

Charles Cappellino
Veteran

Philip Leonard
Interviewer

Interview date not given
Hoosick Falls, New York

PL: State your name.

CC: Charlie Cappellino.

PL: Where do you live, Charlie?

CC: 21 Griffin Avenue.

PL: I see, and are you a native of Hoosick Falls?

CC: No, I came into Hoosick Falls in 1950, I'm a native of a very small town about 15 miles outside of Buffalo. I wound up working in Buffalo, and working for Curtis Wright (?) prior to the war, and the reason I went to work with Curtis Wright was because out of high school, I took an aircraft mechanics course, and when I was finished with that I was hired with Curtis Wright. I worked there for about a year and a half or two, close to that, then of course the war broke out and us good boys, a couple of us, volunteered and joined the Air Force.

PL: When was that, Charlie?

CC: That was 1942, September '42.

PL: Alright, tell us about it, you were enlisted in September 1942–

CC: I was enlisted in Niagara Falls. From there, we went to basic training in North Carolina, we was in Goldsboro, North Carolina. Four months of basic training, and following that we went to aircraft mechanics school, we were going to be part of the maintenance crew for, we didn't know whether it'd be B17 or– well, airplanes. And that was a good four, five months of training and that was also in the Carolinas. And following that, we were shipped up to Rome Air Depot (?), there we formed our maintenance groups to service the aircraft and we were about three weeks from being shipped overseas when I decided I should be a pilot, I wanted to be a pilot. So I went down to Syracuse, took the exams, passed the physical, passed the written tests, everything was fine. So I was shipped– I was taken out of the group, and again I was like starting all over again, I had to go back to basic training, Miami Beach, Florida, in the dead of summer, oh it was hot, was it ever hot. Your clothes would be dripping wet.

PL: Yeah but they kept you in a nice hotel, I understand.

CC: The hotel was fine, but most of the time you were marching up and down the street, basic training.

PL: I know, just kidding.

CC: So, we got through that, I think that took around three months. From there, we went to Shreveport, Louisiana, to college, four months of college work. Math and science and just a few, very nice though; lovely combinations, nice food, couldn't be better. Following that, we went to San Antonio for physical, had to be tested. Down there, we took the written test again, the physical test. I passed everything on the test and on the physical. I got up to be measured against the wall. "Ah, a quarter of an inch too short". I said "Why am I a quarter of an inch too short now? Why wasn't I a quarter of an inch too short when I started?" "Oh I don't know, sorry". The truth of the matter was probably at that particular time they had more pilots than they wanted.

PL: Yeah, I've heard that—

CC: So they said, you want to be a navigator or a bombardier? I was so mad. I said "No, I don't want to be anything." If I can't be a pilot, send me back to where I was. "Can't, you've got to go to gunnery school". I said "You go to gunnery school, but you know as well as I do that all I have to do is get airsick and I'm out". "Well you got to go". "Alright, then send me to gunnery school". Brittle, Texas, here we come. Gunnery school for two months or so, shooting out of B-17's on the ground and all that. Learn the gun, I never did (?) up I just kept right on going. So, from there, we went to Rapid City, South Dakota, and formed our B-17 crews. I became a flight engineer because of my mechanical training.

PL: What is a flight engineer's job?

CC: Well a flight engineer, he pre-flights the plane before you take off. He checks all the mechanical parts, checks the interior, you're responsible really for the mechanical function of the airplane. Or you should have a working knowledge of it, so anything goes wrong you can inform the pilot, your copilot.

PL: That's like a crew chief today?

CC: Well, a crew chief is a ground man, a crew chief would be on the ground. The flight engineer would be flying on the plane. You know, every once in a while they take a crew chief and take him on a flight over the target, if he volunteered.

PL: If he volunteered to go—

CC: But I was located, pilot on the left, copilot on the right, and I was directly behind the pilot and copilot. And I had to man the top-tiered gun. From there, you could see everything, everything. It could scare the pants off you sometimes, could see too much.

PL: I see, so you checked the plane, make sure that mechanically it was ready to go, you gave the word and—

CC: Yes

PL: Because we had someone who was loading them at night, the B-29's before they took off. And their job was to get them loaded. Ted Lucas, I don't know if you know him, that's what he did in Italy. Alright, so now, so what happened? You've made a flight engineer.

CC: Okay, so now we go into training for I guess a good four months, flying all over the country, missions, you know (?)

PL: And your crew was a B-17 crew?

CC: B-17 crew. And you had navigator, bombardier, pilot, copilot, radioman, flight engineer, waist gunner, tail gunner, and ball turret gunner. So that was your crew. Now, oddly enough, the ball turret, you know what I'm talking about, it's a round ball, hangs below the plane. The biggest guy on our crew, great big, bigger than you, was a ball turret man. How he got in there I don't know. It was very cramped up quarters. Well, we finally finished our training and we flew our plane directly over England.

PL: And when was that?

CC: That was, I think 1944. And we flew into Nova Scotia, from there we went to Scotland, from Scotland down to our base about 100 miles from London. And at that point we joined the 95th bomb group. 336 bomb squatters. And now we had to complete thirty five missions before we were to go back home. Not many completed thirty five missions. For example, in our barracks alone, there were six crews. In one week, five crews were missing, gone. Some of them may have (?), some maybe died. But they were gone. I tell ya', it's scary. Well on our first mission, you get up early, always early morning briefing, always, 3 o'clock, 4 o'clock, 5 o'clock, very early. We go down for our first mission, they briefed us. Fellas, this is going to be a milk run. Milk runs are easy. Over France, German occupied. Well, we go over. Flying at 10,000 feet, my god. 10,000 feet they can pick you out like flies. Sure enough, there was an aircraft down there. Wow, we never expected any (?), we never expected anything. Our lead plane, we were flying one, two, three, stacked up and down, our lead plane right in front of us, hit right smack in the middle, he blew up right directly in front of us. That was my first flight. I said, well, I'll never make thirty four more! Well, I got back, obviously, and from there on in, there weren't too many milk runs. That wasn't a milk run either. Now, you'd always get briefed early, you'd fly three missions or four missions, and then they'd give you a pass to go to London, for a weekend pass to London; and you always went, had a good time, came back, and then you were ready to go for three or four more.

PL: Now Charlie, these missions, were they day after day after day? Or did you have a day's' break in between?

CC: You would have a break. They'd run you three or four missions in a row and then they'd give you a break. When you were flying, they wouldn't let you cool off much, they kept you going. They didn't want you to think about it. Usually you got a (?) then they'd lay off you for a while. Now, our fifteenth mission, we were going down to River Valley, now this was Black Alley they called it. And I'm telling you, it was Black Alley. The flak was so thick up there. I was sitting on the top tier looking out, and just looking at change all over the place. Boom, boom, boom, boom, bang. You could see them coming, then all of a sudden, then right under us, broom, picked us up and threw us down, knocked two engines out. Our pilot got hit, our radioman got hit, copilot got a little bit. I got hit, I was in the top tier. And I never wore heated shoes, you know a heated shoe is like a slipper, you plug it in and keep your feet warm. I always wore this kind of a shoe, because I never was cold. Well I got knocked out of my turret, my feet went out from under me, and I look down, thought maybe my leg was missing, it was all there. And I said, what the devil was it, so I took off my boot, the fly boot, looked alright, went to put it back in and this was in it. A 155 millimeter flak. This was in my shoe. I couldn't get my foot in my shoe. So I reached down and I pulled this out. And you know where this hit me? Right in the heel, right there, in the heel part of the shoe, right there. Now, if it hit up farther, it would have taken my heel off. Did the job on that. That's the closest I came. Fantastic. I've had that souvenir since 1945.

PL: What mission was that?

CC: That was our 15th mission. Now, we had to fall out of formation. And we dropped our bombs, we fell out of formation, and we had a straggle back. Now straggling is not the thing you want to do. Cause when you straggle, we always had escorts, they escort, they surround you, protect you, when you go off, they didn't have enough escorts; they couldn't follow you. So you were on your own. We made it just over the Belgian line, and we were flying low, boy were we. Came out of that plane, and they scrapped it. It was so bad.

PL: Well, where'd you land in Belgium?

CC: Just over the end, we were occupying this area, see, we had been into Belgium, we had an airbase there, we got into it. But that plane was junk. Those that could, got on another plane and went back to England. I and two other guys wound up in the hospital in Belgium. Well, I was there about four days in the hospital, foot was alright then, it was really sore, I couldn't walk on it. So, the navigator, the copilot's next to me in bed, and he said "When're you going back?", I said "Well, I think I'm going back tomorrow". He says "Don't go back, go to Paris, go down and see Paris, enjoy it a while". I said "How am I going to go to Paris?" Well, he said "Just catch a plane and go down". "Can you do that, Ellis?" "Sure". So the next day I went down and said "Anybody going to Paris here?" "Well, we're going within about fifteen miles" he said, "You

can probably catch a ride from here”. I said okay. All I had was my firing suit on, a jacket, my flying jacket and suit. In fact, I had a picture but I don’t think I got it with me. So I went to Paris, found my way back into the city, the La Brigée airport, and I told them what I was doing; I’d like to go down to see the city before I head back to England. They wrote me out a three-day pass, which I extended to a week. (PL laughs). I had an escape kit, each of us had an escape kit, it was \$50 English money in there. Well, that kept me for the week. Because you ate, you’d look around and, you’d just drop in and have lunch with them. And I traveled all over Paris, the subways, I saw the cancan shows, I saw tours, I took the whole tour of Paris. Nobody. I thumbed my ride, on the street. Nobody asked any questions of me, never asked to see my dog tags, nothing. I couldn’t get over it. Well, I was out of my time, a week had gone by. So, I went back to the airport, told them I was making my way back to England, to my base. He says “Oh, there’s a plane going to England there, not going where you want to go, but you can take a train from there”. Fine. I hopped on. Here’s another thing, they didn’t know who I was. I could’ve been a German spy. Never asked for any identification, and we were fighting a war! So I jumped on the plane, head down to England, just below London. And told them I had made my way back. They called up my base and said, “Oh, right him out a train ticket”. I stayed overnight there. Next morning on the train. And again, nope, even after all of that, no identification, nothing.

PL: Just your word.

CC: I could’ve been a German spy. Well anyway, I got back to my base, they said “Hi, how are you?” “Fine” “You feeling good?” “Yeah” “How would you like to go to London for a few days?” I said “I sure would”. They wrote me out a pass to London, I went to London for a few days. But I got back to my barracks, and the guys thought we were down, see. All my stuff, you know, when a guy goes down, they take your locker and split it up, take all your clothes and this, I didn’t have nothing.

PL: The guys had taken all the stuff?

CC: Yeah!

PL: Were you reported missing?

CC: No, I don’t think so.

PL: Cause your folks would’ve–

CC: I don’t think there were reported missing. The only thing they asked me, “How are you?” in National Red Band, what I’ve done, what happened, nothing.

PL: But you’re back, welcome back.

CC: So I’m back! Well, now we got a few more missions to fly.

PL: Well they had to put you in a new crew, because your crew—

CC: We got part of our crew all back, and then what happens is, Phil, that while your crew is flying, you may get sick and grounded for a couple of days, but the crew flies. So you may have to make a mission with another crew to catch up, to get your 35 in. In fact, my last mission I flew with a strange crew. And—

PL: So they got you back in the air.

CC: Oh, yes.

PL: Did it take long to get you back in the air?

CC: No, you're back. The only lull we had, you remember the Battle of the Bulge?

PL: Yeah.

CC: Well the Battle of the Bulge was the result of, we couldn't fly a plane for over a month. Bad weather. The weather was so bad, and honestly that was the one time I was wishing to go on a mission, because we were getting beat over there. No flying, no support. Soon as that weather broke, every plane in the world was there, flying. You could see airplanes in the sky from anywhere direction you turned. And it was fantastic, the number of planes in the air. Well, I think we went on to about our 21st mission, and like I said, we needed a bombardier, he was sick. So we drew another bombardier, but he wasn't a bombardier, he was a navigator; which we found out when we said "Bombs away!", the bombs didn't drop. Nobody took the safety switches off, and that was the bombardier's job to take the safety switches off. And he wasn't a bombardier, so he didn't do it. Well, I'd open the door, and look out the bombays and, oh my god, they're all hung up. So, well you asked me what I did, well, one of the things I had to do was there was, I went out, there was a catwalk in the bombays, it's about that wide, put one foot in front of the other and you're walking, and there's two ropes on the side, one rope here one rope here, to protect you. Here we are up about 20,000 feet, I had to go out there, and hang onto that rope, lean off there, and the bombs are way over there, leaned as far as I could lean and click each one of those off by hand. We had to get rid of them. Cause you couldn't keep them up.

PL: I see, so there was a switch, you pushed it and the bomb went, or a little catch—

CC: Where they hang up, they hang them up you see, you just have to manually click that. I did that with my finger.

PL: And then bombs would drop.

CC: And then bombs would drop. One at a time. I don't know where they landed, but I got rid of them. But anyway, that was another experience. That was—

PL: One you won't forget.

CC: Won't forget, yeah. But I didn't mind it. I don't know why, I should've, you know being out there, I didn't mind it. Well, one mission we went on, we went on a shuttle mission, we went from London— England to Russia, we bound on the way to the Northern part of Europe. And then we stayed in Russia for a couple of nights. They were scared to death from us being there and I found out why; just a mission this summer, a group before had done that and the Germans were bombed that night. They were afraid it was going to happen again.

PL: They didn't want the Germans—

CC: They didn't even appreciate us being there—

PL: They were sucking up to the Germans over, they didn't want them—

CC: They fed us well, they put on a show for us, a real dancing show, you know the women, and then we left and we went to Italy. And on the way to Italy, I think that's the time I was about as scared as I ever was in my life. There was this mass formation going flying and, looked up in front, a few miles in front, you could see this wall of clouds, just this straight wall, all the way up as far as you could see. And we couldn't climb above it, we weren't able to climb above it. We had to fly right into it, and now can you imagine flying into those clouds like that, solid mass, with a guy on the wing here, wing here, and here, above you, and below you. That's one time my knees were knocking. Boy, I was scared. And as we got through, as we poked through the top, there was, I can still see it, right over there was a great big ball of fire came from across, a couple collided. I think more than a couple collided. There's no way to, you know.

PL: You couldn't see, you couldn't, be hard to control it.

CC: Well, if your distance didn't fail you a little bit, you would know where you are. So, that was scary, we stayed in Italy a couple of days. Then we'd come back and bombed, on the way back we bombed two, in France again, wasn't Paris. I was told that we bombed at a German barracks that was out in formation training. So we helped them with their parade. Anyway, that was a good mission.

PL: So you flew from England, bombed, Russia, went to Italy, then on the way back, bombed, they loaded you up in Italy and—

CC: We bombed, we left Russia in the assault car.

PL: I see, they considered that a mission then.

CC: Oh, yeah.

PL: One mission, or was that three missions?

CC: You know what, I don't think, I think that was counted as one mission and I never thought

of it until now. I could've gotten out sooner. Honestly, to think about it. When you go and count me, one mission. But it should've been three.

PL: I see, so then you came back to England.

CC: I came back to England, yeah. Well, from there on, I completed my missions, the last mission like I said before, I had to fly alone, I mean alone, with another crew. I tell you when I got back, oh they told you don't straggle. Because stragglers are being picked off. (?) wouldn't come in anymore. You know, I saw many dog fights out there with the Germans and our planes. B-52's, our planes. And he said, don't straggle, because they're picking them off if they straggle. Sure enough, we got hit again and we were flying by ourselves back to England.

PL: And this was on the 35th?

CC: The 35th mission. Oh my god, when we landed, I kissed the ground. That was it. Well, right after that, we got sent home. And then we went back by boat. And I think that must've been in June of '45. Cause I got out in July of '45, so a month before I got out.

PL: Now the war as over in Europe in May of '45 –

CC: August, wasn't it?

PL: August. Japan was May or June.

CC: I got to tell you something. August 11th we got married, my wife and I, 1945, and the whistle blew, and I was out of the drought. And I worked for (?)

PL: Oh, I see. Yeah was in August, but they signed it on September 2nd. So that's when the war really ended.

CC: So I had no job, just got married–

PL: Okay so, that summed up your service–

CC: Well, after I came back from Furlough, I went home, see, Furlough, came back to Atlantic City, I could hear these guys telling about points. Points to have to get out. I got enough points for this, points, points. Well, he said, if you've got enough points, you can get out right now. You need 85 points. I said, oh boy. So we went down and checked the records over, I had eight points. But I had one battle star that weren't given to me and it should've been given to me. Because I was with a group when that battle star was given. I had 85 points, I had 5 Oak Leaf clusters and air metal, and five battle stars. So I had enough for it. He said we'd have to write for it. We'd have to get permission. I said oh boy. He says well you can stay here in Atlantic City for a month, it'll take a month to get it. Or you can go to Lake Lure, North Carolina, vacation spot, a resort. I said, I'm going to Lake Lure, because if I'm over here you'll have to use me and send

me somewhere. So I went there for a month, had a great time, it was a resort. Come back, looked over my records, yeah I got the five points, and got out of service. That's the end of the service.

PL: Okay, now you came back. Now tell us a little about after the service.

CC: After the service, as I said, I had no job. So I finally wound up in a job in a steel mill. Dying wire, you know they take wire and they put it through a dye and keep reusing the size of the wire. My job was to feed that machine. I got third shift, the worst conditions in the world, best thing to ever happen to me. Because, I said, you know, I look at that guy over there, he's been doing this for 15 years, that guy 10 years, I'm getting out of here, I'm going to school. So I applied to an engineering college, Angola, Indiana, Trine State College. They accepted me, they said you can come, if you can find a place to live. The apartments were... (?). So we bought a trailer and towed it all the way over there, and set it up behind a house. And we still write to these people, my wife still writes back and forth. Was very, very nice there, nice people.

PL: Let you set up your trailer, so you could go to college.

CC: Yeah so I could go to college.

PL: And you went under the GI so you went under the GI bill and became an engineer.

CC: That's right—

PL: What kind of an engineer did you become?

CC: Chemical engineer.

PL: Chemical.

CC: Chemical engineer. And you know sometimes, when you get a bad deal like that like I did working in a steel mill, gives you a little push.

PL: Gives you reason.

CC: Yeah gives you reason. So then from there, another reason I chose that college was cause you could get your degree in three years by not taking no vacations, going right straight through. So I got my degree in three years. And from there, I went to work for international papering in Niagara Falls. And I worked there for about a year and half. Then I heard about this position over here, and I didn't even know where Hoosick Falls was, really. But I looked it up and found it and came over and they offered me a job and I thought about it for about a week or two and then I accepted it. I think it was the best thing I could've ever done.

PL: So you moved to Hoosick Falls, when was that?

CC: 1950.

PL: 1950. Now by then did you have any children?

CC: Yes, we had one girl, Linda.

PL: I see, and then you moved here, and you've lived here ever since 1950.

CC: Been in Hoosick Falls ever since 1950.

PL: So you're almost a Native.

CC: I'm about 90% Native, if I live long enough, I'll be 99%.

PL: I'd like to close this before we talk about wood flooring (?), is there anything else you'd like to mention, any of this?

CC: Well, I think that covers my service pretty well.

PL: I think it was great, well we thank you very much for coming.

PL: Alright and we've come back on-