

Dartmouth College Oral History Project  
The War Years at Dartmouth  
Interview with Leo Caproni '42  
By Mary Stelle Donin  
February 26, 2010

DONIN: Today is Friday, February 26, 2010. My name is Mary Donin. We are here on the upper west side of New York with Leo Caproni, Dartmouth class of 1942. Okay, Mr. Caproni, how about you tell us first of all where you were born and where you went to high school.

CAPRONI: I was born in Brooklyn, New York in... the date, you said?

DONIN: Don't need the date. Just interested in where you started out.

CAPRONI: Brooklyn, New York. And high school was originally in New Haven, Connecticut at Hill House High, and because I was not doing very well, I was sent away to a preparatory school called Suffield Academy up in Suffield, Connecticut, and that's where I graduated from and went from there to Dartmouth.

DONIN: How is it that you learned about Dartmouth? Did you know about it before you were applying for college?

CAPRONI: My father went to Dartmouth, and, unfortunately, due to either financial or some other problems that they had within the family, he only had one year at Dartmouth, but he loved it so much and I think it was—it rubbed off on me and I became very interested in Dartmouth. I applied to other colleges as well, but Dartmouth accepted me, therefore I certainly chose it.

DONIN: Did anybody else from your school—What was it? Suffield—did anybody else from Suffield go to Dartmouth when you went?

CAPRONI: Oh, yes. We had one, two—three of us went: Bill Remington—I'm sorry. Russ Greer, and Jim Mulligan, and myself, and that was the three of us.

DONIN: Did you go visit it before you applied?

CAPRONI: Oh, yes. I'd go up as often as I could to ski. I love to ski and that's what I did. I had friends who had gone to Dartmouth, so I had contacts up there to associate with.

DONIN: So, it wasn't your first view when you arrived to matriculate in the fall of 1938?

CAPRONI: No. I was in love with it a long time before that.

DONIN: That's great. That must have made your father very happy that you were going there.

CAPRONI: He was very proud that I was accepted at Dartmouth. I think he was amazed, but he was proud also, yes.

DONIN: So, do you remember where you were for your freshman year, what dorm they put you in?

CAPRONI: Yes. I was in New Hampshire Hall and I lived on the first floor with Jim Mulligan, my friend from Suffield Academy, and it was quite an experience. New Hampshire Hall was entirely different than what we had been used to in preparatory school. Much older people to associate with. It was fun. It was really quite a new and exciting experience.

DONIN: When you say there were older people, do you mean they were upperclassmen?

CAPRONI: Upperclassmen, yes.

DONIN: In the dorm with you?

CAPRONI: Yes.

DONIN: And when you got there, did you have any idea of what you were going to be interested in majoring in?

CAPRONI: Originally, no. I did not have any idea whatsoever. No, I truthfully didn't. I was exposed to a number of things and that's why I eventually chose a dual major and the dual major was psychology and sociology. It worked out quite well.

DONIN: So, do you remember the first time you met Ernest Martin Hopkins during the matriculation ceremony?

CAPRONI: I certainly do. I was invited to the president's office along with all the rest of the incoming freshmen, and we were called in and I was presented with a very attractive piece of Dartmouth paper saying that I had matriculated into Dartmouth College and Ernest Hopkins signed it, looked at me, and he said, "Say hello to your father and welcome."

DONIN: Amazing.

CAPRONI: It was quite a nice feeling and I welcomed it. It was appreciated.

DONIN: Right. So, did you jump right in to any particular sort of extracurricular activities when you had time outside of classes? Did you do any sports or sign up for any clubs?

CAPRONI: Yes. I got into skiing right away and was a member of the freshman ski team. I was not that good, but I survived and stayed with it. The coach was pretty rough, but it was enjoyable. I was slated to do downhill and I eventually was in a couple of races, but I don't think I was good enough to get into any major competitions. But, anyway, it was a big thrill to ski for Dartmouth.

DONIN: Sure. Wear it on your uniform, right?

CAPRONI: Yes.

DONIN: Right. That's terrific. So, there must be pictures of you in that first yearbook, of you on the freshman ski team. I should have looked there to see.

CAPRONI: There could be, and I can't remember.

DONIN: Yeah, I'll have to go back and see if I find any pictures of you on the freshman team. So, what was your social life? What was your social group that you were hanging around with?

CAPRONI: Well, they were a group, basically, of the people who had been at Suffield Academy and also friends of ours from Connecticut. We were all a big group from New Britain—there was quite a group from New Britain, and they came from Deerfield Academy and Vermont Academy, and we all sort of stuck together in our freshman year. And each of us had a specialty that we got into, as far as sports were concerned, and I truthfully can't remember whether we tried out for other things our freshman year, or did we have to wait until our sophomore year? I'm talking about the *Jack-o'-Lantern*—the magazine. I can't remember whether it was a freshman or a sophomore...

DONIN: Yeah, I don't know whether you were...

CAPRONI: You were allowed to. But, there was a rule on that, I remember.

DONIN: That maybe you had to wait until your second year, right.

CAPRONI: Something like that.

DONIN: Wasn't that—that fall of '38, wasn't there a big hurricane on the East Coast?

CAPRONI: That fall... My family had taken me up to Hanover to put me into the dorm and all of that stuff, and the night of the big blow, my father said, "Why don't you get a couple of your friends and I'll take you all out to dinner up in Lyme?" And so we all went out to dinner. I think there were about six or eight of us. We got to Lyme all right, but coming back from Lyme, trees were down all over the place and we went in and out coming down that route from Lyme to Hanover, and we finally got back to Hanover and my family got back into the Hanover Inn, and then they had this blow that was a mess up there and trees all over the place, yeah.

DONIN: Incredible. Everybody seems to remember that. So, what was your first year of classes like? Did you feel well prepared for classes after graduating from high school?

CAPRONI: I think Suffield Academy prepared me quite well, but I don't think I applied myself that well, and my grades were only fair. There's not too much you do as a freshman socially, other than just with friends and so forth. You don't get into fraternities then. But, I don't think I applied myself that well.

DONIN: Well, you weren't the only one. I think that's been the impression of a lot of your classmates and later classmates.

CAPRONI: Well, being in a prep school, you're very confined into a little cocoon-type of thing that your headmaster and his entourage look after you and make sure you're doing this and doing that and so forth. You get into college and there's nobody like that around. You're free to run off and do this and do that and whatever you feel like doing, and I think sometimes you overdo it.

DONIN: Yes. So, did lots of your classmates get part time jobs when they were freshmen, to earn a little extra money?

CAPRONI: Yes. You see, as a freshman in those years, we were required to buy a meal ticket to the dining hall, so we had to take certain meals at the dining hall. Therefore, that was an obligation. Some students had applied for and received—I think it was under a financial aid program—where they waited on tables in that dining hall. Jim Mulligan, my roommate, did. He waited on

table, and when he wanted to go away for a week and so forth, I'd work for him in the hall, but I did not, no.

DONIN: So, let's move on to the next year. That was when you became eligible to try to join a fraternity, is that right?

CAPRONI: Yes.

DONIN: And did you do that?

CAPRONI: Yes. I joined SAE along with my Connecticut friends. We sort of formed a little coterie and we put it together: Mulligan, Bob Smith, Randy Kilpatrick, myself, and there was one other person. So, we went around to see all the fraternities, and we liked SAE the best, and we said, "Look, there are four or five of us and that's it. We come as a group. Take us or leave us." And they took us. And it worked out very well and we enjoyed the fraternity and I still think very highly of that particular fraternity.

DONIN: And did that become the focus of where most of your social life took place?

CAPRONI: It really did. Almost all of your social activities were tied into your fraternity. There were other things. I mean, I joined the... sophomore year trying out for the business staff of the *Jack-o'-Lantern* and that was my extracurricular activity, other than skiing and any other sports I felt like getting into. That was my focus.

DONIN: Now, the sort of traditional events that took place on campus, like Winter Carnival and Homecoming, once you became part of SAE did they really take on a lot of excitement for you because of, you know, crowning the carnival queen?

CAPRONI: Well, number one, what you do is you have to build something in front of your fraternity house that is representative of the theme of the whole carnival, and that was fun for the whole group in the fraternity. Everybody pitched in and did something.

DONIN: So there was a competition among all of the fraternities?

CAPRONI: That's right, yes.

DONIN: Oh.

CAPRONI: So we worked very hard to do as well as we could. I think we came up, probably, with honorable mention, but I don't think we got first prize. Anyway, it was fun.

DONIN: And was it common for you to see or interact with President Hopkins as you moved through your daily life? Was he ever sort of accessible to the students in the way that it seems John Dickey was later on?

CAPRONI: No, no. Not so. He was president and I think you underline that a couple of times and you pretty well establish his position. No, he was not as reachable as Dickey and some of the other presidents were.

DONIN: So, let's talk about the beginning of the war. I mean, I want to hear about your memories of Pearl Harbor day, but were you conscious of a conversation going on on campus about, you know, whether the United States should get into the war or not get into the war? You know, the intervention.

CAPRONI: Before Pearl Harbor or after?

DONIN: Before.

CAPRONI: Before, I don't think we thought too much of it. There were a couple of classes that we went to, and one outstanding class was Herb West's class in comparative literature, and he did talk about books from time to time, but he talked more about current events and where young people are going, which was sort of an innovative way of teaching. He never forgot the fact that he was teaching about books, but at the same time he spent a lot of time helping people think, which was a little unusual for—some professors go right straight down the line and teach nothing but physics, or geometry, or something like that. But Herb deviated and deviated in a very positive way, and it was enjoyable. Anyway, he was the one who hinted that World War II was imminent, and that there was a possibility that something was going to happen.

Where was I when Pearl Harbor occurred? Is that what you're getting to? I was living off campus at that time with this group of SAE friends of mine, and we were studying one Sunday morning and there was a little music on, and all of a sudden the announcement came on about Pearl Harbor, and we just sat there and looked at each other in amazement, because we realized from other things that we knew, how bad this whole thing could be. And, yes, we started to worry what to do, because we were not in ROTC or any other military connections. I don't think any of us were. Maybe somebody when they went to prep school had been in the ROTC—

Reserve Officer Training Corps—but nobody in the college was, because we didn't have a program.

DONIN: And did any of you sort of jump to the conclusions that you needed to go off and sign up right away to fight?

CAPRONI: I think there were probably a few who—probably preferred to do that than to hack it out at Dartmouth any further, but there wasn't an exodus of troops to join up and do anything. I think we were—I think it was like a big slap in the face. We didn't know what—we didn't know where it was going to go, how big it was going to get, and so forth. We didn't know.

DONIN: And President Hopkins, I think, called you all to Webster Hall one day that week and sort of had a meeting about it and announced they were going to start running classes going, you know, fulltime through the summer, et cetera. But, did he urge you to—

CAPRONI: I don't remember that.

DONIN: Really?

CAPRONI: No.

DONIN: Yeah, we have pictures of the meeting.

CAPRONI: What part of the year would that be?

DONIN: Well, this meeting he called the whole school together, I think, right after Pearl Harbor on the Monday or the Tuesday. But then they decided to start running classes, you know, through the summer. But did he urge you all—the class of '42, since you were about to graduate—did he urge you all to stay in school and finish before going off to serve?

CAPRONI: Yes, yes.

DONIN: So, most of the class stayed put and finished up.

CAPRONI: Stayed put or joined reserve groups. And you had the opportunity to join a reserve group and continue your education, but as you finished your education you were obligated to go into that service that you were reserved. My case, entirely different.

DONIN: What did you do?

CAPRONI: What happened was I was in the draft as well, as many students were, and I was rated A-1, whatever. In other words, my draft board back in New Haven, Connecticut, which was my home, was looking for candidates to fill jobs. And you had to have a certain grade average at Dartmouth to stay in. If you didn't, the draft boards could take you. There weren't too many of us who were that dumb, but enough. So, I had a choice of being drafted. I was guaranteed by the college that I could reenter at any time after the war without any...

DONIN: Penalty.

CAPRONI: Penalty. I'm sorry. But, I had to go ahead and take the obligation of joining, of doing something. So, my choice was to be drafted or to join. So, I said, "All right, what I want to do is, I want to be a pilot and I want to fly." So, I applied to the air force then—air corps—which I did, and I was accepted. Briefly, what happened is, you go into a center not as a draftee, but as an enlistee, and so you're just a number. Anyway, what happens is you're allocated to wherever they need you. I said, "But I enlisted in the air corps." They said, "You go where you're told. Period. That's it." And I ended up in the infantry, and I kept going and asking for a reason and they kept saying, "All of the slots are filled up in the air corps, and therefore you can't..."

However, I said, "All right, I'm in the infantry." I went through infantry training; I finally went to officer candidate school down in Ft. Benning; I got my commission as a second lieutenant. I was sent to Camp Cross, South Carolina—I forget the... Alabama, I'm sorry. And because you take tests and so forth, my tests were very well done, so I was pushed up into regimental headquarters, and became S-3, which is intelligence work. Anyway. And I worked with the 92<sup>nd</sup> division for almost a year.

And the 92<sup>nd</sup> division was all black except for white training officers, which was kind of an unusual set up. And it was difficult, because there were a lot of problems within the black population at that time anyway. The north and the south, they were as separated as a lot of the white people were. Anyway, I stuck—I don't know how far you want me to go with this.

DONIN: Well, I'm just interested to get the chronology of when you left Dartmouth and then you returned, right?

CAPRONI: Okay. What I finally did, I stayed in the infantry in that thing. Finally, I was called in one day and the colonel said, "Caproni, son of a bitch." I said, "I beg your pardon?" He said, "Here are your orders. You've been transferred to the air corps in grade." So, I went to Santa Anna, California,



started my pilot training in grade as a lieutenant, which was pretty nice because I didn't have to take all the guff that the cadets did. And I went through the pilot training and became a pilot flying C-46s and C-47s, transports carrying paratroops and cargo. Ended up all over the United States, Cuba, and so forth. Finally, I was sent overseas and went all through the Pacific. I ended up hauling troops into Iwo Jima and hauling wounded out and back to Saipan and Guam and so forth. And then the war ended. And then I'm coming back and go to college.

DONIN: So, when did you—When you left Dartmouth, where were you in terms of your education? How far along were you?

CAPRONI: I was in my—

DONIN: Senior year.

CAPRONI: Junior. No, no.

MRS. CAPRONI: Senior.

CAPRONI: Almost in my senior year.

MRS. CAPRONI: You were in your senior year.

CAPRONI: All right.

DONIN: Okay, so you were in your senior year. So, you only had one term left to complete in order to graduate. Two terms?

CAPRONI: Two terms.

DONIN: So, when did you return to Dartmouth? So, after the war, 1945? Forty-five or forty-six, right?

CAPRONI: Yeah. I can't remember. I was going to write that down. I think it was—I think I had to wait to get in for a while, too, or something.

DONIN: Oh, that's interesting.

CAPRONI: There were some—classes were full, there was no place—By the way, I was married not to this lady, but to somebody else, and I had had one child and there was another child on the way, and she was born in Hanover. But, I bought a house up in Fairlee, Vermont.

DONIN: Oh, yeah.

CAPRONI: And lived up there.

DONIN: And commuted back and forth.

CAPRONI: Commuted back and forth to Hanover.

DONIN: So, you returned to Dartmouth after the war, a married veteran, then, living off campus.

CAPRONI: Right.

DONIN: That must have been a very different experience for you.

CAPRONI: Very.

DONIN: Did you find that you were a better student?

CAPRONI: Living in Fairlee—here's Hanover down here—and getting back and forth, where do you study, and where do you eat, and where do you sleep and so forth? It gets a little confusing, and I think that made it difficult, but I did finally graduate and got my degree, which was all right.

DONIN: Did you—So, your diploma came in '46 or '47? Forty-seven?

CAPRONI: Forty-seven, I think.

DONIN: Did you actually walk in the graduation ceremony with the robe and everything?

CAPRONI: Oh, yeah. Oh, sure.

DONIN: Oh, so John Dickey handed you your diploma.

CAPRONI: He certainly did, yeah.

DONIN: So, did you find the campus very different when you came back, because there were all these—I mean, you were an old veteran compared to these fresh young incoming freshmen, but there were lots of you there: married veterans at various stages in their education.

CAPRONI: Yep. There were, and it was very different. And, of course, what the college has done, they built a lot of facilities for married—that's the other

thing. I couldn't get into any of the college-owned—they had things down at Tuck Drive and so forth.

DONIN: Sachem Village and Wigwam Circle.

CAPRONI: Yes.

DONIN: So, those were too crowded for you to get into?

CAPRONI: Yep.

DONIN: So, that's why you had to live off campus.

CAPRONI: Yep.

DONIN: Oh, wow. So, it really was crowded.

CAPRONI: It was. And commuting back and forth was no picnic. It was very difficult. It was tough.

DONIN: Well, you didn't get to engage in sort of the traditional college campus activities.

CAPRONI: Not really. I tried to get back and work with the *Jack-o'-Lantern* a little bit, because I had done a lot of work for them before the war, and—

DONIN: Yeah, you ended up as their business manager—their advertising manager, right?

CAPRONI: Right. And there was monetary compensation there, too. It was quite good. I needed it. Of course, my father supported as much as he could, and he was an architect in New Haven, Connecticut. Anyway, I also went to—as soon as I could—went to work at the Hanover Inn.

DONIN: So you got a job.

CAPRONI: Yep. And this was just after I graduated, though, because I didn't know where I was going to go, so we were going to stay there and Dave Heald, who was a classmate—you can find him—gave me a job working in all the departments of the Hanover Inn. I had not planned to go into the hotel business at all. I had planned to go into advertising. Anyway, I stayed with the Hanover Inn and became the assistant manager, finally, of that.

DONIN: Oh, amazing.

CAPRONI: Yeah. And they changed managers. Dave went over to Sunapee to take over some government job for the state. Anyway, the new manager didn't think too much of the staff who was there, so I said, "We better get out of here." From there, I went to Florida and worked for a couple of hotel groups down there as an assistant manager of fairly large hotels.

And finally, friends of mine in Pan American World Airways said, "There's a job down in Trinidad for you, running what is called the Pan American Guest House. It's about 120 or 130 rooms, and it is the stopover spot between New York and Rio de Janeiro, and a lot of traffic goes through there, and passengers stay over and also change, going in other directions, too. We think you could do a good job." So, there were some Dartmouth people connected with that and they hired me for that job as the manager down there. I was there for almost five years—four or five years—and running that place. Is that in there?

DONIN: So, your career really took off.

CAPRONI: Yeah.

DONIN: Great.

CAPRONI: And from there I went to other places in the West Indies, and I ran hotels in St. Croix, and in—this was after I finished with them. They finally closed that area down, because flights overflowed; they didn't need that spot. They overflowed. Anyway, I went back to smaller hotels up in St. Croix, and I ran a hotel in—I wrote down a couple of them. Joanna remembers more than I do.

DONIN: She's your archivist. I can see that.

CAPRONI: Jamaica, I ran a place for a while. Trinidad, Tobago. Then I finally came back to the States and started to work for Treadway Inns. Treadway Inns and Resorts was a Dartmouth-oriented... Mr. Treadway was a Dartmouth graduate.

DONIN: Oh, goodness. I didn't know that.

CAPRONI: And they had about twenty-five or thirty inns, and I was the vice president of that whole group. And we did very well until the then-president, Frank Birdsell, who was a Cornellian, decided to sell the whole outfit to Russian associates and they sort of disbanded the whole thing.

DONIN: So, when you returned to Dartmouth after the war as a veteran, did you find other classmates there, your classmates?

CAPRONI: A few.

DONIN: A few?

CAPRONI: Yeah. I don't remember. He was there, but not exactly at the same time—

DONIN: Jerry?

CAPRONI: Yeah.

DONIN: He came back earlier than you did. He came back earlier than you did. He came back really right after the war and graduated with the class of '46.

CAPRONI: That's right, yeah.

DONIN: So, I don't know if you overlapped or not. He may have been gone by the time you came back.

CAPRONI: I think he was, yeah.

DONIN: So, was your absence from the college and missing graduation and all that, did that impact your sort of feeling connected to the class in any way?

CAPRONI: To my particular class?

DONIN: Yeah.

CAPRONI: I think it did for a while, and then I think I had a talk with myself and I said, those were your classmates, get off your back and put yourself in connection or association with them more so, and I have been. Of course, where did I end up? I ended up president of the class now, so I must have arrived.

DONIN: Exactly. It worked. Whatever you did, it worked. And did you have any reason to interact with President Dickey when he was there? Did you ever meet him or interact with him in any way?

CAPRONI: I had a couple of meetings with him and I'm trying to remember what they were in reference to. I think it possibly might have had something to do with how veterans were treated at Dartmouth. Something like that. I was not a complainer. I don't mean it in that respect, but I was interested in

some of them. You always have in any group some that are not very pleased with anything, and I think that what they were looking for were votes that “help me” type of thing.

DONIN: Oh, interesting.

CAPRONI: But I don't know what help they could...

DONIN: Did you feel that the veterans were treated with any respect by the lowerclassmen? Were you treated differently?

CAPRONI: Classmates?

DONIN: Not classmates, but the younger classes behind you. When you arrived back there in '46 and '47, did you feel they treated you differently or show you any respect for being a veteran?

CAPRONI: I don't feel that there was any animosity or any feeling as far as they were concerned, their feeling to us or us to them and so forth. No, we got along pretty well. I think we did think they were very active people, possibly a little more active than we were. I mean, I was very fortunate. I wasn't wounded or hurt in the war at all, so physically I could handle almost anything I needed to. I went on skiing and so forth.

DONIN: But you had a pretty heavy load you were carrying. You know, you were married and commuting to Fairlee, just trying to finish up.

CAPRONI: Too much, too much. Had I lived in Sachem or one of those small things, it would have been much better, but there was nothing available, so...

DONIN: Right. So, do you have any closing thoughts or things that you wanted to mention that I forgot to ask you about? Let's see here.

CAPRONI: No, I...

MRS CAPRONI: The twins, Hopkins twins.

CAPRONI: What, Joanna?

DONIN: Oh, Neidlinger's twins? You were going to tell me a story.

CAPRONI: Oh, yes. That's sort of a cute story. When we were undergraduates originally, the SAE house stood, as you know, at one end of the library and then behind it was Dean Neidlinger's home. And his two daughters loved

all the SAE guys for some reason, and they'd come over and listen to our records, and music, and so forth, and we made them sort of dear friends of the—dear sisters, or whatever you want to call them—of the SAE house.

DONIN: Sort of like honorary members.

CAPRONI: And they were there all the time. You name them. Sue and I can't remember the other.

DONIN: Mary and Susan, I think.

CAPRONI: Mary and Susan. And they were sort of cute, and when we had a group picture taken of the whole SAE house, there they were, right in the front.

DONIN: Oh, I'll have to go back and see those pictures.

CAPRONI: So, we loved them. They were very sweet, and I think they kept a lot of the members of the fraternity sort of that way instead of being silly or something like that.

DONIN: Well, they were probably, what? They were young teenagers.

CAPRONI: They were very small, yeah, then.

DONIN: So there was a nice sort of open family atmosphere, it sounds like, between the Neidlinger family and the members of the college.

CAPRONI: Well, the dean objected to some of our Saturday night parties.

DONIN: I bet he did. [Laughter]

CAPRONI: He thought they were a little noisy and he let us know, yeah. But he was a very fair guy. He was tough, but highly respected by the students.

DONIN: Well, thank you for remembering to tell that story.

CAPRONI: Yeah, they were cute kids.

DONIN: Yeah. One of them ended up marrying a guy in the class of '46. Susan married Malcolm McLane.

CAPRONI: Oh, the skier.

DONIN: The skier, right.

CAPRONI: Huh.

DONIN: Yep. She was one of the twins.

CAPRONI: So, let me turn the questions around. Where are you from, originally?

DONIN: Well, let's turn this off, because we don't need to record that.

**[End of interview]**