



K O R E A



# They Were Called "Doc"

Unsung Heroes of the Korean War

By Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, USMC (Ret)

*Dedicated to the memory of  
the hospital corpsmen of the  
United States Navy who fell while  
serving with the First Marine Division  
in Korea, 1950-1953*

*"I salute our Corpsmen for their  
courage, valor, and willingness to serve  
above and beyond the call of duty."*

—Gen Alfred M. Gray  
29th Commandant of the Marine Corps

14

**A**bove and beyond the call of duty. It came down to that so very often, as it did when nightfall on 27 March 1953 found Captain Ralph E. Estey's "Fox" Company, 2d Battalion, Seventh Marine Regiment in a fierce battle to regain a combat outpost named Vegas on Korea's Western Front. One of three outposts, Reno, Carson and Vegas, collectively known as the Nevada Outposts, Vegas, located some 1,300 yards

forward of the Main Line of Resistance (MLR), had been overrun by Chinese attackers the previous day.

The Marines were determined to retake Vegas. The Chinese were equally determined to hold on to the shell-blasted hill. Fox Co advanced into a maelstrom, deluged by a shower of shells, 60 mm, 82 mm, 76 mm and 120 mm, all the while lashed by machine-gun fire. Despite the furious fires directed at them,

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**Dedication and courage were common coin among the corpsmen of the 1stMarDiv in those days a half-century ago when Marines called on a comrade named "Doc" to tend their wounds under fire. (USMC photo)**

Capt Estey's Marines fought their way forward to shoot, blast and bludgeon the fiercely resisting Chinese from the eastern portions of the hill. Casualties in the ranks of Fox Co were heavy.

It was while attending one of those casualties that Hospital Corpsman Third Class William R. Charette saw a Chinese grenade land only a few feet away from the wounded Marine. Without a moment's hesitation HM3 Charette threw himself over the helpless Marine, shielding him from the blast and absorbing its full force himself. Partially stunned, with his helmet and equipment torn from him by the force of the explosion, Charette resumed administering aid to the wounded man, then proceeded to another Marine in need of assistance.

With his medical supplies demolished by the bursting grenade, Charette tore his own clothing into bandages. Encountering a seriously wounded Marine whose armored vest had been blown from him, Charette, after tending to the Marine's wounds, draped his own vest over the fallen man to protect him from further harm. Then, oblivious to his own safety, Charette stood upright, exposing himself to a hail of fire, in order to give more effective aid to a Marine whose leg had been ripped by mortar fragments.

Somehow managing to be everywhere at once, Charette moved through the firestorm, tending to fallen Marines in complete disregard for the danger all around him. Staff Sergeant Robert S. Steigerwald saw him. "Charette was everywhere seemingly at the same time, performing inexhaustibly," Steigerwald would later testify.

For his extraordinary heroism above and beyond the call of duty HM3 William R. Charette would become one of five corpsmen to receive his country's highest decoration for military valor, the Medal of Honor, during the Korean War. He alone would live to receive the award.

William Charette's willingness to risk all in following the call of duty was not the isolated act of one man. Far from it, Charette's courage and dedication to caring for the wounded were common coin among the corpsmen of the 1stMarDiv in those days a half-century ago. Certainly, courage and dedication were the qualities that motivated Hospitalman Dorrin Stafford on a frigid October night at the small seaport of Kojo on North Korea's East Coast.

Kojo was where Lieutenant Colonel Jack Hawkins' 1st Bn, 1st Marines found

itself on the night of 27 Oct. 1950, following the 1stMarDiv's landing at Wonsan. The South Korean forces the battalion had relieved departed with assurances that there were no organized enemy units in the area. Assurances aside, LtCol Hawkins deployed his rifle companies on full alert, prepared for any eventuality. It was a good thing he did.

Shortly after 2200 Colonel Cho Il Kwon's 10th Regiment of the North Korean 5th Division launched a well-coordinated attack on 1/1's positions. Well planned and rehearsed, the assault slammed into the Marine lines, ranks of North Korean infantry quickly closing to hand-grenade range and by sheer weight of numbers forcing the defenders to give ground.

fight, with more and more of the 1st Platoon's Marines knocked to the ground by enemy fire, that HN Stafford answered the call of "Corpsman!" Armed with only his medical kit and pistol, Stafford dashed into the night to respond to the cry of the stricken Marine and directly into the path of the oncoming enemy. He didn't stop to think about it; he just did it. Dorrin Stafford's answer to the call of duty would prove costly. The courageous corpsman was never seen again.

The fight raged throughout the next day before the attackers were repelled with heavy losses, and the situation was stabilized. That afternoon a Baker Co patrol reached the site of SSgt Roberts' stand to find the bodies of Roberts and 15 other Marines who died with him.



**Helicopter evacuation, so common in another war 15 years later, was something of a rarity in Korea in 1952, reserved for only the most critically wounded. (USMC photo)**

Particularly hard hit was Capt Wes Noren's Baker Co. Waves of North Korean grenadiers, coming on despite heavy casualties, forced First Lieutenant George Belli's 1st Platoon from its precarious grip on the slopes of Hill 109. The platoon's withdrawal was made possible by the determined stand of Sergeant Clayton Roberts, who held back the attackers with machine-gun fire until he fell with wounds that would claim his life.

It was in the midst of this desperate

Some of them had been treated for wounds before dying, evidence that Stafford indeed had reached them. But the body of HN Dorrin Stafford, who refused to abandon wounded Marines despite the great danger to himself, was not found, and his final resting place remains unknown.

If the saga of Dorrin Stafford ended in tragedy, the story of another 1st Marines' corpsman, HN Joseph V. Churchill, played itself out to a better finale, al-

though it took awhile. It began on 23 April 1951, on the fire-swept slopes of a Korean hill known as Horseshoe Ridge, where HN Churchill, a member of Capt Robert P. "Bob" Wray's Charlie, 1/1 was himself seriously wounded while attempting to move a wounded Marine to a less exposed position.

As a pair of litter bearers were carrying Churchill from the field, he saw a Marine platoon leader struck in the throat by machine-gun fire and tumble to the ground, a fountain of blood spewing from a severed carotid artery. Churchill knew the officer would bleed to death in minutes if he were not tended to. It was then that both of Churchill's litter bearers went down wounded.

Determining that neither man had suffered a life-threatening wound, Churchill, despite the great pain of his own wounds, called for two nearby Marines to carry him to the downed officer's side. There he successfully clamped off the

gouts of blood spurting from the torn gash in the man's throat. That done he tended to the wounds of the pair of Marines who only minutes before had been carrying him to safety.

Safety was something that could wait. There were blood-soaked Marines in need of treatment. In the open, and exposed to continuous enemy fire, Churchill set about treating other casualties who were brought to his side, refusing evacuation himself while there were Marines in need of aid. No one would have faulted him for leaving the field, painfully wounded as he was. No one would have thought any the less of him. He stayed. Unable to walk or even crawl, Churchill dragged himself from man to man, oblivious to the enemy fire pouring in from the higher slopes of the ridge.

Finally evacuated himself, Churchill wasn't quite done. When the truck he and other wounded were being carried in came under enemy machine-gun fire,

**Right:** In the snow-covered hills of Korea, corpsmen often kept plasma under their arms to keep it from freezing and administered it to the wounded. At the Chosin Reservoir, the 1stMarDiv carried its wounded out to the sea, thanks in no small part to the division's corpsmen. (*Leatherneck* file photo)

**Below:** HM3 Lynn C. Blethan checked his medical equipment. During the fighting around the Naktong River, he aided the wounded amid a concentration of enemy machine-gun fire.



Churchill went into action again. Dragging himself painfully about in the bed of the truck, he piled cases of C-rations as a barricade to protect his charges from further harm, risking additional wounds himself.

In August of 1986 there was a reunion of Charlie Co veterans in San Francisco. There, before the men he had fought beside, Senior Chief Hospital Corpsman Joseph V. Churchill, USN (Ret), a circuit court judge for the state of Washington, received the Navy Cross from his old company commander, Col Bob Wray, USMC (Ret).

Call him William Charette, call him Dorrin Stafford, call him Joseph Churchill. To the Marines he served with he was simply "Doc." He was Doc, who

SGT FRANK C. KERR





lived with them, who shared their cold C-rations while he squatted next to them in the mud, battling flies for each bite spooned from a can. He was Doc, as dirty as they were, as smelly as they were, one of them in every way, identifiable only by the medical kit he carried and the insignia of rank he wore. He was Doc, the man they called for in their time of need.

For the most part Doc was a product of Field Medical School, where he had learned the advanced medical techniques he would need in order to function on his own without a doctor's supervision. It was also at Field Medical School that Doc learned to be a Marine in all but name, and ... not of some small importance ... where he received his first experience of living in the boondocks.

In the early days of the Korean War, though, not all corpsmen were products of Field Medical School. Some, like Hospital Apprentice Bill Davis, arrived in Korea by less conventional routes. An undersized teenager barely out of high school at the outbreak of war in Korea in the summer of 1950, Davis found himself whisked from the diet kitchen of the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis, Md., almost before he knew how it happened. Deposited in the ranks of Capt Myron Wilcox's newly formed Baker, 1/7 at Camp Pendleton, Calif., he would learn field medicine through the on-the-job school of application.

Some of Davis' instructors would be nontraditional, such as another Davis, LtCol Raymond G. Davis, his battalion

commander. It was outside of Seoul that September, where young Bill Davis was treating his first combat casualty, a Marine with a shell-torn leg and arm and suffering severe blood loss, that the veteran battalion commander taught the young corpsman how to tag the casualty and mark him for evacuation.

"Do it like this, son," said the colonel, thrusting the Marine's bayoneted rifle into the ground and placing the man's helmet atop it. "Now call for stretcher bearers and catch up with your platoon. That's where you're needed now."

Turning to leave, the colonel stopped. "What's your name, son?"

"Davis, sir. Hospital Apprentice Third Class William Davis, sir."

"My name's Davis, too," the colonel



The helping hand of a medical officer seemed a great deal closer with doctors up front and U.S. Navy ships offshore.

replied with a grin. "You just stay close to your platoon. You'll make a good Marine, Corpsman Davis."

Bill Davis would make a better than good Marine. Side by side with his platoon mates, caring for them when they fell, always ready to respond to the call of "Corpsman!" Bill Davis learned his combat skills the only way possible, by experiencing war up close and personal. The trail led him through Seoul and Wonsan, to Sudong along the road to the Chosin Reservoir and into the frigid mountains of North Korea, until a shell fragment tore through his mouth and took him out of the war. Out of the war, but not out of the Navy. Eventually commissioned with a specialty in hospital administration, Bill Davis, the one-time "kid corpsman," would leave the Navy after 30 years as a lieutenant commander.

If the savage battling for Seoul was all new to Bill Davis, it was all in a day's work for Chief Hospital Corpsman Douglas Austin, the senior petty officer with 1/5's Battalion Aid Station on 22 Sept. 1950. It was late in the day that a volley of incoming mortar rounds struck the aid station area, wounding both Chief Austin and the battalion surgeon, Lieutenant Junior Grade "Hogan" H'Doubler. No sooner had the dust cleared than another flight of incoming rounds splattered LT H'Doubler again, sending him to the ground to be evacuated.

Bleeding from shell fragments in his face and hobbled by wounds to his leg, but refusing evacuation, Chief Austin took

over the operation of 1/5's aid station. Aided by two additional corpsmen, Boyle and Thronal, Austin functioned as the battalion's *de facto* surgeon, treating, stabilizing and evacuating more than 50 wounded Marines. Only after another surgeon was sent forward from division would Chief Austin permit his own wounds to be tended.

Whether he was a youngster not long out of boot camp or an old-timer in his second war, Doc was a handy man to have around. More than a few Marines would live to be eternally grateful for Doc's presence.

Certainly, Second Lieutenant Joe Owen would have cause to be thankful for that presence. That was on a bitterly cold day in November 1950, when what was left of Baker, 1/7 was battling its way through a mass of Chinese blocking the road from the Chosin Reservoir. At the head of his small platoon, Owen felt a volley of slugs from a submachine gun slam into his right arm and shoulder, piercing his chest and lancing into his right lung. With blood gushing from his mouth, Joe Owen was spun to the snow-covered ground.

Sprinting to his aid with sheets of bullets flying through the air was a young corpsman, a replacement who had arrived only the day before. Frightened and fumbling, inexperienced in the near-arctic conditions, the corpsman hastily popped a morphine syrette into his mouth to thaw it before injecting Owen with the painkiller and getting to work on his wounds.

"You're a good lad," Owen mumbled as the corpsman cut away his clothing to put a battle dressing over the sucking wound in his chest. Then, unknowingly echoing the words of his battalion commander to another Baker Co corpsman, Owen grasped the corpsman's hand, telling him, "You'll be a good Marine."

Owen continued, "Here, take these," taking the pictures of his wife and children from his helmet. "That's my wife and kids. Don't let the gooks get them."

"I won't, sir," replied the corpsman who had risked his life to go to Owen's aid. Joe Owen never knew the corpsman's name. He was simply Doc.

Corporal John M. "Duke" Alston did know the name of the corpsman who went to his aid. The thing was, Duke Alston and his platoon corpsman, Doc Allen, both members of the 2d Plt of Easy, 2/5, didn't much care for each other. There didn't seem to be any particular reason for it, just a case of two pretty good men who rubbed each other the wrong way. Sometimes the rubbing got a bit intense, to the point of Alston and Allen rolling around in the dirt and pounding on each other.

That was before a North Korean mortar gunner—the North Koreans were very good with mortars—put an 82 mm round close enough to Duke Alston to literally rip his legs out from under him one day in February of 1952. Stunned, disoriented and in shock though he was, Alston knew he was in trouble. The bursting shell had all but torn both of his legs from him. They hung by shreds of flesh, the left leg above the knee, the right leg just below the knee. Bright red jets of blood pulsated from the severed subfemoral artery in his left leg, as his pounding heart pumped his life's blood out onto the ground. More blood ran in a steady flow from his mangled right leg. Without immediate aid Duke Alston was going to die in only minutes.

Suddenly, there was aid. Oblivious to the danger to himself, giving no thought to the fact that the stricken Marine on the ground was a man he held in less than warm regard, Doc Allen sprinted forward to kneel at Alston's side. With tourniquet and clamps he halted the life-threatening flow of blood that was soaking the ground beneath the fallen Alston, got a unit of plasma flowing and worked feverishly to keep Alston from slipping so deeply into shock that he could never come back. Close by Allen's side was the battalion's chaplain, Father Joseph Gallagher, un-

hesitatingly risking his own life to be at the side of a Marine in need.

Helicopter evacuation, so common in another war 15 years later, was somewhat of a rarity in Korea during 1952, something reserved for only the most critically wounded, those who required immediate major surgery. Duke Alston qualified. Whisked aboard a helicopter, he was flown directly to a hospital ship and rushed into the operating room. He would live to serve as an example of a man's ability to triumph over adversity for the generations of high school students who would know him as Mr. Alston, thanks to a man called Doc.

Duke Alston never saw Doc Allen again, but he still thinks of him. How many other Marines who fought in Korea know the same emotions? More than 26,000 Marines were wounded in action during the three years of the Korean War. Many of them, like Joe Owen and Duke Alston, owe their very lives to prompt treatment by a corpsman.

Perhaps that is why anyone seeking the unsung hero of that war in Korea 50 years ago need not look too far. That unsung

hero is close at hand. His name was Doc.

So here's to you, Doc. It is fitting and appropriate that during this month that marks the anniversary of the birth of your service, Navy Day, that we, your brothers in arms, stand and salute you. You were right there with us every step of the way. You were one of us, Doc. You shared our discomforts and privations, not to mention those gastronomic atrocities known as C-rations. You stood beside us in deadly danger. When faced with perils that made common sense cry out to turn and run, you went forward shoulder to shoulder with us. And when in our times of need we called out to you, you never failed to come.

Thanks, Doc, thanks. And God bless you.

*Editor's note: Maj Bevilacqua, a frequent contributor to Leatherneck, is a former enlisted Marine who served in the Korean and Vietnam wars. Later in his career, he was an instructor at Amphibious Warfare School and Command and Staff College, Quantico, Va.*

***Greater love than this hath no man, that he lay down his life for a friend.***

Hospitalman Richard D. Dewert  
USN, D/2/7, Medal of Honor  
Killed in Action, 5 April 1951  
Hoengsong, Korea

Hospitalman John E. Kilmer  
USN, H/3/7, Medal of Honor  
Killed in Action, 13 Aug. 1952  
Bunker Hill, Korea

Hospital Corpsman Third Class  
Edward C. Benfold, USN, E/2/1  
Medal of Honor, Killed in Action  
5 Sept. 1952, Bunker Hill, Korea

Hospitalman Francis C. Hammond, USN, C/1/5  
Medal of Honor  
Killed in Action, 27 March 1953  
Combat Outpost Reno, Korea



## MILITARY HISTORICAL TOURS



### ★ VIET NAM

3-14 October 2001 - I, II, III & IV Corps

12-24 March 2002 - I Corps

23 April - 4 May 2002 - I Corps

35th Anniversary "The Hill fights - First Battle of Khe Sanh"

7-19 May 2002 - I Corps

35th Anniversary "Operations Prairie I-IV and Union I-II"

27 June - 9 July 2002 - I Corps

35th Anniversary "Operation Buffalo and Con Thien"

12-24 August 2002 - I Corps

**I Corps tours include:** Khe Sanh, Camp Evans, Hwy One, Quang Tri, Ai Tu Combat Base, Lang Vei, Rte 9, Camp Carroll, "Vandy"- LZ Stud, Dong Ha, Cam Lo, Con Thien, "Leatherneck Square", Hue, Phu Bai, Danang, Hai Van Pass, An Hoa, Hill 55, Charlie Ridge, The Arizona Territory, Antenna Valley, Que Son, Chu Lai, Batangan Peninsula.

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### SPECIAL TOUR

#### Guadalcanal

#### 59th Anniversary

4-14 November 2001

Tour Historian

Col Joe Mueller,

Historian - 1st Marine Division Association

This very special 59th Anniversary will commemorate the epic battles of **Savo Island** and **Edson's Ridge**, which broke the back of the Japanese Navy and Army in the southern Solomons. These battles set the stage for the advance up the ladder and the ultimate defeat of Imperial Japan. We will participate in **joint service commemorations** at the **American War Memorial** overlooking Honiara, as well as a **wreath laying on Iron Bottom Sound** and participation in a special **226th USMC Birthday** on November 10th in Guadalcanal.

### Tours for 2001-02

4-13 October 2001

France, Belgium and Luxembourg 57th Anniversary Battle of the Bulge

12-21 October 2001 - England & France

57th Anniversary D-Day

13-24 October 2001 - Italy

WWII Italian Campaign

Rome, Naples, Capri, Salerno, Monte Cassino, Gothic and Gustav Lines, Rapido and Po Rivers, Anzio, Florence, Nettuno, Siena

5-10 December 2001

60th Anniversary of Pearl Harbor

8-16 March 2002

57th Anniversary of Iwo Jima

Post Tour: Peleliu Battlefield Tour or Pacific War Memorial Dedication in Honolulu

14-27 April - Northern Ireland

Military History Friendship Tour Post Tour: Irish Republic

20-28 April - Turkey

86th Anniversary of Gallipoli Post Tour: Biblical and Ancient sites in Turkey

20-30 April - Australia

US Veterans Friendship Tour to the Official ANZAC Day Commemoration in Canberra, Australia

20-28 May - France

WWI USMC Battlefields Invited Tour Host: Gen "Chuck" Krulak, USMC (Ret) 31st Commandant of the Marine Corps

3-13 June - France, Belgium, Holland and Germany

"Band of Brothers" WWII US Airborne Forces Tour

10-20 August - France, Belgium WWI British Battlefields of the Somme and Ypres Salient

4600 Duke St, Suite 420

Alexandria, VA 22304

Phone: (703)212-0695 (800)722-9501

Fax: (703)212-8567

E-mail: [mht@miltours.com](mailto:mht@miltours.com)

Web site: [www.miltours.com](http://www.miltours.com)