

Dartmouth College Oral History Project
The War Years at Dartmouth
Interview with Giulio Pontecorvo '45
By Mary Stelle Donin
September 25, 2010

- DONIN: Today is Saturday, September 25, 2010. My name is Mary Donin. I'm here in Rauner Library with Professor Giulio Pontecorvo, Dartmouth class of 1945, and Tuck 1947. Okay, Professor, I guess the first thing we'd like to hear from you is how is it you ended up coming to Dartmouth? Were you a legacy, as they say? Was there a family member that preceded you here?
- PONTECORVO: No. I just knew about the college and had had it recommended to me. Just made an arbitrary decision somewhere in high school.
- DONIN: Had you looked at other colleges?
- PONTECORVO: No, that was not the thing to do in those days.
- DONIN: Right. People were not shopping around.
- PONTECORVO: No, that's right. That wasn't. There were no SATs, there were no other—
- DONIN: Right. Did you have siblings that had gone to college before you?
- PONTECORVO: No.
- DONIN: So you were the first?
- PONTECORVO: I was the only.
- DONIN: The only, okay. And Dartmouth was the only place you were interested in then—in attending.
- PONTECORVO: Yeah, I would have done somewhere else if I hadn't gotten in here. This was where I wanted to come.
- DONIN: And at that point, had you already realized that you wanted to be a doctor? A doctor. What am I saying? Be in education. I was reading somebody else's...

PONTECORVO: No. I wasn't certain of that.

DONIN: What was your major?

PONTECORVO: Economics.

DONIN: And so did you come up and look at Dartmouth before you actually got here, or did you just arrive on, you know, whatever day it was—

PONTECORVO: Oh, I guess I had looked at it, yes. Once.

DONIN: Had traveled up here, which was—

PONTECORVO: Yes.

DONIN: You grew up where?

PONTECORVO: In New Jersey.

DONIN: So it was a bit of a trip.

PONTECORVO: Yeah.

DONIN: Yeah. And so were you sort of an outdoorsy person? Was that what appealed to you about Dartmouth?

PONTECORVO: No, not particularly, no.

DONIN: So, when you got here, did you know anybody else from your part of—

PONTECORVO: A few people I knew who were here, yes.

DONIN: Students who were here.

PONTECORVO: Yes.

DONIN: And this was, let's see, the fall of 1941.

PONTECORVO: That's correct.

DONIN: So, it was President Ernest Martin Hopkins.

PONTECORVO: Yes.

DONIN: And the matriculation ceremony took place, I guess, in Parkhurst. Is that right? Do you remember that?

PONTECORVO: It took place in the end building over there. That's Parkhurst.

DONIN: Yeah.

PONTECORVO: Yeah.

DONIN: And he—

PONTECORVO: Shook everybody's hand.

DONIN: Yeah. What kind of an impression did he make on you?

PONTECORVO: Well, he was a very warm, friendly gentleman.

DONIN: Was he? Good. And where were you living the first year? Do you remember what dorm?

PONTECORVO: Middle Fayerweather.

DONIN: And was it a good roommate that you had?

PONTECORVO: Yes.

DONIN: Successful? You stayed friends through your time here?

PONTECORVO: Yes.

DONIN: And what did you find that your life was like other than in the classroom that first semester, which was the first—or the only time, I guess, you all—class of '45—had a normal—

PONTECORVO: Well, after December it was quite different.

DONIN: Yeah. But you did all the sort of traditional Dartmouth things that first semester.

PONTECORVO: Yes.

DONIN: There was bonfire night, or whatever they called it?

PONTECORVO: Yeah, the usual nonsense, yeah.

DONIN: And, of course, you were too young to be in a fraternity at that point—

PONTECORVO: Yes.

DONIN: So what was your social life? Do you remember? Was it mostly in the dormitory with your pals?

PONTECORVO: Yes.

DONIN: And did you engage in any intramural sports or other extracurricular activities?

PONTECORVO: Yeah. Well, I guess we played touch football and I was on the freshman—went out for the freshman basketball team. But they had real players, so...

DONIN: What does that mean?

PONTECORVO: They had a number of people who could really play.

DONIN: Really good?

PONTECORVO: Three or four. And the rest of us just hung around.

DONIN: Those were the glory days of basketball, I understand.

PONTECORVO: Yes.

DONIN: Forty-three, forty-four.

PONTECORVO: Yes.

DONIN: Yeah.

PONTECORVO: Forty-two.

DONIN: Forty-two. So, did you have any sort of memorable professors that first semester that made an impression on you?

PONTECORVO: Well, there was an English professor named Cox, who was an extremely able guy, and another French professor named Raul —

oh, what was his name? I can't think of it now. I'll think of it in a minute—and they were the—the economics department was not very strong. There were other—nobody else that comes to mind.

DONIN: And so what are your memories of Sunday, December 7, 1941?

PONTECORVO: Well, I was out with somebody for a walk, and I came back, and someone said that the war had started. And I realized that that was going to change everything.

DONIN: And was everyone sort of gung ho to sign up and go enlist?

PONTECORVO: No.

DONIN: No?

PONTECORVO: Some were. Some, I think, just wanted to leave college, and some were gung ho, and some were going to wait and see what happened.

DONIN: And what did you decide to do?

PONTECORVO: Well, I waited. I went in the army in the spring of '43. I signed up in the army reserves. I couldn't get in the air corps because of my eyes, so I waited and signed up in the army.

DONIN: So, you were here—you had completed quite a few semesters before you—

PONTECORVO: Three, four semesters. Four, maybe part of five. I don't know. Something like that.

DONIN: Because I guess they started running classes year-round.

PONTECORVO: In the summertime, yeah.

DONIN: Starting in that summer of '42.

PONTECORVO: Yeah.

DONIN: So you were here sort of full time through the—did you say spring of '43?

PONTECORVO: Yeah.

DONIN: Yeah. And so when you left, was it your intention to come back here whenever you got discharged?

PONTECORVO: Yes. I wanted to finish my education.

DONIN: And so how long were you gone? How long were you serving?

PONTECORVO: Three years.

DONIN: So you didn't get back here 'til '46?

PONTECORVO: Spring of '46.

DONIN: Right. Dartmouth must have been crowded at that point.

PONTECORVO: Overwhelmed.

DONIN: Was it?

PONTECORVO: Yes, a mess.

DONIN: In what way?

PONTECORVO: So many people, they didn't know what to do with them.

DONIN: Yeah. Where did you find a place to stay?

PONTECORVO: Well, they offered me a chance to get a degree and also get a degree from Tuck School in a year-and-a-half if I would agree to do it, and I did, which was a mistake on my part. But, I did. And so I had a place down at Tuck School.

DONIN: Why was that a mistake?

PONTECORVO: Well, when I finally got to graduate school, I had to go back and learn what I hadn't learned here.

DONIN: Did you feel like you were sort of rushed through it, or there just weren't enough courses?

PONTECORVO: Well, there weren't—There was a question of the faculty. There was a question of the enormous crowd of people: the people who came back from the war; there were the people who they admitted; there

were people who came back from the military—the V-12 program here—and so they were just overwhelmed and they didn't have the facilities.

DONIN: Nor the faculty.

PONTECORVO: Yeah, that's right.

DONIN: Did you find you were a different kind of student when you got back?

PONTECORVO: Not particularly.

DONIN: You were the same.

PONTECORVO: Yeah.

DONIN: A lot of men have said that they found they were more mature and more focused.

PONTECORVO: Well, we were certainly more mature. We had been in the army for three years and had been in France and Germany, so I knew a lot of things I didn't know when I left here, but that wouldn't—I don't see how that affected the academic side of things. Made me more critical, maybe.

DONIN: What was the rest of your life here like when you came back? I mean, did you—

PONTECORVO: Yeah, I was in a fraternity and I was in Tuck School. You know, there were lots of people and lots of activity.

DONIN: Did I read somewhere—You were the treasurer at SAE. Is that right? Were you the treasurer?

PONTECORVO: Yes.

DONIN: So you joined SAE when you got back, then, in '46?

PONTECORVO: Yes.

DONIN: And did that become the sort of center of your social life?

PONTECORVO: No, I wouldn't—maybe. The only thing I was requested to do in that position was buy better whiskey. [Laughter] So, you know, it wasn't exactly a big deal.

DONIN: And were you—Did you still feel as if you were a member of the class of '45, even though everybody was all dispersed?

PONTECORVO: Yeah. You know, there were many '45s who came back, and then, of course, there were all kinds of new people and different people, and people from the class of '44 and so on. And then the new admits, and so, you know, it was a very much mixed up place and the students were a lot more experienced, you know, particularly the ones who had been in the military.

DONIN: And there was a new president. You had John Dickey then as president.

PONTECORVO: Yeah.

DONIN: And did you ever get to interact with him?

PONTECORVO: Oh, I listened to a speech he made once. Rather frenetic. What he was going to do and accomplish. And that was my only contact with him.

DONIN: This was too early for the Great Issues course to have started.

PONTECORVO: Well, he was talking about it, but it didn't register with us because first of all, we were in Tuck School, and secondly it wasn't implemented yet, so we didn't know what it was.

DONIN: Right. And how do you feel the sense of belonging to the class of '45 was impacted by all of you being sort of scattered around and spread all over the place with different schedules, and no graduation ceremony, and all that?

PONTECORVO: I can't answer that question. I imagine it was significantly different than the class of '35, for example. But, you know, it was just what was happening then and we had all been in the army and we knew how things were and how things changed. And there was no particular great class unanimity at that point, but that was because the college wasn't unified in any way. The college was all over the place. It had eighteen-year-old freshmen, and by that time we were

twenty-two and had been away for three or four years defending. And, you know, it was a different place.

DONIN: That's a challenge to mainstream such a diverse group of students through the same system.

PONTECORVO: Well—

DONIN: As you say, you know, you've got young eighteen-year-olds just out of high school sitting in some classes with—not you, but with some—

PONTECORVO: It was some people, yeah. It was very—it took a couple of years, I imagine until 1950, at least, to shake it out. I don't know; I wasn't part of it, but it would take that long, yeah.

DONIN: But it seems that your class has, you know, given—look at the group that's here now, sixty-five years later. You've managed to recover from whatever splintering there was during the war to have some—

PONTECORVO: Well, I think identification with the college, and, you know, what you did when you were twenty-two, you remember. That's all.

DONIN: Right.

PONTECORVO: I don't think there's anything very unique about that.

DONIN: And do you feel you were treated differently on campus when you returned, having served in the war?

PONTECORVO: No.

DONIN: By faculty or students? No?

PONTECORVO: No. We may have acted differently, but we weren't treated differently. Don't forget, this class was the largest class ever admitted, and so it was big to begin with and they had managerial problems then, and then the war started and the managerial problems got much worse and all of a sudden, I think it was probably the spring of '42, they instituted sometime in that spring the V-12 program. So, you know, the place changed very rapidly.

- DONIN: Well, it was almost sort of co-run by the Defense Department alongside Hopkins. I mean—
- PONTECORVO: Yeah. I'm sure that's the case.
- DONIN: Official functions show photos of President Hopkins standing right next to some, you know, general or whatever, who was in charge of—
- PONTECORVO: Admiral.
- DONIN: Admiral, right.
- PONTECORVO: I wouldn't—Well, you know, the undergraduates didn't really participate in that kind of activity at that level.
- DONIN: Well, the first group here were all naval officers. I think they were training the—
- PONTECORVO: Yeah. Were they naval officers or were they just training to be naval officers? I had the impression they were just training to be naval officers.
- DONIN: Well, this was before the V-12. It was another group that was just here for—
- PONTECORVO: Well, I wasn't aware of that. It was the first time females were on the campus, in the V-12 program.
- DONIN: Right, right.
- PONTECORVO: Yeah. I was aware of that, but...
- DONIN: So when you left here in '43, this was going on, this training—this military training.
- PONTECORVO: Oh, yeah. It was by far the largest group on the campus by that time. There were very few—I mean, I enlisted in the army reserve and when I got called up, there were very few—outside of my group—there were very few who were just students here. Some pre-med, maybe; a few—
- DONIN: Civilians. Right.

PONTECORVO: Right.

DONIN: Did you mix much with the military training people that were here?

PONTECORVO: No, not at all.

DONIN: In the classroom? Were they in your classes?

PONTECORVO: No, they weren't in the classrooms. They were not in the classrooms at all.

DONIN: And they weren't in the same dormitories as you. They were housed separately.

PONTECORVO: Oh, no. They were housed elsewhere, yes.

DONIN: Yeah. By themselves. So there was really sort of two colleges going on here at the same time.

PONTECORVO: Yeah. And the one college was shrinking rapidly and the other one was growing.

DONIN: Right. Well, they say that's the way these places had to operate in order to keep their doors open.

PONTECORVO: Yeah.

DONIN: So, you came back after VE Day and VJ Day, so you have no memories of that. Did you find that— Sorry, I lost my train of thought. Part-time job: did you have to have a part-time when you were here?

PONTECORVO: Yeah. For a while, I guess, in '42, I worked in the inn part time. Yeah.

DONIN: Did most kids have jobs? Was that your sense?

PONTECORVO: A lot. I wouldn't say most. I don't know. You know, I don't have any numbers on that, but I would say a fair number had some kind of jobs. When I came back, of course, I had the GI Bill.

DONIN: Right. That was a big help to everybody.

PONTECORVO: Yeah.

- DONIN: Big help. And there were a lot of married couples that came back. Didn't a lot of the—
- PONTECORVO: Yes.
- DONIN: —the guys come back and get put up in Sachem and Wigwam?
- PONTECORVO: Sachem, Wigwam, yes.
- DONIN: And did you find that you were socializing with other people that had just gotten out of the service, or with your SAE brothers, or...?
- PONTECORVO: Yeah. Well, I wouldn't say there were any great distinctions made. Some, probably in terms of age. I would go skiing with people at Tuck School, for example, and they were all my age or had been in the military for the most part. I presume some had not. But, you know, there was no great distinction. The freshman were always a little different here. They weren't allowed in the fraternities, so they would have been a little different at that time, but I wasn't aware of that much then.
- DONIN: Now, did you get to go to a graduation ceremony when you finished at Tuck?
- PONTECORVO: Yeah, there was a graduation ceremony, as a matter of fact.
- DONIN: Was there?
- PONTECORVO: The only time I ever graduated from college, yes.
- DONIN: Was it up on the Bema? Were they doing it up on the Bema?
- PONTECORVO: No, no. It was down on the—
- DONIN: Oh, it was a Tuck graduation, of course.
- PONTECORVO: Yeah.
- DONIN: So this was '47, right?
- PONTECORVO: Yeah.

- DONIN: Right. So, things were sort of getting back to normal. Beginning, anyway.
- PONTECORVO: Yeah.
- DONIN: And did you find that you had—Were you able to get a job as soon as you graduated?
- PONTECORVO: Yeah, I got married and was able to get a job.
- DONIN: But your wife wasn't up here when you were at Tuck, was she?
- PONTECORVO: No, she was in Oregon; she was in California.
- DONIN: So, let's see. And had all the sort of traditional activities been resumed by the time you got back in '46? The, you know, Green Key, and Winter Carnival, and Homecoming, and all that kind of thing? Had that—
- PONTECORVO: Well, they had a Winter Carnival. I don't know about the others, but there was a Winter Carnival in '46.
- DONIN: Right. In the—
- PONTECORVO: Yeah.
- DONIN: So Winter Carnival is in February. Right, okay. Yeah.
- PONTECORVO: Yeah.
- DONIN: That's probably—I don't know that they gave them up at all. I mean, maybe Winter Carnival went on throughout. I don't know.
- PONTECORVO: No, I don't know about that. I think they gave them up. I don't think there was one in '42.
- DONIN: And I know they closed the fraternities, as well, I think, for a period of time.
- PONTECORVO: Yeah, I don't remember.
- DONIN: There was not enough people to keep them open.
- PONTECORVO: Yeah.

DONIN: So it was an experience that was obviously shared by so many of your classmates that you don't feel that—I mean, what's your take on your undergraduate experience here, the way it was chopped up?

PONTECORVO: Well, when I heard the war was on I knew this was going to happen, so it really—You know, I was emotionally adjusted to the fact that this was going to really mess up the place and that things were not going to be as one had expected in September. But, you know, there was a great deal of unrest inside. There had been a draft in 1940; there had been—that had been rescinded—and then when the war started, obviously everything was going to change, so I mean, immediately they started gas rationing, and food rationing, and so forth and so on. So, it was not a surprise.

DONIN: Even before you got here. I mean, it was when you were in high school.

PONTECORVO: No. When I got here, when the war started, then I realized what was going to happen.

DONIN: But while you were in high school, I assume there was great talk of whether the U.S. would enter and how that would impact—

PONTECORVO: Yeah. There was conversation about that. Yeah, but, again, it was abstract, so it was...

DONIN: So, you really—The Tuck program was really called a three-two, but you didn't actually do the three-two, obviously—

PONTECORVO: Yeah, no.

DONIN: —but that's what it was called at that point.

PONTECORVO: Yes.

DONIN: And was it an MBA you come out of Tuck with, or did they call it something else?

PONTECORVO: Well, in those days it was an MCS, but they've changed it to an MBA.

DONIN: Ah ha. M-C-S... Commercial Science or...?

PONTECORVO: Yeah. Some nonsense.

DONIN: I see. Okay, well, I think unless you've got other thoughts to share with us, I think we've basically covered it. I'm just going down my list here.

PONTECORVO: Did you ever hear of a man named Herluf Olsen

DONIN: No.

PONTECORVO: Who was dean of the Tuck School?

DONIN: Oh.

PONTECORVO: At that time.

DONIN: Herluf Olsen.

PONTECORVO: Yes.

DONIN: Was he a good dean?

PONTECORVO: I don't know the answer to that question. He had an alcohol problem, but he gave me a big favor. When I came up here in the summer of '49, I had thought about going to Columbia and then gotten disgusted with their application. And I asked him if he could help me get in somewhere and he got me in Berkeley, so that was a big favor.

DONIN: Got you in...

PONTECORVO: Berkeley.

DONIN: By making a phone call or writing—

PONTECORVO: Oh, he had a friend that he wrote a letter to. Said, "Take this guy."

DONIN: Ah ha. And were you pleased with Berkeley?

PONTECORVO: Yes, very pleased.

DONIN: Great. Did you end up staying out there after you graduated?

PONTECORVO: Yes. Well, after I was working on a dissertation and I took a job in Colorado for a couple of years—a year-and-a-half—and then I had a call from Berkeley to come back and teach there for a year, and I went back and finished there. But the Berkeley educational program was much more focused then. Of course, it was only one area of the curriculum, but it was at a much higher level than it had been here, under the circumstances that existed here. Now, I don't know what it is at the moment.

DONIN: Had Berkeley been impacted by the war the way...

PONTECORVO: Well, by the time I got to Berkeley it was the fall of '49 and that was—

DONIN: They were recovering.

PONTECORVO: Yeah.

DONIN: But the quality of the teaching at Berkeley—This was the business school at Berkeley.

PONTECORVO: No, the economics department.

DONIN: Oh, the economics department. So your PhD was in economics.

PONTECORVO: Yes.

DONIN: I see. Yeah. Did they even have a PhD program here?

PONTECORVO: Here?

DONIN: In economics?

PONTECORVO: No, no.

DONIN: No.

PONTECORVO: One of the better-kept secrets around here is how many graduate students they have.

DONIN: Now or then?

PONTECORVO: Now.

DONIN: Right. But back then, they didn't have any graduate students.

PONTECORVO: They may have had some assistants or something like that. For example, in medicine, chemistry, and these places. I don't know.

DONIN: But the Tuck School—so you ended up with an MBA or MCS—

PONTECORVO: Yeah.

DONIN: And then got your PhD at Berkeley.

PONTECORVO: Yes.

DONIN: I see. Yeah. But you feel that the training at Tuck here could have been better.

PONTECORVO: Did you ever read Tuck's book?

DONIN: Edward Tuck's?

PONTECORVO: Yeah.

DONIN: No.

PONTECORVO: Well, his idea of the faculty was practitioners and not academics, and this was before academic curriculums got much more rigorous. And that was true across the board here. Now it's much more rigorous here. Did you know Meredith Clement, by chance?

DONIN: I did, after he retired. I didn't know him as a professor, but I knew him as a patron of the library.

PONTECORVO: Well, he was a colleague of mine at Berkeley and a very good friend.

DONIN: That was sad when he died.

PONTECORVO: Yes. I'm trying to get a hold of Jackie at the moment.

DONIN: You're what?

PONTECORVO: I'm trying to get a hold of Jackie.

DONIN: Oh, she's not here?

PONTECORVO: She's moved to Lebanon and I tried to call the number and I didn't get any answer yet.

DONIN: I'm sure she—

PONTECORVO: But he taught a much more rigorous course here than would have been taught before the war.

DONIN: Sure. Well, I think John Dickey was the one that sort of started the efforts to upgrade the faculty here.

PONTECORVO: Yeah.

DONIN: And obviously it was carried on by John Kemeny as well.

PONTECORVO: Yeah. Kemeny was...

DONIN: Yeah, so... Okay. Well, I'm going to turn off the tape.

PONTECORVO: Okay.

[End of interview]