

Service: Stories of Hunger and War
Episode 1 – “We Gave Them the Food from Our Mess Kits”
Episode Transcript

(AUDIO CLIP with sounds of the dinner table)

JACQUELINE RAPOSO: You told me he spent the war peeling potatoes at the bottom of a ship

PASQUALE D’AMBROSIO: No, no, I peeled potatoes in basic, though.

HANSINE D’AMBROSIO: I think she was talking about the guy she’s been dating.

JACQUELINE RAPOSO: No, you.

HANSINE D’AMBROSIO: Oh...

PASQUALE D’AMBROSIO: Down in Camp Gordon, Georgia. I was on KP three or four times and it was nice.

JACQUELINE RAPOSO: What did you make?

HANSINE D’AMBROSIO: He didn’t cook nothin, he just got the potatoes peeled.

(CONT., LAUGHTER)

JACQUELINE RAPOSO: Hi. I’m Jacqueline Raposo. And that’s me a few years back with my grandparents, Pasquale and Hansine D’Ambrosio. Every generation of the American side of my family has served in the armed forces as far back as the Civil War. Yet even though I’m a food writer – and it’s my job to interview people – I’ve felt uncomfortable starting conversations with the veterans in my life – the family members and friends and military men I’ve dated – because their life experiences in the service have roamed so far across time and space from mine as a civilian. I didn’t know how to welcome them to the table and respectfully invite the complexity of their stories.

Until now.

(CLIPS OF VETERANS OVER INTRODUCTORY MUSIC)

WILLIAM WALKER: My mother was a wonderful cook. We ate a variety of foods that people today never heard of, like chicken feet, that sort of thing...

FRANK DEVITA: My mother had a very hard time, she had three sons and we were all in combat...

GEORGE HARDY: My brother and two of his friends joined the Navy. My father was upset. Because of Afro-American background, the Navy could only accept them as mess attendants...

LAWSON SAKAI: Coming out of the depression, the immigrants from Japan really went wild. Instead of five acres or ten acres, they went to a thousand acres.

JACQUELINE RAPOSO: Welcome to SERVICE: Stories of Hunger and War, a production from iHeartRadio and me, your host, Jacqueline Raposo.

Everybody eats, right? Most of us eat for more than merely sustenance, and how we eat can connect us with home, and family, and friends. But then, how does a personal food story change when a civilian becomes a soldier, or a sailor, or a fighter pilot, or a wartime nurse?

On SERVICE, we're going to explore the food stories of individual veterans and wartime volunteers from World War 2 through today. This season, we'll hear from those whose lives were changed on December 7th, 1941, when the empire of Japan attacked Pearl Harbor and President Franklin D. Roosevelt led the United States into the World War.

(SLOW VIOLIN MUSIC STARTS PLAYING IN BACKGROUND)

We start our first episode off with Pasquale D'Ambrosio, my Poppa. Unlike most of the veterans we'll hear from this season, Pat – as he's known to friends and loved ones – did not see active combat – we'll hear later on what kept him from the fray. But his story sets a scene of how war immediately and irreversibly touches communities; in this case, communities still reeling from World One, the 1929 Stock Market crash, and the great depression that followed, which greatly affected the early lives of these veterans and their families into the start of the war.

And so now, from his home in Bridgeport, CT, let's slow down and sit with Pat D'Ambrosio...

PASQUALE D'AMBROSIO: I was born in Keane, New Hampshire, November the 11th 1926.

Veterans Day. Armistice Day and I grew up in Keane. My mother came from Torre de Passeri, which is up north-east of Rome. My dad came from outside of Salerno, a little town of Campagna, a little mountain town. Had eight of us. The first girl, Mary, died; she was 16 when she died. It was Mary and Doris; my first Pasquale died when he was five, 1923. He died of influenza. And it was rampant in Keane; Keane lost a lot to influenza. And then Mike. And then Antoinette, Josephine, me, and Tony. Had eight of us.

(FACTORY SOUNDS)

Well, it was a small town, factory town. They had a woolen mill, which my dad worked for years. They had Kay Fells, which made the nail clippers, all the nail clippers and stuff like that, they had that. They had a toy company, Kingsbury Toy Company, that made cast iron toys. And during the war, it became a war production of some kind.

My dad had a garden in the back - 100 feet wide, 150 feet long - which he had to spade by hand, shovel-by-shovel. And in it, he had corn, tomatoes. He had rhubarb, which they used to make a lot of rhubarb pie. And horseradish – great horseradish. Then with the extra peppers, my mother used to make jars of relish and pickles. And she had these Mason jars – that’s two quarts – because they didn't have a freezer. So she'd put it in four, five ears of corn and can it, and it would last us all year long. And when you open them up, it was almost as if it was fresh.

(SOUND OF RAIN)

1936 we had our first flood. And that fall, my mother had did all this canning in the quart jar Masons - they had them all over the cellar, preserved for the winter. But the water came in and it came in within two inches of coming into our house. Everything had to be thrown out. And it was sorta sad because the bottles were floating up, almost into the house. And my father was out, my older brother Mike was with the Red Cross. It was me, Josephine, and Antoinette in the house with my mother and my mother was just saying the rosary like crazy [CHUCKLE].

(SOUNDS OF AIRPLANES AND WARFARE FADE IN)

It was Sunday morning...

PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT FROM RADIO, DEC 8, 1941: "Yesterday, December 7, 1941, a date which will live in infamy the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan...."

PASQUALE D'AMBROSIO: Our next-door neighbor, Joe Dennis, he had joined in 1938, '39, and he was a cook on a destroyer stationed in Pearl Harbor. But his ship was out to sea when it happened. So Joe was saved. Whatever happened to him during a war, after the war? I don't know. But she had seven sons, and they were all in the service. Keane had a lot of kids who went in.

Mike was 23 years old.

(LOW BELLS START TO CHIME IN)

He joined the Navy six months after he got married. He came home in September - I wasn't home to see him - he went on the freighter, and he got killed in October. I was an usher in a movie theater at the time - 15 years old, 15, 16 - and Tony was 6 or 7. And he came and he was crying like crazy. He's he says, "Mike is missing in action."

The ship was brand new - SS John Carter Rose. And it had twenty-six thousand barrels of high-octane gas put in on the number one and number two hold, along with Jeeps and planes and whatever they took. And they went from New York down to South America. And from South America, they went across to go to Sierra Leone. They got torpedoed at night, but it didn't work. The two submarines come up and torpedoed 'em in the morning and it hit the gas and it blew out the whole top.

(UNDERWATER SOUNDS AND UNDERWATER EXPLOSION)

Now, Mike was a gunner's mate on a five-inch gun at the bow, right on the top, and two of his shipmates came to the house. "It happened so fast," he says. "Myself and two or three other guys got blown into the water and we were saved, so we never knew what happened to Mike."

(SOUND OF FIRE BURNING)

The only thing I knew, he must have fallen down in the fire, that's probably how he died. So he was listed missing in action for a year. After a year, they claim 'em dead. Five of his classmates that graduated in 1941 were all killed in World War Two. The five of them from that one class.

JACQUELINE RAPOSO: The John Carter Rose sank October 8th, 1942. Of the 61 aboard, 7 others died along with Michael Joseph D'Ambrosio. The survivors were helped into lifeboats, the Germans gave them medical supplies and bread, and pointed them towards Venezuela. None listed are living today.

Starting in World War 1, families would hang a banner in their window with a blue star for every member they had in service - so Joe Dennis' mother had 7 blue stars hanging on her banner. After Mike died, as was tradition, his blue star was changed to a gold one – this is why we refer to blue and gold star families today.

After the break...

PASQUALE D'AMBROSIO: So this is when President Truman said, "Drop the Bombs".

JACQUELINE RAPOSO: Stay with us.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

(LOW BELL SOUNDS FADE IN)

JACQUELINE RAPOSO: Welcome back to SERVICE: Stories of Hunger and War, from iHeartRadio. I'm Jacqueline Raposo. And we return to Pasquale D'Ambrosio's story.

In September of 1940, Germany, Italy, and Japan signed the Axis pact, and President Roosevelt put the draft into place, requiring men between 21 and 45 to register for what could be a one-year term.

Here are Pat and Hansine again at their supper table, remembering how this affected their families and how things quickly escalated when the United States then joined the war in December of 1941.

(DINNER TABLE SOUNDS FADE IN)

HANSINE D'AMBROSIO: 1939, that was the big parade where we said goodbye to all of them, supposedly for one year. Some of them went and never came back. That's why I can't stand parades, to this day. Little by little, we kissed the boys goodbye. My brother Billy went in in 1942; my brother Victor went in in 1943. My cousin Mickey, they weren't going to take him because he had flat feet, so he had his arches broken and he wore steel plates until they mended. And he ended up with the Marine Battalion that went into Iwo Jima. Never came home.

(DINNER TABLE SOUNDS FADE OUT)

JACQUELINE RAPOSO: By the time Japan surrendered in August of '45, roughly 50 million men's registration had been approved for the draft, and 10 million been called to join the armed forces. Let's return to a few months before this, in the spring of 1945. President Roosevelt's death in the middle of this third term has left Harry Truman President, and Pat is now 18.

PASQUALE D'AMBROSIO: By the time I turned 18, the war was almost over. I got drafted, I took basic down in Georgia, infantry basic. We went down on a Pullman. We went across the country on Pullmans. We have to walk through the kitchen car and then come back, pick up our plates and go to our Pullman and sit down and eat in our chairs.

(SOUND OF TRAIN ON TRACKS)

And they would come in and make up the bunks at night, and we used to sleep in Pullman cars, and I sorta liked that because used to hear the clickety-click, clickety-click, and it would put you to sleep.

(STEAM TRAIN WHISTLE)

By the time I got aboard ship to go overseas, it was sometime in the early part of July. We were going out a Golden Gate at 10 o'clock at night. We stood on board ship and saw the lights of Oakland, dimmer and dimmer and dimmer at night until it was gone.

So we went to Manila, from Manila we went to Mindoro. I was with the 96th division. And we were slated to invade Japan on the first of November, November the 1st, 1945.

Kyushu, which is in the southern part, was heavily fortified not only by the army but by the civilians. And someone said, I don't know if it was true or not, that they had found inland that they had barrels and barrels of oil and gas with lines out into the Japanese Harbor, that if we had invaded they would have released this oil that would have come to the top and they would have set it on fire.

Truman found out that the invasion of Japan would have been worse, twice the size of Normandy. So this is when President Truman says "Drop the bombs."

PRESIDENT TRUMAN FROM RADIO, AUGUST 9 1945: The British, Chinese, and United States Governments have given the Japanese people adequate warning of what is in store for them. We have laid down the general terms on which they can surrender. Our warning went unheeded; our

terms were rejected. Since then the Japanese have seen what our atomic bomb can do. They can foresee what it will do in the future.

The world will note that the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, a military base. That was because we wished in this first attack to avoid, insofar as possible, the killing of civilians. But that attack is only a warning of things to come. If Japan does not surrender, bombs will have to be dropped on her war industries and, unfortunately, thousands of civilian lives will be lost. I urge Japanese civilians to leave industrial cities immediately, and save themselves from destruction."

(JAPANESE KYOTO MUSIC PLAYING)

(SOUND OF ATOM BOMB EXPLOSION)

PASQUALE D'AMBROSIO: So they dropped the two bombs and that's when the war was ended.

They celebrated. They bought a car or shot, a caribou and we had meat for the first time in a long time. My mother had sent me a package with salami and a bottle of homemade wine. That salami had mold on it. So one of the cooks he's "No, no, no, no, you wash that with vinegar." So we ate the salami and we drank my father's wine. That's how we celebrated...

I had a friend that I got drafted with, and we were on Mindoro together, and we used to walk through the jungle into the village. And he used to like what they called the balut, which is an egg. And an egg would get almost three quarters matured and they used to crack this embryo open, and the Filipinos used to eat this somehow. And he used to love them! I could never eat 'em. But it was a popular dish in the Philippines. They call it balut.

(SOUNDS OF WASHING, HAMMERING, and SWEEPING IN AND OUT)

And then a couple of girls used to come in and we used to pay them to do our laundries, give them food, you know. The saddest thing, when I got over there, they were so hungry. What we didn't eat, we used to put the barrel to dispose of it, and they used to pick it out of the barrels. So instead of that, we used to just not eat deliberately and give these people the food from our mess kits, because they were so hungry and so destitute for food. They had it tough. Oh, they had it hard. People don't realize the trouble they went through with the Japanese and all.

And then, the 96th division had captured maybe 20 or 25 Japanese, which we had prisoners of war. And, I remember them. They lived in tents and they come out in the morning and they would work doing manual work, putting the floors in the tents and the sides of the tents, and doing the

cleaning of the yards and stuff like that. But they were treated with respect. They were treated with respect.

(SOUNDS OF FOOD SIZZLING)

But the food was good in the army. I enjoyed it. They had hot meals in the kitchen. It was cooked fresh and it was good cooking. They used to have something like brown hamburger, used to call it shit on a shingle - SOS. And I used to put this on the toast in the morning. And I used to love it. I didn't know why. And the guys used to say "you're crazy." But it was so good. Once in a while, I used to still make it here, the brown gravy and over toast or I used to love it on mashed potatoes. The food was good. I liked it. And even the C-Rations, they were like extra-large Cracker Jack boxes, and in it, they had a dried biscuit, they had a little package of three or four cigarettes, something like jerky; it wasn't bad, it was tasty. That was our dinner instead of hot dinners when you were out in the woods or out on training.

(SOUNDS OF MEN IN A LARGE HALL FADE IN AND OUT)

I remember one time, I was on KP and the sergeant says let's do something special. And somebody suggested, take the bedsheets, and we put the bedsheets on the tables because we ate on bare tables, they were like your picnic tables today. We put the bedsheets on the tables, cut up the celery, and put the celery in glasses, and put them on the tables like bouquets of flowers. And then the guys came in, sat down, and that was my first Thanksgiving. I wasn't a picky eater. I was very, very lucky I liked, I liked everything.

(SOUND OF WATER LAPPING)

After the war ended, we started to dispose of some of the equipment that was on the island. They didn't want to take it back to the states. We had to load it on rafts, the guns, the hundred and fifty-five howitzers. Howitzers, they had a four-inch piece in it, used to load em in from the back. I used to have to turn around and push it in and then pull the lanyard when they said "fire." And after that, we took another LSD or whatever it was. The LSD is a big landing ship - used to load the jeeps and the trucks in an hour. And we sat up at Mindanao and this is when I joined the field artillery.

(VIOLIN MUSIC PLAYING AND SOUND OF EATING AT THE DINNER TABLE)

I used to miss polenta. My mother had a four-by-four board and my sister Josephine used to make the polenta and spread it on this board. We used to sit on this table, my mother used to put the sauce on the polenta and us kids used to square off, "This is my portion." And my sister Anne would

her portion and my sister Josephine use to have her portion, and we use to, polenta off the board. And that's what I missed. Because they had macaroni, but it wasn't like, you know, it wasn't like the macaroni. It was good, you know, the best they could make. But that's what I missed. That's what I missed.

(SOUND OF WAVES LAPPING SHORE)

I was in communications. I was up on top of the telephone pole, hooking in electric lines and the Sergeant says, "D'Ambrosio, get down here, you're going home!" I said, "You're kidding!" I came down so fast, my spikes slipped, stupidly, you know - I grabbed the pole and I come down the pole like this, and the, and the splinters from the new pole got ripped through my shirts. And I got to the bottom, and this little Filipino boy's laughing like hell. I took a stone and I hit it him in the ass with it. I was so nervous, and crazy, and hurt. Then I started to laugh at the kid. I say, what can he do. Ya know. So I had to go to the medics and they're taking splinters outta me and they're putting iodine or something on it, nearly killed me. But it didn't bother - I was coming home.

(STEAM WHISTLE BLOWING)

Coming back, we hit on a Sunday morning and there was a Catholic mass being said on deck as we were coming back underneath the Golden Gate. We went back into Oakland. This is where we disembarked. We got loaded on cattle cars, which I liked because we had permanent bunks; we could sleep during the day. Our food was trayed the same way: we used to walk through the cooking area, come back with our mess kits, go back to the cattle cars, and eat it. But the food was hot and this is the way we came across the country, back home and into New York.

(SOUND OF TRAIN)

I had the duffel bag, I put that in the locker. I kept a little overnight bag, and I got out of Penn Station.

(SOUNDS OF CITY STREETS)

And I started to walk up 5th Avenue, I guess. And I saw... the Empire State building!! So like a country boy, I'm looking up in the sky and I can't see it. So, it was at that time they'd charge us 60 cents for service people to go in. So I went in there and, took an elevator to the 80th floor - the 80th floor at that time had a bar and a restaurant. So I was having old fashioned. So I drank, drank two or three old fashioned, I had something to eat, I went up to 180, to the 102nd floor and I had a few more drinks. And then this big guard comes up and he says, "You okay?"

This guard took me inside the spiral. And then we got up there, and I says, "You know, I've been drinking..." He says he says, "No," he says, "it's not you, it's the building." The Empire State Building sways back and forth. Up on top of the Empire State building, they have a phone, so I called up my mother and father. I says, "Hey! I'm on top of the Empire State building." He says, "What?" "I'm on top of the Empire State building." "When you coming home?" "I'm not comin' home until I see New York." By the time I took the elevator down, the elevator coming down the 80th floor came down so fast, I almost threw up. And little by little, I walked up, I ended up in Central Park the Tavern on the Green. I had a little bit to eat, but then I took a taxi back to Sloane's YMCA.

JACQUELINE RAPOSO: Pat spent the rest of his service running the movie projector at a GI hospital in Long Island. He returned home to Keane, got married to Hansine, and joined the National Guard. When they moved to Bridgeport, CT with their three young children, he continued his service there. They had nine grandchildren, nine great-grandchildren, and 3 great-great-grandchildren. Hansine passed away in April, her stories passing with her. You may have caught that Pat's 93rd birthday is Veterans Day. We're taking him to Tavern on the Green.

Like many family members of those who have served, I hadn't heard the details of these stories growing up – in what always read like humility, my Poppa only vaguely referenced that if - what I later found out to be called Operation Downfall - hadn't been stopped by the drop of the atomic bombs and the surrender of the Japanese, he wouldn't be here today. I guess that means neither would I. It's part of the discomfort in talking about winning a war – an unsettling gratitude.

In our next episode, we dig deep into unsettling gratitude with Frank Devita, a Coast Guard Gunner's Mate who faced four major engagements...and also shared Pat's distaste for military macaroni.

Until then, I invite you to invite your loved ones to the table, and if so inclined, share their stories back with us at servicepodcast.org, and @ServicePodcast on Instagram and Facebook, where you can see photos of Pat, the John Carter Rose, Maria D'Ambrosio in her Gold Star Mother's uniform, and more, as well as find resources around what we're learning. You can also send messages to our veterans there.

Service is a production of iHeartRadio. This episode was produced and edited by me, Jacqueline Raposo. Gabrielle Collins is our Supervising Producer. Our Executive Producer is Christopher Hassiotis. Our art is by Girl Friday. Thank you for listening. And thank you, those who are serving and who have served.