

*The following text is a transcription of a speech written by Navy Lt. (j.g.) Frank Jirka for presentation before Ceska Beseda, an association of Croatian Czechs in the United States. Frank gave the speech shortly after returning from Great Lakes Naval Hospital near Chicago where he recuperated and rehabilitated from wounds suffered at Iwo Jima. We found the speech recently after his death in 2000, and it is the only known account, either written or verbal, of his first-hand experiences at Iwo Jima.*



Good evening friends and members of Ceska Beseda. I am indeed very happy to be here this evening and hope you will bear with me while I relate to you some of my experiences and tell you a little about one of the Navy's unknown organizations.

As you probably have been informed, I was a member of a naval organization commonly known as Underwater Demolition. Throughout the war, this organization was never publicized for reasons that you will understand as I go along.

Underwater Demolition was a very small organization that never exceeded 2500 men out of the 3.5 million men in the Navy. It was composed strictly of volunteers who could quit at any time, and was labeled "Top Secret" by the Navy Department.

Underwater Demolition, you might say, was conceived in one of the corridors of our Navy Department in Washington. It started out one day when an admiral, known for new ideas, called in a certain Commander Kaufman who at that time was in charge of the Mine Disposal School in Washington. When the commander reported to the Navy Department he met the admiral in one of the corridors as he was making his way to one of the conference rooms.

The admiral said, "Kaufman, I have a new idea that I want you to work on. You know the Japs and Germans have been placing their mines and all sorts of obstacles along possible invasion beaches. These obstacles will hamper our landing of troops when the day arrives for us to hit these beaches. So I want you to try to figure out some way of removing these hazards."

Commander Kaufman gave this a great deal of thought and finally decided that the only way possible to rid the beaches of such obstacles that the enemy might place there was by sending in men, trained in handling explosives, and blasting the obstacles out sometime

before our invasion forces were ready to strike. Upon arriving at this conclusion, he started to look around for a place that could be used in training men for this kind of work. He picked Ft. Pierce, Fla. as the logical spot because of the terrain, ocean currents and beaches. He got a few Seabees to volunteer, for they were men who had handled explosives all their lives. They built a few obstacles such as those used by the enemy and studied ways and means for removing them quickly and efficiently.

This small organization worked hard but for some reason was never called upon. It was just about to become a thing of the past, and then came Tarawa. You know what happened there. Obstacles and reefs hung up our landing crafts and men were killed trying to wade ashore in water sometimes over their heads. It was then that the demolition men came into light, for it was thought that with their knowledge of powder and how to remove obstacles they might be able to clear these invasion beaches. The first demolition team was given the chance during one of the earlier landings in the Pacific, and they succeeded in accomplishing their mission. From then on, the demand for demolition teams grew larger and soon men who knew nothing of explosives before they entered the Navy began volunteering for this type of work.

Our training program on the Atlantic Coast dealt mainly with the handling of explosives and how to put them to good use on obstacles along enemy beaches. I believe the best way for me to give you a little idea of our training is to tell you just what we did in the course of a normal day. Well, in the morning we had a few hours of calisthenics followed by a few miles of rubber boat races. In the afternoon we would practice setting up charges on every conceivable type of obstacle. There was very little loafing or goldbricking for everyone knew that some day he would have to put what he was learning into use under conditions which would not be as ideal as the ones found during practice. From the very beginning, of course, time was always emphasized. Everything had to be done like clockwork. The obstacles had to be blasted, the beach and approaches reconnoitered as quickly and accurately as was humanly possible.

Some evenings we would reconnoiter beaches, which meant coming in on a beach, crawling along it into the swamps or thickets until we reached and passed a group of sentries without their knowledge of us being there. Well, do I recall my first night at this type of work. I bet I sat and crawled through every cactus bush on that island in nothing more than a bathing suit. That same evening a big field rat almost ran over me. He scared me so that I had to rest a minute in order to catch my breath.

Several evenings a week, we would clear out obstacles. We accomplished this by coming in on a landing craft to within a few hundred yards off the beach. From there we used our rubber boats to carry in the explosives. One had to be very careful for the waves and currents could just as well as smash your body up against a pointed rail or send you sprawling into a barbed wire fence. I saw one boy who was a little careless and let one big wave carry him into such a rail. After the wave passed, we saw him hanging in the air with the rail sticking into his side.

While in the States, we worked a seven-man team, one officer and six enlisted men, but after we got out to the Pacific the team set-up was changed to four platoons consisting of twenty men and two to three officers per platoon.

At our Pacific base, the emphasis was more on reconnaissance and coral reef blasting. Here again, our mornings were spent taking exercises, but instead of going over an obstacle course, we would have to swim a couple of miles in a given time. For this, we wore an ordinary bathing suit with swim fins and a facemask that covered most of our face and had a large plate glass front. After noon chow, we would practice either reconnaissance or the blasting of channels through coral reefs. The latter was accomplished by loading our rubber boats with explosives, paddling up to the reef, laying the charges and setting them off. Let me tell you that when two to three tons of TNT goes off, it makes Old Faithful look like nothing more than a pot of boiling water.

Daylight reconnaissance always proved rather interesting. To properly execute such a problem our landing crafts would speed parallel to and about a mile out from the beach. At given intervals we would jump out of our craft and begin our long journey towards the shore again wearing nothing more than a swimsuit, fins and facemask. When possible we tried to swim in pairs, for it gets rather lonesome when you have to swim any great length by yourself, especially when you are supposed to obtain an accurate report on the condition of the beach, number of obstacles, etc.

I don't know if any of you ever paid much attention to the bottom of the ocean while swimming in Florida or California during vacation. Well, I often did and I want to say that there is just as much beauty to the ocean's floor as there is on land. It's interesting to note how the ocean floor gradually rises as you approach the beach, some places sharply and others so gradually that you hardly notice it. You see all types of beautiful caves, rocks, plants, and fish of many types and colors. It is so fascinating and mysterious that one sort of gets a chill up and down one's spine.

My one big scare came when one day while swimming in very deep water where I couldn't see I happened to look up to the right of me to see a six or seven foot shark coming along, much to my surprise. I reached for my knife, and it wasn't there. For some reason, I had forgotten to take it with me. Just about this time your imagination gets the best of you, but I tried to act calm, swim slowly along and keep saying over and over again what I had been told about most sharks not bothering a person, but rather being a very curious creature who after looking me over would swim on. Believe me when I say that I was never more relieved in my life when that baby must have decided that I was OK and disappeared into nowhere. After being once introduced to a shark under not such ideal conditions, you never leave your knife behind and only then do you start wondering whether there might really be some truth in the statement that sharks, as a rule, are just curious. During the weeks to follow, I bumped into a few more sharks or eels, but this time my mental reaction to them was not so severe or alarming.

We also did obstacle and reef blasting as well as reconnaissance late at night. This night work seems to take ages, for you don't know where or when you are going to run into

some sharp rocks, obstacles and/or under tow. Besides that, you have never seen the beach before, the night is pitch black, the air is cold, and you soon lose sight of your craft, so you can picture for yourself just how you might feel under such unpleasant and weird conditions.

One evening we had an added attraction. Starting around 12 midnight, four of us were sent in to scout a beach with full packs. Since we never saw the beach before, except on a map, we took it very easy. After some reconnoitering, we believed that we were on the right spot, so we signaled to the rest of the men. When all of the men were accounted for we proceeded on a five mile hike up a mountain. Arriving at our destination around eight, we hit the sack for two hours and proceeded back to our headquarters almost completely exhausted.

When the big day arrived, we boarded our APD's and set out for Iwo Jima. En route we had a short stay and practiced at Ulithi. From there we headed up to Saipan where we picked up some men from Marine Recon. companies of the divisions that were going to hit Iwo.

Our task force arrived at Iwo Jima on the morning of the of February 16<sup>th</sup> at 6 o'clock. It was a very foggy, cold, raining, miserable morning, so much so that for a while I couldn't see very much of anything. About 9:30 am the fog started to clear and the first thing we could see was Mt. Suribachi, rising around 550 feet into the air. As the fog rolled along, the rest of the island became visible. It was nothing more than a piece of rock and sand with dark sandy beaches and black treeless ridges. Now and then one could see steam rising from the sulphur pits found on the northern tip of the island. During my observation of the island, the task force maneuvered into position and the big guns from our large battleships and cruisers started to work over the island as we moved in. It was just about time for noon chow when someone noticed three small specks coming over the horizon. The next thing we saw was a few of our torpedo bombers diving down on these specks. A few minutes later we could see some thick, black smoke followed by a series of large flashes. We found out later that the boys sunk three Jap oil tankers coming into Iwo to refuel the airstrips, and didn't know that we were there until it was too late.

That afternoon a few of us were busy getting ready for a job we had volunteered to go on that evening. It seems that the Japs had some barrels on shore, which were believed to be full of gas or oil. The Japs were supposed to ignite these barrels as the first wave hit the beach. Now our job was to go in, see just what was in those barrels and if they contained fuel or some form of explosive, try to find the detonating control and cut the circuits. We were told not to be taken alive and were given a knife and one hand grenade for protection. For some reason this operation was canceled, and a short time afterwards we were informed that some of the barrels contained Jap snipers.

On the morning of the 17<sup>th</sup>, our first reconnaissance took place. To give fire support for the teams we had a few LCI's (Landing Craft Infantry) converted into gun boats, and several destroyers. As the LCI's were forming in a column, word came over our APD

loudspeakers to get ready to embark in our Higgins boats. Just about this time I felt as though I was shaking like a rattlesnake's rattle.

Well, word was given to embark, so we climbed down into the boats. Our landing crafts formed in a column corresponding to our beaches and directly behind the column of LCI's. When we reached our prearranged distance off the shore the LCI's turned, went parallel to the island and upon reaching their assigned beach turned in. Our landing crafts did likewise. Just as we were about 400 yards off our beaches, all hell broke loose. Mortars, coast guns, machine guns and small arms fire was being fired all around us and at us from what looked like a rather dead island ten minutes before. We tried to call for some fire support, but it was of no avail, since we couldn't tell exactly where the firing was coming from due to the Japs' crisscrossed pattern of defenses, with interlocking trenches, gun positions and rat hole-like caves.

While the morning operation was still underway and after some of us finished our reconnaissance, a marine captain, two of his men, and I went out to where our supporting LCI was to be located. We found that it was hit and out of action. Just then a large shell hit near our craft and raised the aft end up with quite a force. After looking around we noticed an LCI that wasn't the one assigned to us, but which was off our beach. We decided to go aboard and try to spot our gunfire from it. We came alongside and the four of us climbed aboard. I went up to the bridge, told them what I was there for and what team I represented. I was standing at the time, on the after port side of the bridge, but since the forward gun's smoke was obstructing my view, I moved to the forward starboard side. I no sooner moved over when our ship, which was around 700 yards off the beach and slowly moving in, almost got hit.

I said to the captain that it looks like we're getting in pretty close, when the next thing I knew I was flat on the deck, wounded. I tried to stand but was unable to do so. Since I was not suffering from any pain I looked down to see just why I was unable to stand. It was then that I noticed a pair of blown up feet at right angles to my body, without shoes or stockings. I thought surely those couldn't be mine for I was wearing shoes when I came aboard. Then I suddenly felt a painful drawing sensation and upon noticing carefully found that those mangled pieces of skin and bone were all that was left of my good nine and a half C's. I then crawled to the after end of the bridge, for the spot that I was standing on was no longer there. I asked for some morphine and gave myself a shot. I then had a fellow mark the time of the injection on my "T" shirt and had him help me apply tourniquets.

I forced myself to stay awake and it was during this period that all of my past went by me slowly and vividly. If that's what happens when a person is dying, I'll never worry when my day arrives. While stretched out on the deck I kept on thinking about my cousin A.J. and it was just as though he was there telling me to keep on fighting and not to give up. I perched myself up on my elbows in order to see just how bad the ship was hit. I glanced down on the main deck and there I saw men covered with blood, sprawled all over the place. Some dead, others dying. The ship was hit three times – forward, in the pilot

house, and on the after part of the ship. We had to use our auxiliary steering apparatus, since the main one was shot out.

In an hour or so they finally took 27 casualties out of 48 men off and on to the USS Tennessee where at last we saw a doctor. They gave me five units of plasma and two quarts of blood, which possibly some of you Beseda members generously donated and for which I'm very grateful. Around ten hours later they took me to the operating room and there they removed what remained of my feet.

A few days later, I was taken to Guam. From there I was sent by plane to Pearl Harbor. After spending two weeks at Pearl, I was placed on a ship that took me to Mare Island, California. While in San Francisco, I was very fortunate in being able to attend the conference. Since I did not have my new limbs at that time, I was in part carried into the conference by a doctor, a captain at that. I thought that the conference was indeed very interesting and am sure that the delegates from the various countries were doing a lot toward ending wars for all time.

In closing, I would like to say that I believe the Demolition Teams have made a name for themselves in the Pacific as well as in the Atlantic. Underwater Demolition Teams were always the wave before the first wave in Normandy, Ulithi, Guam, Saipan, Peleiu, Tinian, Philippines, Borneo, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa. Every American in combat duty, whether he was a soldier, sailor, marine, whatever outfit he may have been in, has made a name for himself on every island in the Pacific and every battlefield in Europe.

So let us just not hope for a lasting peace, but always remain prepared while striving and working hard for it, so that the boys now coming home, and most of all, those who laid down their lives in defense of our country, will realize that this war, the bloodiest of all, has given this world a lasting peace, and that their children will not have to make history again on some future battlefield.

*After returning to the United States to rehabilitate from his injuries and the amputation of both legs at the knee, Frank Jirka received the Silver Star for his bravery and his selfless concern for others while under intense hostile fire at Iwo Jima.*

*Upon discharge from the Navy, Frank finished college, got married to his high school sweetheart, and was admitted to the University of Illinois Medical School, where he graduated to become a urologist and surgeon, all while wearing his prostheses. He went on to become President of the Chicago Medical Society, President of the Illinois Medical Society, and in 1984 President of the American Medical Association.*

*Frank died from lung cancer in 2000 insisting that he be buried wearing his prostheses. He claimed he would never have appreciated life or accomplished as much as he did had he not lost his legs that fateful day in 1945.*



Frank J. Jirka and daughter two months before he died