

U.S. NAVY MEDICAL DEPARTMENT ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL HISTORY WITH PHARMACIST'S MATE FIRST CLASS
LOUIS ORTEGA, USN

CONDUCTED BY
JAN K. HERMAN, HISTORIAN, BUMED

23 JUNE 1995
PORT JEFFERSON STATION, NY

OFFICE OF MEDICAL HISTORY
BUREAU OF MEDICINE AND SURGERY
WASHINGTON, DC

Interview with former PhM1c Louis Ortega.

Tell me about corps school.

When I came out of boot camp, I went to the USS *Constellation*, the old wooden warship and there we were assigned to school. This was in April of 1941. When I found out that I had been assigned to corps school I said, "Wait a minute, I'm an electrician; this is what I had gone to school for. I had gone to Samuel Gompers Vocational High School in the Bronx. It was either automobiles or electrician. So I went there for 3 1/2 years to learn to be an electrician. When I found out I was going to corps school, I said, "Oh, boy. I don't even know how to put a bandaid on."

So in June they sent us to the old Naval Hospital in Brooklyn on Flushing Avenue and this must have been built back in the Civil War because there were old catacombs and dungeons underneath. It looked like old Fort Sumter from the Civil War with big pillars made of stone. When you went through the basement, everything was dingy. Every 40 feet there was a little light bulb. And that's where the morgue was. The first week they took us down there. That did it. Everyone ran for the gate and tried to climb over the walls.

It was a 16-month course and they cut it down to 8 weeks. We had the Materia Medica, first aid, anatomy and physiology-- all the simple things to get you prepared.

When we graduated they took us into the hall and told us that 30 of us, or 50 percent, were going to stay in Brooklyn at the naval hospital. They needed 15 to go to Philadelphia. The rest would be split between Boston (Chelsea) and Charleston, SC. They needed five men for New London. Six people raised their hands. I got picked. And I was convinced that by hook or crook, I was going to submarine school.

We got to the submarine base and they took us up to the lower base. The new base was being built and all they had was the dispensary and had just started working on the barracks. The dispensary was a beautiful building, two stories. The basement had all the facilities for the lab, the pharmacy, x-ray, medical storeroom and so forth. The main floor was all marble with a spiral staircase right in the center going up to the second floor. The first floor was the captain's office, the administrative office, and personnel. On the second floor was the main hospital. On the left, as you walked up the stairs, was the a 25-bed ward--10 along the wall, 5 in the middle, 8 on the port side, two by the nurse's station. And then you had a solarium that overlooked the base with four beds in

there.

Right across from the nurse's station was the head for the patients, a laundry room, and a storeroom. You went through swinging doors, and to the left of that there was a ward with a porthole. That was isolation where they put all the bad boys. That is, good boys who had turned bad by getting the clap or gonorrhoea. While they were in isolation they lost time. In other words, once they came out of sick bay cured, they had to make up the lost time at the end of their enlistment.

Across from there was small mess hall, and a swinging door. That was the SOQ (sick officer's quarters). And the far end you made a right turn and you went right into the operating room.

On the first day, here comes a Navy nurse with about 12 years in the Navy. Her hat was cocked to the side and she said, "My name is Tracy and I don't mean Dick Tracy. When I tell you people to jump, you jump. When I tell you to squat, you squat." We had a boy from Brooklyn named Bernstein. He started giggling. She hit him and he went right through the swinging door into the laundry room. Those Navy nurses were rough.

We were there from August through November. At the end of November it was my turn for night duty. On Sunday afternoon on December the 7th, I got some lunch and we were listening to the radio. The football Dodgers had never beat the Giants. The two teams were playing in the Polo Grounds. Ace Parker was the quarterback for the Dodgers. He threw a touchdown pass to Pug Manders and the Dodgers went ahead. They kicked the extra point and were ahead 7-nothing. We were going wild. And all of a sudden they interrupted. In the background you could an announcement being made. "All military personnel report to your base immediately." We thought that it must be one of those drills. Shortly after that we heard, "We interrupt this broadcast to announce that the Japanese have just bombed Pearl Harbor."

"Pearl Harbor, where the hell is that!" One of the old submarine chiefs said, "That's out in Hawaii. We have a sub base out there."

On weekends the chiefs I had made friends with on the ward used to take me out on the boats. The school had the old R boats and every time we went out someone would take a piece of chalk and mark a leak. Those boats were left over from World War I and they were using them for training.

In the meantime the *Grampus* (SS-207) was a brand new 300-footer just being commissioned that week in New London. I was scheduled to go out because the chief of the boat was a friend of mine. I hit the rack that night and a few days later they woke me up and told

me to pack my bags. I had gotten orders to the FMF. I said, "The what? What the hell is the FMF?"

"The Fleet Marine Force."

"But I'm no Marine."

"You are now," they said.

So five of us, the same five who came up from Brooklyn, packed up, put on our pea coats and in the middle of winter got on the train to Washington, DC. When we got there it was the first time we had seen segregation. We saw the colored and white bathrooms. "What's going on here," we thought. One of the guys was colored. Of course, in those days colored guys in the Navy were either stewards or they were cooks or bakers, or they were musicians. There were none in the Hospital Corps. And this guy had come down from the sub base with us. He was going to South Carolina. So when we went to get on the train they said, "You can't get on here. You have to get on the last car."

We left Washington and it took us 24 hours to go to Wilmington, North Carolina. This was an old coal-burner. When we got there our white hats were black. It looked like we had eyeglasses on from the soot.

There was a 2-ton truck there at the station and they said, "Hey swabbies, are you for the FMF?" It was an open truck. We threw our gear in the back, climbed in, and went 60 miles in the middle of winter to New River, NC. When we got there, there was an old sign hanging saying, "Welcome to the home of the Third Marine Brigade, First Marine Division, Fleet Marine Force." About a mile up the mud road we saw tents and thought, "What did we get into."

We ran into an old pharmacist's mate who said, "All right, you guys, get out of that goddam truck. Jeez, look at the shit they sent me."

We didn't know anything. We had never been to a Marine base before. In fact, we had never seen a marine except maybe at the gate when a marine guard asked to see our liberty card.

"You see that big tent over there? Well, get in there." When we got to the tent they told us to strip. God, this was winter. So we took all our blues off. I remember standing there bare-assed naked.

"Here's four pairs of khaki, four pair of khaki t-shirts, two pair of boondockers, four pair of socks, one overcoat, one marine hat, one steel helmet of the World War I variety. Here's your Unit three,"

So we packed our blues and that's the last time I saw them. Sea bag and all--gone.

Then we lugged our new equipment up the road to the first tent.

There were four army cots. They gave each of us a pallet full of straw to use as a mattress. So that's how we started our tour with the Fleet Marines.

A week later they told us to get down to the armory. "Here's your gun belt, your .45. Here's two clips of ammunition.

We were there a month training. In the meantime, the brigade was down in Guantanamo. That was the Seventh Regiment. They brought them back up so we had about a month of maneuvers out at Onslow Beach.

One dark night in April, they told us to pack up. We were going out. They put us on cattle cars, pulled the doors back and there was straw all over the place. Then they slammed the doors shut. The next morning when they pulled doors open, we were in Norfolk, VA inside a warehouse going aboard a ship called the *Fuller*.

During your time at New River, had they trained you in weapons use or anything? What was a typical day like?

We would go out on maneuvers--hiking, simulated landings on the beach.

As corpsmen, did they have lugging medical equipment around?

Yes, Unit 3 medical bag and 782 equipment. This was the old pack. Today they have the knapsacks. Some of us had the old puttee leggings. Later on we got the regular leggings. We had the old tin hat. The Unit 3 was like a horse harness you put over your head and it had two bags full of first aid equipment. And that was it.

So there we were on the *Fuller*.

On our way overseas with the Seventh Regiment. Thirty days later, 10 May 1942, we pulled into a pier at Samoa and that's where they dropped us off. In the meantime, the First and Fifth Marines were being formed at New River. They were calling in all the guards from the Navy yards, the recruiters, all the outposts, from the islands of Puerto Rico. All the veterans were in the Seventh Regiment. The Fourth Marines had all been captured in the fall of the Philippines. And of course I would get Chesty Puller. He thought he would be in on the first action. When they dropped us in Samoa it nearly broke his heart.

By then there was nothing between the Japs and Australia. Everything had fallen. When we got to Samoa there was nothing there. We worked day and night building defenses. When the word came that the First Marine Division had landed at Guadalcanal, I thought Chesty was going to kill himself. We were all broken-hearted. And then we started to get the bad news. We lost five cruisers in one

night--Savo Island.

Toward the end of August we got the word. We were needed. We were hot to trot. On the 15th of September we landed at Lunga Beach. We went up on the Crescent City. Again, it was one of these over the side and the landing craft didn't have ramps. They went in so far and then you jumped out into the water and everything had to be passed by hand. We went down the cargo nets into the Higgins boats. When we got on the beach we had to take our gear off, lay it on the beach, and form a line to pass supplies.

Was there any opposition?

No. Not at that time. That night everything was piled up on the beach. I was with a marine driver because the medical companies, the stretcher bearers were all musicians. They used musicians to help with the stretcher-bearing. I was sitting with this corporal on top of these boxes. It was my turn to be on watch--12 to 4 in the morning. So I was sitting with this corporal on top of these boxes. He said, "I wonder what the hell we're sitting on?" He pries open a box, sticks in his bayonet. "Hey, peaches!" He just passed one over to me when kaboom! I went flying on my ass. A spotlight came from the sea and the shells started coming and the trees were falling. It was a mess. A shell cut off the top of a palm tree which fell on me. It was a Jap submarine came up and threw in a couple of shells. Then it disappeared. One guy was wounded.

Then we marched into the bush and were assigned positions. I dug a little slit trench, put my foot in it and thought, "That's deep enough." Then put a piece of tin over it, then some palm trees. A few days went by while we were getting organized. We weren't moving anywhere. Then came the first air raid. Everyone just sat out there and watched. "Wow, look at that one over there." Suddenly shrapnel from the anti-aircraft fire started falling. I got into my trench. I learned two things. When you build a foxhole, build it deep. And secondly, never go alone. When you're by yourself you think and your mind starts doing all kinds of weird things. You hear the swish of a bomb which sounds like shaking tin foil. Then the ground shakes and then you wait for the next one. And the ground shakes again. By that time you really want some company. With two people in there you learn one thing. Look at that sonofabitch, he's scared as hell. And he's looking at you and saying the same thing. Oh, I'm not scared, he's scared. With someone else there, you're able to compensate for the fear but when you're alone, you sweat. You knew when an air raid was coming. Every fly, bird, every insect seemed to head for a foxhole. And sure enough, soon the bombs started falling. I don't know how the insects knew it.

There were always flies all over the place. The coconut groves had been unattended for years. The coconuts were rotting. There was a difference to the smell of the jungle. The rot, the dampness. Some places the sun never shined.

The following day there was another raid and a bomb hit close by. The edge of the crater was 3 yards from my foxhole and caved it in. I saw that and I began digging deeper. We dug it so deep that you could stand up in it and still be underground. And being Americans, we liked our comfort so we put matting around it. We put two stools inside. We put logs over it and sandbags on top of those and ponchos to make it waterproof and then poured dirt on top of that. What we had was a pillbox.

After being on the line almost a month, we were pulled back near Henderson Field for some rest. It started about 11 pm on 13 October 1942. We were laying down in our pillbox. A whistling noise and then boom! "What the hell was that?" And then another one. For the next 4 hours we were bombarded by four battleships and two cruisers. Let me tell you something. You can get a dozen air raids a day but they come and they're gone. A battleship can sit there hour after hour and throw 14-inch shells. I will never forget those 4 hours. The next morning when they stopped shelling, there was a haze over the whole area. Five miles of coconut groves were gone! Where the day before you had miles and miles of coconut trees, now 5 square miles were wiped clean. Every tree was gone. The airfield was destroyed.

And over on Point Cruz you could see six Japanese transports merrily unloading troops. The next day after they unloaded, in comes a transport. We hadn't seen a transport in over a month since we had landed. It brought the 164th Army Infantry with the new Garand rifles. That helped a lot later on. We had the old Springfield '03 with the bolt action. When the next battle took place and threw the 164th into the line, the Japs would charge and waited for the five shots the '03 had. But this time the army would let them have it with two extra shots. They hadn't seen a semi-automatic rifle because theirs were bolt actions too. We stayed with the Springfield right up to the end of that campaign. It was when we got to Australia that we got M1s.

And, while we were at Guadalcanal we got rid of the old steel helmet and brought us the pot helmets.

After the battleships worked you over, did you have any casualties to treat?

No, not in our area because though they leveled the whole area, believe it or not, none of us were hurt. When we were underground,

unless it was a direct hit. Most of those shells landed on the airfield. We had three medical companies--A Company, First Marines, B Company, Fifth Marines, and C Company, Seventh Marines. And there were line company corpsmen. We saw casualties with our company in action.

What was the situation with malaria?

If you had malaria, you might have it five times. Everybody was getting it over and over again. I had it five times--twice on the island and three times in Australia. Those were reoccurrence attacks. If they evacuated people who had it five times there would have been no one left in the field. By the first of December, we had more casualties--four or five thousand casualties from malaria, dengue fever, than we did from actual battle.

What did they do with you when you got it?

When the survey came out in December, the First and the Fifth Marines were evacuated. They sent them to Brisbane and stuck them out in a swamp loaded with mosquitoes. So they were always in the hospital. All day long in Brisbane you could hear the ambulances taking men to the hospital. Since we came in last, we stayed last. We didn't leave there until January 9th. On New Years Day we moved to the beach.

Anyway, we were sent to the beach by Lunga Point and we were there 7 days when we got the word that the Army was coming in and we were to be relieved. We were all exhausted. We had no clothes. All I had was my shoes, no socks, no underclothes. All I had was a pair of torn dungarees and a khaki shirt. They came ashore with Higgins boats. We climbed over the sides into the boats. When we got to the ship we couldn't make it. We started up the cargo net and fell back in the boats. Sailors were tying ropes around us and pulling us up. I had gone to Guadalcanal weighing about 150; I left weighing about 110.

What kind of chow did they serve you at Guadalcanal?

To this day, I will not eat hotcakes because when we landed, the supply ships got sunk. And all they got ashore was Spam and pancake flour and peaches. Fortunately for us, we had a guy named Sergeant Duncan who had worked at the Waldorf Astoria. He made pancakes with peaches, he made pigs in blankets with peaches and Spam. And we were having it twice a day, then it was down to once a day. We'd get a hunk of peach on top of Spam or you would roll it up, or he'd bake it, but it was always Spam, and that's all we had, Spam,

Spam, Spam and peaches, and hotcakes for 5 months! There was nothing coming in. We never got a decent meal.

When we got out of there, everything started to change. We got new equipment, new weapons. For the Gloucester campaign, we were given the choice of a carbine or the .45.

What did you do with the malaria cases? How did you treat them?

Atabrine and plenty of fluids. And whenever they could they would put them back on the line. They had no choice. If you had had it 10 times, they would finally evacuate you. There were no replacements. If you were to send everyone back with two, three, four cases of malaria, you'd have nobody left. The casualties alone from malaria, dysentery, and from battle fatigue.

So you weren't getting medical supplies in either?

Just what we had brought in with us. That was it.

Did you guys feel abandoned?

The first couple of months, yes. Until we came in on the 15th of September, the first guys who had come, hadn't seen anybody since August 7th. When they had that big sea battle of Savo Island and they lost those five cruisers, everybody hauled ass and never came back. They went ashore with a 30-day supply of food and ammunition. So they had to replace that with captured Japanese rice.

Did you actually eat any of that captured rice?

No, because the other two regiments had exhausted supplies. When we came in we shared what we had with them. Because we were able to bring stuff in even though we were only there a couple of days before they took off. We didn't see them till October when the Army came in. Once the Army came, they came with sea bags, brand new uniforms, food, medical supplies, MIs, new helmets, everything. We said, "Look at these candy asses!" At night, we'd sneak into their camp and help ourselves because they had so much stuff! They couldn't get it off the beach fast enough.

So, the whole time you were on Guadalcanal you were patrolling.

We were in garrison and on patrol. We had sections we moved around in. Sometimes the 5th got hit pretty bad and they would be pulled back toward the airfield and the 7th would take their place. If the 7th got hit, then the first would take their place. There was the Raider Battalion. The 2nd Marines were in Tulagi the first week when there was the heaviest fighting over there when they ran in to a garrison of over 2,000 Japs and they were dug in. So that

was a hard battle. Finally, they had to bring them over by Higgins boats to the island to replace some of the units. They never fought in Tulagi anymore. Everything was on the Canal after that first week.

Did you go out on patrol with these people?

Oh yes. We crossed the Matanikou, we crossed in the northern part of the Tenaru. We went about 40 miles as far as the patrols would go. We'd find the Japs on the road dead, on the trails, but we would never catch up to them. And then we'd pull back.

How did they die? Who shot them?

Disease and hunger. They were in worse shape because they would be dropped off and then our planes would come and bomb their food supply and sink their ships. But they could go 16 miles a day with a little ball of rice. But they found out they were not supermen, that they could be defeated. And their diet caused them to explode when they died. Within a couple of hours they were bloated. And the next day, boom, they exploded. The maggots were all over them. An American boy would take 2 or 3 days before he'd turn purple and start bloating. We'd pick them up and wrap them in a poncho and bury them.

When did you leave Guadalcanal?

When January came we left on the *Hays*. The word got out that we were not going to Brisbane. Vandegrift and Halsey were down there and they blew their stack. We were being assigned to MacArthur's 6th Army and were going straight to Melbourne. And that was an experience I'll never forget. The ships pulled into the harbor. There were tugboats blowing their whistles. We got to the pier and there were thousands of people. They put us on a train for the 40-mile ride out to Franksten (sp?) which was the other line. Then we were bused to Mount Martha which was the Australian Army camp. At every stop along the way we heard "Welcome Yank!" And they were waving their flags. It took hours to get up there because of that.

They fed us mutton and we weren't used to eating lamb. The Australians said, "If it's good enough for us, Yanks, it's good enough for you. So we ate mutton and that's where I learned to drink tea.

Let me tell you, the Australians are great fighters but they would stop in the middle of a war to have tea at 10 and 4. There's a fight going on, shells are flying and they're cooking their tea.

At that time I got my promotion. I was called in. He said, "For the Battle of Matanikou, you and Smitty, and Kyle have been promoted to pharmacist's mate third, and for the Battle of Lunga,

you, Kyle, Williams, and Scotty have been promoted to Pharmacist's mate second. We didn't get ribbons, we didn't get medals, but we got promotions. And that's how I made third and second. Then is when they told us we were reorganizing the whole division. "We are reorganizing the whole division. You people are tired. We're getting replacements in. We're forming a new regiment, the 17th Marine Combat Engineers. You and you and you are going to the 17th." So we left our C company, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines and went to F Company, 2nd Battalion, 17th Marine Combat Engineers. A week later they told us we were being transferred to Waga Waga, New South Wales to the Royal Australian Engineering camp for training in combat engineering.

What kind of training did you receive?

We learned how to use gelignite, how to build and repair bridges, and the corpsman went along because there was a lot of hard labor. You had to cut trees down, you had to build pontoons. We were all marines being trained by the Australian Army. Just below the camp was the AWAS camp--the Australian Women's Army Service. AWAS meant Australian Army Volunteer Service but it really meant Always Willing After Sundown. We made a big joke about that. We had a good time with the Australians.

Then I got malaria and they rushed me to the Australian field hospital. It was a recurrence of a previous attack. To treat it they gave me a 1-ounce glass of quinine daily accompanied by a big sugar ball about that big. That quinine was so bitter but in 7 days you were cured, back on the line.

We stayed up there until August when we got the word we were shipping out. We went back to Mt. Martha. The 1st had gone on maneuvers. The 5th had gone to New Guinea. So the 17th and 7th Marines were put on ships and taken up to the Northern Territory of Australia. We were there a week then we went to Goodenough Island off the coast of New Guinea. We were there 3 months training and building a base.

The 1st of December '43 we got word that we were moving up to the big island of New Guinea. Now we began training with LSTs, no more cargo nets. On 22 December we left for Finschaven. We crossed the Bismarck Sea and Christmas day we lowered the ramp right on the beach at Cape Gloucester, New Britain. Aerial reconnaissance had showed lush green, a nice road. We figured we'd get our jeeps in there. When we landed we found a muddy road and about 10 yards after that was swamps and petrified forest. And then it started raining. It rained for almost 60 days without stopping. We were in the water, the sick bay was in the water. Our camp was in the

water. We went out on patrols. It took about a week to take the airfield and then when we got there we were up on high ground. But all around that area was mud, mud, mud.

Was there a lot of opposition when you went in to the beach?

No. Because the Japs were down in Rabaul and we landed 90 miles up at the point right near Cape Gloucester airfield. In the meantime, the Army landed 60 miles on the other side and they couldn't move. They got pinned down. So after our campaign, Chesty Puller had to take a battalion and go 60 miles to relieve the Army at Aroewe. So we cut the island in half and in 3 months the campaign was over.

So, where did we go from there? Everybody thought we were going back to Australia. The 1st Marines went back to Wellington, the lucky dogs. We got aboard ship and went to the Russells, a few miles up from Guadalcanal. We landed there and there was mud and the coconuts were rotten because the plantations hadn't been taken care of for almost 5 years and the rats were about that big running all over the place. We had to start building a base. I was there about 2 weeks before they told us we were going home. They put us on an LST and 5 days later we were in Brisbane. There, they gave us brand new fatigues and put us on the USS *Copahee* (CVE-12), one of those baby carrier flattops. They used them to ferry planes over to Australia. Seventeen days later we were at the Marine Corps base at San Diego. We landed and they gave us a new set of greens. We had no seabag, no clothes, no nothing. We got 30 days leave. When we were finished we were to report to pier 92, the receiving station on the Hudson River in New York City.

And so I came home in the summer of '44. I had been overseas since January of '42. Now I was back in the Navy.

After awhile they needed a corpsman to go on independent duty while we were waiting for a chief to come from Germany to take over the station. So they sent me to Holidaysburg, PA, just about 7 or 8 miles outside Altoona. They had built a radio school for radiomen. They had built it right in the center of town. There were no fences, no gate, no nothing. I was there for 3 months before I got orders for Shoemaker, CA. When I got there they told me they were starting a new outfit and that we would have to go through 2 weeks of training--the obstacle course and everything. This new outfit was supposed to be blood and bone bank. In December 1944 I reenlisted for six more years.

After the training they shipped us to Aiea Heights, HI. When we got there we were transferred to the military government in the Marshall Islands. When we got to Menjoro they sent us to Kwajalein. When we got there they told us we would be the military government

for the new hospital for island affairs. Our job would be to be in an LCI out of Roi Namur where the hospital would be built. We were supposed to make the rounds of the islands, pick up all the pregnant women and hold sick call throughout these islands.

Roi Namur was 18 inches above sea level. There wasn't a tree in the whole place. It was all coral. And you had to wear sunglasses because the sun shining off the coral was so bright. We walked around all day, heard the babies being born. I remember the first baby I saw being born. I had the duty and a 16-year-old girl. I was watching her and giving her medication and the doctor had gone to the movie. And she started thrashing around. So I went and got the doctor and told him I thought she was ready. He examined her and said no, she hadn't dilated yet and maybe it would be a few hours more. We started to turn around and "whaa", she threw her leg up in the air and out came the kid on the cot bouncing around. I had never seen a baby being born before.

During the day, when you had nothing to do you just sat or walked the beach searching for coral cat eyes to build necklaces. I felt just like Mr. Roberts. The war had passed us by and nothing was happening.

I went on night duty in August. I was half asleep when I heard all the yelling and screaming. "They dropped an atom bomb on Japan and the war is almost over!"

And the war ended and we were still sitting there and really depressed. "What am I going to do with myself?"

In October they told us they were closing down. You guys are going back. And they dumped us at Perry Island in the Eniwetok Atoll. It was nothing but tents, a staging area for sending people back to the states. We spent a month there before getting on a ship to Seattle, WA. It was so cold there and all I had was the clothes I had worn in the tropics.

This was January of '46. We got orders to the receiving station in Brooklyn. It was on Flushing Avenue. I took a bus and it took 5 days to get across to New York. After leave I transferred from Brooklyn, NY to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba aboard LSM-104 on independent duty on 27 January 1946. The remaining 24 years of service were on the following ships and duty stations USS *Kearsarge* (CV-33), USS *Pcer* (-849), USS *Marietta* (AN-82), USS *Tangier* (AM-110), USS *Avenger* (MSO-423), USS *Owl* (MHC-35), USS *Robin* (MSC-53), USS *Des Moines* (CA-134), USS *Franklin Roosevelt* (CVA-47), USS *Forrestal* (CVA-59), 1st Marine Air Wing, Vietnam.