

Service: Stories of Hunger and War

Episode 2 – “Why Am I Alive?”

Episode Transcript

NEWS CLIP FROM RADIO, DEC 7, 1941: “Japan is at war with the United States and Great Britain. Tokyo has announced in a declaration in a few minutes, we will switch to points where battles are raging in the Pacific. First, let's hear from Ankara, Turkey, where the news of this may or may not....”

(PIANO THEME MUSIC COMES IN)

JACQUELINE RAPOSO: I'm Jacqueline Raposo. That's the beginning of a news clip from December 7th, 1941, the day the Japanese empire bombed Pearl Harbor and the day before the United States officially joined the Allies in World War Two. As I listened to veterans of this time share their stories, I can't help but notice how, on that one day, the size of their world exploded, too.

(VOICES OF VETERANS OVER THEME MUSIC)

WILLIAM WALKER: The Navy was island hopping: Leyte, and Iwo Jima, Okinawa.

HAROLD BUD LONG: I was in Paris on August 16th with a free French.

PASQUALE D'AMBROSIO: We took the big ship from Manila to Mindoro, and after the war ended, we took another LSD or whatever it was, to Mindinao.

JACQUELINE RAPOSO: Welcome to SERVICE, Stories of Hunger and War, a production from iHeartRadio and me, your host. That last clip you heard was from our episode with Pasquale D'Ambrosio, who left his New Hampshire home with the Army to sail to the Philippines.

(PIANO VERSION OF AMERICA THE BEAUFUL FADES IN AND UNDERSCORES)

Today we spend time with Frank Devita, a Brooklyn boy who crossed the globe over almost three years in the Coast Guard. Pat and Frank, and our next few veterans, all came from close-knit communities; they knew their neighbors, and after the war, married childhood sweethearts. They had to wait for the news. Listening on the radio or going to the movie theater. They couldn't internet research or download a map as words like Epernay and Okinawa became part of their common language, like I'm doing as I listen and learn. Before they deployed, there were things

about the world they just couldn't know. So we're all on the same page, here are a few things they could have known: They would definitely have known that the four big allied powers were Britain, France, and the Soviet Union, along with the United States, and the Axis powers were the German Nazis, the Italian fascists and the Japanese, who by late 1941 had occupied most of Europe and so many of the Pacific Islands. They might have known that in North Africa, Italian colonized Libyans were fighting British colonized Egyptians, and thousands of Africans were being forced to fight for their colonizers abroad.

With the Spanish only recently post-Civil War and Latin American countries pulled between Axis and Allied loyalties, they might not know what to make of such civilians. While they would have known of the heavy bombing all over Britain by the German Luftwaffe, they might not quite have understood how vital civilian farming was for survival there. And as rumors about the barbarity of the Japanese were flying stateside after Pearl Harbor, there's no way these kids could have known who they were going to face when they then headed to the Pacific themselves. Such is the case today.

A feisty, patriotic 17-year-old, Frank joined the Coast Guard because they were the branch that could send him out the soonest, and he knew he wanted to defend his country. What he couldn't know was that what lay ahead was active combat, facing fears and foreigners and decisions that would shove him into adulthood. But what he ate and how he found or shared food seemed to bring Frank a little sense of home, and a little sense of fun, no matter where on the globe he was floating. So now, from his home in New Jersey, let's slow down and sit with Frank Devita.

(SOUNDS OF NEW YORK TRAFFIC FADE IN)

FRANK DEVITA: My name is Frank Devita of the U.S. Coast Guard. I was a gunners-mate third class. I had a very good family life, born and raised in Brooklyn. My dad worked for the Navy for 30 years. My mom stayed home all the time and she raised all these children, four children. My sister Agnes was the oldest, and my brother Silvio came along, and I came along, and then my brother Daniel came along. We had a good family life, but we were born during the depression. I wouldn't say we were poor, but we were on the borderline and we didn't feel it because, during the depression, everybody was poor. I mean, the subway was five cents, a loaf of bread, for five cents, milk was five cents. We lived near Coney Island and there was the trolley that went from my, near my street, to Coney Island. It was five cents. I walked to save the five cents so I could buy a hot dog on Coney Island. A hot dog was five cents.

My mom was not a good cook. But she was a wonderful mother and my dad, too. He designed all the uniforms for the Navy, and he came across a lot of big admirals and generals, and all that kind

of stuff. So like once a month one of these generals or admirals would come for dinner. And my mom's favorite dinner and at that time, she used to make roast beef with rice and brown gravy, and she made a great cake.

(UNDERSCORING SOUNDS OF EATING, RADIO STATIC, FOOTBALL GAME ETC.)

Pearl Harbor Day, there was an admiral there and a captain, and when we used to have company, my mom was very strict: No children at the table. So she would feed us early. And then when the company came, we would leave. I was a big giant fan, football Giants. And I wanted to listen to the Giant game. So I was in the living room, had the radio very low, and they were in the kitchen doing their thing. They interrupt the game to say that the Japanese just bombed Pearl Harbor.

(RADIO STATIC)

PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT RADIO ANNOUNCEMENT FROM DEC 8, 1941: "I regret to tell you that very many American lives have been lost. In addition, American ships have been reported torpedoed on the high seas between San Francisco and Honolulu..."

FRANK DEVITA: So I went into the dining room and I said, "Excuse me." And my mom says, "I told you not to come in here like this." "But I have important news." "What's so important?" "The Japanese just bombed Pearl Harbor." The admiral and captain with their wives, they left. That's how I remember Pearl Harbor.

(SOUNDS OF LARGE SHIP ENGINE ROOM AND WAVES)

My mother had a very hard time. She had three sons and we were all in combat. My oldest brother was in the army, I was in the Coast Guard, my young brother was in the Marines. She kept it hidden because she was a very quiet person but I'm sure she prayed a lot.

(SOUNDS OF METAL CONTAINER SQUEAKING)

I was a gunner's mate in the back of a ship called the stern. It was four anti-aircraft guns, 20mm. When there wasn't an invasion I was in charge of those four guns. Since I was a gunner's Mate, they gave me what's called a gunnery shack, which was a room about 8 feet by 8 feet. And in that shack, I had all my tools to fix the guns and ammunition. I decided that's where I was going to live because, you see, I'm a very finicky eater. I always, since the day I was born.

(SOUNDS OF MEN IN MESS HALL)

When I through the chow line, the first time, you got a tray with five or six compartments in it and they slop the food on. So the first time I went through the chow line, they had spaghetti. It looked like glue. So this guy had this thing [ladle] up like this, "I don't want any!" He said, "How come? You look like you're Italian." I said, "That's all I don't want any!" [laughing] So I decided that I was going to live in that shack.

So when we were in Boston, I stopped them Boston and I bought a frying pan, a coffee pot, and a hotplate. I stocked up all the canned goods I could find – pork and beans, and soup – and I was all set. But then I wanted meat or fish or something like that.

(SOUND OF BOOTS WALKING ON A METAL GRID)

I used to have what they call the 4-to-8; you're on watch for four hours, you're off for eight hours. I had the night watch at that time and my job was to walk around on the ship and see if anything was wrong. I went into the officers' quarters. I opened the refrigerator. Steaks! So I stole some steaks from the officers, and I brought it back to my shack. And I cooked steaks.

(SOUND OF FOOD SIZZLING)

Aboard ship, very tight compartments. The guys, the next day, they said, "The goddamn officers were eating steaks last night!" [laughing] I never told them. I'm like an eel. I don't get caught.

(SOUND OF AN ENGINE GEARING UP AND SHIP ROCKING)

The Samuel Chase was an attack transport used to bring the troops into the beach with little Higgins Boats. Higgins boat is about 30 feet long and it holds between 30 and 32 troops, and it's flat bottomed so it could go up on the beach. We had eleven-hundred troops aboard ship that we took into the beach in Normandy. It was 5000 ships went into the invasion - 5000. So we went in with three other ships - The Dickman, The Billy, and the Henrico - all attack transports. All Coast Guard. People don't realize that most of the troops that went into the beach were brought in by Coast Guard.

Since I was a gunner's mate, I was assigned one of the machine guns. So, about two weeks or three weeks before the invasion, an order came down from Washington and they took our machine guns away. And my job, see, there's a ramp in front of the boat And that's the only steel on the whole boat because the boat is made out of plywood. So my job became to drop this ramp.

We supposed to invade on June 5th. But there was a big storm and we called off the invasion 'til June 6. It was a little foggy and drizzly. It was a June day, but it felt like an October or November day. It was not a good day. So the water was still very rough. And you wouldn't think, you know, the English Channel, but it was like an ocean. The waves were very high, and the boat was going like this.

(THROUGHOUT THE NEXT SEQUENCE, WE HEAR HEAVY WAVES, THE SHIP AND BOATS ROCKING, AND THE BLAST OF VARIOUS MACHINE GUNS, CANNONS, AND GUNS)

We were going to load the troops about 4 o'clock. About 2 o'clock, we started feeding them: eggs, sausage, pancakes - everything - ice cream, jello, that you could think of. It was the worst thing we could have done. We had overfed them. Some of these guys were never on a boat their whole life. They're all seasick. Then on the first wave, we lost six boats immediately.

(LARGE EXPLOSION)

One boat that was hit by an 88. An 88 is a gun that the Germans have - the best gun in the whole war. This 88 hit one of our boats and killed one of our men on the boat, and two of the men, they were blown out of the boat into the water. And they crawled to shore. ...they took the guns from dead soldiers and fought with the army all day long. We couldn't get on the beach because there are too many obstacles on the beach.

Now, I'm in the back of the boat and these guys are in front of me, all [vomiting noises], and the wind took it, I was full of vomit.

So we got maybe 20 or 30 yards away from the beach and the captain says "Drop the ramp." I never heard him because of the fire of the cannons and the two big diesel engines behind me. So then he yelled out again, he says, "Drop the ramp." At this time, I heard him. But the only problem was, there was 30 machine guns along the beach there. And they were firing at us. And they were hitting the ramp of the boat because the ramp was steel. And the machine was - [making machine gun noises] -like a typewriter [more sound] hitting that ramp. And he told me to drop the ramp. And I knew, even though I was a little kid, I knew when I dropped that ramp, the machine guns that were hitting the ramp would come into the boat and kill me. I didn't want to jump the ramp. I froze for a while. And then he says, "Goddamn DeVita, drop the f-ing ramp." And I had no choice. [voice breaking] I dropped the ramp.

(HEAVY MACHINE GUN SPRAY)

And the machine guns that were on the ramp came into the boat. About 14 guys immediately were killed.

So now, I was the three-quarters of the way back and there was two kids next to me. I was 19, they were 19, but I called them kids. And it was standing next to me, they thought, they would be safe. The Germans had machine guns up on the hill. Now, there was 2 guys. One guy was maybe four feet away from me. He got hit, across the belly - machine gun bullets across the belly. I don't know how this guy survived. His belly was ripped wide open. He was bleeding. We couldn't do anything for him - we had no morphine. We had no morphine.

And the other kid - who had red hair, never forget - [crying] - he had... [crying] machine guns, machine gun took his helmet off. Half of his head. And he fell in front of me. And you know, it's a fallacy, everybody thinks when a soldier is dying, he reaches out the god. Not true. He reaches out to mama - [voice breaking] - and they cry, "Mama."

(LOW BELL SOUNDS COME IN)

He was crying, "Help, help, help." I couldn't help him, I couldn't even help myself. I had no morphine to give him. I knew he's going to die because half of his head was gone. I didn't know what to do. I had nothing. So I started praying, the Lord's Prayer. I don't know if he heard me. But for some reason, he stopped saying, "Help me, help me, help me." He was lying at my feet. And I reached down. And I touched his hand because I wanted him to know he wasn't alone. He squeezed my hand. And he died. He was just a little boy.

JACQUELINE RAPOSO: After the break...

FRANK DEVITA: I said, what the hell just happened here? And why am I alive?

JACQUELINE RAPOSO: Stay with us.

(BELLS FADE)

COMMERCIAL BREAK

(LOW BELL SOUNDS COME IN)

JACQUELINE RAPOSO: Welcome back to **SERVICE: Stories of Hunger and War**, from iHeartRadio.

I'm Jacqueline Raposo. And we left Coast Guard Gunner's Mate Frank Devita on D-Day, June 6th, 1944.

Here's President Roosevelt the morning after:

PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT FROM RADIO, JUNE 7, 1944: "...Last night, when I spoke with you about the fall of Rome, I knew at that moment that troops will the United States and our allies were crossing the Channel in another and greater operation. It has come to pass with success thus far. And so in this poignant hour, I ask you to join with me in prayer...."

JACQUELINE RAPOSO: Frank doesn't know how many wounded they carried back to the Lucky Chase that day, but 380 soldiers' bodies returned to his ship alone. When all is said and done, between that June 6th and August 30th, when the Germans retreated back across the Seine, there were an estimated 425,000 casualties split almost equally between the Allied and Axis forces. We pick up Frank's story when his 18-hour battle finally starts winding down...

FRANK DEVITA: After the 15th wave, they started bringing the boats up. The crane came down like a cherry picker to take the boat put it on the deck. The boat looked like shredded paper from the machine gun bullets. And all the crews went down to the mess hall. They had cheese sandwiches and coffee. My stomach was a rumble. I couldn't eat anything, so I didn't want to go down. Plus, I was full of blood [crying] and vomit, all over my uniform. I must have stunk to high heaven. I walked to my guns at the stern of the ship. Somehow I felt like I was safe there. It was late at night and I sat down on the cold deck and I said to myself, "What the hell just happened here? And why am I alive?" It got dark. And I turned around to see if anybody was with me. And then I saw a stack against the bulkhead, stacked like a cord of wood, all the bodies, [crying] and I cried myself to sleep.

I just want everybody to know, I am not a hero. I'm a survivor. How I survived with all those machine gun bullets flying around me? God was with me. My mom was with me. I survived. A lot of them did not survive.

(FOG HORN)

I slept for three days. The captain knew what we went through so he didn't bother us. But after three days, he got on the loudspeaker, he says, "The fun is over. Let's get back to work."

(BAGPIPE MUSIC AND CLAPPING CROWD)

My ship went back up to Glasgow Scotland, that's where our home base was. When we pulled into the Clyde, and everybody's waving as the ship went in because we were bringing in food and supplies to them, so they were very happy to see us. And I spotted this girl. We made eye contact. So the next day I was walking along the street and lo and behold, I saw this girl and I recognized her. It was one movie house in the whole town. I said, "Do you wanna go to the movies?"

I walked her home that night and I met her mom, and she made some tea. They had nothing to eat. At that time, it was very strict rations. I said to myself, "I'm going to get something to feed these people." I had a friend of mine, he was a cook aboard ship. And I said, "Jerry, I need a ham." They used to have a ham, they had a tin shaped like a ham. He gave me one of those tins. So the next night, I went back and I says, "I got a present for your mom." And I gave her that ham. Well, she split the ham with all the neighbors. But you'd think I gave her gold.

(SOUND OF ENGINE ROOM IN A LARGE SHIP)

Yeah, I was in the service 33 months altogether; 27 months was aboard ship. See, I love my ma, I love my family. I was very family-oriented. You know how Italians are, on Saturday, you got to have the veal cutlets. Sunday, you have to have the pasta, right? Otherwise, you're not Italian. So I missed that. I missed that. Yeah.

And my mom had a sister whose name is Marietta. She was a great, great cook. She used to send me packages, V-Mail they called it. And sometimes, I'd get a package eggplant in a jar or something like that. And the guys would say, "What the hell is that?" I said, "That's eggplant, taste it!" "Ew, no!" Then they'd taste it. The biggest mistake I'd ever made. Then I had to split it with them.

August 15th, we went down to Marseilles and did the second invasion, and the second invasion is a lot easier. They didn't have that many machine guns or 88s. No one was wounded or killed aboard my ship. And we went through the Panama Canal. My ship was not big enough to go by itself. So we tied a submarine alongside us and we went through the canal together. Now we had an ice cream machine aboard ship and the submariners wanted ice cream, said, "We'll make a trade for you." We wanted alcohol. "We'll give you ice cream and you give us alcohol." We got the alcohol, they got the ice cream. And we all got drunk. We got drunk. And then we went to the Philippines.

(SOUND OF PLANES AND ANTI-AIRCRAFT GUNS INTO THE FOLLOWING)

You know the Japanese, the war was coming to an end, but they wouldn't surrender. So, they had

these airplanes, they used to put a 500-pound bomb in it. They would fly into the ships; It was a suicide mission. And the planes would fly and I would fire them. I don't know if ever hit them, I'll be honest with you. But I did fire at the kamikazes. But they sank a lot, a lot of ships.

(LOW JAPANESE STRING MUSIC)
(COMBAT BOOTS ON CONCRETE)

And I ended my war in Osaka, in Yokohama, in Japan. The war had just ended, I was an MP. They gave me a gun and a bully stick. There was the wall there, I stood next to that wall for four hours. I didn't move. I was scared! I heard so many stories about the Japanese - they cut the prisoner's heads. I think of my mother came along, I would have shot her!

(SHORT GUNSHOT)

It was wrong. The Japanese people were so nice. One time, I was walking along the street, and this Japanese woman came up to me and she says, "Thank you. Thank you, thank you." "Why are you thanking me?" She says, "The war is over." These are the people, not the government. They suffered terribly. We bombed the hell out of them. They had no food. We started feeding them. Basic, like, army food. K-rations, stuff like that. Yeah. We started feeding them. That's the first thing we did.

I was discharged in 1946. I had a lot more knowledge than I'd had when I first went into the service. They taught me a lot. And going from country to country, meeting different people, that was an education in itself.

A lot of military guys hated the Japanese after the war. I didn't feel like that. I felt, once the war was over, we shook hands and our enemies became our friends. During the war, I HATED them. I actually hated them. But then when the war why should I hate some people. They're human beings, they get up in the morning, they put their shoes on the same way I put my shoes on. Different nationalities and different religions, but they're just like us. They're just like us. You can't hold a grudge on them for the rest of your life.

I'm a lucky person. I'm lucky that I survived D-Day. My mom was on my shoulder all the time. You see, when a serviceman is killed during the war, they send a telegram to the mother: "Mrs. DeVita, sorry to notify you but your son has been killed." I didn't want my mother to get that telegram. I was determined she was not going to get that telegram. And she didn't. Yeah.

JACQUELINE RAPOSO: Frank's brothers Silvio and Daniel came home safely, too – there are no gold stars in their family. He went on to marry his high school sweetheart, Dorothy, and together they had three children, six grandchildren, and five great-grandchildren. Dot was such a prolific cook; Frank misses her chicken and rice more than anything. Frank has since returned to Scotland and to the beaches of Normandy. He says he still sees a very different beach than most people see there.

In our next episode, we spend time with John Bistrice, an Army infantry from Ohio who was aboard Frank's Lucky Chase on that June 6th before continuing into Normandy. We'll hear that finding food during wartime is not quite as easy without your own personal gunnery shack kitchen. But that no matter where you are, V-Mail -- that's Victory Mail -- is always, always appreciated.

And along those lines, I invite you to leave some V-Email for our veterans via message form at servicepodcast.org and you can find more audio clips of Frank and photos of him and the Lucky Chase. On Instagram and Facebook, we are @servicepodcast and please invite your veteran loved ones to the table too to share their stories.

Service is a production of iHeartRadio. This episode was produced and edited by me, Jacqueline Raposo. Our supervising producer is Gabrielle Collins. Our executive producer is Christopher Hassiotis. Our art is by Girl Friday. The soundscape behind Frank's D-Day story was crafted by Ambiance Hub.

Thank you to the Greatest Generations Foundation for connecting us with the Devitas for this episode. You can sponsor a veteran's visit to hallowed grounds, memorials, and cemeteries through their foundation at TGGF.org. Thank you for listening.

And thank you, those who are serving and who have served.