U.S. NAVY MEDICAL DEPARTMENT ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL HISTORY WITH HMCM (ret.) HERBERT RENNER, USN

CONDUCTED BY
JAN K. HERMAN, HISTORIAN, BUMED

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Interview with former hospital corpsman Herbert G. Renner, Jr., Company E, 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines. Present at Nevada Cities battles.

Where are you from?

I was born in 1931 and raised in Washington, DC. I went to school in the District and graduated from Calvin Coolidge High School class of 1949. I joined the Navy immediately after high school in January of 1950. There was a Navy-Marine Corps recruiting station on Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, DC. I went to join the Marine Corps. The Marine Corps side was out to lunch so a Navy chief grabbed me and talked me into joining the Navy.

I went to boot camp in Great Lakes and then went to corps school there. They classified me as a Hospital Corps striker because I had been a soda jerk in a drug store. When the personnelman opened his manual to classify me found that a soda jerk or someone who worked in a drug store would make a good hospital corpsman. This was before the outbreak of the Korean War.

I went through corps school and then went to my first duty station in Beaufort, SC, at the Naval Hospital down near Parris Island. I spent 2 years there circulating among the wards in the different services and made third class. I then got my orders to the Fleet Marine Force, Camp Pendleton in November 1952. I went through the Del Mar Hospital Corps training classes--the amtrac training. We got on amtracs in Del Mar and made landings around Del Mar. I went to Pickel Meadows up in the Sierra Nevadas. That station still exists. I went through that. We went up on a Greyhound bus and they dumped us out on top of this hill. There was about 10 feet of snow up there. That night we lived in snow caves. The next morning we took off and went up one side of a mountain and slid down the other side. We did that for about a week and at night the DI's would harass us with raids. We would have to get up and repel the raids, cross streams on ropes. As we would cross the frozen streams, they would blow the ice up with TNT--small charges just to break the ice up.

Then we got on the bus and went back to Camp Pendleton and got outfitted to go to Korea out of Tent Camp 2. This was in December of '52. We went to Korea on a half draft. A half draft was a flying draft. There were 35 or 40 of us--cooks, bakers, corpsmen, and other Marines that they needed. The regular drafts went by ship--the large quantities of men. I think that most of the people on our plane were corpsmen. They had been losing quite a few of them over there.

Anyway, we got to Japan. Then we flew over to Kimpo airfield in Korea. We deplaned, got on some trucks, and they took us to the rail head in Inchon. We took a train to Munsane, which was a rail

head south of the main line of resistance. The train had its windows and most of the floor blown out from guerrilla raids or whatever. The train had been put together from pieces. We stopped at almost every bridge to make sure they were safe to cross. We went to a staging area--a tent city I can't remember the name of it. The next day we were assigned to our units, put on trucks, and taken to the front lines. I remember it was a clear, cold, brisk morning that we walked up to the front lines. The trucks took us part way and we had to walk the rest of the way to the gates in a hilltop behind the MLR. The gates were through the barbed wire which were usually covered by machine guns and a minefield all around. You walked through there and that's where the company area was.

Was there a town nearby that would locate it?

No. Nothing.

Where was it in relation to the 38th parallel?

This was early January of 1953 and the main line of resistance was called the Jamestown Line. It was a trench line about 155 miles long that went from one side of Korea to the other. All along that line were different organizations of the 8th Army or under the 8th Army command. You had the Marines, the ROK army, the ROK marines, and all the Army units strung out along that line. And this was at the time all the movement had ceased. There was a stagnation. We went on patrols at night. There were different types of patrols. There were combat patrols, where we would go over and pick a fight with the enemy. There were ambush patrols where we'd lay out and ambush their patrols.

There were recon patrols where we'd go out and look at their emplacements. These were called Buicks, Cadillacs, Chevrolets named after automobiles. I can't remember now which was which. If they told me I was going on a Buick, I knew I was going out on a combat patrol. Or if they told me I was going out on a Chevrolet, that meant we were going on a recon patrol. A Cadillac might have been an ambush patrol. I don't now remember the association between the name of the patrol and what it was. We'd go out at night.

There was one incident called Ungok when the Marines made a daylight raid against a strong point the Chinese had. I think the word was at that time that it was done to impress a bunch of VIPs. The casualty rate on that raid was anywhere from 75 to 90 percent depending on who you talk to. The photographers were there at the collecting points sticking their cameras in the faces of the wounded as they came in.

Were you there to witness this?

No. But I was on the line and heard about it and I've got the stories of the guys that were there. I remember the story. And in a letter home I had complained to my father and mother that they had made a daylight raid and it was murder. We were blaming everybody including Truman for the stupid move. It was the only criticism I ever had of what went on in Korea.

Were you a company corpsman?

Yes. I was assigned to Easy Company, 3rd Platoon, 5th Marines, 2nd Battalion. I was to provide first aid. Every patrol had a corpsman. The larger the patrol--if they got up to platoon size, they might take another corpsman or two depending on what type of patrol we were going on.

Let say you were going out on a Buick. How many people would be involved?

Sometimes a squad--a dozen men or so. The patrol leader, who was a sergeant, handled the small patrols. Usually a lieutenant took a platoon. The sergeant we had, named Williams, we called "Trigger Jack." He carried a Thompson submachine gun. I had a .45. Most of the other Marines had Browning Automatic Rifles, or M1s or carbines. We also had satchel charges. We'd go out with a full canteen so that water wouldn't slosh around. We didn't drink out of our canteens while out there. The cap might ding on the side so we kept our canteens full and drunk out of them after we got back. We had to get back before daylight.

We'd lay out there behind a rice paddy wall on an ambush patrol in the winter time with our thermal boots and our parkas and lay there all night waiting for the gooks to come by. Sometimes they did; most times they didn't. You'd get in a firefight with them, grenades would get thrown, and then one side or the other would bug out. We were always looking to get prisoners. One time we found a couple of them sitting in a shell hole about frozen to death. They weren't too unhappy about getting captured.

I remember one time I was going out. We left the MLR (main line of resistance) and going down a communications trench to the lower part of the hill where there were some bunkers and a little gate in the wire. A gate to me in the wire is a little 2-foot-wide path going through the barbed wire and mine field. There were some bunkers there covering the opening with some machine guns. We were going down this little trail. At first the trenches are head-high, about 6-feet high. Then the trenches are 4 feet high. And then they're 2 feet high. Then there's just a little gully and you are stepping out through the wire into no man's land. Just about the time I was going out through that gate I tripped on the damn com (communications)

wire. Every patrol took a spool of com wire with them, so there were scads of com wire. A Marine would carry a pack board on his back with a reel of com wire covered with canvas. The wire came out of a little hole in the center about 4 or 5 inches in diameter. The wire fed out as he walked. There was a phone hooked at his end. They never brought it back. You simply cut it and left it out there. This system was more reliable than the radios. I used to call the com wire the spaghetti of the battlefield. There was black spaghetti everywhere. You'd get it caught in your boots. I tripped and fell into some concertina or barbed wire. They also had tin cans with stones in them hanging from the wire. The Marines got me out of that barbed wire and stood me back up on my feet and we continued on the patrol. There wasn't a word said but I knew I had been the lesson-giver that night, not to slip on the com wire. There were mines in there too. I could have gotten somebody killed.

Do you remember any particular patrol that may have been worse than any of the others?

A platoon size patrol when we went out a little bit to the right flank of our company area, we went into this three sided bowl. The open side was to our MLR (main line of resistance). It was kind of a bowl in the side of a hill like a large, wide canyon. We went in there. I guess the gooks thought we had gone over the forward ridge and were coming down the other side because they started a mortar barrage. But we hadn't crossed over that ridge yet--the front of the bowl. The platoon leader called in a boxing fire which were mortars and machine guns over our heads to keep them from coming across the ridge. Then we bugged out the back end of it and aborted the patrol. Usually if they found out we were around, we would call in fire and then abort the patrol. If we were going on a raid, then we'd actually go into their trenches and blow up their bunkers and get into an intentional firefight with them. But if they had the upper hand we'd back out.

These were all Chinese. Were there any North Koreans out there too?

They were almost all Chinese.

Did you ever have any encounter with any of them?

I did on Vegas. I put a battle dressing on a guy who had a hole in his left thigh. He was dug out of a collapsed bunker. He was half crawling half walking. They were taking him to the rear. There were a lot of dead ones around. They called this time the Battle of the Cities, the Battle of the Nevada Cities. The Battles of Reno, Carson, and Vegas. Carson was on the left flank. Reno was in the

middle. Reno Block was slightly behind it. Vegas was on the east and was the tallest hill. Reno was taken by the Chinese and we never got it back. Carson held. They took complete control of Vegas and we counterattacked multiple times and finally drove them off. I think our casualties were over a thousand in a 5-day period. This was March 26th through March 30th. By the 31st it had all cooled down and we were relieved.

The group I was with was in reserve behind the MLR and we were sitting on sandbags watching a movie called the "Quiet Man" with John Wayne. They had given us about three cans of beer each. We had been on the line about 60 days at that time when we were pulled back in reserve. While we were sitting there watching the movie, they told us to go back to our tents and get all our gear together because we were going to move out. You could hear the stuff going on up at the front and we knew something was going on. We piled into trucks and went into what they called a blocking action. We were taken up toward the MLR and then disposed wherever they needed us. One time that day, the 26th and early on the 27th we were heading for Reno but we never got there. The other units had been thrown into the battle and been pretty badly mauled. By the 27th they decided that Reno couldn't be retaken. There were too many casualties so they called in air strikes and massed artillery and just tore the Reno fortifications apart. That's where Tom Wadill got buried.

He was buried by friendly fire?

No. It was Chinese fire that buried him.

What do you recall about that fight from your own perspective?

I was involved with Easy Company, Third Platoon. I don't know what day it was because we had been scurrying around behind the MLR and going into different blocking positions. But when we were thrown into the Vegas battle, which was probably late the 27th or early the 28th, I remember going by a bunker which was used as a medical aid station. I went in to get some more medical supplies. It was pure horror in that place. There were bodies everywhere, and the surgeons were covered with blood. I couldn't get anything in there so I went out. The dead were piled up beside the bunker and I worked on the slightly wounded. Then I had to go off with my people. We ran across a rice paddy wall. There was a 75 mm cannon firing at us as we ran across this rice paddy. I remember a Marine jumping in a shell hole and damn if a shell didn't come in right behind him and blew him up. We never knew who he was because there was nothing left of him. Then I tripped and fell just before I got to a gully on the side of a hill. There were three prongs of a bouncing betty sitting right there in front of my eyeballs. I got back up and ran into the gully. I hadn't gotten in there 60 feet and a barrage began. I don't know whether

it was 105s or 155s or Chinese, but we thought it might be our own artillery. I got up under the washed out roots of an old dead tree when that barrage started. One of them hit right above me and the dirt fell down on me. I pulled my helmet down so hard so as it almost covered my feet. And I lost my hearing for awhile. That barrage came right up that gully. If it was Chinese, they knew exactly where we were.

Then we had to wait for the Chiggie bearers to come and pick up the non walking wounded. These were the Korean Service Corps. They'd come up with litters and take the wounded out. They were tough little devils. These were guys who were too old or too young to be in the fighting units. Then we piled the dead up somewhere in that gully. I think we lost 14 men in that barrage.

I remember going up that hill. A mortar barrage came in. There was a guy with a radio on his back with one of those long whip antennas. He flopped down and I flopped down beside him waiting for the mortar barrage to lift. And when I got up to run he didn't move. He was dead. Something had gone through his helmet and destroyed the top of his head. I was always in a catch-up situation having to stop for the wounded. Then the Marines would be gone and I'd have to catch up with them. Sometimes we'd be held down by an artillery barrage and we'd all be together and then pretty soon I'd be all by myself helping somebody, and then I'd catch up with them. There weren't many of us left by the time we got to the top of that hill.

Anyway, we kept up the attack on Vegas and finally got to the top of that hill. All that was left was tangled up com wire and barbed wire. The trenches were maybe 2 feet deep and we slept in them that night.

That night there was an 83 percent full moon; I've looked it up. The fight started at 1900 on the 26th and by the 30th the moon was full. But because of the haze and mist on the battlefield I didn't see much moonlight. It was dark that night on Vegas. It was also chilly and I didn't have a jacket on. I remember being hungry. Weapons were everywhere--burp guns and the Chinese long rifles, bazookas; you name it. In fact, we destroyed a bunch of M1s because we couldn't carry them back off the hill. You'd drop the receivers out of them and bust them up so the gas tubes wouldn't work. I was carrying some .30 caliber magazines in a harness for a Browning Automatic Rifle for Leo Kelly, who was a BAR man. That morning here they--the Chinese--came out of a mist. Leo was cutting them down; they looked like rag dolls falling in the haze. You couldn't see the expressions on their faces; they were too far away. When he ran out of ammo I just sat there handing him magazines. Finally our artillery came in and broke up their attack. This all happened on the 29th. It was total chaos. I never got hit. The top of my helmet

got torn up by shell fragments. My flak jacket was a mess. My clothes were shredded. I'd lost my .45. When I came off that hill I carried a bazooka tube with me. During that 5-day battle, we had a thousand casualties--about 214 killed, about 900 wounded, and about 9 captured. It was a bad time.

At that time, only about 60 percent of the Chinese had weapons. But they were getting pretty well armed from the weapons they captured from the UN forces. A lot of the Chinese had long rifles with bayonets and short rifles with bayonets, burp guns, plenty of grenades, M1s and plenty of ammo when they overran our positions. The first wave that came in would be well armed. The second wave would have grenades and they'd pick up the arms of the ones that had fallen in front of them. The Chinese would come in under their own artillery barrages and sometimes get shredded by their own artillery. Then our artillery--81s, 60mm mortars, 105s, 155s. And our tanks would open up with their 90mm guns. That was a dandy of a cannon because the 90mm could hit a spot and almost immediately fire another one right behind it.

One day I was walking down the trench and I didn't see this 90mm hanging over the trench. I must have been a dozen feet away when that sucker went off. It knocked me down, my helmet flew off, and I thought I was dead. I thought incoming had killed me. Had I seen that tank I wouldn't have gotten within a hundred yards of it. That muzzle blast was enough to have ignited the bushes. That really destroyed my hearing. I have horrible hearing today. In fact, I'm on a hearing-assisted phone right now. I always had bad hearing after that incident.

Years later I was in a diving bell when I had a cold. I didn't know that my eustachian tube was blocked up. I got down about 25 feet in that diving bell and the top of my head felt like it was coming off. I was on the aircraft carrier *Forrestal* as a flight deck corpsman and that didn't help. I was also on fleet ballistic submarines for 5 years, and blowing up slabs of stone with the Seabees.

You must have taken care of a lot of casualties.

I remember one time during the day, we were going into a blocking action and there was a mess tent behind the MLR. They were serving some hot chow. We stopped in there to get some while we had the chance. We got our chow and went out in a field and sat down to eat it. Some tanks came up on a ridge just to the south of us. The gooks saw them and began shooting at them. Well, the short rounds fell on us. One of the Marines in our outfit caught a palm-size piece of shrapnel across his face, taking off the right side of his face off and most of his skull. When I got there the only thing I could

do was put a big abdominal battle dressing over it and give him a half-grain shot of morphine and just sat with him until he expired. The thing that bothers me. . . I know I read his dogtag but to this day I couldn't tell you that man's name.

I remember one time on patrol a Marine stepped on a box mine. Box mines were wood and were about the size of an old cheese box. It was filled with about a quarter pound of TNT. A stick went across and there was a little foot treadle on top. When you stepped on it you broke that stick, it hit the detonator. Usually, it wouldn't kill the victim just mangle you or blow your foot off. They were cheap but effective. Any time you can cause a casualty, it takes a couple of men to get him out. The ground was kind of frozen and it threw him down. When I ran up there he was getting back up on his feet. Box mines are made so you can hardly detect them with a mine detector, which we didn't have anyway. When we got back off patrol and went in the bunker and cut his trouser legs away, I took a tweezers and pulled the wood splinters out of his leg and put some benzalkonium chloride on the wounds. He was one lucky Marine to still have his leg.

What did you have in your medical kit?

I've got a complete list of that stuff. It started with a bag about 10 inches wide by 6 inches thick by 8 inches high. It had a large compartment in the rear and a fold-down compartment that gave you two compartments forward with double zippers. It was made of green canvas. In those we kept morphine syrettes. Sometimes we kept more morphine in our pockets. We had small battle dressings. We had scissors and a special pair of scissors like bandage scissors only they were real heavy. On the back of the hinge was a wire cutter that you could use to cut com wire and barbed wire. You used it if someone got tangled up in barbed wire. You could cut a dime in half with the blades of that scissors. They were useful for cutting boots or belts off or cutting through clothing. We had a tissue scissors, hemostats, mosquito hemostats, needle holders, and needles and thread. There were all types of roller bandages, dressings, eye dressings, benzalkonium chloride as an antiseptic. In a tube about 8 inches long and about 2 ½ inches in diameter was a blood volume expander called serum albumin with an administration set. It opened like a can of tennis balls. You could stick a needle in their vein. If they'd lost a lot of blood, the serum albumin would draw fluid back into their blood stream. It was good for a short time.

How many morphine syrettes would you have carried?

I might have a dozen or so--a couple of packs in the first aid kit and a couple packs in my pocket, and I might give Marines one

each. In those days we didn't have problems with drug abuse. The main thing a Marine would want was some aspirin or an APC, or some Band-Aids for his minor scratches. We gave them whatever they wanted. They knew how to use the morphine. They'd give them a half a syrette full. They were half-grain syrettes. You'd give them a quarter grain and save the other half of the syrette for later, if the guy wasn't too badly hurt.

Do you remember any other serious casualties you handled that you knew you saved?

There were a lot of them. I don't remember their names and I've even forgotten their faces now.

Do you remember hearing about the armistice?

At 10 o'clock in the morning we heard that by that night there wouldn't be any more shooting.

Did the Chinese get in their last licks before then?

The licks were going on, I think, until the word came up and things started to quiet down. I imagine there were people in isolated areas that hadn't gotten the word. I remember it being a quiet day when we got the word. And the relief that I didn't have to go back on one of those damned night patrols. To this day, I don't like to go out at night in an unlit area. It spooks me.

I've got over 30 letters I wrote home to my father that I've transcribed. I think there's over 6,000 words. I'm going to incorporate them into my book. It tells the story from the time I left Beaufort Naval Hospital all the way through the armistice. I kept a running flow of letters and he saved them. After he died I found them in an old cedar chest.

What happened after the armistice?

I got transferred to the 1st Engineer Battalion assigned to mine-clearing detail around Panmunjom. I remember standing on hills looking down at Panmunjom and going down and standing on the road as the Chinese prisoners came down and crossed Freedom Bridge. And I remember our guys coming back in the Chinese trucks. Wadill and Penn were there but I never saw them.

What was that experience like seeing the prisoner exchange?

The Chinese were coming through in their trucks and they were throwing their uniforms away right down to their skivvies. The Americans were coming back in Chinese gear but they weren't throwing things away. I have got a little scrap of paper about 4 by 4 inches and it's got a hand-colored drawing of a propaganda leaflet that one

of the Chinese prisoners threw at me. I picked it up and put it in my pocket. I've also got a bunch of propaganda leaflets that were fired back and forth in shells, some of theirs and some of ours.

So the Chinese prisoners were pretty defiant.

They were yelling and making a big commotion.

It's been 50 years since all this happened. Anything that stands out in your mind?

I know one thing. It was a pleasure being with Marines. And to this day, if I had to work with somebody, it would be with a man who had been in combat. Trifles wouldn't bother him. That's the best man you could ever hire.