

U.S. NAVY MEDICAL DEPARTMENT ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

REMINICENCES HM3 (ret.) BILLY PENN, USN

MARCH 1995

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

Testimony of former HM3 Billy Penn, captured on Vegas and held as a POW until released in "Little Switch" in April 1953. In March 1995, at the request of his friend and former Commandant of the

Marine Corps, Gen. Robert H. Barrow, Penn chronicled his experiences as a prisoner of war.

My tour of duty as a hospital corpsman attached to the Fleet Marine Force started off on a rather ominous date. The 50 of us from Pendleton Marine Base arrived in Korea on Friday the 13th in February of 1953. Even though my tenure in Korea, North and South, was short compared to some of the experiences of the Vietnam POWs, it seemed like a lifetime on occasion. I think maybe the Vietnam POWs were a little more prepared than we were then. As you know, the Chinese and the North Koreans had never heard of the Geneva Convention.

After landing in Seoul, they were transferring us at night to a rest area, which was approximately three miles behind our MLR. They gave each one of us an empty M1 to carry up there; however, I found one clip of ammunition and took it with me.

On the way up with about three of us in a truck, enemy mortar fire was really getting close, and the truck driver told us to get out and get away from the truck. I started running; I guess I ran a hundred yards or so, and after the mortar shells stopped, they started calling my name, and when the driver realized where I was, he told me not to move. It seems that I had run out in the middle of a minefield, and they had to get the engineers to come and get me. I was really starting off in good fashion.

Our main jobs for the first two to three weeks were patrols between the rest areas and our MLRs. There were a lot of artillery shells day and night. Finally, we moved up to our MLR to replace a company on the MLR when that company pulled a daylight raid on a hilltop called Oongot. They suffered a ninety percent casualty rate. The first casualty I took care of was Geronimo, an American Indian. It seemed like all American Indians were nicknamed either Cochise or Geronimo.

Our company had to go out that night after the daylight raid to pick up the dropped equipment the Marines had left. We went out again the next night, farther up the hill, and I found the Korean dolls I now have in a Chinese machine gun bunker. We stayed on the MLR because the other company had such a high casualty rate. We made two patrols at night, and I was the only corpsman so, therefore, I had the honor of going on both patrols.

On one patrol we were ambushed on the way back; I had one bad casualty I was trying to drag back when I ran into some Chinese, and the casualty and I lay in a ditch that night for a long time.

After the Chinese left, I heard Roscoe Woodard calling for me. He had come back for us. Thank God for Woody! Woody and I had long talks about home. He was from Lucedale, Mississippi. I was from McComb, Mississippi. We talked about home, families, and the Corps. I seems that Woody already had a couple of Purple

Hearts. He had been wounded twice before, was in the hospital for three months, and elected to stay in Korea rather than to go stateside.

Finally, I was attached to the 5th Marines, 3rd Battalion, H Company. One afternoon we got word that a corpsman was needed on Vegas. I volunteered to go. We had three outposts between our MLR and the Chinese MLR--Reno, Vegas, and Carson. They were so named because they felt it was such a gamble to be out there. I knew that Woody was already out there as a machine gunner.

On the way out, a lot of incoming mortar and big stuff were hitting close. How could they see us? We were on the backside of a tall hill. Incoming was getting heavier when we got to the trenches on Vegas. I went straight to the command bunker when the artillery really intensified. I was in the bunker when I could hear somebody calling for a corpsman. I was taking care of a Marine when two Chinese jumped on me in the trench. They were like ants, all over us. One stuck a bayonet through my left leg above the ankle and I couldn't move; he couldn't get the bayonet out, and I saw his finger on the trigger and his gun clicked. They had taught us that if you ever had a bayonet in somebody and you couldn't get it out, to fire the rifle, and the recoil would help pull it out.

I knew I was about to lose a foot. He started to cock his rifle with the bolt action when I got my .45 and shot him in the head. It moved him about three feet down the trench. I was an expert with a .45. At boot camp they kept trying to get me to stay on with the Marine Pistol Team. Thoughts of that have gone through my mind since that time. The Chinese are so small; they look just like ants with a 10-inch waist. They were all over us. They had run up on the hill with their own artillery still firing.

I was able to remove the bayonet and rifle still in my leg and started pulling the Marine into the command bunker. I was hit in the left knee superficially with shrapnel, took a shot by burp gun in the right shoulder, a through and through wound. I didn't really know about the shoulder until later when I saw how much blood I had lost.

A bayonet in the right lower back glanced off my flak jacket. It barely scratched my skin, but it scared the devil out of me. As I turned, my elbow caught him in the throat, he fell, and I jumped on him. The adrenaline was flowing so I'm not really sure about him, but I hit him so many times he did not move after I got up. This is very difficult to write.

They were all over us. I picked up an entrenchment tool and started swinging. I hit one in the neck and the way his body was shaking on the ground I thought I had decapitated him. I had a flashback of wringing a chicken's neck at home.

Dead Chinese all over. Our machine gunners and Marines had

really done a job on the first wave of Chinese. I had been told that the first wave of Chinese had the weapons and that most of the second wave did not have weapons. They were supposed to get their weapons from the fallen first wave. Everyone was in hand-to-hand combat. A Chinese and I were "involved." He had me on the ground with a bayonet over his head driving it toward me. I reached up and gouged out both his eyes as we rolled over. I remember seeing him running around screaming. I saw Woody standing outside his machine gun bunker swinging his M2 [automatic carbine] like a baseball bat. Trying to get another Marine back to the command bunker, I was jumped again by a Chinese and I beat him unconscious with a rock. I started out of the command bunker again (The door was only about four feet tall), and as I stooped to get out, I was hit by a rifle butt on my helmet. Reflexively, I raised my .45 and when it went off it was on the tip of his nose. I'll never forget the expression on his face as the .45 went off, or the feeling I had seeing what power it had at pointblank range.

I backed into the command bunker seeing what looked like a thousand Chinese over Vegas, even though the whole outpost probably wouldn't hold that many. Just as I squatted behind a 12 x 12 support, a satchel charge came in the door and all I remember is a big flash of white light. I had put all of my eggs in one basket and they blew up my basket.

I don't know how long we were buried. It was dusk when we were hit, and dark, I think, when the Chinese dug us out. I was blinded at the time and could only see blurs of light. I could not move. The 12 x 12 was across my chest, and one was across my helmet. It was probably an hour after I woke up that the Chinese started digging us out. I could feel arms and legs all around but no one was moving or crying out. When they did get me out of the bunker--what was left of it--they put a bandage around my eyes. I didn't know if it was a blindfold or a bandage. And they started pushing and shoving me.

There was still lots of artillery all around. We went approximately 300 yards and went into a tunnel. Then I realized they had probably tunneled up through our outwire.¹ The tunnel was about four feet tall and three feet wide. I was tripping all over bodies in the tunnel; I don't know if they were Chinese or Americans. The tunnel was probably a thousand yards long. When we came out we were in a large trench. That was a big trench!

They put me in a truck with four or five wounded Marines or GIs and we were driven for a long way to a small area with several huts. We were put in this place for two to three days. No food or water. Cold as it could be. One Marine, Sammy

¹Barbed wire placed out front of the Marine positions.

Armstrong, probably 18 years old, had a bad arm wound. I thought he was really bleeding one night; I couldn't see. It was dark; I still had my bandage on. When I checked him, I could smell gangrene. I tried to rouse the guards and they hit me. But they took Sammy off, and when I saw him during the exchange of prisoners of war, he was absent an arm but otherwise in good shape.

We walked for approximately one day and came across a wounded Army man from West Virginia. He could not walk; I could not see, so we made a good pair. I carried him on my back and he told me where to walk. We came to what was later found to be an old abandoned gold mine. I think they called it Camp No. 10, way up in the mountains. Another Geronimo gave me a bath and washed my clothes in a stream. About ten of us were in a small room.

My presence really confused the Chinese. I was in Marine clothes with Navy insignias on my shirt. I think they thought I was a forward observer for the artillery or the big ships sitting out there shelling them all the time. So, I was in isolation for a long time. My isolation "domain" was a hole in the ground five and a half feet long, three feet wide, and four feet deep with several 2 x 4 boards about one inch apart covering the opening. This turned out to be the camp's latrine. My uniform at that time was a T-shirt, fatigue pants, no shoes or socks. This was where they retrieved me for the firing squads.

Food was a very small handful of rice daily. Then, I had 15 to 16 straight days of fake firing squads. They would go through "ready, aim, fire," then click. At that time, I was hoping they would kill me. That takes a lot out of you. Once or twice they'd send a live round close to my head into the rock wall behind me to get my attention.

It was cold. My feet, toes, and fingers were black, but I never lost any toes, fingers, nose, or ears. Even today, when my feet get cold everything tingles and hurts. The song "Hand on my Shoulder" was so evident and alive then, long before it was written.

The camp was high in the mountains so no barbed wire could be used. They would hit our ankles with rifle butts, which caused so much swelling we could not walk very far. There was a young Marine with a bad wound in our camp, who had a tattoo of an American flag over his right deltoid muscle. There was a tear on his shirt over the tattoo. He would unveil that flag to everyone—a beautiful site. We even said the Pledge of Allegiance to our flag. The Chinese beat us every time they caught us. Finally, they took him with me to the firing squad routine, tied his hands behind him, put him on his knees, put a gun to the base of his skull, and killed him three feet from me. God rest his soul!

Name, rank, and serial number didn't seem to impress them. They had never heard of the Geneva Convention. For me, the

brainwashing really started then. After a few rifle butts to the head and body, I told them I was from Mississippi, had a mother, father, and two brothers. I was accused of germ warfare. I didn't know what on earth they were talking about. Then the bad cop/good cop routine started. After about four days of no sleep, being kicked and hit with rifles, and so forth, you learn to fake unconsciousness after the first rifle butt to your head or ribs, like Pavlov's dogs.

We had a Chinese interrogator, who graduated from the University of Illinois, or Chicago, and had a masters in sociology. Wow! We named him "Blood on Hands" because he kept reminding us we had Chinese blood on our hands. He informed us that we had killed 5,000 Chinese, the first indication that we had done well. He kept trying to get me to sign the germ warfare papers, inform him of our battle strength and so forth, plus tell him which division we were from. Once again, I think they thought I was a forward observer for artillery strikes.

One time after a firing squad, he told me that the International Red Cross had informed him that my mother, father, and brother were killed in a car wreck. I was wondering how the IRC [International Committee of the Red Cross] knew I was there.

I asked him about my sister. He said she was also killed. I had no sister. By that time, I was pretty mad. I informed him that he was lying. I had no sister. He hit me and called in some guards. They held me down and pulled my fingernail from the right ring finger with pliers. It had been injured earlier. It never grew back. It is a constant, daily reminder to me of my captivity. Nothing can be done to correct the nail bed.

On what I suppose was Easter, they gave all of us a dyed egg. Later on, we learned from one of the cooks, an Australian, that Stalin had died. I guess we thought it was like the old Wild West. If the Indian chief were killed, the Indians would stop fighting. We were so happy in a quiet way. We found out there were some Cuban POWs there also. We had two Australians in our hut; one was a cook.

By the grace of God, I had a tube of ophthalmic ointment in my top pocket which I kept putting in my right eye. Finally, the eyesight on the left returned. The wounds on my leg, knee, and shoulder were healing. The Australian cook kept me supplied with some boiling water, and I kept pouring it on all of my wounds to remove the exudate. Thank God for the 23rd Psalm in my Bible. My mother had given me one with a steel case cover inscribed with "May this keep you safe from harm."

One day they loaded us on a truck and we headed out. There were no bombing runs by allied planes or artillery. We noticed in the morning that the sun was on our left which meant we were headed south. Still no noise of war going on. Were we really headed south? Still no noise of war going on.

We arrived in Kaesong and were held in an old Buddhist temple full of artillery and machine gun holes. I met other POWs. We were given clean bandages, Chinese clothing, and tennis shoes, none of which fit. We were told we were part of "Operation Little Switch," an exchange of sick and wounded POWs. Peace talks at Panmunjom were going on at that time.

I was there for three or four days before my name was called. I guess they tried to soften us up a little bit. We saw a Korean opera one day, a Chinese opera the next day, a real culture shock. There was some exchange of experiences and stories among other POWs. Most were dumbfounded, depressed, and there was not much talking. Most had very hollow looking faces. This is where I ran across Sammy Armstrong again. Glad he made it, but sorry he lost his arm. He was so young. Of course, I was an "old 20-year-old" myself.

My name was finally called. I was loaded on the truck and headed for Panmunjom. The first Americans we saw in uniform, we all cheered and cried. We were taken to Freedom Village. The first nurse I saw was a lieutenant in the Army. I can't remember her name, but boy, was she beautiful. She took the bandage from my right eye and almost passed out. I realized then that it must be pretty bad. I ran into a corpsman, Bobby from Tennessee. I can't remember his [last] name, but we were in corps school together. He told me about the high casualty rate on Reno, Vegas, and Carson. Woody and most others were killed. They already had a memorial service for me.