

## The Court Martial That Never Happened

### An episode from the war experiences of Marshall Parks, MD

As transmitted by Ron Fishman, MD

Marshall Parks told me much of this story one morning over breakfast at the AAPOS meeting in Montreal in 1991. His daughter Grace and son-in-law Paul Mitchell, MD were also at the table. Marshall knew of my abiding interest in his experiences in World War II and my habit of prompting him every time I could, but this time the story came out spontaneously.

I already knew that Marshall had reported to the Navy medical officer deployment office at Pearl Harbor in August of 1944, together with another doctor, to receive their assignments to ships in the Pacific Theater. There were two ships to be manned, one a spanking new destroyer with all the amenities, the other an old four-stacker from pre-World War One days. The two young doctors drew straws to see who would get the new ship and Marshall lost. The other doc was thus assigned to the new *USS Johnston*, which by mid-October was in the middle of the Battle of Leyte Gulf in the Philippines and was sunk with the loss of almost all hands, including the captain and the medical officer.

New general medical officers just out of internship were usually assigned to destroyers, destroyer-minesweepers and similar smaller ships who were often stationed many miles away from the main battle fleet in order to act as radar picket ships and give warning of any approaching Japanese force. Kamikaze attacks became a significant threat that fall, and the first target they encountered as they approached the fleet were these small picket ships, which started to bear the brunt of their attacks. Marshall's ship was part of the task force at Peliliu, an island 500 miles to the east of Leyte, that the planners thought would be a walk-over but which turned out to be heavily garrisoned and bloodied the Marines all through that October and November, The supporting ships thus had to stay much longer than anticipated and were prime targets. Marshall later remembered that he would come out on deck one morning and see that a nearby ship had been heavily damaged in its forward section, so he tried to spend his time that day as much as possible toward the rear of his own ship. Then on another morning he would see a ship heavily damaged in its aft quarters, so he would try to spend his time amidships. Then a ship would be hit in the middle, and he came to realize that there was no safe place anywhere. As I recall, his own ship hit a mine during that winter, and sank soon after he had managed to escape from it.

In February 1945, Marshall was aboard the *USS Gamble*, a destroyer-minesweeper that was assigned to support the landings at Iwo Jima. Most of what follows came from Marshall but I have supplemented it with facts from US Navy documents and a later letter of Marshall's.

On February 17, The *Gamble* fired at targets on the beach in preparation for the Marine landings scheduled for the 19<sup>th</sup>. On February 18, it swept a sector for mines and retired

at nightfall to a screening position offshore with other ships of the flotilla. Then suddenly, about 9 PM, a Japanese twin-engine bomber, flying in low to avoid radar detection, hit the ship with two bombs in the firerooms, flooding them, putting all three boilers out of action and making the ship dead in the water. Five men were killed outright and eight were badly burned.

Marshall was in the officer's wardroom beneath decks and was knocked out by the blast, probably for most of an hour. When he came to he was in total darkness but could feel the ship listing, upwards at the forward end and downwards by the fantail. By this time he had enough experience to recognize that this meant the ship was in serious trouble. He tried to find his way out of the wardroom to get forward and up on deck, but slippery, stinking fuel oil covered every surface and all he could do was try to crawl forward uphill against the list. He found himself in a maze of hallways, the bulkheads distorted by the explosions. He could not find a ladder in the darkness and finally came to a blind alley. At least he was away from the awful fuel oil. He sat down on the deck with his back against a bulkhead and resigned himself to going down with the ship. But in a few minutes a hatch was opened forward and a flashlight lit up an adjacent passageway. He heard the voice of the Damage Control Officer calling "Hey, anyone down there?" "Yes!" Marshall yelled. "Who?" said the voice. "The Doc!" Marshall yelled and clambered out on deck.

He found the ship on fire towards the rear. Men were fighting to get the fire under control before it set off the ammunition and depth charges stored nearby. A sister ship, the *USS Hamilton*, had drawn up alongside and men were trying to transfer the wounded, laced in tightly on metal stretchers, by a rope line over the rails of the two ships. Two men made it but the rough sea was buffeting the ships and threatened to crush the men between them. The attempt was called off and the *Hamilton* drew off to avoid being damaged by the imminent explosion of the ammunition. (It had already been acting in contravention of an order by Admiral Nimitz, the top Navy Commander in the Pacific, to avoid such mercy attempts ever since the cruiser *Birmingham* had been damaged while alongside the carrier *Princeton* when it exploded). Also, the ships, lit up by the fires, were sitting ducks for any Japanese submarines in the area.

Marshall and his corpsman had had the foresight to prepare a "Burn Locker" of supplies and medications for burn wounds and they found it miraculously undamaged. Marshall then decided get the *Hamilton's* whaleboat to transfer the wounded from the *Gamble* to the *Hamilton*, the *Gamble's* own boat having been destroyed by the explosions. As Marshall, the wounded, the corpsman and the burn locker were pulling away, the Captain of the *Gamble* yelled at them not to take the burn locker and to leave the corpsman with him. A shouting match developed - the captain on the bridge, Marshall bouncing up and down in the rough sea in a whaleboat overburdened with casualties. Marshall turned to the corpsman, who was torn between following Marshall's order or that of the Captain, and said it was up to him. Finally the corpsman, in disgust, said "To hell with Captain. I'll stay with you, the burn locker and these badly burned guys." So off they went in the darkness, the Captain yelling and threatening to court martial Parks for flagrantly disobeying a direct order.

The corpsman returned some hours later to the *Gamble*, evidently without adverse consequences. After the war he went on to medical school and became a GP in Indiana. Marshall never returned to the *Gamble* but soon transferred with the wounded over to the *USS Terror*, a cruiser which was the flagship for mine sweepers in the area, and which had a large well-staffed sick bay. Marshall and the other medical staff worked hard for the next few days on board the *Terror*. One man died but the other wounded were soon transferred to an Army hospital on Saipan.

Marshall stayed on the *Terror* but was occasionally sent out on another ship when it was detailed for some hazardous mission. In April, off Okinawa, he was away from the *Terror* when a suicide plane hit the ship right in its sick bay at about the same time Marshall would have been in his bunk there. The Admiral commanding the mine craft off Okinawa ordered Marshall to return at flank speed to the *Terror* since most of its doctors and corpsmen had been killed or wounded. In transferring from a whaleboat up a ladder and over the stern rail, the medical officer ahead of Marshall slipped on the oil-covered deck and fell back into the whaleboat, hitting his head and dying the next day. Marshall got up over the rail without slipping and was promptly appointed Chief Medical Officer on the flagship. The Admiral worked as his assistant that night, bandaging, splinting and helping with intravenous transfusions, then helping Marshall to identify the dead and place their remains in body bags. (These of course must have been the same people Marshall had worked with daily for two months).

That morning in Montreal, I heard only the bare bones of this story from Marshall, who was usually quite reticent in talking about the war. It was a vivid piece of oral biography and I had absolutely no doubt as to its authenticity. In fact I was struck by how much he left out, how one had to read between the lines in order to recreate these scenes. I wondered how much of it was captured in the official records. Soon afterwards I happened to be near the Navy War College in Newport, RI and stopped in to talk with the librarian. I then wrote the Naval Historical Center at the Navy Shipyard in Washington for the Action Reports of the *Gamble* and the *Terror* during the Iwo Jima battle.

They were very interesting, mostly for what they did not say. The *Gamble's* Captain went on at some length describing how his well-trained crew (trained of course by himself) managed to save the ship. Almost parenthetically there is: "At 2245 the remainder of the casualties were transferred to the *USS Hamilton* under the care of the medical officer." The Chief Medical Officer on the flagship *Terror* on the other hand went out of his way to commend the dedication and skill of the medical people who cared for the 39 casualties: "The ship's doctor, dentist, staff doctor and the doctor from the *USS Gamble* all worked the better part of 3 days and nights in taking care of these men. However, the treatment they received corresponded closely to what they would have received in a hospital." This report was certainly known to the *Gamble's* Captain, who saw no glory in requesting the court martial of a man who had been so commended.

When I eventually presented this material to Marshall, his reaction was "I wondered why I never heard anything more about that court martial." END