



U.S. Coast Guard Oral History Program

Interview of **Seaman 1/c Jerry Ciccimaro, USCGR**

World War II Pacific Theater Combat Veteran

Conducted by C. Douglas Kroll, Ph. D., U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary

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Seaman 1/c Jerry Ciccimaro, USCGR, left, and interviewer C. Douglas Kroll, right.

Biographical Summary

Born in Los Angeles, California on 19 July 1927, Jerry Ciccimaro spent his early years living with an aunt and uncle in Los Angeles. As somewhat rebellious teen he accumulating numerous traffic tickets, mostly for speeding and was expelled from Fremont High School for getting into a fight with the football coach. Just before his sixteenth birthday he father took him to the Coast Guard Recruiting Office in Long Beach and signed a parental permission form stating that his son was almost seventeen (rather than being almost sixteen) in July

of 1943. Enlisting on 8 September 1943, he attended recruit training in the San Francisco area at Treasure Island. His initial assignment was to a horse beach patrol in the Morro Bay area on the central California coast. On 13 May 1944 he reported aboard the Coast Guard-manned USS *Cavalier* (APA-37) in Pearl Harbor. Aboard the *Cavalier* he was involved in the invasions of Saipan and Tinian, Leyte and Luzon. Enroute to the invasion of Okinawa the *Cavalier* was torpedoed and severely damaged. Ciccimaro was one of small number of crew members that remained aboard as the *Cavalier* was towed to Honolulu for emergency dry docking and repair. While in Honolulu the Japanese surrendered and World War II came to an end. He was then transferred to Terminal Island (Long Beach), California on 16 August 1945 for discharge. While waiting for discharge he made a shake-down cruise aboard the newly commissioned USCGC *Wachusett* (WPG-44) from San Pedro, California to Alaska and return. He served aboard *Wachusett* from 23 March 1946 until 11 April 1946. Discharged from the U.S. Coast Guard at Wilmington, California as a Seaman First Class on 17 April 1946 he returned to his home in Los Angeles. After briefly serving in the U.S. Navy at Naval Air Station Los Alamitos, he pursued a very successful career as an auto mechanic and auto body shop repair technician. He is currently retired and has been living in Palm Desert, California since the 1970s. He married and had a daughter and son, all of whom are now deceased. He has a niece, Linda Lee, one grandchild and two great-grandchildren.

INTERVIEWER: Where were you born?

CICCIMARO: Los Angeles.

INTERVIEWER: And when were you born?

CICCIMARO: July 19, 1927.

INTERVIEWER: Can tell me about your childhood and growing up in Los Angeles?

CICCIMARO: When I was about 18 months old my mother passed away and my dad went sort of haywire. I had three sisters and he put them in a Catholic home in Burbank. I was 18 months old and nobody wanted me so my aunt and uncle took me in and I was raised by them until I was about 13.

INTERVIEWER: Were they living in Los Angeles.

CICCIMARO: Yes, near where my father lived. I lived with them until I was about 13 and then my dad put the family back together and took my sisters and me back to his home in Los Angeles. I went sort of haywire when I got my driver's permit. I couldn't drive alone. I was supposed to have somebody with me. I got into a lot of traffic citations for speeding and different things. I was kind of wild at that time. I got thrown out of Fremont High School after getting into a fight with the football coach. My dad decided that he had to do something about it and that's how I ended up in the Coast Guard. I was actually underage when I went in.

INTERVIEWER: You weren't even 16 yet, correct?

CICCIMARO: Yes, I was 15 turning 16, and he told them that I was 16 turning 17. At that time, if you were 17 and wanted to join the service, your parents had to sign for you. So he took my down to Long Beach and

signed me in and that's how I got into the Coast Guard which I think was a good thing for me. Anyway it made a man out of me.

INTERVIEWER: Where did they send you for boot camp/recruit training.

CICCIMARO: In San Francisco, at Treasure Island.

INTERVIEWER: Do you mean Government Island in Alameda?

CICCIMARO: No, I'm almost sure it was Treasure Island.

INTERVIEWER: Any specific memories about boot camp?

CICCIMARO: Nothing, other than at that time, there were only about 100 of us in that particular camp, and at that time that camp was fairly empty.

INTERVIEWER: How did boot camp prepare you for your first duty with the Coast Guard? Was it good preparation?

CICCIMARO: A little bit. When I was about 13 I got connected with horses. I went to work with a couple of my friends were training to be jockeys. I was small at that time and they told me they needed help there. So I got a job with Connie Ring Stables. At that time that was a big, big stable and was learning to be a jockey, more or less. So anyway, I had that under my belt, so when I went into the Coast Guard that I had horse training. So when I got ready to be dispatched from boot camp they sent me to Morro Bay [CA] that at the time had a horse patrol that went all the way to Morro Rock. They also had a dog patrol that went down to Pismo Beach along the coast. I spent about 8 months riding horses up and down the coast for the Coast Guard. We had to keep everyone, including sunbathers and picnic-goers, off the beach.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ride by yourself?

CICCIMARO: No, there were always two of us. I still remember the ranch that was our base, called Barnum's Ranch. I still remember my horse, named White Socks because it had four white lower legs. White Socks was a great horse except for one nagging habit. Every so often, without warning, he would turn and run out into the ocean. Anyway, I stood there for several months and then one day we got the news that they were going to ship us all out and bring in new crew. I guess they had like a turn over. So the next thing I knew I was on a small aircraft carrier going to Honolulu [HI] to catch a ship I was going to get assigned to. I don't remember the name of the aircraft carrier. We went to Pearl Harbor and in about 10 days we got assigned to ship I was on for over a year or so, the *Cavalier* [APA-37].

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember your experience when you saw Pearl Harbor for the first time?

CICCIMARO: Not too much. It was two years after the attack on Pearl Harbor and I didn't see anything out of order. Everything was cleaned up so I didn't get to see any of that stuff. When we got liberty in Honolulu I remember there was a strict curfew and different things like that there that they had. Maybe I was just too young to remember all lot of things that happened.

INTERVIEWER: What was your assignment on the *Cavalier*?

CICCIMARO: I was under the Boatswain's Mates [Deck Force] and they taught you how to tie knots and we spliced cables and different things like that. One this particular ship they had two 5 inch 37 guns, one on the stern and other on the bow. They assigned me to the gun on the stern and I was to bring the gun up and down, while the guy on the other side of the would bring it this way [hand gesture indicating right to left]. That was my assignment whenever we had general quarters, but during the day I had different jobs under the Boatswain's Mates.

When you're going at sea there really aren't a lot of duties you have to perform, most of them is being your watch. You had a 4 hour watch all the time, two or three times a day. Then we took a dry run with the *Cavalier*. The *Cavalier* was called an A-P-A, that's Assault Personnel Attack, and if it was just a P-A it would be just Personnel Attack. It was a converted banana boat. There wasn't anything that was fancy on the ship at all. We went out for about a month and came back in, and I don't know if you remember the actor Cesar Romero, but they shipped him to our ship for probably 3 months or something and then when we came back in they shipped him to Hollywood to sell [War] bonds. At that time bonds were a big, big seller and anybody in entertainment was selling bonds. So he went back to Hollywood.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have any contact with Cesar Romero while he was assigned to your ship?

CICCIMARO: No. But I do remember when we brought him back to Hawaii he hosted a cocktail party for the entire crew of the *Cavalier*.

INTERVIEWER: Were all these cruises in the Hawaii area and you just went back and forth, picked him up once and dropped him off another time?

CICCIMARO: He didn't go on any invasions with us.

INTERVIEWER: We did this in the Hawaiian area and then one day they said we were going on an invasion. That would have been the last part of 1944, I think it was July or August. Saipan was our first invasion, and Tinian and we secured them in no time flat. Then we went to Papua New Guinea to pick up troops that were going on the next invasion. I don't know how or why but we were always the flagship [TRANSTRON FOURTEEN]. Always in front with rows and rows of other ships on our sides. This when we were one of the lousiest ships in whole fleet! Anyway we picked up troops there and we had to go ashore with landing craft, and when we went ashore all the beaches were black sand, never saw anything like that before. We went into this island, and if you went in about 50 yards, you saw all these natives, and I mean scary natives. Scare the

hell out of you. We picked up the troops and left there and were on our way to Leyte on the back side of the Philippines. So we are on our way there, and about a week after we are at sea, I discovered a cousin that I grew up with when I went to live with my uncle and aunt for up to age 13—this was their oldest son. He was probably about 10-12 years older than me and been somewhat of a father to me. He was on my ship as one of troops going ashore in the invasion. And I felt so bad when we got to Leyte and I saw him going over the side to get in the boats that were going to take them ashore. It scared the hell out of me to know he was going. And then there so many casualties they told us to stay there and become like a hospital ship, which we did. I didn't like that. You saw all these guys coming aboard that we all shot up.

INTERVIEWER: What were the living conditions like on this old banana boat?

CICCIMARO: It wasn't uncomfortable. Everybody had a bunk and it had a big galley that could seat probably a hundred people on the mess deck.

INTERVIEWER: Was the food pretty good?

CICCIMARO: No. Not really. I don't remember too much, but I do know that, we called it at that time "shit on a shingle", he had that an awful, awful lot. Anyway I got attached to one of boatswain's mates on the ship who had been in the Coast Guard for about ten years before World War II began. He was kind of like my guardian every place we would go, and ended going with him and the bunch he ran around with.

INTERVIEWER: Was this on liberty?

CICCIMARO: Yes. On different islands. It was not really liberty. We went ashore on islands that had nothing on them. They had beer and the beer was always hot. I didn't like beer anyway. I think it was after Luzon that we went back to Pearl Harbor for something that had to be done to the ship and while I was there on liberty by boatswain mate friend got me about half drunk, which didn't take much at that time. I woke up and had this tattoo on my upper right arm. He had tattoos all over him. About three days later we underway to Luzon and on our way my arm got this big [indicated very swollen]. They had to operate on me and they cut it off and had it sewn together but the heat kept breaking it open. They finally let just heal the way it is now [pointed to scar]. I'll never forget that experience.

We were on our way to Luzon and had to pass through a strait with mines. I mean all over the place. Some them were right on top of the water. Some about twenty feet below the water. It scared the hell out of me. And there were about 100 ships in this patrol going over. We were about a day or two out of Luzon when we had messages coming in that the Japs were sending kamikazes at us. And boy all of a sudden after passing through the mine fields when here comes these [Japanese] bombers down on us. And that's another occasion this if I live to be a hundred that I'll never forget. We were always the flagship, and for some reason the USS *Fremont* [APA-44] was always alongside of us and the kamikazes were coming in so low that you could shoot at them or you would be shooting an one another. He had to catch them as they were coming down. I

remember looking over, through glasses, at the Freemont and this plane hit the bow of it and everything on the front of this ship was pure black. The plane blew up and guys were still strapped to their guns. They had a lot of 4-40s on them and they were still strapped dead in their harnesses. That's another occasion that I'll never, never forget. We finally got away from the bombers [kamikazes] and his Luzon. This is the one were [Gen.] MacArthur was coming back. We dumped all the people off there and then we were going to go around to Manila and pick up whatever was left of the 2nd and 4th Marine Divisions, for delivery to Okinawa. As we came around the far end of the Philippines we got torpedoed. It was kind of unusual that way we got hit. As the bow of ship would go down, the stern would come up. The torpedo caught the propeller as the stern was going up, blew open the main shaft alley which is about six feet by six feet and goes all the way to the engine room. It flooded the shaft alley and the engine room. We had no power. We were dead in the water. It's kind of ironic that we didn't sink. When we eventually got to dry dock we couldn't believe how big the hole was. Then right in the middle of the ship the upper hull had cracked open. You could look out and see the ocean from the mess deck. We were lucky that there was a tugboat in the bunch we were with. They would tow us back to Pearl Harbor. We were still afloat, but with no power. Within twenty minutes our ship was evacuated, all but about twenty of us, and I was one of the twenty that stayed on there. The tugboat started us back to Honolulu. Luckily enough they put destroyer escort [DE] around us. We were only going about four knots and the destroyed escort would sail in circles around us. About the third night the destroyed escort sank the sub that had been following us, so we were home free after that. It took us almost two weeks to get to Hawaii. We were going so slow. We were about a day out of Pearl Harbor when they wired to us that all the dry docks were full and they have to be taken to the San Diego area, or Terminal Island [Long Beach]. We were just hours from Honolulu when they wired that they had an opening in a dry dock for us. Afterwards I guess we were lucky that we got in. Most of other ships in our bunch had gone on to Okinawa and got it real, real heavy. When we saw the ship in dry dock we wondered how we had managed to stay afloat. We were there for about two weeks. And one by one, they started shipping us out.

One morning we woke up and heard horns and whistled blowing, and whatever have you, and found out the war had ended. I was still in Pearl Harbor. It's kind of ironic. I was just a young kid and I didn't know or care about anything at that time. All the money I had saved during the war---I lost every dime [laughing] of it playing poker on the way back. After the war was over they starting shipping everybody back to Terminal Island [CA], that was where you got discharged from. So I got to Terminal Island and found there was a list like this [gesture for very long list] with different people that were waiting to get discharged. The boatswain's mate friend of mine from the *Cavalier* somehow or another always ended up with me. When we got to Terminal Island, he is still in the Coast Guard. They shipped him to San Pedro. He came over to see me on Terminal Island where I'm waiting to be discharged. My name was way on the bottom of the list, because I was just a young kid, no family. They were taking all the people that were married or had a family ahead of me. He asked if I wouldn't want to sign up to make a dry run on the *Wachusett* [WPC-44] . That was a brand new Coast Guard Cutter, with all brand new Westinghouse equipment. That sounded like heaven to me after being on the *Cavalier*. That *Cavalier* was a good ship, but it wasn't made for war. I signed up be go on the

Wachusett. They were going to up to Alaska and back on a trial run. He said that by the time we got back, my name would be close to the top of the discharge list at Terminal Island. Instead of two weeks it ended up be a month and a half.

INTERVIEWER: Were you a boatswain's mate by this time or still a seaman?

CICCIMARO: Yes, I was still a Seaman First Class.

INTERVIEWER: Did you still work with the boatswain's mates on the *Wachusett*?

CICCIMARO: I learned a lot by that time about splicing cable, knot tying and different things like that. And I got to where I could operate the winches real good. I would load and unload it. That was part of my job. At that time, on that kind of a ship you had different duties. I did part-time on the gun, part-time with the boatswains and then when we got into a port I would operate the winches. I finally came back into port. By this time my name was right near the top of the list. I knew I was getting ready to go out. Its kind of funny but by this time the war was over and our ship [*Cavalier*] was still in dry dock. I heard it was going to be used for atomic bomb testing in the Pacific. Later on I learned that instead it had been placed in what they called that "graveyard of ships" way on the far end of San Diego. That was more or less my experience in the Coast Guard.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember that day you got discharged?

CICCIMARO: Yes. I did a lot of crazy things. I remember ripping my uniform off, rather than taking it off, which I wish I would have done. I was still kind of wild in those days. But when I got out I had a pretty level head on my shoulders, compared to when I went in. It made a man out of me.

INTERVIEWER: Just a couple of general questions. What was the relationship between the enlisted force and the petty officers aboard the ship?

CICCIMARO: Very, very good.

INTERVIEWER: In working with the officers on board the *Cavalier* or the *Wachusett*, did you notice any difference between reserve officers and academy/regular officers?

CICCIMARO: Not really.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have any contact or interaction with crewmen of other races?

CICCIMARO: No.

INTERVIEWER: What the relationship between Coast Guardsmen and other armed service members in Honolulu or elsewhere? Any rivalries? Animositities? Get along?

CICCIMARO: No. None. Everyone that was on that island respected anybody that was in a uniform.

INTERVIEWER: How did you feel about the Japanese you were fighting against during the war?

CICCIMARO: At that time I don't I could have hated any one race any more than another.

INTERVIEWER: How did your Coast Guard wartime experience change your life.

CICCIMARO: It made a man out of me.

INTERVIEWER: Is there any area I have missed and that you think are important for future generations to know?

CICCIMARO: No.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you very much.

END OF ORAL HISTORY

