

PFC Christopher N. Calvano
Narrator

Kenneth and June Hunter
Interviewers

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Guilderland, NY

Kenneth Hunter: KH

June Hunter: JH

Christopher N. Calvano: CC

CC: Served in the U.S. Marines July 13, 1944 – March 29, 1946

CC: Born in Amsterdam, NY July 4, 1918

KH: Where did you work Prior to entering the Marines?

CC: As Order Clerk at General Electric company was the last job I had before joining the military on a voluntary basis.

KH: What was your reason for enlisting?

CC: My feeling was since my early days of always wanting to become a Marine.

JH: At the time of enlisting you had a wife/ family.

CC: I was married at the time of enlisting to my wife Francis Calvano who was pregnant with our second child at the time and I left the office at noon and went up to the draft board and volunteered to go into the Marines. I had to fight my way into being accepted because after three deferments with General Electric on defense work and my draft number was not up at the time, they told me to go on back home. I insisted and finally signed up to go and be inducted in Albany, NY. Of Course upon arrival home from the draft office I related the news to my wife but I do not recall the facial expression at the time but I can assure you it was not the best.

KH: What was the climate like, how were the people feeling at that time you went down to the draft board?

CC: When I went down to the draft board to be inducted they were going to put me into the Army. I argued about it saying that I didn't come here to join the Army and I wasn't drafted and my desire was to become a U.S. Marine and they told me that the clonal was full at the U.S. Marines and they had no room for me. Whereas I specified because of the many Marines being killed overseas, I felt that they had room for me to join. As a result the recruiting Marine officer said he would return and let me know his findings. Upon his return he said you have been accepted into the U.S. Marines but you will regret it that you asked for it.

JH: Overall have you ever regretted it?

CC: Yes I regretted it only to the point that my boot days were the toughest days of my military life with bunions and suffering but enduring the mosquitos and the trails and [unclear] of it in boot camp.

JH: How did you find out you were accepted into the Marines and where did they send you for training?

CC: I was accepted down in Albany the old railroad station on North Pearl and they sent me down to Paris Island. Where they met me at the station called the [unclear] and from there they boarded us on a bus to Paris Island.

JH: What was basic training like for you?

CC: Basic training of the Marine Core was very tough. We had eight weeks of basic training. We endured [unclear] several inches deep in marching, mosquitos nicks to our bedding near latrines.

KH: How was the food like, what kind of uniforms were you wearing and what was your pay?

CC: The Marine uniform was dungarees and we had two sets. Each day we had to clean and wash them and put them out to dry and put a new set on for the next day. The food was good, we had no complaints about food. We got up early in the morning and went to bed late at night; and you better get some sleep otherwise you are still up in the middle of the night with a bare chest and have mosquitos biting you up because some foolish Marine had this big mouth open all night long and wouldn't sleep and allow the drill sergeants to sleep and they gave us the business. "All right fall out!" the drill sergeants shouted. There we stood and if you had to stand at attention and eat which was awful hot during July through September you fell straight on your face in the sand.

JH: Going back just before you got called into the service, there is some things that people don't remember especially from the youngsters today.

CC: We were subject to things like rationing; can you remember what it was like when we had rationing before you went in on your call? The rationing I remember was the gasoline and the rubber tires because I had to travel from Amsterdam to Schenectady General Electric. At that time they use to issue us coupons for so many gallons of gasoline and you didn't use them foolishly you used them religiously for what they were intended to be.

KH: What about rationing for food?

CC: In the civilian life it was a little tougher, you couldn't get butter but we made good of the food we had in the garden like victory gardens and picking up dandelions in the fields and raising beans the Old Italian style. It stuck to us and making bread and it was the way of life those days. Unknown to the younger boys and girls today in this life.

KH: Returning back to days of recruiting. When you first went in, did they give you haircuts to the regulation style, inoculations, and/or a physical?

CC: As we rode to Paris Island, Daniel Lou was an old time Marine that could put a mortal shell, I forget how many feet into a barrel. He was the barber and he charged us fifty cents. He had an electric clipper and he stood aside a box out in the sunlight and went up one side and then the other side up and across their heads and said okay you are done and you had less than an inch of hair on top of your head. The reason for that was he had to leave enough hair so you didn't get sun struck.

KH: What about the medical treatment, the examinations, inoculations. Did they prepare you for this or was it a surprise?

CC: Yes they did but at times when you complained about blisters and you wanted them last they would call you just to tease you, sick bay marine but they would set you.

JH: As asked before, how long was your basic training?

CC: Eight weeks

JH: What were some of the things you experienced in basic training? Did you have a rifle or pistol experience, learning how to go through obstacle courses, bayonet drill?

CC: I was perhaps more fortunate than many of the marines in boot camp. Particularly because of the fact that I was a musician and they asked me to go to an audition for the U.S. Marine band. As a result of that I missed the chemical warfare induction of training and the [unclear] course because each time I was called to go for rehearsals where as we also broadcast every Thursday at four o'clock from CBS for an hour band concert throughout the country from Paris Island.

KH: How did you get your training? Did you just pick this up or schooling to be a musician?

CC: I started playing the violin when I was eleven years old. I went through my musical life the hard way. I use to shine shoes at my father's shoe shop for ten cents, eventually was able to buy a music stand, buy my own strings. I use to carry my violin to school, walk two and a half miles to go and two and a half miles to come back with a paper brown bag with my lunch. No bus nowhere, my musical experience involved music theory, harmony, composition, choir work, and orchestra band. I ended up as an honor student of music honors upon graduation.

JH: Where did you graduate from?

CC: I graduated from Amsterdam high school the Wilbur H.

JH: Did the Marines appreciate the musical concerts?

CC: Yes, it was a joy playing in the band. We use to get up at six o'clock in the morning, and would have rehearsals. At twelve o'clock noon while I was in headquarters battalion at boot camp I was free until the next morning. Then I use to go to what we called the bowling alleys and set up bowling pins and made money that way and put it in the bank. Eventually I got home on two emergency referrals through the Red Cross to come home once because my brother died and there was nobody home outside of me as a man. The second time my wife had a hard time with our second daughter Christine when she was born.

JH: Where did you go after basic training?

CC: After basic training I stayed right on Paris Island in headquarters battalion with the general and then from there after two emergency referrals I was told I had to go to new river or camp [unclear] for another week. There we took our new issued rifles and had to clean the [unclear] with cold water. You can imagine what you had to do to get it off. From then on it was kind of cold, we use to have snowbanks up against our plump chest. Then after one week we left and we went through the southern part of the states all the way to camp [unclear]. There we stayed for another week till we joined a ship the USS [unclear] for overseas deployment.

JH: Where were you deployed to and what marine units were you assigned to?

CC: I was assigned to the third Marine division. When I got aboard the ship I was assigned into the galley. The ocean being as smooth as glass, not being a water boy I got sea sick. Then as I was getting sea sick I learned to cut hair knowing what little I had experience of, watching my in-laws they were [unclear] and barbers I cut hair for nothing but because of the donations I made eight dollars at the bottom of the ship. Eventually the captain marine asks if I was a barber. I said no sir, he asked what my number was. I said 415 as snare drummer and the marine said that is not your occupation. I said no sir but the boys can't get their hair cut aboard ship because the navy barber doesn't have time for us. We have been on this ship going on thirty nine days and the hair was growing too much. So I would cut their hair the best that I could and did a pretty good job. Being marines we don't like to have crew cuts, we liked to have civilian cuts. So the marine says okay carry on. But then as I cut, I cut one guy with an Iroquois Indian haircut and another one with a bald in the center and clean cut. The marine came back and says he is going to court Marshall you. I referred as sir I am sorry I didn't know what the rules were. He says okay you are forgiven. From that time on I was cutting his hair.

JH: Did he give you good tips?

CC: I made Private First Class overseas and on Parris Island before going to Guam. They let us off the ship and we had a little beer party and there we rendezvous with two more ships. I stayed on the same ship we sailed out of Santiago, CA. The forty fourth replacement draft went onto the other ships to Australia. Eventually they hit Okinawa but I went onto Guam. From Guam we waited ashore on a gap to angina village. Then we went up into the hills and we [unclear] and made friends with the Guamanians who were catholic people and they are very religious and that is another story.

KH: Mentioned earlier besides a bandsman that you had some experience with the choir.

CC: Yes I sang in a choir as a youth but I was not really eligible and had to be a senior to join it. I was a tenor and had quite the voice being Italian I guess? I love to sing and I use to be able to sing high notes. I sang in a choir and from that experience I had then when I was overseas. From Guam we ended up moving into Saipan and they transferred me from the third Marine division to the second Marine division from Saipan. Then the bomb dropped in Nagasaki, from there we got aboard shipment and went to Nagasaki. In Nagasaki is where the band was bulletted in a

Christian girl's school. I sang at a protestant choir and what happened is the father Aheart (?) from long beach, CA caught me. He asks why you are singing in a protestant choir. I love to sing and I said it doesn't make any difference to me because I'm singing in the presence of god and that's the way it is. He said we would like to have a catholic choir before Christmas passes. He asks would I like to join. I sure would I said father, I knew the mass, carry in and so forth. We started to have rehearsals and as we had rehearsals nobody knew what was going on. How it would work, how to coordinate tanners the basses and so forth. We had one play the piano but no one directing, so being a musician and music is very dear to my heart. I said father I'm taking a leave of absence, and he says where are you going? I said I can't stand this, there is nobody here to give direction, and the people don't know anything about the mass. They don't know how to sing, they don't know how to coordinate and phrase the music. Father then asks if anyone knew how to direct a choir? Nobody knew, and he asked me. I said I use to have my own dance band in high school. Father asks if I can handle it. Yes father, under one condition. It wasn't said I'm only a PFC and we have sergeants, lieutenants and captains in here singing and I said if they are going to take any direction there going to take it from the PFC and I won't take any huff or puff. It's my direction and my choir and you will do as I say. There is no authority here as far as rank. Father said I got it. We put the mass on and sang it at the Nagasaki Theater. We recorded parts of it, and one exciting thing during the mass was as we were singing on the alter someone dropped a steel helmet on the concrete deck and you can hear it in the recording which was very bad because the generators were going. From that point on I wrote a few ballets, one was a big orcastration that we played for a fireman's ball in Amsterdam, NY when I came back I still have the manuscript.

KH: Did you see any major combat with your duty with the Marines?

CC: I am glad to say I did not, I am probably the luckiest guy in the Marines. However I had one incident where I thought I might have had an occasion to kill a first lieutenant. The occasion arose when I was doing guard duty at an airbase on Guam. He was the first lieutenant and officer of the day and I was stationed at a pulse and as he crept along the jungle, along the palm trees. I saw something coming so I ducked behind a palm tree and I had my rifle focused on him because I was one shot short of being an expert with a rifle and one. I pointed it at him and as he approached me I went to his rear and went side by side until I got in front of him, presented the arms which is a manner of saluting. He immediately grasped my rifle and asked me the various questions about the orders of the day and how many rounds of ammunition. Well I lied and said I didn't have any, in reality I did but I had taken them out. After he got through he gave me the rifle and says carry on. Began your pardon sir I said. What is it the officer said? May I say something out of the ordinary? Go ahead he says, I respond with you have a lot of guts. The officer asks what I meant. I have two children at home, I had this rifle pointed right at your heart, I could have killed you because you came out like a bold piece of timber out of the field there and I thought you were a Jap because there were two officers that killed that same night because the Japs were infiltrating into the commissary for food. The officer laughed and left then.

KH: What was it like with any of the people that you came across. The Guamese, the Japanese?

CC: The Guamanians were very religious, we had them enjoy our picnics with us. In our band in Guam which was a third marine event, we had three sections of battalion bands. First, second and third division bands. We invited them all over to an intense, we had ice cream, and we had Coca-Cola, no beer and hot dogs and things like that. They were very nice people, they were escorted by the military police and the priests of the church. Nobody touched anybody.

JH: What was the feeling when Japanese people, were they resentful?

CC: When I arrived in Nagasaki, I may be an extrovert, I may be nice, I don't know? I tried to treat everybody as a human being. My opinion of the Japanese people per say were wonderful, very kind, very courteous. I had made friends with them. One in particular was professor Maksune. A professor at a college in Nagasaki, he and I became good friends because he noticed I had a parker pen which had a gold tip. He kept looking at it and I ended up giving it to him. I enjoyed [unclear] his wife and two lovely daughters and their home which is customary in Japan. The other friend I had was a minister's son, a vegetarian. We went to movies together and he would explain some of the movies that took place as Japanese. How I met professor Maksune was at a time I was looking for stamps. Stamps in Japanese the word is kitte and I went to a department store to buy stamps for my very good friend in Amsterdam Mr. Lattice who was a stamp collector. I was able to buy some stamps through him I negotiated the word stamp to the clerk and that is how I got to know him. I finally got the stamps and bought albums of them and brought them back home and gave it to him. Some of the stamps were very valuable but I was not [unclear].

KH: Seeing that you have various stamp collections yourself, I can imagine you have exhibited this to various functions?

CC: The World War II stamps I have framed, are important because of the history. It reflects the various campaigns of the World War II. Each stamp depicts a pictorial view of it. It has the five emblems or disks of the various services and then the American flag. On the bottom is my name and the person who made the frame for me. Which I purchased, it was a very beautiful thing and it was displayed at the Vietnam memorial in Albany, NY for three months.

KH: Did you ever have any injuries or illnesses while in the service?

CC: The only injury I ever had which was pains in my chest which never got documented overseas. They cured me with drops in water to kill the pain, in reality I think that is why I had my heart attack. I had an operation five years ago.

KH: How do you assess the men and officers you served with, I imagine you had something where some were rotten and others were almost saints?

CC: Of all the people I've been associated with at any kind of official responsibility the one I detested most of all was a PFC drilling sergeant. He picked on me religiously, being the only Italian boy, oldest boy and the shortest boy. When my wife sent me my food like peperoni. He took it away from me and I never forgave him for that. The reason was I worked for general electric and he knew it, and he worked for Westinghouse which is a competitor. Ending up I became the number two rifleman and as the day of graduating boot camp in my set of greens

because I couldn't afford a set of blues. He came up and congratulated me and I said thank you very much. He said that was a nice shoot, I said you know I made it my business. He said what do you mean? I said Karl I just wanted to remind you. Don't ever get into my sights overseas because I'll never forget you. What you did to me and how you degraded me and I was the only one you picked on. Maybe that was part of the training but you made a hell of a man out of me.

KH: Where were you and can you remember what the feeling was like among the troops and the people when the war when the war was officially over?

CC: When the war was over we were on Saipan and we were told to board ship and head for parts unknown but it was Nagasaki and to get to Nagasaki you had to go through between the islands and the hills with torpedoes coming both ways at you and was recorded at the time as we were on ship. Expect seventy percent casualties, needless to say jubilation was part of the tape. Let's get back to the choir, as a result of the Christmas choir father Aheart gave me a bottle of [unclear]. Of course PFC's don't get liquor, officers do. That bottle of [unclear] could have been sold for hundreds of dollars. You know where it went? Everybody had a little swig at New Year's Eve. Not me, I didn't drink.

KH: Can you remember where you were and what it was like when you got the word that the war was officially over, what was the general feeling of the troops and the people?

CC: The troops were very joyful, as far as people were concerned we never saw it neither. I don't know why, maybe it's because of the cliffs that thousands of Saipan people dove off of the cliffs as you recall history tells you. My joy at the time after that was to be able to go to the edge of the cliff and watch the waves and the pools of water that various assortment of color tropical fish in the little inlets. It was beautiful.

KH: In Japan you said you got to Nagasaki, that was one of the two targets of the atomic bomb, did you get to see the destruction that was in that area?

CC: Very much so, it was devastating. People were burned others were torn apart. I can't imagine how we would feel today. It was terrible the destruction of lyric would last for years and years. I remember playing ball where the bomb dropped and the building adjacent to had [unclear] that were twisted from the bomb. The heat of the bomb twisted the [unclear]. That's where I was exposed to radiation and so documented today.

KH: Did you experience any effects from that radiation?

CC: Thank god I have had no experience of that what so ever other than cancer in my feet. Which I don't believe is attributed to it. It might but is always under surveillance. I've been treated for radiation on that basis.

KH: Now while you were in the service did you receive any kind of decorations, medals or accommodations for your service?

CC: I received nothing more than ordinary ribbons for being overseas. Other than that I had no reason to accept or to receive any medals of honor other than the fact I did my job.

KH: When did you leave Japan for home, I assume you came directly home?

CC: When I left Japan, we left from [unclear] because from Nagasaki we were shipped over to [unclear] naval base. From [unclear] we boarded a ship and we came back. Needless to say I got sick again, seasick. Must have been the navy gave us fried fish. I guess all the sailors and marines had their heads over the railing.

KH: How long was the trip to come home?

CC: I don't remember exactly, but it must have been a good week or so. From there we went to camp [unclear] and we had delivery forty eight hours. We didn't have dress shoes we took off and hitch hiked to Hollywood. Went to the [unclear] and saw the dance band. I brought back some jewelry from Japan, some different trinkets and things for friends such as rings and rubies.

JH: How long where you stationed there before?

CC: Stationed at camp pearl took a few more days aboard ship all the way back. I wanted to not go aboard ship I wanted to get discharged at camp [unclear]. I wanted to travel into Mexico by myself and then go up through the northern part of the states over across the Dakotas back home because I didn't think I'd ever go that way again in my life. Needless to say again the orders came out as board ship. Aboard ship I was the king I was stationed in the middle of cars, and I use to direct traffic when it came to channel time, this group was the first and this group and we ended up in St. Louis where we got eggs and bacon and had breakfast there. Then from there we came back to camp [unclear] naval base where they discharged us. From there I met my wife in New York and spent a few days there. Then I came back home and started life all over again.

JH: When you got home I imagine your children have grown quite a bit or changed?

CC: Yeah, Alena I'll never forget now, that was 1946 she was six years old. When Christine was born I thought she would be a boy. What we were going to name her at the time is a funny thing. If it was a boy it was going to be Christopher Junior. If it was a girl it was going to be Christine. Well it was a girl she was supposed to be the boy but I have two beautiful daughters. One is going to be sixty three in December the other fifty nine.

JH: How many years have you and your wife been married?

CC: We've been together too long, but the years are sixty four. We are going to celebrate that at the Immaculate Conception where the bishop can say mass in October here.

KH: Looking back on your service was there any unusual funny or inspiring thing that you experienced? You mentioned something about Red Cross workers, people who stood out?

CC: When I was in Guam, let's say this. On my way down to Paris Island in Baltimore. The Salvation Army, met us at the station and gave us coffee and doughnuts. As far as the Red Cross was concerned, many people dislike them. I love them, I think they do wonders I think they deserve all the contribution that anyone can give them, as much as they can. Overseas I needed a piece of paper or pencil the Red Cross would get it. I wanted a chess set to pass my time they

were there. I wanted soap to wash my face and hands, they were there. Nobody else was there to give it to us.

KH: When you got back what was the discharge procedure like, were they doing it individually or big groups at a time?

CC: Individually but quick and fast.

KH: Did you have to pay your own way back home? Or did they furnish you with transportation?

CC: I don't recall that for sure. I can't say yes or no, in regards to that home sweet home.

KH: When you got home, what did you do after you arrived home, what kind of work?

CC: First thing I had to do was to start providing income because there wasn't any. The women don't work much so they can sustain the family. I lived with my in-laws and that was nice, it was a big help. I went back to general electric to try to get my job back, which they had to hire me. I couldn't get in because there was a strike in 1946 so I had to go on a fifty two twenty club. I got two checks and that was it. Then I got back into general electric, I got back in the same job. Then I progressed up into supervision, inventory control and termination of contracts.

KH: Now for those not familiar with the term fifty two twenty, correct me if I'm wrong. They receive twenty dollars a week for a maximum of fifty two weeks?

CC: That is correct.

KH: Twenty dollars at that time, I assume did not buy much.

CC: It didn't buy much but it sustained it, you know you have to be frugal about it.

KH: Did you get back into your music again, when did you get into that?

CC: I started to play dance music on the side over the weekends like country music and things like that, hill-billy stuff. Then I said to myself, this is not my life. I have two kids at home, playing a violin in front of a group of people and have the girls try and smother you, so to speak. That's not my life, so I gave it up. I went back home and I never did play again. My violin sits on the couch here now and I'm going to sell it. I haven't played it in ten years.

KH: How did the military influence your life?

CC: Military life gave me a different perspective of life, is to how you react towards everybody else. You had to learn to live with the person, you had to learn to love and forgive. If you can't do that, if you even got love in your heart when you look in the mirror, you can't give it to anybody else. I hope those are words that people will take in seriously.

KH: Did you keep any correspondents, travel to convention meetings with and are you involved with any kind of organization of x military people?

CC: Its funny you ask that question because I got too involved, first of all I had friends and I had quite the association which I still have with one marine. It was a town in Massachusetts, he was like a brother to me. He was younger and I acted like a big brother to him. Since I have been out of the service I joined a marine core league, I went up through the [unclear] I finally became [unclear] of the marine core league in Albany, NY. Captain William Dale O'Brian. I was commander three times for three terms of V.F.W. Guilderland center. Commander three times of the Italian-American war veterans. I currently belong to the Zaloga American legion program organization. I did belong to the American musician association of the bands in the Marines, CA. Since then I have dropped it because you're going to have your self-involved in too many things and the do's are [unclear]. I am a pedigree devil dog of the Marine core league. I got that pedigree in Boston, in 1982 I was awarded as the top recruiter of the Marine core league of the country. I became second in honors as marine of the year in the United States in 1982 at Dare Bore, Michigan also. I was the Marine of the year in the state of New York, nominated. I currently do a lot of writing for a pastor and [unclear] and for familiarizations that have newsletters assorted, take their words and I corrected them and I would phrase them as best I can for the limited amount of knowledge I have. As far as I'm concerned, my greatest accomplishment are two. One I establish a marine scholarship bandsman award in Albany County through the marine core league, which eventually I understand is going to be in my memory. The monument when I was commander of the V.F.W. in Guilderland, I along with my veterans of foreign war members went out and solicited, where as we guarded as much as nine to ten thousand dollars. We put up the monument in front of the Guilderland Town Hall. Which honored all veterans of all wars and no specific person or individual person was ever mentioned. There it sits, that is perpetual.

KH: As a Marine have you gone to Washington D.C. the capital to see the Marine monument there?

CC: I never got to see the capital but I did get to see the Iwo Jima monument, I went to the Arlington cemetery. We went on a bus tour of several days, it was beautiful but it was awful hot, I didn't feel good.

KH: When you came back here I would assume that you had no problem getting medical treatment at the V.A. center?

CC: As far as I am concerned, the V.A. center in Albany is one of the finest institutions that I can say is around judging from what I hear. I had heart surgery, I've had pneumonia I had gout, I've had cancer treatments on four different spots on my legs, which Mediterranean people from that area are prone to. As soon as I get down there it's tremendous. My medication is cheap, over the counter I can get it and it's even cheaper. The attendance I get is a worthy consideration to go and get it, I advise everybody get a card and be registered with them. May take a few days or months but it's your fault for procrastinating.

KH: Looking back on all of your experiences, would you do it again if the situation was the same?

CC: I definitely would, once a Marine always a Marine.