

Interview with Otis Forth
Interviewer: Frank Catone
May 25, 2009

Q: Mr. Forth, thank you very much for letting me do this interview today.

A: No problem. I am actually glad to have you; I love talking to people other than my wife all the time.

Q: Well do you engage in any other activities that involve interacting with others?

A: Yes. As a matter of fact, I go to church every Sunday with my wife and we always have conversations with everyone before and after church, there is about a group of about 8 of us that go out to eat.

Q: That sounds pretty interesting and seems like you enjoy doing that as well.

A: I do, and it seems like every time I have the ability to get out of the house and enjoy the weather outside, I normally go on walks around the neighborhood with my dogs and do occasional yard work.

Q: Well it's good to be active like that and be involved in society. So new subject, can you tell me where you were born?

A: New York City, Manhattan. I was born on 38th Street. My parents were born in Dublin, but my brothers and sisters; they're all born in New York, all on 38th Street, really. It was the Great Depression, as you people know, and we didn't have much. We were not as fortunate as you people were, where you can go to college, and it was unheard of then. I read the Daily News quite often. That was my library, where I started off with the comics, then, the sports and I graduated into even the editorial, and the News is a tabloid, if you don't know it. It still is, but it was my education there and it was New York.

Q: How did your family come to settle in Midtown Manhattan?

A: Well, what it was, there must have been people here, friends or relatives, that came before them and they probably settled where they were, and that happened to be Midtown Manhattan.

Q: Was it a largely Irish neighborhood or was it a mix?

A: Well, the block was half Italian and half Irish.

Q: Did the two groups not get along or did they just not mingle?

A: We got along. We didn't bother with one another.

Q: There were no fights or anything. What did your father do for a living?

A: My father was uneducated, never went to school, and he couldn't read or write, and the same thing goes for my mother, but my mother. My father was a laborer. He worked for Con Edison, Consolidated Edison, the New York City area power utility company, and my mother took care of the kids.

Q: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

A: Well, I had two brothers and I had two sisters.

Q: Are you the oldest, or where do you fit into picture?

A: I'm the youngest one.

Interview with Otis Forth
Interviewer: Frank Catone
May 25, 2009

Q: I do not think that you said your birth date on the record. Would you?

A: Well, my birthday's March 7, 1922, goes back quite a bit.

Q: Did you have to do a lot of chores around the home? You said your brothers went out and collected the coal.

A: Yes. Well, what I did was, when I was old enough, like, in the morning, I would go to this grocery store and pick up the milk. We didn't have any home delivery and we had a can and the grocer would fill up the can with milk and that was it, or whatever we needed, whatever staples we needed, like bread or such, nothing really fancy, or maybe I'll take a walk to the bakery store. So, that's what I had to do, more or less, but any other chores, maybe on the side, I would help clean up, use linseed oil on the furniture.

Q: Did your family live in an apartment?

A: It was a tenement, and it was about, I think, a four-room flat.

Q: You mentioned that you were very aware of the news and what was going on in the city.

A: Yes, I guess you could say I knew what was going on.

Q: Did you follow politics, for example?

A: Well, as a kid, I would read the editorials, and the News was strictly for Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and I would read that.

Q: Do you remember any parades where Franklin Roosevelt came?

A: Oh, the parades, I remember parades. I remember the St. Patrick's Day Parade, the NRA Parade that they had. NRA stands for National Recovery Act, and they had a big parade. It lasted for hours and I remember Mrs. Roosevelt being there. It was a long, long parade. I think it lasted all day and into the night.

Q: The National Recovery Act was part of Roosevelt's answer to the Depression.

A: Yes.

Q: How bad was the Depression in your neighborhood?

A: Well, in the neighborhood, it was like this: if you couldn't pay the rent, and a lot of people couldn't pay the rent then, the landlord would get whatever furniture you had, and they'd put it right on the sidewalk. That was it, and you saw quite a bit of that. People were hungry and I don't know how some managed. We were just lucky enough that my father was working and my brothers and sisters; so, the income was there for us.

Q: Did your older brothers have to leave school and go out to work?

A: Well, let's see, one brother went to high school and another brother never went to high school. He went to work, if he could find it. I don't know whether he worked or not, but my oldest brother did. One of my sisters went to work, she was older, and another sister was still in school as I was growing up. She was not that much older than I was.

Interview with Otis Forth
Interviewer: Frank Catone
May 25, 2009

Q: Being in the heart of New York, do you remember seeing some of the scenes that we commonly associate with the Great Depression, like the bread lines and people selling pencils?

A: Well. Yes, there were people there.

Q: Can you tell us a little bit about your schooling, your education, where you went?

A: Well, the schooling, I went to grammar school, junior high school then, and then, high school. Forget about college, we never thought about college. I felt I was not qualified.

Q: How did your family feel about education? Did they want you to stay in and at least finish high school?

A: Well, my mother passed away when I was a child often, and my father, wasn't too worried as far as education. What they were interested in was the money, getting money into the house, so that they could live properly.

Q: Did you have any part-time jobs when you were in high school?

A: No, I just went to school.

Q: Okay. Did you work in the summers?

A: No.

Q: Were you able to take part in any recreational activities, like sports or hobbies, anything?

A: As much as I could. I liked to play football, baseball, and soccer with my friends from school whenever possible. But whenever they weren't available, I would normally just go for a run or sit on the porch and relax.

Q: Was religion a big part of your life when you were younger?

A: I guess you could say that

Q: Were you Catholic?

A: I was a Catholic, and not really into it the way I should have been.

Q: It was interesting that you mentioned following the news through the Daily News and other sources.

A: Yes.

Q: Were you aware of what was happening overseas with Mussolini and Hitler?

A: Oh, yes. I was old enough then to know what was going on. Then, again, if it wasn't the News, it was the newsreels. We had newsreels there. In-between a double feature, they'll give you a newsreel and, there, they would cover events. You could see what was going on.

Interview with Otis Forth
Interviewer: Frank Catone
May 25, 2009

Q: What did you think of what was happening in the world, particularly in the late 1930s, as Hitler was taking over all these countries in Europe and Mussolini invaded Ethiopia?

A: Well, I wasn't really focused on that. I thought about it, I knew it was there and it wasn't right, but that was it. I still continued my life the way I was going on.

Q: It was not discussed in your neighborhood or among your friends.

A: very little.

Q: Did you ever think, before Pearl Harbor that the war in Europe would drag America...

A: Well, yes. Then, the papers and the newsreels, they were on it. They covered the news and they gave you the facts and of course, you had to think about that, especially before Pearl Harbor, where young guys were being drafted. My friends, my relatives, they were being drafted and, of course, you had to think about that.

Q: When did you graduate from high school?

A: In 1938.

Q: You were out working for a few years before America entered the war.

A: Well, I was working. It was tough even when I graduated, in 1938, jobs were scarce. Doors were not open to you. So, it took quite a while before I got any kind of a steady job.

Q: What stands out in your memory about New York in that era?

A: Well, I don't know what stands out. I do remember going to Yankee stadium for a dollar-ten and I could get one of the best seats in the house, because most of the seats were not reserved. There was the grandstand, the bleachers, but the grandstand was usually covered and took up most of the area there. I would walk to Grand Central from my house, which was a short distance, and I'd be in the ballgame before you know it, get there early, so that I can see the guys going into the clubhouse and I think I would get one of the best seats in the house. That was my passion, more or less.

Q: Do any of the games stand out in your mind, like when the Yanks would go to the World Series? Were you able to go to those games?

A: Yes, quite a few games. One thing that stands out in my mind is, one day, I saw Lou Gehrig, my idol, not a role model, because I could never be what he was, and I saw him at the plate, one day. He was standing there with a bat in his hand, he was just ready to strike the ball out, and I said, "Gee, this guy's going to hit a homer." On the next pitch, sure enough, he did, and I remember that. [laughter]

Q: Were you able to go to his farewell ceremony?

A: No. I was working at the time.

Q: Going back to your high school. What was it called?

A: Central Commercial High School

Interview with Otis Forth
Interviewer: Frank Catone
May 25, 2009

Q: Was there anything in particular that you studied?

A: Well, basically bookkeeping.

Q: Was it a commercial course or did you learn other things besides the bookkeeping trade?

A: Well, there's also salesmanship, too.

Q: When you got out of high school, was that initially what you were trying to get into?

A: Yes, but I couldn't get a job. I guess I'm lucky that I had a brother in-law in the jewelry trade and, actually, he got me this job.

Q: You said other members of your family were being drafted into the war before you.

A: Not in my particular family, but I had cousins that were drafted into the war.

Q: What about your brothers?

A: One was drafted later; I was in the service at the time he was drafted. The other one never served because he was married, and he didn't go.

Q: Before you actually entered the service, had you considered enlisting or going into any other service, like the Navy?

A: No way.

Q: Were you aware of things like the German American Bund or pro-Mussolini people in the United States?

A: Yes, I read the papers.

Q: Where were you when Pearl Harbor was attacked?

A: Well, I was home. I'll tell you, the day itself, what happened? I was living, at that time, in Astoria, Long Island. I was at a park, watching a football game, a local football game. It was a cold day and, me and my cousins and some friends went to the movies after. We walked into the movies and one of the ticket collectors says, "Hey, looks like we're getting into it," and we didn't know what he was talking about. We knew he was talking about the war. I said, "Yes, we will," but later on I realized that he knew that the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. We didn't know it then, because we didn't go into any details. Then we went to a wedding ... and on the way to the subway, they had the Enquirer, the city Enquirer and the headline was, "Japs Bomb Pearl Harbor." We paid no attention to that at all, because we thought it was just sensationalism. So, we went into the wedding and I danced with a girl there and she told me, "You know, we're at war, the Japs." That's how I found out. After that, we just left. I couldn't be at that wedding anymore.

Q: You were pretty upset by the news.

A: Yes.

Interview with Otis Forth
Interviewer: Frank Catone
May 25, 2009

Q: Did you realize, at that point, that you would probably be going into the service?

A: Well yes actually, it made me kind of want to get drafted because it just angered me.

Q: Could you tell us a little bit about when you joined the service, where you went first?

A: Well, when I joined the service, I went to the draft board and I told them to put me ahead, which they were very happy to do, and before you know it, I was drafted into the service.

Q: So, when you did enter, what kind of training did they put you in?

A: They put me in aerial gunnery training and after we graduated, we took a physical where a colonel was conducting the test and you had to go through. It was a way stricter examination than normally, and you had to pass everything okay and I did.

Q: Then, what did you do?

A: Went to Atlantic City for a brief time then went overseas for basic training.

Q: Did you get to see Atlantic City at all while you were there?

A: Well, whatever there was to see of it. It was all GIs down there and there were no casinos then, and Atlantic City was very dull. What could I tell you?

Q: Before you went overseas to Hawaii, were you ever able to get back home or visit your family?

A: Yes. Only once for a few days.

Q: Did you have a lot of contact with your family when you were in the service?

A: Well, my father didn't read or write. So, I wrote to my sister, and it wasn't that much, but it wasn't that little, either.

Q: Was that important to you, to get mail from home? Was it good for your morale?

A: I liked to get mail, but I didn't go crazy over the mail itself.

Q: Can you tell us again about going over to Hawaii, what that process was like?

A: You mean on the boat itself?

Q: Yes.

A: Well, I'm not a sea-goer, but I took this trip on this boat and it was an old Army ship and they said it was from World War I, and it looked it, and they didn't have any modern conveniences. It was an old ship and they assigned me, with other guys, down in the hold of the ship, right by the propeller, and that's all you'd hear, all day long. So, I got sick and I'd lay in that hammock there, listening to the propeller, and I didn't feel good anyway. It wasn't the greatest thing in the world. If I go up on deck, I would throw up over the railing.

Interview with Otis Forth
Interviewer: Frank Catone
May 25, 2009

Q: Did you know, when you got on the ship, that you would be going to Hawaii and what you would be doing?

A: Yes, I knew exactly. They sent me to Haleiwa Field, and I was in the 47th Flight Squadron.

Q: What were the conditions like in Haleiwa? What was the base like?

A: Well, I loved the base. The base itself was by the sea, beautiful scenery by the sea, especially at sunset. It was by the water and they had a nearby Japanese, AmericanJapanese, fishing village, which was so unique and quaint. It was beautiful.

Q: What were your regular duties? What would you do in an average day?

A: Well, there I would check out the planes early in the morning, before they took off, and check with the tower, see how they heard us. They'd give you a, "Loud and clear," if it was okay, and then, you'd say, "Roger and out," and that was it.

Q: How long were you at Hawaii before you were sent over to Iwo Jima?

A: Well, about twenty months.

Q: Did you and your fellow ground crew want to do something else or were you satisfied to sit out the rest of the war in Hawaii?

A: No, we just wanted to get the war over and done with. That's how I felt, and many guys felt that, "Hey, let's get going here. What are we doing in Hawaii?"

Q: You felt frustrated being there.

A: Yes, after a while. I have never went to Honolulu anymore.

Q: Were the relationships stressed between the Marines and your small unit there?

A: No. Marines were actually more combat wise than we were, but they took charge. They never bothered with us and we didn't bother with them, but they took charge. They knew what they were doing.

Q: Did your unit's mission change at all after the battle ended?

A: Well, it never ended. We were still bombing Japan. We were still going and going and going. We were there for that purpose. The Marines were a separate battle they settled there. Whatever they had to do, they did it. But we were still there. We stayed there until the end of the war. As a matter of fact, we were still up in the air, when the Marines came back from a mission, and the war was over, while we were up in the air. So, actually, the 47th was there first and last.

Q: Did you still have to worry about snipers?

A: Well, you had to worry about whether there were still Japs on the island.

Interview with Otis Forth
Interviewer: Frank Catone
May 25, 2009

Q: Were you eager to go back home?

A: Of course. You get it over and done with. That's why we were willing to leave Hawaii, get it over and done with.

Q: Do you remember the day that you found out the war had ended?

A: I was there.

Q: Was there any celebration?

A: Well, the only celebration I was at, we had our little mess hall there, I drank more coffee and had some cake. There was no one to celebrate with.

Q: How quickly did they get you off of Iwo Jima and send you back to the States?

A: Well, it ended up in August, at the end of October, I was on my way home.

Actually, I could have gone home before that, if I was willing to go back to Iwo Jima, but I never took that option. I was going to stay there. How could I enjoy myself and go back to Iwo Jima?

Q: I do not quite understand. You said you could have gotten home earlier if you had gone back to Iwo Jima.

A: Yes. I was due for a furlough, if I was willing to come back to Iwo Jima, while the war was going on, but I didn't want to go back to Iwo Jima. I just wanted to get it over and done with. I couldn't enjoy myself if I went home and I had to go back to Iwo Jima.

Q: Okay. During the war, you could have left Iwo Jima, gone home, and then, come back to Iwo Jima.

A: Yes.

Q: Did you ever give any consideration to staying in the Air Force or did you just want to get out?

A: No thoughts. That was it. I'll show you those papers, whenever you're ready.

Q: Did you use the 52/20 Club, unemployment insurance provided to former servicemen under the GI Bill?

A: No. I didn't take advantage of that. I should have, but I didn't take advantage of it. I had money. My father saved me some money while I was gone and that was it.

Q: Did you go back and live in New York?

A: No, I went back to Astoria, back to where my sister was.

Q: How did you end up in Indiana?

A: Well, it's a long story. I was working for this cosmetic place, after I had some problem with the jewelry boss, and I left him, and I got another job. I had two kids and a wife. My other wife passed away. What happened was that I got this job, through the New York Times and answering an ad. I started out making about a hundred bucks a week, it was pretty good money. But I wasn't going to get that unless I followed the same trade I was in, and that was up in New England somewhere. I didn't want to go there.

Interview with Otis Forth
Interviewer: Frank Catone
May 25, 2009

So, I had to take a lesser job, a job I knew I could do. So, I took a job with this cosmetic place, in a production department and I worked there, and I was making progress, slowly and surely. I wasn't a college graduate, so, I didn't have the easiest time in the world. So, the offices were in Brooklyn and I worked in the office, and the offices moved into New York, on 42nd Street, not far from where I was born. That was great, but the plant got bigger, the offices got bigger and they moved to a plant out in New Jersey, Jersey City. So, it was a hassle, going back and forth from Astoria to Jersey City. I would get home and I'd have these really bad headaches. So, I moved to New Jersey for the whole time I had that job. When I moved out of Jersey, I moved to an area outside of Philadelphia until I retired. Then I found myself in Huntingburg, Indiana because my wife has family here.

Q: Was that in the 1960s when you moved to New Jersey?

A: No. It was 1972.

Q: How long did you work for the jeweler before you made the switch to the cosmetic company?

A: About six or seven years.

Q: Had you met your first wife before the war or after the war?

A: Before.

Q: However, you got married after the war.

A: Yes.

Q: Do you have any children?

A: Just two boys.

Q: After the war, did you keep in touch with any of the people that you served with?

A: I did for a while and I did send a Christmas card here and there, but you do it for a few years, but, before you know it, all gone.

Q: Do you think the war affected you in terms of making you who you are today?

A: I don't think it made much of a change on me itself.

Q: You said you did not take advantage of the GI Bill. Did you use any part of it?

A: The only part is the houses, when I buy a house, but I didn't take any advantage, which I should have, but I didn't.

Q: Was there a lot of discipline and protocol in the Air Force? For example, did you always have to salute your officers and call them sir?

A: Well, of course, you always called them sir. You never called them John, Jack or whatever.

Q: In general, was the Air Force maybe more relaxed than the Marine Corps or the Navy?

A: Oh, I think it was.

Interview with Otis Forth
Interviewer: Frank Catone
May 25, 2009

Q: Do you remember the day that Franklin Roosevelt died and what the reaction was like?

A: Yes. My reaction? "Who knew Truman? Who was this Truman?" You know, that's the reaction I got. "Who knows Truman?" but he turned out to be pretty good, didn't he?

Q: You came out to New Jersey with the cosmetics company. Did you stay with them for the rest of your career?

A: I was with them maybe about twenty years...

Q: Did you work anywhere else?

A: Oh, after that, I retired, and then I got myself a job a courthouse in Dubois County.

Q: Is there anything else you would like to add about either your time in the service or any other part of your life?

A: No, that's okay. I think you've got a good part of my life.

Q: Thank you for being so open.

A: Your very welcome Frank.

Q: What are your sons' names and where did they go?

A: One is Charles, the other one is Steven. And they both went to Indiana University in Bloomington.

Q: That is awesome.

A: It's a good school. I'm glad they went there, and it turned out to be a blessing.

Q: You encouraged your children to go on for higher education.

A: They're both MBAs.

Q: Well I hope one day I get my MHA.

A: Good luck and enjoy college while you can.

Q: I will try too and thank you for letting me do this interview.

A: Oh, come on, it was my pleasure.