

Phillip John Caccavale
Interviewed May 5, 2003
Brevard, NC
Fred Meyer

Phillip (Phil) Caccavale's interview is significant for a number of reasons. At the time he enlisted, he was representative of middle class America, and the Division with which he served was one of the most decorated of the War. He survived as one of only five original members of his unit, he was awarded the Bronze Star for valor as well as two Purple Hearts, his observations on the horrors of war have, over the years and alongside his wife's, been shared with schoolchildren when they study W.W.H., and his insight into what constitutes "disability" (he received a disability discharge) is something that serves as an inspiration to all.

Not unlike other veterans, Phil passed quickly over his enlistment in 1942 and his training in Spartanburg, SC (where he coincidentally met and dated his wife-to-be before her entry into the WAVES). He had attempted to enlist in the Marines, but was rejected because he was colorblind. When inducted, he was asked if he would have any problems fighting in Italy (being of Italian descent), to which he replied no. After finishing training, his unit was shipped out to North Africa via a painfully slow 14 day ocean crossing, most of which he spent below deck seasick. They arrived in North Africa just in time to miss most of that campaign, and were retrained for amphibious landings in Tunisia and Sicily.

Whatever action they missed in North Africa was offset during the next three campaigns. Phil was a member of the 30th Infantry, 3rd Division. *That division recorded more deaths and casualties than any other Army division by almost 2-1. One of the best trained groups in Europe, in one of their first marches they had to cover 45 miles in 36 hours, and be prepared to fight when they arrived. During that time alone, they were in the field for 45 days.*

To give the reader but a sample of the conditions in which they fought, the weather was cold and wet. Phil had two pair of socks which he tried to change every day (not washed, mind you). One day toward the end of that particular field stay, while changing his socks he realized he had frostbite, so had to be hospitalized. *Think about it; you 're not even aware your feet are that cold*

Phil shared stories of what it took to keep his unit supplied. Unlike today where there are highways to anywhere, all supplies had to move along rudimentary roads (at best) by mule, something most would view as primitive by today's standards, *He also dwelt on the closeness that developed between the members of his unit, an experience very few can relate to in today's society. He uses the phrase, "We're here for one another" to describe that closeness.*

To give the reader some insight into the physical side of what they experienced, Phil was 5' 10" and weighed 135 lbs. *As the BAR (Browning Automatic Rifle) man, he had to carry the 31 lb. rifle, an additional 31 lbs. of ammunition around his waist, plus his own personal gear wherever they went, which was usually over mountains.*

During most of this time, their only break was when the mail arrived. Coming from a large family and Italian community, Phil always had something to read. Eating was another matter. As long as you liked C-rations, you were fine.. but who did? For example, during one stretch, the cans of rations were immersed in hot water. As you passed by, you were given one heated can containing either vegetable soup, hash or beans. That and a biscuit and piece of candy was your meal. Things got so bad that he and his friends chipped in and bought and slaughtered a cow and some fresh vegetables, which after having the cow inspected, they ate. One night in a farmhouse, they opened a box of food and, in the dark, began eating it. They later realized they had eaten raw bacon.

Under these conditions, stress levels were high. The casualty and death rate meant they were always getting new men, some of them fresh out of training. In one tragic incident, a new man accidentally killed a sergeant. As Phil said, it was bad. In one case, the man ahead of him fell apart after having the rifle shot out of his hands. When you're in the field that long, it becomes very difficult to keep all healthy. Sometime before this, Phil had (much to his objection) been promoted to sergeant. He was now one of the most experienced, and one of the few original members remaining. Yet another story involved the death of one of the last remaining members and the heroics of a sergeant that, according to Phil, were worthy of a Silver Star (his deed was never recognized). Tragically after the war (and because of his other experiences), that sergeant was never able to function in society. Sadly, Phil indicated it was not unusual for some not to be recognized and others to be awarded medals "just to make it look good."

During his three Italian campaigns (lasting almost two years) the only entertainment they saw was Bob Hope and Joe E. Brown. As he said, when the infantry was pulled back, they were always sent to the woods, where they usually drank a lot of Italian wine. *One interesting story on what things cost (keep in mind the value of a 1944 dollar today), an egg cost one dollar; a bottle of wine was fifty cents.*

During his last Italian campaign, he was wounded in three places by a mortar shell, ending his army career. The doctors told him he would be disabled for life, and would never be able to be a plumber again. Years later, he retired after a career in that business, including starting and (with his wife) running a plumbing company (after having worked as one for five years after his discharge).

Phil and Betty returned to New York after they were married, where they eventually started their own plumbing company. They have lived in Brevard for over thirty years. Phil has supported several Veteran's Associations, and has been active in scouting. *He and Betty both present to schools where his message to kids is that war is no fun, that peace is better than war, that steel entering your body is very painful, and that many didn't come back.* He feels we always need to back our government's decisions were war is concerned, acknowledging that sometimes we make mistakes, but that we are usually well intentioned. He feels there will never be another like the one in which he served, as tactics have changed.

Two other stories, *one worth noting and bringing to the reader's/observer's attention. Phil suffered post-war trauma, but they didn't see it coming, nor had the world experienced it. It seems that rain set it off. One night Betty awakened to Phil sitting on top of her, trying to choke her to death. The good news is that she was able to break the hold and awaken him, and that they knew how to deal with it. When will the world learn to stop the killing?*

Finally, one night during the fighting, they came upon a farmhouse where they would overnight.. but not inside. Rather than dig a foxhole as the others had to, Phil claimed a cement water trough as his (protected) resting place for the night. Only one trouble. There was no drain, and in the middle of the night. . .
Ed.note: All punctuation and italics reflect the integrity of the original document.