

The National Museum of the Pacific War
(Nimitz Museum)

Center for Pacific War Studies
Fredericksburg, Texas

Interview with
Bert Cooper
November 23, 2001

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Mr. Cox: This is William G. Cox and the date is November 23, 2001. I am doing an oral history today with Mr. Bert Cooper who was in the First Marine Division and participated in several invasions during the Pacific War. We are doing the interview in the Fredericksburg High School auditorium. This interview is being done in conjunction with the Oral History Program of The National Museum of the Pacific War for the preservation and interpretation of experiences our veterans endured during World War II. How are you this afternoon Mr. Cooper?

Mr. Cooper: I am fine Bill.

I would like to start out with making one correction. I wasn't in several invasions in the Pacific because I was too young. One I did make was the last and the biggest battle of the Pacific and that was Okinawa. On Okinawa I ran into my brother. I was in the First Division and he was in the Second Division Marine Infantry. We knew that we were both on the island and he asked his Captain if he could go looking for me. His Captain said, "Cooper, you've got twenty-four hours to find your brother. If you aren't back in twenty-four hours, I'm sending a rifle squad out to shoot you on sight." Well if anyone has been in the Marines, he knows if an officer says something he means it. We found each other in less than the twenty-four hours and we had an hour or so together and afterwards he went back to the lines. .

I met with my brother two or three more times before his outfit left Okinawa, for China and the medical unit I was with was separated from the 1st Marine Division. We went to the Philippines. It wasn't too long after that my brother came back to the states from China and I came back to the states from the Philippines and we were back home in Yonkers, New York with our families. I have lived most of my life in Yonkers, New York.

Mr. Cox: That's very interesting and we will get into that in more detail in a little while. Right now, I would like to ask you a little about your background; what your mother and father's names were, where you went to school and a little about your childhood as you recall it.

Mr. Cooper: My Mother's name was Dorothy Halprin and my Dad's name was Albert Cooper. I was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts but when I was two years old the family moved to Yonkers, New York. I went to school there and shortly after I graduated from high school I joined the Navy. That was February 1944. It was just in time to get to where things were happening out there in the Pacific. I joined the Navy and I told them I wanted to be a gunner's mate, an aerial photographer, a reconnaissance mate or something of that nature. They said I should be a corpsman. I said, "Are you kidding, I pass out if I smell disinfectant if I visit someone in the hospital." He said, "Well, we'll try to get you gunners mate."

When he put down gunners mate first and aerial photographer second I knew he, this personnel advisor so to speak, was going to change that as soon as I left the room. I was on the list with four hundred others in boot camp in Sampson, New York, which is upstate. We went to San Diego, California to the San Diego Naval Hospital Corp School. That is where the four hundred of us went. The only ones out of the four hundred with any kind of medical experience were a bunch of guys that were morticians on the outside. There were no male nurses or anyone who had any experience dealing with injured or wounded people. It took ten or twelve weeks for them to train us at the Hospital Corp School. We wound up with colored photographs and movies of wounded men with open gashing wounds all in color. I remember putting my head down on the desk on day with my elbows sticking out. All of a sudden the Chief Pharmacist mate came down the aisle and whacked my elbow with his fist and my head went down on the wooden desk, I can still feel it. He said, "Sit up straight and open those eyes sailor, before long you are going to see this really true to life." It wasn't too long after that they gave us some Marine field training. It wasn't the extensive training that most corpsmen had before we came along because they were losing corpsmen as fast as they were losing Marines out there on Iwo Jima. In fact six of our guys were pulled out of our outfit and airlifted over to Iwo Jima and within ten days six of our buddies were killed tending to wounded Marines. That gives you a brief idea of what was happening out there to the Corpsmen. They

gave us an exercise training in carrying and using weapons such as rifles. The BAR's, [Browning automatic rifles] and how to use grenades. It was all very brief. They took us on a few fifteen-mile hikes with full pack with helmet and rifle. Shortly after that we were out of training and sent to the hills west of Oakland, California to a Base called Shoemaker. This Base was built to take care of seven thousand men and they had sixteen thousand men there. The chow lines went like a snake up and down, up and down. It was two or three hours to get in to get a meal. We were sent to Treasure Island, California where we boarded a troop ship and I say that with quotation marks because this so called "troop ship" was loaded with combat ready Marines and we corpsmen were assigned to the First Division. They sent us out in a convoy out of San Francisco within twenty-four hours and we couldn't talk to anyone. We couldn't make any phone calls or anything of course. Everything was restricted for twenty-four hours before we pulled out. The convoy started to mass outside of San Francisco and got pretty big by the time we got to Hawaii. Others were coming up from Oceanside, California with more Marines and some were coming from Bases up in Washington and in that area. We were about a day or two out of Hawaii when the engines broke down on this so called "troop ship". I say so called troop ship because it was actually an old Danish Merchant Marine Ship that was impounded in New York Harbor at the beginning of the war. They decided they were going to make a troop ship out of it because they were short of troop ships. They

kept building more and more liberty ships and fighting ships but they didn't have that many troop ships. That is why a lot of those cruise ships going to Hawaii and even the Queen Mary was converted to use as troop ships. When the engines broke down we had a layover in Hawaii for about three or four days while the engines were being fixed. While we were there we would go ashore on liberty. I'll never forget this as long as I live. Every time I see a "coke" machine I think of those old "coke" machines that were boxes on stilts and they put chunks of ice in it. There was no refrigeration to speak of so they put chunks of ice in those "coke" boxes. When we lifted the lid and instead of coke cola bottles they had put cans of Dole pineapple juice. If you never tasted pineapple juice that had come out of the factory and was canned within a day or two before you drank it, it was like *nectar of the gods* compared to what we take off the grocery shelves. These were about twenty ounce cans and we would sit there in the hot sun and drink that stuff like crazy. Especially those of us who were not drinkers. Up to that time I didn't know what hard liquor or beer was, I just didn't drink.

Mr. Cox: Did it affect your digestive system?

Mr. Cooper: No, not at all. We didn't have any trouble because we were just kids. I forgot to mention that they gave us a destroyer escort. It kept making circles around us as we were being towed into Hawaii. We had to get

back to our convoy and we didn't know where it was headed. We had never heard of Okinawa. We had heard of Iwo Jima because we had been notified about our guys being lost there. We came out of Pearl Harbor and we tried to go like heck to make up the time but this old dilapidated ship wasn't up to the task. It was built to hold seven hundred troops and it had twelve hundred troops on it. Fresh fruits and vegetables were rotting on the deck in the sun. They didn't have any room to store them below. They had bunks six high. Where do you think they assigned me? The top deck, my nose was in the pipes. I would go to sleep that way and wake up the same way. It was so tight if I rolled over in the sack my shoulder would hit these pipes and I'm not that broad shouldered. I would hit my head on those pipes if I woke up too fast in the morning if I wasn't careful. Finally we did catch up to the convoy. Right before we caught up to them all hell broke loose. We didn't know what it was. It was loud sounds going off on the ship like crazy, boom, boom, boom. We thought we can't be in the war way out here. Most convoys would stop in Ulithi and places like that and then form up for battle in the Northern Pacific so we knew we weren't way up there. These destroyers in the convoy had detected a Japanese submarine that had penetrated one end of the convoy and those booms were depth charges. We were downstairs in the mess hall eating when those depth charges started going off so everybody started yelling, "We're being torpedoed" and some of those guys would pick their trays up and throw them up in the air. I don't know why they did that I guess it

was nervous reaction. It was crazy, food was flying all over and we were slipping in it. We could have broken our necks sliding in all of that mess. We got topside and they announced that there was a submarine that had penetrated. They either sunk it or scared it off. They didn't see any wreckage float to the surface so they figured it was scared off. It didn't do any damage to us and that was the only incident that we had until we landed on Okinawa.

Mr. Cox: You went straight to Okinawa?

Mr. Cooper: Well, we did have stops at Ulithi and Kwajalein where more ships joined the convoy. We never transferred to any other ship. We were trained by the Marines how to go over the side of the ship in the cargo nets. The next time we went off that ship was to go down those cargo nets when we landed at Okinawa.

Mr. Cox: Could you tell when you got on shore if there had been previous landings ahead of you?

Mr. Cooper: Oh yeah, we knew we were not the first. Let me say this, when we were landing they announced to all Marines and Corpsmen what your disembarkations stations were so we lined up in rows along the railings of

the ships and the ropes were dropped down. All of a sudden there were about three or four rows of us on the landing ropes.

Mr. Cox: The Corpsmen landed first?

Mr. Cooper: Oh no, Marines and Corpsmen landed together. You landed according to whichever Marine group you were assigned to. You went with them wherever they went. You had to live, eat, sleep and God help you if you had to die with them. As we were going down these nets and I was with the uppermost group of guys coming over the railing onto the rope. I was part way down the rope when all of a sudden there was screaming and yelling. I could see across the bow of the ship. [the center part of it] I could see this Japanese plane coming down and it was an overcast sky, very low so he didn't come down out of the clouds until he was about a thousand yards off our portside. Everybody sees him and all of a sudden the sky erupted and I want to tell you it was like if you took a handful of pepper and threw it close to your eyes and everything is black spots. There was anti-aircraft from the ships, anti-aircraft from the landing crafts and the anti-aircraft from the shore units that were already there. Everything opened up and they couldn't hit him. All of a sudden at about two hundred yards, which is two football fields, they hit him and we could see the flash in the cockpit. When it flashed we could see his body fall

forward on the stick. When he hit the stick it was like hitting a wall, he went ninety degrees down into the water

Mr. Cox: Was he a Kamikaze pilot?

Mr. Cooper: Yes. He was headed for us. They knew what ships were fighting ships and troop ships. If he was going to go he didn't want an LST. How many could you kill on a LST? He wanted a troop ship with a thousand or more men on it. He was headed right for us and we were all yelling and cheering like a bunch of high school kids. I raised up my arm with my carbine and was yelling, "Hit him, hit him," like at a football game. All of these other Marines and Corpsmen that had never seen combat were yelling. This old grizzly Sergeant says, "You crazy s.o.b.'s get down on the deck this is not a football game. You are not in high school you are in a war now, get down on the deck." Everybody hit the deck and we tucked our faces into the cargo net. As we were landing on the beach from the landing craft we saw this Navy net tender. A net tender is to keep enemy submarines out. So they had them there for what purpose I don't know. Who in the hell is going to put up nets in the back of the fleet? In front of the fleet is land. We couldn't figure out where to go so the net tender goes over there and laid down his chain and hook and pulled up the net like a mother picking up her baby kitten. He took it over as close as he could get to dry land and dropped it on the beach so no one coming in on landing

craft could hit it if it was under water. It was the eeriest sight. All I could think of was it was like a mother picking up a baby kitten and putting it out of harms way. That was our introduction to combat. We had these raids night after night and there was this one particular Jap plane that was a twin engine. I think they called them Betty's and he came over every night at twelve mid-night for weeks upon weeks. We called this guy "Piss-call Charley". You know what piss-call means in the service. You wake a guy up and say, "Piss-call". A few weeks after that, they finally hit him with the anti-aircraft fire. I guess he got a bit too low or too slow and when they hit him the searchlights crisscrossed across the sky like an x and that meant we got him.

Mr. Cox: They did the same thing at Guadalcanal.

Mr. Cooper: Were you at Guadalcanal?

Mr. Cox: No.

Mr. Cooper: My first brother that went into the Marine Corp was in Guadalcanal with the First Division. It was the famous Fifth Regiment that wears the French Forgere from World War I. They are the only Regiment in the Marine Corp that ever received that from France. He was on Guadalcanal and he got shot up pretty bad in what they call the Matanikau River Expedition.

He was only a kid, eighteen like I was two years later on Okinawa. He was sent home on a hospital ship and discharged because of his wounds. For forty years afterwards he would find pieces of shrapnel that had worked it's way through his skin. He would find it inside his shirt and shoes. The doctors had told him at Mare Island Naval Hospital, "Son, we can't take it all out of you. There are so many little pieces. We took out the big stuff but you will have that for years and years." This other Marine brother was married when he joined the Marines in 1943. He was on Saipan, Tinian and Guam. He did those three battles with the 2nd Marine Division and then he went to Okinawa. That is where I met up with. He was working on 1st Marine Division casualties.

Mr. Cox: How far did you work your way inland when you got off the ship?

Mr. Cooper: We didn't have to fight our way inland because the first waves had done that several days before. The first night they had a couple of ten wheeler trucks waiting for us. They were driven by black Army soldiers who couldn't do anything but transportation or mess duty like in the Navy. Of course, President Truman unified the services but I think if they had done it sooner we may have won the war sooner because these guys were itching to fight. We got into these trucks down on Brown Beach and it started to rain and it rained and it rained. It was something awful. We had taken our rifles, you know Corpsmen get rifles in the Marines, and turned

them upside down so they wouldn't get wet. We got stuck in the mud and all of a sudden an artillery barrage opens up. We found out later that barrage was between Marine 155 mm "Long Toms" and Japanese artillery on the other side of us. We could see the flashes in the night from both sides, which was a couple of miles on either side of us. We thought, where is this guy taking us? We would see the flashes and all of a sudden BOOM, BOOM and they would hit both sides of the terrain. Luckily they didn't have any short-fall rounds. This black guy started cursing and that is the first time I ever heard that black phrase and I didn't know what the heck it meant but whatever it meant it made the engine go fast and got us out of that mud. I think he was scared as anyone on Okinawa. He didn't want to die with a truckload of Marines. He said, "What kind of memory would that be? An Army guy gets a bunch of Marines killed before they could go into action because he couldn't get the truck out of the mud." I want to tell you about mud on Okinawa. Tanks got stuck in the mud because they were so heavy. The rains were like Monsoons. Trucks got stuck, everything got stuck, nothing could move and it was just a mess. Finally the rains let up and they were able to pull some of these trucks and tanks out of the mud onto land that wasn't so soggy. They got things rolling again. Shortly after we had landed, I guess about two months they dropped the Atomic bombs. We had heard about the Japanese surrender. One day we saw a white plane come over. It had a green stripe on it like the Navy Hospital Ships. The green strip denotes don't fire on it. They

had the Japanese Generals, Admirals or whatever flying over to meet with the Generals on Okinawa. General Buckner got killed so it was General Geiger who was the first Marine General to command a land Army. Before that it was just Divisions. He took over Marines, Army, everything. Then they announced to us the surrender and they would sign it up in Tokyo Bay. They got us all lined up one day in the bright sunshine and raised the flag and they proceeded to read off the orders for the outfits on Okinawa and what waves they were going to be in. My brother was scheduled for the first wave. Our outfit was scheduled for the second wave. We let out a whoop and holler like crazy because we knew we were dead men if we had to invade the home islands, the big islands.

Mr. Cox: This was what the order was going to be to go into Japan?

Mr. Cooper: Yes, we had been training for weeks and weeks to get ourselves battle ready. They read those orders to us because they knew they didn't have to use them anymore because of the surrender of Japan.

I remember one thing vividly about my service. On Okinawa there was this big ugly Marine who was uglier than Ernest Borgnine, (who is a good actor but an ugly actor.) He was tough and muscular and built like a tank. His men loved him and we had him as a patient. One time he called me over to his stretcher and said, "Doc, I don't think I'm going to make this one." I said, "Oh come on, we never give up." He said, "I just feel it in

my body that I'm not going to make it this time." He had been shot up several times in other island campaigns. He said, "I wonder if anyone will remember me?" I looked him straight in the eye and said, "I'll remember you Gunny. (He was a gunnery sergeant) I'll remember you for the rest of my life, I promise you that." He died that evening. Across the tent was a young sailor on a stretcher and he called to me, "Doc." He could hardly talk above a whisper. The only thing pink you could see was where his lips were. He was in a gun tub with seven other guys, gunnery men and shell handlers. They got hit by a Kamikaze, which killed seven of the men. He was the only survivor if you could call it surviving. When we got him he was black. We knew he didn't have much time left but we kept him going about a day and a half doing everything we could do. We gave him a lot of stuff for his pain but he was just covered with black burns all over. It was amazing and even the doctor said he didn't know why he didn't die instantly. He calls me over and I kneel down to his stretcher. He says, "Doc, I'm an orphan who is going to remember me?" I said, "I'll remember you, I'm going to remember you everyday of my life." To this day every night when I pull the covers up to my chin I say, "Did you remember the Sarge and the Gunner's Mate." Ninety-nine times out of a hundred I had thought of them during the day and once in a while if I didn't I would go to sleep saying, "I thought of you guys" and I've been doing it every day.

Mr. Cox: Do you think of that as a burden?

Mr. Cooper: Oh no, it is an honor. These guys gave their lives for me as well as the other survivors on Okinawa and all the civilians back home. To me these guys are all heroes. I made a speech last night about my buddy, Bruce Watkins and gave him a watch. It has a Marine Corp Emblem, the First Division Emblem and the Silver Star Emblem on the watch that I had made for him. They know that I think of these two guys every day and it is not a burden. It is a testimonial to what men will do or have to do to save the freedom for the rest of us. So when the doctors told me when I went to join up again for the Korean thing, "Not this one sailor." I said, "Why not?" He said, "Because your left eye is worse than it was when we discharged you." When you reenlist they have your old medical records. I told him my vision was twenty-twenty with glasses. I told him, "Come on Doc, I know you can pass me if you want to." He said, "What do you want to do go to your own funeral?" I looked him straight in the eye with a smile on my face and said, "I'll do the same thing my brothers told me when I was the fourth one to go in during World War II, turn sideways and the Japanese won't have a target." There were four of us brothers in the service in World War II. I'll do the same thing in Korea, I'll turn sideways and the Koreans won't have a target because I'm so darn skinny as you can see. They always kidded me about that. I guess I turned sideways enough because I never got a scratch.

Mr. Cox: Where did you go in Korea?

Mr. Cooper: I landed at Pusan and went on a Hospital Ship the SS Haven. The Marines were taking a lot of fire up there in that invasion of Inchon so the Captain of the ship asked for any volunteers of Corpsmen who have some experience on land with Marines. They needed volunteers to go ashore because they needed more help. Corpsmen were getting hit and also because there were too many wounded Marines to take care of so a bunch of us volunteered

Mr. Cox: So you went up to Inchon.

Mr. Cooper: Yes and we started to go with them when the Marines started south toward Seoul but they told us we could go back to our ship.

Mr. Cox: You didn't get caught in that battle of Changjin Reservoir?

Mr. Cooper: No, but we got the casualties from there.

Mr. Cox: So you were working on the hospital ship?

Mr. Cooper: Yes. We had severe casualties from frostbite. Arms, legs, feet and hands were so badly damaged from frostbite that surgery was working twenty-four hours a day doing all the amputations. When their limbs were black from the frostbite that was a sign that gangrene had set in. Their toes, fingers and part way up their arms were black and shriveled up like burnt matches. The only way to save their lives was to amputate. I remember one kid who was a state champ in the eight eighty yard run for his high school level in Ohio and we had to take off his left leg just below the knee and the other leg above the knee, one hand above the wrist and three fingers on the other hand. This guy was going to have a heck of a life to adjust to. Talking to him you could see he wasn't throwing the towel in, he wanted to live

Mr. Cox: That is where the blacks got their first introduction to combat in the Army the twenty-fourth.

Mr. Cooper: Yes, and they did a good job. The Marines had them and had them doing all sorts of things not just cooks or transportation. It was good to see it. I think a lot of people came from parts of the country where they abhorred members of the black race or any other race besides their own and they began to see and realize that these people could make a good contribution to society, not just in the war.

Mr. Cox: Many of them have.

Mr. Cooper: I remember this one Marine came into the tent and he wasn't too badly wounded. He had taken a little shrapnel. In the evening we had a habit of rubbing these guys down with alcohol so they wouldn't get bedsores from these stretchers. These guys would be in these tents until the doctors would send them back to duty or evacuate them. I get to this black guy and he said, "No, it's all right doc I don't need a backrub." I said, "Why don't you need it." He said, "Look, I don't want to start any trouble." I said, "Turn over, you're getting a backrub." So I give him his backrub and then I go to this next guy that you might call a "redneck". He said, "Don't you touch me after you touch that black nigger." I said, "What did you say?" He said, "You heard me." I look under his stretcher and see he had a bayonet and you aren't supposed to bring any weapon into a hospital compound. I said, "You are in a hospital compound when you are in this tent and if you don't turn over I'm going to turn you in and they will bust you for breaking that rule." The rule is because some of the guys might become delirious and stab or shoot somebody. So he turns over and I pick the bottle of alcohol up off the mud floor of the tent and I poured it right down the crack of his ass and he almost went up through that hole in the tent. He was a Corporal. You run into all kinds.

Mr. Cox: Do you suppose at some point and place he is giving an oral history and telling about that experience?

Mr. Cooper: I wonder but if he is I hope he is telling that story.

Mr. Cox: Did you make it on up to Japan?

Mr. Cooper: Oh yeah, but not then. When I went in to sign up again they gave me about three months time in Yokosuka Naval Hospital in Japan. The reason for that was that things had changed so much medically in five years time. They felt that we fellows that had been out in civilian life needed to run through some more training on how things are done now in 1950. On minor burns for instance we used to put tannic acid on them. They found out later tannic acid wasn't that good, that it would leave more scars. There were a lot of changes on how you would extract things like bullets and shrapnel. I spent three months there and every time I had liberty I would go into the towns and villages. I would look at these Japanese gardens and I fell in love with them. I said, "Someday if I ever get married and have a home of my own I am going to build one of these Japanese gardens." Thirty-six years I've been working on it and two weeks before I left to come here I planted a variegated Japanese Cypress. Variegated means two colors, a green bush with yellow points. I

instructed the kids that mow my lawn, “make sure you flood that bush every three or four days,” because we don’t have a lot of rain.

Mr. Cox: Are you a nurseryman?

Mr. Cooper: No, I was a salesman, but the thing is I fell in love with the Japanese gardens. Now these gardens have been in the newspapers back home with pictures of my late wife and I. I’m very proud of them. A garden club will call and ask if they can have my garden on tour. I never turn them down.

Mr. Cox: That is your hobby in your retirement?

Mr. Cooper: I also volunteer at the tourist information desk at the Bradley Airport, which serves Hartford, Connecticut and Springfield, Massachusetts. I also volunteer with Headstart four to five year old kids before they start kindergarten. I have a lot of fun with the kids. They like me and I like them and I’ve been doing that for eight years.

Mr. Cox: I want to thank you on behalf of the museum and myself for your time to do this interview and what you did during World War II.

Mr. Cooper: Thank you. I feel honored that you would ask me because compared to what some of these guys that were up in the lines did as corpsmen, I feel what I did was minor.

Transcribed by:
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May 3, 2002