

Dante J. Orsini
Veteran

Mike Russert
Wayne Clarke
NYS Military Museum
Interviewers

Interviewed on February 18th, 2004
Chaplain Museum Glens Falls, New York

Q: Could you give me your full name, date of birth and place of birth.

DO: My name is Dan Orsini, I was born on May 29th, 1920 in South Glens Falls, New York.

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

DO: Okay, I graduated from St. Mary's academy in Glens Falls in 1938. Then the following year 1939, I attended South Glens Falls high school for a postgraduate course and that was the extent of my high school years.

Q: When did you go into the service?

DO: May 4th, 1940.

Q: When did you decide to enlist and why?

DO: Well things around Glens Falls were kind of tough. There were no jobs available for the younger people and there were three or four of us who decided let's enlist to the services. They were looking for people to go into the service at the time. It was peacetime so to make a long story short I traveled to Albany, New York and within two days I became a U.S Marine.

Q: Now why did you select the Marine Corps?

DO: Okay yes, that's a good question because I went down there specifically to enlist in the Coast Guard and the guy that I went down with was found to be physically unfit for the service at the time. So I walked out with him and then I walked by a marine standing there. I said "who are you ", he said "I'm a Marine that's my Marine recruiter ". So I went inside for an hour and was in the Marines. Just one of those things. I had to read about them but I was too young to understand what it was all about, I learned quickly.

Q: Where were you inducted and where did you go for basic training?

DO: I was inducted in Albany on the date May 4th, 1940. They sent me to Parris Island, South Carolina. It was at that time that was the only boot camp in the Marines and spent 12 weeks there.

Q: What kind of weapons did you use, did you have the o3?

DO: Yes, Shrink Feel o3.

Q: How about the type of helmet? Did you have the World War I type helmet?

DO: No, at that time they had come out with the regular World War II helmet. It wasn't shaped quite like the one they had now or in World War I but it was similar to that, it wasn't the old rim.

Q: How would you rate your training?

DO: What I may rate my training, it was tough I mean it was all blood and guts. Like I was telling you I found out quickly what the Marines were about and I was an athlete anyway so all the things we had to do didn't really bother me. A lot of running, a lot of crawling, a lot of getting up in the morning and boot training was boot training. How to defend yourself, how to kill your enemy and I got to say in all honesty that back in 1940, I didn't expect to be using some of their training which I did later on in life and I was there for 12 weeks. I can't say that I enjoyed my boot training but I did it.

Q: Was this your first time away from home?

DO: Yeah, really.

Q: How'd you feel about that?

DO: It didn't bother me that much you know, I just kept in touch with the people at home. But I wasn't the type to you know melt under pressure and I just did the best I could with what I had to work with. I made \$21 a month, had a bar of soap and a little pale for washing and stuff like that and that was the way it was. There were a lot of us in the same boat. Young guys, some college people we just didn't have any people desert or feel bad. They were there because they wanted to be there, they weren't drafted so that made a big difference.

Q: Did you receive any specialized training at all?

DO: Not another boot camp.

Q: After boot camp?

DO: After boot camp I received a lot of specialized training as they did yeah.

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

DO: Well can we back up because you're asking me about specialized training and don't forget I enlisted in 1940. One of the things just before we left boot camp we each had an interview. They called me into some office and the guy asked if I could type. I said yeah, I can type, I learned how to at South Glens Falls high school. He said okay sit down at the typewriter so I sat down and he asked me to type some stuff and he said yeah that's okay you're all done. So I walked out and fifteen minutes later they called me back in to tell me I had been chosen to be assigned to the Marine Corps institute which was in Washington, D.C. When I heard Washington D.C I almost fell apart. So I found myself in Washington, D.C for the next three and a half years. Like I say in my resume, there a lot of good things happened to me, a lot of specialized training. I'm talking about tough training there too, and I grew up as a Marine. Immediately I was assigned to the Marine barracks at eighth and I street in Washington, D.C, just as a Marine PFC. It took a little bit of time but I worked my way up the ladder and when I became a sergeant they assigned me to the White House and the Capital Guard. So I was kind of proud of that. They wear dress blues and all of that stuff and I found myself with the president on many occasions, Mr. President Roosevelt. Once in Warm Springs Georgia, two or three different times on the train. Our job was strictly guard duty as a matter of fact when I remember President Roosevelt driving in and out of the Warm Springs complex. It was always in that open car that he was familiar with, you know and it still sits today at Hyde Park here in New York. I attended many dedications with the president, the dedication of the Naval Hospital in Bethesda which was dope about that time. He was there to lay the cornerstone for that building and I was there for that. When the president was elected for the fourth time, three or four of us were because we were on the White House guard. We were asked if we wanted to attend the inauguration ceremonies which were at the House of Representatives Capitol building. So I was one of about thirty-five or forty Marines who were among that group of people, I have a photo of it here someplace. I saw the president when he was sworn in and that kind of excited me, I kind of liked that whole thing. That was his inauguration, the same day we went to the inauguration ball which was at the Mayflower Hotel. The same group of Guys and I happened to sit at the same table with the Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter at the time. Mickey Rooney was a young kid, he was one of the entertainers at night so I had the opportunity to share the table with those guys you know, so that's something we don't forget.

Q: What were some of the things you talked about at the table?

DO: Well there were ten of us at each table and Mr. Frankfurter, he was just a nice guy. He was a well-spoken individual as far as I was concerned he was a civilian. I didn't know who the hell he was and I didn't put much thought into the fact that he was a Supreme Court Justice. So you know, it didn't mean much to me at the time and then it meant a lot to me later on in life. I have a copy of the original invitation to the inauguration.

Q: How about Mickey Rooney, did you ever get to talk to him?

DO: Yeah, I talked to him quite a lot.

Q: Now can I go back to the question I asked before about Pearl Harbor. Where were you and do you recall your reaction to that?

DO: Absolutely, on December 7th, 1941 I was playing basketball at the Naval War College when informed of the Pearl Harbor attack by the Japanese. On December 8th, along with another contingent of Marines we once again went back to the House of Representatives where I witnessed the president give his Day of Infamy speech, that was one of the greatest days. I was right behind him, maybe eighty feet and there were five-hundred House and Senate members. It wasn't like it is today with thousands of people back then there were the same number of House of Representatives members and Senators but believe me, it was a much smaller group. I was in the gallery above and that's where I was stationed but the Marines were all over the place.

Q: Were you armed at all?

DO: Yes, we sure were, we had the O3 with us. That was a good question because that's one of the few times we were armed. I was armed with a 45 pistol and my O3 rifle only because the day before Pearl Harbor was attacked so it changed everything immediately.

Q: So the other times you were with the president prior to that you were not armed?

DO: No, I was armed in Warm Springs, not around D.C though. They had the secret service around so we weren't armed on those occasions no. We were more of a security type deal, kept everybody in line and that kind of thing just to show that we were there.

Q: You were with the president for several years, did you notice and physical changes with him in the times that you were with him?

DO: Yes, I did. I went to the White House many times, I even saw the president swimming in his pool. I knew he had a physical disability. I was going to mention that FDR's birthday was on January 30th, that's when they started issuing FDR dimes.

Q: What were some of the changes you saw in the president?

DO: The physical changes? Well I knew he wasn't well, he was always smiling and as often as he could stand correctly. He didn't like to be seen in a seat I noticed. I know what he had, I mean he developed at the age of twenty-three or twenty-eight that infantile paralysis. It became known as Polio then, so I don't think he withered away or anything like that and he was always a handsome man and was well spoken. When he was on his feet he really did a great job but you couldn't help but notice in the three or four years that there was a difference not tragic. There was a difference from the first time that I'd seen him until the last time I saw him which was in 1943 I think. Before I

left for overseas and well he was a great man. That was the first time I ever voted Democrat and I'm proud of that.

Q: You probably got to meet his family too right?

DO: I met Mrs. Roosevelt and of course the major Jim Roosevelt, he was a Marine so I saw and met him two or three different times when the president went to Warm Springs for his relaxation a rehab. A lot of his family went down there also and this was during peacetime so it wasn't hard to see the president down there. Things were a little different then after the war things were a little tighter.

Q: So you were there for three years, what happened after you left the White House?

DO: After I left the Marine barracks in Washington, D.C I requested to be transferred. What happened was they came to me and said we know you want to get transferred because I had been here a long time. I had just gotten promoted to Sergeant Major and at the age of twenty-three they told me I was the youngest Sergeant Major ever in the Marine Corp. Usually when you think of the Sergeant Major in the Marine Corp you think of some old grizzly guy forty-five or fifty who's been in there with all kinds of stripes. When they honored me by making me a Sergeant Major they said I rated it and whatever and my record spoke for itself. They said we'd like to have you go to officer candidate school, they said I was going to be assigned to the 1st Marine division in New River, North Carolina. They wanted me to go to officer school first and get my commission and then go join the troops with the 1st Marine division. I don't want to sound like I'm bragging but I went through OCS, I received my commission as a 2nd lieutenant. The very next day when I read my orders, they ordered me to stay at Quantico as a machine gun instructor for sixteen more weeks. That destroyed me, I didn't want any part of that. I didn't even like the machine gun. So anyway that was an order and I went to the Colonel at the time and I asked what this is all about? I was told to go back and join my group, he said these are your orders and that's the way it was, what alternatives did we have? It can resign your commission and make you a Sergeant major again. I said I would resign my commission, so I did. I resigned my commission as 2nd lieutenant and kept my enlisted rank then went to New River, South Carolina as a Sergeant, so that's when I joined my unit, I was Sergeant Major.

Q: I think there is more crustacean being a Sergeant Major than a 2nd lieutenant?

DO: I thought so at the time no question about it, I didn't like what they were doing to me. I wouldn't have thought too much of it if they allowed me to go back to my unit as a 2nd lieutenant. I would've been considered a platoon leader but with the service that I had they wouldn't have you know. I wanted to go back with those guys and I'm really happy that I did.

The rank didn't mean that much to me, that's unusual but that's how I thought about it. After two months at camp Lejeune my division for overseas duty in the South Pacific I

participated and saw action during the invasion of Guam which was in 1944 whether marines built airfields for B-29's aircraft. It was estimated at that time there were about 10,000 American casualties, this is American casualties dead and over 40,000 Japanese killed. I took one of the official photos of the flag-raising and they had that here someplace.

Q: So Guam is where you saw your first combat?

DO: Yes, Guam is where I saw my first combat. Anyway this is the photo that I took of the flag-raising in Guam in 1944, I wrote on the back sixty years ago. Other people had taken photos too. This meant a lot, taking a photo of the flag-raising. I sent copies of this all over the world. Then in June of 1945 the Marines landed on Okinawa, the last battle in the South Pacific. My battalion which were artillery saw action in two locations, the Naha airport and the Shuri Castle. There are an estimated 14,000 Americans killed, over 63,000 Japanese. That was a fierce campaign, Okinawa was tough. Our Commanding General Simon D. Buckner, was killed during a mortar attack. In our positions he was a greater leader and I attended his burial and in fact I have his photo here of his resting place with me saluting him. While temporarily attached to the Marine division in Okinawa, I received a letter of commendation from the Commanding General for duties performed as a member of a Special Forces unit. A two day reconnaissance mission which I still don't talk about anymore but they sent forty of us on a two day mission to kind of look around two airfields and adjoining on to see how they would take our aircraft and my CO was killed. To make a long story short I took ... over the squad when he was killed and brought him back and that's why I got the letter I guess. Shortly after the Okinawa campaign, President Truman approved the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki which killed over 120,000 Japanese and brought the war to an end eliminating the need for an invasion of the Japanese mainland.

Q: Where were you when you heard about that and what kind of reaction did you have to that?

DO: I was in Okinawa and we all jumped for joy that day when we heard of all that. The first time we heard that the atomic bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima and that might end the war we weren't really sure. Then we learned about the second bomb, the second bomb was dropped on Nagasaki. We got an opinion then that maybe the way might end which it did, we were all ecstatic about that because somewhere along the line here it says our division as you know.

Q: When you heard about the death of President Roosevelt saying you were close to enlisting that you're pretty well

DO: I was onboard the ship at the time when that happened yet and a lot of people you know felt bad about it because he was our president and it's kind of hard to lose a Commander-in-chief and he was a well-liked man beside being the president he was just

a nice man, he was just a nice individual. He had Cerebral Hemorrhage down there he just died and we all felt bad about it. They swore Truman in, they all said okay we have a new president he's our Commander-in-chief we are going to go with him anyway. For the record Okinawa was to be the staging area for the invasion of the Japanese and that's all we were told after the bombs were dropped. So as we all felt better we were wondering where all these guys were coming from and why they were coming to Okinawa. So I want to tell a little story may I? At this point and this is one of those "what if" stories that could have changed the war completely. I talk about this only to certain people and this was back when the U.S navy had a ship, the USS Indianapolis Cruiser. Maybe some of the people you have interviewed have already talked about this. The two atomic bombs were assembled in the U.S but now loaded, were put aboard the *Indianapolis* cruiser, now nobody knows us nobody knew until after the war. The *Indianapolis* cruiser took those two bombs to the islands, the Marianas to the island of Tinian where we built those B-29 bases and six days after they had to leave. Everybody got onboard ship again and they left the atomic weapons there and the ship left to go back the Pacific or wherever they were. They were 1,100 miles from Okinawa and the ship was torpedoed on the way back. They launched 1,100 naval personnel and the ship was sunk. That was a story where three-hundred seamen were in the sea for two or three days and no one knew where the ship was. There was silence, they were running deep, they were under orders to run silent no radio no nothing but going and coming. In other words no one knew where the ship was when they went to the islands and they had the same secret when they left apparently they hadn't reached the destination where they concerned everything when they were hit. That's why it took three or four days to find these three-hundred men only through aerial survey that somebody said hey Louis who the hell is down there. They found the three-hundred men in the water. That's what if. What if that ship had been sunk on the way to the islands? That would have meant that two atomic bombs would have been at the bottom of the ocean, not armed but they would have been there. Who knows what would have happened. That was my 'what if' story, pretty interesting I thought. In December of 1945 a few months after the bomb was dropped the first Marine division was ordered to Peking, China. We were ordered to take over the U.S Embassy there and to keep peace between the communist Chinese. During several skirmishes several Marines took him in at the Embassy from the communists. They had two or three thousand fatalities, we had about one-hundred I think. It's not important at this point but I wanted to mention to my family that my first ever blood donation came when some of us were called to donate blood to a few wounded Marines. At this time it was arm to arm donation. The needles were much larger than they are today. My family wanted to find out how I started giving blood because since I was discharged I have over fifteen gallon of blood.

Q: Were any Japanese units in the area at the time or were they out of there by that time?

DO: Well strictly Chinese communist and they were ready to come over the hill. I can tell you that at a certain particular time here we were in Peking and I was there for a long time. I want to get ahead of my story in December of 1945 we received a letter of commendation from the Commanding Officer at the second Battalion 11th Marine for duties performed while Sergeant Major during a very trying time when the experienced men were being discharged far faster than they could be replaced. Especially when kindness forced Chinese that were only a few miles from my position. We knew they were there and they knew where we were and they wanted in the worst way to get into Peking. In January of 1946, the first Marine division and a division of Nationalist Chinese gathered at Tiananmen Square for a ceremonial troop formation and inspection and that's approximately 20,000 people total. I was impressed with Tiananmen Square, a real huge area part of the occasion was the medals awarded by the Nationalist China to thirty or forty Marines. Sort of a thank you from China to America for helping save their country from becoming communistic. I was once again in the right place at the right time. I received the medal they called it on the order of cloud and banner from the president of China Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek. According to their custom we were not allowed to bring the awards to our country. We had to return them but we were allowed to take photos which I did which I have here. While at the American Embassy in Peking, I met Chang Kai-Shek on several occasions. She was a great lady, she was probably more popular than her husband. She was educated here at Radcliffe College in the U.S. Our division ordered us to go home and I was honorably discharged at Bainbridge, Maryland after over six years of service. I had several citations and medals and stuff like that.

Q: Did you join a veteran's organization?

DO: Yeah, my father-in-law who was a World War I veteran sought to wit that I immediately became a member of the American Legion when I got home. So I've been a member of the American Legion ever since 1946 I guess. I still belong to the one over here in South Glens Falls and Joe Furey who will be here this afternoon and I formed the Marine Corps League memorial detachment number two and we're still members of that he's more active than I am. He is Mr. Marine Corps league as far as I'm concerned in this area. By the way I want to mention that whatever I did in the service I was fortunate. I never got wounded. I saw a lot of action and always thanked the lord that I didn't get hit. I was near Jimmy Butterfield when he got blinded. I don't know if they know about Jimmy, he got blinded in Okinawa and I considered him to be a hero. The guy you're going to have in here this afternoon Joe Fiore, I considered him to be a hero too. I used to call him the pineapple kid, he walked around with grenades in his pocket, and we just raised hell. He got wounded two or three different times and there are a lot of other friends that I considered heroes. I just want to touch on one story. The guy's name was Dave Sexton, he lives in South Glens Falls, New York. He was in the U.S Army World War II. He landed in Normandy on June the 6th and in August 1944 he was

wounded badly. They threw him on the truck thinking that he had died, he was on the truck with a bunch of dead men. Shoulders and graves registration came along and they tagged everybody, they then discovered that day he was alive. They picked him up and he spent twelve weeks in the hospital overseas and then he came home, but this guy was a really wonderful person. He's the kind of person who made being in the service worthwhile, people like these guys you know.

Q: You also joined the reserves lunch once you were discharged?

DO: Yes we joined the Marine Corps Reserve and because of my ring Sergeant Major at the time, they knew I had a 2nd Lieutenants commission at one time. They said they wanted me to become the Commanding Officer of another Marine Corps Reserve which I did. So I was their Commanding Officer for almost a year that was pre-Korea time.

Q: Did you make use of the GI Bill at all?

DO: Never took advantage of that. I had a lot of schooling in the service, one of the things I did while I was in the service was I became a member of the Marine Corps Institute. That was their school for Marines. I took a lot of courses and I got a lot of Diplomas from the Marine Corps Institute. My other schooling took place while I was employed in civilian life at Scott Paper Co., they paid for me to go to school at three years in Cell University. I got an accounting degree from LaSalle University. No I didn't take any advantage of the GI Bill.

Q: Did you ever keep in contact with anyone who was in the service with you?

DO: Oh yes, the first two or three years after we were discharged. I attended 1st Marine Division reunions. They were in Philadelphia and New York City and other places. It was nice to see the people that you were with but after a while they just dwindled you know. We lost touch more locally over here than over there.

Q: How do you think being in the service changed or affected your life?

DO: It made me a better person, there's no question about that because the only thing I learned was respect for the next person. No fooling around, took life seriously you know. All the training that I went through in the Marines did me well in civilian life in many many ways. I worked at Scott Paper Co. here in Fort Edward for thirty-five years. I was promoted so many times because of my military background. I know how to get along with people, I know what to do and the right things to do. They taught me these nice things to use them you know. They put me in charge of other people and the military helped a great deal. I think it's all because I went in on my own in 1940 so whatever happened to me, it was my decision to go in and I never regretted a moment of being in here. Except I didn't like seeing all of my friends getting killed or hurt and stuff like that. But that's part of war.

Q: Well, thank you.

DO: Thank you.