

# Corpsman Up!



NATIONAL MUSEUM *of the*  
UNITED STATES NAVY



In this packet, we will be learning about what roles U.S. Navy hospital corpsmen played in World War II! By learning about their history, we can better understand and appreciate the work they do today.

Contact the National Museum of the U.S. Navy for Field Trip and School Visit opportunities!

\*This packet is intended for elementary schools, to be used in groups of three or fewer and/or individually.

# What is a corpsman?

The U.S. Navy and the U.S. Marine Corps do not have medics, they have corpsmen. Navy corpsmen get their names from the U.S. Navy's Hospital Corps. Established in 1898, the Hospital Corps gave the U.S. Navy the ability to give enlisted sailors formal medical training. Corpsmen assist doctors on board ships and submarines, and some are attached to Marine units. When in combat, corpsmen are trained to run towards the action to help the wounded, often risking their own lives to do so.

During World War II, hundreds young men became corpsmen mostly by chance. Some even requested completely different jobs! Many did not have any medical training or experience before enlisting in the U.S. Navy. That meant they had to learn everything from the ground up. After passing their U.S. Navy training, they would move on to Hospital Corps school, where they learned things like first aid, anatomy, and hygiene. They would also learn how to operate medical equipment like x-ray machines. Finally, corpsmen would be assigned to U.S. Navy hospitals, ships, or Navy air centers to put these skills to use. A select few of these would then be sent to the Marines.

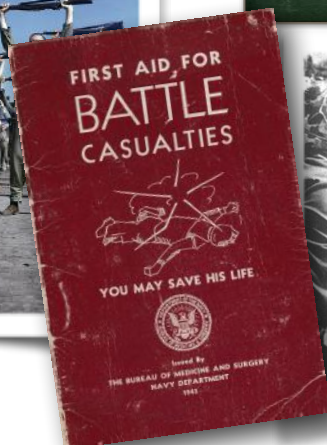
Beginning in World War II, corpsmen who served with the Fleet Marine Force would go through boot camp with the U.S. Marine Corps. This gives them the skills they need to act as a field medic on the battlefield. They were also trained in combat skills to protect themselves and their comrades if necessary.

In the field, these Fleet Marine Force (FMF) corpsmen helped provide emergency first aid to wounded Marines. By quickly disinfecting and bandaging wounds, treating burns, and setting broken bones, corpsmen helped ensure their buddies would survive the trip from the battlefield to a hospital ship. Corpsmen would often help lead the wounded back to aid stations, where Navy doctors could provide more intensive care. Wounded Marines would then be sent to a hospital ship, and finally a U.S. Navy hospital for recovery.

Corpsmen serving in hospitals and on-board ships usually provided routine medical care, but were sometimes asked to preform medical miracles! Most famously, submarines on war patrols carried a well trained corpsmen, but no doctor. While hunting for enemy ships, submarines cannot surface whenever they want to, and they are often far away from any friendly ships or ports to ask for help. During World War II, hospital corpsmen had to preform emergency operations to remove a submariner's appendix without the help of a licensed doctor three different times!



Did you know?  
Navy corpsmen are often nicknamed "Doc"  
by the people they serve with.



# Corpsmen in WWII

## Guiding Question:

Do you think you could be a Navy Corpsman? What skills would you need to have to be a good corpsman?

In wartime, both sides usually try to avoid purposely attacking medical personnel. According to the Geneva Conventions, any doctors, medics, nurses, or corpsmen are not supposed to carry weapons, and must display a red cross insignia on their person or helmet to show they are a noncombatant.

While these rules were usually respected in Europe, corpsmen serving in the Pacific quickly learned that anything that showed they were a medic could put them at risk. The Japanese liked to target corpsmen and Army medics, as well as doctors. They knew if they hurt or killed someone with medical training, they wouldn't be able to help other wounded Marines or soldiers. They also knew that both Marines and soldiers might be more willing to risk their lives to help save a corpsman or medic. Corpsmen serving with the Marines were trained to use weapons just as well as a Marine and often carried firearms into combat, even if they did not use them during battle. They wore the same uniforms as their Marine buddies and tried to blend in as much as possible. This made it harder for the Japanese to tell who was a corpsman and who was a regular Marine. On many occasions, corpsmen had to use weapons to help protect the wounded or themselves.

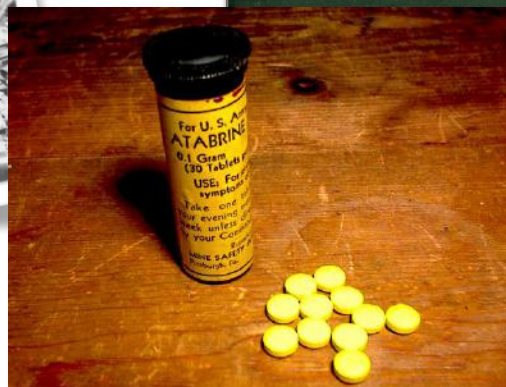
Corpsmen in the Pacific also had to battle dangerous diseases like malaria, dysentery, and beriberi. They helped treat the diseases, and tried to prevent the spread of them by giving medicine to Marines. Some corpsmen were asked by their commanding officers to give talks about first aid and field medicine to groups of Marines before they went into battle. This helped Marines know how to keep themselves and their buddies safe in case a corpsman couldn't get to them quickly.

Although most corpsmen saw combat with the Marines in the Pacific or on Navy vessels around the world, many participated in amphibious landings in the European theater as well. They set up beach aid stations and provided first aid to wounded soldiers in North Africa, Italy, and Normandy.

No matter where they served, corpsmen were trusted and relied on by their comrades. Some men would even tell corpsmen their secrets and worries about the war and their lives back home. Corpsmen were also trained to help treat "battle fatigue", what we now know as Post Traumatic Stress. In places like Normandy, the Philippines, and Okinawa, corpsmen would also do what they could to help civilians caught in the middle of battles.

## Did you know?

Atabrine helped prevent malaria, but the pills tasted so bitter, many people hated taking them! Corpsmen would sometimes watch to make sure the pills were actually being swallowed.



# Uniforms



When serving on a U.S. Navy ship or at a U.S. Navy hospital, corpsmen wore the same uniforms as other enlisted sailors. When serving with the Fleet Marine Force, Corpsmen were given special permission to wear many of the same uniforms as the U.S. Marine Corps with a few modifications. Buttons and stitching would be changed to subtly label a corpsmen as U.S. Navy personnel. This included combat uniforms and service uniforms, with the exception of the USMC dress blues. This could sometimes get corpsmen into trouble – members of the military police or officers might not recognize them as a corpsman and expect them to report to duty with different units!

Corpsmen who assisted U.S. Army beach landings also occasionally wore Army issued clothing. This helped them blend in the same way wearing Marine uniforms on beaches in the Pacific. Depending on the situation, they may have worn red cross arm bands or painted identifiers on their helmets to make it clear they were medical personnel.

## Guess that Uniform!

Can you guess when a corpsman might wear these uniforms? Fill in your answers in the space provided.



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# Rank & Insignia

During World War II, Navy corpsmen had the official rating of Apprentice, Hospital Apprentice, or Pharmacist's Mate. Beginning as an Apprentice while in training, a corpsman would be promoted to a Hospital Apprentice First or Second Class after finishing Hospital Corps School. They could then advance in rank to Pharmacist's Mate Third Class all the way up to a Chief Pharmacist's Mate.

Most corpsmen serving with the Fleet Marine Force were a Pharmacist's Mate Third Class or higher. This made them roughly the same rank as a Sergeant, Staff Sergeant, or Technical Sergeant with the Marines. This helped give them some authority when dealing with enlisted men, as a corpsman's orders were just as important to follow as a Corporal or Sergeant. This was true on board ships as well: a Pharmacist's Mate First Class is equivalent to a Petty Officer First Class.

A corpsman's rank would be displayed on the left arm of his uniform. For Pharmacist's Mates, patches with an eagle, medical cross, and chevrons would be sewn on. Additional chevrons would be added to the design when the corpsman advanced in rank. Corpsmen serving in the Pacific with Marine units would rarely wear visible signs of rank: anything that made them stand out as different from an enlisted Marine might have made them a target for snipers.



Hospital Apprentice	
Pharmacist's Mate 3 <sup>rd</sup> Class	
Pharmacist's Mate 2 <sup>nd</sup> Class	
Pharmacist's Mate 1 <sup>st</sup> Class	
Chief Pharmacist's Mate	

# Equipment for a FMF Corpsman

## Medical Bag

Navy corpsmen carried several different styles of bag through the war. The first was a simple expandable bag often called a Unit 1. It was usually worn on a shoulder strap. An experimental design first saw action in 1943 on Tarawa: the pouch was attached to a corpsman's chest and opened into his lap. These weren't a big success, and the Navy quickly went back to bags with shoulder straps. By the end of the war, most corpsmen were using a harness to hold two bags on their hips. This arrangement was called the Unit 3. No matter what kind of bag a corpsman carried with him, it would be stuffed full of bandages, antibiotics, and other tools to help the wounded.



## Morphine

Corpsmen carried several morphine syrettes in their bags. Morphine was used to help dull pain and keep the wounded from going into shock. Corpsmen would tag casualties to show other corpsmen or doctors how many syrettes they had already been given. Too much morphine can be extremely dangerous!



## Bandages

Sterilized bandages were one of the most important parts of a corpsman's kit. These would help protect a wound and stop bleeding. Some corpsmen would stuff every pocket and pouch they had full of bandages, getting rid of other equipment like extra socks and underwear to make room!



## Sulfa Packets

Although Penicillin had been discovered in 1906, corpsmen in the field had no access to it. Instead, they used Sulfanilamide to help disinfect wounds. After tearing open the packet, they would sprinkle the powder over a wound before putting a bandage on. Corpsmen and other personnel shortened the name to "sulfa" when they talked about it among themselves.



## Did You Know?

World War II was the first time antibiotics were available to military medical personnel.

### Plasma

Although it was unusual for a corpsman in the field to have bottles of blood plasma in his kit, he would still have many opportunities on the battlefield and in aid stations to give patients plasma to help replace blood they lost. Blood plasma is just one part of what makes up our blood, and can be stored safely for longer periods than whole blood.



### Forceps

This helpful tool could help pull shrapnel, bullets, and other debris out of a wound, making it easier for a corpsman or doctor to clean and bandage the injury.

### Scissors

Cutting clothes open or away from a wound helped corpsmen see exactly what kind of injury they were dealing with.

### Corpsman's Knife

These knives were used to help cut brush and branches to use as splints for broken bones. They could also be used to aid in emergency amputations.

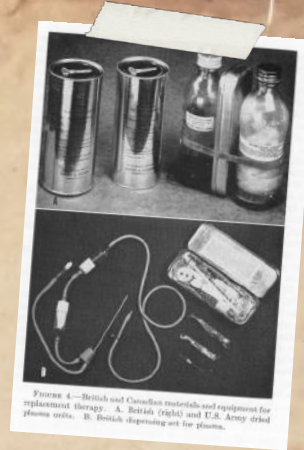


### Canteen

Drinking water was often a big concern for troops serving in the Pacific during World War II. Corpsmen would remind Marines to keep hydrated. Many would share their own drinking water with the wounded, even if water was in short supply.

### M1911 Pistol

Corpsmen were given these pistols to help protect themselves against night attacks and infiltration by the Japanese. Some corpsmen didn't like them and instead chose to carry carbines or M1 rifles to protect themselves and their buddies. Others thought heavier weapons got in the way of treating injuries and stuck with their pistols.



# Pack Your Bag

Some medical bags corpsmen carried had numbered pouches. This helped corpsmen remember what equipment was stored in what bag.

Can you guess which pouches might have held which items? Write the number next to the item on the pocket where you would store the item.



1. 2 Medical Armbands
2. Safety Pins size 3
3. 1 box Adhesive Plaster tin
4. 2 Tourniquets
5. 2 boxes box Sulfanilamide
6. 2 boxes Sulfadiazine
7. 1 tin Bay's Adhesive Plaster
8. 4 Halazone bottles
9. 1 Triangular camo bandage
10. 3 Large First Aid Dressings
11. Scissors
12. Pencil
13. 1 medical knife
14. 1 Large First Aid Dressing
15. 4 Plain Gauze Compressed bandages
16. 1 Wire Splint
17. 1 box Ammonia Inhalants
18. 2 boxes Morphine Syrettes
19. 1 Emergency Medical Tag book
20. 2 boxes Iodine Swabs
21. 2 Plain Gauze Bandages
22. 1 box of Sutures Plain-Type A
23. 1 box Sutures Mild Chromic-Type B
24. 1 Medical USN Surgical Instruments set



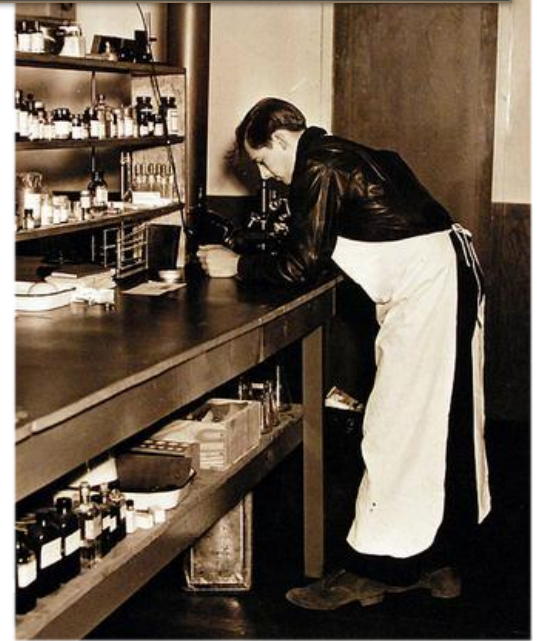
# Campaigns

## World War II in Europe

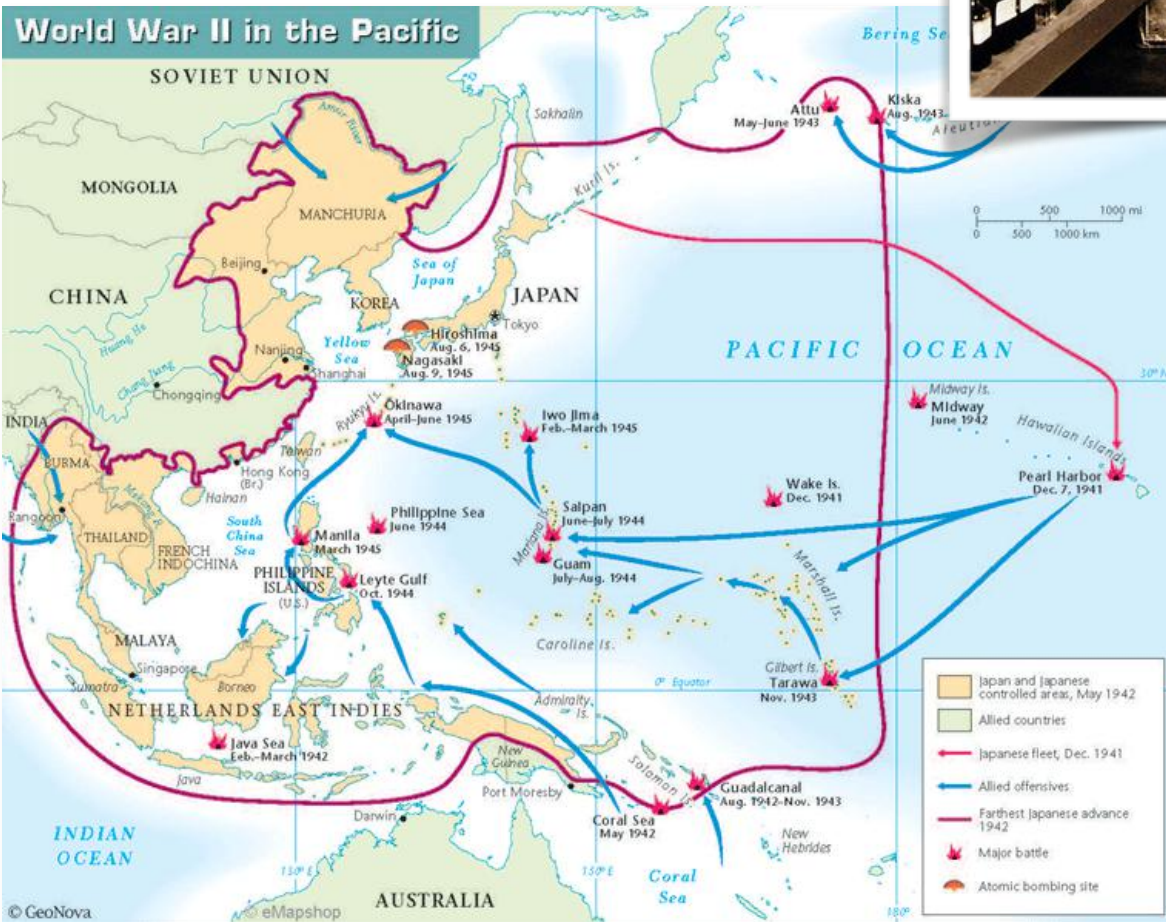
- Axis countries, 1942
- Axis satellite states and allies
- Axis controlled areas
- Allies and allied controlled areas, 1942
- Neutral countries
- Axis offensives, 1940-1942
- Allied offensives, 1942-1945
- Farthest Axis advance, 1942
- ★ Major battle



Before the war, people weren't able to travel as much as we do now. Service men and women were stationed in far away places they may have never even heard of before. This corpsman is working in a sickbay unit in Iceland.



## World War II in the Pacific



# Awards & Honors

In 1945, Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal honored the Hospital Corps in a speech, saying **"The Hospital Corpsmen saved lives on all beaches that the Marines stormed... You Corpsman performed foxhole surgery while shell fragments clipped your clothing, shattered the plasma bottles from which you poured new life into the wounded, and sniper's bullets were aimed at the brassards on your arms."**

They are the only corps in the U.S. Navy to be so honored.

During the war, Navy Corpsmen were awarded:

- 7 Medals of Honor
- 66 Navy Crosses
- 465 Silver Star Medals
- 982 Bronze Star Medals

## Medal of Honor Spotlights



**Pharmacist's Mate Second Class George Wahlen:** George Wahlen originally wanted to join the Army Air Force during World War II, but when their recruiter told him they were all full, he decided to enlist in the Navy instead. Instead of being placed with an aircraft mechanic school, he was transferred to a hospital corps school. After completing training, he decided to transfer to the FMF.

Wahlen saw combat with the Fifth Marine Division on Iwo Jima. After being wounded in the foot by an enemy grenade, he refused to leave the battlefield and continued to aid his comrades. He was wounded twice more and was finally evacuated after the third wound left him unable to walk. He still managed to crawl to the aid of a wounded Marine before being tagged as a casualty himself. Wahlen's dedication would earn him the Medal of Honor.

When presented with his Medal of Honor alongside many other Marines and one other corpsman, Wahlen would remember President Harry Truman shaking his hand and telling him "It's mighty good to see a pill pusher here in the middle of all these Marines!"

**Hospital Apprentice First Class Fred Lester:** Born and raised in Illinois, Fred Lester was only seventeen when he joined the U.S. Navy Reserve. After completing Hospital Corps School, he was assigned to the newly assembled Sixth Marine Division. The untested division first saw action on Okinawa in 1945..

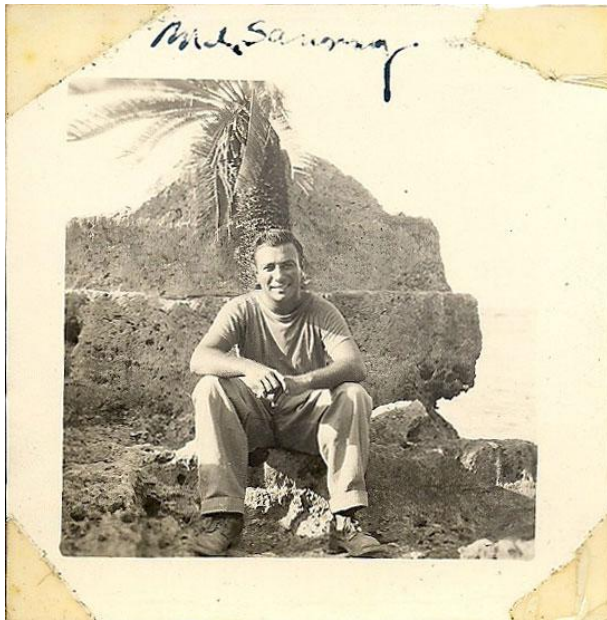
While on the island, Lester was shot twice while dragging a wounded Marine to safety. Realizing he was hurt too badly to be saved, he refused medical treatment for himself and calmly instructed other Marines in first aid to help save the other wounded man. He died only a few minutes later. Lester's heroic actions at the cost of his own life earned him the Medal of Honor.



## Other Famous Corpsmen

### **Pharmacist's Mate Third Class Henry Warren Tucker:**

Henry Warren Tucker was assigned to the USS *Neosho*, an oiler stationed in the South Pacific. During the Battle of the Coral Sea, the *Neosho* was badly damaged, and the crew abandoned ship. Tucker helped treat the wounded in the water, putting ointment on burns and bandaging other wounds. He helped sailors get into life boats and refused to be helped himself. Tucker was eventually reported missing in action and presumed lost at sea. He was awarded the Navy Cross for his devotion to his fellow sailors. A destroyer commissioned in 1945 was named in his honor.



### **Pharmacist's Mate First Class Sammy Ray:**

Sammy Ray was already a bird zoologist with a college degree when he joined the U.S. Navy and was assigned as senior corpsman to the 1st Marine Division. Ray saw action with the Marines on Peleliu and Okinawa. Years later, he could still recall how horrific the fighting was.

When he wasn't in combat treating wounds, Ray eagerly collected bird specimens for the Smithsonian. He was given special equipment to hunt, preserve, and ship the birds back to the United States, which sometimes puzzled his fellow corpsmen and Marines. In 2012, some of the 171 specimens he collected during the war were included in an exhibit at the National Museum of Natural History in Washington, DC.

### **Pharmacist's Mate Third Class Richard Borden:**

Richard Borden was only 18 years old when he landed with the 6th Naval Beach Battalion on Omaha Beach with the first wave of troops on June 6, 1944. Within hours of the landing, he saw his partner killed while they tried to carry a stretcher. He would work nonstop for two days helping casualties, begging others to give him more blankets for the wounded and often pleading with personnel on landing craft to fit just one more man on before leaving the beach. In total, he spent two weeks on the beach treating casualties from the invasion.

Borden would be awarded the Bronze Star for his actions, and later see more duty in the Pacific. In 2004, Borden was also awarded the French Legion of Merit in recognition of his actions at Normandy. Despite these honors, Borden never considered himself to be a hero.



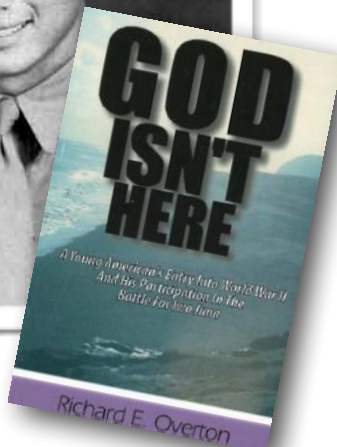
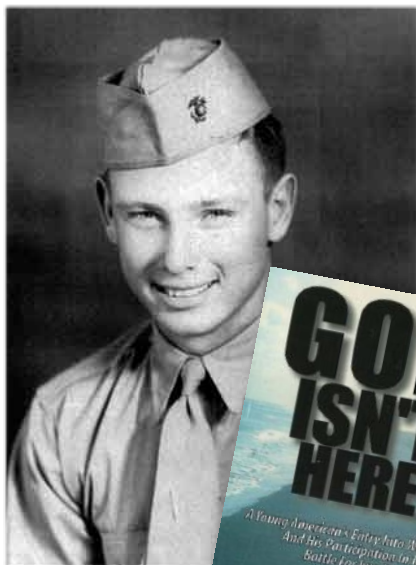
## Other Famous Corpsmen



**Pharmacist's Mate Second Class John Bradley:** John Bradley was long thought to be one of the men captured in the famous flag raising on Iwo Jima photograph, and joined surviving Marine flag raisers on the 7th War Bond Tour around the country in 1945. Although recent research has proved that Bradley was not in the more famous photograph, Bradley did participate in the first flag raising on Mount Suribachi and can be seen in Lou Lowery's photo of the event. He was also awarded the Navy Cross for his heroic actions saving a wounded comrade at the foot of the mountain on February 21, 1945.

Bradley told his parents that participating in the flag raising was one of the happiest moments of his life. Later in life, he struggled with being in the spotlight and didn't talk much about his service history.

You can see Doc Bradley standing in the back of the photograph with his hand on the flag pole.



**Pharmacist's Mate Second Class Richard E Overton:** Richard Overton grew up in California and had many Japanese American friends. He was sad to encounter kids who looked just like them on Iwo Jima. He was almost killed his first night on the island, and was eventually evacuated due to combat fatigue.

While he was serving occupation duty in Japan, Overton wrote down notes about his experiences in the service and on Iwo Jima. He would use these notes and other first person resources like Navy manuals to write a memoir: *God Isn't Here: A Young American's Entry into World War II and His Participation in the Battle for Iwo Jima*. It is one of the most thorough accounts from a corpsman who served in the war.

# Corpsmen Today

During World War II, you could only be a U.S. Navy corpsman if you were white and a man. Today, both men and women of any race or ethnicity can be corpsmen, as long as they have completed the necessary training.

Unlike corpsmen during World War II, who received very basic medical training, today's U.S. Navy Hospital Corpsmen are highly skilled medical professionals. Just like World War II era corpsmen were using top of the line equipment and medicine, corpsmen today use cutting edge technology to help speed up evacuation times and promote blood clotting. New understandings of how illnesses are transmitted and how to aid those with post-traumatic stress have helped corpsmen treat their patients more effectively. Modern hospital corpsmen can choose to take more training to become extremely specialized medical personnel, focusing on specialties like laboratory technicians or aerospace medicine.

Otherwise, U.S. Navy corpsmen are very similar to their World War II counterparts. They provide emergency medical care to Marines and also civilians in war torn areas, and serve in hospitals, U.S. Navy facilities, and on ships to care for sailors and their families. Corpsmen also help set up clinics, distribute medicine, and provide care to civilians wherever the U.S. Navy is sent, especially in times of war or natural disasters.

