

National Park Service (NPS)

Mariana Islands Wartime Experience through Oral Histories Fellowship
(WAPA 4170)
Mellon Humanities Postdoctoral Fellowship Program



Cyril O'Brien
Unknown

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This digitization was made possible through the National Park Service by a grant from the National Park Foundation through generous support from the Mellon Foundation.

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Interviewee: Cyril O'Brien

Session 1

Military Rank: Sergeant, Correspondent for Easy Company Second Battalion Third Marines

Interviewer: Rose Manibusen, National Parks Service

Guam

Date: Unknown

[START OF SESSION 1]

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Q: This is Rose Manibusen for the National Parks Service and I'm interviewing Cy O'Brien today, as the war was seen by World War II veterans. Can you give me your full name?

O'Brien: Cyril, C-Y-R-I-L, Cyril O'Brien. They called me in the Marine Corps OB.

Q: And can you give me a place of residence?

O'Brien: And I live at 1004 Reddick Drive, R-E-D-D-I-C-K Drive in Silver Spring, Maryland and I was a writer and a media representative for the Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory just outside of Washington, D.C. until a year or so ago when I retired. I had been in the newspaper work most of the time and, in fact, even when I was working at Hopkins I was still a representative for papers in New Jersey. And, in fact, one of the reasons my coming back to Guam, a secondary reason by all means, is to write for newspapers and magazines about what I see here. However, it's not my principle reason. My principle reason for returning was simply to see the battlegrounds and to see the landing beaches where I landed as a member, as a Sergeant with the First Battalion of the Third Regiment of the Third Marine Division very near Adelup Point. I'll be—this is my third trip and I'll be staying, as I did before, oh, in the vicinity of a week.

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I was 21 when I joined the Marine Corps in 1942, in July, and I landed on Guam when I was 23, two years later. I was with the, as I mentioned, the Third Marine Division. And I had served before on Bougainville, Solomon Islands north of Guadalcanal, and there I had been in the Infantry. In fact, I was an Infantry Scout and I was so good that I wonder if some of the poor Marines I was with are still there. They—because I

was brand new at it and I had not much experience as a scout but my first introduction to combat and—

Q: At Bougainville?

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O'Brien: At Bougainville. So, therefore, when I came here, I had heard guns fired before but, however, there were—I was a replacement on Bougainville, I didn't make the landing. So making a landing makes all the difference in the world. There was an awful lot of more fire. In fact, I remember the thing that's—probably the first impression I got of Guam was the night before the invasions. I was on a ship offshore and the star shells were falling continually and I could look out there and see these big black hills that would be illuminated and they'd even throw silhouettes. And you'd see them and then another star shell would pop and all night the Navy shelling continued and all night the star shells broke and all night you looked at these big black hills, which almost hypnotized you and you thought, "Tomorrow, I will be in there."

It wasn't necessarily a sense of fear, as it was excitement. There was no need to fear it because you knew you were going to have to do it. Everybody was excited and I remember before we landed they gave us a big meal at 3:00 in the morning, or whatever it was, I think it was steak. Even then, I couldn't eat steak at 3:00 in the morning. And I know that the Chaplain all gave us Communion and we went down and got into these AmTracs, these mechanized vehicles that take you ashore. I remember there was a Corpsman with me, a very cheerful fellow with a big mustache, and he said, "OB, I'll see you on the beach." And unfortunately, a shell landed in his AmTrac and I never saw him again, after all, he was killed.

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When I got ashore, there wasn't nearly the gunfire that I thought. I had been watching the beach and it was erupting in guises of flame and smoke and just fiery pandemonium. But when I landed, there was only occasional rattling of a machine gun or a fire here or a puff, whoosh of a mortar here, but not the same fuss as it was before. I found out later the reason for that that the gunfire apparently had kept the Japanese down and the first few waves didn't get all that intense firing that came subsequently.

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Later, however, the din was unbearable. I remember trying to talk to somebody on Chonito Ridge. We had to move up the hill. I remember, we crossed these rice paddies and we're going up the hill and the din was—I remember the sound was so great that you had to yell at someone merely so they could hear you.

The—what did I want to do? I had been in the Infantry as it were, a Marine, the Line Company on Bougainville, but now I was a Marine Corps Combat Correspondent. And what I wanted to do above all things was to write a story about these Marines and the first invasion I had ever seen or known and I wanted to get every detail. But, I'll be darned, every time I would sit down—we had a little typewriter, much, much bigger than your recording machine here—and then—and we would fit in your knee for a desk and you typed on that. And I remember rattling off the lead about the invasion of Guam by the Marines and all of a sudden these confounded mortars would start to come in and they had—and they were like—it wasn't a matter of being concerned about them, what you were worried about they were interrupting what you wanted to do. And so you would say, "Damn those mortars." And you'd go over—you didn't have time to dig a foxhole so there was a fellow over in the corner and I said, "Could I—you mind if I get in with your foxhole with you?" And he said, "Okay, OB." So I went back, but I still didn't dig a foxhole, I started to use the typewriter again and the mortars came again. I went over again, the third time, he said, "Hey OB, you better dig your own foxhole."

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So I was of course impressed by the defense of the Japanese. They were on top of that hill and they were pouring everything at them. They were really defending themselves very well and the Marines were just as tenacious as they were defensive. They were oh, about 100 yards or something from each other. In fact, the Marines were so close that the Jap—it wasn't 100 yards, but they were very close. The Marines were so close that in some cases the Japanese couldn't even throw their hand grenades, they used to roll them down the hill, because if they threw them, they'd go too far, they were that close.

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So eventually though, a group went up the side and of course the history tells how they got them and we laid a lot of artillery and fire in on them. And I went up—later I went up and saw the Japanese defenses

and some of them were huddled—huddled in—they were dead but you could see they were huddled in fear, like someone huddling out of the rain, a couple of them were. There must have been—they huddled like that when the shells went off.

Q: Do you remember how long it took to get the Chonito Cliff area?

O'Brien: Able Company was, I believe, a day and a half before they could get over that, not 100 yards, 25, 30, 30 yards, but it was all up hill. That's Able Company, which I was pretty much attended to, took that long. It was the next day to go over that short period. However, of course, the other Regiment like the Ninth had gone by, you know, ran right threw like a juggernaut on the other part. But here they were shot right on the beach by the Japanese.

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O'Brien: There was a poignant personal item in this. As I said, I had been in a Line Company, that Second Battalion. I was with Easy Company, Second Battalion, Third Marines. Right before we left for Guam, I was offered a job as a Combat Correspondent. In fact, I had been offered a commission to go back to the United States and I was about to take it until I met a newspaper man who was a correspondent and he told me there was an opening and they were going to Guam and didn't have time to get anybody from the States and I had it if I wanted it. So I became—well, I am a writer so I wanted to be a writer so I took the job. I was happy to take it and they made me correspondent. And I landed, as I say, here as a Sergeant. The Marine Corps kept us all—all the correspondents as enlisted. They did it to—they commissioned us after the war. They kept us enlisted because we have a better rapport with the men. If you went in there as a Captain or a Lieutenant, you wouldn't have the same rapport.

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So I was with this fire team, this cracked fire team, and when I went—they—this Easy Company, Second Battalion and the rest of the companies tried to assault that Chonito Ridge from the north, from the flank, I suppose facing the—it would be the flank and they were chewed up. Everybody in the fire team that I had been with was killed. Had I been saved, I very likely would have been killed with them because it was the fire team and everyone was killed. In fact, most of the squad was killed.

Q: And what squad, what Company was that?

O'Brien: It was Easy Company Second Battalion Third Marines. So I, with many officers, whose name by the way was also O'Brien, got to the top at Chonito Hill and was killed as he reached the top there. So I think the intensity of that battle has been underplayed in the United States by historians. They made Guam appear as a battle of light resistance. This is what the earlier press report said. This was very easy for the AP and UP or the other reporters who were sitting off shore and getting their reports from the Navy to report. But had they stood right here and seen that, they would certainly have never considered this to be an easy campaign. And it wasn't for that Able Company that was practically wiped out halfway up the hill.

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Of course, my memory and most of my attention is glued to the Chonito Cliff because this is where such an impression was made of me. Then I stayed with the First Battalion and we moved across the island. It wasn't an easy thing. In fact, there was such things as I remember one night, which most anybody with the Sixth would remember about the second night or so this Japanese Banzai attacked and struck parts of the First Battalion, which I was with. I was saved only because I was separated from them by a ravine. They chose that side, the other side of the ravine to come down and not where I was. It was pandemonium and the Japanese platoon, as you probably know from history, that they were throwing charges into the tents and bayoneting people in their foxholes.

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Then it was, as a correspondence, I wasn't writing about the overall event of the regiment, the overall event of the battalion. I was writing about individual people. Private so-and-so, Corporal so-and-so, I was writing about them. So when an event occurred, I would go to that area and the—go—to interview the Marines right after the event had occurred. Sometimes I had to stay there and of course, you took part or was present at the fire—in a firefight when these things occurred and just had to lay low. Frequently, of course, you were still caught in mortar fire.

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[END OF SESSION 1]

[START OF SESSION 2]

O'Brien: (Started mid sentence)...was that they never called me Sergeant or Captain or anything they called me OB. And you would write a story home and if one of these Marines would see me come by and say, "Hey, OB," wave his hand with a newspaper clipping in it. And you would go up and there across the front page of the paper in Erie, Illinois would be the story and a picture of this Marine. And the proudest thing about that is this, they say that the dispatches of the water services of course always knew what was going on and they talked about McArthur. But they said that the articles that we wrote as correspondents about people will be kept for generations in family bibles and that's a really interesting thing to keep in mind.

There were interesting individual stories. I remember there was a Lieutenant Grillo from North Jersey. He stopped me and he said, "OB," he said, "this is a miracle. My life was saved by almost a miracle." And I said, "What was that?" And he pulled out of his pocket a prayer book or a missile he had and it was right in his pocket over his heart and I'll be darned if it hadn't deflected a bullet because it was made of metal. He had a metal cover and it had deflected a bullet.

There was another young fellow I was with one night, I remember, and there was an attack. Then he said, "Oh my god I've been hit, I've been hit," and he knew he felt he blood all over him. He was sticky and black and he knew he had been hurt badly. Yet, later, he found out he wasn't hit at all because the blood that he smelled that he had on his hand smelled sweet and tasted sticky. What it was, it was a can of peaches he had in the foxhole. [Laughing.] A hand grenade broke it open and put all the juice all over him and in the night, he thought he had been hit and he felt he was bleeding to death and he couldn't find any wounds.

The day after we took it, maybe the same day we took it that afternoon, I went to the top—I wanted to get this on tape. I went to the top of the hill. I was halfway up to the top of the hill where I knew the day before there had been a machine gun, because we were going up with a group of correspondents. We thought—with a photographer. His name was Herb Ball. Herb Ball is from Tanzania, California and Herb

and I as a photographer worked as a team. When we saw Able Company tracked up there, we thought I wonder could we get up where Able Company is.

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So we started to go up the hill with a wire team. We were moving halfway up the hill and this machine gun opened up. You could see the little mists. Now nobody sees a machine gun open up and they miss and lives, if the machine gun is firing at them. It wasn't. The machine gun was firing at a Marine machine gun down the hill and as someone explained to us later the Marine and the Japanese machine guns were going at kind of a duel over our heads. [Laughing.]

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Then a young fellow jumped up with a car beam, one of the—stupidly, and fired at the Japanese machine gun, which was about as far away as the car across the street. And I thought oh, we're dead. We're dead. How would the machine gun [unclear] paid apparently no attention.

The next day I went—but we didn't bother going up it was impossible. The fire was too intense. It would have been crazy. You could never have gotten to Able Company. So we went—I went down to the bottom of the hill and I found the Captain of Intelligence who—I was under Intelligence for logistic purposes. And he said, "OB," he said, "My god," he said, "I got the report you were dead." So someone thought I was dead. I did, I thought I was dead, too.

Anyway, the next day I went up the top of that hill. There I found a Japanese machine gun. It may have been the one I saw before. I found this all by myself. There was nobody with me. There were two Japanese beside it and both of them had holes in their heads. Both of them had been shot. In between them was an unexploded American hand grenade. It had never been fired. It was one of the green hand grenades and never been fired, never went off. And right in front of them was a Marine. He was slouched over and a carbine across his lap and his head had been smashed—his helmet had been smashed in by what may have been machine gun fire. So you could tell what had occurred there. This Marine had thrown a hand grenade and it was defective and that's what cost him his life and then he killed him with his pistol, with his carbine, and they in return killed him. It was a dramatic scene that I will

never forget and my god it was so fresh [coughs] the event couldn't have been more than 12 hours old.

Q: Was it anybody that you knew?

OB: No, no. I tried to find out who it was and never found out. But I had one advantage that in combat, and in the Marines Corps, that other people did not have. I, as a correspondent, could go literally anywhere I wanted to at any time, you know, just as long as I stayed in my assigned area, which was the First Battalion. But the thing that would get me was the use of Line Marines. Remember I—it's true I had been there where the firing was, but remember I wasn't the guy who had—I came up when the event had happened or I learned what occurred. I wasn't the man who was standing there with these screaming Japanese coming at them. I had heard about it the next day. And somebody who told me the story yesterday was killed this day. And of course, the thing was if you were alive, you were a big success. That's all you had to be was—if you breathe and touch yourself, you knew you were a big success.

I had to—gees, you really get tremendous admiration for these people who were facing, you know, facing imminent death continually. The possibility of death was a lot like—almost as if this is a certainty of being rained upon, that's how close it was, you know, if you were out in the rain. Although I wrote about it that I was with them, I still remember I did not have the same tension. Did not have the same—I wasn't in the same jeopardy as the men who actually were there and these people screamed at them. The universality of people.

I've written stories of another island about the Japanese killed themselves afraid of these terrible Americans who would torture them. And I—you know, the innate chivalry of the American, I don't give a shit. The innate chivalry in respect for womankind as an impression. We want back—I was on a patrol. We went back over this heavy stream, something like a river, and we found these Japanese women in a cave. They were [unclear] little ladies and of course, nobody looked pretty after living in a cave, their hair falling down. And I always remember when we got to the stream these big Marines picked these women up and carried them across the water so they wouldn't get their feet wet. You know, it was just innate chivalry for them to help these little ladies across the stream. Now these were the enemy Japanese, if you wanted to call them, but the fact they were still women and that respect came out of that. I was very much impressed by that.

Of course, what shocked me was you could never get used to seeing people with terrible wounds. That's

the problem, you know, to see other men hurt badly like that, it's just—but I'm amazed I've seen them so badly hurt and torn up and you wouldn't think they'd cut their finger. You know, they were—except for the shock of it. When I landed on Guam I was going ashore and I found I had a slash or cut in my hand that was bleeding and I thought, "Heavens, I better get something on this or it will—it may get infected or something, you know, it was all dirty." And so there was an aid station very close to me and I went up to it. It was very close by and I went to the aid station and went on up to the aid station and I looked and I saw all these men that had been so badly hurt, I just put my hand in my pocket and didn't say anything. I just went away.

Yes, about the people in Guam, I was very much impressed. The thing that impressed me was they were living in hovels under the ground because their homes and everything had been destroyed. And I remember them living in holes in the ground practically. This was like first day. And I couldn't believe seeing this young girl come out from under the ground and she looked as clean and fresh, her clothes, I'm wondering how in heaven's name could this—the pride and self-respect that young lady had. You know, I would have said to hell with it. I wouldn't care if I had anything on me. But I was impressed by that.

Well, later, the first time I had ever tasted their red rice we were on a patrol section here and so eventually, we put an outpost way out. When one day suddenly, out of thin air, in came a whole group of people from a nearby town and right there on the spot they cooked beef, they had the meat, they cooked beef for the whole group. It was about not quite Company strength and they cooked all the meal for us, gave us all—cut up all papaya and then made us the red rice and it's the first time I'd ever had red rice. Now every time I came back to Guam, we usually have a fiesta and usually get the red rice. But it was the first time I had ever seen it.

Q: Was there anybody [Crosstalk]?

O'Brien: There was—yeah, there was a young man his name was—a young man, about 14, he had a [unclear], a wagon, and they're only one speed and that was slow. And he used to come by all the time. Occasionally, he'd give us fruit and we'd give him candy or canned goods or whatever it was and we got to know him very well. I found out later that he and his father had operated a radio. They hid it in his wagon. If the Japanese knew I guess that would have been death if they were caught.

Then there was a lady named Rose. I think her name was Torres, like Priscilla Torres the girl in Saipan. We used to go—she used to always do all our shirts and she had a—it wasn't an electric iron, she had a heated iron on the stove. We were able to get fresh starched shirts and she'd do that right here. Oh, it was a wonderful feeling. And I remember her very well, too. Go ahead.

How I feel about the Japanese? No, I don't have the—no, I don't have bitterness. I feel that they were young men, the ones I had contended, they were young men who were GIs and who had to stay here and do the same thing we did. Had I, however, as some other Marines did, had very close friends bayoneted or killed beside them, my feelings may have been completely different. But with my own experience, knowing them as just other soldiers, no I didn't. I don't have any bitterness.

One day, an interesting story, I was asked to take a prisoner back from here to Division. And we were going along and group of Marines got hit in the firefight and they brought this wounded bloody Marine out and they took our jeep from us and left me alone in the jungle with this Japanese. And I thought, "My God, if a Marine see him I'm dead." And so along came a Marine Corps truck that I was taking this Jap back to the stockade and the driver—I was hitchhiking and the driver stopped and the Japanese, he didn't want to get away, he jumped on the back of the truck like I did. And the driver said, "Whose your buddy?" [Laughing.] He was—so he had been from Tokyo and grew up there, grew up in the city, and wanted to surrender. He didn't go for all that [unclear] crap. [Crosstalk.]

Q: Did he speak English? Did he speak English?

O'Brien: No, I had an interpreter with me. No. Okay. What would I like to see? Well, I—

Q: Before we get—

O'Brien: Huh?

Q: Before we get into the National Park, could you give us what you remember after you left Guam and where you went after you left Guam?

O'Brien: Oh, what I remember about Guam. I think—okay, is it on?

Q: Yeah, it's on.

O'Brien: I always, from the time I landed, I always felt close to Guam. I don't know if it's my landing—because I landed here. I've always had a soft spot for Guam. I always felt—I—it was part of me and I thought there's no American on Guam that was nine minutes before me here. Each way was three

minutes and so that put me theoretically nine minutes right here. So there was nobody here nine minutes before me. So I thought, you know, that—so I felt somewhat possessive of Guam. Now looking back, I just felt warm about it, I felt warm about the people.

What I like about the people, okay. One, I like it's beautiful. Two, I feel close to it. Three, the people have always been warm. They've always—I never saw a sour grape yet. Maybe I never got in any trouble with anybody, but they're always very warm and receptive. And another very interesting thing, too, they're not—you've seen places or other parts of the world where people just don't seem to give a damn. Here, everybody's so alert. You know, it's funny the Americans anywhere they go, and they probably picked this up a little bit from the British, what is that Anglo Saxon superiority that the British—the Americans really don't have that that much but the British had a lot of it. I came back here and I went—I was on Guam or Saipan there was a young Chamorro girl who spoke Carolinian, English, Japanese and Chamorro and she turned the languages on like you'd turn off lights, you know. God, they're impressive. I was very much impressed by the people of the land. I just very much like Guam. It's a lovely land.

Q: Did you follow the troops to Iwo Jima?

O'Brien: Oh, yes, I went to Iwo Jima then. I was with the Third—I landed with the Ninth—no, I didn't land with the Ninth Marines. I was with the Third Regiment, which was never committed on Iwo Jima. And when I realized I wasn't getting committed, I started to scream and yell and I wrote—I got in touch with my commanding officer who was ashore. And I said, "Get me ashore. I don't want to be just standing off the land. If I'm this close, I'll be damned, I want to get to it." And he pulled some strings and he got me ashore and I joined the Ninth Marines on Iwo Jima and I had a chance then to—of course, a lot of the fighting was over by the time I go there. And the—

Q: Was the terra like?

O'Brien: What did you say?

Q: What was the area like, the terra?

O'Brien: Well, at first I landed where everybody landed on the—on the Danash (ph), which is the base of Suribachi. Danash (ph), very interestingly enough, if you had the—well, you live in the States you know. If you've ever burned coke, it looked just like coke, porous looking thing. And then they moved us down to

the southern part of the island where they were patrolling. So I used to go out with the—I tried to get as much—I'd do as much as all of the Marines as I could, if I didn't get the way.

One night I was on an ambush. I always remember this. You know, I was on an ambush and they were waiting for the Japanese to come by and all of a sudden everything lit up, sparks and noise and guns would chatter and bang, bang and they killed a number of the Japanese they caught in the ambush.

All right, in the morning I found heel marks. What occurred is—like heel marks that were left something like marks of a cart, a wagon. Like the tracks of a wagon but they were heel marks. I'll tell you what, someone had come in under our guns, the Japanese, taken a fellow, taken a buddy, and dragged his body or his wounded buddy, out from under our guns and took him away and he's lost in the field. And I thought, you know, that's—that was really a courageous thing for him to do. I remember that.

Okay. The thing I remember about Iwo Jima was the—there was a lot of—all of my acquaintance with Iwo Jima were like here were the most intense with those first couple of days. The banzai attacks, the attacks on the hill, but then it got slower. As the Japanese were beaten, it got slower and it got slower and there would be a firefight here and then there would be a long period of nothing and so forth. On Iwo Jima, the intensity of Chonito Ridge seemed to have a [unclear]. It would never stop. It always was the same intense combat that seemed to just never stop. But that's the difference in Iwo, it just seemed to be much more—the fighting seemed to be much more intense. Okay.

Q: The War in the Pacific National Historic Park was commemorated for all people, all nations who participated in World War II. What would you like to see personally at the park?

O'Brien: First, let me tell you what I like about it.

Q: As far as development.

O'Brien: What I like about it is that it's the most complete, centralized memor—area of memorabilia and history of the war, including the uniforms, the Japanese soldier in the uniform with the weapons. There are things down there that I recall and that I'm happy to see. However, the museum is an entity. You have done nothing to relate the museum to the hills that are right neighboring you. I can look right now

out this window and see a hill where combat took place. Right across the hill right over there. But there's nothing here that tells me that's so.

I think the idea—the National Parks Service has done a wonderful job. Of course, they've had 100 years to do it. At Gettysburg, Fredericksburg and the other battlegrounds, they've outlined the battle scenes, they've delineated the units, they've told the progress of the battle and it's simple for even a non-military person to get this whole picture.

What I would like here, and I think anybody would like, would be to have a marker out on the road, or in here, maybe a bronze graphic depiction of the hills so someone could stay here and look at these hills and then mark them out on the road. Then point out in as simple memory as you can where the landings took place, marking off the units and then maybe something about what happened on Day 2, Day 3, Day 4. You wouldn't have to cover the whole battle that could be done subsequently. But I think the battle for the beach head should certainly be covered and made simple and graphic right here at this very spot. Here you could do it inside better, you do it on a wall or on a wall map. But out there, you might put a marker, a bronze—put them in bronze or copper out there on the street and then someone could come by. And you say—you don't know how effective it would be. It's done already. It's done at Fredericksburg, it's done at Gettysburg, it's done at Bull Run or Manassas, depending on where you're from, and done very effectively. I'd like to see it that would be great.

Q: Is there anything that you would personally like to add?

O'Brien: Let me see. I would like to see a permanent, very obvious marker here, very much of the kind that you will see in the States. They are large and they are white with black letters. The Parks Service puts them up and they're everywhere in the States. And you can go by and it will say, "Here General Braddock in 1767 did this." Why can't we have such a marker here that people driving by, and you do have many visitors, would stop and see it and make it a tribute as well as a marker to the Marines that landed here. And I can look at the very hills where they lost their lives right now. Fine.

Q: Okay. On behalf of the National Parks Service, I would like to thank you for your contribution to our history collection.

O'Brien: Thank you.[END OF SESSION 2][END OF INTERVIEW]