

Author: Peter A. Pasolini
and Interviewer: (son of Alfonso A. Pasolini)

Interviewee: Alfonso A. Pasolini 1

The subject of the interview which follows was an eyewitness to events which occurred during World War II on the European front, as a United States Army corporal attached to Special Services. This paper is presented in the first-person, autobiographical point-of-view to serve as a vehicle in clearly conveying the subject's feelings, motivation, experiences and opinions in regard to those events he was involved in and witnessed first-hand during that era.

Alfonso Pasolini -

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I am a first-generation Italian-American of Roman Catholic faith. I grew up on the lower East side of Buffalo, NY. When World War II started I was eighteen years old. I had just dropped out of school and was working as a waiter at a local restaurant in the city. My plans were to get a good job, find a girl and get married, have some kids and move up the social register. I told myself to just work hard and to keep my mind off of the events in Europe.

I had mixed emotions about the war in Europe. I found it easy to hate Hitler and his Third Reich due to all the atrocities that he was waging on the European people. However, being Italian-American I found it difficult to have hatred for Benito Mussolini and his Fascist Army in Italy. But, since Mussolini and Hitler became allies, my emotions in regard to Mussolini had changed from like to dislike.

My confusion was heightened by the fact that the United States and Russia were allies. Although we were allies, I didn't agree with the communist ideas. I believed in man's freedom of choice in his workplace, in his speech, and foremost, in his religion. It seemed that Russian Communism was taking those rights away from the people of Russia. Later my country instructed me to fight arm-and-arm with the Russians against Hitler, and so I did.

It was Sunday, December 7, 1941. I was working at Lorenzo's Restaurant as a barboy. The bartender on duty that day was named Tommy. He told me to turn the radio on so we could listen to some music like we always did at work. The reception was not too clear, so I taped a nickle on the antenna to clear up the sound. What we heard was the Japanese had just attacked us at Pearl Harbor. I was not clear on where Pearl Harbor was, but it was clear to me, being twenty-one at the time, that the US was going to war against Japan. I wondered what was Japan's beef with us.

Within months I found myself in an army boot camp at Camp Shelby, Mississippi, where I trained for combat. It was a very confusing nine months in the boot camp. Thoughts of "Who will I fight - the Germans or Japanese?", "Where am I going to fight?", and "Will I live or die?" crowded my head. It was at this time that my faith in God became the strongest. I realized that I would need a strong religious faith to get me through this bad situation. As my religious convictions grew, so did my hatred for Hitler. Hitler was the man I held responsible for the war in the first place. I perceived the nine months at boot camp as physical and mental preparation for the job of ridding the world of Hitler and his Nazi Army.

We set sail for Europe on the ship, the Queen Mary, destination unknown. We finally stopped in Glasgow, Ireland, and that's where we stayed. I was working with US Army Special Services and our role was to act as decoys to confuse the German intelligence and allow them to believe that we were ready for battle at any time. My rank was T-5, Corporal, and my job was to drive the colonel from the reconnaissance camp to the front line.

I fought under two generals, General Patch and General Patton. Patch's army moved forward like most other armies: one section at a time. Patton believed in full mobilization, as the front line moved, everyone moved. So when you get through the crust of the enemies' lines, all you had left were the top officers, and in Patton's estimation, they were ill-equipped to do battle. At first the enemy's resistance was tough, as they had been fighting for five years before we arrived, and they were well prepared. Our chief officers informed us that once we got our army prepared that the tables would turn, and sure enough, they did. As we moved forward to defeat the German Army, we left a trail of destruction. In this "trail" I saw thousands of German privates who were dead along the roadside. At this point I began to feel that these were boys just like me with families that loved and cared for them just as I had. It was not them that I hated, it was that monster called Hitler.

I considered my correspondence with my parents as being totally separate from my life as a soldier. In my communication with family back home, I would make sure to convey some idea of normalcy, so they

wouldn't worry so much about me. Their letters of support and the news of all the support back home was crucial to us in winning the war. It is my belief that seventy-five per cent of the credit should go to the men and women that worked in the factories, state-side, to supply the troops.

At this time we would mobilize for a number of days in a row. These days were then followed by long periods of boredom in which we filled the time by playing cards for money, going into town for dinner and to see a big band play, or by putting on our own variety shows: anything to keep you occupied between battles.

By the time we took control of France and had invaded Normandy we were hearing about all of the atrocities that Hitler was committing in his own country. We heard that he was planning and carrying out mass executions of millions of people, in particular those of the Jewish race. We did believe that this was true, but not until the day came that I liberated the concentration camp at Dachau, did I believe that such an animal could exist on the face of this earth. I had often wondered why the followers of Christ had not done something to prevent Christ's crucifixion. Here was evidence of the reign of terror that Hitler was allowed to wage on the whole European continent. If all of the events which preceded and contributed to our involvement in the war had never happened, and if Hitler was guilty of only this mass execution of millions of people, I still would have fought the war. What we saw was unbelievable and many of us couldn't sleep for days after that. The horrible memories will haunt me for the rest of my life.

After liberating Dachau, I was in Salzburg, Austria where I worked in the Officers' Club running the laundry room. We turned our attention towards the Pacific and the war with the Japanese. I had been told that when we were finished in Europe, we would be needed in the Pacific. The day was August 6, 1945 when I found out that we had dropped a big bomb on the Japanese city of Hiroshima. We had heard about the Manhattan Project, but I didn't know what it was all about. When I found out about the devastation it had waged on the people of Japan, I started to question our country's tactics in the Pacific. "My God!", I thought. "These are innocent people we are killing!" Since this was a city and not a

military post, I was particularly troubled. My commanding officer explained to me that if we didn't drop the bomb, it would have cost the United States one million lives to win the war in the Pacific. To this day, however, I still believe that the second bomb which was dropped on Nagasaki was totally uncalled for. I knew that the Japanese were tough fighters, but it was just a matter of time before they would have surrendered after the first bombing at Hiroshima.

On August 9, 1945 the war was over and now I was going home. I was so happy to be going home to see my family. I experienced a feeling of patriotic pride in being an American who had served to help win the war. This was mixed with a sadness in reflecting on all of the lives which were lost. I had entered the war as a young, naive soldier, and I felt that I had been reborn into a human being with a deep understanding of human behavior.

After a few months state-side, there were two international events which attracted my attention: The Yalta Peace Conference and the Nuremburg War Trials. I felt that at Yalta the US made too many concessions to Russia. I knew that Stalin had committed many atrocities, as Hitler had. I felt that the War Trials were just, but I felt that many more men were guilty and should have been charged and held responsible.

My tour of duty as a soldier of World War II still continues today, because it is my duty and honor to present these facts as a testimony to history. I feel fortunate that I lived and witnessed history and that I lived through those events which continue to shape today's world.

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Commentary by Peter A. Fasolini—

The preceding soldier's account of World War II events was related by my father. These events occurred only fifteen years before my birth. I feel that his views represent those of an average American soldier. His strong motivation to be willing to put his life on the line against the enemy, Hitler, was most evident throughout his account. He viewed Hitler as an enemy who had violated humanity. This contrasted with his views towards Japan in which he adopted a pro-American hatred for the Japanese who had attacked us at Pearl Harbor. It appears that the impact of American propaganda in the war effort caused him to change his

mind about his willingness to fight alongside the Russians whom he disliked as much as Hitler. Similarly, he resolved the conflict between his Italian heritage, his initial neutral regard for Mussolini, and his role as an American soldier in a war against Italy. He was often able to separate governments' ideologies and the impact of their decisions from those people who inhabited or fought for the countries involved. Although he was a loyal soldier, he still privately questioned some of America's actions during this era, and he took offense to any immoral injustices committed by any of the involved war parties. This revelation changed my perspective in regard to a generation of people who I believed had always supported the status quo and never questioned our country's moral perspective.

My understanding of the successful war effort was enhanced through his description of protecting his family from his problems on the war front while feeling very grateful for their strong emotional and material support. The strong bond between soldiers who were overseas and the workers on the home front contributed to a stronger commitment from the armed forces in battle.

In his role as a supportive reconnaissance soldier in Special Services, I understood the contribution of the combat soldier who is not on the front line. All wars are fought differently, and his accounts clarified the manner in which World War II was fought in Europe; advancing the front lines and advancing the occupying troops.

The enormity of witnessing the Holocaust was most evident throughout the interview due to the fact that he found it extremely difficult to articulate the horror of what he saw there. This certainly contributed to his feelings in regard to the Nuremberg War Trials in that he believed they had not been thorough enough in the prosecution of those responsible.

Throughout the beginning, middle and end of World War II my father always distrusted Russia. It was this distrust which helped me to understand the hatred which precipitated the start of the Cold War. The conclusion of the war brought on the Atomic Age and its impact on the world. I feel that its idea could only have been conceived in a generation of non-questioners and that its ill effects had to produce a generation of questioners which would follow.