

Part #2

MH: How old was your father when he passed away?

FO: Gee, I don't know the exact age that my father passed away. I know I was in the hospital on Guadalcanal after being released from the hospital ship which was a big, big experience for me. Eight days in an amputation ward, wounded in action, you know. While I was in there those eight days I can remember going up the ramp on that thing and I had a huge old limb, a tree taped to my side. When we came aboard that ship and we came up that ramp there was a sign, "Amputation Ward". And I thought, "Oh. Man." We were headed right for it. Went right straight to it and when we went by it. I started saying my prayers, my thank-yous and you know they had had a sighting of a submarine in the area where this hospital ship had anchored and was taking up people from Okinawa and taking them aboard and doing the operations and stuff and taking care of the men and then sending them back to the hospital. They just had been pulled in there to help because we were having so many casualties. I knew when I saw that amputation ward that I was in for a rough time here. And then I was setting there saying my prayers and went by the door and I started praying and thanking God that I didn't have to go in that place. But the only reason that they didn't take me in there was because there was a life boat that they had put in the way and they had to go around the lifeboat. We turned right around and went right through that door, "Amputation Ward." Eight days and eight nights were spent with a horrible odor and the sound of sawing bones day and night. I asked the doctor, "When are you going to do something for me, Doctor?" He said, "We take our patients according to their signs as to what shape they are in. When you get down to where you are the worst one in this ward then we'll do the amputation." I said, "Can I go take a shower?" and he said, "You can do anything that's possible for you to do while you're in this ward." I said, "Well, take this big old tree limb off my side. I want to go see if I can't take a shower." I hadn't had a shower in several days. They took this log tourniquet off my side and I could walk. I felt like I could walk a little bit. He said, "Do you have to have help?" And I said, "No. I'll go. Just tell me where it is." He said, "It's two doors toward the bow on the starboard side of the ship." So I knew my way around a ship. I'd been aboard a number of ships and I went out the door and walked down. I was already on the starboard side when I went out and I walked down two doors. Well, that's what I call "the head," and that's what it was always called, the restroom was "the head". The shower was in there in one big room. There wasn't anybody on deck and there wasn't anybody around, it wasn't busy. So I walked in to where it said, "Head," and there was a long string of stools along one side and

then a shower stall and I heard the door slam and kind of turn and looked and to see who'd come in. It was somebody I didn't know and I turned around and I was going to say, "Well, what the hell happened to you?" I looked and was looking in the mirror and I was looking at myself. I didn't have any hair. My hair was all burned off and singed and I was really a ragged looking thing and one eyelid had been cut open and it drooped down and I looked through the hole where the eyelid dropped down. They hadn't cleaned me up or done anything with me.

It was a scary situation to be in an amputation ward, of course. But I wrote letters to lots and lots of mothers and parents of those boys that were there because the doctor said, "You know you still got two hands, you ought to be writing the letters that these guys tell you they want to send to their mothers. And I wrote a number of them and it was a hard, hard thing. It's hard to tell, even write, so I spent a lot of hard time trying to get through that situation. I did my crying at night.

MH: Could you tell me about the time that preceded your hospital time, the time you were wounded? If that was the time when you received your purple heart?

FO: No, I'll tell you about my purple heart later on. I just don't know what you want me to tell you first, Mitchell. Tell me what you want.

MH: Just the story about the time you were wounded.

FO: Oh, how I got wounded when I was on the island, before I went to the hospital ship?

MH: I know you were wounded a number of times.

FO: I first got wounded on Bougainville. But the time that I was on the hospital ship was on Okinawa and we were into the second landing. I had to make two landings on Okinawa, two amphibious landings. One was in the north part of the island and it seemed that things went real well; at least I thought they went real well. Of course we lost a lot of men in our outfit. But we had secured the northern part of the island, at least I thought and we were headed for a rest or a break and back to Guadalcanal for more training. But before this happened they said we've got like a 50 mile hike to take. And I thought, "Why are we walking over they island?" So, they walked us down to the southern part of the island and they took us out to sea and put us aboard another ship and then we had to make another landing on the southern tip of the island where all the personnel and the natives and

the people that lived on the island were. And then all of the Navy nurses that were on the island were stationed down in that area and they had all just been driven down to the southern part of the island and they put us aboard this ship and we made another landing.

If you want to know about a nightmare, I can tell you about a nightmare and that would be the landing on the southern tip of Okinawa to make the second landing where all the personnel were bunched up. There wasn't a chance for a trained Marine to even operate in the manner that he was trained. It was something else. I particularly remember a boy that was aboard ship with me when we were on the way toward the island and going to make the landing. He was an explosive man, he carried all kinds of explosives in a pack on his back all the time and all he did was sit around and pinch off explosives of some kind and put it in a wad and make a little ball out of it and play with it. I thought, "Gosh, the man is far out." He set there and take that explosive and make a little ball the size of golf ball and toss it up in the air and catch it and play with it, you know. It was scary to me and I kind of shied away from him. When I was Sergeant of the Guard one day, why, he refused to even help clean up the ship and I said, "Well, what's the deal? How come you don't want to take your tour of guard duty aboard ship?" He said, "I don't have time to do it." He said, "I got a lot of work to do." And he set around bouncing that up in the air. I didn't realize that he was trying to figure out how much was in it by the weight of it and he'd toss it up in the air and catch it. And he sat there and pinched these plastic explosives and stuff like that.

When we landed there [the 2nd landing on the South side of Okinawa] and they said, "Boy, let's try naval gun firing." I said, "Man, you can't try naval gun fire with all these people around. It's not going to work. Were going to kill more Marines than we do the enemy." They were just so bunched up and it was terrible. I said, "What about getting some explosives men in here and using those explosives." Well, guess who showed up? The man I had the argument with and had put on the report for not doing his guard duty. And I thought, "Of all the places that a person should be and have something like this happen." He came up and said, "Hi, how are you?" I was surprised when he spoke to me in a manner as friendly as he was and I said, "Hi." I could tell that he'd been around on a number of islands before this, you know. I asked him, I said, "Could you help us out?" He said, "We'll see. What have you got?" And I told him they wanted to try to get all these people out of these holes they've got dug in the hillside here and see if we can do anything about it and I can't use naval gun fire. Even being a forward observer, you could just say, "No, we can't do you any good." So I asked for someone with explosives to come up and I'm glad it's you." He said, "We'll see what we can do," and walked over and opened that bag and started tossing in the air and catching

round balls until he got the size he wanted and then he started throwing them in these holes, running one to the other. I looked at the bodies flying through the air, arms and legs and human elements of all type, flying through the air. And when they landed beside me I saw that was a navy nurse, dressed in the uniform, a woman, There were all women in this area in fox holes and caves and just concentrated. And every time he'd throw an explosive in, why there would be a couple of them fly through the air. And I stopped him and I said "Hey, wait a minute. This is not going to work out." I said, "Let's go." He said, "What's the matter? I thought I was doing a pretty good job." I said, "Yea, but you haven't looked at what you're doing." When he turned and saw they were women he said, "Let's go." And we walked out and left that situation and I got out of it.

MH: Can you tell me about your responsibilities as a forward observer?

FO: I can tell you when you say responsibility; you had a responsibility, Mitchell. You were in charge of something where you really wondered if you were doing the right thing or not many, many times. If you were off a little bit, it would not only blow you up, but blow anybody up within 200 yards. The guns were so big that if we got within 200 yards it was considered a direct hit. That's what they called it, a direct hit, within 200 yards, those big guns on those LSTs, destroyers and then when you get on to the battleship and you fire that big gun. Sometimes on those little islands over there, when they [the shells] go over your head, you think they're going to jerk your helmet off. You wonder, "Boy, did I do it now? Did I get it too low?" And you were responsible. If the officer gives you a target, you worked out the co-ordinates and figure out where that was. And you would talk to the people aboard ship way out in the ocean and when that thing went off, you could hear the blast coming, but it was already gone. When you hear it, it's already past you and exploded. So, there isn't much of a chance to rectify or change and then you sit and look with your binoculars and you say, "Up 200 yards," or, "Right 200 yards," or whatever direction you want to move the firing of the big guns from the ship. That was your job as forward observer and you were responsible for many a, many a person. But if it worked out for you it was kind of a joy and an experience that you really, really were thankful that you were a forward observer and could do this kind of thing. It is a responsibility that I would hesitate today to even take hold of. I don't think I could handle it.

MH: Could you tell me about the terrain? What the islands were like? Weather-wise?

FO: Well, temperature-wise it was a warm climate because when I joined the Marine Corps I went to San Diego to take my basic training. I could have gone to Paris Island which is out in North Carolina, but I went to California because I was thinking I'd be outside all the time. Better to be warm than cold. When you go to Paris Island you spend some cold, cold, times. I guess when you think about it, it's a funny thing. The first night that I spent after I took my train ride to San Diego and went to boot camp, the first night there was what I thought was really, really cold. It was fifty degrees and I was freezing to death when that air blew off that ocean and we were all cold. They put us in a little hut like thing, you know and they had kerosene heaters in those huts. And we were in there and somebody said, "Does anybody know how to light these kerosene burners." Of course in the Marine Corps there's always somebody knows how to do everything there is to be done. And some smart guy said, "Hell, I know all about kerosene burners. What do you got?" He said, "Well, we got three kerosene heaters in this hut. We can heat things up in here a little bit if we knew how to light the darn things." He said, "Well, I know all about lighting these things. Stand back." So he lit one and then he went over and lit another and turned them down to where he thought they should be, and man we were tired and we went to sleep. I can remember waking up that next morning and of course one of the guys had been drinking whiskey you know on the trip out and he had a hang-over and he said, "Man. what makes it taste like I've been sleeping under a turkey roost? I had never had such a bad taste in my mouth." I looked at that man and there were just two circles where his eyes were and the rest of him was coal black. He had turned those heaters up so high that the room was just filled with soot and all over our equipment and our stuff. That was the first black marines to ever join the Marine Corps. There were no black men in the Marine Corps at that time, and we were the first just because a man didn't know how to light a kerosene burner. It was funny at the time, but what a mess it was to clean up.

MH: I understand that you were stationed on Guadalcanal numerous times.

FO: Yeah, well after I was taken out of the Third Marine Division, [when] they formed the Sixth Marine Division and they said they were going to have a Joint Assault Signal Unit and would need so many telephone men, so many radio men and this and that. I got my orders to report to the Sixth JASU. And I didn't know anything about this, you know. But I did know that I had been to Nounea, [the capitol city of] New Caledonia. We had stretched telephone line from one end of the other of New Caledonia and that was our first thing that we did when we were over in the Pacific. And then back and forth from Guadalcanal to all those places.

MH: What was Guadalcanal like? What kind of experiences did you have there?

FO: Guadalcanal wasn't all flat, there were some hillsides. Our campsite [for the Joint Assault Signal Unit] was, I believe, kind of an unusual thing. [We always returned to the same camp site every time we were on Guadalcanal]. The captain [Captain Griffin] took us in on Guadalcanal and the first thing he did was bring a man that was a member of a college from Texas. He brought the sergeant up and he said, "Do you know how to figure board foot?" I said, "What are you talking about?" He said, "If you were going to buy lumber how would you figure the board feet in a pile of lumber? How would you figure board feet if I gave you a list of certain kind of lumber, the length and the width and everything? Could you tell me how many board feet?" I said, "Why sure. An inch wide and 12 inches square is a board foot." This college graduate that he had with him was a sergeant and he said, "Well, I didn't know that. I didn't know how to figure board feet. They took me down there and we started to get a truck load of lumber. And they said we have to tell them how many board feet we want. I wasn't going to tell them, 'Hell, I don't know how to figure board feet.' Cause I knew we'd lose our place in line and we wouldn't get any lumber at all," he says. "So he brought me back and we were going to find somebody that knows how to figure it out." I said, "We'll yeah, let me show you how to figure board feet." They went back down there and we started hauling lumber to this campsite that we had there. And the captain had us build racks for all of our tents and that was our permanent home for about seven trips of training back to Guadalcanal. In and out of the islands and the standbys and when you were put in reserve, you would leave that campsite and go aboard ship and go to the islands. And if you were in reserve you would sail around that island until they secured it or figured it was secured or you went in and made another landing on that island until it was secure. I was on standby for a number of islands and then we'd go back and train again and I made my four landings.

First time I landed on an island [Bougainville was when I] stepped in that bamboo pit. Then I was in a hospital for 38 days and I had a lot of difficulty. I made that mistake myself. We had taken wounded men down to the beach and when we came back from the beach, you know, I saw this little trail that was going back toward my campsite and I wanted to work my way back and get with my unit again. As I worked my way back I saw this side trail and I thought, "Boy, that trail looks better than this one and it's heading right toward our campsite. I'll just take it." I got about 20 feet down the trail and it made a turn, you know, but it looked real good, like it had been used quite a bit. While I was walking around I stepped into a trench and fell through what they had put over the top, which was a decoy

type of thing. They had spread brush and stuff over the trail a little bit and underneath was this split bamboo pit and it was poisoned bamboo. I put a scratch on my left leg that wasn't bad. I took my t-shirt off and wrapped around it, you know and went on. It kept kind of hurting and I developed blood poison in that leg. I got a big knot under each leg and a big knot under my arm and when the captain came and said, "We're headed back to Guadalcanal for more training." They'd figured this island was secure as far as naval gun fire was concerned. We weren't going to knock down any more trees and they had some huge trees on Bougainville, I mean they were huge "man-sized" trees. It was kind of an experience to see trees that large where the roots of the trees go way up in the air and then join the trunk of the tree and there's a wilderness underneath that tree. Every night it rains and there's water to sit in and you sit down and sleep in the water, that's the way we slept on **Guadalcanal. (meant to say Bougainville)**.

Captain said we're going to leave the Bougainville **[and return to camp at Guadalcanal]** and I said, "Well, I'm going to sick bay." He said, "Well, what's the matter with you?" I said, "I got this big knot under my right arm and a knot under my left arm and I've got a knot on each side of my crotch." He said, "Well, let's go to sick bay and find out about it." We went down there and the doctor looked at me and he said, "Oh, my!" And then he hollered, "Get this man on an airplane and send him to Guadalcanal right now." I had blood poisoning. So I went to the old army hospital on Guadalcanal and checked in there and for 28 days and 28 nights I spent in the hospital while they worked on that spot on my leg. The Captain came in the next morning and said. "I don't like the looks of your leg, Fred; I'm going to call a doctor that I know in Los Angeles." The next morning that doctor arrived and he stayed for two days and two nights and he scrapped that bone and then he started treatment. First he took a great big needle and gave me a shot of penicillin. Everyday for all the time I was in that hospital, I took that same shot of penicillin. He scrapped the bone and then they started this treatment where they put my leg in traction and put a big old weight on it. And it would pull you out of bed. Every time you turned loose of the top of the bed well, down to the foot of the bed you'd go. It was too much weight but that's what they wanted on it. They scrapped the bone everyday. They gave me a shot of penicillin everyday and they poured hot water and then cold water and then hot water and then cold water continuously 24 hours a day for all those 28 days and they saved me from having to have that leg amputated. It's kind of a scary thing to think about it even now for me.

MH: How did you get your Purple Heart?

FO: I got my Purple Heart after I got home and I'll tell you how I got it. They did call me out for a brigade formation one time and read a thing to me and gave me a Bronze Star. Well, that was a surprise to me. I got the Bronze Star I think because I had helped bury and helped take the wagon around and take our men and bury them. The flies were so bad on all those islands. It seemed to me that I always thought that when I was helping those guys, "You know I might be helping some mother get her son home." And the flies were so bad on our men that were lying around that I spent every chance I got just going with those groups. You know, it's an odd thing, you as a grandson, I know don't understand this, but those people that help bury those men. When they come to them - they get on the wagon; ride the wagon and when they come to a dead person they jump off, you know and start talking to him. Wonder why in the world all you people that are working everyday, day after day after day like we are and burying people just a short distance under the surface of the earth. and then taking their rifle and take the bolt out of the rifle and either throw in the ocean or dig a hole somewhere where it can never be found and that stops the weapon from being used by the Japanese again, but why do you take so much time? And I thought, "Well, if I could do this, I could help some mother someday take one of these boys home for a burial, a church burial. Have a nice sermon and bury their son." I was surprised when they read that Bronze Star citation in front of the - you know. I thought, "Gee, what'd I do now," when they said, "Sergeant Oscar F. Oerly, front and center." I got out of rank and marched up there and saluted him and said, "Sergeant Oerly reporting sir, as requested." And they started reading this and I thought I didn't know anything about - I wonder what this is all about. They read and read and read and then I realized it was because I'd been helping the guys with the death wagon bury our guys and take care of them.

MH: Now, was this a temporary burial on the islands? They were all eventually brought back to the United States?

FO: Yeah. Well, not all. They have a lot of cemeteries around all over. That's another thing you have to learn to go through when you're in the Marine Corps is when you dedicate a cemetery. That's a hard, hard thing to live through each day. Every year you think about that on Veterans' Day, how many cemeteries you stood at attention and they played taps for and then to be row upon row [of graves]. When I visited the National Cemetery in Washington DC and went on that Honor Flight, you know, we had a boy that was a movie star, Bob Webber. After he went home, he became a famous movie star. He and Lee Marvin were supposed to have been buried in the same location kind of in the National Cemetery there. I thought,

"Well, I'll see if I can find Bob Webber's grave site. I'd like to just go visit his gravesite." I found Lee Marvin's gravesite. I saw Audie Murphy's burial place, the man was so famous, such a hero in the Army. The small guy that - he's buried there near Lee Marvin but I never did find Bob Webber. My Lt. Pierson use to write and tell me all about Bob Webber. He was a great movie star. He was in the *Dirty Dozen* with Lee Marvin. He played the part of the Col. from the Marine Corps in that movie. And I saw him with Goldie Hawn. He must have had a crush on Goldie Hawn because I saw him in a number of television programs with Goldie Hawn.