

**Carlton E. Covell
Veteran**

**Michael Aikey
Wayne Clarke
NYS Military Museum
Interviewers**

**Interviewed on August 13, 2001
Latham, New York**

Q: To start the tape is a little introduction, to let the viewers know who everybody is. We are interviewing Mr. Carlton Covell at the Latham Headquarters. It is August 13, 2001. The interviewer is Michael Aikey and the videographer is Wayne Clark. Mr. Covell, where were you born?

CC: Camden, New York in Queen Village of Oneida County.

Q: Did you grow up in Camden?

CC: We left Camden when I was about ten and went to Rome, NY. My father ran an automobile-top shop. My father was an upholsterer, but he became an auto-top maker and ran the business for a number of years in Rome.

Q: That was not very easy to do, making car tops at that period.

CC: No it wasn't, I refer to him as a Master Upholsterer. He made leather sample furniture pieces for The Harden Furniture Company, who are still in existence. It was his job to do the leather work. He then got interested in automobile-tops, moved to Rome and went into business for himself.

Q: Did you apprentice with him?

CC: Yes, especially in the auto-top shop. I was about ten or twelve years old, and I would go to the shop on Front Street in Rome, New York. There is no longer a Front Street. I used to go there after school, he had an old treadle machine. It was my job to turn the wheel to get the treadles going so he could sew. That stuck with me all my life. I learned how to sew as a youngster, even though he would not let me sew. It was later on that I got into the sewing.

Q: Did you go to high school in Rome?

CC: No, my last school was in McConnellsville, which was close to Camden. There was a furniture factory there. I could not pass the eighth grade, arithmetic held me back. Later, I had to use arithmetic all my life. The teacher told me I had failed arithmetic, that was in June in 1925 when I was fifteen. I quit school and never went back.

Q: Did you go into the upholstery business at that point?

CC: Well, at the age of seventeen, I was kind of a street kid. You know, shooting pool that's what we used to do. We were living in Rome at the time. My friends and I were the poolroom crowd or gang and stuck together. I have always referred to myself as a street kid because that is where we spent our time as we were leading up to the Depression. I learned how to shoot pool and billiards very well. I can't do it anymore because I can't see well [laughs]. All of my

good friends are all gone now. I was the first one in our group to get married. I was two months shy of eighteen so I had to get my parents' signature, my wife had just turned eighteen. We went through some hard times then as that was leading right into the Depression. There was no work.

Q: How were you able to earn a living during the Depression?

CC: I used to go with my father and brother, taking one street at a time in Rome. First it was James Street, then Washington, Madison, George -various streets. We would start ringing doorbells, rapping on doors asking for odd work, mowing lawns, shoveling snow in the winter, especially any work on furniture, doing whatever they had to do. That is how we picked up what few dollars we could make. David Dunn Boswell (@6:19 spelling) married my wife and I on the day before Christmas, December 24th 1930. We were in our sixty-third year of marriage when my wife passed away. We had a long time together, she was a real partner. She was also my seamstress when I was later in business for myself.

Q: That's great. Now as World War II was coming about, were you in the upholstery business?

CC: No, at that point I was a bartender. My mother had gotten me a job as a soda jerker in Troy, New York. In the meantime, they had moved to Troy and the man they rented from was Tom Gaynor (@7:15 spelling). There were a lot of ill stories about him, but none of the stories were true. He was really a fine gentlemen. I have been in contact with him all my life. Tom gave me a job as a bartender and I worked seven nights a week, twelve hours a night and received fourteen dollars a week. That job started in late 1935 and I stuck with him until 1939. Then I went to the World's Fair, and worked as a bartender at the Ballantine Inn. I believe I then quit that job, joined the union in New York and went to work in various places like the Commodore Hotel, the Essex House and a few other places. I was working at the Essex House when I heard about the bombing of Pearl Harbor. It was seven o'clock at night, my shift was from seven at night till about two or three in the morning. I knew they were building the Rome Army Air Base in our home town. When I returned from work I told my wife "you know what we are going to do? We are going back to Rome, I can get a job there". So that is what we did, right after the war started. I got a job in Security at the air base, that was kind of a pleasant job but I did not like it. Then I got a transfer into the leather and canvas department, and I was very happy there. I stayed until I was enlisted.

Q: When did you enlist?

CC: I started working at the base in 1943, we had a son and daughter at the time. I went to Utica without telling my wife. The enlistment office had all the branches, the Army, Navy, all of them. I went to the Army because my older brother was in Africa. I told the fellow I would like to join the service. He said okay and took all the information. He finally got to the question "Are you married?" I said yes, "do you have children?" I said yes and he asked their ages. One was ten and the other was eleven and a half. He said "get out of here". So I went home with my tail between my legs. There were a lot of 4-Fs, which was a stigma back then. I told my wife I wanted to go in the service. It took her about two weeks before she relinquished and said "oh, you want to go? Okay come on" She had to go with me to Utica and sign the form.[both laugh]. When I went in, the fella said, "what have you got against the Navy?" I said nothing, and he said "you're in the Navy".

Q: So that really wasn't the choice?

CC: No, that was it.

Q: Okay, so you are married, you have two kids, why did you want to join?

CC: Well, you know, back then it was a different society. Everybody was behind that war, ninety-nine percent of the people were for it. I already had a second brother who was in, he was in the Air Force. My first brother was in the Army. When I went into the service my older brother Stanley had just been discharged early. He was the only one out of twenty-six in his squad who came out of this bombing alive so he was a sole survivor and received a lot of medals, he was a real hero. Anyway, between my older brother and the one who was a little younger than me – Donald who went into the Air Force and was already on his way to England so, I could not stay home.

Q: Now the family has one in every service branch.

CC: Two of us wound up in the Navy. My younger brother was in the Navy too, but as a gunner in the Navy Merchant Marine.

Q: Where did you go to Basic Training, tell us about that?

CC: Samson Naval Training Base in Seneca New York. It opened in 1942 and closed in 1945. A total of 225,000 people took their boots there. It was a great experience. Three months of training. I still have pictures of my company. That's where they gave us the tests. I had been a Boy Scout and had always remembered the semaphore signals, A, B, C, all of that stuff. My job during that three month period was to instruct the rest of these fellas how to do semaphore with these flags which was good duty. I never had KP (kitchen patrol) duty in boot camp, never had to wash dishes. But in the end they chased me around the barracks to throw me in the shower, other than that it was good duty. I was thirty, some of us older guys were excused from the obstacle course of running, jumping and tumbling. But that is what I liked to do so I never took that excuse to get out of anything.

Q: What was living in Samson like?

CC: It was pretty strict. We got up early in the morning, took a run. Everything was timed perfectly. That was great experience as far as I was concerned. I finally took a test to determine what your skills would be geared for and strangely enough they wanted to make a radio man out of me. I knew nothing about that stuff which is what I told the instructor. Well he said “your marks are good”. I would rather go to parachute school. I knew my younger brother was Army in the Air Force parachute division, so that is what stuck in my mind. I was looking at a letter I had written to my father and in it I told him the quota was very small for a parachute rigger, but I think I am going to get it. And I did get it. As far as I know, there were only twenty-six of us that went through parachute school in Corpus Christi at that particular time. They told us at Samson, you have to make two test jumps. Back then we thought “yeah, so what”. That's the way it was.

Q: Were you in Sampson during the winter?

CC: No, I went into the parachute training either June or July and got out September 21, 1943. Then I went right back to Sampson and shipped out of Corpus Christi.

Q: Did you ever get into Geneva at all?

CC: Yeah, but not in for Liberty. Our Samson group never got the turkey, or whatever it was awarded which allowed you to go into Geneva. I had been Geneva many times, but not during the time that I was there as a sailor.

Q: After Basic Training you went into rigging school?

CC: Yes, a parachute rigger. It was very interesting, very good. I already knew how to sew and operate a sewing machine. This is something we had to make in parachute school. (Carlton then picks up a canvas bag, snaps it open) We had to make this tool case. In order to get a four point score, which is a perfect mark in the Navy, I had to make my rip cord. (Holds up a metal object) We had to weld and bend the bar, make the pins and do the wiring, everything. We had to get marked on this and my mark on this particular case was 3.75.

Q: Very good out of four. That is a nice job.

CC: Yes, they could not mark me four. I was very particular because I knew from my early experience exactly how to set the stitches and keep a straight seam. So that came in handy. Then we had a lot of running, jumping, tumbling and swinging on the bars. That sort of activity to loosen you all up, it was very enjoyable.

Q: How long did the rigging school last and then what happened?

CC: Three months. After that I got my choice of assignments because I had pretty good marks. I picked Jacksonville, Florida because it was a little closer to home than Chicago. I stayed there until early 1945. I was shipped out to Shoemaker, California and stayed there a few days until I got an assignment. They shipped me over to a **(20:33 unclear)** outfit in Oahu, Hawaii

Q: So you are rigging parachutes for Navy flyers?

CC: Yes, for anybody that flew would have a chute on whether it was on their chest or their back.

Q: How many parachutes could you rig safely in a day?

CC: Well, that was interesting, it's a good question. In Jacksonville, on the whole East Coast, that was a major repacking and repairing base. I went back there a few years ago and I could not even find the loft. The loft was the highest building on the Base. The Navy parachutes took two riggers, one on each side of the table. We could pack a chute in three minutes, the whole thing. I went to a parachute riggers' reunion a couple of years ago in Pensacola, Florida and learned they can now pack a chute almost immediately. I don't know how they do it. When I was packing, early on in Jacksonville, they were still using silk. They now use nylon. But in my time two of us could pack a parachute in three minutes.

Q: What are some of the important things you have to remember when you are packing a parachute?

CC: First, it had to be air-dried, then it was stretched out on a table. Now, here is a twenty-four foot canopy stretched out with all the shroud lines. Then two of us come in, a packer opposite a helper. I would take this tool (Carlton is holding a flat, metal rod) and pull the shoot on it. There were marks on the canopy where it had to be pulled. We removed the rod and get ready for the next portion. We had to consider all the shroud lines too. We had to pull the chute out and allow some air into it. I can't describe exactly how the process went, it's hard to remember how we did the lines. The lines were folded and weaved in a certain way. We just got through it. I recall at Jacksonville there were about ten riggers of which there were three or four female riggers. They matched our skills, there was never any question about that.

Q: They were also military?

CC: Yes. There were also primarily civilian people on the sewing machines, but we did sew too. When we finished the chute, then the packer had to sign his name, add the date and fold the slip up and place it in the pocket in the parachute. This was so if it was ever used or malfunctioned, they could tell by the ticket who had packed it. At Jacksonville, I had three of them that were used by pilots who had to bail out. I kept those tickets here in my book. I thought it was interesting where I made a mistake was I did not get the pilots' names. You don't think about those things I guess.

Q: When they use the parachutes, do they send you the ticket?

CC: No, what would happen, and it happened to me three times was a new Officer would come into the loft and holler out a name. You raise your hand and he would come over and give you a big hug. Yeah! A real, good hug and thank you and give you a bottle of whiskey.[both laugh]

Q: They were pretty appreciative weren't they?

CC: I tell you, I think a parachute rigger had the best rate in the Navy. I was the only rigger aboard the ship. I had a parachute officer, but nobody told me what to do. He was a young fighter pilot, a good guy, he never asked me one question. I knew my job, it had to be done a certain way, and that is the way it was.

Q: When did you get your first ship assignment?

CC: I got that when I went to Shoemaker, California they shipped me over to Oahu which was interesting. When I got to Oahu at the CASU Unit (meaning Carrier Aircraft Service Unit) there were twelve or fourteen other riggers. Only one guy came with me from Jacksonville, so we were among strangers. They were being shipped out by seniority. One day on my way back from the movies I passed this big stairway that lead up to the loft area. Bouncing down the stairway was a first-class rigger. He noticed by my uniform that I was a rigger and says "where is the chief here?" I said "I don't know, isn't he up there?" "No, there are only a few guys up there". I replied "Do you need to see him? He will be back." He said "I'm here to get a replacement for my ship because I'm getting off it." Well that was all I needed to hear and asked him to take me to his Personnel Officer and he said "sure". He brought me over to Kasaan Bay and I was accepted and left the loft the next day. The guys were extremely mad and cursed and booed at me because I was not supposed to have done that. But, after the Personnel Officer assigned me, that was the end of that.

Q: Now, the ship you were assigned to was an escort carrier?

CC: Yes, escort carrier USS Kasaan Bay #69

Q: What was life like aboard ship?

CC: Pretty good, it was kind of close. My sleeping quarter was directly under the hangar deck where all the arresting gear cables were. I used to sleep up on the gun sponson. We left Oahu for anti-submarine duty about mid to late June of 1945. As you know, the war was over in August. I recently learned when I read this book (*Top Secret: The Details of the Planned World War-II Invasion of Japan and How the Japanese Would Have Met It* – by James Martin Davis and Bert Webber) that we were on our way to a rendezvous. I did not know we were going to raid Japan on November 1, 1945. We were operating with one destroyer, four destroyer escorts and a submarine. That was our little group on anti-submarine duty.

After we left Oahu and went further out I discovered the Captain was communicating to

everybody that we are going into hostile waters and to make sure that your insurance is where you want it, if there are any changes to be made report to so-and-so. I thought to myself "Jesus, what the hell am I doing here really!?" You never know what to expect, we never really did get into actual combat, but we were on several general alarms. They never did discover what the general law was for anti-submarines so that is what we were there for. There may have been a submarine there, but I do not know. Nothing ever happened. Then I had an opportunity through the Personnel Officer, I forget his name but he was a nice guy and younger than I was too. There was a mention of extra pay and they checked me out as a gunner. I did that for extra pay thinking as long as I'm here let me get a few extra dollars since most of my money was going home. I did make four flights TBMs (Torpedo Bomber General Motors) as a gunner.

Q: What was that like?

CC: It was very, very interesting. I liked that, not the thought of what might be, but rather to get up there in the plane and away from the ship I guess. I enjoyed it, I flew backwards looking at the tail. It was alright. I feel I was very fortunate. I was fortunate when the war ended because after reading this book I mentioned earlier, that event would have been a real catastrophe. There were five hundred and fifty three escort carriers built. The one I was on was out of the first-class, the Casablanca Class. And out of all those carriers, there is only one still in existence down in Galveston, Texas. It is a famous ship think it is the Bogg..(@33:25 spelling). It saw a lot of action. My thought is why did they sell and destroy all these ships? They should have made a museum out of one of them. Like they have different battleship and carrier museums. The escort carriers were small, as I recall we had fifteen or sixteen TBMs and about ten fighter planes. I think they were F4Us (Vought F4U Corsair). That was all that we had. The flight deck was only five-hundred and seventy-five feet long. Everything had to be catapulted off. There is only one take-off and one landing in darkness. They were classed as extremely dangerous Navy. Those pilots had to be the best in the world.

Q: So what was it like to land on one of those things?

CC: Unbelievable. It scared the daylights out of me because these aviator guys, before they could land would go around in a circle and you would swear those wingtips were going to hit. I looked out that bubble and said "we're never gonna make it". When you are way up there and looked down, and see that tiny dot..it was something else. I've seen a few of those planes go over the side, accidents and things of that nature. It was a little scary, but also you were there and you had done it.

Q: Did you get involved with any kamikaze attacks?

CC: No, the closest I ever got to that was at a rest camp on Guam and there was one of those captured Japanese Bakabon planes there, kamikaze, and we all took turns to get into it and see what it was like. It was amazing. I could just squeeze into that seat and directly in front of my nose was the sight. So the young Japanese pilots who did that job, I don't know what kind of people they were. They were either very brave, or they did not have any brains because they were a goner once they sat there.

Q: What was rest camp like at Guam?

CC: Very good. I understood there was still Japanese inhabitants that stayed there for quite a while. Some did not even know the war was over.

Q: Any USO (United Service Organizations) shows?

CC: No, I never went to a USO show there. They may have had some. Our squadron went there, about one hundred and thirty men.

Q: Were you in any of the hurricanes?

CC: Yes. That was terrible. I was in the one sometime in August when the typhoon finally wound up in the Aleutian Islands. I think that is when we were at Iwo Jima picking up service men. It could have been Army or Navy, whatever, we took on an extra six hundred people. We were supposed to leave the day after next, let's say, but the orders came out that we were leaving immediately because of the typhoon.

We were only hit by the beginning of it. Here I am on an escort carrier which is about forty feet from the water up to the flight deck, and water is coming up over the flight deck. I tell you, I never got seasick. But I think one of the reasons was the story got out in order not to get seasick get right in mid-ship because the ship is rolling and mid-ship is almost stationary. That was a real bad storm and it lasted. We returned to Oahu and stayed there a couple of days and then back to the States. Afterward my ship went onto that "magic carpet duty" (Operation Magic Carpet brought back over eight million American military personnel from the European, Pacific and Asian theaters). We took one more trip and then that was demolished.

Q: So you were on the Magic Carpet trip?

CC: I made one trip, the one where we picked up those six hundred guys.

Q: It must have been pretty tight quarters.

CC: Tight? It was tight! And there were card games going on twenty-four hours a day. [Laughs] I wasn't much of a card player.

Q: Too bad they didn't have a pool table.

CC: Yeah, I would have liked to have had a pool table.

Q: Did you cross the Equator at all and did you become a Shellback (initiation ceremony for crossing the Equator)?

CC: Yes. When I crossed the Equator they put you through all kinds of maneuvers, Good Lord! [Carlton laughs and throws up his hands for emphasis] And I went over the International Date Line, which was exciting.

Q: Was the Shellback ceremony a fun time, or just a pain?

CC: It was just a pain. But you had to do it, everybody else was in the same shoes. I have the card at home I kept it. On the way over on a transport I can't remember the name, we had two meals a day.

We were in a hold, when I say we I mean four of us riggers from Jacksonville that did go to Oahu. One of them was Johnny Marrows (@41:51 name spelling) who was very a very good friend. Of these four, a couple of the guys were from the deep South like J.D. Nicholson (@42:00 name spelling) This was a transport of all Navy, black guys. J.D., being from the deep south did not want black guys ahead of him in the chow line. Back then that racial thing was very prevalent, so I would have to say to him "J.D. you have to stop this attitude because you are going to get killed." We had boxing matches that would match a white guy against a black guy and see him get beat up. That made for real tight quarters too. When we slept the

guys were stacked right close on top of each other. [Carlton holds his hand about a foot above his head to indicate how close the person slept above him.]

Q: Were you able to get letters from home?

CC: Yes. I did not get too many letters. Before I left Shoemaker, I knew I did not know where I was going just overseas. So I wrote a list of places to my wife like Okinawa and Guam, and opposite that I put a number and told my wife you will know where I am because somewhere in the letter I will put the number. And that is what I did when I wrote to her so I guess she roughly knew where I was.

Q: What was your wife doing during this time?

CC: She went to work at the same time I did at the air base. Back then there was no Air Force. It was the Rome Army Air Force. My wife worked first as a stock tracer and stayed until I got discharged. After I went into the service she got a little bit better job, working for bomb site which was a very secure, underground building. She had to have special clearance and get through several doors in order to get to work. She had a nice job, made a lot of friends who she talked about for years.

Q: Was it hard for her to work full-time and raise the children?

CC: Yes. But back then I guess kids were different. Our society was different. The kids never gave her a problem. After I got out of the service and until they became adults and got married, our son and daughter never gave us a problem. They both turned out very well. My son was an investigator for the U.S. Treasury Department. After he got out of the Marine Corps he went back to college, got his degree and went into government service. He became a Treasury Agent, then transferred into Federal Law Enforcement Agency in Georgia. My wife and I used to go visit him down there because he lived on St. Simons Island in a beautiful home and it didn't cost us anything. We just went and stayed with our son.

Q: So once you got discharged you did what?

CC: I went right back to the air base first and did not take advantage of that 5250 club (@46:55 not sure what this means description needed) which I should have done. I went back to work and got a bright idea and put an ad in the Rome Daily Sentinel newspaper. I was looking for a partner for my idea of buying surplus goods and reselling it. But I did not have any money. My ad read "partner wanted to buy and sell surplus". I did not say anything about money. I got a call from my good friend Steve Snider (@47:35 name spelling). He furnished the money and I furnished what we were going to buy. It worked out very good, we went to several sales and sold the merchandise as fast as we could get it.

Q: That's great. When you were in Troy, I'm going to bring up a name I'm just wondering if you have heard of it, Mame Faye?

CC: I'm glad you mentioned that. It is a little incident I forgot. I knew Mame Faye personally and I knew her brother Tom. Anyway, I'm out in the East China Sea hanging over the side of the ship and started talking to the sailor next to me. I didn't know him, he asked me where I was from and I told him "Troy, New York". And he says, "Do you know Mame Faye?" I said "yes, as a matter of fact, I do know her." This is interesting because when I worked for Gaynor, I took the job because I had seniority to deliver to all the girls on the line which was right around the corner from our restaurant. I would deliver sandwiches, ice cream, beer, whatever they would want after three o'clock in the morning. It was a fourteen dollar a week job, and I

got triple that in tips! And those girls, like anybody else, if they would go out to bingo or whatever, a few would come to me and some of them were nice-looking girls...They would hand me their wallets and say "Carl, take care of this until I get back, otherwise I will spend it." Okay, when they got back off their binge, I would give them back their wallet and there was always a good tip, they were good tippers. That was my experience. I know that Mame Faye was stopped one time. She used to go to the five-and-ten cent stores and get her eye on a good-looking girl and try to talk her into becoming a prostitute. But they stopped her. Yeah, I remember Mame Faye.

Q: Do you remember when they closed her down?

CC: Well, I'm thinking it had to be somewhere around 1945. That was an exciting time really.

Q: Troy must have been a much different place than it is now.

CC: Oh yeah, but you know the strange thing is you can still go to Troy and see people walking around the street, just not like it used to be. If you go to Mechanicville and you don't see anybody on the streets. Albany you can see a few people on the street.

Q: What do you think in general of your service experience?

CC: My wife and I were heavy into genealogy for forty years so we know our whole line. And this often comes up, exactly what you are asking. I tell this to friends, people and family, if I had to do it all over again I would do the same thing that I have done. That is how good my life has been. I have had some bad times and some good times. I would not change much. My experiences in my lifetime have been good. I have a great-great grandson, think about that one. I never knew my great-grandfather, and only knew one grandfather, my mother's father. I did not know my father's father who was a Civil War Veteran who went through the Civil War with a twin brother. During my genealogy hobby years later I discovered his twin brother had gone to Nebraska right after the Civil War. My wife and I went to visit his son who lived in North Platte, Nebraska. So that has been the main thing in my life, our family genealogy project. I'm still in correspondence with cousins in California, Texas, Oklahoma and Michigan who never knew I existed. My life has been good because I've raised a couple of good children who have good children and they are all the same.

Q: Thank you very much sir, it was a wonderful interview.

CC: I have enjoyed it.