

SERVICE: STORIES OF HUNGER AND WAR

Episode 3 – “I Came Off in Waist-Deep Water” - John Bistrice

Episode Transcript

Producer Gabrielle Collins: This episode re-enacts scenes of war. You'll hear gunfire and descriptions of violence. Listener discretion advised.

Historical Audio Clip: “America looks abroad, presented at this hour on Sunday afternoon by the officers and staff members of the Foreign Policy Association. This nonpartisan organization, which is open to all who are interested...”

[theme music comes in low]

Narrator: Hi, I'm Jacqueline Raposo. And one thing I did not expect when I started sitting with our World War Two veterans were how many of them would share stories of feeding foreigners abroad...

Veteran William Walker: "I went to Leyte Gulf. They were friendly and they were gracious that we were there to serve them..."

Veteran Frank Devita: “When we pulled into the Cleide, everybody's waving as a ship went in because we were bringing in food. They had nothing to eat; at that time, it was very strict rations...”

Veteran Harold Bud Long: "And what happened was, the kids didn't have nothing to eat. We fed them in the morning, what we call 10-to-1 rations..."

Narrator: Welcome to Service: Stories of Hunger and War, a production from iHeartRadio and me, your host.

There's a lot of weight to the word rations, when we look back at this point in history. The word alone means "a designated amount of food assuring survival." But hunger and want are associated with it, too. In our episode with Coast Guard gunners mate Frank Devita, we heard

about rationing in Scotland and how much it meant a family to receive a tinned ham. Today, we spend time with John Bistrica, who is on Frank's ship on D-Day before storming into Normandy with the Army's 1st Division.

[music shifts to acoustic guitar variation of Amazing Grace]

For those in the infantry like John, "rations" could mean a few things:

K rations were survival food; a combination of preserved and dried foods like biscuits and jerky that could be carried from position to position, and they'd stay dry and fresh. When you hear John say that he only has a D-bar to eat, he's referencing an oat and chocolate bar the Hershey Company created that wouldn't melt and was bitter enough that men wouldn't want to scarf it down unless truly hungry. And as we're going to hear, because they were staples in the K rations and at base camps, several veterans reference how much they hated powdered eggs, so many of them remember the simple joy of finding a fresh egg.

C rations were cans mixing wet and preserved foods - evidently there was a lot of hash in those C rations today. These kinds of rations are called MRE's - Meals Ready to Eat - and we civilians can thank such wartime production for our favorite instant drink powders and protein bars, a connection we're going to explore on this show down the line.

Then there are the rations imposed by governments upon civilians to help regulate foodstuffs in short supply. Transportation means prioritized moving war equipment and personnel, and so imported items like coffee, sugar, meat and canned goods became limited and could only be purchased with ration cards: grocers would stamp the items you were buying and once your stamps ran out, no more of that item for the month. As we'll hear, John's war and food story is a bit feast or famine with both sides of the word ration at play. So now let's slow and sit with John Bistrica.

[Amazing Grace fades as rustic mandolin and accordeon music comes up, followed by the sound of machinery and steel hammers]

Veteran John Bistrica: John E Bistrica, Private 1st Class!

I grew up in Youngstown, Ohio. My father worked hard. He was a blacksmith, he worked forty-two years as a blacksmith in McDonald, Ohio for U.S. Steel. He used to speak the Croatian language mostly to us instead of English. And then my mother used to holler at him, "Speak English, speaking English!" But he used to sit at the supper table talking Croatian.

My mother made Croatian food in English food. She used to make a nut roll, roll the dough on the dining room table and put the nuts in there and then roll it and then bake it. It took a lot of time. And when she made raisin cookies and cake, that took a lot of time. And as breakfast, I had Jack Armstrong's American boy Wheaties! That's what she would give me.

[the sound of overhead planes, dogs barking, and chairs rocking underscores...]

I got hold of the newspaper and I sat down on the chair and my dogs jumped up on my lap and my father was sitting in a rocker or in the other room. And then as I was reading the paper, the radio came on and told us...

Historical Audio Clip of President Roosevelt on December 8th, 1941: "...December 7th, 1941, the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan..."

Veteran John Bistrica: And then my father said to me, "See, I told you they would throw the scrap back at you." The Japanese used to come and pick up the scrap metal that was no good to us anymore. They used it in Japan! They made things out of it that they didn't have the steel there to make it out of. When they used to come the McDonald to picked up the scrap, he'd tell everybody up there that someday we're going to get it back at us. And that's what happened.

[Church organ version of Amazing Grace underscores the following...]

When I went to church on Sunday, I found out that one man, he was a 10:30 mass with me two weeks ago, and he says, "I'm leaving. I got to go back to Hawaii." And then we find out that he was killed in Pearl Harbor on the Arizona.

Well, everybody was worried about what was going to happen, although that conversation was about the war. We talked about it in school. All the boys were wondering if they were going to be drafted and what was going to happen.

[Sounds of factories and machinery work]

I graduated in June of '42. I went to work at a brewery and then I went to a commercial shearing plant, and the things that I was welding - parts of Bailey bridges and pontoon bridges - I didn't know that someday I would go over them. I got drafted in October, I never got called up until January of '43.

[Training sounds of military vehicles and firing ranges]

I was an infantryman, but I was actually an armored infantry. It was an armored division attacking, and that's when the armored infantry with come and back 'em up. You had to train for everything: you had a train for half-tracks, and a Jeep wasn't called the Jeep, it was called a Peep. And you had to learn how to drive them. I got a T-5 rating and I got a Jeep driver for the colonel.

[Peppy jazz music underscores...]

Fort Meade, Maryland, they called that Boom Town because there were tents and they were selling all kinds of equipment, and shoelaces and wristwatches and they were selling food. I would say before Thanksgiving - that was in '43. I was going to believe in that day. So I ordered a hamburger. That was a best hamburger I ever eat. Just something about how they put it together, it was just so tasty. Maybe because I was eating all the bad food! I don't know.

[Ship fog horn brings in the sound of waves and boats creaking...]

We got on the ferry in New Jersey and they took us across to New York to Pier 90. And that's when I got on HMS Rangitiki. It traveled from New Zealand to Australia and maybe South America. And they picked up Coca-Cola and white bars of chocolate. We used to get a lot of SPAM and we had a lot of mutton!

About 200 of us got on this ship. Convoy probably had 100 ships. You could see the screws on the ship behind you. And we were escorted by Canadian Corvettes, aeroplanes, and we had Navy ships with us.

[women giggling]

And the ship on the right side of us going up was full of WACs and the registered nurses: we used to wave to them, that's all we can do is wave to 'em. I guess they were getting ready for the war, too!

You had the exercise every day jumping off the ship. And we had special life preservers - Mae West, life preservers.

Mae West voiceover: "I'll save ya, boys!"

[vintage recording of a classic "boing"]

Veteran John Bistrica: Somebody gave them the name!

[vintage recording of laughter]

And if you went out on the deck, you had to put the Mae West on it in case the ship was shot. We had two submarine attacks at nighttime, but nothing happened to us.

[ship sounds fade; Jeep engine driving fades in]

The convoy broke up into three parts, and I stopped at Liverpool and at Liverpool we were put in trucks and we were sent up north to Litchfield. And then they took us to Lyme Regis, where I joined the First Division.

[low whispers, Jeep driving, and vintage truck horn below the following...]

What I remember in Lyme Regis? Everything was a blackout. You had to keep the lights shut off driving the vehicle. And when I first got to England, I used to holler at the English people, "Get on the other side of the road!" I was the wrong one, not them! Sometimes I used to swear.

They were at wartime status, but the best thing I ever had out there was pudding - Yorkshire pudding! That was good Yorkshire pudding.

[sound of cutlery scraping a glass dish fades into the sound of food frying, ping pong, and laughter]

We didn't talk about the war. We weren't talking about the invasion at all. We try to keep it off our mind. We didn't want to know what was going to happen. We used to go downtown and get fish and chips. We played in the rec room, we played ping pong in there -- was nothing much you could do there!

One Sunday, I went to the Charge of Quarters: "Is there a Catholic church around here?" He says, "Yeah, it's up the road, St. George's."

[church organ music and whispering ambiance through the following...]

So I was in my uniform and I walked through the door and the ushers took me out front. I said my prayers. I sat down. Then all of a sudden, the priest dressed in his vestments already came out, he says, "Were you an altar boy at home?" I says, "Yes. I used to serve ten thirty mass." He said, "Well, guess what? You're going to serve mass today." So I served mass in my uniform. And then after mass, here are the ushers and a couple of women there, they took me down the hill in a restaurant and they bought me a breakfast meal. And they told me it wasn't powdered eggs, it was real eggs. So that's the first time I had real eggs when I was in England.

The English people were very good to us. And before we left, they had tears in their eyes and they were wishin' us luck.

[whispering comes up and underscores the following...]

After we left for Lyme Regis, we went to D-Camps in Portsmouth. Everything was quiet down there. You couldn't go anyplace. The MPs were watching the gates. You couldn't even write a letter. They didn't want the Germans know it was happening. You had nothing in your wallet to identify. You had to take all your patches off your uniforms and your hat. But the Germans knew already that we were the first division.

[sound of landing craft engine, waves etc. underscores the following...]

Samuel Chase was a ship that carried all the landing craft. They had a special code word - "Piccadilly Circus" - That was the code name on the landing craft. You were to supposed to stop at "Piccadilly Circus", which is actually eleven miles out in the channel, because they didn't want the Germans and know where the heck we were at. While we were sitting on the Samuel Chase, going around in circles, before I got to the landing craft, one sailor came up to me. He said, "How would you like some nice food?" I said, "I would love it." He said, "But you'd have to give me your blanket." So I gave him my K ration boxes, three boxes. He filled it up with fruit, and cake, and baloney sandwiches and everything else.

And then the invasion was delayed one day because of the weather.

[sound of warfare – machine guns, bombs, and soldiers calling into radios – comes into and quietly underscores as theme music layers in...]

I carried my assault jacket, over 100 rounds of ammunition, four grenades, and I carried a whole pack of rifle grenades. My cartridge belt. Then my life reserves. And then I had a gas mask... I would say probably 40 pounds of equipment.

Narrator: After the break...

Veteran John Bistrica: When I got off the landing craft, I prayed that I get off on shore in one piece...

Narrator: ...Stay with us.

COMMERCIAL BREAK

[sound of heavy waves lapping]

Narrator: Welcome back to Service: Stories of Hunger and War from my Heart Radio. I'm Jacqueline Raposo. And as we continue with John Bistrica's story, I'd like us to keep something in mind. This season, we're hearing the voices of men over 90 years old. John just turned ninety six!

Only a few years ago, he was able to travel for the 70th anniversary of D-Day, connecting with and educating crowds. Now, that's not physically possible for him. Our veterans are very aware of how many of their compatriots are passing daily bodies once strong and true fallen prey to tide and time. These Service episodes honor the stories our veterans can share with us now. But if you visit servicepodcastd.org, you can see and hear more of their contributions over past years. And the scars from what they gave in that service over seventy 75 years ago now haven't nearly faded.

[sound of waves builds to progressively add those of machine guns, grenades, men calling, etc.]

Veteran John Bistrica: Would I be lying if I said I wasn't scared? When I got off the landing craft, I pray that I get off on shore in one piece. And I did. But I went off in waist deep water. And many other guys didn't make it.

There was nobody in my way. There was no Germans or nothing because they already pulled out. But after I got off on the beach and I was looking for my C-Company guys, I come up into the hedgerows and I seen a G.I. He was bent over the hedgerow. Well, he was from C-Company, but he was also dead. He had a bullet through his head.

[three short bullet sounds]

A sniper had got him through a tree.

I finally found the rest of my company. The first thing is Sargent says, "You got any rifle grenades? I think there's two snipers in those trees." So I set the rifle down and he told me which way to push it: to the left, the right or up or down. And I fired 2 rifle grenades.

[rifle launcher clicking and launching grenades, which then explode]

No shots from the trees. Either I killed them or they took off.

[sound of footsteps moving through brush, with battle sounds lower in background]

After we got organized and we went on the road, we run into some French. They gave us cognac to drink and all they would say is Wash Kaputt. That means "the Germans took off". And they would tell us which way. So as the day went on, we were going through the hedgerows. So to get to the other hedgerow, you had to crawl underneath the hedgerows or over the top of the hedgerows -- you didn't go through a gate because the Germans had their guns zeroed in on the gate, so if you went through the gate, you certainly wouldn't get killed.

When we stop before nightfall, we were told, "Don't dig a slip trench - dig a foxhole because we might have an armor attack." While some of us slept, I looked at my rations. And all those K rations that I got from the sailor on this ship, they were soaking wet! So I couldn't eat them. I had to throw them away. Here I was with no food except a D-bar and no blanket that night. I used a raincoat to cover myself up. The guys gave me food.

And then all you heard was the big guns, Screaming Mimis, from the battle wagons swear you could touch shell going over your head.

[battle sounds crescendo and fade, then rise with nighttime crickets and the sound of men starting to walk]

We're going south in France from Omaha Beach. So that night nothing happened. But as morning came, the sergeant was coming down the line where we were all dug in and he would tap us on the helmet and he'd put his finger to his mouth, "Be quiet." And he'd point. We run

into 14 Germans. But they weren't Germans: they were Lithuanians, Polish and everything, just like the American Army, draftees!

[metal machinery dropping to ground]

They surrendered, dropped all their guns on the ground and they recaptured.

[sound of military boots walking, then an Army jeep driving into and away from the scene...]

Caumont was the biggest city - we had it made at Caumont. They had bigger hedgerows. That means we could dig a bigger hole to go sleep at night. We sent out patrols and at nighttime guys had to go on stand next to a tree, make sure no Germans were sneaking over to shoot at us.

And then one time when we went on outpost, we heard a noise. And here it was, a Red Cross truck. And the girl got out, she says "Where's the front lines?" And I says, "Well, you better go back a couple of hedgerows." They didn't know they were past it. They got back in the truck and took off. We never did get coffee and donuts that day.

They brought rations up to us all the time, the guys in the Jeep. I didn't smoke, so I gave my cigarette ration out to the Frenchman and he would give me a loaf of bread. And then as we were walking along, if there was no Germans to fight and we were just walking, we'd find them on the road standing with cognac in their hand. Then we would dump the water or whatever we had in our canteen and put the cognac in there. So it'd save it till the next time.

And then aunts would send us food, too. They'd send us cake and candy and everything there.

[nostalgic piano music mixes with the sounds of footsteps through brush, stopping to drink and swallow liquid, then eventually walking again]

What was happening at home? What was happening to my dog? My father was still working pretty hard... The food mother used to make! The nut roll.... Kielbasa sausage - that's one of our favorite Croatian foods, kielbasa. And blood sausage. We were never hungry, that's for sure.

[Walking sounds fade. Battle sounds come in high before the following, which then includes a loud crashing sound, a high-pitched ringing tone, the morphing of all battle sounds and periodic loss of sound]

October 44?

Everything was falling down on me in the slag pile. I was all full of slag.

I couldn't hear ammunition that they're firing from the guns, the loudness, I guess. When they picked me up, they were talking to me and I couldn't understand them. I was losing my hearing and they were making noise. I ended up back in England and I want to go back, and they wouldn't let me.

[Battle sounds fade, replaced by slow waves and a deep ship fog horn, which progressively fade as well to be replaced by train tracks, whistles, and sleigh bells]

Convoy I went over on took 15 days. The Queen Mary took five days to come home.

[Knocking, a dog's deep and excited bark]

I come home on a train five days before Christmas. When I came to the door, I knocked, and the dog woke up - Auchie, that's a Croatian name, Auchie.

Nobody was home. Then I had to go look for where my mother was. So I went up the next street and she was up the neighbor's house. When we come home, she unlocked the door. The dog jumped on me right up to my shoulders and he would never let me go. It's three years he hadn't seen me.

[Slow strings version of *Silent Night* comes in to underscore the remaining monologue]

I went down on front street - it was really something! They had boxcars down there full of Christmas trees. That was the first time I decorated since I left the service. We had a special dinner. And I went to midnight mass.

How many of my friends aren't gonna be here this Christmas that got killed on Normandy?
There's not many of us left.

[Silent Night fades into theme music]

Narrator: Of over 15 million surviving American World War II veterans, we can estimate that maybe 350,000 are living today. We're thankful to have John Bistrica with us is one of them.

John was wounded in late October of 1944. He returned to Youngstown, got married to his childhood sweetheart Ann Marie, and they had four children. He lives in Youngstown to this day. Of course, there's a lot more to John story. You can hear him explaining details about hedgerows and foxholes in our short supporting episode - For the Mechanically Minded - and you can see photos of letters he wrote to Anne Marie during the war, hear a clip of him sharing his run in with the Andrews Sisters, and more at servicepodcast.org and on Facebook and Instagram, we're [@servicepodcast](https://www.instagram.com/servicepodcast).

I always invite you to invite your loved ones to the table. And if so inclined, you can share stories back with us too, or leave notes we'll pass along to our veterans. There's a form for that on our website.

Next time, we move into Italy with George Hardy of the U.S. Army Air Corps. As one of the prestigious Tuskegee Airmen - the segregated African-American fighter pilot squadron - we'll find that Georgia's food stories are less about what he ate and more around when he couldn't eat.

Service is a production of iHeartRadio. This episode was produced and edited by me, Jacqueline Raposo. Juuni Ramocan was our excellent onsite engineer with John. Deanna McGovern did our vocals from a west. Gabrielle Collins is our supervising producer. Our executive producer is Christopher Hassiotis. Our art is by GirlFriday. Thank you to John's son, Joe, for all of his help. Thank you for listening. And thank you, those who are serving and those who have served.