

Documenting Marine Corps History Through the Spoken Word

By Fred H. Allison, PhD¹

What good is oral history? Many argue that it is a questionable means by which to document history. After all, memory can be faulty and people are prone to exaggeration and subject to outside influence, cultural norms, political considerations, personal promotion, self-interest, and more. But then again, people write official reports and are likewise influenced by the above motivations that might show up in their writing. The Marine Corps has maintained an oral history program since 1966, when Marines became extensively involved in Vietnam. The Corps' investment in collecting and preserving the recorded voices of Marines is significant. It not only indicates a desire to more thoroughly document Marine Corps operations for the sake of history, but beyond that, it is proof of the Corps' belief that every Marine plays an important role in accomplishing missions. Marine experiences and perspectives are worthy of retention for the sake of history and for the benefit of future Marines.

Marine historian Benis M. Frank pioneered the Marine Corps Oral History Program. Beginning in 1965, it was an element of the overall historical program. Its mission was to provide yet another source of information about the Vietnam War as well as the recent past history of the Corps. Oral or spoken histo-

ry was just emerging as a means of collecting primary source material, a concept originated by Professor Allan Nevins of Columbia University.

Commandant of the Marine Corps General Wallace M. Greene Jr. saw the utility of oral history and considered it a form of living history. He believed that the "tape-recorded voices of Marines who had seen service in Vietnam would serve to obtain a vast collection of lessons learned."² Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak, the commanding general of Fleet Marine Force Pacific, supported the Commandant's initiative. Krulak wrote, "The personal comments of the key individuals participating should prove invaluable in amplification of the written SitRep [situation reports]."³ Generals Greene and Krulak were right. Oral history has the unique capability to capture the thoughts, experiences, and perspectives of individual Marines and thereby provide context and a deeper understanding of operations.

An aggressive oral history collection effort in Vietnam followed. Marines of all ranks and military occupational specialties (MOSs) were interviewed and the program captured a broad spectrum of experiences and perspectives. During the 10-year span of

¹ Dr. Fred H. Allison has managed the Marine Corps' Oral History Section since 2000. He is a retired Marine major, a native of Texas, and earned his PhD in history from Texas Tech University in 2003.

² Benis M. Frank, "Living History," *Marine Corps Gazette* 54, no. 11 (November 1970): 47.

³ LtGen Victor H. Krulak letter to Gen Wallace M. Greene, 25 June 1966, History of the Oral History Program folder, Oral History Section, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

the Vietnam War, some 15,000-plus interviews were collected, many in the field but others at continental U.S. bases with recent returnees. This is an incredibly rich repository of information on the Vietnam War.

This set the pattern for the Oral History Program and operational interviews remain the top priority. Since Vietnam, Marine Corps oral historians have collected interviews with Marines at important areas of operations. Nearly 25,000 operational interviews are now in the Oral History Collection.

Oral Histories from the Field

Operational interviews are a unique and valuable asset. Because they are often conducted in the field and on-site, they provide immediacy, detail, and accuracy that are often lacking in interviews with veterans conducted years after the event. They are a window to the real world of Marine Corps deployments, operations, and often combat. The events discussed in operational interviews are not yet history but will eventually become history. For instance, the Marines at Khe Sanh under siege in 1968 did not necessarily regard what they were experiencing as historic; they were merely doing their duty and trying to survive. Now, 40 years later, we know that Khe Sanh was a monumental Marine Corps battle. The interviews collected there are in essence an oral snapshot of that historical event (imagine interviews with troops in the field at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania). The same can be said of operations today in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Ultimately, the great utility of operational oral histories is that they supplement the command chronologies that units are required to submit to History Division. They provide the human perspectives and experiences that cannot be captured by a concise report. When historians gather to write history, operational oral histories are a vital ingredient and a primary source that supports the official Marine Corps version of combat operations.

The vast majority of operational interviews done since the early 1990s have been conducted by Marine reservists serving as part of a specially focused unit. The Mobilization Training Unit (MTU) was originally founded in 1978 with the mission to deploy trained

field historians and combat artists with all Fleet Marine Forces commands. The MTU's first full deployment as a unit was in 1983 to Operation Urgent Fury (Grenada). Subsequent deployments in the early 1990s included Operation Desert Storm (Kuwait), Operation Provide Comfort (Kurdistan), Operation Safe Harbor (Guantánamo Bay), Operation Able Manner (Haiti), and Operation Restore Hope (Somalia).

In 1994, the MTU transformed into an Individual Mobilization Augmentee Detachment (IMA Det) and deployed field historians to Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo. By the decade's end, nearly 2,000 oral history interviews had been collected. With the advent of the Global War on Terrorism, IMA Marine reservists have conducted more than 7,000 oral history interviews during Operations Iraqi Freedom, Enduring Freedom, and others dealing with terrorist organizations.

The IMA field historians are successful Marines in their primary MOSs and most have extensive deployment histories, so they are able to gain the trust and confidence of unit commanders and their Marines. Many of the Marine reservists are history professors and authors in their civilian careers, and most possess a master's degree or PhD. Presently, this small group of field historians (around 12 in total) visit forward deployed units in combat zones and during major field exercises and occasionally even catch rides aboard amphibious ships returning home to collect interviews. The field historians then draft detailed summaries of each interview to support research. The interviews and associated documents are digitized and stored in the Oral History Collection.

Issue-related interviews are a type of operational oral history, but instead of combat the focus is on innovations in technology, doctrine, tactics, or procedures. An example of this was the author's 2005 visit to Marine Operation and Evaluation Squadron 22 (VMX-22), the squadron testing and evaluating the Boeing MV-22 Osprey, during which interviews with aviators and maintainers were conducted. Other topics that issue-related interviews document include humanitarian operations, contingency deployments, and important training exercises—essentially anything that could be construed as historically significant.

Career Oral Histories

The distinguished Marine/career interview project is another important aspect of the Oral History Program. This part of the program began in 1966, when Major General Ford O. Rogers, a pioneer Marine aviator, was interviewed by Benis Frank. Since then, about 300 career interviews with prominent Marine officers have been conducted to include most of the post-World War II Commandants, with the exception of Generals Randolph M. Pate, Greene, and P. X. Kelley. The first Commandant to provide a career interview was General Clifton B. Cates. In most cases, the interviews with the Commandants began within a few years of retirement.

These interviews are in-depth, detailed, and cover the prominent officer's entire career. These individuals can provide valuable insights and perspectives on changes in the Marine Corps and bear witness to important operations in which they have participated. The career interviews are fully transcribed, edited, and indexed by oral history staff. The finished transcript, often with photographs and supporting documents added, is copied, bound, and distributed with copies going to other military research facilities and appropriate civilian libraries. These transcripts see a lot of use, both because of the authority with which the interviewee speaks and because the polished transcript is easy to use.

Veterans' Oral Histories

A third type of oral history maintained by the Oral History Section records the stories of veterans. This type of oral history has grown in stature of late as a means of historical documentation and to note veterans' service. Recognizing this, but limited by resources and manpower, initiatives were undertaken by the Oral History Section to support or facilitate efforts by individuals or organizations to capture the experiences of former Marines. These initiatives include a volunteer program, a self-memoir program, joint oral history projects with veterans' organizations, and partnerships with other servicemember organizations.

One organization in particular is the Witness to War Foundation, which conducts professional-quality video interviews of combat veterans. Lieutenant General Ron Christmas (Ret), who serves on Witness to War's board of directors, linked the Oral History Section with the organization for a collaboration that has resulted in the donation of a number of quality video interviews.

Another example is the Women Marines Association (WMA). Led by Colonel Elizabeth M. Wilson (Ret), WMA members interviewed a number of women Marine veterans extending back to World War II. The interviews were subsequently donated to History Division's Oral History Collection. The WMA project exemplifies what veterans' organizations can do to preserve their history and traditions as well as support Marine Corps history. The WMA has donated more than 100 oral histories into the collection.

Collection Digitization Efforts

Since its inception in 1966, the Oral History Collection has grown to include more than 30,000 interviews. Interviews are conducted digitally now and due to an aggressive digitization effort, more than 80 percent of the collection has been digitized and stored on CDs. This digitization effort is the result of a collaborative project with the Naval Historical Foundation. In addition, a state-of-the-art database stores information on each interview, and the sound recordings and associated interview summary sheets or transcripts can also be accessed through the database. The work of professionally processing an interview is the biggest chore involved in building and maintaining oral history collections; it is time-consuming and tedious. Nevertheless, it must be done, because without it the interview has little use. The Oral History Section is responsible for ensuring proper processing and archiving of each interview. Digitization and databasing, however, has done a lot to streamline this work.

The Rewards of Oral History

With all this great material and easy accessibility, we must ask: What is it for and who uses it? First and

foremost, oral histories are collected, like command chronologies, to support the official Marine Corps writing program. A lot of official and unofficial written Marine Corps history is undergirded by oral history interviews, including very prominent commercially published books on the Marine Corps. Mainly, however, like the rest of the History Division, the Oral History Section exists to support the Marine Corps itself by assisting units and individuals in need of historical information. Oral histories are available for use by Marines for their research, especially the large number of Marines attending the various schools at Quantico. Finally, being a public archive, the Oral History Collection is available for use by outside researchers, scholars, media, and the general public. A substantial number of oral history products, averaging about 1,250 each year, are provided to researchers and others on request. Among those making requests are notable authors, historians, and producers of broadcast historical programs.

While oral history is not the best way to establish facts, however, it is the best way to understand what it was like to be on the ground during significant events. Oral history records eyewitness viewpoints—personal experiences—along with the context and conditions under which historic events occurred. In this way, the voices of past Marines can make a direct connection to Marines of today. This information can be gained by no other method than by talking and recording personal experiences.

For example, the victory of Marines at Guadalcanal would have much less meaning and value if we did not know just how bad the weather was, how hungry the troops were, or the effects of Japanese shelling. We know these things from the spoken word. Marines of today can understand and connect with Marines of the past through these human voices and through this tangible connection, Marine traditions, ethos, and esprit de corps are carried forward.

The personal accounts of Marines can tell us about combat and what it was like to be at some of the Corps' iconic battles.

BELLEAU WOOD

Then came June 7 when we went into Belleau Wood. . . . They [Germans] had gotten in there and very fast had organized into interlocking machine gun nests . . . they shot on sound, not sight. They didn't see us and we didn't see them at first. They opened up with those Maxims at crossfire as soon as we made a sound. . . . The woods didn't seem to stop the bullets one bit. It was a big battle, and it really roared. At first machine guns and rifles, then some mortars, and later on some artillery. We were in the open and they were concealed, and they were Prussian Guards and didn't give up easily. We'd have gone into anything, we didn't care how much it was, never stopped at all until we were just decimated, and we just couldn't go any further. The only thing our officers knew was, "Go ahead! Fight 'em and kill 'em, damn it! Straight ahead, what are you waiting for?!" It was a pretty bad business. It did have the effect on the Marine Corps: it showed us up as being very stubborn fighters and we got a lot of respect we could never have gotten otherwise from the Germans.⁴

TARAWA

As we're coming in every once in a while somebody would step into a hole and somebody near him would grab a pack strap and pull him up. Sometimes we could actually see the coral under us and sometimes not, it just depended on how many shells were landing and whether or not there was blood in the water and so forth. A lot of times you were just wading blind. When we reached the beach, I saw where [Major Henry P. "Jim"] Crowe was. It turns out I landed almost directly behind where he was. . . . The beach area was very, very narrow. At high tide in some places, the water came all the way to the sea wall. In other places, you'd have maybe three or four or five yards of dry sand. There were already bodies floating in the water when we reached the beach. There were also wounded Marines lying in the area. There were some that weren't, but Crowe was very good about making sure that everybody went over the sea wall. So the sea wall where

⁴ General Alfred H. Noble, interview with Benis Frank, May 1968, transcript (Oral History Section, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA).

we landed was anywhere from three to five feet and there were already casualties on the beach and there was one Japanese officer's body there. He had his pistol in his hand. You could tell he had fired all his rounds because the slide was back. I had laid the law down for my platoon that there wouldn't be any souvenir hunting. I would have liked to have picked the pistol up but I didn't do it because I was going to abide by my own rule. Crowe had told me, and he told me again, get over the sea wall and start swinging in and swing to the left. We had to physically lift these thousand pound guns over the wall and I'm sure we got some help from troops that were there. When we went over the wall, then we had to pull the guns by hand across the sand. That first night, I probably was not more than 50 yards inland. It's hard to describe how much fire was taking place. The place was just roaring with every kind of weapon. The Marines were shooting, the Japanese were shooting. Gunfire was coming from all directions because the island was essentially flat. Everything was either burning or in wreckage. I don't remember seeing a single building still standing. So there were fires burning everywhere.⁵

CHOSIN RESERVOIR

I hadn't been sleeping about a half an hour when I awoke to a sound in the trees behind us, "phhfft, phhfft," almost a whisper sound. I asked Ray, a seasoned veteran of the Pusan Perimeter, what that was. He said, "Bullets." I asked him why the hell he didn't wake me up. He said, "They were too far to do anything—I would've woken you when it was time." Out to the front of us was a rice field, it was totally quiet—cold and dark. All along the line there was no firing, disciplined. There was a building in a V of two mountains beyond the field. Our platoon sergeant had bazookas fire and hit that building. You never saw so much movement; they were loading up to attack. Then we fired a flare and when that flare lit and those bazookas went off that whole field like it stood up and started running toward us. Then you talk about bells, whistles and horns and clanging and banging and screaming, "Marine you die tonight, you die tonight!" And they came at us. We just kinda leveled in and

let them have it. It was just continuous then until daylight. Just as daylight started lighting up on the eastern horizon, here came the [F4U] Corsairs. And when they heard those Corsairs, it was just like somebody turned off the noise machine.⁶

VIETNAM

We were rushing north in the middle of the night to try to rescue 2/3 [2d Battalion, 3d Marines] which had been overrun, literally overrun. Everybody in the whole CP [command post] group, except one guy, [Major Robert F.] Sheridan, had been killed. He was badly wounded. He had holed-up under a tank. We were trying to get to him. As we were going up the old French road, here comes a [Boeing] B-52 [Stratofortress] strike. We could hear the aircraft but we couldn't see them and all of a sudden you see the most incredible sight in the world—these huge flames like the big storms you see on the rim of the sun, big, curling flames, just roaring up in the air. I'd never seen anything like this in my life. In the daytime you don't see any fire, you just see a blast.

When Con Thien became such a conflagration they moved dangerously close to 1,500 yards [for a B-52 strike]. In order to get through this damn thing, not only did you have to be under cover, serious cover, you had to fix yourself in such a way that you wouldn't bounce. It was one thing to be in a bunker, but the damn ground would throw you around like a damn pinball if you weren't really seriously stretched out. What we'd do is we'd face one side of the trench—you never sat down in the trench—and put your back on the backside of it and you just shove and so you're suspended. You could see the aircraft. They were phenomenal. These things were low. We could see them come over the Tonkin Gulf and you could actually see the doggone doors open. Everybody could see that too and the minute they'd see that, they got their feet up and push like hell. You would just strain your whole body like that and most of my Marines would put a battle dressing or sock in their mouth. My socks were so dirty I never did that because you couldn't wash the damn things. And just grip that damn thing the

⁵ LtCol Roy H. Elrod, interview with Fred H. Allison, May 2013, transcript (Oral History Section, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA).

⁶ John Cole, interview with Fred H. Allison, May 2007, transcript (Oral History Section, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA). Cole was a rifleman in Company I, 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, at the Chosin Reservoir. Here, he recalls the initial Chinese attack on Marines at Yudam-ni that occurred the night of 27 November 1950.

best you could and you better have your chin strap buckled and I mean tight. So, you're straining like hell. You could see them pickle that load and the last bomb hadn't come out of that airplane before that first one hit. And boy, there were three [aircraft] in a row just a single column. . . . I'll tell you, it would throw you around. You better be taking a strain because they would pop you right out of the damn trench. I mean it would blow you—[laughs] I felt sorry for who was tired or who didn't want to strain anymore. You see these guys fly through the air and pick up and dust himself off and get back in the hole where you—it was just unbelievable.⁷

HIGHWAY OF DEATH, DESERT STORM

It was like, if you could, put your head inside a Weber grill with the coals red and glowing. We're punching through the clouds at night, using our radar to guide on the target until we're clear underneath, then [we] sweeten the dive using the FLIR; outside its incredible, hellish, red, orange glow off the fires . . . a ribbon or road, cars and vehicles on both sides, on fire, you could see movement, people scattering. Oil well smoke created an overcast, you dropped all your bombs then climbed above the clouds heading home. It was clear, cool and quiet, behind you the clouds were glowing red.⁸

Leadership is another topic of high importance to Marines. Again, an oral history interview can provide examples of leadership.

THE TROOPS GO FIRST

The 4th Marines had landed and we were going to move around and give them support. General [Lemuel] Shepherd came up to my squad and was sitting there and his aide

brought him up a box and in that box there was a lemon pie and a jug of tea, hot tea. I have always liked hot tea, always liked tea and I had always loved lemon pie—and without even opening it he gave it to me and said, “This is for your boys.” He gave us that. I cut it in eight pieces with a K-bar and shared the tea—most of them did not want the tea; they would rather have coffee—and we did not, and I was the senior man as the squad leader, I did not offer my commanding general a piece of that pie. The eight of us ate it. And he did not say a word. He just sat there and was glad we enjoyed it and did that for us. And I would remind him of it a hundred times.⁹

CONNECTING WITH THE TROOPS

I will give thanks for the rest of my life that I had the platoon commanders that I had in Hotel Company. I had one staff sergeant named Copeland, who retired as a master sergeant, and he's now teaching the NROTC [Naval Reserve Officer Training Corps] unit at Naples High School, and who is probably one of the most effective natural leaders I've seen in my life. Very fortunately, he was a black Marine, about six feet five, about 230 pounds, chiseled, and nobody, nobody wanted to fool with Staff Sergeant Copeland. He was my best friend. I mean between the two of us we licked the race thing. We licked the alcohol thing. We licked the drug thing, because nobody wanted to pay the consequence. I'm not talking about maltreatment here. I'm talking about telling people what Marines were going to be in this company, what the standard was, and if you didn't meet the standard you were going to pay a price, and there are a lot of innovative ways you can do that.

On base the idea of having the base gym, where white Marines just did not go there, was really troubling to me. The first thing I did was attack that, and one way to break the ice with the company—and this is definitely a troubled company. I mean we had deep divisions in it. I mean I saw it. I felt it. It was palpable. I marched them down to the gym in PT gear with their basketball shoes. I reserved the gym, which I could do. I sat them down in the bleachers and

⁷ Col John W. Ripley, interview with Fred H. Allison, May 2001, transcript (Oral History Section, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA).

⁸ LtCol Michael Parkyn, interview with Fred H. Allison, May 2014, transcript (Oral History Section, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA). LtCol Parkyn was an Grumman A-6E Intruder pilot with Marine All-Weather Fighter Attack Squadron 224 (VMA[AW]-224). This is a description of an air strike on the Iraqi convoy outside Kuwait City. The convoy was so large and the devastation wreaked upon it by Coalition aircraft so extensive that it became known as the Highway of Death. FLIR = forward looking infrared; this technology detects thermal energy and is used in aircraft, tanks, ships, and other vehicles.

⁹ MajGen James L. Day, interview with Benis M. Frank, October 1989, transcript (Oral History Section, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA). Day recalls a time when he was a corporal and squad leader in the 2d Battalion, 22d Marines, 6th Marine Division, during the battle of Okinawa.

I got out in front of the company and I had a basketball in my hand. I asked the company to produce who was the best basketball player in the company and they all pointed to this young Marine who was about six three/six four; a strapping young Marine who happened to be black, and we got out in front of the company and he and I played one on one to ten baskets and I gave him the ball first. No warm up shots. He and I traded misses for the first two and then I beat him ten to six or something like that. I gave him the ball back and said, okay, sit down. I could see there that the thing changed between the company commander and the company because this predominately black company—they're very heavy on minorities—hadn't seen anyone who would come in and come down and play their game on their level and do it better. I had just happened to have been playing basketball a long time in my life and I was still in good shape. I played on the AWS [Amphibious Warfare School] team. Basketball is something I did a lot of. Then I divided the company up, took all the baskets, and made different teams and we all played basketball. All played basketball. Not just one group. Not just another group. We did that a lot, and based on that athletic competition, that permeated to other sports. And then the colonel had a big field day I remember, on New Year's Day, 1 January 1975. We had the battalion field meet out there at Camp Schwab and it was one of the best run field meets I've ever seen. They had the right mixture of athletics and professional military skills and Hotel Company won that field meet and the morale of the company just kind of [shot up]—they'd been down for so long. They'd been told they were bad for so long.¹⁰

Some interviews are unique in that they put you in a place of great historical significance.

7 DECEMBER 1941— PEARL HARBOR

At exactly 0755 Sunday morning I awoke to sounds of low-

¹⁰ Gen James L. Jones, interview with Dr. Gary Solis, 2002, transcript (Oral History Section, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA). This occurred during Gen Jones' command of an infantry company on Okinawa in 1974. This time was a bottoming-out period for the Marine Corps as the disillusionment of Vietnam and widespread social protests had manifested itself in poor troop morale and discipline. Gen Jones characterized this assignment as the "hardest job he ever had."

flying aircraft and the sounds of machine gun firing. My first thought was that the U.S. Army Air Corps was playing games by disturbing their Marine buddies on a Sunday morning. That thought lasted about two minutes, as I could hear our aircraft on the flight line exploding. I dressed quickly in my liberty khakis which I had removed a few hours earlier, grabbed my rifle, and ran outside. (I even put on my khaki cap because Marines do not go outside uncovered). What I saw was fighter airplanes with big red balls on their wings passing in what seemed all directions and firing their guns. They were flying so low I could actually see the pilots who appeared to be laughing. I was completely terrified. My terror lasted only a few moments and was replaced with anger I had never experienced. I immediately headed for the nearest shelter, which so happened to be the freshly laid cement foundation for our new swimming pool still under construction. From there, along with several other Marines, we began shooting at the enemy aircraft—just like I was taught in boot camp. . . . [We] actually shot one, perhaps two, Japanese aircraft down. During the last attack my rifle was shot out of my hands . . . the enemy bullet had either ricocheted or hit my sight direct . . . it missed me by about six inches. The Marines that day made every possible effort in defending their base and in spite of the confusion, and un-readiness, displayed undaunted courage in the face of direct enemy fire.¹¹

11 SEPTEMBER 2001— THE PENTAGON

Where the smoke was, was where we knew people, we assumed, would be injured. We made it down to ground level in between the D and C rings and . . . just took turns crawling into the hole, a big hole inside the Pentagon that was all filled with smoke and fire . . . looking for bodies, people alive, or people injured. The smoke was so thick, you'd have to come out to catch your breath, sort of like in the gas chamber. . . . I took my camouflage blouse off, and cut it in half, or ripped it in half and gave the other half

¹¹ Col Albert A. Grasselli, interview with Fred Allison, 2002, transcript (Oral History Section, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA). Grasselli was a private at the time and an air traffic controller for the airfield. The Marine Corps Air Station at Ewa, Oahu, where Marine Aircraft Group 21 was based, was one of the first targets the Japanese raiders hit.

to somebody and I used my half for my face so we could go in there and actually breathe. . . . It was terrible. We were pulling people out and their skin is melting off . . . people with their hair just burnt up, the toxic fumes from the wires and everything else burning. The hardest part of all was when you would get in there and you could only go so far until you couldn't breathe anymore or see anymore. You don't want yourself to become a casualty . . . you had to turn around and you could still hear them saying, "Help me, somebody help!"¹²

Then there are interviews that give you a unique perspective of historical events.

A GUAMANIAN CIVILIAN, BATTLE OF GUAM, 1944

My father got a couple of fresh eggs, cooked them, and brought them to a Marine that was sitting there eating. The Marine didn't want to take the eggs. He says, "I can't take this, I can tell that these are probably the only eggs you have." My father said, "Lieutenant, we saved them for you." He ate them, but you could tell that he really didn't think he should, but he ate them and was very grateful. But my father was very grateful, we were grateful. What came out of that was the sensitivity of the lieutenant, realizing instantly—he was just a young guy—realizing instantly that, "Hey listen, I don't want to take this." We were eating rice and soy sauce, and he was eating these fried eggs, he noted it. But my father had said, "We're going to give him something that they didn't have." My father knew they didn't have fresh eggs in the Marine division; they had these powdered eggs, not fresh eggs, so he went and looked for these eggs and found these two eggs and said, "This is the best treat we can give this guy." This is a very minor story, but I think it made me realize what special people these guys were. They would be so tough in fighting and so gentle when

they were not, that they would refuse a gift because they knew it was so precious. But he took it because he knew that it was intended for him.¹³

Oral history interviews can also relay first-hand accounts of important social changes.

MONTFORD POINT— BOOT CAMP, SECOND DAY

Well, I remember very well, about the second day we was in training my drill instructor, his name was Corporal Cheek, broke us out one night and he told us we might as well pack up your bags and, leave quietly because there had not been any Negroes in the Marine Corps for so many years, and whatever made you people feel that you can be Marines. He said, "If you want to escape this thing the best thing to do is to just leave quietly and shove the hell on off home." And in that case quite a few of the members of my platoon started packing their gear, sleeping bags, not sleeping bags but the suitcases and so forth, getting ready to leave. And so I remember very well I had a friend of mine, later, he came from Birmingham, Alabama, his name was Cooper, and so Cooper and I got together and we told them right there, in my hut, don't nobody leave. We said that's what they wanted us to do. But I left home to join the Marine Corps and when I joined the Marine Corps and got to Montford Point I had 25 cents in my pocket, that's all I had and my last suit I had it on. I came into the Marine Corps to stay and so I intended to stay in the Marine Corps until I went home in a pine box. And I explained to them that nobody was going to drive me from nowhere. If they could be Marines, I thought I could too and they could too. I finally convinced them not to leave. And so the next morning when the DI came he broke us out, we fell out, he went through and counted noses, about twice, three times, and said, "Well, I see you are still here." He said, "Well, I'm going to make you wish you had never joined this damn

¹² LCpls Dustin Schuetz and Michael Vera, interview with Fred Allison, 13 and 20 September 2011, transcripts (Oral History Section, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA). The comments here are a blend of both Marines' statements. LCpls Schuetz and Vera's office was near Ground Zero, the terrorist-flown airliner's impact point. Schuetz recalled that after the jet slammed into the building he and Vera first ensured their office was cleared of personnel. Then, instead of evacuating themselves, they went the other way.

¹³ BGen Vincente Blaz, interview with Fred Allison, 2013, transcript (Oral History Section, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA). A native of Guam, Blaz joined the Marine Corps in 1951. As a youth, he and his family endured the occupation of Guam by the Japanese. A primary reason he joined the Marines was due to the impression Marines had upon him during this battle.

Marine Corps.” And so we started training that day. And I assure you, it was training.¹⁴

Finally, there are interviews that relay to the listener (or reader) the unique character of the Marine Corps, its esprit de corps.

LEAVE NO MARINE BEHIND

We lost practically no Marines who surrendered to the enemy. We not only brought our wounded out, we brought our dead out. I can see our trucks returning from the [Chosin] Reservoir now, piled high with dead and wounded men who were roped to the running boards of all of our trucks and other vehicles. And the examples set by the individual Marines, bringing out their dead and wounded from the Chosin Reservoir is outstanding. . . . Anything up there, they learned it. [The same thing happened] in Haiti and Nicaragua and Santo Domingo they didn't leave a g—m soul up there. All the Marines that were left in Korea, [were] where the men had fallen in crevices and that kind of stuff, and nobody knew they were there and couldn't see them. But when a column was coming out there and a man was

wounded, you could see the body, the column halted and they put this man aboard; and if they couldn't get him on a truck, g—m it, they carried him. You could see a 130-pound Marine out there carrying 175-pound man. Every Marine knew that he could trust the man on his right and left . . . when the true history is written of the 1st Division's conduct in Korea it will go down as the greatest thing that's ever happened in the United States of America; because nothing has ever happened like it before, especially the love of man for his brother.¹⁵

The Oral History Section of Marine Corps History Division has the mission of collecting, processing, and archiving the interviews of Marines. Through these interviews, Marines learn the history of the Marine Corps, not from a book but from the voice of a Marine who lived and experienced that history. In this way, a tremendous amount of Marine Corps history is collected, generations of Marines become connected, and esprit de corps—that essential element that makes the Marine Corps unique—is fostered.

• 1775 •

¹⁴ SgtMaj Edgar R. Huff, interview with Henry I. Shaw Jr., June 1972, transcript (Oral History Section, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA). SgtMaj Huff was among the first group of African Americans to attend boot camp at Montford Point. He enlisted in September 1942.

¹⁵ LtGen Louis B. “Chesty” Puller, interview with Colonel John H. Magruder III, 1961, transcript (Oral History Section, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA).