

Interview with Robert P. Argentine
October 8, 2004
Pittsburgh, PA
Interviewer: James Zanella
Transcriber: Fran Margiotti

[Begin Tape 1, Side A]

JZ: This is an interview with Robert Philip Argentine as a part of the Italian American World War II Veterans Oral History project sponsored by the National Italian American Foundation and the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania. It is October 8, 2004 and we are in Dormont. Is that right?

RA: No, Mount Lebanon.

JZ: Will you please tell me your full name and date of birth for the record?

RA: Robert Philip Argentine, and my date of birth is August 6, 1922.

JZ: Where did your family come from in Italy?

RA: Well, my dad was from Palermo in Sicily, right near Termini Imerese. And my maternal grandmother and grandfather were from San Giovanni in Fiore, in Calabria. Beautiful mountain city.

JZ: Tell me about your childhood. Were you born here in Pittsburgh?

RA: Yes, I was born in Pittsburgh. I told you my dad went from job to job with Coppers Construction Company.

JZ: Oh, Coppers Construction Company.

RA: Coppers Engineering and Construction.

JZ: Where at in Pittsburgh were you born? Certain neighborhood?

RA: I was born on Congress Street in the First Ward of the Hill District.

JZ: How long did you live there for?

RA: I think I was only there for about a year when my dad and we moved.

JZ: So your dad worked on construction.

RA: He went around the country building steel mills, by-products plants and chemical plants.

JZ: Wow. What are some of the cities you said?

RA: We lived in Buffalo, Chicago, Indiana and Hamilton, Ohio.

JZ: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

RA: I had one sister.

JZ: So you, your sister and your mom would go from city to city?

RA: Well, my dad would be transferred and they would move us. We would go wherever they moved us.

JZ: How long did you do that for? Until you were a young man?

RA: I did it until I was in high school. It was quite a time because everywhere I was; I was always the new kid in the place until I was in the eighth grade.

JZ: In those cities where you lived, did you live in an Italian neighborhood or wherever your family could find a place to live?

RA: No, we lived in different areas. We lived in some pretty nice neighborhoods and of course we lived in a lot of apartment houses.

JZ: Tell me about your home life. Some of the things your mom cooked and how you spent the holidays. Anything stand out?

RA: My mom was a great cook. She would always make the big Italian dinner with penne, gnocchi, ravioli or something like that and salads. And always something else, like turkey or something like that.

JZ: What did your father think of Mussolini? Anything like that. Did he ever come up?

RA: Well, at first most Italians thought Mussolini was doing a good job before the war. He was straightening out the economy in Italy, or at least that's what I remember.

JZ: Did you father serve in the Italian army at all?

RA: No.

JZ: Tell me about your life during the Depression and some of the things that stand out.

RA: Unfortunately, my dad didn't make a darn good living and we ended up in Buffalo. He decided to go into business and open a restaurant and they went bankrupt.

JZ: Oh jeez. Did he cook or did your mother cook?

RA: No, my mother cooked. I think they took advantage of the fact that he was the stranger in town.

JZ: Did you help out? Or were too young?

RA: No, I was too young. I was just a kid.

JZ: Did you speak Italian?

RA: Well, I can speak it. Not real good, but I can speak it now. At that time I couldn't. My dad could, but he wanted to be an American family.

JZ: Oh, really? So he wouldn't speak Italian to you?

RA: No, he did only with his friends, not with us. My grandmother tried to teach me, but in them days who wants to learn Italian. We weren't into being too bilingual. We wanted to be American. Later on, I took Spanish and Latin in school. When I went to Italy, I wanted to learn so I could converse properly and it came pretty easy for me.

JZ: Yeah, I bet with Spanish and Latin. What did you know about what was going on in Europe as a young man with Hitler and Mussolini? How did you feel as an Italian American?

RA: Well, we didn't know too much about what was really going on. All we knew was what we heard on the radio. We weren't too concerned with Italy, we cared more about Germany.

JZ: You graduated high school in 1940?

RA: Yes, 1940, you hit it. I graduated grade school in 1936. I was valedictorian in my high school.

JZ: Were you? Wow. Congratulations. Where did you graduate from here in Pittsburgh?

RA: No, that was in Buffalo.

JZ: So you studied pretty hard.

RA: I studied very hard as a young man and later on it came pretty easy.

JZ: What did you like studying?

RA: I liked math and I loved history.

JZ: So, as valedictorian, what did you do after high school? Did you go to college before the war?

RA: Well, by that time we moved back to Pittsburgh and I started working to try to make some money for college. My dad didn't want me to. He said we would do it. That was hardheaded. I made a few bucks and went to school. I had already taken an ICS program in engineering. I was going to Pitt at night school and I got a job working construction.

JZ: Was it an Italian company or the city?

RA: It was an Italian company. The guy was a very good friend of my father's and he thought he was doing him a favor by putting me on, but dad gave him all kinds of hell. His son is still in business- Mascaro, Pete Mascaro.

JZ: What did you do for them?

RA: I was a carpenter out back and carried lumber.

JZ: What was the pay like?

RA: Well, before then I went to work with my uncle on the super highway and I was supposed to start as an engineer's helper. The day I started the engineer got fired so I ended up carrying water and lumber for this job. I was making thirty-five cents an hour.

JZ: Wow. When you came back to Pittsburgh where were you living? Still in the Hill District?

RA: When I first came back, I stayed with my uncle and I went to work with him during the summer. Then when my dad came we ended up in Oakland on Kennett Square

JZ: Many Italians lived in that area, no?

RA: A lot of Italians, Jews, Jewish people and Polish people lived in that area.

JZ: I guess during 1940 and 1941 you were working and then Pearl Harbor happened. Do you remember that day?

RA: Very well.

JZ: Can you tell me a little bit about that day?

RA: At that time I was working and my dad and I finally made up. I went to work with him down in Weirton, West Virginia while we were living in Oakland. Every Sunday afternoon we would sit in the living room and read the Sunday paper and listen to the radio which is when the flash came over that Pearl Harbor was attacked.

JZ: What did you think? Were you prepared to volunteer at this time or were you still in shock?

RA: I wanted to go and volunteer for the Air Corps. I knew I was good in math and I knew I could get in as a navigator or something but not a pilot. My mother started crying and saying, "Wait until they call you, wait until they call you." So I waited.

JZ: So you waited until you were drafted. When were you drafted?

RA: 1942.

JZ: Do you remember the month and day?

RA: I think it was December 1942.

JZ: So during that year from Pearl Harbor until you were drafted were you still going to Pitt?

RA: I was working. By that time we finished in Weirton and we were working in the ship yards in Ambridge where they built the LSTs.

JZ: That must have been a big operation in Ambridge?

RA: Oh it was. Believe me.

JZ: I guess at this time Italy had declared war on the United States. What did your dad feel? What did he think?

RA: I know he felt very bad about it. I know he was concerned about his family over there. He had a lot of brothers and his dad. His mother had already died.

JZ: Tell me about your first day when you got drafted? I guess you got on the train and went down to Fort Meade. Tell me about that day.

RA: Actually, we were on our way down to Fort Meade morning, afternoon or evening, going through the Rockies but some dumb guy busted the window in the train and most of us didn't bring many clothes with us because we were going to have to throw them away or send them home. We froze going through the Rockies but we made it. Going down to Fort Meade, Maryland.

JZ: After that, where did you go?

RA: After Fort Meade they sent me to Camp Eustis in Virginia, which was with Long Toms. 155 mm artillery pieces.

JZ: What was the name of the camp?

RA: Eustis, Fort Eustis—E-U-S-T-I-S in Virginia.

JZ: You said you trained on the anti-aircraft.

RA: No, that was the field artillery. After basic, because I studied that primary pretty well up, I was supposed to... made to be.... They gave you tests and everything and I made the thing. I was supposed to get a 30 day furlough and go up to Yale

for a one year because I wanted to get into the SEEBES. Anyway I was getting my... That's when I got transferred into the anti-aircraft in Eustis. Then my outfit 49 went down to Georgia. I was supposed to leave the next morning when a call came down from replacements overseas and away I went.

JZ: You weren't even done training?

RA: No, I was done training but it was on the Long Toms. Then, they sent me to this artillery outfit.

JZ: What is Long Tom?

RA: They're 155s field artillery.

JZ: I guess you were transferred overseas?

RA: So, I went into this outfit and the rest of my training had been on the Long Toms, but I went into that outfit anyway and they told me I was a truck driver.

JZ: A truck driver?

RA: I went up to the captain and I told him that there must be some mistake. I never drove a truck. He said to me, "Did you ever drive a car?" and I told him I had. He said, "Well it isn't much different."

JZ: Oh, great.

RA: I went overseas as a truck driver not knowing how to drive a truck.

JZ: They just put you in wherever.

RA: The truck was carrying three and a half tons of ammunition and a machine gun on top of it and I had never operated a machine gun before. But I learned real quick.

JZ: What year was this when you went overseas, 1943?

RA: Yeah, 1943. I went to Africa first.

JZ: You landed in Africa. Tell me about that trip.

RA: In Oran.

JZ: In Iran?

RA: Oran.

JZ: What did you do there?

RA: Well, they had us mobilizing right away, dumping us, we were going up to the Kasserine Pass, but then Patton beat Rommel. They sent us back. We got ready for Sicily. We were going on hikes, up mountains, hiking primarily.

JZ: I guess you were driving the truck and hiking the whole time?

RA: I wasn't driving the truck then, but when we got ready for the invasion of Sicily is when I started driving. I didn't know how to shift gears.

JZ: When did they invade Sicily? In late 1943?

RA: July 10, 1943.

JZ: I guess the day it was invaded you landed the same day?

RA: Yes, we landed in the sixth wave. It was about two hours from the initial invasion.

JZ: Where in Sicily did you land?

RA: In a place right outside of Agrigento.

JZ: You were driving a truck? You were on board of the truck when they landed with the LSTs, is that it?

RA: Yeah, they landed with two or three feet of water and that's what I was afraid of, that I wouldn't be able to get it on the beach but I did.

JZ: You did. After you landed on the beach what did you do? Were you under fire?

RA: Oh yes, it was a tough landing. We were under fire. I was pretty fortunate I had an angel on my shoulder. That was the second day. The first day we had a horrible experience. That night, these planes came in and we had orders to fire at them. They were firing at them and here they were B-25s, someone screwed up and didn't give the pass and we knocked down about ten of them. Guys were cheering until we realized they were B-25s and then they were sick. We had a lot of machine gun mess in concrete bunkers. And all above us. And finally got hit.... Hit them with their artillery and got rid of them. But then they ... Like I said, I was very lucky I had an angel on my shoulder from surviving the German dive bombers took a....came down and was strafing. I used my machine gun and I hit that S.O.B. and I saw the plexi-glass shatter. Whether I downed it or not I don't know but he dropped a bomb and I saw it. It was a 500 pound bomb. When I saw it coming down I thought my mother is going to feel awful bad. I had three and a half tons of ammunition. Here it came down but it hit four feet on the side of the truck. I was right by the water's edge and water came up and hit me but the bomb never went off. I was just soaking wet. I was very lucky.

JZ: That's a story.

RA: The plane took off. I hit him. I might have wounded the pilot, I don't know, but he took right off.

JZ: That bomb never went off?

RA: It never went off, thank God, or I wouldn't be here. I saw him coming down and all I think was that my mom was going to feel awful bad.

JZ: So it just happened in a couple seconds? No time to react?

RA: No. Where was I going to go?

JZ: That was right on the beach. What kind of gun were you firing?

RA: A .50 caliber. I had to have a guy show me how to clean it because I had never operated the thing. I had to learn how to shift gears in the truck.

JZ: Thank God for training, huh? Jeez. How long were you in that battle to invade? How long did it last?

RA: It lasted about three days on the beach. We moved inland once they got rid of the machine gunners and we started after them. I will never forget the one night we pulled into this area after we first moved out. Boy, it had the worst smell. We laid in this field and went to sleep. When we woke up we were right at the cemetery next to the people. They had been bringing the bodies in. They had the bodies stacked one on top of another about eight feet high full of all dead people.

JZ: Civilians?

RA: Yeah. They were all the Italians.

JZ: Were most of the enemy soldiers Germans, or were they both Germans and Italians at that time fighting the Americans?

RA: Well, at that time they were both Italians and Germans. But then the Italians capitulated. We captured Sicily. Well, we went into Salerno. They announced that Italy had surrendered and capitulated. Thank God we could go right in...But, here the Germans were still there and had those 88s down on the beach. They were knocking the hell out of us for awhile until finally the Navy got them on the second day.

JZ: I'm curious to know under these circumstances when we landed on Sicily, did it ever come across your mind that this was the land of your father and your ancestors?

RA: Oh, sure.

JZ: How did you feel?

RA: I felt bad about it because you don't know if you're killing one of your relations. You know, you don't know that. My father had always told me that he was from Messina and never went into details. Well, while we were waiting in Salerno I tried to get a pass so I could go see my grandfather in Messina. Well it was only 60 or 70 miles, but there was no transportation so I never went. Here I found out that my Dad had misstated. Messina, Praiano is right outside Termini Imerese of where we were and had I known it. But I didn't know that that's where he was. I could have walked it. Maybe it was ten miles away.

JZ: Were you in Messina at all?

RA: When I was in Termini Imerese, I was right near the border near the state of Palermo and the state of Messina.

JZ: After Sicily you went to Salerno? Did you do the same thing? Were you still the truck driver?

RA: No, I finally got out of truck driving and got on one of the four .50 caliber machine guns. I was an operator on that. I also ran the power plant and portable generators.

JZ: Oh, so you ran generators. What did you use that for specifically?

RA: For electricity wherever we needed power.

JZ: In the field?

RA: Right.

JZ: The electricity was for officer headquarters or MASH Units?

RA: For whatever.

JZ: Did you ever deal with civilians? What was it like dealing with them?

RA: Once they found out that I was Italian they would invite you to their house and make spaghetti for you and this and that. I hated to eat because they didn't have enough to eat themselves. One time I went to meet these couple of girls and they made spaghetti out of refined flour, real coarse. It was like putting sand in your mouth. I didn't want to say anything because it would have been a big insult.

JZ: Did you speak a little Italian with them?

RA: Oh, yes. I tried to talk to them as much as I could. I would give them soap if they had no soap or chocolates. Whatever. I gave them whatever I could.

JZ: I'm sure they appreciated that. They had nothing.

RA: Oh yeah.

JZ: So after Salerno is when you went to Anzio?

RA: First we went up to Caserta, Alto River, Cassino which was very bad.

JZ: Oh, Mount Cassino. Tell me about that.

RA: It was very bad. The Germans were firing down on us from the top of the mountain and we were down in the valley. It was pretty tough.

JZ: At that time what were you doing?

RA: At that time, I was on the 40 millimeter and the machine gun. They moved us around. We were what they called the "Bastard Battalion". They moved us around wherever they wanted.

JZ: What army were you in? You weren't apart of "The Big Red 1" were you?

RA: The Third Army. I went over with the 41st Division to Sicily, but there I was with the Third Army.

JZ: Tell me about combat. What are some of your combat experiences? Some other ones besides your guardian angel experiences. Tell me about some of your combat with the gun.

RA: We had a tough time with.... When we hit Cassino, it was pretty bad. They pulled us out of there and we went back to Naples. We were guarding the harbor in Naples. We were at the Capo di Camo. That's where I got a piece of shrapnel in my leg. We were at the king's summer palace.

JZ: In Naples. How did you get shrapnel in your leg? Showing off?

RA: Well, the first night we were pulled back, we were so happy to get away from Cassino that this buddy of mine from New Jersey and I started drinking wine. We were half loaded when we got to Naples. That evening, our men... Long story really. We had a guy that in the states liked to drink up. "This is how you kill Germans." And this and that. It got out of order and they had to send him home finally. He couldn't stay in combat. Anyway, they kept getting closer and there was artillery bursts, guns were going off, and firing at the planes and the planes were firing. He & I were standing out instead of looking for a foxhole or something and a piece of shrapnel came at me and hit me in the leg. ... We kept riding this guy. Oh, they're getting closer, they're getting closer. This guy dove & made a hole. Here the sanitation had been knocked out. The people had used it to crap in. It was loaded with crap and this guy went down in it.

JZ: It probably smelled so bad. How long did it take you to recover?

RA: Oh I wasn't hit that bad. It was just a piece of shrapnel. It was on the tail end. It burned a hole through my pants. It was right on the surface. It was on the tail end of the burst. And I was able to just pull them away from me. The wound almost healed itself.

JZ: After that I guess Anzio was next.

RA: Right. We went up to Anzio. We were pretty fortunate. We landed at Anzio. We were only there for two days and then orders came and they shipped us to Sardinia to get ready for Southern France, Corsica.

JZ: Oh wow, so you weren't in Anzio for very long. Thank God.

RA: No. In Corsica, we were guarding the airport.

JZ: When you invaded Corsica, you were fighting the French or the Germans?

RA: Nobody. We went right in. No one was there. No resistance.

JZ: No resistance. Wow.

RA: We set up an airport and that's where the planes took off to bomb France and Germany.

JZ: You said you went to Sardinia and then Corsica. How long were you there for?

RA: I don't remember exactly. Off hand, I would say maybe two or three months.

JZ: Was it pretty much like R&R? Wasn't dangerous or was it?

RA: We had a couple air raids.

JZ: The Germans trying to bomb. Did you try to shoot them down?

RA: I don't know. Fortunately I was damn lucky. My gun was.... I was on the multiple 50's. We were right at the gas dump when they invaded.Fortunately they

went right to the planes and not the gas dump.They knocked out about twenty of our planes that were on the ground. The next morning they pushed them planes to the side and new ones came in.

JZ: How many planes did you ever shoot down? Did you ever tally?

RA: The only one I personally can say was the Stuka, in Sicily

JZ: Tell me about some of the weapons you used.

RA: We used the small arm.30 caliber. The main thing was we used multiple .50s. The 40 millimeter we operated when we were in the front.

[End Tape 1, Side A]

[Begin Tape 1, Side B]

JZ; After Corsica you went to Southern France. Where did you land in Southern France?

RA: We went into Marseille. We went right up, there was no resistance there. We went in I guess about...

JZ: None? This was after D-Day?

RA: Yeah, this was about ten days or one week after the invasion on D-Day. We went right up.

JZ: You weren't driving a truck were you?

RA: No.

JZ: Where did you ride at? How did you get up there?

RA: We went up with the truck. We would load the truck or jeep.

JZ: After that?

RA: We went to Avignon first. We kept moving ahead. We went up to Frankfurt, Germany.

JZ: So I guess at that point you were starting to see more resistance?

RA: Oh yeah. We were chasing them pretty good. By that time we started getting so many prisoners that they pulled us out and we went back to Versailles instead of putting a prisoner of war camp there. I was in charge of it. We had about 5,000 German officers.

JZ; So you were in charge. What was your rank at that time?

RA: They always had me active when acting as sergeant. That means I was in active duty but I didn't get the pay.

JZ: Oh, duty but you didn't get the pay. Back then it was all about the pay, they didn't want to pay anyone. So you had 5,000 Germans and mostly officers.

RA; Yeah, they were all officers.

JZ: So they were tough guys, didn't want to be there? Or they were kinda happy.

RA: No, they were happy to be alive just like the rest of us. Then the war was over.

JZ: This was in Versailles you said?

RA: It was right outside of Versailles.

JZ: So it was a big camp. You put them in tents, barbed wire all around it. What did you do there? You said you were in charge.

RA: We had eight sections and I was in charge of one of the sections. Different guys had different things.

JZ: So how long were you in charge there, until the end of the war?

RA: We pulled out and handed it over to the French. Then we went up to the big battle, Battle of the Bulge. We got the tail end of that. It was bad.

JZ: You fought in the Bulge?

RA: Yeah, and after that was over, they sent us to Brussels. We took over Brussels, Antwerp.

JZ: What did you do there? Guard duty.

RA: We were military police. They had a regular outfit there but they were stealing so much that they needed more people.

JZ: What were they stealing? Anything & everything?

RA: They were selling all the army stuff.

JZ: Oh, they were selling army stuff to the civilians. What happened to those guys who were selling the goods? Were they arrested by the MPs?

RA: Well, I don't know if they were able to prove who did what.

JZ: You ended in Brussels at the end of the war. How were you on points? Were you getting ready to go to the Pacific?

RA: Well that's what we were going to have to do. At that time, they wanted us to re-enlist. But before that, they were going to send us home for a couple months and then go to the Pacific.

JZ: You weren't happy about going to Pacific were you?

RA: I was glad to be going home for a little.

JZ: Tell me about the medals over there. What are some of those medals and ribbons?

RA: Well, that's for different theaters and invasions. I know one was for meritorious combat.

JZ: When did you find out about the war ending in Japan? Were you still in Europe when the war ended in Japan?

RA: Yes, when we dropped the atom bomb in Japan. It makes me laugh today when people say we shouldn't have ever done that. They estimated that we would have lost over a million men if we invaded Japan. They were already digging out caves.

JZ: When were you finally discharged?

RA: I got discharged in December, well no, I was discharged in January but I got home in December.

JZ: Of 1945. I guess looking back on it...What are some of your thoughts when you look back on your service in the Second World War? I guess it was every American's duty at that time. Were you proud?

RA: We just accepted it. We knew it was the right thing to do.

JZ: You weren't protesting. As an American of Italian decent how did it feel to go back to Sicily and Italy and free your ancestral homeland? Your Dad's land. When you came back, did your father talk to you about what you saw in Italy? I guess he was concerned.

RA: Oh yeah. They would send over all kinds of food and stuff over. Whatever they could. They would send back whatever they could, clothing, food.

JZ: You went back to Italy?

RA: Yeah, I went back.

JZ: Did you see those places where you fought?

RA: Yeah, I found some of them. I went back primarily to see my homeland, my dad's and grandmother's, which I did. In San Giovanni in Fiore, I found the church, the house she was born in and the church she went to. There were just a few distant relations there. Then I went to Sicily, to Palermo, and found my grandfather's grave in the cemetery. My dad had a gang of brothers, but I didn't find them; a lot of them moved. My one uncle went up to Palermo was the chief of police up there.

JZ: After you came home, did you finish school? Did you finish at Pitt?

RA: I came back to Pittsburgh and started working. I went to school for one year, but going back to school after being in combat so I went to work. I had been studying engineering even prior and I was of the few guys that could read prints. Pretty early I became a general foreman to better myself. I was going to school at night and kept this one job down at J & L to put in a water house. I took it purposely because it was close and I could go to school at night but once I started there I guess after the second week or so, we started working a lot overtime. Six, seven days a week. I was making good money and at the meantime I was going to school at night. I didn't have time to study to keep up with everything. I passed everything but I didn't get out of it what I should have. That's when I finally gave it up.

JZ: You were a general foreman?

RA: Yeah. I went with Dravo Corporation.

JZ: And you stayed with that same company until you retired?

RA: No, I stayed with them for about five years. Then I went with Eichleay Corporation. I joined the Carpenters Union. In fact, when I worked with my dad. The agent got sick, had a heart condition. A couple of guys came and asked me to run it. I figured, "Why not?" I took a crack at it. I first became business agent and then I became the business manager. I've been doing that for about forty years.

JZ: Any final thoughts about your service in World War II or your generation and what they did for this country? Any final thoughts?

RA: Yes, I've always regretted when we were in Sicily the Air Corps needed men and I volunteered for it, but the stinkin' colonel didn't like anyone to leave the outfit. When we got up into Italy, I took all kinds of tests. At that time, ironically, I had perfect vision and I was up on my math. I had Trig & Algebra. So, I kept asking,

“Did you ever hear from them?” What I felt bad about was we had another Jewish boy that graduated from Rutgers and they wanted him for aerial reconnaissance. They told him they would give him First Lieutenant right away. Never heard nothing from them. When we got on board ship to go Anzio and mail call came. They gave me my letters. Pass, Pass, Pass, then on the end, left the theater. We moved to another zone... so I couldn't go. Son of a bitch. I had won the try out. I even felt bad of this Jewish boy, nice fellow. They offered him money, First Lieutenant, because he had graduated. They messed him up too. They screwed him too.

JZ: Anything else? I would just like to say thank you for your service and what you did for our country. Thank you very much for inviting me to your home.

[End Tape 1, Side B]

[End Interview]