

# John LaFalce

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WEBB: And we are going to talk to Mr. LaFalce about your experiences in World War II, as a part of the [US] Navy. So welcome to the Oral History. Let's just start, if you don't mind, by talking a little bit about growing up. I know you were born in New York.

LaFalce: In Poughkeepsie, New York.

WEBB: What was it like growing up?

LAFALCE: Well, growing up, in a large family was an experience that I didn't pay much attention to when I was a child. It was just something that was happening. And I didn't pay any attention to the fact we were eleven children in one apartment. You know, back then at that young age, I remember, probably at the age of about three or so that I have recollections of some experiences that I've had down in that apartment. Now, I was born on a street called Perry Street. And I don't remember that at all. Then we moved to Main Street which was not too far from where we were. There, my recollection pops in. We lived on this Main Street which was sort of the crest of a hill that went down near the railroad station and the river, the Hudson River. We'd go into the front door. I remember, and then we would walk up a set of stairs. And then our apartment was on the second floor. And the backyard was a very small area as I remember. And when we went to the left, we went down an alley way that brought us to a street called Clover Street. And right on the right side of Clover Street in the alley way was a grocery store where my mother used to do her shopping. Back then, because my mother and father were illiterate people from Italy but, they were the most loving parents, I think anybody could ever have. And they raised a family of eleven: two girls and nine boys. I was the youngest of the pack. I don't know if you want me to go into details about experiences there.

WEBB: You can.

LAFALCE: Anyway...These are things that stick out in my mind. First of all, in that apartment we had one bathroom. And that's where we learned how to dance. [Laughs]. Talking about waiting...wow! But you know we never paid attention to that at that time. As we got older, then we said, "Wow, eleven people, one bathroom." But it didn't enter our minds at all, back then. At least it didn't enter my mind. But I remember my mom sent me down to get some Rinso for

her laundry and she said, "John, just go down." Because she spoke in Italian to us, this is kind of strange. We could understand her, we were able to understand her, and we spoke very little Italian back to her, we spoke mainly in English. And that is kind of strange. But nevertheless, she told me to go down and get some Rinse-O and I had to go down the alley way to the store. So, she said hurry because I need it right away. So I was running down the alley way and I didn't see my sister Mary coming and I bumped into her and I fell over. And Mary said, "Where are you going in such a hurry?" I said, "Well, Mom wanted me to get something. I forgot what it was." But on the way down, I forgot to tell you I was saying, "Rinse-O, Rinse-O, Rinse-O." So I wouldn't forget. My memory is not much better now. But nevertheless, I bumped into her and kind of fell over. She said, "Where are you going so fast?" I said, "Mom wanted me to get something and I forgot what it was." And she said, "You were saying Rinse-O." [Laughs]. So that's right. So I continued down and got that Rinse-O. All of that sticks out in my head. I also remember a friend bringing me some boots for the winter weather. They had boots leftover from their younger one and gave them to me. And putting them on and sitting in a chair next to the stove. We had a low-coal stove there, a wood stove, whatever. And one other thing that stuck out that was kind of interesting to me, to this day: our children have so much. You know, come Christmas time, especially there is not enough we can do for them with toys and stuff like that. Well, I remember my sister, Helen, and this was Christmas Eve, and she said, "John, Santa Claus is going to be coming." She said, "Let's hurry up, but you've gotta be in bed." So, she said, "Let's get washed up real fast and let's get you to bed." So she took me to the bathroom there, and got me washed up. When we finished, she says, "Oh, Santa Claus already came! And he left you a present!" Wow. So it was a little tiny, one carved train. It didn't have any crank on it for it to move. I had to push it. And I was so thrilled with that train. With that present. I couldn't believe it. I just get emotional all over some of those things and how things have changed so much. But anyway, it wasn't long. Quite soon after that, we moved into a house up on a place called Fitchett Street which was a couple of miles up sort of west of that. I'm sorry, it was east of that. Going to the river, was going west. So east of where we were. It was out in a rural area. My father and brothers, my older brothers, and there was a carpenter who lived two houses from us who helped us build the house on Fitchett Street. It was a good-sized house. We had one great big room upstairs. We had three beds. So we were three guys in each bed. And the youngest of the group of three had to sleep in the middle. [laughs]. So I was the youngest of all so I was definitely in the middle. But we lived in that house. The guys slept upstairs. They had a band, a dance band. They used to rehearse the band in that same room. The three beds were over on one side. And then on the other side, there was a lot of room. We had a piano up there that they had to take apart to get up there and then put it back together again. So, they had band rehearsals up there and I could remember that they neighbors would, in the summertime, would hear them rehearse. And they would come up, because it was at the end of a street, there wasn't that much traffic at all. And they used to dance out in the street. [Laughs]. To the

rehearsing there of the...they had a dance band. They became quite good. They would play jobs for Vassar prom, the Vassar College was in Poughkeepsie. And they were hired each year to play at their prom for a number of years. So they were quite good. Anyway, we were very active in church choir. That's where we got our start, in fact.

WEBB: I was going to ask, I know music plays a major role in not only your life, but in all of your family's. I was going to ask where it started. Where did you get the interest?

LAFALCE: Yeah. It started when I lived in, I think I was still on Main Street. Yeah, I was definitely. Because my brother Tony brought me to...we had a church for the Italian folks and a church for the Irish. It was all Catholic church. But nevertheless, the Italian church was not built yet. The Irish church was. So we went to the St. Peter's School and the pastor there was a young priest. And he was a musician. He started a choir. He saw this talent in my older brothers. So he worked especially with them and developed them and taught them music. So I think that is where the music really began. With that priest. Father Joseph Moore was his name. So we all got involved in choir work. As time went on, I got involved, each of us as we grew old enough to participate in the choir, had done that. So when we moved up on Fitchett Street, we were still involved with the choir. Of course, we were a couple of miles away now from the church. And then, eventually they did build the Italian church for the Italian folks. And then built a school as well. So I started at St. Peter's school at the age of seven or so. But then when we moved to Fitchett Street, the Italian school was built. They went up as far as the 4th grade. I was in the first graduating class so by that time I was in the 4th grade. So I started at Mount Carmel School, I was in the 4th grade. And each year they would add on a grade to Grade 8. So it went from 1st grade to 8th grade and I was in the first graduating class from Mount Carmel School. And I became good friends with a fellow by the name of Tom Forsino. As we grew older, we still remained friends, very close friends. Then came...well, the war started 1941, I guess. We got bombed at Pearl Harbor. And they were drafting people. Because before that, they were over in the European side involved. But then, nevertheless were drafting people for the war. I didn't want to be drafted into the Army. They were drafting into the Army. And I thought, I was thinking of fox holes and the terrible experiences that had to be. And both my buddy Tom and I were talking about maybe getting into the Navy. That was, you know, there was a very good chance that you might not make it out of there either, but it wouldn't be like in mud and fox hole. So I thought if we had to go, we'd prefer the sea. And that's how that went.

WEBB: Let me ask you, Pearl Harbor was such an event...Do you remember what kind of effect that had on you? Or on your family; on the community?

LAFALCE: Well, it was a very sad, and terrible event for sure. But at that age and knowing that there is a chance you might be drafted. You know, at the age of sixteen and seventeen, it's not like when you are forty or fifty. I think that kind of experience should be different, must be

different. So we took it as though it was something we had to do. So we did. We went up for our physical up in, I think it was Albany, quite sure it was Albany, New York. We both passed our physical. We enlisted into the Navy, at the same time. We went to Sampson Naval Base [i.e., Sampson Naval Training Station, New York] for our boot training. As I recall, I think it was an eleven-week, I am not sure if it was eleven weeks...a boot training program. But we got involved, both of us sang in a choir. In the boot camp, we had the opportunity to sing in the church choir. We were invited because of that, we were invited to join what they called, "Ship's Company." And it gave us, I think that too lasted about...I think that too lasted about three months, as I recall. I am not positive of this time frame. You know, I am only eighty-six, but my memory is not holding up too well. So we both were in Ship's Company. And our duty was mainly to sing in the choir. But we were also assigned to the library, and we had duties there, putting books away and things of that sort.

WEBB: What was boot camp like? What kind of things did you have to do as you were going through boot camp?

LAFALCE: Well, we had to go through all of the routines of learning various kinds of details that you would be expected to do on a ship. About lines, anchors, and maintaining a ship, you know. Keeping it clean and always readiness. So we had training in putting out fires. We went through that kind of routine. I can't remember all of the little things. A number of tasks that we had to learn. And of course, we had exercise programs every day. We started out doing aerobics and all kind of running around the grind. We called it a "grinder." It was about a mile around where all of the barracks were put up there and we'd do a lot of drilling. Lot of discipline going on. But, both Tom and I were buglers in the Drum Corps before we got into the Navy. So we played bugle and they needed buglers for, you know, doing the mess call or Reveille in the morning. And then at night, used to play "Taps" when it was bedtime. So we had time to practice these bugle calls and that was a pretty good duty. We enjoyed that a lot.

WEBB: Of course, you had to be up first and you were the last person to go to bed.

LAFALCE: Yeah, that happened more than once. [Laughs]. So, nevertheless, we finally got through that Ship's Company. And that lasted...I don't know, I don't remember. Three months or something like that. Then we were assigned to an outgoing unit. We never, Tom nor I, asked to be transferred together. We never put in a request for that. It just happened, both of us for some reason or other, were transferred in outgoing unit to...I can't remember the various stations we were sent to, but it was always together. If Tom were here now, he would probably remember better than I. But eventually, we were assigned to the U.S.S. Oakland [CL-95]. It was a light cruiser.

WEBB: Let me stop you for just a minute. I've got a couple of questions I would like to ask. The first one is: You signed up for the military, how did your parents, especially take that. You've spoken, you know, it was your duty... But that doesn't necessarily mean that...

LAFALCE: Well, they were not too happy about it but they didn't stop me. In fact, I think they had to sign for permission for me to go in. It was kind of strange that three of my brothers in the end, the end result...three of us nine boys, were in the Navy and three were in the Army. And three didn't make their physical to get into this service at all but they were in defense plans-making. As I recall, they were in this factory that made Army coats. That's the way that worked out.

WEBB: Where were you in sort of the order? Were you the first one to sign up out of your brothers?

LAFALCE: No. I think I was the last one. I was the last to enter the service. I went into the service in '44, near the end of the war. It was in July of '44. So, we were in for about two years. A year and eleven months, as I recall. So we were in towards the end of the war. But nevertheless, we were involved in the Philippine liberation. And the last...because we were then, as we were getting in towards the end, and Okinawa was the very last battles that we had to...we were victorious in that as well. But that's when the kamikazes were, they were very, very active. Anyway, I was assigned...you asked me a question, I didn't know if I answered it.

WEBB: You did. You answered it exactly what I was looking for. So let's go back then, you were assigned to the U.S.S. Oakland.

LAFALCE: Yes, it was a light cruiser. Our duty...I don't really remember what the flotilla was made up of but we were assigned to a carrier task force. I think it was Task Force 38-point-something. Going out, when we left San Diego. Oh no, we left San Francisco because we went under the Golden Gate to go out. Didn't seem like much of anything. We were just going out to the war. As being a kid, seventeen-years-old...but we found out, not too long a time, that it was serious business, you know. So there were about four carriers we were assigned...we were supposed to be their protectors. We had a couple of light cruisers. I think there might have been a heavy cruiser, I am not sure about that. But we had several destroyers, smaller ships. The destroyers, most of the time, were scouts, they'd see what was going on. I was always in awe of these pilots. They can land a plane on a ship, not only that, but at night when there is no moon. We were not allowed to smoke, topside because an enemy plane could spot a cigarette. They had these planes that would come in with instrument flying that would land on this flight deck was really incredible. We lost a few planes on takeoff, during the day we could see them not hitting the wind just right and going into drink. This one carrier didn't...well they made it back. It got hit by two kamikazes; it was right off the stern. I had duty back there. I had a very

important job by the way. My job was to keep the ship afloat. I used to chip paint and paint it. I was really, very important on this ship. My station was on the fantail. That was the f-part of the ship. I just heard this explosion this one day. Looked up and sure enough the [USS] Bunker Hill [CV-17] ...I heard later that two kamikazes got it. We went out scouting around, see if we got survivors. We never thought it would make it back because it was listing [tilting to one side due to water that came into the ship] awful. See, they had...they were ready to do a strike on the mainland of Japan, but they never got one plane off. They were loaded with bombs and with fuel when the kamikazes got it. It was just one great big black plume of smoke, is all I remember. And that listing. But we heard later on that it made it back to Pearl Harbor. Those carriers, they carry, you know, 3,000-4,000 people. It is a tough experience. Then, you grow up fast when these things start to happen. One of our boys got killed accidentally during battle because the 40 millimeters were operated by either remote control from the bridge or manually. So if there is a plane coming in, an enemy plane coming in, they put it in automatic from the bridge and all the 40s [gunships] would point at it to see if we could get that down. Did you ever hear of the Sullivan brothers? The five Sullivan brothers. They were aboard the Atlantic's last ship. There were four brothers...five Sullivan brothers. I think there were five. They made a moving picture about it. They were on the same...well, that ship went down. And after that experience, they never allowed family members ever to be on the ship together again. So the five brothers were gone. But then they built a ship right away and technically the same for one exception. And that is there are 40 millimeter turrets extended beyond the side of the ship. So when they had to maneuver the ship, the 40 mm around the gun turret would move, there was room for the men to be in the back of the gun. But, on the Oakland, they made it straight across and they cut off that, so there was no room for people to get back in there. So when we went into automatic control at that time, one kid got stuck back in there and was killed. And watching a burial out to sea is very horrible experience, very horrible experience. That's one of thousands upon thousands, upon thousands, upon thousands. And war is evil. That's all I can feel. Very evil because it's a result of very few people that cause that to this day. Anyway, we got through that. Then it was shortly after that, that President Truman decided to use the atomic bomb. It was either that or lose millions of people on the Japanese side and on our side. Because they were determined they were not going to give up. They were determined, too proud. They were going to fight to the last person. And as horrible as it is to be the only nation to have used an atomic bomb, I am awfully sorry that had to be done and I am sure others are too but it saved a lot of lives on both sides to have used it. That's the way I feel. Because it would have been slaughter otherwise to go in and try to go in and invade on land. So it was right after that, the war came to an end. And then we had to go into the bay, Tokyo Bay. There were a lot of mines that were set up in that bay area. So each of the ships that went into the bay had to take on a Japanese pilot to guide us through these areas. We finally got in there, we docked alongside the [USS] Missouri. Well, alongside is a thousand feet away but

nevertheless we were alongside them and we could see the ceremonies through binoculars of the signing of the unconditional surrender.

WEBB: What was the mood like when you were watching the signing?

LAFALCE: Well, it was a pretty exciting thing there to see that we were victorious, you know. We listened to the ceremonies on a radio. It wasn't long after that that we were able to go ashore and make liberty. When we made liberty, of course the buildings were blown apart in the big city of Tokyo. We went into Tokyo there, but some buildings were only half destroyed, the large department buildings. The part that was not destroyed was open for business. So we'd walk in. But you know, it was a strange thing that I remember. When we walked down the street, the sailors would walk down the street, the Japanese people would step off and walk in the gutter so we can go by them or whatever. So we would tell them, I remember specifically, "No, you get up and you walk on the sidewalk." You know, motions. "No, you go!" I can't explain why...I don't think it was a *fear* upon them but, I don't know what it was that made them do that. Nevertheless, that's what I remember. Well, anyway after the experience in Tokyo Bay for a while, I don't recall how many weeks we were there. They wanted to use the Oakland to trans...and other kinds of tasks to do and carrying other military personnel to different places. They went to different islands and transported personnel. They had some other tasks for them. So they transferred us to a destroyer. To go back to the States. So we got on this destroyer, and we went up to Seattle. While we were in Seattle, because I had not gone through high school. I did a couple of years and dropped out and went to work. But, while I was in Seattle, I was told I could take these General Educational Development tests. So I did that. I went to the University of Washington to take these tests; I think that's where they were giving them. I was successful with that. So, when I got back to New York State, New York state did not recognize them at the time. So, I loved the music. That was my greatest interest. I went, what was called the Troy Conservatory of Music. They did not require a high school diploma. So I did the Troy Conservatory for a year and then, New York state decided to recognize the General Educational Development test and get these equivalency diploma. With my equivalency diploma, I applied at the State University of New York at Potsdam. They had a great educational...music educational program to teach music in public school. So, that's where I went and finished my schooling there. I got my bachelor's degree there and I was able to work, and I had, within ten years, I would have to get my master's to get a permanent certification, which I did. So I ended up with a master's degree there. And I just loved my work at Arlington Central School. My first job was at Hyde Park Central School. That was my first year. And then I had an opportunity to sing with the Robert Shaw Chorale. I don't know if too many people know about the Shaw Chorale, at that time it was a very famous chorus. Shaw would come up to Potsdam to conduct the chorus and orchestra and various works. Each Spring. When I met him there, I tried out for some solo works. And Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* as I recall. And I got

the lion's share of the solos in that work. And then another year I did the role of Elijah. So, a lot of wonderful things were happening for me there. And then, after my first years, I am repeating now, at Hyde Park, I tried out for the Shaw Chorale and was successful. I spent one year there. I thought getting out of that training, watching him work would help me in my school work which, it didn't. So when I got back, I got a job at the Arlington Central School and I stayed there for the rest of the time. So I did about thirty years of teaching and retired from that. But during this time, I was singing with my brothers as well. We had the Nine LaFalce Brothers. They had a dance band which was very successful, and I don't know if I mentioned this to you here. That they played some very big jobs at Vassar College being in Poughkeepsie. They were always contracted to do their proms, Vassar College proms. So they were really quite good. They had a good dance band. And then we also sang as a group, nine LaFalce Brothers. We were on the *Arthur Godfrey Show* way back then. I don't know if anybody remembers the *Arthur Godfrey Show* anymore but it was a show where they had three entertainers competing to...I think we did get some money from that. I don't recall...a hundred dollars apiece. We were on three successive mornings. I sang *Old Man River*. My brothers backed me up on that one. And we were successful there. I am repeating myself again, we were on his show for three successive mornings. We also did some recordings. We were hired by RCA Victor to do albums, no not albums, I am sorry. We did two, what they called, we did four sides, which meant two 45 RPMs, one on each of the sides. We did four songs, two records. And they set up an itinerary for us, to go around the country to promote the recordings but it had to be at our expense. And we couldn't afford it. We were all married, we all had children. So we just didn't take advantage of that. After that, after our contract had run out there, we were offered a job with Jubilee Records. With Jubilee Records, we did two albums. We did one that was a Christmas album. *Christmas with the Nine LaFalce Brothers*. We did a folk song album called, *Campfire Favorites*. Once again, we didn't promote the recordings, we just enjoyed doing them. It was a great experience. A lot of fun. And what I think is, and what other people find most remarkable about the LaFalce family, having a mother and father who were illiterate and took care of all the money matters, you know. Buying food and clothing for the kids. But where was I going with this now? The fact that we were close to the church and good values system. But we, I think, we had developed a respect for people. We developed a very high regard for people and never once ever did the brothers or anybody in the family ever get violent with another or hit, or push. *Never*. We argued a lot. Yeah, mostly about music. [laughs]. But you know, we'd have our differences but never violent. And nor my mother or father ever hit us. It was a very unusual situation with eleven kids. Even in the new house that we moved into on Fitchett Street. It had one bathroom. And then there was a toilet downstairs, I remember, so we didn't have to dance too much to wait to get into the bathroom. We are a very very close family. All through the years until our old age. And now there are just two of us remaining, my brother, Tony and myself. And I am eighty-six-years-old, and Tony is ninety-two. And it's just a beautiful

experience, we were so fortunate. And as my brother Tony would say, "John, we are not fortunate, we are blessed." That's how he would put it. Yeah, whatever.

WEBB: Well, if I can, I'd like to ask you some questions. Going back into your military service, there was a lot of downtime, I guess is the right way to say it, as you are going from the United States over to the Pacific. What kinds of things did you do onboard the U.S.S. Oakland? Were there rituals? As a musician, did you perform for the troops?

LAFALCE: Well, on board ship we sang in a choir. Otherwise, I don't remember. Well, we were not all together. So we were all in our own little area of serving. But the only musical experience that I can recall was aboard ship. And also, in basic training, in boot camp. We sang there in a choir and then we were assigned to that outgoing, rather than the Ship's Company, we sang there in a choir. Yeah, but other than that, I don't recall anything else. We'd read, we had time to read. Just kind of socialize on downtime. Not too much downtime, we were always busy working, putting line away, or chipping paint. [Laughs]

WEBB: I wondered if you were in a choir on board the ship, was it a non-denominational?

LAFALCE: Oh yeah.

WEBB: Were you singing hymns? Or were you singing popular songs?

LAFALCE: No, they were hymns for church services. You know, time creates change...over time things change all the time...obviously. Unfortunately, the times today are a little questionable, to say the least. But, back then, the church, every church I guess, had their own policies and rules. Aboard ship, there was a Protestant minister who gave the service, and we'd sing there. Now, this is not for airing, I don't think. But we sang in the choir, nevertheless. I think folks can figure out the rest. Tom and I decided in our conscience that this is the right thing to do. And talk about conscience and I don't know how to put it really, but, there was a situation that was more prevalent back then, about race. We were on this Fitchett Street, our house was at the end near the woods, near the end of the street but then the curved around and went up a hill. We were at the last house on that block. There was an all-white neighborhood but next to our house, there was an empty lot. Next to that was a house and then another house, and another house all the way down. A Black family moved in next door to us. And, you know, there was that feeling back then, more so, it's still terrible today. Unfortunately. But back then, it was more pronounced or whatever. And my mother said, "We are all God's children. God made us all, we are all God's children." So she set the tone for us. Anyway, for our family. Well, it came the time where my mom. Because my sister, Mary, became a nun. She was a nun since she was seventeen years old. I don't know how old she was when my mom was getting close to her...well the late eighties, close to ninety. Well, maybe she might have been just ninety years old. Mother Superior, my sister's Mother Superior at the convent. She said, "You know Mary,

you should have your mother come down to the infirmary here, so we can keep an eye on her, and take care of her." My sister Helen was with her, and she was up there in her years. So, it happened. My sister and my mother were invited to go down to the convent. And before they moved, I can't remember his name now. The gentleman from the Black family. And my mother became close friends. I remember they walked in the middle of this empty lot to see one another. And they embraced, and they said, "I'm going to miss you." That's how beautiful that was. My mother was an incredible woman. My father was an incredible man. I think about them all the time. I think about all of my family, my brother Frank, my brother Joe, my brother Louis, my brother Pat, my brother Jim, my sister Mary, my brother Tony, because Helen was the first one at the top, and then Mike, and Carmen. And I was the last one. But, I am very very fortunate guy to have had, I've had a beautiful life. Modest, beautiful. It's sad that there is so much greed going on now. But there was no greed in that family of ours. We didn't have that much but we shared what we had.

WEBB: Makes a huge difference. How did you...or were you able to communicate with your brothers while you were on board the ship? Were you able to write to family members? Were you able to receive mail?

LAFALCE: Yes, we did. But...I don't...I recall only one time reading...oh no, this was when we were back to the States. I think it was in Seattle. I am not positive about that. I don't have much recollection about writing letters, really. But I remember, I used to kid around, I used to say, "We are gonna go get our mail at the next buoy." [Laughs] When we were out in the middle of the ocean. I don't have much recollection about that.

WEBB: So you were not necessarily able to keep track of the other brothers that were in service?

LAFALCE: No. That is correct. That is correct. I didn't know what was happening.

WEBB: As close as you are with your family, I think that would be a fairly difficult...

LAFALCE: Yeah, you know, of course it was in my mind, but we did not communicate about it. I wondered how they were doing. Oh yeah, I recall that. But we, each one of the people in the service had a situation that turned out good for them. For example, Tony was on this ship, ready to go through the Canal. They were going to go through the Pacific side, I believe. And the ship had a problem. Did you talk to Tony about this?

WEBB: We did. We interviewed Tony.

LAFALCE: I may be overlapping some here. It was a strange thing that all of the people on the ship had to get off. So they were all off the ship. But the way Tony explained it to me, they were

at one point, they were all in the line. And Tony was at the very end of one of the lines. Some I don't know if Tony asked them, I think Tony asked them, "Do you have a band on this base?" The guy said, "Yeah. Why do you ask?" And he says, "I play sax." He says, "Really?" So they needed a sax player. And he ended up there, so he didn't go back, he didn't have to go into battle. And he was a really great musician. Tony was a very fine musician. He was pretty much the leader of our Nine LaFalce Brothers band. He not only got to play in a band, but they promoted him to band leader. [laughs] in the short order. He knew his theory, music theory, he had a great ear for improvising. And so they took him on, and then my brother Frank worked in the post office when he was a civilian. When he got in, they need postal workers in the Navy. So they assigned him to a post office there and he didn't have to see battle. My brother Louis was a barber. And they needed barbers. So he made out there. My brother Mike went over to Europe. And he was ready to get into battle. They were ready to send his platoon or whatever they called it, I don't recall the details of where it was. But he played trumpet. And he used to play trumpet with some group, I believe. And he also sang with the choir probably. But they were playing football and he fell and hurt his knee badly. So they had to send him to the hospital and it was a really serious injury. So his platoon went on. And he stayed back behind. And they had a very bad experience from what he heard. But he was okay. Then they sent him back to England or wherever. And my brother Carmen was in the Navy. He saw some activity there. He was a signalman. I don't remember where he was located. If it was in the Atlantic or the Pacific, I really don't remember that. So that was, Frank, was in the Navy. Carmen was in the Navy. I was in the Navy. Tony was in the Army. Mike was in the Army and Louis was in the Army. My other three brothers, I think I mentioned to you before, they didn't make their physical and they worked in the defense factories.

WEBB: How easy was it after the war? You had, music really has a driving force in your life. How easy was it to get back into civilian life? Something that we hear a lot is about the post-traumatic stress, shell-shocked kind of thing. Was it fairly easy for you because of music?

LAFALCE: I think music was a salvation big time but it [the war] left an effect on my being which didn't help me. Although I enjoyed success in my music with the Robert Shaw Chorale, singing with my brothers, and doing successful work and I love the kids in school. Junior and Senior High. I ended up at a Junior High. I never knew why I was getting dizzy spells now and then. Especially when things were quiet, like at a baccalaureate program, very serious, nothing going on, nothing to occupy my mind otherwise. I had to be front and center to direct a chorus. I used to have a panic attack almost...but got very dizzy. Well, this happened when I was doing school work, directing school. So I would talk to my principal, Mr. Nighthead. I said, "Mr. Nighthead would you do me a favor please and sit in the front row during the concert because I am having a problem with dizziness." He said, "John, you'll be okay but of course, I'll sit there." And that helped me. With the Shaw Chorale, it was a three-month, first half and then two months, the

second half. It was around Christmas time; it was the end of the first half. I was fine for maybe the first month and a half, halfway through the tour. I was fine. It was all new, new experience, you know. My mind was occupied. But then, it was the same program each time. And I was right in the center of twenty-nine singers. Right smack in the center, up the second and third level, I was totally exposed to the audience and our audiences were big. 3,000 and above in those venues we did. I was fine for the first several weeks. And all of a sudden, I had a dizzy spell, but I didn't pay any attention to it... and I sang. The next night, the same thing happened. And the third night, it happened again and then I was looking for it. And it made it worse. So when we were down in Tucson, we were traveling around, I went to a doctor. He examined me thoroughly. He took my blood pressure; he examined me thoroughly. He said your blood pressure is low, maybe that's causing it. Drink a little wine, it might help. Maybe do some exercising, get your blood circulating. I did that. Didn't help at all. I sent home for glasses. I was wearing glasses, but I don't know why because I never used them. The doctor said I needed glasses, maybe he needed more money, I don't know. Whatever. [laughs]. But I got glasses. So I sent home for glasses, put those on. That didn't help. Then we were up in Utah, we sang at the Mormon Tabernacle there. And I told Shaw, I had a talk with him. We took a walk around the Tabernacle and he was speaking to me, and he said, "It's just nerves. You'll be okay." So at the end, he said, "Come upstairs, I'll give you a little shot of sherry." He said, "I take sherry before every performance." He said, "This will help ya." So I took a shot of sherry, it didn't help me. I was still looking for that awful experience of falling over and being a spectacle. So, I approached Shaw after, I said, "Robert, is there any chance you could put me at the end of the row? I feel more comfortable on the end so I can get out if I have a problem." He said, "John, I can't do that because I place every sound of the chorus in specific places to get a certain texture of sound. So I can't move you." So then, we were getting near the end of that first part of the tour. We were in Binghamton, New York. So I did approach him and I said, "Robert, I can't come back for the second half. I can't put myself through this." So I had those experiences and I never knew what caused it until I went to the VA for physical checkup. And I went to a psychiatrist. And he asked me what I did on the ship. And I told him I was in, what they call, the handling room, a 5-inch gun. We had twin mounds. And in the handling room, I could imagine what they were experiencing down in the magazine or any place on the ship. The effects that kind of an experience has on your brain. So my psychiatrist says, You have an anxiety problem. You have the PTSD [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder] and that will stay with you forever. "He says, "You'll never get rid of that." Because when I first got out, I'll never forget, the nightmares I had. I never paid any attention to what caused it. Back then, there was not much about the effects on a combatant. They never talked about it. So I never paid any attention to it. I had an ear problem that happened on ship. They had a record of my being in sick bay with an ear infection. They treated me when I got out through...they gave me authorization to get my ears tended to through the VA. But otherwise, as far as the PTSD, that was not found out until recently, about

a year ago, two years ago! So the doctor says...these nightmares that I had, they lasted quite a long while. I'd be in bed, fall asleep, dead sleep. Then, something came over me. My body got into a sort of cramp. My entire body was into a cramp. I couldn't break out of the cramp. It was scary so I tried to move my finger to see if I can get something started to wake me up. I couldn't move my finger. Then I tried my toes, and I was successful. I moved the toe. And then it broke the spell and then I woke up. That happened every night for a long time. And I said, "What can I do about this?" So one night, I tried sleeping with the light on, and that helped. It must have been the light going through the lids that did something positive for me. And I was okay. But when I am active, I am alright. But if I am still or in a solemn place. To this day, I cannot go to a theater or a church and sit in the middle. I get a panic attack and I got to leave. So any time, I have to go to a theater, it's not very often. I have to make sure I am near an aisle seat, near a door. So this doctor is right, I just can't shake it. Eighty-six years old. Yeah, but anyway. A lot of kids went through that.

WEBB: Well, kids now are going through it too, unfortunately.

LAFALCE: Terrible.

WEBB: Well, let's talk about something a little happier. How did you meet your wife?

LAFALCE: Well, I met her at college. She was in the music program as well. Great voice, also. She would have been with the Shaw Chorale except for two reasons. One: Shaw was not looking for altos, that's what she was. And she was also pregnant with our first child. And the doctor said you wouldn't be able to go on the tour anyway. It was a bus tour, yeah. But, I am sorry your question again?

WEBB: Just how you met her.

LAFALCE: Oh yeah, Joan. Right. So we sang in this select chorus together called the Collegiate Choral, Collegiate Singers. And we toured. We did quite a bit of touring together with the Collegiate Singers. But we didn't really date until the last month of our last year. We were in an opera together, a summer workshop in *La Boheme*. She was Musetta and I was Marcello. Played two of the leads there. Then there was Mini and Rodolfo. There are four leads in that one. And that summer, we got very close, and we got dating. She had accepted a job in Rochester. And I had accepted a job in Hyde Park. So we were falling in love and we wanted, you know someday we will get married. So she called her superintendent in Rochester and explained the situation and he said, "No problem. You'd be exonerated from your contract." So then we taught at Hyde Park together and at the end of the year, we got married. We decided to get married. And then I went with Shaw, she stayed home for that duration, three months, you know. The experience with Shaw was invaluable.

WEBB: You've talked so much about the importance of family. You have...?

LAFALCE: I have five children. Incredible kids. And they too, never get into it. I don't even remember them getting into an argument. Maybe when they were little kids, they might have. But even to this day, they communicate all the time on the phone you know. Because Maureen is still in Poughkeepsie with her family. And we visit her. And she will come out to Arizona and visit us. My oldest daughter is up in Portland, Oregon. She is teaching school. And my, Diane, another daughter, she is in education, as well. She is a principal of an elementary school there in Chandler, Arizona. And John is an assistant director of a company called Stars Stand Together and Recover. He is into that program. He is doing very well with them. My youngest daughter, Renee, does voiceovers. She does videos for commercials. She is keeping busy with that. Maureen is at the Dutchess Community College. She is a lead programmer, or I can't remember her real title. She is in programming computers and network for the entire campus. She has been into that for a long time. Who did I live out? Linda, Maureen, Diane, Renee, and John. Yeah, five of them. They are incredible kids.

WEBB: That's really cool. I do have one last question. I don't know...you were a music teacher for sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds, maybe slightly younger than that?

LAFALCE: Yeah, the youngest that I had was in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. We started with 7<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> at the beginning. I might have taught some 7<sup>th</sup> graders in general music. I think New York State started their requirements for taking a semester of music, semester of art, semester of shop, etc. In the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, it might have been 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>. But I had...I mainly worked with 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> graders. And then I had the high school chorus. But the 9<sup>th</sup> graders were freshman in high school but we were all in one building. But then we got bigger, they had to build a high school. But we still had the 9<sup>th</sup> graders in our building. So I mainly worked with the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> graders. They were so good. Really. And the quality of their work, that we used to tour. And we would do other schools' assembly programs. Outside of our district as well and for clubs for the Rotary Club and stuff like that.

WEBB: Did you ever have to give any of your students' advice when they were drafted, or joined the military, or anything like that? Once you were out of the military, you were...?

LAFALCE: No, I never got involved with advising them about the military. But, a few of my children would come to me with their problems. They could have gone down to the... guidance counselor. But some of them would come to me and confide in me and ask for guidance and stuff. There were, now and then. But, I'll tell you something very interesting and strange that happened to me. This was in 2011, a couple of years back. Two of my students, they ended up after getting out of school, getting married. And they were into music too. One has his doctorate in music, and he was a dean of a college in Boston University. And she also taught in

university, his wife. Bill Dieter and Julie Harry-Dieter, Really great people, good musicians. And then there was another one who has several doctorates in physics, and he was one of the founder of Homeland Security. Well, anyways. Julie and Bill came, they lived in Scottsdale, Arizona for a while. I won't get into any of the details, it would take too long. So they knew we were there. We got together; we had lunch. And one thing led to another, about our experiences when they were kids. They said, "Maybe we should have a reunion." And lo and behold, it came to pass. They got this thing organized and then they wanted to sing some of the songs they sang then. So they asked me and I had some input about the songs that would be best for them. And I made, I still have them in my library at home. I cleaned them up and Photoshop and made copies of them and sent them to them. And they sent them to everybody. Facebook is what got us together. So lo and behold, the bottom line is the reunion occurred on July 23, 2011. About eighty-five or ninety kids now in their sixties showed up. And they sang and it was just..."awesome" doesn't explain it. It was such an honor for me to have them come back. But anyway, they had their music a couple of months in advanced. This happened a couple of months before July. They had time to learn their music. When they got together, they sang incredible. And somebody filmed it and sent it to me. It was too long a film but I ended it into three smaller segments into about seven minutes each. And now, it's on YouTube. It's on Facebook and YouTube. It was a very happy time.

WEB: That's awesome as you said. Powerful. It's a really nice.

LAFALCE: Well, music is a very powerful force, I think.

WEBB: It is.

LAFALCE: That's what caused this whole thing.

WEBB: One last question for you. Did you remain close to Tom?

LAFALCE: Oh, to this day. I was on the phone with him just last week. He is in an institution for care. He has had physical problems. Quite a bit of his life, later part of his life. And he is in a beautiful place. I talk with him on the phone, and he is doing better, yeah. He is doing better. So we keep in touch, to this day.

WEBB: Well, that's good. Well, sir, I want to thank you for taking the time to talk to us today. You have a remarkable story.

LAFALCE: Thank you.

WEBB: I am glad that we captured it for others to hear.

[1:19:29]