

An Interview with Rocco Carofano
WWII USMC Veteran
By Michele Starkey

Rocco Carofano grew up on a farm in Marlboro with seven sisters and two brothers. “We raised berries and fruit for wine.” His father passed when he was just 12 years old and his mother continued to work the farm to support the family. Rocco was barely 18 years old when he enlisted in the Marine Corps during WWII.

Where did you enlist?

“I went to Newburgh and was sent to New York City and from there we went to Parris Island in South Carolina for basic training. I trained for 14-15 hours per day as a machine gunner.”

What was your first overseas assignment?

“We went to Samoa with the 2nd Battalion Special Weapons Outfit. We were there to help stem the tide of the Japanese movement into the Pacific but the Japs never returned. I met a fellow named Bill Gallagher during this time and we remained friends for fifty years after the War. We even sent letters back and forth when he moved to California. My son, Peter, took me out to California to meet with Bill face-to-face in 2002. It was a very emotional time as we reminisced about all of the memories from so long ago.”

Where did you go after Samoa?

“The 2nd Marine Division headed New Zealand for about six months before going to Tarawa. The fighting at Tarawa was intense and lasted just 3-1/2 days but U.S. marine casualties were almost too overwhelming to count. There were thousands who were killed but we managed to knock the 6,000 Japanese soldiers down to just 35. It had to be done because the Japanese had a stronghold on Tarawa. Many years later, I was talking with a buddy, Al Crisci, and he told me he was at the battle of Tarawa. When I asked him where he was, it turned out that he was only about 50 feet from where I was fighting and I never knew it. That’s the funny part about being in a battle; you never know who is fighting right along side of you.”

What came next?

“After Tarawa, we headed back to Hawaii for some more training for about 5-6 months and prepared for the next attack. I was transferred to the 3rd Marine Division to take part in the Guam Invasion. By the time that we arrived in Guam, the invasion was over but some escaped Japanese soldiers were still firing at our Seabees and 24 of us were sent to flush out the Japs. After that, we were sent to Tinian and Saipan. We needed to overtake the airfield on Tinian.”

Editorial note: Seabees built the busiest airfield of WWII on Tinian - dubbed North Field - enabling B-29 Superfortresses to launch air attacks on the Philippines, Okinawa, and mainland Japan. It was a strategic turning point in the War.

What happened when you arrived at Okinawa?

“Well, there were about 140-150,000 Japanese just 2 miles inland at Okinawa. We had to barrage them with mortars. There were 3 Marine Divisions and we split the island in half with half of the Marines taking the south side and the others taking the north side. I was one of the machine gunners who ended up transferred to the 6th Marine Division at that time. I had 2 men who were my assistant gunners. Each carried a part of the machine gun – one carried the tripod and the other the ammo. Our mission was to secure the airfield and protect it. There was an enormous amount of activity and skirmishes. Japanese planes were constantly incoming and dropping what we called ‘pattern bombs.’ My assistant

gunner lost his eye from one of those bombs and I lost my hearing when the bomb exploded near our foxhole. I had a tremendous concussion and a terrible ringing in my ear.”

Did you continue to fight even though you were wounded?

“Yes, I did until about two weeks later when I felt a severe pain in my stomach and fell down. I thought for sure I’d been hit with shrapnel until the Corps man arrived and said, ‘Your appendix are about to explode.’ Believe it or not, they removed my appendix right there in the foxhole, handed me a gun and told me to keep my head down. Three days passed and on the fourth day, I was returned to duty and we shot down 3 Japanese planes that day. The 4th plane landed on its belly on the airfield and we overtook it.”

What did you do after the bombs were dropped?

“All of the Destroyers and Carriers were heading back to Pearl Harbor. From there, we went to San Diego and into quarantine for seven days. I remember the base was surrounded with barbed wire – we couldn’t leave until we spent 7 days there and then I took the train, along with everyone else, back to the Brooklyn Navy Yard. After a few days, I asked if I could visit my sister who lived just a few miles away. I remember getting into a cab and telling the driver I just got back from the Pacific and he never charged me the fare to go to see my sister. I had to be back by 5:00 am for revelry.”

When were you discharged and how long did you serve?

“I served for 35-1/2 months and was discharged in November of 1945. All of my military records were destroyed in the Kansas fire and it has plagued me my entire life. I tried to go to Castle Point to get my special hearing aids and they told me they needed proof that I was injured in the War and if I couldn’t produce documents, then I would have to get the doctor and three witnesses to sign an affidavit. I don’t even know if any of those guys are alive anymore. I ended up with a 65% hearing loss in my left ear and a 50% hearing loss in my right ear. I finally spent the \$3,500 for special hearing aids to amplify sounds.”
Editorial note: On July 12, 1973, a disastrous fire ravaged the sixth floor of the NPRC's Military Personnel Records (MPR) building in Overland, Kansas. In terms of loss to the cultural heritage of our nation, the fire was an unparalleled disaster, destroying approximately 16-18 million Official Military Personnel Files (OMPF).

What did you do when you returned home?

“I went to work back on the farm and in 1951, I was introduced to my wife, Angela, and we were engaged and married within 6 months. We’ll celebrate sixty years of marriage this September. We have three children (Debbie, Peter and Jeri) and three grandchildren (Adam, Jessica and Janalyn). After working on the farm a few years, I worked construction for a few years, and then in 1956, we opened the 4C’s Restaurant in Marlboro. We had the restaurant business until 1969. I worked as the Highway Superintendent for Marlboro for 12 years and managed the landfill until I retired.”
Rocco was a Volunteer Fireman for 35 years and was inducted into the Softball Hall of Fame in 2009. He remains a member of the American Legion and VFW Post 1161.

The VFW Post 1161 meets every third Friday of every month in the City of Newburgh Post 973 Bldg. The meetings begin at 1:00 pm and you can call Quartermaster Steve Fanizzi at (845)236-7295 or Commander Donald Ruckdeschel Sr. at (845)562-7828 for more details.