

Oral History Interview of Jerry Papa
Military Service: Army for Three Years
November 28, 2002
31 June Place, Aberdeen NJ
Guggenheim Oral History Project

Interview of Jerry Papa

*I fought in a war and I left my friends behind me
To go looking for the enemy, and it wasn't very long
Before I would stand with another boy in front of me
And a corpse that just fell into me, with the bullets flying
round*

*And I reminded myself of the words you said when we
were getting on
And I bet you're making shells back home for a steady
boy to wear
Round his neck, well it won't hurt to think of you as if
you're waiting for
This letter to arrive because I'll be here quite a while*

*I fought in a war and I left my friends behind me
To go looking for the enemy, and it wasn't very long
Before I found out that the sickness there ahead of me
Went beyond the bedsit infamy of the decade gone
before*

*And I reminded myself of the words you said when we
were getting on
And I bet you're making shells back home for a steady
man to wear
Round his neck, well it won't hurt to think of you as if
you're waiting for
This letter to arrive because I'll be here quite a while*

*I fought in a war, and I didn't know where it would end
It stretched before me infinitely, I couldn't really think
Of the day beyond now, keep your head down pal
There's trouble plenty in this hour, this day
I can see hope I can see light*

*And I reminded myself of the looks you gave when we
were getting on
And I bet you're making shells back home for a steady
man to wear
Round his neck, well it won't hurt to think of you as if
you're waiting for
This letter to arrive because I'll be here quite a while*

**- "I fought in a War"
Belle and Sebastian**

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November 28, 2002
For the archives of the Guggenheim Library
& The Veteran's History Project**

Question: Where and when were you born?

Answer: November 20, 1919, in Bridgeport, Connecticut

Q: And from there where did you go?

A: When I was 3 years old I went to Italy, about 20 miles from Naples and I lived there for 15 years and then I returned to the United States in 1938 and I lived in New Jersey until I was drafted into the Army.

Q: What was it like growing up in Italy?

A: I lost my father when I was seven years old; it was hard time from that time on. But I learned; I went to school, went to high school. At the same time I learned to be a barber. And then I drop out and in about a year and half I return to the United States.

Q: What were your favorite things to do while you were growing up?

A: My favorite thing was to play soccer and play with the kids my age.

Q: Let's talk about the soccer; what was your soccer experience like?

A: Well, I was the only one to organize it in a little town where I grew up. When I say organize, I mean I combine seven small villages to make a pennant out of seven, eight teams, the championship of the region, and I played with one of the teams.

Q: Which team did you play for?

A: The team was called Sala; S-A-L-A. And the region was Caserta, which was a county on the sea. We just played to make the best of each other, not for no prize or anything.

Q: What position did you play?

A: Goalie.

Q: When did you start to play?

A: (laughs) Oh, from the time I started to walk.

Q: You must have been very good. When the war broke out in 1939, you were in the United States?

A: Yes.

Q: So you came to the United States in 1938. What was pre-war Italy like? Where there tensions in Italy while you where there?

A: It was the fascist dictatorship at the time and it had a good way to get the people to make up the regime. And everyone was enthusiastic about Italy being a great nation again, but it seems to have been a mistake because they never thought the United States would go fight in Europe and defeat the Axis: Rome, Berlin, Tokyo.

Q: Is that why your family left Italy?

A: Well, I left with my brother. And my mother, forecasting war, so she sent me and my brother to the United States, the country where I was born to be safe.

Q: And she stayed?

A: And she stayed, and my sister. I had a sister there too.

Q: How long did they stay?

A: Well, my mother died right after the war. My sisters came back to the United States in 1946.

Q: What was your knowledge of the rise of Hitler and Mussolini?

A: Well, I went to school there, I grew up with that system which showed me the nice things about the regime, which at that age you don't understand so much until you realize it was the wrong regime.

Q: What was it like living under that regime?

A: As a young, I never think about the economic side, but the political side I was enthusiastic about it because it was youth movement, all young people being pushed to back up the regime to besides the schooling there was the propaganda that make people think the regime way.

Q: Looking at it now, how would you compare and contrast the similarities and differences between our democracy in the United States today and the regime in Italy?

A: There was a big difference. There was always a lack of freedom. The only thing that you were a little bit [free to do] was to breathe the air over there, the rest was very much controlled but being a young person you don't see no difference. That's the way of life. But now I could see the difference is just like night and day.

Q: What was your opinion of Japan when the war started?

A: Well, I did know much about it. Like I said, when your young you never watch the political difference, but as the propaganda spread all over the nation we could believe that Japan, Germany and Italy were totally invincible.

Q: In 1939 when the war started in September, do you remember where you were or what you were doing when you found out that the war had begun in Europe?

A: Well, at the time it was December 7, 1941, when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor. I was playing cards with my uncle, my brother, my cousin when news broke that Japan had bombed Pearl Harbor.

Q: Prior to Japan bombing Pearl Harbor and the war starting 1939, did you ever anticipate that you would be a part of the war?

A: Never, because at the time there was not even what they call a selective service. No one was called to be drafted. It was the United States helping England to supply and things like that but there was no suspicion of getting involved because it was peaceful here; the nation was not attacked until Japan did. So there were no ill feelings militarily with anybody.

Q: Did your mother and sister move at all when the war started?

A: No, they had property in the little village and they stayed there. When they went into the war there was a big hardship.

Q: Was that village ever attacked?

A: It was close to a military region and the Air Force academy was only about two, three miles away from the village, plus artillery and infantry camps so they got a little bombing too.

Q: And you had great concern for them, I imagine?

A: Oh, sure.

Q: What were your feelings about Pearl Harbor, you said you were playing cards when you heard, what were your feelings about it?

A: Well, It was sad because there was a big catastrophe there and it was not a nice event. Awful.

Q: How do you think that the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 compares to the attack on the Trade Centers last year?

A: Well, it was about the same except Pearl harbor was the beginning of World War, the entire world involved while the World Trade was just a terrorist attack not a nation attack, a terrorist attack. They are different.

Q: And how did you get involved in the Army?

A: I had registered in selection, to selected for Army or military, training, something like that.

Q: And when were you drafted?

A: I register on September (pause), selected for December 13 and I was inducted into active service January 15, 1941.

Q: Where were you trained?

A: Camp Lee, Virginia.

Q: And what were the training facilities like?

A: Well, that's one of the big differences between the military in the United States and the military in Italy. Here we had a barracks with a lot of convenience. When I say convenience I mean we had showers, bathrooms, we had regular beds and like I said before there was a military section where I grew up and I could see the soldiers facilities. They were 10% compared to the United States. That's when I started to see the difference between the regime, Democracy and Dictatorial.

Q: What was a typical training day like?

A: You mean the military training?

Q: Yes.

A: It was very accelerated because the war broke and they need GI's in the quickest way. It was usually five months training and I had to do five months training in two months.

Q: Did you immediately make any friends in training or was it entirely too accelerated?

A: No, there was friendship because there were 31-37 GI's sleeping in the same barrack and I made a friendship, a close friendship with a fellow who was in the same position I was because we couldn't speak the English language too good and we slept one next to each other for the entire military service. His name was Ben Lapilla.

Q: And you were both Italians?

A: We both were American born but grew up in Italy.

Q: So you immediately established a rapport and became friends

A: That's right.

Q: So that made your experience easier?

A: Made it easy.

Q: What division or part of the Army were you in?

A: Well, I was in the medical department. They didn't have divisions, they had departments. I was in the medical department.

Q: When you came out of training, where did you go?

A: When we came out of training, which was in the end of March we were transferred to Camp Landing Florida, the station hospital. And I was there as a medical person.

Q: What was a typical day like?

A: A typical day was you get up in the morning, answer roll call and then you go for breakfast. Then you go on duty into the wards and you take care of patients.

Q: Where there a lot of men you were taking care of?

A: Oh, yes. The hospital was what was called a station hospital, had about 2000 beds. There were 500 men, about 200 nurses and about a couple hundred officers, doctors and administrators.

Q: From there, where did you go?

A: From there I was transferred to Fort Bragg to go over sea. I know was going over sea but I was transferred to Fort Bragg to another military medical outfit.

Q: When you came out of your training what was your rank?

A: My training? When I came out of training I was a plain GI. Then I made the PFC later on.

Q: What kind of contact did you have with your family and your friends when you were away?

A: The only contact I had in New Jersey with my relatives, by mail. No contact with my mother in Italy. There was no connection, except from the Red Cross I was to get some news.

Q: What relationship did you have with other officers? For instance, the head of the medical department, what was his title?

A: In the medics, most of the officers were doctors and technicians. My training involved barbering, so I did a lot of barbering there too. So I made a lot of friends with the officers and technicians because I gave them haircuts.

Q: So you had friendly relations with officers?

A: Oh yeah.

Q: Did you ever serve in any kind of convoy duty?

A: No.

Q: When you went over to England how did you guys get there?

A: We went from Camp Kilmer, New Jersey to Staten Island aboard the luxury liner queen Elizabeth I, and we crossed the Atlantic on the Elizabeth.

Q: What was that like?

A: That was a beautiful ship (laughs). But the only thing, in the cabin there was usually, (pause) occupied by two person, but GI's there were twelve soldiers in one cabin and we crossed the Atlantic in seven days. Usually it will take four and we landed in Glasgow, Scotland and we went to Liverpool, then from Liverpool railroad station we went to a camp. Camping there, and then we were ready to take over in a hospital near Salisbury, south of England.

Q: What were the travels like on the ship across?

A: Oh, the ship across. It was the end of April the Atlantic was calm but cold because we traveled the Northern part of the Atlantic and the ship was zigzagging, every two minutes we would change route, zigzagging to avoid the submarine, to avoid the German submarines. We had one stop in Greenland.

Q: What was that like?

A: That was very cold. From Greenland we went to Scotland.

Q: How long were you in Greenland?

A: We were just off Greenland, we didn't dock.

Q: What did it look like from the boat?

A: It was white, a very cold country, very icy there.

Q: What kind of a reception did you get when you docked in Glasgow?

A: Well, we had the Red Cross meeting us at the pier. I think it was donuts and coffee.

But then we got trucked to the railroad station and from the railroad station we boarded a train that took us to Liverpool.

Q: How long did that take?

A: It took a day. From Liverpool we boarded a convoy, a truck convoy to Bristol, to Salisbury I mean, to Salisbury where we stayed in tents. The hospital was not ready to be occupied.

Q: So from Glasgow you went a hospital in Liverpool?

A: No, the hospital was in the outskirts of Salisbury.

Q: And there were wounded soldiers there, I suppose?

A: Well, there was very little. Maybe 30 or 40 people. But when the division of Europe started getting the wounded GI and at one time we had about 3000 between those wounded and sick soldiers.

Q: What sort of medical work did you do, like suturing for instance?

A: No, my specialty was to shave anyone that needed to be shaved to be operated on. If there was hair involved I needed to shave it off. I had to make sure that the person who was going to be operated on was clean.

Q: Is that primarily what you did.

A: That was the primary duty. The secondary duty was to give haircuts to the officers and sometimes even to the nurses.

Q: You were a lucky man!

A: Oh yeah (laughs).

Q: You got to do what you liked. Now, though you weren't in infantry did you see action at all?

A: No action at all. I saw bombing.

Q: Tell me about the bombing.

A: The bombing was by plane. The whole continent was bombed; Liverpool, Bristol, any other towns. South Hampton especially. It was a port in the South of England. And we were not too far from the bombing.

Q: Were you scared?

A: Oh, certainly. It was not a firework. It was no amazing firework.

Q: What would you say was your most terrifying experience while in the Army?

A: Well, I was in London for a couple days. And while I was in London, on a particular night there was a bombing by the German air force. And when I woke up the next morning I saw all the devastation around me except the hotel that I where I was staying. Everything was to the ground. The building I was in was standing up yet. And I when I woke up during the bombing some one fell on me because there was someone else staying in my room. The explosion threw everything on the floor and then we find out that there was somebody else in the room. See, there was no electricity in these hotels. At eight o'clock all the electricity was shut. So, you go into a room not knowing if there's anybody else. And the closest I came to being wounded or sick or dead was the bombing in London on that particular night.

Q: Did you have to go out and look for survivors?

A: Oh yeah. I went down to the lobby and tried to help with whatever there was to do, to get involved, I did do much because we had to go back to base.

Q: Where was the base?

A: The base was in Salisbury about 30 miles away.

Q: How did you get back to the base?

A: By bus or American trucks.

Q: How long were you in Salisbury?

A: I was in Salisbury for almost two years, three years, but twenty months for sure.

Twenty, Twenty-one months.

Q: What ended your stay in Salisbury?

A: It was the end of the war. After the war was over after the V-day my outfit was scheduled to go to the Pacific and we were awaiting our order when Japan surrendered so everyone was going to be sent back to the United States according to the amount of points. And the points meant how long we were in the service, how many battles were involved, how long we was over sea. My total points was 68. And they started from about 200, somebody had. For combat there were more points, battle points. I got no points because I was not in the front. And 68 points made me come back to the United States in December.

Q: What was your reaction to the dropping of the bombs?

A: The atomic bomb? Well, it was a sad thing to know a lot of people died but the relief that it will probably end the war. In fact that's what it did.

Q: How did you view FDR as a president?

A: One of the greatest ever and I continue.

Q: What was your reaction to his death in April 1945?

A: It was a shock, he wasn't alive long enough to see the war end. He died before the war ended.

Q: How did you feel about Truman; when Truman became president?

A: Well, in the beginning I was skeptical because he was not an experienced president and because he started from a very difficult time but it seemed that he became one of the greatest presidents we ever had.

Q: When and where were you discharged?

A: I was discharged December 24, 1945 in Fort Monmouth, New Jersey.

Q: So you were in Fort Monmouth when the war ended.

A: No, when the war ended, I was over sea.

Q: When you were discharged, what was your rank?

A: PFC.

Q: And that stands for?

A: Private First Class.

Q: When you were discharged what did you look forward to the most?

A: Well, to meet my brothers who I left two years ago, or twenty months and of course my girlfriend which was your grandma.

Q: Did you meet before the war?

A: Yes.

Q: And how did you meet?

A: Well, I was living in the same house that she lived and that's when I met her.

Q: And what was the first thing you did when you came home?

A: First thing I did when I came home, I knocked at the door. They did not know I was coming home. I knocked the door on Christmas Eve and there I was surprising everybody.

Q: What was that reception like?

A: Oh, it was a great reception. And I was more happy than they were because I was home finally, safe after four years of military service.

Q: And what was the first great big Italian meal you had when you got back?

A: Well, it must have been pasta because that's the main Italian dish, but I don't remember all those things, all the Christmas goodies, you know, the Italians have a fish dinner so my pasta must have been clam sauce.

Q: When you got back did you seek a professional career after the war?

A: Well, my profession was barbering, so I went back to barbering.

Q: Did you get married?

A: When did I get married? Five months after I got discharged.

Q: When did you begin to share your war experiences with your family?

A: Oh, right away after the greetings of seeing each other, I started talking out of my hair because I didn't have it too tough. It was tough military life but my life was not as in danger as much as GI Joe on the front line.

Q: So it wasn't very tough to share.

A: No.

Q: Have you seen any recent films on World War II?

A: Well, I see them on television, I don't go to the movies much since Grandma died, but I saw, the last one was, GI, uh,

Q: Saving Private Ryan?

A: Saving Private Ryan.

Q: How do you feel films like that and films in the same vein portray war? Would you say that they're accurate?

A: They are realistic but they are exaggerated a little bit but they are pretty realistic.

Q: Do you still stay in contact with your friends from the war?

A: I still keep contact with one of them that in about two weeks from now I go visit him in Florida.

Q: Is he older or younger than you?

A: Three months younger than me.

Q: Where in Italy was he from*?

A: From Sicily

Q: How do you feel about the on-going talk of war with Iraq?

A: That's a difficult question. It has to be done to save, for our own security and to save maybe from a World War III.

Q: What do you feel the world should learn from your war experience? What would you tell people is the most important thing they should know about war?

A: War is a dreadful thing, not only on the front line but it's even behind the front line, everybody suffers. There is no winners, there are all losers. But being an American to save the American institution I am in favor of doing anything possible to save from sea to shining sea.

Q: Thank you very much

A: You are welcome

Conclusion of interview