

**Frank J. Girardi
Veteran**

**Mike Russert and Wayne Clarke
New York State Military Museum
Interviewers**

**Interviewed on
5 December 2007
Latham, NY**

Q: Would you please state our date of birth and place of birth.

FG: Frank J. Girardi, December 25th, 1920, Naples, Italy.

Q: When did you come to the U.S.?

FG: 1927.

Q: So, you were 7 years old. Did you come over with your family?

FG: Yes.

Q: Why did they decide to leave Italy?

FG: My father was there before us and he wanted to get us to the U.S. One of my sisters was here. They worked and saved their money. Then they brought another sister over. She worked and they saved their money and then brought the rest of us over. There were seven of us in our family. We settled in Troy, NY.

Q: What was your educational background prior to going into the service?

FG: I went to grammar school and high school in Troy. I graduated in 1939.

Q: Did you go to work after high school?

FG: I had quit and had to go back to get my diploma. After that I went to work at Cluett Peabody. They made Arrow shirts. I worked there until the war broke out. When the war broke out I volunteered for the Navy.

Q: Do you remember where you were when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

FG: We were having a Christmas party at Cluett's and all of a sudden on the radio they said that Pearl Harbor had been bombed.

Q: How did that change the Christmas party?

FG: They had never heard of Pearl Harbor. Nobody knew, so we had a good time and that was it.

Q: Why did you decide to enlist?

FG: I was 22 years old. There was a draft and I said to myself that I didn't want to go into the Army. So, me and a buddy went to Troy and enlisted in the Navy. Then we had to go to Albany to a recruiting station there. An Irish guy, Commander O'Sullivan, swore us in. We had to stay there and then go to boot camp in Newport, RI.

Q: What was that like?

FG: You got up early and they had us do calisthenics and taught us different things. We had inspections, etc. We were there for two months. In the meantime, they had assigned us to a ship. Me and my friend got on the Massachusetts. We were lucky. We didn't get hurt or nothing.

Q: Was that your first time away from home?

FG: Yes. My Dad had a lot of children and we never went anyplace. He never drove a car or anything. We used to go up to the park on Sunday when he was off work. Me and my Mother would pack a lunch for all the children. There were swings and they had a pool up there so we would go swimming. That was our big day.

Q: When you were at Newport, what was the food like?

FG: Good. We were young and needed to eat. If a guy didn't want something, we'd say give it to me!

Q: Did you receive any specialized training there?

FG: No. They did that on the ship. They showed us the guns and reveille, how to get up in the morning and what your job was.

Q: What were your duties once you were on board?

FG: My duties were topside. I was assigned to a 16-inch gun in ground battles and for aircraft battles I was on a 20mm gun. I had to learn how to handle the ammunition, how to use the gun, and all of that stuff. Then we went on shakedown, as that was a new ship. By the time they got it ready we were in South Boston. We stayed in the Fargo Building until they got it all together. Then we went aboard and they took a shakedown cruise up and down the Atlantic coast. We learned how to handle the lines tying up to the dock and how the anchor chains worked, etc.

Q: So, you were a plank holder then.

FG: Yes, I was there from the beginning until the war ended.

Q: You mentioned that something happened to you when you were in Boston Harbor.

FG: We were on our shakedown cruise and it was winter. We pulled into Boston and tied up to shore. They needed somebody to go out on the lines and tie them together so rat guards could be installed. There was ice on those lines and I lost my balance. I was hanging on about 40 feet above the water and there were big ice chunks below me. If I'd hit them I would probably gotten killed. One guy tried to help me but he slipped and then made it back to the ship. Luckily, a Coast Guard boat was going by and they signaled them in. They came between the ship and the dock. I'm hanging on for dear life and losing it. The guy yells at me to jump. So, I jumped and landed on the top of their cabin. I didn't go through and was ok. Everybody clapped. They took me back to board the ship.

Q: How long was it before you went overseas?

FG: We completed our shakedown and went to Casablanca in November of 1942. We were part of the task force supporting the invasion of Morocco. We had to cross the Atlantic.

Q: What was that like?

FG: The Germans were trying to hit us. There were depth charges and torpedoes. We were surrounded by destroyers and had to zigzag. We got to Casablanca harbor, where the French battleship Jean Bart was trying to get out. We hit it. They fired at us but did not hit us. A cruiser hit us just above the waterline. It did damage but nobody got killed. So, we were lucky there. We had a shore battery shooting at us too. We shot them out, we shot the cruisers out, we shot the battleship out, and then we were safe. Then they sent in the troops and told us to go back to Boston to get fixed up.

Then they told us to hurry up and get fixed because they needed us over in the Pacific where our ships were fighting at Guadalcanal. We were the only battleship in operation. The others were either hit or tied up. We went through the Panama Canal with a task force. We went to New Guinea. We arrived

there at night and the Marines were fighting on the hillside. You could see the tracers. The next day the Marines on the ships were ready to go ashore. They needed to take the airfield. First they clear everybody out of the way and we bombarded the shore to clear the way to the airfield. They got the airfield, then we got out of there. We hit all of them islands all the way to Japan.

Q: When you were engaging the French fleet and during these shore bombardments, you ere where?

FG: I was in the 16-inch gun crew, handling the projectiles. We had to put chains around them and move them to an elevator that lifted them to the guns.

Q: How much did these shells weigh?

FG: Two tons. Then they had another compartment up there where they sent these bags.

Q: So, the shells were in one compartment and the bags in another?

FG: Yes. First, the shells went up, and then the powder bags went up behind them. We had radar and we had spotter planes telling us where to hit. They hit them good.

Q: Were you ever affected by the concussion of the guns firing?

FG: Yes, the whole ship shook. The first time it's a shock, and then you get used to it.

Q: Did it ever affect your hearing at all?

FG: No.

Q: How far below the turret were you?

FG: I was down three decks. When they sounded general quarters, we had to run down there quickly.

Q: What was daily life like on the ship?

FG: When under way we couldn't do much. I had to take care of the shower room. That was my duty. Men would come in to shower while I was cleaning and I wouldn't let them until it was clean.

Q: What were your meals like on the ship?

FG: They were good. We had good cooks and a nice cafeteria. That battleship had everything. We had 200 Marines aboard. They were 9th Division. I was in 1st Division. They had 1st, 2nd and 3rd up forward. They had 5-inch guns all around, with 40mm and 20mm in between. The ship was like a target you couldn't get through. You didn't fire at the planes. You fired at your range. The guns fired this way and that so we covered 360 degrees all around us when the planes came in. You didn't have to hit the target. They had to penetrate through it. Only when they flew low near the water our guns could not hit train low enough so we would call on other ships to get them before they got us with a torpedo. They were good, those other ships. The San Juan was a good ship that did a lot of damage. She was a destroyer ahead of us. The carriers were in the middle and the battleships were around them.

Q: When you had extra time how did you spend it?

FG: We played cards like acey-deucey. We played handball. A few learned how to fight.

Q: You mentioned that you listened to Tokyo Rose?

FG: Yes. We'd have a radio on and she would tell us we were a bunch of suckers and our wives or girlfriends were cheating on us. We were suffering out there and they don't care.

Q: But the music was good, wasn't it?

FG: Yes. The music was good. Glen Miller and all that stuff. Back after Casablanca we went into

Boston and there we went to the USO, etc. Then we got to Seattle and went into dry-dock at Bremerton. The guns had to be re-bored after all the shots. They had us cleaning all the barnacles off the hull.

Q: Did they have to replace the gun barrels or just re-bore them?

FG: They just re-bored them. They rushed it too. We were supposed to stay there longer, but there was so much fighting out there with the Japanese around the Philippines and all that. That's where we went.

Q: So, you were involved in (the battle of) Leyte Gulf?

FG: Yes, we were in that. They once gave us 2 hours of liberty. We went ashore in a landing craft. There was a beer party and we were allowed two bottles each. I didn't drink so I sold mine for \$10 a bottle.

Q: Did you smoke at the time?

FG: Yes, I was smoking.

Q: So, you were in support of actions like Tarawa, Saipan, etc.?

FG: Yes, all of them.

Q: At Okinawa were you attacked by kamikazes?

FG: Oh yes. They would come at night and drop flares and light up the whole sea. They could see us but we couldn't see them. There we were, on the ship, wondering where they were coming from.

Q: Did you fire at them yourself?

FG: Yes, I would fire and then the other guy would fire. The gun was heavy so we had to take turns. The quartermaster watched the radar and told us when to shoot.

Q: You had ear phones?

FG: Yes. They said shoot and we shot. We didn't know what we were hitting. We shot down 26 planes during the war.

Q: Did your ship ever get hit?

FG: No, just at Casablanca. We were lucky out there. Almost every island (campaign) and we never got hit.

Q: You said that you were sea sick during the typhoon.

FG: Oh, that was during the Philippines. The ship was really pitching and the water was coming over (the bow). The big lines they tie the ship up with got loose and trailed over the side. They sent us out on the deck to pull them in and tie them down again. The ship would pitch and the water would come over and knock the guys around. Some got injured. One of the cruisers, the USS Pittsburgh lost part of its bow and they had to tow it back to Hawaii for repair. In that typhoon everybody was sick. We got stores just before the typhoon. We had boxes of potatoes tied down back at the stern. They got loose and when the sea calmed down we had potatoes floating all over the ocean.

Q: What was your crew like?

FG: Oh yes, we were close. There were a lot of nice guys, from all over the U.S. I never had any trouble with any of them. You had to stick together.

Q: What about the officers?

FG: The officers were great.

Q: Were the black guys mainly in the kitchen?

FG: Yes, there were a lot of black guys in the kitchen.

Q: Were they segregated on the ship?

FG: Yes, but there were not that many blacks on the ship. Just a few. There was just one Jewish guy on board. We asked how he got there because Jews were not common in the Navy. He had volunteered. He was from New York City and a nice guy.

Q: You said that there was a good friend of yours in your division that always protected everybody?

FG: He looked out for us on the guns, which were dangerous. He was really smart. He was from Brooklyn. His name was Tony Solarno.

Q: Did you ever get ashore in Japan?

FG: No. They were going to make up a task force from our ship to go ashore for security duty. They wanted volunteers. I said I wanted to go home. Some guys volunteered and went ashore. They came back the next day because they were not needed.

Q: Did you see any USO shows or other entertainment?

FG: No, we never had that. We had our own band on the ship. We had guys who used to be entertainers and they used to put on shows. It was up on the bow when we were in calm seas. When we were in Seattle, we went to the USO and danced, etc. In Seattle bars you had to stand up because there were no seats. That way they could see when somebody was getting drunk. On the 4th of July Seattle put us in their parade. We would take the ferry from Bremerton across the harbor and on the waterfront was the Troy Diner. It made me homesick. I had lived in Troy all my life.

Q: Do you remember when you heard about President Roosevelt's death?

FG: I can't remember about that.

Q: How about when you heard about the dropping of the atomic bomb?

FG: We were off Okinawa and could see the planes going over. 5 or 6 hours later they dropped the bomb and then we heard that Japan surrendered. We were all excited and clapping, etc. The war was over and we were going to go home. Some of the guys were crying. They hadn't seen their wives or their kids. I was a single guy. They told the Massachusetts to go back to the States. Then we get a tin can with a bad screw. We could only do 5 or 6 knots. We went up around by the Aleutian Islands and down to Seattle. When we got to Seattle they gave us 30 days leave. So, I went all the way to Troy and back. Then they sent me back to Sampson, New York to be discharged.

Q: Did you have to there long?

FG: One night I think. They gave everybody an Arrow shirt when we got to Sampson. I had worked there.

Q: After you left the service did you use the GI Bill at all?

FG: NO, I went back to work. I wanted to work. Even when I was in grammar school I worked delivering milk, for 50 cents a day. My mother needed the money. There were seven of us. It was the depression.

Q: Did you join any veterans' organizations?

FG: Yes, I joined the American Legion and then the VFW, but then I quit them all. I was too busy working two jobs and didn't go anymore.

Q: Did you stay in touch with any of your service friends?

FG: I had a friend that joined the Navy with me. Michael Mittly (sp?) was his name. He was the kind of guy that, when reveille came, he wouldn't get up. We would be on working parties and he would disappear. He got on the ----list. They shipped him off. I asked why he got to leave and I couldn't have leave to go home. They said I wasn't going anywhere.

Q: Do you know what happened to him?

FG: When he came back from leave, they put him on what we called a "Kaiser Coffin". They were the escort carriers. His ship was sunk and he was in the water for three hours without a life jacket. He saved himself and he went home. After I got discharged, I met him and we went out a couple times. Then he got married and I got married. He later died of a heart attack.

Q: Do you have a reunion organization for your ship?

FG: I never went. We got letters and such but I never went.

Q: Have you visited the USS Massachusetts at all?

FG: Yes. I went a couple times, once with my son.

Q: How do you think your time in the service had an effect on your life?

FG: Well it was a lot of sacrifice. You learned to follow rules and get along with everybody. I made a lot of friends.

(showing photos)