bombers overhead and being called to General Quarters almost every night, we received orders that we were to have that formal visit. We didn't know who it would be. All hands turned to and scrubbed up our old LST-357. I must say, we were proud of her. It was a "spit and polish" job, par excellence. We were surprised, of course, when it turned out that our visitor was the king. When he arrived on May 25th, I think we were a hundred yards or so offshore anchored in the harbor. He arrived in a little boat and was piped over the side with his retinue of palace guards and British admirals, all heavily laden with impressive medals. He was an affable sort of guy and really did go through the whole ship--up and down the ladders, through the tank deck, and everywhere, possibly excluding the johns. But he didn't make a speech. He just said a few well chosen words in parting, thanking us on behalf of his countrymen, for our contribution in the great cause. I guess kings don't give speeches.

Right after that life really got busy. Countless Army vehicles were loaded aboard. I received 300 stretchers along with units of plasma, blood, drugs, splints, and other medical supplies.

Where did you store all these supplies?

I don't remember where we stored all the stretchers. We couldn't store them on the tank deck because that was filled with Army vehicles and later with all the Army troops who came aboard. I don't know how many hundred there were. I was told an LST could accommodate 750 troops and their vehicles. Those soldiers slept and ate in their vehicles and on the decks.

What about you and the ship's crew? What were you eating?

We were eating our ship's fare which was vastly better. The day before we left, we were told the assault troops would have our grub--steaks for dinner. And they would sleep in our bunks that night, throughout which the whole Navy crew would stand on watch.

Were you participating in the rehearsal exercises off the Devon coast when the Slapton Sands incident took place?

No. That happened on April 28th. On that day, we were out in the Channel near the ships involved in that rehearsal. But we did not have Army troops aboard assigned to make the practice landings on the English beach. Reports of lives lost in the sinking of two LSTs were, under threat to survivors, hushed up, only to be revealed decades later.

After you loaded all your Army troops and their vehicles in May, did you engage in any landing exercises?

No. Soon as we were loaded, they sealed the ships. No one could go ashore; no one was allowed to come aboard. We were sealed for 3, 4, or 5 days, I've forgotten how many. That was about June 1st, right after the king's visit.

When you say they sealed the ship, did you get an order that you were just not to go ashore?

We were at the dock for loading but then anchored out in the harbor while other LSTs were loading. It was after all LSTs were loaded that orders came that effectively sealed the ships, isolated them in the harbor. Ominously, all ship's papers, logs, and personnel records were collected and put ashore so they would be available in case of disaster.

So you all knew that something was cooking?

Anyone who didn't surmise that we were heading south must have been in a perpetual dreamland.

How many corpsmen did you have at this point?

At this time, I had 18. Two had been sent ashore because of medical and physical disabilities resulting from stress. Dr. Landaal retained, so far as I knew, his 20 corpsmen.

And you were the only physician aboard?

Just before we left, the Army gave me one doctor and two corpsmen. They were in a "beach detail" as was the doctor--not part of my FOXY-29 complement.

What was going on in the air before your departure?

During the weeks of April and May, most every night about midnight or 1 o'clock German aircraft came over, and for us waiting in the harbor, that meant general quarters. Mines were dropped in the harbor, but never hit us. However, extensive damage was done ashore in Weymouth during May, wiping out whole city blocks and a few buildings visible on the shore. I think most of the planes, however, were going to London or Southampton or other cities north. I guess they just dropped a few for us along the way. But being at general quarters every night and hearing enemy overhead was a very stressful experience, continuing all those weeks at Weymouth. I had to send two of my men ashore. They just couldn't take it. All of us were, to say the least, pretty stressed out.

What happened on June 4th?

We started out in a procession. The 314 was the first in line, my LST, the 357, was second. Our Navy spearhead was protected by a minesweeper on each side ahead. We proceeded east down the coast, but before noon or so the entire procession turned around and went back.

It must have been blowing pretty good out there.

It was overcast, drizzly. I guess the order went out that D-Day would be postponed, so it was back to Weymouth for us. Next day, June 5th, our same procession started out east along the coast, but this time we soon turned south. It was during that time that the skipper unsealed his books with the official orders. All of us knew then, for the first time, where we would land. It wasn't to be where everyone assumed the invasion would be, where the Channel was narrowest, where marathon swimmers can and do swim across, rather where it is 100 miles across. I was in his cabin when our good

skipper, James J. MacLeod, a schoolteacher from Michigan and now a full lieutenant in the reserve opened that book of official orders. (All the ship's officers were USNR while our chiefs and some first class pharmacist's mates were regular USN).

Just the two of us looked at this book and it was the most amazing document I ever saw. It had strip pictures of the beach! I asked the skipper how in hell they could possibly have taken those pictures. I don't know whether he assumed or actually knew but he told me that seals and commandos must have managed to approach the beaches underwater to take those photographs showing beach defenses, undetected by German occupants. If one of those books had gotten out the whole invasion would almost certainly have been another Dunkirk. How that information was collected, printed, and distributed without one leak is a triumph of security.

Was it dark already when you headed across?

It was about dusk. We realized then that we would not be turning back to Weymouth. The die was cast.

Was it a particularly rough crossing or had the Channel smoothed out a bit?

It wasn't anything like what we had been through in the Atlantic, nor even as rough as it had been when we had first started out on June 4. Choppy is the word.

Was it overcast?

I couldn't tell until dawn came, but I do recall that the sun came out that morning of June 6, surely a good omen, we hoped.

Did you have any seasickness to deal with?

No, though understandably we were a bit stressed out waiting to get hit along the way.

You said you were in convoy with minesweepers.

We had a minesweeper on each side and one or two British destroyers as escorts. We were leading a long procession, the length and size of which we could not know. Some behind us would be from Portsmouth, perhaps Fowey and Southampton, all to join somewhere out there in the English Channel on D-Day. What an unprecedented procession it turned out to be, not only to our Omaha destination, but to Utah Beach on the west, and to English and canadian sites to our East. There we were, at Omaha, in the middle.

Were you up on deck any time during that night?

Yes. All hands were at general quarters and fully anticipating attack by sea or air.

You thought about submarines, I'm sure.

We had good reason to think about that, and about the E-boats that had taken the toll at Slapton Sands. They had already taken a toll at Slapton Sands. We also thought about the famed Luftwaffe. But surprisingly no attack came, no interference of any sort on the entire trip across. Surely the element of surprise must have been achieved. (And it was left to history to record that!)

Could you see the beach?

In the darkness one could see many miles of beach afire from the work of our bombers overhead.

How far off the beach were you at that time, a few miles?

I remember reading in the log that we were at the transport area for LSTs. I would guess a mile or so.

I'm sure no one got much sleep that night.

None. I don't imagine the army troops slept much knowing what was in store for them.

What happened with first light?

We could see our bombers and some gliders being towed to positions behind the lines and there were the gallant paratroopers landing inland. All during the night and morning we saw and heard the battleship *Texas* (BB-35) and the cruiser *Augusta* (CA-28). They were out there lobbing shells out of those huge guns, blasting away at the beach. The skipper told me they were directing their bombardment by grids in accordance with radio signals from positions behind the beaches. It was a display of sight and sound I'll never forget.

Did you see paratroopers landing?

I believe we saw a few about dawn, or maybe later - it may have been after H-hour. But at 6 o'clock all the bombing stopped. H-hour was 6:30 am.

Were you towing one of those rhino barges with you?

We were indeed. Just before 6 o'clock we began loading up the rhino with troops and vehicles. We also discharged our DUKWs through the front ramp and launched the LCVPs. As I recall, we had six LCVPs, each capable of carrying some 30 men. Two or three of these never

came back, and were probably annihilated trying to get through the beach mines and entanglements. We also learned later that some of the DUKWs foundered in the choppy surf, drowning many assault troops laden with their heavy armaments and packs.

How were the LCVPs lowered into the water?

From the ships' davits. All of these craft circled our ship waiting to go in. Then, on signal, they headed in to Omaha Beach.

Were you receiving shore battery fire at this point?

Not that I know of. The army doctor I mentioned earlier, with and his crew, went ashore. He was the associate professor of obstetrics at Johns Hopkins University and we had shared a cabin en route. I wondered why in hell they were sending that poor fellow in with a beach unit. Those guys were really destined to take a beating. He was pretty frank with me. He had run afoul of the director of an Army hospital in North Island where he had been stationed. That hospital commander had railroaded him into a beach battalion. A highly qualified Army obstetrician, he was pretty sure he wouldn't be coming back. I never heard from him again. One report was that he was killed trying to reach the beach. I thought that was a terrible abuse of authority to relegate a doctor to duty where there was nothing he could have done on the beach that any recruited and trained corpsman wasn't capable of.

At least two of our ship's officers went in on our LCVPs. Fortunately, they were able to get back. A real problem existed in bringing large numbers of casualties to LSTs because of the withering small arms fire on Omaha Beach. Beach battalions had to do their first aid dug in the sand. I heard reports of the action from several shipmates who were able to return to the 357.

Did some of your corpsmen Also go in?

Yes, a few did, four or five perhaps. Most of them, however, were with me waiting to receive casualties. We cruised up and down the beach trying to pick up all we could. We received about a dozen of them that first day, brought out in various small boats and hoisted over the side in slings. By evening we were headed back to England.

So you went back to England that night.

Yes, that night. We returned to Weymouth. Then we loaded up again on the evening of June 7th.

Were your 12 patients in pretty bad shape?

I don't recall. We got so many at Normandy, I don't remember

those particular ones. I do remember that we didn't lose any of those from the D-Day trip. On the second trip I lost one out of 220. The way I remember that specific number was that one of the ship's line officers' jobs was to count casualties brought aboard for entry into the ship's log. I had no time for counting, or for anything else except the necessary triage and treatment of casualties. You asked earlier about the ship's sick bay; the officers' ward room served as my operating room.

After loading up at Weymouth we started out for France again on June 8th. On this second trip the German E-boats were ready for us. That's when we met a different reception. I think the log says that zero hour was approximately 1 o'clock in the morning. Our convoy of five LSTs had as escort of only one Canadian destroyer. Since we had been the first across on 6 June, we now were first for the second trip. This attack occurred early on 9 June.

Were you awake at the time at general quarters?

Yes, all Navy hands were at general quarters.

Did you ever hear the E-boats coming?

No. I was later told that they were painted black to be invisible at night.

But you saw it happen.

Yes. There were at least two or three terrific explosions. The decks of what I believed was the LST 314 were afire, with people jumping overboard in flames. They were there in the water screaming. It was a ghastly sight. I pleaded with my skipper, "For God sake, let's stop and pick them up." He replied no, we couldn't do that. The Navy forbids that, lest we too go down. Admittedly, he was right because by then a second LST was hit. Surely this was the most traumatic experience of my Navy career. I was quite sure my friend Dr. Landaal and the men we had trained together were over there. They had only two LCVPs left from D-Day on the 314. They had lost the others at Omaha. My recent correspondence with CAPT Tutt of the 314 tells that Dr. Landaal gave his place in one of those LCVPs to the injured and said he would take his chances in his life preserver. He went over the side, along with the captain and several others and doubtless died of hypothermia. The next morning the Canadian DE that had escorted us is said to have returned and pulled a few survivors from the 50 degree F water along with untold numbers of bodies. Dr. Landaal's body was recovered and sent back to the states for burial. CAPT Szabo, the executive officer of the 314, later told me they were able to launch a raft, sparing some of the other survivors. He wrote

me that the ship went down in 20 minutes in flames after being hit by three torpedoes. The fate of the Army troops aboard the two LSTs remains unknown. I don't think those guys had a chance. If they had any life vests, I never saw them. Almost certainly most of them drowned in that frigid water.

So you continued on your way.

Yes, at 10 knots and we arrived again at Omaha that morning. The crossing took from 12 to 15 hours. Again, we returned to the transport area but were not permitted to beach. Beaching and refloating an LST is dependent upon the tides. And an LST, high and dry on a beach becomes a conspicuous sitting duck for enemy attack.

Was there still a lot of activity going on the beach?

Small arms fire continued on the beach for at least 3 days. During that time LCTs, LCIs, and all kinds of other small craft pressed into service brought us loads of casualties. LCTs could marry to us, ramp to ramp. That's how we received 220 casualties within a few hours of cruising up and down the beach. We didn't stay in one place. And as soon as we took those aboard, we headed back to England. You have to give credit to the Army and the Navy beach units who provided life-saving first aid under the most adverse conditions, applying tourniquets and improvised splints, administering morphine injections, and I am sure, giving great moral support.

You were both the triage and treatment officer.

Yes. I was it. We all went many hours without sleeping or eating, I'll say that. These were times that demanded all we could give. And my PhMs did just that, quite oblivious to the sounds of the battle outside out "tank deck hospital."

The injuries must have run the gamut from gunshot wounds to traumatic amputations.

Yes, I did see a few mangled and missing limbs but I didn't feel pressed to do any amputations. Nor did I want to. If you stopped hemorrhage and thoroughly debrided open wounds, you couldn't justifiably say whether a mangled arm or leg could be preserved by the definitive care of a well-equipped and staffed hospital ashore. I refused to amputate a limb if I thought there might be at least some chance of saving it. So often there's no way one can decide without a period of observation. My treatment role for those was mainly debridement. I had to make numerous medical decisions under pressure. I did suturing and, of course, directed life support

measures including plasma and blood. Probably the most urgent measure of life support was one of maintaining blood pressure. That required continuous monitoring throughout the 15 to 20 hours of return trips. Without intravenous fluids I'm sure some patients could not have survived. All this constituted the Navy's mission for FOXY-29.

Did you see any burns?
I don't recall any burns.

Were your corpsmen trained to start IVs?
Yes. That's one of the measures they learned at Lido Beach.

What was the most sophisticated treatment you could provide during the crossing?
I have often been asked how much of my medical education I was able to use. My answer to that is damned little. We had no x-ray; our facilities and equipment were exceedingly limited, often improvised. We were, essentially a well planned linkage between battlefield first aid and Britain.

Did you have any penicillin with you?
I don't remember penicillin but we did have sulfa drugs.

On this second trip you had some German POWs.
Yes. I remember them because they were yelling "Schmertz, schmertz." I didn't know what that word meant, but soon I learned it is the German word for pain. One of my more learned corpsmen told me that. I don't recall how many of the wounded were German. We didn't classify them specifically as Germans. My primary interest was in classifying them according to their injuries. You've seen the pictures of me doing the triage as the casualties were brought aboard. Nationality was not a criterion for our care.

How were you able to take those pictures?
I didn't take them. I arranged with some of the ship's crew to use my camera. Previously, I had a gentleman's agreement with the skipper: I freely admitted that I had a camera and knew it was against regulations to take pictures in wartime. But I wanted at least a few to bring back home. The agreement was that if we went down, it wouldn't make any difference, and if we didn't go down but were captured, the camera and all the pictures would go over the side.

Did you take those 220 casualties back to Weymouth?

Yes. As I recall on that second trip we had to unload them onto an LCT because the dock was so busy. But LSTs and LCTs were well designed to fit ramps together for loading or unloading personnel and equipment.

Did you finally get some rest? You hadn't slept in a number of days.

We of the medical team were, frankly, exhausted.

Did you go over again?

Yes. We made a total of five trips. On the third trip, we had less than the 220 casualties of the second. And on the fourth (to Utah Beach) we carried several casualties aboard ourselves, high and dry on the beach. By the fifth trip we may not have had any, for by that time C-47s were using the improvised runway hurriedly built above the cliffs at Omaha. We could watch them landing and taking off. They had the advantage of being able to transport their loads of casualties to hospitals throughout England, whereas we could deliver only to hospitals near the coast.

This whole FOXY-29 program constituted a new chapter in warfare medicine, first aid and the definitive care with all the staff and equipment of modern hospitals. The U.S. Navy had devised this innovation because they wisely anticipated massive numbers of casualties early in this largest invasion in history. Even a fleet of hospital ships could not have served the role of the LSTs, being available and empty after delivering their armaments to the scene of battle. FOXY-29 fit the geography, for with the English coast only 100-150 miles away from the coast of France--a matter of less than 24 hours in an LST--this was the logical answer to an unprecedented need. What would not have been practical over a distance of a thousand miles, fit this need well. In doing so, the LSTs with their FOXY-29s wrote a proud chapter in the annals of Navy medicine.

After the fifth trip the medical units were removed from LSTs. Mine was reassigned first to Southampton where there were 19 air raid alarms sounded in one night. At first, we went down into the shelters, but surprisingly found no one there, demonstrating how accustomed the Britishers were to air raids. They just slept right through whatever came. During that night, a Nazi 2000-pounder dropped into the park where my men were, right beside the little hotel where I was quartered, but it didn't go off.

The next morning the bomb squad was out there and they removed it. The word was that it was probably defused by some good German back there in the factory who didn't want to annihilate any more

people.

From Southampton, we took the train to Roseneath, Scotland for processing back to the states. The LST crews, though, stayed on, and I understand that some of the LSTs made as many as 30, 40, or even 50 trips taking equipment over for the Army's advance on into Germany. FOXY-29's mission was finished by early July.

How did you get back?

I saw the real Navy for the first time. I came home on a seaplane tender called the *Albemarle* (AV-5). It was a big ship, really deluxe compared to an LST. We had movies and ice cream and all the comforts of a cruise ship. It was a lot different from crossing the Atlantic on an LST.