

John X. Ferlita

Hillsborough Remembers

John Ferlita tells a tale of community sacrifice and home town patriotism in war-time Tampa. Along with his brothers, Mr. Ferlita worked in the Tampa Shipyard, helping build the ships that kept the troops in supplies. He tells of worry and loss, of hearing the news from Europe, and of the changes that took place in Tampa during the depression and the war.

WWII

At Home & Abroad

Mr. Ferlita is my grandfather and a life long resident of Tampa. The interview is being conducted on November 21, 1999 at my home. The interviewer is Lauren Companioni, representing the "Juniors to Seniors: Hillsborough Remembers Oral History Collection Project."

Lauren Companioni: How old were you when the war started?

John X. Ferlita: Well, let's see, I think I was 29 or 30, something like that.

LC: 29 or 30? Do you remember what you were doing or where you were when you first heard about Pearl Harbor?

JF: Absolutely. We were fishing at the Gandy Bridge, catching some red fish, and had one of those Motorola. In those days, the portables were about 1-1/2 to 2 feet long, didn't have any small ones, and I had just landed a nice trout and this thing came on the radio that the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor and we all were dumbfounded, and couldn't believe it. We knew it was true because they kept repeating it.

LC: What were your initial emotions?

JF: Well, I said, "Those damn fools will never beat the United States."

LC: What were your initial feelings about the war?

JF: Well, we knew that there were going to have to be sacrifices made and in those days patriotism was a big thing. Everybody took the war very seriously and everybody helped the war effort whichever way they could, and, as you know, they succeeded. There were a lot of things that had to be done, and, of course, conscription was first. They had a lottery and I was

classified 3A, a deferment. Instead of being idle, I went to work for the shipyard, but that is another story.

LC: How did your family talk about the war?

JF: Well, we talked mostly about how it affected all of our family directly.

JF: Only Frank Massari was a Naval student at the time and later transferred into the Air Force. I think he had finished his Medical Degree at the University of St. Louis. Wait a minute, I am getting the war's mixed up; that was the Korean war. But mainly it was a very serious proposition.

LC: How did your family portray it?

JF: Well, they had gone through other wars, minor things over there and in Europe. You have so many countries, one gets a beef or you call somebody up and there's a war. If you look at history, there is one called "one hundred years of war" and one "30 years of war." Then they would stop the war and regroup until they were strong enough to fight again, and that's about the way it went.

LC: At the time, how frequently was war talked about around the community and what was the mood and tone of the conversation.

JF: Well, the thing that was mostly talked about was that the Japanese had the upper hand in the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and as you know, they had two statesmen in Washington, D.C. talking peace at the time. So it was absolutely a fouled up dirty trick that the Japanese pulled. Those were some things you talked about, but mostly positive things. We got rationing and everybody was happy. If you got an A ticket, you were allowed four gallons of gas for the week, but

then, that is another story. At the shipyard they gave us a small amount of gas to go back and forth. Patriotism was very strong and everybody got behind it 1000%.

LC: So it was mostly positive?

JF: Mostly positive and that's the reason, remember your grandfather and people from this country does things in a big way, and this is a given time and that is what it took. They started building factories initially and things like that, and once we got it on line, then there was no stopping us.

LC: Were you pretty confident the whole time period that we would win the war?

JF: Yes. The thing was that we had to bide our time and get it out in the action.

LC: As far as your social life went and what you did on the weekend, how did that change and what sort of things you and your friends and family did?

JF: Well, there wasn't too much to do anymore. We had the radio, TV hadn't come in yet. We would go to some of the lakes around here which were swimming lakes and clean and pure in this state, not polluted like they are now, and to what little movies there were. Of course the dances were optional and we primarily went to the Centro Espanol and the Centro Asturiano.

LC: How were you assigned to the ship building yard as opposed to going overseas?

JF: Well, the fact that I was a 3A--

LC: What is 3A?

JF: 3A is a certification that says you are the last one to go unless you are doing something positive. Well, I felt being an administrator I wasn't doing something positive, so I signed up first for the shipyard. Brother Guy and brother Jimmy signed up for the shipyard too. Salvadore was above the draft age, so it didn't affect him. That is how we got in because they needed people badly.

LC: What exactly did you do in the ship yard?

JF: Well, I had experience as a master mechanic, you know, from the bottle works and fooling with outboard motors and things like that. I was assigned to a destroyer tender, which was a very large ship and had these big king poles on it which could take a destroyer by the tail-end and change its propeller. That is what the tender was capable of; it was a great big ship. It was built in 1943, 1944 and 1945. My job was in ship ordinance. Now, to the Navy, when you say ordinance that means fire power, what kind of cannons you have on the ship. I installed everything from the large 5" gun down and we put projectile elevators up so that you could pass the ammunition, Praise the Lord, and all that. Then I also put on 3" guns, all of 40mm and the 20mm. GE, when I served this Country, always did things in a big way. GE with one joy stick, could absolutely fire and aim each gun. You just sat up there where I was, and watched it. All the guns would go together. They would go up, they would go down, you know, it was really something terrific to watch. That was my job coordinating that, and of course we got that 4.0 rating on that first one and then on all of them. I have been looking all over for this little emblem they gave us, which was for excellence. They gave us all an E for excellence. In fact, the other day, I found a picture of the shipyard people.

LC: You said a 4.0 rating?

JF: 4.0 means the four marks of the compass. It means all the way around, in other words, a perfect rating, because what they shot at, they hit and I told you before about bore scoping.

LC: What is that?

JF: Process of where you put a rifle or telescope right down the center of the barrel. Then I remember using the corner of the Tampa General Hospital as a reference point. I put the scope right on the edge of the building and move the barrel until I saw it and then I would say, "mark". Now the guy upstairs who was looking to sort of shoot something would get on the same mark and when he would say "mark" and I would say "mark". We knew we were on it and that is where we would set it, and that is the reason those things lasted. It is amazing how accurate they were, they shot at everything and they hit everything.

LC: Are there any interesting stories you can share about the time you worked in a shipyard? Anything you remember that stands out?

JF: Well, I will tell you about the Russians for whom we were also building mine sweepers, but I didn't work on many of those, just temporarily if they needed some help to install ordinance. When we would get through with the ship, they would take it on a trial run. They would come back, and, if it had a broomstick up on the top, that meant a clean sweep, which meant everything went great. The first mine sweeper we gave the Russian's, it came in because something was wrong, but I don't know what. I didn't go below, but the other mechanics or workmen came back and said, "John, guess what, you know those potato peelers we put on

there?" "Overboard." "You know those washing machines and everything? They threw them all overboard."

LC: Why did they do that?

JF: They didn't want to spoil those Russian's. They weren't used to it. They go back with that and the other ships they have don't have anything -- you wash your own clothes. The whole durn works, they threw it all overboard. Anything that was a laborsaving device they got rid of. Those potato peelers, they were great big things, you could put several sacks of potatoes in, and they would come out as clean as a whistle. But that was funny, I thought.

LC: I guess we are going to go a little bit into the depression. Once you realized the stock market had crashed, what were your initial feelings and were you aware of the impact it would have on you in your life.

JF: Well, the stock market was bad, bad for the community and bad for everybody, but in our case, our crash came in the boom, which was a couple of years before. Your great grand-dad after prohibition set in had to liquidate, so he was sitting there with over a million dollars that he didn't know what to do with.

LC: Liquidate?

JF: When you liquidate, you get rid of your possessions and turn it into cash. It is called equity in the banking business. So he was very, very restless, doing nothing, and had worked all his life, every day of his life, so he started buying property at the tail end of the Florida real estate boom. Now, today when you buy property somebody co-signs, somebody gets collateral, it is a good solid loan and you don't lose much, but in those days, during the boom

everybody was selling on paper. I remember one property up the street from us, where they were starting dime taxicabs, that property, LoCicero owned it. They sold that property for \$75,000. I think he got his money, he was the only one. The next guy came in and offered the guy \$125,000 and he bought it with \$10,000 down. It just kept repeating and that is how the boom ruined everything. It went up to \$275,000 and that guy got stuck, it was all paper. Today, that is a lesson that we learned from the depression, but see, great-granddad, his problem was he was just too honest a man. Everybody said "Mr. Ferlita, declare bankruptcy, at least you could salvage something." He said, "No, I owe this money so I'm going to pay it." After the prohibition was nullified, the Country went wet in 1933. All my brothers and I worked and it took us two years, but we paid all his debts off. That's the reason we all have a good reputation. Your great-granddad had been mortgaging good property, for what? To pay taxes. Uncle Sam came and took everything we had, which included our home on Tampa Street where I was born, in the big red building. We just had to suffer through it, but we were used to that kind of stuff, although we kids were spoiled rotten. I wanted something, I would go "ah, aah", and mother would give it to me. That is the best thing that ever happened to me, was the fact that I had to go to work, if not just to keep me off the street. Believe it or not, I got \$2.00 a week after school and I would save money.

LC: What work did you do?

JF: At the wholesale grocery. I would load and unload trucks. Then as I got a little older, I worked in the summer. I began to do all the window displays. I delivered groceries and I helped a guy. I began to work with crepe paper and I would pull those rosettes up and make you a nice bouquet. People

would save labels from Gold Medal mild and Gold Cross milk and redeem them for prizes at the premium store.

LC: How did your life-style and your way of life change during the depression, for example, like any food, there were certain things that you had to do without?

JF: Well, because of the tie in with the grocery business, we never did without. We pinched, I remember that. I was going to school and I would make the coffee every morning.

LC: What does pinch mean?

JF: Pinched means hurts. We did without a few things, but we still managed to have three meals a day, but there certainly wasn't any cash around, Uncle Phillip was in the clothing business and we would get our shoes there. When things got a little better, we bought clothes there, but in large, we weren't affected as bad as some of the other people. My dad already had a car, my brother had a car, Salvadore had a car, Jimmy had a little Monterey Coupe, and brother Guy and I had a roadster we bought for \$75.00. He was such a Don Juan, he used the car every night, and I never got a turn. So I said, "you keep it." But, it was a tough time because you really had to be careful and we had to just watch everything, no foolishness, and I think that is one reason that generation grew up the way it did and realized that money doesn't grow on trees. I tell you, today the younger people, they think it does grow on trees.

LC: How did your family portray the depression?

JF: Well, as I said, my Daddy worried himself to death, I know he did. I remember that he was a benefactor to just about everything in this city,

because they knew he was a good touch. He was in the YMCA, YWCA, all of the Latin clubs and the Sacred Heart Church. He was one of the biggest benefactors, and they would go see him first, then he would start the ball rolling and they would say, "Mr. Ferlita gave so much, how come you can't do that." You know, they would work on people that way.

LC: So your dad was pretty much worried about the depression?

JF: Oh yeah. That was the worst thing. We were young enough that it didn't affect us too much except we didn't have money. Sometimes you would get a nickel for popcorn at the movies. I never will forget the time this guy strapped on a big tray of stuff and he would say, "Peanuts, popcorn, chewing gum." It was a silent movie, so he could yell all he wanted, you know. Everything was a nickel. That was the depression.

LC: How long was it until the return to normal after the depression?

JF: Well, in 1932, Roosevelt got elected. I think things began to change. They started that WPA, and put people to work. They got money to circulate. He called it "pump priming." If you put a pump in the ground and you just put it down to the water, you can pump all day long and all you get is air. So he would prime that pump. You put water in it and it chases all the air out.

LC: Right, I think.

JF: Well, that is the way you get water out of the ground. Then they initiated Public Works and things that just had to be done, and toward the end there, it was when that Pearl Harbor thing broke out. Everybody loved FDR, he was elected four times. The last time he was really in poor physical

condition, I think the first year of the last term. They would keep it hidden, because it would destroy the confidence the people had in the Government. I tell you, everybody asked us, "can you spare a dime," and were selling apples, pears, or anything to make a nickel. It was important that the Country stay very solidified and, of course, then the war broke out. The war put everybody to work, put people in the Army, the Navy, the Coast Guard, and we began to work on the war efforts.

LC: So, in general, how many years do you think you put?

JF: Well, we have to count from the boom, you know. Sometimes things got a little bad, but in 1933, our last election, things started getting better. Money started to flow. There was nothing to buy, so money was accumulating. After the war, a lot of people had money who had never had it before. There wasn't anything to buy, you couldn't spend it, and you were making pretty good money.

LC: You talked about, before you were talking about the ration card that they gave you.

JF: Oh yeah.

LC: How was that?

JF: Well now, you had ration cards. I just spoke to you about gas, but you also had ration cards for meat and all the necessities because we were shipping it overseas and shipping it to the Armed Forces, and lastly, we had to do without it at home. They would give you these little coupon things and you were allowed so much, 1 lb, 2 lb, whatever. It's like on the ship, I ate spam until I went ga-ga. I ate it for three years, and now it makes me flinch. **JF:** (continues) I never want to even see that stuff again. But it was a

sacrifice that we all had to make and we made it willingly, and at that time, I don't think there was a Country in this world that could whip us.

LC: So, did it come in a booklet?

JF: Yeah, a little booklet.

LC: How much?

JF: They would give you a month's supply at a time, roughly about that much, sometimes longer, so they wouldn't over feed us. It was always the same amount. There were exceptions, you know, if you had a lot of people. If you had infants, you got the milk; you got what you needed, but no excess. Nobody wanted to do it to excess, because I told you, people were patriotic and it was just unheard of to burn a flag like they do today. They stomp on it, or dirty it, or even leave it out overnight, but we didn't.

LC: When you heard about the Holocaust, did you know exactly what was going on?

JF: In those days, we had a radio and usually listened to what they said, and it was hard to imagine, until the facts actually came out. I don't think any of us were aware of how bad this thing was, it was just a terrible thing. I think that even today, you know, these motion pictures that are made about it, what was that last one, Schindler's list?

LC: Right.

JF: Movies like that, they were very informative. I think I learned more from that one than I did anything else. We heard about them making lamp shades out of human skin and stuff like that, and sometimes you take it with a grain of salt. I don't doubt it with those people, I don't know, just a crazy man called Hitler.

LC: What did the community think about it?

JF: Well, we had a lot of Jewish people in the community who were very dear friends of ours and some are still friends to this day. You know, like Gary Freld and a number of them, I can't think of them all. We all went to school together, and of course, it was just something that was overwhelming. It was just too horrible to think about it or talk about it, just miserable, a bad thing.

LC: Wow.

JF: That's the reason so many homes were built because a dollar was worth a dollar then, let me say that. Today it is worth half a dollar, maybe not so much, I don't know, but that whole Wellswood subdivision was built in about three to four years.

LC: How many, or were there any friends or family that you lost because of the war, or any great stories that came with them when they returned?

JF: Yeah. Jenny lost a brother. She also had a brother who was a Naval Bombardier, and recently it was confirmed that he bombed a submarine, and Jenny sent me that clipping. I have it somewhere. Maybe I can get it to you in time.

LC: Anything that you have.

JF: Speaking about the war, hand me that encrusted bullet over there. Naturally, these guys, our guys were very accurate shooting at people. This was found by your friend, Jimmy Warren, who gave it to me.

LC: What is it?

JF: They would put the target and learn how to strafe. Nobody was

allowed on the beaches, and this was a couple of the bullets from the machine gun on the air craft, and after a while all this stuff was floating around. See how it broke in two?

LC: These two were together?

JF: Yeah, they were like this, and if you break this open, you'll find one in there.

LC: A ().

JF: Yeah. That is how they, and minerals form and gather together, just like the earth was formed. Wrap it and you can take it to school and show it to them. Indian Rocks Beach, you know where that is?

LC: Right, yeah.

JF: Bird Key, Egmont Key and they would get a grade on how well they did, and those are the things that you had to fight with.

LC: So this is a bullet that--.

JF: It came out of a machine gun out of the aircraft.

LC: Wow! Did you have friends that came back, a family that came back from the war?

JF: Yeah. One of my best friends mentioned above, came back. It's like a few came back, but a few did not come back. Anthony was in the Aleutian Islands in the Japanese campaign and a book was written on that campaign and he is mentioned in it, on a certain page, where he led a charge on one of the Japanese holes there, and the worst thing he said he got is frostbite in the toes.

LC: Really?

JF: He had to go get the frost tips done and they sent him back Statewide. In fact, when you look at the War Memorial in Sicily, you see the names of those who lost their lives in the war and you see the same names here in Tampa, like Joe Ficarotta, and others like that.

LC: Anthony Bellas, do you remember what he said about his experience, about fighting in the war?

JF: Well, as much as that man liked to talk, you know when he started talking, it was hard to keep from crying. He wouldn't talk much about it. I don't think any of them liked to talk about it, but he would just tell me a little bit about the campaign, what they had to do and everything.

LC: Is there anything that you want to add?

JF: Well, yes and no. People took to this war effort and I just want to tell you that today, I don't know if a guy would even go if he was sent or subscribed to go. Everybody they just couldn't wait to get in, like Herman Ficarotta. He was taking it easy, but he was over there at the armory, behind the bank.

LC: Who is this again?

JF: Herman Ficarotta, and he just got tired of it and said, "I want out of here." First thing you know, he was shipped to Asia, and then he would write me from over there. I don't know what I did with his letters, they were masterpieces, all of them, and I don't know just where they were, but we were real close friends. I guess the good Lord was with him, because he came back. And I guess our patriotism doesn't exist today like it did then, which is very, very sad, because it started with that Vietnamese thing. Nobody liked them, they just didn't

like it, they did what they had to do and that was all. It was a losing cause at the time, we shouldn't have gotten involved in it. Sometimes our leaders want to make an impression and leave a legacy, and that is how you get into these things. Other than that, that is about it except it was a rough time, the war and the depression itself.

LC: Any changes in Tampa, like the city itself?

JF: I think about fifteen years ago after Anthony Bellas came back he couldn't get over what he saw; but if he come today, it would knock him over. The Mallory docks are still there and now what have you got there - Harbor Island. First of all, you have a new hotel, the convention center, the ice palace, you've got the aquarium, and then you've got the cruise centers now, and the Port of Tampa new building, and then the skyline. The skyline has changed so much. I never will forget, I had made a turn on Florida, I think, I was over in the other county for years, and I went underneath the expressway, and I looked around and said to myself, "where am I." I was lost for about three seconds, I mean. I said "where am I going?" Then I saw the clock at City Hall, which is called Hortense, and I knew where I was.

LC: Wow.

JF: It was such an unfamiliar scene, that it was very funny. Then of course, all of a sudden, you know these funnel choo-choo trains you see in the wild west shows, there was one over there. I thought it was on that little island. Now you know what Harbor Island is called. Uncle Guy and everybody lives over there, big high rises and big apartments, and now they have boatlifts all over the place, and of course, the suburbs, they are not suburbs, we've got a whole city named

Temple Terrace out here. I remember your great grandfather Raymond caught the devil from his dad when he was caught playing "discovering America" in what was then a remote area. They went out there and went hunting. There wasn't anything beyond Columbus Drive.

LC: Do you remember what Uncle Anthony said about what he noted, some changes noted? Did he say anything ()?

JF: Well, the buildings and everything, you know. When his sister Helen was here, I took her downtown to see where her folks had lived.

LC: How long was he gone, Uncle Anthony?

JF: This was the result of the depression. His dad lost money and had to close his shop and he went back to California. His dad had a car called "Locomobile." Of course, loco in Spanish means crazy, but what he meant was like a locomotive. It was self-propelled, and we all would ask for a ride. Of course, our mode of transportation was off the tail end of a streetcar. The cars ran so slowly that you would run and jump on them and ride as far as you wanted to, down to Florida Avenue, then jump off. There was a street that went to Ballast Point and Port Tampa. A group of us boys, seven or eight, would board the streetcar together. We would let the sidebar up and down and every time we would stop, one of us would drop off, so we would get to Ballast point and the balance of the passengers would get off. The Conductor would look up and say, "what happened to the rest of them guys?" We were mischievous, but we never tore up anything, but it was a very interesting time.

LC: Thank you, Grand-pa.

JF: You are quite welcome. My E for excellence, I will try to find it for you; if I can't we will have to forget about it.

LC: Right.