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Interviewed by SIHA summer intern

My name is John Boccuzzo from Long Island, New York.

What year were you born, what day?

December the 13th, 1923.

1923?

1923.

And you were born on Long Island?

No, I was born in Brooklyn.

Why don't you talk a little bit about growing up?

Well, at 5 years old I was raised in an orphan home in Farmingdale, Long Island. I stood there til I was 12 years old and then I was sent to Brooklyn orphan home til 16 years old. From there I completed, up to 16 years old, I completed the orphanage. Then I was released from there, discharged, well I don't know how you put it, but I was let go with a few other fellas of the same age. And we had to leave the orphan home because that was the rule. You could only stay there until 16 years old and then we were on our own. Then we picked Time Square, New York for our place to live cuz we were homeless. And we lived in Bryant Park, sleeping on park benches. We didn't have a place to sleep or anything because the YMCAs were all filled up, so our home was in the park. We slept on benches and then later on we found that we could get ourselves, when it turned to wintertime, we slept near the subway opening so hot air came out and we put a piece of cardboard down, put newspapers around our legs, and then we slept there and we got the hot air from the subways. and we survived that. After spending almost a year in the park...

What year would that have been that you spent the year?

1939. And then I got my first job working in a sheet metal Factory in Queens.

How many of you were there, like in the park?

About five of us and we had a couple girls hanging out with us also from the orphan home where they were. Cuz they had orphan homes for girls and we got all together. And then the priests in the YMCA told us that Roosevelt made a program to get the kids off the streets, you know to go to work. It was called the CCC. They told us that there'd be job openings, but they didn't tell us where we were going or anything. They told us we had to go to Fort Dix to get to where we were going to go. So, they told us, they pick groups like this group goes to Oregon, this group goes to Montana, this group goes to wherever... South Dakota. And they told me, this the group I was in, that we're going to Idaho. I just made the...we never heard of Idaho and I don't know where the heck we were going and so we were a little scared and stuff because we thought we were going to another country or something. And so, they told us to board the train the next day. It was in the wintertime, right John?

January 1940.

Then we took a train.

How was that?

Oh, the train was awful. It had coal burning and the soot...we breathed that in for almost 7 days. It would darken our faces and everything. And all that coal soot, or whatever you want to call it. And then we finally arrived in Boise, Idaho after 7 days. We got off in Boise and there was army trucks waiting for us to go to camp Gallagher.

Where was that?

In Crouch, Idaho. Then we got our assignment there. They told us that we'd be working for the Forest Department during the daytime and in the evenings we're under the Army rule. So, you know, doing our salute at night and athletics and all that. Then we arrived at the camp, got our assignment to what barrack we were living in. It was a group of at least 200 kids, at least 200 kids. All from, mostly from New York.

What was their ages?

Oh, most of them were 17. The reason why I got in at the tail end of 16 was because being an orphan and they waived that part. Only for orphans where there were no parents you know. But the ones that had parents had to sign them at 17. That was the age. And they told us what things to do and what our assignment was going to be. We're going to work for the Forest Department cutting trees, fighting forest fires, building fences, working on Indian reservations, building ranger stations, and built small bridges that go over creeks (not rivers).

What do you remember about your time in Crouch? What are some of the stories?

Crouch was a small town and we used to go there on weekends. They had like dances on Friday and Saturday nights. And they had a general store, one big store, a diner. It's a very small town, I think it was only about 15 people at that time.

It's still about the same size.

Anyway, they had a general store but they had this one big hall that I remember was a dance hall and the fiddlers would come in and do the...

Do-si-do

...do-si-do and stuff like that but we had a lot of fun. And we done that. And then we saw movies and stuff like that and it was a very small town but it was a relaxation for a little bit. And then once a month we would go to Boise, Idaho to go to a movie and get our shoes repaired. And then we would go back to camp, and we would do our assignments, the same thing again then. But most of our work was mostly forest fires and stuff like that. We had Army, we had mostly World War I people running the camps like cooks, and we had officers running the camp.

Did you have a curfew, a time you had to be inside?

Oh yeah, we had to be inside. But sometimes they let us go. Like we used to walk to Stanley for a few miles and you know do things in Stanley. But Stanley was very small, there wasn't much to do there. You know, just look around and things like that. And then from there we left Idaho, and we went to Oregon, John Day Oregon to finish the rest of my... I think there were six months, you had to sign every six months...

Oh really?

Yeah, every six months you had to sign up, if you wanted to stay in another six months.

So, you wintered In Crouch and then right after Crouch, they took you up to Redfish.

And then I went to Oregon.

And then after Redfish, you finished in Oregon?

Yeah. Well, Redfish Lake was our summer camp. Crouch was our winter camp. And the roads were pretty rugged in those days. And then after Idaho, we were stationed in Oregon, John Day, Oregon. And then I finished the rest of my time there and then we got discharged. Like I said, I wanted to stay in Idaho cuz I was going with some girl in Idaho, and I wanted to stay in Idaho, but the rules were you had to go back to New York and after you'd gone to New York, then you can go back on your own.

Why did you have to go back?

Yeah, there was only so much time you can stay in. You couldn't stay in there too long, cuz other kids had to come in. And then the Red Cross summoned me that I had to go back home.

Why's that?

Well, because I didn't want to leave, and I wanted to stay out here cuz I had no home to go to, being an orphan.

What did you do with the Red Cross?

Well, the Red Cross, cuz they talked me into it, that they figured the Red Cross would help me out, you know. Of course, being I didn't have parents to go back to in New York, so they took care of the... And then I got back to New York, and I met my brothers and we all got together and then we lived in Corona. We found a room near a place to live in Corona. I had three brothers, including myself. And then, my next job was working for a cup company. Paper cups, machinery. I worked on the machines making them. And after that, I was in New York on a weekend, and we went to see a movie up in New York. And then, when we came out of the movie, we saw people looking up at this Time Square building with the news flashing that Pearl Harbor got bombed. And then we looked at each other because we didn't know. I'd never heard of Pearl Harbor, I didn't know where it was located, I didn't know what was what. And then we went home thinking nothing about it and the next day we heard Roosevelt declared war and said every able-bodied young men 18 to 26, I think it was at that time, to pick the branch of service you want to be in. And so, the next day we got together, and we decided where we want to go. So, one of my brothers went, well we all took the Navy, three of us, and one took the Army. I got into the Navy. I wanted to be a Marine, of course, but at that time the rules were that you had to be 5'8". So, I was only 5' 6". So, they turned me down on that and they told me to get in the next line. They told me that I was too small for the Marines, and then they told me to go in the Army line and they said I was too small for the Army at that time. But they changed the rules after that; you can go in no matter what size.

And they sent you to the Navy.

Then the Navy took me. He looked at me and said oh yeah, we can use guys like you. They need a lot of these guys to get into these bomber planes, in the belly of the bomber where you know you...Cuz I was small. But anyway, then I went to boot camp up in New York state for training. Then from there you had to take different uh... First, they ask me if you want to go to submarines, cuz submarines were volunteers. But I didn't like that because of the close quarters that they live in and so I didn't take that. And then the training wasn't bad. We had to pass the swimming requirements you know and then had to go on your back and do that. And then the tower came in where I was going to be assigned to an aircraft carrier which the height is pretty uh, in case you got hit, you would have to jump off or whatever. Anyway, the tower in training was a high tower and the rule was to jump off that feet first to go into the pool. And that I didn't want to do. It took me a little while to do that. So, when I went up there and looked down, I didn't like it. Going down, feet first, no diving. And so finally after a few days, they told me, look, don't look down and stuff like that. Otherwise, we didn't get leave to go into town and that I wanted. So, this way here we have fun in town, meeting girls and stuff like that. And then I did it. I went feet first into the pool and then we had to swim about so many yards and that was it. I finally made that jump. After that we went to the Navy Yard to show us our ship at Camden, New Jersey. And then we had to go there and look at the ship that that we were assigned to. And then they were telling us that we were going down to break the ship in, they call shakedown crews. That's what the name of it was. And then we had to go all the way up to Maine, to the Atlantic Ocean, the roughest water to go in. They went up to that toughest water so they can make us get used to the water. And all that stuff and that's what they wanted us to do and stuff like that. They looked at my records and they saw that I can type which I took commercial course a little bit in high school. I didn't finish high school. I took up that and then they told me the best thing to do is be to become a radio man. We'll teach you the morse code. And I had to go to school a little bit to learn how to do the morse code with the typing, as I was typing. You know that di-dah-di-dah-di-da-di whatever. And then I finally graduated from there and they assigned me to Communications, a radio man. That was my main job and my battle station on board the aircraft carrier was a gunner, a 20 mm gunner. When we were being attacked, we had to run to our battle station and my battle station was a gunner.

You were on an aircraft carrier, right?

Right, on an aircraft carrier.

What one, what name?

The USS Cabot. And our ship was used for bait also when other ships were hit. When two cruisers were hit, we had to go and protect the two cruisers from the Japanese planes because once they crippled the ships they would go after them and sink them. So that was our job. And we were in nine battle engagements through the whole Pacific, going from Island to Island. And we saw so many islands which I never thought was in the Pacific. And then we finally got, it was getting to the close of the war in 1945 and they told us that the war is coming to a

close and we were ready to invade Japan. The battleships were lined up and they were ready to bombard Japan and bring in the war planes and battleships to open fire and all that stuff and everything. And then they told us that the war was going to come to a close and told us all to go up on top of the flight deck to see this secret weapon that they're going to fire to end the war. And we didn't know what it was, and we were looking at each other. Secret weapon, what could this be? It's got to be something terrible or whatever it was, you know. And it was called the atom bomb it was called. And they fired one of them and we can see in the distance, very long distance, we can see a mushroom cloud, but we never thought what that was. But then they set off a second bomb and they finally surrendered, the Japanese surrendered. They surrendered aboard the battleship USS Missouri and that was the end of the war. They told us, you know we all couldn't get out at once, and they just let us discharge a little at a time and stuff like that. And then I had to go to Rhode Island and then they sent me to Long Island to be discharged on Lido Beach. And that's where I finally got home, and the war was over finally. I lost a brother.

Why don't you talk a little bit more about him, your brother Henry.

My oldest brother, Henry. He was, we were all, in the orphan home, and we looked up to him. He was the one that he took care of us all and made sure that we all stood together and being without a mother and a father. And I miss him and then after that...

And how did you hear about it?

I heard about him when I copied a message and being that it wasn't decoded and the officer decoded it. Cuz all the messages were being decoded. We wouldn't know what we were typing. They decoded it and he came out and told me when he decoded it that my brother Henry was killed in a border destroyer and went down with the ship. He was 22 years old at that time. And I lost him. And then I finally got home. I was discharged from Rhode Island and went to Lido Beach to be discharged from the Navy. And then we arrived home and then the rest of my brothers got together and then we found a rooming house and we stood together for a while.

Who's the rest of your brothers, how many?

Well, there were three of us left.

Let's go back now before the war and let's talk about some of the work that you did, and some of the fun stories you have from here in Idaho, either in Crouch or here at Redfish.

The first camp was in Crouch Idaho, Camp Gallagher and I was assigned to that and one of the barracks. They were built like Army Barracks, and we were assigned there, and they told us that we're going to work in the forest.

And so, what do you mean work in the forest?

Fighting fires under the Forest Department. We were assigned work every day. We worked like on Indian reservations, or we worked on building fences like that...

What... oh these fences, the worm fence.

...for the ranches when they were damaged by cattle or whatever.

You'd work for the ranches?

Yeah, I worked on ranches and we worked on Indian reservations, we worked on building the fire towers. We worked on roads. Our biggest road that we worked on was from Crouch to Lowman. We finished that road, it was all dirt road at that time.

So, what did you...when you were out working on the roads, what did you do most of the time?

Yeah, most of the time. Well, we graded it mostly and I had to do a lot of sloping. Like in those days, they sloped the sides of the road for I guess for rain or whatever, so they don't get too much...

Are you working by hand?

Yeah, most of it was all by, well shovel. Pick and shovel I think they call it. And a lot of it was done by what they call caterpillars, you know tractors. And then we done a lot of cleanup the creeks a little bit. And we built the little bridges over the creeks.

When did you guys flip a truck? When did that happen?

When I was coming back from work. My mistake.

Were you here at Redfish or down at Crouch?

Well, we were working on the road, and we were coming back and somehow or other the driver of the car lost control. That's all we know. And he flipped over, course there was no guard rails or nothing, so he went over. All I can see from my truck, we all stopped and all I saw was the truck bouncing off the sides of the... and going down into the Payette River. You know, it was a lot of rocks.

How many guys were in the truck?

I think we carried about 20, I think. 17, 18, or 20 something like that. It was close to that.

What happened?

Well, he lost control somewhere I don't know what. I never found out.

So, the truck went in the river?

Well, he was gone too. Yeah.

Did they all drown?

Yeah, well when they hit the rocks and everything, I guess you know cuz that truck was bouncing in and out you know.

So, no one survived in that truck?

No, no one survived. And the truck they just left it there. They took all the bodies out and then that was it, that I know of, you know. I lost a lot of friends of mine in my barracks. I always remember one kid's name. His name was Lincoln, his last name. I always remember that name. Lincoln.

Where was he from, New York?

Yeah, we're all from New York, mostly. Well, we talk kind of funny because the locals didn't understand us too much, but they knew we were from another place though, that's for sure.

How was it getting along with the locals?

Oh, it was good. Oh yeah, they were very friendly, especially the bar guys you know. But we couldn't drink. They told us not to drink. We were too young at the time. Before we headed into Crouch, there was a little uh, like a little saloon there where this guy would push up the thing there and he used to sell liquor and candies and all that kind of stuff. But he wouldn't sell us liquor because under-age, Idaho law I guess.

That was in Crouch?

Yeah, Crouch.

You remember the name?

Yeah, his last name (all I know was mostly last names) was Curtis. I don't know if anybody would know that.

And he ran a saloon/bar in Crouch?

Yeah, it was like a saloon that was just stood there, but he sold everything from soup to nuts. He sold liquor and everything, but we couldn't drink. So, he just gave us, well I would say root beer because most people don't know sarsaparilla. My best friend was Bucky, called Bucky Garone, his last name.

How do you spell that?

G-A-R-O-N-E. Buckarone, that's what he always liked to be called. Bucky. And he was a drummer. Back home he played the drums. He was in a band. And that's how I got to know him. And then when he found out I was from Corona and he was also from Queens, in Springfield Gardens, Queens.

You met him out here, right?

Yeah, I met him out here because I didn't know the group that we're with.

And you guys were both from the same place?

And surprised we... yeah. But he was an entertainer, a drummer in the band. He was a good drummer.

What type of stuff did you guys get into when you were out here? What did you guys do out here for fun? You and Bucky, what'd you guys do?

Well, we used to go to work during the day, we couldn't do too much. We used to just hang out and then there was someone in town that used to show us movies. He had a movie camera and he used to come to the camp and show us the latest movies. And the last picture I saw that he showed was Destry Rides Again. I remember that one. They only gave us \$8 a month to spend, the rest of it they would put it aside until your discharge and you would get that in a check from whatever it was by the government. And the \$8 you spent for yourself, whatever you wanted. So, like I said, everything was nickels and dimes. \$8 you couldn't spend that fast.

So, the money that you didn't get, you know the \$22, where did they send that?

The government saved that, and then when you got discharged, they would give it all. I believe it came to...It seemed like it was going to be a hell of a lot, but it was only \$700, \$800, you know something like that. And so, when I got home, I splurged a little bit.

But a lot of a lot of kids that you worked with, their money was sent back to their families?

Yeah, to their families, if they had families. I didn't have a family, so they saved it for you if you didn't have someone to give it to.

Give it to him.

That was our rations.

When you were out on the fires?

Yeah, most of it was like fruit...

Dried fruit?

...dried fruit and different stuff like that that you can eat. And all these were packed on mules. Cuz they use mules mostly because they're good climbers you know than horses. A little stubborn, but... And that was our rations.

But, I see it says one day...

Yeah, this was on the Idaho Montana border, northern region.

When you were up in the Bitterroots fighting fires.

Yeah, US forest fire.

So, you left Crouch and you came up to Redfish for the summer?

Right, that was our summer camp.

Summer of 1940.

Yeah.

And what did you do up here, up in Stanley?

In Stanley, well, we did the same thing, almost the same thing up here too, but no Indian reservation because there was nothing around.

What roads did you work on?

Well, the only road that we worked on, and then we also worked a little bit on that road into the camp there before it goes to Redfish Lake Lodge. That dirt road that leads into the place.

And what else did you do? You fought fires?

Yeah, we fought a lot. I think that was mostly around here. Well, the biggest one I remember was the one in the Bitterroot area. That's the Salmon area. Salmon, Idaho. Near Sandpoint, is there a Sandpoint?

There is, but that's much further north.

Well, anyway, it's the Salmon area. I think they called it the Bitterroot Mountain area. That took a long time to get under control, almost a month.

That was in the summer?

In the summer that's right. Boy, that was raging. That was scary.

Yeah, that is scary.

What I remember about the fire, mostly when it was over, it was ashes about this deep. Looked like another planet. God Almighty. And all we saw was burnt trees. And we saw a lot of animals, uh dead. We saw some live ones looking for their buddies, I guess you know.

So, when you're on the fires, typically you're just digging trenches things like that to try and stop the fire?

Yeah, yeah. In Redfish Lake, mostly we done that. I forgot what else we did around there.

Bridges.

Bridges, mostly over these creeks, things like that. Course after we'd finished Lowman. Course that was our summer camp and I guess it was supposed to be, you know, cuz we lived in tents. But we used to walk from Redfish Lake, I told you, all the way to Stanley. But we had to get back before it got dark because we didn't want the animals to follow us, you know. Them son of a guns, they would attack you, boy that'll be the end of you. Yeah, they were after you in the dark, right. But, we didn't work too many hours though. They used to send us out. We did more travelling than working. And then we got to the place, maybe had three or 4 hours to work, and then we would board again and go back to the camp again. And we had to take lunch with us you know.

What did you normally do on the weekends?

What did I do on weekends? Well, mostly into town in Crouch. Garden Valley didn't have too much. We built that ranger station, some of it anyway. That's in Garden Valley.

This your first time back to Idaho since 1940.

Oh, I tell you, I just don't... I can't get over because being here when I was a kid and coming back when I'm old. It's really something that I don't think I'll forget it though to tell you the truth. This is very, uh...it's amazing, I mean the way I feel looking around, a lot of this stuff comes up and brings me back to the days. Well, we had our good times and not too many bad times though, just that truck incident. But everything else was good. Kids were good. We never had any skirmishes and things like that. And, you know, never caused problems. Most of the kids that I was with, most of them were a little more rougher than I was. You know they come from the city, you know. And they came from Manhattan. That's the worst part, at that time. Oh, the best food is in the CC camp that I ate. Better than the home, better than the Navy. The best food I ate was in the CC camp. Oh my God, those World War One cooks, they were good. They gave us good breakfast and stuff that I never ate when I was a kid. I think, I consider that the best part of my life, I think, was the CC camp. I learned a lot in the CC camp. You know, different things, different part of the country that I never thought it was in the United States. Like I said, I never heard of Idaho. Well, like I say, this was the best time in my life, I think. I was scared when I came out here because on the train scared me cuz I didn't know where I was going. All they told us; we're going through Boise and after there you're going up into the mountains to the road of the camp in Idaho. But a lot of it was rough. I don't like to get into it, you know. In the city part, that Brooklyn part. Growing up in Brooklyn from 12 years, when they sent me to that home in Brooklyn. That was my nightmare. Terrible. I don't like to talk about that.

No, it's more fun to talk about Idaho.

Hey?

It's more fun to talk about Idaho.

Oh my God, what a difference. I said of everything in the orphan home and in the Navy, the best was the CC camp.

Goodbye.