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Anthony "Tony" Cardinale Jr. oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, March 19, 2008

Anthony C. Cardinale Jr. (Interviewee)

Michael Hirsh (Interviewer)

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[Transcriber’s note: The Interviewee’s personal information has been removed, at the request of the Interviewer. This omission is indicated with ellipses.]

Michael Hirsh: Can you give me your name and spell it for me, please?

AC: My full name is Anthony, A-n-t-h-o-n-y. Initials...you want my middle name too?

MH: Sure.

AC: Claude, which is C-l-a-u-d-e. And Cardinale, C-a-r-d-i-n-a-l-e, Jr. I was named after my dad.

MH: And there’s also a Tony III?

AC: Yeah, I named him after me so that he’s—my dad is Anthony Sr., I’m Anthony Jr., my son is Anthony III, and his son, my grandson in California, is Anthony IV.

MH: Wow! What’s your address here ... and your phone number here.... And your date of birth?

AC: My date of birth is May 29, 1920.

MH: Nineteen twenty, so you are?

AC: I'll be eighty-eight this year.

MH: You'll be eighty-eight this year.

AC: In May, yeah.

MH: Where did you grow up before the service?

AC: Well, I grew up in—I'm one of ten children; we were five sisters and five brothers—in a little town of Pittsburg, California.

MH: Where's Pittsburg, California?

AC: Pittsburg, California—it's across the bay from San Francisco. Are you familiar with some of the towns like Martinez, Concord, Walnut Creek?

MH: Concord I know. I've been to Concord.

AC: And we had—I was born in Pittsburg, and then we left Pittsburg. I got married, and I bought a home in Danville, California.

MH: You went to high school there?

AC: I went to high school in Pittsburg, California. But we lived—my dad—the bank foreclosed on his business and the home, and we moved out of Pittsburg in 1936, I believe it was. I was sixteen years old, yeah.

MH: When did you go into the Army?

AC: I enlisted in September of 1942.

MH: You went where to enlist?

AC: I went to San Francisco, to the induction center there. I had an inkling to want to get into the Army instead of waiting to be called on the draft, you know, so one day I decided and told my mom I was going to San Francisco on the train to the induction center to enlist. Filled out a bunch of papers and all, you know, and they rejected me for being six pounds underweight. (laughs) I think I weighed 135 or something like that, and I was not heavy enough for them to take me, so I went back home all dejected.

MH: How tall were you?

AC: Six feet. I've been six feet for years and years.

MH: So they rejected you for being six pounds under?

AC: Six pounds underweight.

MH: I thought that's one of the things the Army can fix very fast.

AC: Now they can, I believe, yeah, but at that time—so, I went back home all dejected and all. Instead of waiting for them to call me, the next four, five, six months or so, I think I quit smoking, and I started eating a lot, you know. One day, after about five or six months, I decided to go back. I had breakfast at home, and I took the train to San Francisco. Across the street from the induction center was an eating place. I sat down and I had breakfast there again—more hotcakes—and I had brought a couple of bananas with me. (laughs) I ate those two bananas as I was walking to the induction center, and they took me. (laughs)

MH: Then what? Where'd they send you?

AC: They sent me to a place near Monterey. What is the name of it?

MH: Presidio?

AC: Huh?

MH: No, not that.

AC: No, Presidio is in San Francisco.

MH: Monterey—Fort—oh, God, they have the language center there now, or they did. I know what you mean, though.¹

AC: Anyway, it was a place near Monterey, Fort something-or-other. At any rate, that's where they sent me to be inducted in. And from there, they sent me and a few other guys to basic training at Camp Roberts, California, which is probably—I don't know, I'd say about halfway between San Francisco and LA, in that area. So, we had basic training there about three months. You want me to continue?

MH: Sure, yeah, just tell me—

AC: It was about three months' basic training: you know, rifle shooting and all, going through obstacle courses and stuff. After three months, they sent me and a few other guys to Fort Lewis, Washington, to join the 115th Mechanized Cavalry. When I heard they said "115th Calvary," I talked to a couple to my buddies, I said, "Oh, Jesus Christ, you mean to tell me we're gonna ride horses?" (laughs) But we learned it was mechanized cavalries.

Anyhow, as I was there, I don't know how I got chosen, but they sent me to communications school to learn to be a radio operator, which I was all the rest of my three and a half years in the service as a radio operator. And I was promoted to what they call a technical sergeant, which was three stripes and a "T" rather than a real buck sergeant, who's a drill instructor. Technician 4th Grade is what I was: radio operator. What else can I tell you?

MH: When did they send you overseas?

¹ MH is referring to Fort Ord and its sub-installation the Presidio of Monterey, California, which was closed in September 1994.

AC: I was fairly lucky. I was three and a half years—about three and a half years in the service, and I was only fourteen months overseas. Some guys, as soon as they were inducted, over they went.

MH: So, you went over in what, early 1944?

AC: I think it was late forty-four [1944], because as I recall, we had Thanksgiving dinner on the ship from New York on the way overseas.

MH: Were you already in the 42nd Division?

AC: No. No, I was just out of basic training. The 42nd Division—

MH: Well, out of basic you went to the mech, the mechanized cavalry.

AC: Yeah, from Fort Lewis, Washington.

MH: From Fort Lewis, and then somehow you ended up in the infantry.

AC: Yeah, they sent me—you know, my memory fails me, Michael. Let's see— (coughs) Excuse me. Yeah, I wound up, and they sent me to Camp Gruber, Oklahoma. Camp Gruber, Oklahoma, for more basic training. I had to go through all that crap again, learning to shoot the rifle and the machine gun and obstacle courses and all that crap. So, eventually, that's when they sent me to Fort Riley, Kansas, to communications school to learn to be a radio operator, and that's what I was all through the war, during combat areas and all that.

MH: So, you went by ship, and you went to England first or you went straight to France?

AC: No, we went straight to Marseilles; we landed in Marseilles, France. Went through the Mediterranean, went through Straits of Gibraltar to Marseilles, France, and that's where we got off.

I have to tell you something funny. So, they had loaded us off the ship on to the launch boats, you know, from the ship over to the shore, and they sent us to this great big area. It

must've been 5,000 pup tents all over the place. We had to put up our pup tents, you know, pending our next assignment. This is funny. And it was a little chilly, so everybody started building little fires, you know, close to their tents. And then, all of a sudden, we heard a lone plane flying up above, and somebody suggested that that might be a spy plane or something, a German spy plane there, and everybody started hollering, "Put out the fires! Put out the fires! There's a spy plane!" You know? Then one guy hollered out, "Piss on you! I'm cold!" (laughs)

MH: Nice.

AC: I always think about that.

MH: Got his priorities straight.

AC: Yeah, yeah. (laughs)

MH: So, this is in late forty-four [1944] that you land in Marseilles?

AC: Yeah, yeah.

MH: Okay. And then you move out?

AC: Oh, no. Christmas Eve—I think it was Christmas Eve. It was Christmas Eve of forty-four [1944] that me and my outfit ended up on a combat zone line in a French town near the Maginot Line. I forget the name of that town; I can't remember now.

MH: It's okay.

AC: From there, we went—our unit continued up—we were assigned to General—what's that famous general's name?

MH: [George S.] Patton?

AC: Yeah, we were assigned to General Patton's 3rd Army. We continued from one town to the next, and as we were going—my outfit was not directly in the front line but directly behind the front line troops. And as we approached, you know, one town after another, after our front troops went through, we noticed every little town we went through must've had about a dozen churches with their steeples, and we noticed all the steeples were topped down. Somebody asked, "How come all the steeples are chopped down?" and one guy says, "That's because German snipers were up there in the steeples, so our troops—any church they saw, boom! They chopped it right down." (laughs)

And then, what else? My mind sort of fails me.

MH: You're probably headed toward Munich, I would guess.

AC: Yeah, yeah. We were heading towards Munich, and we stopped—we had no idea, from what I've heard. Our leaders or captains decided to stop in this little town of Dachau. Dachau, that was the name of the town, but later on the name Dachau meant terrorism for those people. We went into Dachau, and that's when we got out and we started—yeah, we went into the main—or the side, a back entrance to the camp where there was a whole train of boxcars. And that's where—

MH: Did you smell it before you saw it?

AC: Yeah. Oh, yeah. And as we were walking from—the boxcars were open, you know, where you see all kinds of dead bodies.

MH: What was your reaction to that? You were just a kid at this point.

AC: Yeah. At that time, I thought—okay, that was in 1945, so I was twenty-five years old.

MH: Which actually makes you old for—there were a lot of, you know, eighteen, nineteen year olds.

AC: It was at that time, Mike—before that, before I joined the Army and even during some of the time reading about the atrocities and all that, I didn't think much about it at that time, you know. And the day I went into that concentration camp and looked through all those boxcars with all those dead bodies, I knew in my mind that we had to be there. Somebody had to be there to stop all that crap.

MH: So, you knew about concentration camps beforehand.

AC: Right, we kept reading about the atrocities. You know, you read it, you didn't think much of it. But then when I saw it for myself, I thought, you know, we had—but when I was still living in California, I remember when Japan threw a couple bombs on our Pacific coast in California, and our government decided to intern all Japanese—people of Japanese descent—back into American concentration camps back in Colorado, away from the Pacific coast.² And then I said, “I wonder why they're doing that.”

All of a sudden, my mind goes back. As a little boy in my hometown of Pittsburg, California, we lived about four blocks from the waterfront, where just about every day in the summertime, we'd go over and jump in the river and swim, you know. And I remember during those days that, on the wharf, we'd constantly see all kinds of Japanese getting in their boats with cameras and tripods. And even at that time, I often wondered as a kid, what kind of pictures are they taking right here in Pittsburg? What is there to see? But later on, it came to me that, even in those days, the Japanese all up and down the Pacific coast were taking pictures of the whole Pacific coast and sending photos to Japan in preparation for an invasion in California or whatever, the Pacific coast. That's what came into my mind.

So, then I decided that's the reason our government decided to intern every Japanese, even the naturalized or American-born Japanese that were really Americans. They were all sent back, you know, and they were gonna talk about—they talked about sending Italians away from the Pacific coast, too. When we heard that—hell, 99 percent of the people in Pittsburg where I was born were Italians, Sicilians. And I think we had a group of our supervisors, as I recall, went to Washington and pleaded with them to not send Italians away. They said, “That would be the whole town; there'd be nobody left in Pittsburg.” (laughs)

MH: So, to come back to Dachau, you approached the train from the front or the back?

AC: We what?

MH: When you approached the train with the bodies, you were—?

² Cardinale is referring to the February 1942 bombardment of Ellwood, California, in which a Japanese submarine shelled an oilfield near Santa Barbara. President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, authorizing the internment of Japanese Americans, three days before the Ellwood incident.

AC: Oh, from the back, as I recall.

MH: It was parked on a siding, but not inside the gate.

AC: Not inside the camp, for some reason. I was a radio operator, and I was always in the back seat with a radio operating either by Morse code or by phone, you know. And so we stopped, and I didn't even know where we were. The colonel said, "Okay, let's go out and look." And that's when—

MH: Who's the colonel? Is that [Henning] Linden?

AC: No, no. Linden was a general.

MH: It was the general, okay.

AC: He was the general.

MH: So who's the colonel?

AC: It was Colonel [Henry] Luongo was his name.

MH: Luongo?

AC: Luongo was his name. He was a colonel; he was the commander of our regiment, which was the 222nd Regiment. There were three regiments with the 42nd Division, and I think that's true with any division has three regiments. Ours was the 222nd Regiment, 232nd and 242nd.

MH: Luongo is L-u-o-n-g-o?

AC: That's right, yeah. Colonel—what the hell was his first name? I forget now.

MH: It'll come to you. So, he's in the front of the Jeep?

AC: Right, and I'm in the back.

MH: And you're in the back. So, they pull the Jeep up next to the train? I'm just trying to create the scene that happened.

AC: It was outside the back entrance to the camp, so that's when we get out.

MH: And you're near the back of the train. Thirty-nine boxcars or coal cars, that's a fairly long train.

AC: Yeah, it is.

MH: So, you get out at the back end of the train?

AC: Yes.

MH: You can smell this?

AC: Oh, definitely.

MH: And there are bodies that have spilled out of the cars?

AC: Yeah.

MH: And so you're walking along, behind the colonel?

AC: Yeah, he passed that one car where I saw that guy.

MH: Are you carrying a radio on your back?

AC: Yes.

MH: That's the big radio with the whip antenna on top?

AC: Right, yeah. Either that or—no, at that time, we had what they called—they had a walkie-talkie, which was a receiver and a transmitter both on one big, large unit.

MH: PRC-6?

AC: Huh?

MH: PRC-6, or maybe I'm—? They called that one in Vietnam a PRC-6, a PRC-6. And they had a PRC-10; that was the big one. But anyhow—

AC: I can't remember the numbers. At any rate, so we—where was I?

MH: You're walking behind the colonel.

AC: Right, yeah, and he had already passed that car. You know, we'd walk along and peer into each car, just disgusted with all the dead bodies and all. And as I'm walking along, I see something move, see a hand waving like this, back and forth like that.

MH: On top of the pile or in the middle of a pile?

AC: Right in the middle, toward the back. The boxcar was open and he was towards the end, the other end of the boxcar.

MH: So, the doors are open—was this a boxcar with doors and a roof or was this a coal car with nothing, no top?

AC: There was no top on it, but the front of the cars were open. I don't know who left them that way. What happened was, we learned later that when the Germans heard that we were coming, they had—excuse me, I'm trying to think. They got information from

this lone survivor that I found, that when the Germans heard the Americans were coming, they went along and started shooting any—they started rounding up a lot of the prisoners that were in boxcars; [they] had been shipped from another concentration camp, from Buchenwald, because the Germans heard the Americans were approaching Buchenwald, so they shipped all those Buchenwald prisoners that were still alive over to Dachau. And then, when they heard the Germans were approaching Dachau—when the Americans were approaching Dachau, they decided to get all the prisoners in the boxcars and marched them into the camp, the camp at Dachau.

MH: So, you saw this guy lying—I mean, he’s in a car like this? I mean, those are bodies there, right?

AC: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, that’s right.

MH: So, he’s lying in a pile like that?

AC: Right, yeah. Yeah.

MH: And you saw a hand move.

AC: Yes.

MH: What do you do?

AC: I saw a hand move, and what happened was my colonel, Colonel—at that time, it was not the colonel of my regiment, but it was another colonel, Colonel Downard, Colonel Don Downard. He was a colonel of another regiment, but he happened to be there at the time. So, I hollered out to him, I say, “Hey, Colonel, we got a live one here.” So he came running back, and he jumped into the boxcar. I think you have that picture, don’t you?

MH: Yeah.

AC: Of the colonel?

MH: I have the picture that was probably—was that taken before this picture? You see the colonel, he's near a Jeep.

AC: Let me go get my book.

MH: Okay.

Pause in recording

AC: What was it we were going to look for?

MH: We were trying to figure out the sequence of events. Was this picture taken before the picture with—was it Colonel Doward?

AC: Colonel Downard.

MH: Downard. There's a picture of him, I guess, carrying the man toward his Jeep.

AC: I don't think it's him carrying the man to the Jeep.

MH: Oh, okay.

AC: This—you've seen this, I guess.

MH: Let me see.

AC: That's (inaudible).

MH: (rustling papers) Ah, okay. So, this is the man being pulled out of the car?

AC: Right, yeah.

MH: And that's Colonel Donald E. Downard, D-o-w-n-a-r-d. Who was there to take these pictures?

AC: It was probably a regimental photographer. See this? I just—by luck, I was not in the picture, but I was standing right here, and the staff photographer, I guess, was taking all kinds of pictures. He was behind me and took this shot above my head.

MH: So, then the colonel pulled the man out and handed him to you?

AC: Yeah, he handed—and the boxcars—see, he was way over toward the back end of the—and I was standing right here, and that's when he handed him to me. And then I picked him up, and here, somebody took him from me after I walked a few steps from the boxcar. This was the picture I was looking for. Somebody took him from me. I don't know who that man is: someone that I don't remember. He took him from me and put him in the Jeep to take him to a first aid station.

MH: Okay. And we have no idea whether he survived, or where he went or anything?

AC: No, we've tried. I tried Colonel Downard, I contacted him a few times, and he said the last time that he remembers, this man was—he says, “Tony, the last thing I remember, that man that we found, he was laying on the stretcher right next to me,” because he had been wounded. Colonel Downard had been wounded, and he was in an area pending being sent to a first aid station, a regular Army area hospital, and he says, “The last thing I remember is this man that we found laying on the stretcher next to me.” And he says, “For years and years, I've tried to get information about his whereabouts, to no avail at all.”

MH: Did the man say anything to you when you were holding him?

AC: Yeah, in German, he said “*Frei? Frei?*”, which means “Free?” He was asking me. I says, “*Ja, du bist frei*, you are free.” I learned a little bit of German at that time. So then, Captain [*sic*] Downard said he tried many, many times to get information. And I—

MH: What kind of thoughts are going through your mind when you're carrying somebody who looks like he's been starved almost to death?

AC: What kind of thoughts? You know, nothing that I can recall. It's just that that particular scene has been embedded in my mind all these sixty years, whatever, you know. But at that particular time, I just thought in my mind, you know, that we had to stop this. Somebody had to be there to stop all this crap that these Nazis were doing. That's the first thing that came to my mind. But we were busy, going from one town—

MH: When this incident is over, then what? You never went into the camp, to Dachau?

AC: That's inside the camp—oh, yeah, yeah, that's outside the camp. Yeah, we went inside.

MH: You did go in the camp?

AC: (rustling papers) Yes, where's that—I saw a picture here that—yeah, see here, these are—trying to find a picture. Here's some scenes in the boxcars with the dead bodies. Where is that picture that I saw of the people? Here's all the dead bodies piled up.

MH: Did you go into the camp itself?

AC: Yes, uh-huh.

MH: What did you see in the camp?

AC: I was trying to find—maybe there's a picture. Well, the people cheering and all. Let me see those. (rustling papers) This is the first scene I saw. Here's one of the cremation furnaces. This is what I first saw when we come in, and then the people cheering and hollering, "*Amerikaner! Amerikaner!*" Here's the main entrance. This is the main entrance to Dachau, camp Dachau.

MH: So, you went through those gates?

AC: No, we went—that's the main entrance.

MH: That's the main gate?

AC: We went through the back entrance and came around this way.

MH: When you came in, did you go into where the crematorium was, where the gas chamber was?

AC: You have a picture of it there, don't you?

MH: Yeah, I see this, the crematorium.

AC: Yeah, but I didn't go inside of it, no.

MH: Tell me what you saw inside the camp. Did you get near the people that were in there?

AC: Oh, yeah. We heard—I'm trying to think. When me and a few of my buddies were walking along the boxcar where I found that guy, we kept hearing rifle shots and all, and we could tell the difference in the sounds of the enemy rifles and American rifles. So our American troops were killing some of the guards—

MH: The guys who were in the towers?

AC: Up in the towers, yeah. And when we—then, when the guards were all shot down, then our troops started bringing some of the inmates out in the open. They hugged us and kissed us, you know.

MH: Were you afraid of getting sick from them?

AC: Yeah, I was afraid of—I kept trying to push them away, because of disease, or what do you call it—

MH: Typhus.

AC: Typhus and stuff like that. But I kept trying to stay away from them, you know. And then—

MH: Do you remember the expressions on their faces?

AC: Oh, just smiling, smiles, and some just drooping down with hope, I guess you might say.

MH: You kept them inside the camp; the gates weren't opened up so they could go out.

AC: Some came out, out of the main entrance out here. They let some of them out here, yeah. That's where they started to hug us.

MH: Did you run into the 45th Division guys?

AC: No, no, although we did hear—there's always been a confab between who got to Dachau first. But as I kept reading, there's three or four other camps by the same name, Dachau.

MH: Many camps, yeah.

AC: They even say—the Japanese [Americans] even claim they were the first to go into Dachau.

MH: They were someplace else. But the main camp—I hear the 45th came in the front gate, and you guys came in a back gate or a side gate. It's strange that, sixty years later, they're still arguing about it.

AC: Yeah, they still are arguing about it.

MH: What did the experience do to you?

AC: What did the experience do to me? The sun never sets on any day that I don't think about, that that particular day when I found that man. And as I told you when I first went

in there, that's when it first hit me that we had to be there, we had to try to stop all this crap that was going on with the Nazis. That's the thing.

MH: When you came back to the U.S., you told people about this.

AC: Oh, yeah, yeah.

MH: Did you run into people who didn't believe you?

AC: Some years later, at a local bar when I stopped in for a couple drinks with my lady friend at the time, there was one—there was a—the news media had reported, you know, a number of times about six million Jews, six million people were killed in the concentration camps. One day at a local bar with my lady friend, the subject of the war came up, and we started talking, and one guy says, “That's a bunch of horse manure. The six million people were not killed.” And I looked at him and says, “I was there. I saw some of those million. Read the books, read all the reports from the Holocaust Museum and all that, about the millions of people, the Jews, especially. Hitler killed all the Jews, you know.” So, that's about all.

MH: Anything else you want to tell me about this?

AC: I can't remember what else I could tell you.

MH: Okay.

AC: That I've not already told you. (laughs)

End of interview