

James Conti
Narrator

Sean Quinn
Interviewer

July 2nd 2013
Guilderland New York

SQ: Just for the record, could you give your name, date of birth, and where you were born?

JC: James Conti, Born June of 1920, the president at that time was Calvin Coolidge.

SQ: Where were you born?

JC: I was born in Jamestown New York.

SQ: What was your life like before you entered the armed services?

JC: I went through the depression. By 1932 the depression was in full bloom. Things were very difficult and it was hard to find work and we had a difficult time making a living. After that things started getting better around 1935 and the depression ended and that's when things started stirring up in Europe, Mussolini invaded Ethiopia in 1937 and after that Hitler, who had been gaining power in Europe, invaded Czechoslovakia and had a lot of putsches in Germany and finally in 1941 we entered World War II when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, At that time I was in Junior High School and listened to Roosevelt's speech and the declaration of war against the Japanese and the continued on through High School. On my Graduation from High school I went into the Coast Guard. I was stationed for Boot Camp in Brooklyn New York. Spent three months there and then was shipped out to Charlestown South Carolina where I was assigned to the Captain of the port and our responsibilities there were to load ships with food supplies, munitions and so on because the war in Japan was still going on and I was in the Coast Guard until July of 1946, when I got discharged and came back home.

SQ: When did you enlist in the Coast Guard?

JC: I enlisted in the Coast Guard in 1945.

SQ: Why did you choose to go into the Coast Guard?

JC: Well, I wanted to go into the Navy at that time, but the Navy had their quota filled, so I thought the next best place would be the Coast Guard.

SQ: What training was necessary to enter the coast guard?

JC: For Boot Camp, we were training in Brooklyn and we did a lot of water activities. Everyday we'd go out and use rowboats and practice rescue skills, also we practiced jumping from ships, 30 or 40 feet high. Regular Boot Camp activity: marching, gun drills, regular ship activity: like night visions training, and that went on for about 2 months.

SQ: What was an average day in the life for you?

JC: You'd get up in the morning at about 5 o'clock. Get dressed and have breakfast, then you'd start training, either march or run or do gunnery activity. Standing by while the larger guns were shot, like the cannons. That would go on all day, we'd have chow at noon, we did a lot of marching, the day would end, roughly around 5 o'clock, we'd have the rest of the day to get dinner, hang around awhile, and hit the sack around 10 o'clock.

SQ: What ship did you serve on?

JC: I wasn't on a ship

SQ: Did you go out on boats at all?

JC: Just rescue boats. The Coast Guard was involved in a lot of sea rescue at that time.

SQ: Did you have any trouble adapting to boats?

JC: No

SQ: Did you ever come across a U-Boat or anything hostile?

JC: U-Boats? No.

SQ: What did you do between World War II and Korea?

JC: After I left the Coast Guard I didn't do anything for about a year or two, then in 1947 I took advantage of the G.I bill and went to college, worked on my masters there for three years, then in 1950 I was drafted into the Korean War and when I was drafted in the war I was stationed in Fort Dix, in New Jersey and I was there for about three months. After that we got shipped to Georgia, Fort Benning, and I was there for about another two months and I got trained in the medical corps. A couple of months after that we were shipped out to Germany and I was in what was called a clearing company. Did you ever see M.A.S.H?

SQ: Yeah.

JC: M.A.S.H is Mobile Army Hospital Unit and our unit, the clearing company was ahead of M.A.S.H on the lines, we were getting the wounded right out there on the lines. We set up field hospitals which were these huge tents, bigger than this house, and we'd take care of people who got wounded, got hurt, it was mostly training then. I was in a town near Frankfurt called Darnshlat. I was there for almost a year. We did a lot of training. I was the Training Information NCO at that time and I set up training programs for the troops, each week I'd have a schedule of what they were going to do, like: exercises, field training, bivouacking, maneuvering and things such as that. Then after about a year there our unit got transferred to another place in Germany called Schifshol and did about the same thing there. I was in charge of training and trained some recruits, assisting physicians, and actually working like nurses out in the field, we bivouacked in the field during the winter a lot, in the snow. That was most of the training. We stayed in Germany until 1952, then came back to the United States. At that time I finished my college. After I got my Master's Degree I went to the University of Buffalo to get my Masters and after that I did graduate work at Cornell and at the University of Pennsylvania

SQ: What persuaded you to become a medic instead of returning to the Coast Guard?

JC: I don't really know. When I was back in college I initially was a biology major and I wanted to get into the medical end of it. They were happy to give it to me because of my biology background and I could fit right in to what they were doing.

SQ: What were your interactions with the locals like?

JC: I had a lot of interaction with them, in fact I learned to speak German, a young boy, about four years old, taught me how to speak German. Another German teacher taught our classes, asked me one day if I wanted to see what a school was like and I said yes. So I went to one of the schools, it was called a gymnasia, where upper level students went. We went into class and they were reading poems by the poet Gerthe in German and the teacher said, "would you like to hear them do it in English?" I said "no, that would be too

much trouble' but they flipped right over and did it in English and that really amazed me. I think they were eighth graders. I did a lot of traveling around Germany, different towns, went to Nuremberg where a lot of people got killed, some of the camps where there were ovens, people were burned. It was very....touching

SQ: Did you ever meet anybody who was resentful of you?

JC: Not really, we had a lot of Germans working for us in our Kersern, which was our camp that we were stationed and they worked pretty closely with us. I'm sure there were people that resented us but I didn't come across them very much.

SQ: Do you have any fun stories, from when you were in the Coast Guard or in Germany, or anything you'd just like to talk about?

JC: I think what I liked about Germany is a lot of days we would not have much to do so we would start walking through the woods, and they kept their woods immaculate, we'd walk and every few miles we'd come to a town and every time we came to a town they'd have a guest house, which is like a bar. We'd go in there and they'd have these huge loaves of bread, with some of their wurst and lunchmeats, and good beer, and we'd walk out there and have a good lunch a good bottle of beer, and then hike back again. Doing that we met a lot of people, went past a lot of farms and they were still not up to date with their farming, but it's improved since.

SQ: What did you do with yourself upon returning home?

JC: I taught school for fifteen years in Jamestown and I coached football at that time and I became very active in the Teachers Union. I was President of the Teachers Union of Jamestown and then I became more active and became the Vice-President of the New York State Teachers Association. Some years after that they asked me to go on staff, Director of Staff for Western New York. We had about fifteen staff members and what they did was negotiate contracts for the teachers, and what happened in 1967 was a law was passed called a Tailor Law, which gave public employees the right to collectively bargain with their employers, that's the way teacher unions and teachers came up a little on the weight scale. After that they asked me to come to Albany to become Head of Operations for the New York State United Teachers, which is a state union, and I did that until I retired. When I first started teaching I made \$2500 a year plus they gave me \$50 a year to coach football. That was a real big salary (laughs).

SQ: How would say your time in the service has affected you and your life?

JC: The Coast Guard taught me a lot of responsibility, same with the medics. I learned to stay with a job. Let's see, all that stuff affected my life, and my work with the teachers union affected my life because I had a lot of contact with different people, government officials and at one point when I was doing graduate work at Cornell during the Vietnam War. After I did the graduate work I got called to Washington to meet the Secretary of State Dean Rusk and he was seeking our advice on the war in Vietnam and we talked with him and as we talked with him President Johnson came in and sat with us, talked with us. Thinking about that time it had an impact, not a great impact but an impact. It gave a feeling that you were part of something bigger than yourself and that you could contribute.

SQ: Have you kept in touch with any of your old friends from the service through the VFW or something similar?

JC: I'm a part of the American Legion but I don't keep in touch with anyone except for the ones I grew up with, who are still living, had a couple of friends who got killed in World War II and several of them that lived and that I kept in contact with.

SQ: Is there anything you want to say to wrap-up, about your experiences?

JC: One thing I want to say is I've lived a long life, seen a lot of changes, and I'm amazed at the way the world has come over all these years and I'm sure you're going to see a lot more changes and going to tell somebody your story when you get to be my age.