Matteo A. Casola
Veteran

Interviewers
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I: Mr. Casola, where were you born?
MC: I was born in Positano, Italy, in the province of Naples on October 19, 1923. Though I was born in Italy, I was born as an American citizen. My father, an immigrant to America, served in WWI. After the war, a law stated that any immigrant to the United States who served honorably in the war effort automatically became a U.S. citizen along with his wife and children. That law was changed in November of 1923, but since I was born in October of 1923, I was born as an American citizen. If I had been born in Italy a month later, I would have had to apply for American citizenship after the normal wait of five years.

I: Your life started lucky right from the start, didn't it?
MC: Yes, right from the start. [both laughing]

I: When did you come over to the states?
MC: My father went back and forth many times. Like many immigrants to America at that time, the dream was to return back to their birth country with American money to live a life of comfort and ease. It didn't work out that way for him. After fighting in WWI, my father returned to Italy but went back and forth between the two countries in the following years. After he returned to Italy around 1930, Mussolini issued an edict that every American citizen had to give up his citizenship and become an Italian citizen or everything he owned would be confiscated. He was told one night by the Carabinieri, the Italian police, that he would be arrested in the morning because he was not willing to give up his American citizenship. So, during the night, he traveled to the American consulate in Naples and told them what was happening. The American consulate stepped in and told the Italian officials that they might be allowed to confiscate property but they were not allowed to arrest my father. My father was allowed to take five hundred dollars with him and returned to America with his family around 1931, right in the middle of the depression. That is when I came to America. He worked for his brothers, saved up some money and bought his own place where he stayed until he retired and collected retirement pay at age seventy-two.

I: What kind of business was he in?
MC: Most of the Italians were in the food business. His had a smoke roasting shop with hot sandwiches and vegetables. My mother would do the cooking. As the neighborhood changed, he decided to go strictly fresh vegetables, with just a few Italian products.

I: Where did you go to school?
MC: I went to PS125 elementary school on 125th St. in New York City, and then junior high was #43 and high school was on 130th St. Then I dropped out of my high school because I was required to help the family business. The perk of having a very large family was that the children, whether male or female, would help the family survive. That was the tradition carried over from Europe. But, my parents believed in education so I worked for my father during the day and at 5 o'clock I took the subway and then walked up a steep hill for night classes at George Washington High School. I completed my high school education and graduated right before I was drafted in 1943. I reported to Fort Upton on Long island on February 4, 1943. My dad had done his basic training at Fort Upton during WWI. When I was there, Fort Upton had become a collection center where draftees would go to be redistributed to other places after testing.

I: What was Camp Upton like in 1943?
MC: It had rough wooden barracks that were put up quickly. When I arrived on a rainy night, we just went to the barracks. In the morning, they gave us our uniforms, our immunization shots, our indoctrination and then we got our first taste of KP duty. Two other soldiers and I were assigned to clean an officer's club, which was not at all fancy. I stayed at Fort Upton about a week and was shipped to Camp Croft, South Carolina, where I did my basic training.

I: You are an Italian boy from New York City in South Carolina. What was that like?
MC: At that time, you had a choice between the navy and the infantry. Of course, if you didn't choose the navy, you went Infantry. So at Camp Croft there were quite a few New York boys in my unit. There were a few from New Jersey and Pennsylvania but in my barracks they were mostly from the New York City and the surrounding area—Staten Island, the Bronx, Queens, Manhattan and then Westchester County. We were kept quite busy. But, compared to the conditions for the dough boys, the armies of WWI, our experience was heaven. The food was a tremendous improvement. At the mess halls, we ate as a squadron, with six men on each side of the table. One soldier was designated as the server, delivering food for the whole table. On the weekends, we would go through the line with our stainless steel tray to choose our own food. The army was very conscious of waste so you were required to eat what you took. Today, after basic training, things are different—the soldiers have more choices of food and they eat at round tables or four to a table, more like a family. The army has changed a great deal and it is a wonderful opportunity compared to when I first joined. To understand the situation, back then, all of a sudden the country had to put together seventeen to nineteen million men between all of the services. Compared to the European armies, we were the envy of the world. For many of us, myself included, we were exposed to a great variety of good food with meat every day. There was KP duty but not many complained.

I understand our WWII army much better now. It was an army unlike any army that had existed before, with men from all over the country, from the West and the South, from dairy farms and from cities, American Indians and all nationalities… It wasn't an army built to go out and conquer lands and then tell others how to live. It was an army built to create freedom. While the Germans made it seem like we were the great beast coming to

devour them—my division, the 69th Infantry, they called us the American SS because the 69 looked like two "S's. It was friendly. We had camaraderie. Our white pilots who flew bombers over Germany and Japan were protected by black fighter pilots flying cover for them. We were strong together. With the lack of officers and non-commissioned officers, it was incredible that an army so large in which our only desire was to bring freedom to other people could be assembled. We only asked for a small piece of land to bury our dead. The men and women had their heart in it to win. Our troops had that unity during in the Gulf War, but not with the forgotten veterans in the Korean War and the Vietnam War.

I: Did basic training go fairly well for you?
MC: Basic training was very good for me. It was excellent training. I shed a few pounds and stayed at 135 pounds until I advanced in the ranks and got a little lazy. [Laughing] When I left the army, both active and reserve, I was up to about 155 pounds.

I: Tell us about basic training. What was the goal?
MC: They basically wanted to teach us how to stay alive. We were taught that you either kill him or he will kill you. You will have no choice. We were not an army out for blood, to kill and plunder and we had soldiers who were not comfortable with killing but we were told we had to learn to fight their way. In fifteen weeks they had to get us ready for battle and two of those weeks were practicing maneuvers. The army started with small units, platoons, which were coordinated into a company size unit. Four companies coordinated to make up a battalion. It is something incredible which takes a lot of work, training, and the right people who know what they are doing giving commands.

I: The non-commissioned officers that were over you, were they veterans of earlier WWII campaigns or were they holdovers from WWI?
MC: Some of the sergeants over us had been wounded in Indo-China or some of the islands, some still carried jungle rot. They were a little rough. They shamed you into not dropping out on the twenty-five or thirty mile marches by telling us we would be left behind. But, we found out that it didn't happen that way overseas. If someone broke a leg or was wounded, we never left them behind.

I: What happened after basic training?
MC: We finished basic at the end of May and in June, my unit landed in Europe. But, at the end of basic, I had gotten a serious skin infection from the old WWII pack straps and was sent to the hospital for two weeks. When the infection healed, I was put in with another unit which was just completing basic training. I trained with them for another two weeks and got shipped over to the 69th Infantry division at Camp Shelby, Mississippi. This unit was being sent to the Pacific which concerned me because I am scared to death of snakes and didn't like the jungle either! [laughing] A Japanese regiment, the Nisei (a unit comprised of second generation American soldiers of Japanese ancestry) also trained at Camp Shelby. The Nisei unit were little guys but they could out-march us with gas masks on in 90 to 100 degree temperatures. They put us to shame. They fought very successfully in Europe. I was sent to Camp Kilmer, in New Jersey and was able to visit my family in New York for a few days while other soldiers were able to spend a few days in New York City. Then, we were put on ships and sent to

reinforce Montgomery's unit, which was about to invade Holland. The British Red Devils, or Red Berets, the top parachute unit, was supposed to take the canals in Holland, but the Germans found out where the parachutes were going to drop so the British brigade was destroyed. Instead of reinforcing Montgomery's unit, we were taken off the ship and we stayed in England until Christmas. At Christmas dinner, half of our unit was randomly selected to be reinforcements at the Battle of the Bulge. Within a few days, those who survived the battle returned, wounded, to England. In the middle of January, the whole 69th Division was sent to mainland Europe. At first we were part of the 1st Army, then became part of Patton's army helping them to build roads, and then we became a "mop-up" division and we would clear out the towns.

I: Were you trained as in infantryman?
MC: Yes, I was a Private First Class, eager to get my combat infantry badge so I could be paid ten dollars more each month when we were only getting fifty.

Another assignment we had was to police Aachen, the first German city to be captured by the Allies. The town had just about been blown to bits. There were a few houses, mostly walls and a few German stragglers. Unlike in the movies where it appears that soldiers are constantly shooting or killing somebody when they go into a town, that didn't happen with our unit. We went in to cover an assigned area and we just fired into it. We did get some prisoners who had given up which took us about a week.

I: What were the German prisoners like?
MC: They were surprised that they had been defeated since they had had constant victories until now. They were surprised that the Americans could fight as well as we did. There was a great deal of respect for each other's forces. There was a lot of comradeship between the British soldiers and the American soldiers. When we were in England, because the British girls liked the American soldiers, the British men hated us. Their complaint was that we were "overpaid, oversexed and over here." When we got across the Rhine, we had a black (Afro-American) platoon integrated into our company. They were usually separate platoons because that was before integration. We got along very well. In combat, you don't look at color. We had their backs, they had our backs.

I: How did the company officers handle it?
MC: The officers had their own quarters, office, and sergeants and they all did their jobs and worked well with us when we had patrols or other chores. They didn't mix until some years later during the Korean War when blacks and whites trained together. When I got on a career path and was selected for schools, the classes had both blacks and whites. We competed but it was good clean competition. We had some West Point Cadets who joined us to catch up on their training. We spent more time picking on the cadets than the afro troops because we knew the cadets would be officers later on. When I got my commission in 1950, I got married and was sent to Fort Lee, Virginia, where I was an instructor where we had integration of troops.

I: Do you remember where you crossed the Rhine River?

MC: We crossed at the Bridge at Remagen. When we got there it had been reinforced and pontoon bridges had been established. It eventually collapsed because of all the weight that had constantly traveled over it.

I: Once across the Rhine, what were you doing?
MC: Two of our regiments were combat, my regiment was in reserve. We took Kassel, which was a large city. After we swept through a city, we had to clean it up. We took many German prisoners who had been trapped in their houses. By this time, it was April and the Germans could sense that the war was coming to an end. They were more worried about the Russians who had entered Poland and were headed for Germany. General Patton was right when he said that if we wanted to, we could have walked right into Germany. The next large city that we took was Leipzig. We were supposed to have a big battle there with a whole battalion of 88's facing our regiment. We thought we would be getting a beating but by nightfall they surrendered. Apparently, most of their soldiers at this point were women. With a few sporadic battles we took Leipzig. It had been destroyed by air bombardment as well as artillery fire. At one point, a whole battalion of Germans surrendered to us. Their heart was not in fighting the Americans and they were more worried about their families at home facing the oncoming Russian troops. We were around Leipzig for three or four weeks reestablishing the electricity in the city, but more importantly getting the brewery working to distribute beer to everyone.[both laughing] We also fixed the ice cream plant. I found a three wheeled truck that runs on charcoal. I fired it up and drove all around but it had no breaks so I had to stop by running it into a wall. I broke a few ribs so they put me in the kitchen to work. There were a lot of sheep and giant half-pigs in the area but no-one knew how to butcher them for cooking. Since I had watched my father cut meat, I took on the job and became the butcher for the company for a while.

The war was over after that. One of our patrols strayed beyond their assigned area by mistake and met the Russians. Near the end of the war, it had been prearranged that there would be fanfare when a specific general and his division met with the Russian army. It was not supposed to be our general or the 69th Infantry. General Bolte and the 69th got a lot of press for that unplanned meeting. We were known as the three B's—Boltes, Bivouac and Bastards. He kept us out in the field. The only time we came in from the field was to shower, change clothes, pack up and move on. We were well trained and in great physical shape. Whether we had to walk three miles or thirty miles, we could do it.

I: So tell us about Victory in Europe day, May 8, 1945.
MC: The Russians were happy, the Americans were happy and we went to each other sides of the camp until it was discouraged. We never did meet the rough Russian Manchurian troops that Stalin had trained. We traded cigarettes but they had so little to trade and were amazed by the American army. The Russian army also had female combat soldiers mixed right in with the men. They were not like our American WACs. The Russian women dressed in combat uniforms, were heavy, muscular women who loved to drink and party. We were discouraged from getting involved with them. When both sides got drinking, it can turn into a heck of a mess. There was one argument

between an American soldier and a Russian soldier about who was a better soldier. They both pulled knives. Thankfully, we jumped in and stopped it.

Then the order came down that the Big Four had agreed that half of Germany should be turned over to the Russians. When that was announced, there was a mass exodus of Germans who traveled with the Americans to the west side of Germany. This created some problems for us since these German people had nothing.

I: How long were you in occupied Germany?
MC: The war ended in 1945 and I returned to the states in May of 1946. So I was in Europe for about eighteen months.

I: Did you become a career soldier at this point?
MC: I decided to make it my career. I enlisted in the reserves and went to night college because the GI bill paid for it. I went to ROTC at City College. The Colonel told me I would get my commission as soon as I finished two semesters of advanced ROTC. Within a year, I was a 2nd Lieutenant. I didn't get my bachelor's degree until 1950.

I: Why did you decide to make the army your career?
MC: I found it very exciting and felt that in the army I could become what I wanted as long as I kept my nose clean. I like giving orders. I like taking orders and passing them on to someone else. [laughing] I felt I owed this country a great deal. My father gave up a lot to bring his wife and three children here. My five other brothers and a sister had died in Italy because of lack of medical service. They died while my father was in WWI and when he returned it was very sad for him. He was protective of his family. I wanted to be an officer and a chemical engineer. I was proud of our army and enjoyed wearing a uniform. My wife was very supportive and loved the army life. She never complained when I took an assignment or went off to school. I do owe my education and everything I have to the army. I completed a tremendous amount of school and when it was time to go to the Command and General Staff College, I think I was the only captain ever admitted there. They only took majors and lieutenant colonels but I had completed all of the other courses so they sent me. Later, I taught the Command and General Staff classes to the reserve forces in Albany. The army is the top when it comes to teaching management and how to lead men and women.

I: What did you do when the Korean War broke out?
MC: I was in the reserves and had been married one week so we went to Fort Lee, Virginia, where I took special courses. We spent three years there where I finished courses and did some teaching. I volunteered for Vietnam but they didn't want me at that time.

In Fort Lee, there were many reserve officers, active duty officers, and cadets. We were working with Turkish, South American, and Thailand army officers. I was assigned to tutor the Thai officers and we had a set units in the program. The Thai general in charge of his group insisted that I just teach his men how to kill the enemy, not about laundry, showers for the troops, and making ice cream. He said his men wash their clothes in the streams.

I: When did you finally leave active duty?
MC: I finally got out in 1976 and stayed in mobile desk units. I worked as an observer, I checked out units, and did studies. I was one of a group of officers who were selected to be called up by the President if we were needed. We carried a letter of mobilization in our pockets and if we got a phone call, we would go to any civilian or military airport, tell them our orders, and fly to where we were needed. I never got a call but about a month after the war in the Persian Gulf, I received a call releasing me from this duty.

I: How much did the army change from the time you joined until you retired?
MC: It changed unbelievably for the better. The men now had tremendous opportunities to learn. But let's start with the basics—the food, the clothing, the living conditions all were improved. Basic training now in peacetime is only nine weeks and they learn computer skills, electronic skills. The pay is not what it should be, but many of the young people wouldn't come close to making this amount out of the military. As the soldiers work in different areas of the military, they learn skills and gain knowledge for example in law, aeronautics, rockets, electronics.

I: How would you sum up your military experience?
MC: If I had to do it all over again, I would do it. I owe the army a great deal—my education, and the ability to tell someone what to do and how to do it. If I had it my way, I would like to see everyone do eighteen months in the service of their choice. I think they would learn a skill for work, they would learn how to get along with others, they would learn respect and they would learn to appreciate the freedom they have so they protect it.