

Nichola Russo

Welder

Oral History

Interview conducted in Pittsford, New York

[Date unknown]

Eugene Marino [Russo's cousin]: How old were you at the time?

Nichola Russo: Sixteen when I decided I would go into the Navy when I was seventeen. Partly because I didn't want to go into the Army. If you waited till you were eighteen, you'd get drafted. They would automatically put you in the Army. And I didn't want that, because we had seen all these World War I movies during the Thirties, about these people dying in the mud. I figured I would just as soon die out to sea, where it was clean. My mother didn't want me to join, of course, but I said when I get seventeen, I'm going, and that's it. I turned seventeen in April, and by June I was in.

Marino: Did you quit school?

Russo: No, I'd quit school about a year before, when I was sixteen. We grew up in the Thirties, we were always hungry; we wanted to make money. We wanted money in our pockets. So I took a welding course, which was later my saving grace. At least I had experience in something when I went into the Navy. I worked for Easton Bridge. They trained me, and we built bridge sections of steel. Overhead welding and vertical welding, as well as flat welding. It gave me good experience for later.

Marino: So you went in when you were seventeen.

Russo: Right after my seventeenth birthday. I was working on this job, and I was hesitant, but I said I gotta do it. If I don't do it now, if I wait till the end of the year, I may not make it. Something may come up, and I'll get drafted. So I decided to start then.

Marino: Was that the only motivation for you going in?

Russo: Absolutely. I didn't want to get in the Army.

Marino: You had no great patriotic feelings to go out and beat the Japanese?

Russo: In the back of your mind, you'd say, at least we were defending freedom. That was probably it. The Italian immigrants who came over here, they wanted us to be Americans. They said you're now in America. My parents wouldn't talk Italian in front of us because they didn't want us to learn Italian.

Marino: Where did you take your basic training?

Russo: In Samson, New York. For boot camp.

Marino: That's not far from here. Had my father already gone through there? He went to Samson.

Russo: He went in before I did. I didn't know he had joined.

Marino: What was boot camp like?

Russo: It's an eight-week course. We finished in six weeks, probably because--they said, "We need sailors on ships in Norfolk, so we're gonna cut you short." They sent us home on leave and gave us tickets to get to Norfolk. So that's where I reported to.

Marino: What did you learn in boot camp?

Russo: You did a lot of marching, a lot of running, you had that obstacle course. You learned how to shoot a rifle and how to shoot a revolver. You learned all those things, and you learned about people, too. We had one guy who never wanted to take a bath. I can still remember his name, but I'm not gonna say it. Our CO, the officer in charge of us, his office was right in the

barracks, and his bunk, but he was up front. The shower section was right off his, so he could keep an eye on everything that was going on. One day we drug this kid in, that stunk, and we scrubbed him down with a scrub brush. When it was over, he went back to his bunk. The next evening we're all waiting around and he takes off for the showers. He came back, and everybody's looking at him, and he whipped off his towel and said, "Clean as a whistle." Everybody clapped, and everybody forgave him. Everybody accepted him; nobody ever mentioned it again. He was part of the crew. We had another little guy from Tennessee, and he was very expert at catching flies. He could catch a fly in the air.

Marino: So the guys were from all over.

Russo: The guys were from all over. And what you did was you accepted everybody. You gave them their space. Because you were close together, only a bunk away, so you don't make a lot of criticisms. You tried not to get into altercations; it was very rare. Even when I was on board ship, you're in very close quarters, but everybody respects you.

Marino: No rivalries?

Russo: No. On board ship the officers were served by the blacks, and they had separate quarters. They were separated from us. And all they did was serve them [the officers]; they didn't even put them on guns. I think they had battle stations, but I can't remember now what they were.

Marino: So you had no contact with the blacks?

Russo: Once in awhile you'd meet one going by and say hi, how are you, but they kept to themselves. They ate separately, and they did everything separately. There was definitely segregation.

Marino: You went to Norfolk in what year?

Russo: That's '43. August of '43. And on August 21, we pulled out of Norfolk and went to the Pacific.

Marino: How did you know what ship you were going on?

Russo: When I got down to Norfolk, we were all put in a big field. These recruits are coming from all over the country, and they're going to converge. There was a big loudspeaker system, and they would say, "You're going to be boarding ships. We're going to start calling names. We're going to tell you the ship, and we'll show you where to go." So I'm there, and we've got big duffel bags, and we're waiting in line, sitting on our duffel bags. The roll call is going, and all of a sudden I hear, "Eugene Marino." I'm saying, gee, there's got to be only one Marino in the United States. It must be my uncle; I'm going to go look for him. I found him. He was wrestling with Wally Papps(?) on the ground. I got him by the shoulder and I picked him up, and he said, "What are you doing here?"

He says, "What ship are you going to be on?" I said I don't know. He says, "I'm on the South Dakota." So we were talking, and he introduces me to his friends, and we're all standing around, and all of a sudden, "Nichola Russoí South Dakota!" I said, "I'm with you!" He says, "Keep quiet." Like the Sullivan brothers, they'll separate you.

When we went aboard ship, I got in the deck division. I later got transferred to the R division because of my welding experience. R is for Repair. We did all the repairs onboard ship. In Damage Control, we had firefighting parties. We had to have people ready to repair the ship. We took care of the flood boards and the sump pumps, to save the ship. We were always on duty on the flood boards and sump pumps. Even though battle stations had not been called, we would still be on those. The reason was submarines. Because if a submarine hit us, the ship would list, and we could level the ship with the flood boards. We would flood the

tanks on this side to balance with the ones on the other side. Otherwise the big sixteen-inch guns are pointing into the water, or up in the air.

They put me on flood boards or in the sump pump. The sump pumps were even down further. You're down in the *bottom* of the ship. But most of the time I was on the flood boards. Then we had a damage control section in the bowels of the ship, which also had a little wheelhouse, in case the wheelhouse up on the main bridge got bombed. Then control of the rudder would be down below. Then there was a manual way to steer the ship, too.

Marino: So you were basically on duty?

Russo: Well, we had to work. We were the repair department, and it's a big ship. It's twenty-six hundred men, it's a town, and it had all the things--it's all steel. If you go through storms, things get broken off, ammunition boxes get thrown around. And in normal operation, things will happen. I was usually with another guy, and we'd both go on a job carrying a hundred feet of welding coil, and we'd plug into the nearest place. The welding plug-ins were maybe two hundred feet apart, on each deck and in each area. You could always reach somewhere in the ship to weld. That was the job for a day. It was an eight-hour day, but there was also watches. You were on four hours, off eight, on watch for eight hours and off four. It was 4 - 8 - 4 - 8 - 4 - 8. This was in addition to work. So if you came off watch in the morning, you still had to go to work.

Marino: So it was pretty tiring, and dirty?

Russo: It wasn't dirty. It was tiring. You were always tired. You'd always love to go to sleep; that was the great thing. But we ate well. I didn't even know what a grapefruit was when I joined the Navy. We were in boot camp; I thought it must be like grapes. Then I see this round orange ball that tasted sour as hell. But we ate great. We ate very well, even onboard ship out at sea. There were times when we used to transfer soldiers, like two to three hundred men would transfer from one island to another, and they can't believe it. "You guys eat like this all the time?"

Marino: Another advantage of being in the Navy.

Russo: Another advantage of being in the Navy. You die clean and eat well.

Marino: So you got on the ship in Norfolk and you went through the Panama Canal.

Russo: We went through the Panama Canal. We stopped on the other side of the canal at Balboa City. We were only going to be there one night. The ship is divided into three divisions. Each department, each unit--one, two, three. When it comes to going ashore, one third of each little group goes ashore. Then the ship, in wartime, it has to have two-thirds complement aboard ship. I was lucky, when we got to Balboa City, it was my third of the division, and I went ashore. We went sightseeing. To look at girls. So they would ask you, did you go to a museum or did you go sightseeing? There were whole streets of prostitutes.

Then we went to Hawaii. And I got to go ashore there. We were there three or four days. Then we took off from there, and we went to the New Hebrides group of islands, to the island of Efate. We were there for almost three months. We would go out and sail around the island. They would put drones up and practice shooting at the drone planes, they'd run the ship around and bring it back in, stay out a day or two and bring it back in. One time we went to Fiji. That was quite an experience. We got to go ashore there. I can remember these two natives--they were like copper-colored people--there was a tall woman and a real handsome big well-built male, and they were walking together down this path, and she's got a huge basket of something on her head, and she's walking with her hand holding onto his arm. She's carrying this stuff on her head and he's got nothing.

Marino: When did you first see combat?

Russo: Our first operation was to the Gilbert Islands. That's when we started bombarding the Gilbert Islands. We bombarded Tarawa. We bombarded Hollandia. Then we went into the Marianas. This was the Turkey Shoot. They threw three or four hundred planes at us, and we just kept knocking them down. We were defending the carriers. The battleships had a lot of antiaircraft power. I was on the flood boards, and they'd send a relief down for me, and they'd say go up and watch and come back down in half an hour. So I would go topside, and I'd be watching this turkey shoot going on. I saw quite a bit of it. I saw the planes going into the water. It was quite a sight to see.

Marino: Do you feel any danger, up there watching them?

Russo: No. I think it's age, you know. When you're 16 or 17 or 18, you haven't got a brain in your head. You don't know enough to be scared. But these guys aren't aiming at you; they're aiming at a big ship.

Marino: When you were onboard ship, did you understand the strategy?

Russo: Yes, we were kept pretty well informed. We had a speaker system. They would tell us what's going on and where we're going. They also had little transcripts of what we did, after. So we understood what the strategy was. We understood the island-hopping strategy. They explained a lot. Your father was on the radio, and he knew more than I did. He was a radioman. He used to take messages and do translations.

Marino: He's sort of critical of Halsey, because he thought he risked--

Russo: I think every admiral makes mistakes. I think every military leader makes mistakes. I know he went chasing the Japanese fleet. You can understand that. If a guy makes an error, it's going to cost lives. But that's the game you're playing.

Marino: Did you ever see Halsey?

Russo: Yes, he was aboard ship. I saw him twice. Once I was on the first deck forward, doing some work over there, and one of the guys says, "Hey, Halsey's coming out on the admiral's deck." The second deck up is where he would come out and walk. His two Marines would be guarding the doorway. "Watch when he lights up his cigarette." He put the cigarette in his mouth, and he lights it with a match, and he takes one big drag, and he inhales that thing so that ash went halfway down the cigarette, he took such a big breath. He took about two drags and then he threw the cigarette away. The other time I met him, I had to do some work up in the officer area. Usually an officer would stop you as soon as they saw a sailor up in officer's country. A couple of times I got stopped. This time I'm going down, and here's Halsey coming down, with his two guys following him. I stood on the side, and I salute, and he says, "Carry on, sailor," and that's all he said to me. So I saw him pretty up close.

Marino: Did the sailors on board like him?

Russo: Oh, yes, we loved him. Our dress--we had a blue denim shirt and blue denim pants. We ran around in our skivvy shorts most of the time, our boxer shorts, because it was hot out there. We were right on the equator, and it was hot, hot, hot. Even down below, it was hot. When an admiral comes aboard, everyone's got to be dressed nice. But he would come aboard, and he'd say carry on as you were. Just the way we like. He never interfered with the crew. He was liked.

Marino: Where else was the South Dakota?

Russo: Then we went to battle--after Hollandia and the Marianas, then we took the Philippines. That's when we got into a big typhoon. The waves were ninety feet high. We went right through it. Two destroyers capsized that night, losing everybody. That's the

frightening thing. They said nobody's allowed out, so a couple of us guys says, "Let's go see what's out there." So we went up and we got out on this little deck. We leave the door open, and we look and we see this wave that's higher than our superstructure. The wind is so hard, there is no crest of this wave. It's just blowing it right off. It was the only day we couldn't have soup. The galley closed down, and they handed out sea rations. We went on a forty-five degree angle through the waves. That's how we rode out the waves. It lasted that day and well into the night. The next morning they said, last night they found three guys swimming in the ocean, covered with oil.

From there, we were down in Leyte Gulf and Luzon. We bombarded and they landed and took over that. Next we were to go to Iwo Jima. And then they hit Okinawa. The Third Fleet was bombarding Japan. We hit Honshu, and then we hit Hokkaido.

Marino: When did you hear about the bomb?

Russo: I think we were bombarding. It was just two days after that last bombardment of Hokkaido. We hit the steel mills up there. We were going to go bombard somewhere else, and then we heard the atomic bomb had been dropped. Over the loudspeaker we hear all the news. They're telling us they estimated I-don't-know-many-people--it destroyed the whole city. One bomb. Couldn't believe it. This was amazing. And we were happy. Then they dropped the second bomb.

Marino: So the end of the war comes and you get to go to Tokyo.

Russo: I didn't get to go to Tokyo, no. We sat in the harbor for a long time. They had to secure the harbor. They had to do a lot of securing of the military bases and the ships and everything. So there was a lot of work to do. They had to get the mines out; they didn't know where the minefields were. We were sitting in there for quite a while before they said, okay. They weren't going to send us ashore until Japan surrendered. The surrender was going to be on the Missouri, and our nose was out of joint because we were the most famous battleship, we'd been in the most action, the Missouri just came out at the end of the war, did a few bombardments, and had no distinctions at all. All the fighting the South Dakota did, it was almost a foregone conclusion amongst anybody that it would be the South Dakota. Because Truman was from Missouri, that was the reason they were given that glory. We were really upset. When the signing was about to be done, we were so upset that they announced over the speaker, "We will be moved alongside the Missouri, and we will tie up right beside her during the signing, and we can witness the signing."

Marino: So you actually saw the signing?

Russo: Yeah. We were looking down at it. I've got the pictures of it in my album. Those are official pictures. They told us, "Don't take pictures. We will take the pictures, and we will give everybody a set." Your father got a set, but he lost his on the way home.

During all this time we were waiting, during the securing, our yardarm was out, in the rear of the ship. We had to have boats down in the water, and they would go ashore, and they would do things, and they would bring back these big sampans. They were like oversized rowboats. They used to tie those up alongside. We were all antsy. We wanted to get something. So we were outside there, the first day they went ashore, there was about five of us on the deck looking at the sampan. One night, it was dark, we climbed on the yardarm, we got on the boat, and we rode ashore. The first thing we ran into, these small ships all in a line. There were shells of ships. The Japanese had run out of copper. We're rowing along and we see this big row of buildings, and there's lights all along, so we said we'll go over there. The Marines were guarding it. They were shooting on either side of us, trying to get us to come in.

They thought we were Japanese. We were in a sampan, after all. So we rode to the side of the dock, there were two of them there, and we said we're from the South Dakota. We're looking for guns. He said, "You are, huh? You got any pogeey bait?" Pogeey bait is candy. No, if we'd only known. We'd bring you all you wanted. He said what else have you guys got? We emptied our pockets of cigarettes, money, whatever we had. He said, "Okay. The guns are down there. Take the first right and the first left, and it's right in there." We do, and we find all kinds of guns. We tied up bundles of them, and used the gun straps to tighten them off so we could carry these things back to the boat. So we went get back to the boat, and we load the boat, and there are so many guns. One guy is lost back there, and he's yelling. The watch goes by, and as soon as the officer is gone, here he comes walking out with his guns.

We rode back to the ship, and we saw the lights in our eyes. Somebody had found one of the sampans missing. The master at arms were running up and down the deck. One of the guys jumped on the anchor chain and fell in. When he gets up there, he's all wet, and they follow his footprints right down to his bunk. We went to the rear of the ship, where the big turrets were. The first guy that went up, he lowered a rope, and I think we got about four bundles up. Which was about forty or forty-five guns. He dropped them down into the hold and made a hell of a racket. The guy that was sleeping down there, he just threw some rope underneath there, and then all the guns fell on the rope. That's how we got our guns. They didn't even know we had them, until somebody shot a gun one night. Then they found out.

The next day we have to face court martial. But they didn't want to report that we stole a sampan. You're not supposed to have non-regulation stuff tied up alongside the ship. We didn't know that then, but we found out after, that was probably one of the reasons why they didn't give us a court martial. They give us a deck court martial and they sentenced us to be restricted to the ship until it reached Hawaii. It wasn't on our record.

They promised they would store your gun, we would package it for you, we'd ship to your home when we got to the States. That's what they promised us. Which they did. I was very hesitant to turn mine in. I had mine down in the sump pump room. If they find it, they'd confiscate it and I'd have nothing. At least, they'd made a promise. They give you a sheet of paper and you sign it, and you give them your gun. And when I got home, it came.

Marino: Did you miss the Navy at all after you got out?

Russo: When we came back to the States, we came into San Francisco. Then we went down to San Pedro, and from there I went on leave back home. We took a car cross country to Chicago and then took a train the rest of the way. AAA had drivers that would drive you for fifty bucks apiece. The ship went around through the Panama Canal and up to Philadelphia. After my leave I went to Philadelphia, and that's where I got discharged. They tried to talk me into staying, of course. I said, no, I want to be discharged. I was sick of drinking beer, and bars and everything else. I said I got to get my life back together again. I signed it and got my pay and I walked out of the Philadelphia Navy Yard to begin the rest of my life. Which has been a very good life for me.

Marino: What did you learn from your Navy experience that affected your life?

Russo: I understood a little more. About life, about war, and there's a lot of goodness in people. I thought the officers treated men very well. I had a bad experience with one officer, but most of the time the officers were very good to the men. The Navy was very good to us. They fed us well, took care of us, were concerned about our feelings--like having us go alongside the ship to witness the surrender. They're human, too, you know. They were mad,

too. So that's what you learn--that there's two sides to every story. And you never really know all of it. I always felt in my mind after that, if I did a good job, I would be recognized.

Marino: Do you think being in the war made you more ambitious?

Russo: It does make you grow up. You come out an adult. I wanted to go to college. I finished my high school in a year--I did three years of high school in one year.

Transcribed by:
Diane Diekman
CAPT, USN (ret)
25 January 2014