U.S. NAVY MEDICAL DEPARTMENT ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL HISTORY WITH HMC (ret.) JERRY STRICKLAND, USN

CONDUCTED BY
JAN K. HERMAN, HISTORIAN, BUMED

9 NOVEMBER 2001
TELEPHONIC INTERVIEW

OFFICE OF MEDICAL HISTORY
BUREAU OF MEDICINE AND SURGERY
SKYLINE COMPLEX, FALLS CHURCH, VIRGINIA

Interview with HMC Jerry L. Strickland, World War II hospital corpsman crewman aboard USS *Hornet* (CV-8); witness to takeoff of Doolittle Raiders; Battle of Midway, sinking of *Hornet* at Battle of Santa Cruz Islands, 26 Oct. 1942.

Where are you from?

I was born in Middlesex, NC, which is about 35 miles from Rocky Mount on June 4, 1921. My dad was a sharecropper in North Carolina. We grew tobacco. In 1939 we made $11 dollars.

Eleven dollars?

Eleven dollars on the farm being sharecroppers. I told my dad I wasn't going to farm anymore. I was 18 years old. I couldn't get job here; there were no jobs to be had. I wanted to go to a business college here in Rocky Mount and he didn't have the money to send me. So I got on the highway and hitch hiked to Raleigh and signed up for the Navy. My dad refused to sign for me because I wasn't 21. It was November 1939.

I went through boot camp in Norfolk, VA. I went to Hospital Corps school in Portsmouth, VA, and finished in May of 1940. I then got transferred to the Naval Hospital in Newport, RI. I was there about 3 months. There were 10 of us corpsmen on the ward and I was the junior corpsman. Dr. Merritt, a reserve doctor who had been called in before the war, had relieved Dr. Powell, who left to go to Guantanamo, Cuba to form the Fleet Marine Force with the corpsmen and doctors. So he took his second class petty officer whose name was Woolridge with him to Guantanamo Bay. They called me in and told me that I was going to be in charge of the ward. I was still a hospital apprentice first class and they put me in charge over the other 9 hospital corpsmen of the ward.

Anyway, I ran the ward for about 8 months, and then one day the personnel office called me and said, "Jerry, you've got your orders." I said, "Where am I going?" "You're going to x-ray school in Washington, DC." So I went to x-ray school for 6 months at the old Naval Hospital at 23rd and D.

That's where I'm talking to you from right now.

You're kidding?

No I'm not.

How about that! Our barracks was right on Constitution Avenue right up from the Lincoln Memorial. I'm sure they've been torn down by now. They were temporary barracks, anyway. That's where the school was, right there in the old Naval Hospital.

So I finished x-ray school in July of 1941. By this time I had

made 3rd class petty officer and I went to the Naval Hospital in Philadelphia and was an x-ray technician there for about 4 months. Then they called me up and told me I was being transferred to USS *Hornet*, a new aircraft carrier which was going into commission in October of '41.

So I went to Norfolk and went aboard the USS *Hornet* as precommissioning outfit and we went in commission on October 20, 1941 at NOB Norfolk. I was one of about 25 or 30 corpsmen. I went aboard as a 3rd class petty officer. In February '42 I had met a girl in Philadelphia and she came down to Norfolk. We got married at the Catholic church in Norfolk. We went on a 5-day honeymoon and came back. The ship left Norfolk about the middle of February '42. We went through the Panama Canal and up to San Diego where we trained Marine fighters taking off and landing on aircraft carriers for a week.

What were you duties on the ship?

At first I was in charge of the ward. We had 10 corpsmen working on the ward. In the early morning we'd go to breakfast. We then cleaned the whole sick bay. Then the doctor would come by and hold sick call. I was the one with the book to take down the orders for sick call. Usually, we would have three or four patients at the most--catarrhal fever and different things. That's what I did to start with.

How big was the ward?

The ward had about 25 or 30 bunks--double decker bunks. They had thick mattresses and you could turn the beds up and hang them up on a chain on poles throughout the ward so we could mop underneath. When they were occupied, the beds would be down.

What did the sick bay look like?

What I just described was part of the sick bay. Off from that was the sick call room. I made second class on June 1, 1942 and went to work with Dr. Gerald A. McAteer who was a surgeon from George Washington University Medical School. He was a lieutenant then, about 8 or 9 years older than me. He and I ran the sick call room from then until when we were sunk, which was about 7 or 8 months. During the Battle of Midway on June 4, 1942 . . . I'm getting ahead of myself. Let me back up a little bit.

After the ship left San Diego, we went up to San Francisco to the Alameda Naval Air Station and loaded 16 B-25s on board. Jimmy Doolittle and his crew came aboard.

Did you wonder what that was all about?

We thought we were ferrying planes to Alaska. It never even dawned on us that we were going to go bomb Tokyo until we were 2 days out of San Francisco. CAPT Mark Mitscher was our skipper. He got on the loud speaker and told us that we were going to bomb Tokyo. Our morale really shot up.

How far out were you when he made the announcement?

About 2 days out. We left on April 1st, 1942 and headed northwest. That's why we thought we were ferrying these B-25s to Alaska.

Did you see Jimmy Doolittle at that point?

I helped inoculate him and his whole crew. I was helping Dr. McAteer with the sick call twice a day, in the morning and evening 7 days a week. One of Jimmy's crewmembers was a doctor and Dr. McAteer and I helped him inoculate his crew.

What kind of inoculations did you give them?

We gave them tetanus and yellow fever and anything else that was required for China; I forget what all it was it's been so long ago.

Did you have any discussions with Jimmy Doolittle?

No I didn't. I just said hi to him. Anyway, I used to go topside to the flight deck and go through the airplanes. They had 5-gallon cans of high octane gasoline stacked up to the ceilings and tied down in the center passageways of those B-25s tied. You know, those planes flew 2200 miles.

On the morning of April 18th, we were about 600 or 700 miles from Tokyo. We spotted two Japanese trawlers.

Were you up on deck then?

No. I was below because we were at general quarters. My battle station was in the main sick bay because I was the x-ray technician on board the *Hornet* and I had to be with my x-ray machine. I had a little portable x-ray machine mounted to the wall in the ward with clamps to keep it from rolling all over the place.

The last plane that took off on April 18th was the 16th plane. One of the crewmembers on the deck. His name was Airman Wall. He was a plane handler and his arm got chopped off by one of the propellers of the last plane back on the fantail. The wind was blowing like crazy and he got pushed or shoved into the propeller and it chopped his left arm off.

What did you do for him?

They had brought him down to the operating room of the sick bay and they called me in to take an x-ray of his shoulder, which I did after they got the bleeding stopped. Dr. McAteer was one of the surgeons. The flight surgeon was Dr. Ocko. Dr. Osterloh was a lieutenant commander and was my division officer.

I started to tell you about taking the exam for second class petty officer. I took it back after the Jimmy Doolittle raid in April of '42. Dr. Osterloh called me in and told me that I had made a good grade on my examination for petty officer second class but he said I was too young to be a petty officer second class. He told me he would give me another exam next quarter. Anyway, I finally made second class on June 1st, 1942.

I want to ask you something about the Doolittle raid. You were down in your battle station in the sick bay. Did you know what was going on topside?

No. We knew the planes were getting ready to take off because they sounded general quarters early that morning after we had spotted those trawlers. We knew something was up but they didn't advertise it or call out a blow by blow. They had two ships they had to go sink--those two trawlers. The cruiser *Nashville* went over and blew them out of the water with one salvo each. They thought that our position had been radioed by those trawlers back to Japan. So Jimmy Doolittle and our skipper, Marc Mitscher, decided that Doolittle had better take off and get on their way.

When did you finally learn about what happened up there?

Later they told us what was going on. We could hear the *Nashville*'s guns shooting but didn't know what they were shooting at.

When did you learn about what had actually happened with the Doolittle raid?

After the planes took off for Tokyo, they passed the word and told us what had transpired. I knew nothing until then.

So the only business you had in the sick bay was taking care of that airman.

Taking care of that airman. The chaplain, whose name was [Edward B.] Harp, also had his battle station down in the sick bay. He was a real nice guy and we used to talk quite a bit.

What happened after April?

We came back to Pearl Harbor, refueled, and headed for the Coral Sea. We were down there when the *Lexington* (CV-3) got sunk.

What do you remember about that battle?

I didn't remember too much because we were far removed from the battle. Being an aircraft carrier, we were not right in the midst . . . We didn't have submarines after us or anything else. We encountered them later when the *Wasp* (CV- 7) got sunk.

But this time a patrol spotted us down there in the Coral Sea. All our aircraft carriers were down there, the *Enterprise*, the *Yorktown*. We took off for Pearl Harbor and refueled and reprovisioned and headed for Midway. All of us were waiting for them out there--the *Enterprise*, the *Hornet*, and the *Yorktown*. Those were the only three carriers left in the whole Pacific. On my 21st birthday, June 4th, 1942, the *Yorktown* was sunk. We were a couple of hundred miles away when that happened.

I should mention that the *Hornet* was CV-8, and during the battle we had Torpedo Squadron 8 aboard. I knew those guys. I knew George Gay, the only survivor from the whole bunch.

After that we went back to Pearl Harbor, provisioned the ship, and headed for the South Pacific again. We were down at Guadalcanal in August of '42 helping the Marines, and hitting Bougainville, Tulagi and other islands down there in the Solomons. On October 26th, 1942 we were engaged in the Battle of Santa Cruz Island.

What do you remember about that day?

We were at general quarters early that morning before the planes took off to bomb the Japanese fleet. I think Halsey was on the *Enterprise*. He kept six fighters back from the *Enterprise* to protect both carrier groups. Not one of the fighters was from the *Hornet*. We sent every plane we had off to hit the Japs. They hit them about the same time they were hitting us. From what I gathered, there were 80 planes in the first wave, and they all hit us. I had heard that we got credit for shooting down 59 of the 80 planes; I don't know how true it is but that's what we heard.

After about 30 minutes, they told us to leave the sick bay and go topside to help take care of the wounded. So I went up on deck.

What did you see up there?

I saw Marines stacked up like cordwood up there and I started taking care of them as fast as I could smearing tannic acid jelly which was a mistake. They told us later that we had dirty hands and infection got into the wounds, and we shouldn't have been doing that.

These were burn victims.

Yes, burn cases. We should have been using sterile techniques but didn't have sterile technique at a time when we were in a battle

and the ship was listing 35 degrees to starboard.

Were you administering morphine to these patients?

Yes. We had morphine. In fact, I gave Dr. McAteer morphine. He was wounded in a compartment up forward. Several people got killed in his compartment. He had several ribs fractured, and both ankles were crushed from the deck coming up under him. Later, we transferred him and all the wounded to a destroyer that came alongside. That day we lost 147 killed and about 500 wounded.

While you were still down in the sick bay and before you went up on deck, could you hear what was going on topside?

Every time a bomb or torpedo would hit, it would bounce the ship up and down with a loud noise. That's all.

Did the ship start listing while you were still below?

Oh, yeah.

So you knew it was time to go up anyway.

Yes it was. Dr. Stetler, a commander, ordered three of us corpsmen down to the pharmacy. The first class pharmacist's mate with us was a pharmacist and he had the combination to the safe. In that big safe were little 2-once bottles of Golden Wedding rye whiskey. We filled three pillow cases full, strung them over our shoulders, and came back topside with them, and I helped distribute it to the wounded before we transferred them to that destroyer that came alongside.

And this was to anesthetize them a bit?

It was to calm them down a bit.

So you not only saw the burns but you must have also seen a lot of traumatic amputations.

I did. We must have lost half of our Marines up there. There must have been 60 or 70 Marines killed.

These were the Marine aviators?

No. These were Marines who were onboard.

Why did you have Marines onboard?

They manned most of the guns--the pom poms and the 1.1s, the 20 mm's. They manned the guns along the deck between the flight deck and the hanger deck, on both sides--fore and aft too. The Japanese came down and strafed us several times and that's when those Marines were killed and wounded. I was up there taking care of them.

So you had Marine gunners. Did you have any Navy gunners?

Navy gunners also. The Navy gunners were manning the big guns--the 5-inch guns. And also some of the other guns. Half the gunners were Marines.

How did you get the wounded aboard that destroyer that pulled alongside?

Stretchers. We had stretcher-bearers to take them down. When I called for a stretcher-bearer, the first thing I knew there'd be two there. I'd get them patched up and wounds taken care of, give them morphine. I had a red pencil. If I gave a patient morphine, I'd put an M on his forehead so he wouldn't get another dose.

Did you have to lower the stretchers with ropes?

No. The destroyer came right alongside and we just transferred them right over.

But you were listing pretty bad at that time.

We were listing pretty bad; we were dead in the water. The cruiser *Northampton* (CL-26) was towing us when we had another attack so we had to cut loose from the tow. We never got another tow. We were 45 miles north of Guadalcanal at Santa Cruz.

We got the wounded transferred and the whiskey all given out. Then we started having services for the dead. We'd get five of the dead prepared and then tie a 5-inch shell casing between the legs, tie him up in a sheet, then Chaplain Harp would hold services for them, and we'd slide them over the side on a board.

After we got 25 or 30 of them slid over the side, we had another high altitude attack. I think nine bombers came over. This happened as we were burying the men from the fantail. We had to cut loose and take cover.

In the middle of this mass funeral?

Yes, right in the middle of it. After that, we never buried any more. They sent word around to abandon ship. By this time it was getting late in the afternoon, about 5 o'clock.

How far were you listing by this time?

We were listing about 35 degrees. All five fire rooms were flooded. The water was covered with black, tarry oil. That's what they burned in the boilers. We had stopped burying the dead and abandoned ship. I went down a line; I had never learned how to swim. When I was in boot camp I got somebody to qualify for me.

How did you do that?

I was ready to go home on boot leave but they wouldn't let me go until I qualified. I wanted to go home and see my mom and dad. I was 18 years old and had never been away from home before. A buddy of mine volunteered. He said, "Let me put your clothes on. I'll go down and qualify for you."

Anyway, I climbed down the rope and into the water. I had a life jacket on. I took my shoes off and was in the water about 2 hours before a destroyer, the USS *Anderson* (DD-411) picked me up.

How far were you from the *Hornet* while you were in the water? Could you see the ship?

Oh, yes.

Didn't they have to sink the ship because it wouldn't sink?

Yes, they did, later that night. There were about 200 of us on the *Anderson*. We stayed back and threw about 300 rounds of 5-inch ammunition into her. The *Hornet* was still upside down the next day. We had to go in and finish it off. The watertight integrity was great. They did a good job building that ship at the Newport News Shipbuilding Company.

It must have been pretty sad to see your ship go down.

Yes, it was. When they pulled me aboard the *Anderson*, I was completely covered by that black tarry oil, my clothes, my skin. A seaman said to another seaman, "Grab him by the butt and pull him aboard." I wouldn't go below because I didn't want to get blown up on a destroyer and not have chance to live. So I'd go down on the one side, go through the chow line, and come back on the other side and eat topside. That's the only time I went down there, to eat several meals a day. We were on that ship about 5 days. We escorted a destroyer that had its bow blown off back to Noumea, New Caledonia.

After spending a week at a rest camp in the hills there, we boarded the *Lurline*, a troopship that had once been a luxury liner. That's where I ran into Dr. McAteer again. I came back to San Diego aboard that ship and helped take care of Dr. McAteer.

When we arrived in San Diego we didn't have any uniforms. They had issued us a pair of dungarees in Noumea but I didn't have any shoes. I went ashore in San Diego barefooted.

Barefooted?

Remember, I had gotten rid of my shoes when we abandoned ship and that was the last time I had shoes. I was 5 days on the *Anderson* and 3 weeks on the *Lurline* and didn't have shoes that whole time. We finally got a pair of shoes in San Diego, two pairs of underwear,

and another pair of dungarees. That was about it. I didn't get a full sea bag until I got back to the Naval Hospital, Memphis, TN.

When was that?

When I got back to the states, I went on 37 days survivors' leave. I had gotten married in Norfolk before we left. By this time it was just before Thanksgiving of '42. I got the train out of San Diego to Philadelphia. My wife had an apartment, one of those wherry housing projects near the Navy Yard. It took 5 days to get across country on one of those troop trains. They'd stop us to let troop trains carrying tanks and soldiers, and everything. That's why it took so long. I finally got home the afternoon of Thanksgiving Day.

The next morning I went down and got the newspaper and there on the front page was my brother's ship. He was a bosun's mate on the USS *Hugh L. Scott* (AP-43). It had been sunk at Casablanca with four other transports. German submarines got them as they were coming out after unloading their troops. His ship had been sunk on November 11th, 2 weeks after mine! He swam in about a mile to the beach and survived. His outfit, the 6th Beach Battalion, hit the beach on D-Day.

Where did you go after your leave was over?

I had to report into the 8th Naval District Headquarters in New Orleans. Six of us corpsmen reported in there. The admiral there asked me where I'd like to go. I wanted Philadelphia because my wife was already living there but he said he couldn't do that. But I could have any hospital within the 8th Naval District. I picked Memphis. On March 17th, the hospital there was commissioned.

That was in Millington.

Yes, Millington. I was a petty officer first class by this time and was in charge of the x-ray department. I ran it for a year before I went back to sea.

I got orders back to the West Coast and went to Terminal Island near Los Angeles and waited for a new small craft to go into commission. I put the USS *Chain* (ARS-20) in commission in March of '44 at Vallejo. It was a salvage tug. It was used for auxiliary repair and salvage. I had eight divers on board; a couple of them were master divers. It was independent duty for me as we had no doctor on board. I was it. It had 120 men on it and I was the doc. I spent a year and a half on that thing up and down the coast of Brazil. I couldn't get off; I couldn't make chief. I saved a couple of guy's lives out there and never lost a man. The captain called me one day and told me he was recommending me for warrant officer. I was 22 years old at the time. It went off to BUMED and then came back. They

told me I couldn’t be promoted because I was too young.

They kept telling you that you were too young.

Here I had a ship sunk under me, ran an x-ray department for a year, and yet I’m still too young. Anyway, we came back to the states, I got off that thing, and by that time the war was over. And I finally made chief.

At the end of the war I came home to Rocky Mount and couldn’t get a job. There were none to be had. So I went back to Norfolk, reenlisted, and stayed in for 20 years.

Were you involved in the Korean War at all?

No. I got orders in the states for a couple of years, then got orders to the Naval Station, Sangley Point, The Philippines. I spent 2 ½ years there.

When did you retire?

I retired in May 1959.

What did you do then?

I went to the Miami International Airport and became a customs inspector. I spent 20 years at that and retired.