

Catello Charles Annicchiarico, Narrator

New York State Military Museum
Interviewers Wayne Clark and Mike Russert

Interviewed on September 29, 2004 at Elmsford, NY

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

CA: Catello Charles Annicchiarico, I was born in Dobbs Ferry, New York in 1924.

INT: What was your educational background prior to entering service?

CA: I went to one year of aviation school in Manhattan. During the Depression we moved from Dobbs Ferry to Brooklyn. In 1938 I graduated from elementary school and I went to the Herron High School, aviation high school, in Manhattan. I then got out of school at the age of 16 and I went to work in a factory. Later I went to work in the New York Army Base when the war started. I was a longshoreman and I was working loading ships, ammunition, tanks, and then I joined the Navy.

INT: OK, so you enlisted. Do you remember where you were and your reaction to Pearl Harbor when you heard about it?

CA: Oh yes, I was living at 516 Clinton Street in Brooklyn, NY. Just prior to that, the first ship that sunk, the *Reuben James*, was the ship that my brother in law was on and we were worried that he was missing in action. Turns out that as the ship was going down he was on a raft and went under the ship. Then we heard about Pearl Harbor.

INT: Why did you select the Navy?

CA: Because my brother in law was a Navy man and he said if I joined the Army, he would disown me and I loved my brother in law. Gordon Long, thirty-two years, God bless him, may he rest in peace. He was on every ship in the Navy.

INT: Where did you go for your basic training and when did you go there?

CA: Sampson [Naval Base], New York, January 1943. I got out of boot camp in 1943—I have my records here—from there I went to Camp Bradford in Virginia and from Camp Bradford I went to the Richmond mechanics school, diesel school and from there I went to Camp Bradford in Norfolk, VA. From there I was transferred to the *USS James O'Hara*. What happened was at Camp Bradford I didn't get along too well with one of the officers. Seems that there were two of us that would always win the obstacle course, Bill Anderson and I, [Holds up newspaper clipping.] and this Lieutenant Briscoe, he was the commander of the Beef Battalion, and he wanted me to join the Beef Battalion and I didn't want to so I got put on KP [kitchen police/kitchen patrol] for two months. So then I

became a bad boy. I went AWOL and I went to California. When I got to California I was given a Captain's Mast and I said I joined to fight, not to wash dishes so they let me stay there and they put me on the APA-90, the *O'Hara*. That's when I got experience. We went to Saipan [Breaks off] Let me tell you when we got to Pearl Harbor, I was on board an oil tanker, and when we got to Pearl Harbor, we were all on deck and we had tears in our eyes to watch all these ships that were sunk and all the lives that were lost. It was very heartbreaking. From there I went to the *USS O'Hara* and then we went to Saipan—that was another rough deal. They were told by the Japanese that we were monsters, that we would degrade them, and that we would rape them and kill them, and if we degraded them, they wouldn't go to heaven, there wouldn't be the geisha girls for the Samurai. They were jumping off a three hundred foot mountain, men and women with kids in their arms. That was a terrible sight to see. I lost one of my best friends on Saipan. He was giving a little boy a chocolate bar and the boy's 13-year old brother came out and hacked him three times with a saber. When we came back there three days later he died. If you think a funeral is sad, you have to witness a funeral at sea. It's one of the most depressing, sad sights you want to see and, again, a lot of us felt it. You're on a ship with a guy and it's like family.

But the best part was when we went through the Canal. Before you go through the Canal, they send you this letter [Shows letter]. This letter tells you that you are being charged for "Impersonating a Shellback" which is the word for a sailor who's got big time in. We had one day to do what we could to a Shellback. We had one lieutenant and we used to really rib him. What did we do? We sneaked into his cabin and we sprayed him with red paint, three of us. He came looking for me, he says, "I know it's you, Pappy." I was hiding up in the crow's nest. When I finally came down, boy did I get it. Then we had to go through the [1-2 inaudible] where they hit you with a bat, and made you crawl through the tube but the one that really got me was when you had to go through a long log, like a thin piece of wood I would say and it was greasy. You had to go across it and it was a pool of muddy water with garbage in it, everything, and you name it, was in there. I fell in twice, finally to heck with this. I crawled across and when I get there that big heavy chief, and I kiss him on his greasy stomach and that was funny as heck. You'll never forget if you were in the service and you went through the equator. Then you became a Shellback.

INT: What did you do on the *O'Hara*?

CA: First I was in the engine room and one of my friends, he was 28 years old and had three kids, they needed a volunteer for a 20mm gun and they chose him. So I took his place. During general quarters I was on gun 16, it was a 20mm gun and believe me, when you're on a millimeter gun, you see all the action. Then we came back and we loaded up for Luzon. Meantime while we're waiting in port, we got hit with a kamikaze. Two P-38s were chasing this Japanese plane, Zero, and he was coming over the ship so we were told not to fire. So they shot him down and he hit us. When he hit us he lodged on our ship and we had to throw plane off. The pilot was welded in his cockpit, he couldn't have been no more than twelve or thirteen years old. But he was a kamikaze, the divine wind. So we threw him overboard and we had to go to the base to be repaired. Then from

Saipan we went to Luzon; Luzon same thing; and from Luzon we went to Leyte and while we were there, General MacArthur came back and we were unloading our troops. We unloaded our troops and believe me, it was rough. From Saipan we went to Eniwetok, that was a ten-mile stretch of sand that was an airport, that's all it was, and 103 degrees. We unloaded our troops there, I think it was the 7th Marines, and then we went to Iwo Jima. Iwo Jima was rough, very rough, very very rough but we were lucky. On the way to Iwo Jima—you know, a lot of sailors used to call the Coast Guard, I forgot the name they called the Coast Guard, but let me tell you, the Coast Guard were fighting men. We had 33 on our starboard side and 35 on our port side, both Coast Guard ships and both got hit. Thirty-three lost about thirty-fourty men and 35 got hit with about fifteen men. That's why I always respected the Coast Guard. I told my two sons they should join the Coast Guard because that is a fighting outfit.

After that comical things happen like one time I was painting the upper deck of the engine room and one of the chiefs, I didn't like him, he was always on my tail, so what did I do? I spilled a can of white paint on him. [Laughs] He went ape, "You're on report." I came down and I said it's the heat, I'm sweating like a dog. The lieutenant came down and said what are you doing with that man? He sent me to sick bay and he told the chief, "You're not going to report that man, no way."

After Japan surrendered we went to San Francisco and we were treated very well. Then I got transferred to the DD-889, the *O'Hare*. It was pretty nice, it was very good service. Then I made my points and I got released. My experience was something I'll never forget and I'll tell you one thing, I was proud to go, I was proud to serve my country. It's not like today. I used to work down at piers. If you ever came over to me when I was working on piers and said hey fella, is that ship going out? You'd get the beating of your life because I would report you to my dock boss and four or five guys would come out and before you [breaks off] the FBI would come down, bag the guy, and take him away because that's the way it was in them days. When I worked down at piers we were loading these big ships, they used to call them sea trains. We were loading them with ammunition, with tanks and you don't ask questions. That was in Brooklyn, the pier workers down in Brooklyn, pier workers all over New York were the best when it came to security. You'll never ask are you working on that ship? What's on it? To make the story short but that's how it was. Anything else you want to know?

INT: Did you ever make use of the GI Bill?

CA: Yes, I went to a school for architectural work but they cancelled it and I went for dancing and believe me, I became a heck of a good dancer. [Laughs]

INT: Did the government pay for that?

CA: Yes. Then after that, I went back to work down at piers.

INT: Did you ever use the 52-20 club? Twenty dollars a week for fifty-two weeks after you left service.

CA: Yes, I had that. It came in very handy because I didn't get a job right away. It was rough in the beginning but then when I got a job I got off it.

INT: Did you join any veteran's organizations?

CA: Oh yeah, I belong to the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

INT: Did you ever stay in contact with anyone that was in service with you?

CA: Yes, a couple of my friends but most of them are gone now, there's a couple of my friends still alive. I wrote a letter about a year ago for a reunion but I never got an answer. The reunions are always far away. The reunion I wrote them was in California but I didn't have enough money to go, let's put it that way. I was a working man. But I did write letters and corresponded with a couple of my friends. Life takes a toll on you.

INT: Could you tell us about some of these photographs you brought?

CA: This is when I got out of boot camp—that's what I looked like at 18.

INT: You were a pretty good looking fella back then.

CA: I had hair then. [Laughs] [Shows the obstacle course newspaper clipping again.] This is the one, it was at Camp Bradford, they called it a physical fitness deal. To us it was torture. This gentleman is me and this gentleman is Bill Anderson and we used to win every week. It got to the point where they finally said hey, so I said to the captain, "Look, sir, we'll win but we'll donate the money to charity or something." [Laughs] They agreed with that because we were two of the best on the obstacle course. [Shows photo of himself in white uniform] This is me in Hawaii. [Shows photo of himself and two other sailors] This is me onboard the *O'Hare*, the DD889. [Shows photo of himself in dark uniform] This is me on leave, when I went home. This was in [East Arlington?] New York, because that's where I used to live. [Shows photo of himself and another sailor.] This is me and my friend Sal. This little guy, this little idiot, he had forged papers, he signed up at 13 years old and where do I meet him? On my base at Camp Bradford. I said what are you doing here? He said he got papers saying he was 18. I went to my commander and said he was only 13 so they sent him home. [Shows photo of himself and another sailor.] This is me in Richmond, Virginia. [Another photo] Same thing, Richmond, Virginia, that's about it.

INT: [Hands CA a group photo] You had these that you sent us.

CA: [Shows photo of approx. 40 sailors] This is a naval training station that I went to, it's a diesel school. I'm looking for me, the little guy, here I am. If you notice something about me, most of the guys would wear their hats straight, but not me. [Shows photo of himself in white uniform again.] I always had my hat with the wings on it and always cocked over my eyes. Until I get married and my wife tells me what do you wear it that way for? That was a salty way, see the way it was cocked? Your hat had to be two fingers above your eyebrows or else you got gigged. [Laughs]

INT: Thank you very much.

CA: Thank you.