

Part #3

MH: So how did you end up getting your Purple Heart?

FO: Well, I wound up getting my purple heart after I got home. Jan wrote to Truman, President Truman. She said, "Where are all the Purple Hearts my husband has coming to him?" And she wrote a number of letters to President Truman before I ever got a Purple Heart. Well, after they reported me lost in action for 22 days and my mother went through that time of no contact for 22 days and then she got a letter from me that I wrote after I'd written the letters for the guys that were in the amputation ward on the hospital ship, I wrote home when I could. And she got that after 22 days and I tell you when I set there and held her hand and knew she was passing away and she said to me, "You know the worst 22 days of my life were the 22 days that you were lost in action. I just want to remember the good things in life and that's really one of them. That it didn't end the way I thought it was going to end."

MH: Can you tell me about your friend, Sy[who was from Goosecreek, TN]?

FO: Sy Miller? Yeah. I don't know. It hadn't been but a few days when somebody told me, "You pick your closest friend according to his character." And I remember in boot camp my two drill instructors were Benson and Krohn. Benson was a corporal and Krohn was a corporal. One was a full time Marine and the other had just joined a short time and was helping and they were in charge. Boot camp was an experience that really would take you - well you could talk about boot camp for a number of days. There were things that went on in boot camp that are funny and things that were pitiful. We had all kinds of stuff. They give you a bucket. Take all your clothes off and give you a bucket. I couldn't figure that out, you know. Give you a bucket and put a toothbrush in your bucket. (He laughs.) You take all your shots with that bucket hanging on your arm and they don't have to worry about a shirt being in the way. They put a shot in one arm and when you turned to see what they were doing there'd be a doctor standing on the other side and he'd give you a couple of shots. They'd give you all your shots at one time.

When they do give you clothes the first thing you do is march you to the dental office and they fill your teeth without any pain-killer. That makes you a tough Marine, I guess. I had to have three teeth filled when I joined the Marine Corps. They did three fillings for me. It was the only time I've ever had dental work down without any painkiller. (They laugh.) I didn't holler, but I wished I could have hollered. They'd take you to the barbershop and you look at some

Commented [djo1]: Note there are stories about Sy in the handwritten notes that John typed.

people with long hair, beautiful curly hair and stuff like that and when you look at it on the floor it don't look nearly as good as it did on the person that had it. (They laugh again.) It was something. (Fred, can you tell us a story about Cy Miller?)

Commented [djo2]: Note: there are stories about Sy in the handwritten notes that John typed.

MH: Can you tell me about Charles B. Pierson and the day that he got shot?

FO: I'll tell you about Charlie Pierson. There are a lot of things I can tell you about Charlie Pierson. Boy, I'm hoping we get to make the trip and you get to go with us. I think you would be impressed with Charlie as much as I was with Charlie. He's one of the greatest leaders I believe that I have ever had. He joined the Assault Signal Unit and became my Lieutenant. He was my leader. He taught me a lot of things. He taught me how to be what I thought was a fairly good observer in the Marine Corps and taught me things that I didn't know about naval gun fire and how to fire a missile. One thing we could do is light up the sky. We could call for flares from battleships and ships out at sea and have flares when we were under banzai attacks and we could light up the sky and that was really, really a wonderful thing. That's probably the most effective thing we were able to do as spotters for naval gun fire was to call for flares. Instead of fighting in the dark, we fought with plenty of light. It makes a big, big difference. It's not nearly as scary when you have some person coming at you screaming, "BANZAI!" It drove people wild, I mean to have people charging at you and your trying to get the bayonet on your weapon and here they are before you're even ready for them.

MH: How frequently did that happen?

FO: It depended on where you are and what the situation is on an island. It's an action of desperation. It is, you know, like on Saipan, when they talked the women into jumping off the cliff and taking all the children with them and there was just a big stack of humanity at the bottom of the cliff. That's not a sight that you loved to see either, no matter how many enemy you have, you don't care to see those things. It isn't good.

MH: Could you tell me about Charlie?

FO: To continue the story about Charlie, I'm hoping that you get to make the trip and like I say, once you get to meet Charlie, why I think you'll understand Charlie, don't need a lot of telling about. He came to visit me after we were home and his wife's grandmother - he lost his wife only a short time ago. Charlie and his wife used to come to visit her grandmother in Sedalia, Missouri (pronounces the state - Missouri-a) and they would stop and visit me for an hour or so and take time to

come out on a job where I was or come by my house. Jan and I and the family went down to visit them a short time after we were out of the Marine Corps, and we visited him in the house that we're going to go visit him now in a few days. It's going to be quite a treat for me to take Diane back and let her see where she spent her third birthday. On the day we went to visit them she became three years old. And they had a little cake for her. Charlie and his wife had, I think, four girls, and their names all started with an "L", Laura, Libby, Lucy and like that. They had four girls. One time Charlie visited me and he owned a dairy that his father had started years and years before and it was right in the middle of a little town, Plano, Texas. They had to haul their hay in because they passed a law that couldn't any trucks go into the area where their dairy was. Well, they had to get the hay into the dairy and when they would bring in big truckloads of hay they would take their tractor and wagon and meet those trucks and haul the hay the distance that they wouldn't let the trucks in to. All of his cattle; I can remember his cows, when we were down there come milking time that each cow was named. Charlie would be milking and the cows would all come in pecking order. Do you know what pecking order is? Chickens have it. Cattle have it. But each day when the cattle would come in they would be in line. They were all named, you know, and he would name them for me and he knew how they were coming up the trail toward the milking house. He'd get them in there and hook the milker on them. They were like pets, instead of a business. It was something to see. We had a good time. And the jackrabbits in that yard of his, the first time we drove in - we got there, I think, about nine o'clock or even after nine, I don't know what time it was, but I never saw so many jackrabbits in a pasture in my life as there was in his front yard. They were just all around the house and everywhere and when we turned the headlights hit that house and started shining on his house, all these jackrabbits kept scooting on out to the field. They were shagging out. They were jumping and going on. It was something.

MH: Will you tell me about the time that he was shot? The Tomato Soup story?

FO: Tomato puree? Yeah, I can tell you about pork and beans and the puree and all, but you want to know about Charlie and the can of tomato puree. We carried some wounded guys out - we really ran into an ambush while we were out on patrol.

MH: Where was this?

FO: When we were on Okinawa and we were on patrol and we lost thirteen men. We had a dog man with us who had a trained dog. I don't know. We probably had 25 men on this patrol. As we went down the trail, I was so close to this man that

had the dog and I said, "Boy, your dog is acting like there's Japanese around." And he said, "Ah, they've been living here for days and days. Look at the fires they've had and the fish heads they've eaten and how they've been cooking here in this area. It still smells like they've been cooking around here," he said, "And I think that's what's disturbing my dog." I said, "Man I don't know, I have had a lot of dogs in my life and that dog is acting like he's worried and that worries me." About that time we ran into this ambush. They just started shooting all of a sudden and I was on the trail and I think everybody else was on the trail too. Of course everybody jumped into the woods and man we could hardly carry the dead personnel and the wounded personnel out that day. It wasn't something that you like to remember but it's still something that you need to talk about I guess and I'll tell you about it if you want to know anything about it. Just ask me what you want to know and I'll sure try to answer your question.

MH: The puree, that part of the story?

FO: As we go to the beach to carry out the wounded men, it was a rough trip and I can remember we even had to tie ropes on to the stretcher to keep from tripping and falling down as we went down the hills and terrain. We were trying to cut through and get to sickbay as quickly as we could because we had a really badly wounded person we were carrying. We came down there and after we got there we were just like resting, standing, we were tired. Charlie said, "I'm going to have to go to sickbay." I said, "What are you going to sickbay for?" He said, "I really got hit. I got shot back down the trail and it hit me like a ton bricks. It really was rough." I said, "Well, where are you hit?" He said, "In the back somewhere. I don't know just where. But it's in my back." And I had noticed he kept putting his hand down in his belt and on his back side and then he'd take it and wipe the blood off his hand on his pants. He didn't want to be obvious and he didn't want to complain, but he said, "I'm going to have to report to sickbay." I said, "Charlie, please don't check into sickbay. They'll pull you away from here. Let's wait and go back to our unit and then check you in. You'd get to stay in the unit that way." He said, "No. I better report to sickbay." I said, "Well let me look at it and let's see what it is. I carry a morphine shot. I can give you morphine shot." I was kind of kidding like. He said, "It's not a joke. It hit me pretty hard." I said, "Let me see it," and we got to looking and I couldn't find it, where the wound was and I got to looking around and his pack was all bloody and I started looking at the pack on the side there and they had shot through a can of tomato puree. (He laughs hard.) This was running down his back and he would slip his hand back and kind of pull his belt out, you know and rub around and I'd see him take it and wipe it on his pants leg. (He laughs again.) That can of tomato puree really had him where he thought he was

wounded very badly. He was going to get a Purple Heart, all right, but they didn't give Purple Hearts for tomato puree. He's the one that needed Jan to write to President Truman and get him a Purple Heart. Like one guy said, [Jim Crowe, USMC, Guadalcanal 1/13/1943] "You'll never get a Purple Heart lying in a foxhole, follow me." You'd get a Purple Heart if you followed those guys that hollered that.

MH: Will you tell me about the new boots and the new socks incident? And when that happened in proximity to the story you just told.

FO: That was another time when we were down on the beach when they were unloading a lot of stuff. You know, when we went on Okinawa about a day before we left aboard ship, they came by and sprayed all of our clothing and then said, "We have discovered that there's a worm in the streams on Okinawa that will get on you like a leech and penetrate the skin and then go inside your bloodstream and it's a very serious situation. So we're going to spray your clothes." So they sprayed all our clothing. If you got to where you were going to take your clothing off, why you could have just set them in the corner because it was nothing but stiff. You could imagine what spray would do to a pair of pants. And when you have a pair of pants for 22 days and you don't get to change or take a bath. All you get to do is find a stream you maybe could take your shoes off and wash your feet and try and splash water on your face and get as clean as you could. But that's all the bathing that you got to do in those 22 days.

We came to this big-old stack of shoes there on the beach and we had had our socks and shoes on for 22 days without having them off and we sat down. Charlie said, "Look! Find you a size that fits and put them on." Socks and shoes, new socks. It wasn't just clean socks, they were new socks. And it wasn't just clean shoes, they were new shoes. Pick your size, sit down and put them on. I got mine on and boy; they looked good and felt good. I stood up and there was an MP that walked around the corner and he said, "Now just sit down and take them off and place them gently back in the box and put them back where they were." I heard somebody say, "You ain't got enough bullets in that gun to make me do that." (He laughs.) I said, "Let's go," and Charlie was on a Mexican stand-off with this guard and I backed out of there, but Charlie just walked out. All the time I was walking away with my back. I was scared. I didn't like that situation. But anyway I got a new pair of shoes and socks.

When we got home [to camp] and it was about 50 degrees and the mortar was falling around us and they kept shooting, firing the mortars at us, the knee-mortars [officially a Japanese grenade discharger]. They were a scary thing to me because anybody could use them, any Japanese could carry one, use it and they

were good with them. They were little knee-mortars you could set down on the ground and drop a charge in it and it would go up in the air. I guess they had used them for years and years and of course we were on Okinawa which was the training island for all the artillery for the Japanese army. So you can imagine how many tunnels were in this island and what all was going on.

MH: Tell me about the time you risked your life for a floating dollar bill.

FO: Yeah, I can tell you about a dollar bill. It's probably the day that kept me from being anything but a poor man all the days of my life. One dollar bill can do that. Be good advice to you as a grandson too, for you to know about this. We were on stand-by aboard ship for one of the landings and we didn't get to make the landing, but we were sitting out there floating around and floating around and floating around and we had to stay in convoy formation to keep from being attacked by submarines in that area and while we were there the captain said, "We're going to have a swim party today." And I thought that's a great deal, you know, to get to go swimming in the ocean and at least that will get you clean and it's good recreation and a good leisure time thing. So, they broke up the cruising formation that we had, pulled off to the side and rang the bell and put a bunch of swabbies along the rail with rifles to get the sharks off if they came and attacked us while we were swimming, you know. And they had rope ladders that they throw off the side of the ships. Landing nets is what they were. That's what you'd go down when you made an amphibious landing and you would get in your Higgins Boat [landing craft] and you 'd go ashore and they'd drop the ramp and then you'd run out on the beach, hoping you'd run out on the beach, anyway, but that's the way you made a landing. I was swimming and all of a sudden the bell rings three times for you to board ship, you know, and I was getting ready to climb up the ladder and as I was swimming toward the ship there was a dollar bill floated by and I said, "Hell, I'll just get that dollar bill." I supposed it had blown off the ship where the guys were playing poker. Big poker games went on especially during landings. That's how they'd get through the days, as they sailed on the ship till they got to the island where they were going to make a landing. I just thought somebody lost a dollar bill from one of the poker games, I'll pick it up. As I started swimming toward it; I wasn't fooling around, just a little bit, but all of a sudden I realized, "Hell, I'm not gaining on that dollar bill. That dollar bill is getting away from me." And I looked and the ship had changed course and started the prop and when they started the prop it leaned over and the landing net I was swimming to go grab floated away from the ship and an undertow current started pulling me and I couldn't swim nearly as fast as that was pulling me. When the ship listed a little bit, I could see that old prop coming out and gosh, what a huge propeller that ship had on it. I

fought and fought and I lost ground all the time and I keep going toward that prop and when it would lean a little, you know the ocean would whip it over a little bit, why I'd see that prop and, "Golly. I wonder how many pieces that thing is gonna cut me into?" Great big prop and I had seen a prop hit a shark one time when we were unloading the ship. The captain said we can't go in port because we have to have a zero balance to get a new provision and we were throwing away big cases of canned stuff. I threw away an orange crate that had some oranges in it. I was helping the people from the storage area throw the stuff off of the stern and there were a lot of sharks following us. And I saw this great big old shark come up there and snap down on it and eat crate and all, bite into it and it was gone. He swallowed the whole crate. He just took everything and down it went [That was the big shark I had seen chopped up by the propeller.] I looked at that big old prop and I thought, "I'll never make it." So I started saying my prayers and telling my family goodbye. And until then I had always had a dislike for officers to get up on the fantail of a ship when we would board a ship and the officer would get the best place. They would get to sit back there and drink a little whiskey and put their feet up in the air and get them a lounge chair. They even had recliners. It was kind of like taking a cruise and when you were just regular personnel you didn't have any place to sit, there just wasn't room to sit down on a landing craft. They fed you bean soup and sometimes you would pass up that bean soup just to see if you could get a seat. If you didn't get a seat, you'd walk down and get in line and get your bean soup. Man, sleeping quarters are pretty rough when all you get is bean soup for all the days that you are aboard ship. That is something else. Anyway, that prop was pulling me to it and pulling me to it and as I got to the last net just before the fantail, why I saw a lieutenant from AGL [Air Ground Liaison] and I thought, "Well, golly!" And he come shinnying down that rope ladder and reached down and grabbed my arm and I had my arm stretched out a mile. I mean I was reaching and he reached and grabbed my wrist and I mean when he grabbed my wrist there was no way he could have got me loose unless he came in too. He helped me get started up the ladder and then he took off up the ladder and I followed him and I got up there. Man that was a day that you'll never forget; how I could be so close to getting it.