

Edward W. Ciccolella

by Martin J. Pociask

Edward W. Ciccolella proudly displaying his medals for his helicopter flight and rescue work. In addition to receiving his Air Medal, Ciccolella was also awarded the American Campaign Medal, Asiatic Pacific Campaign Medal, World War II Victory Medal, Distinguished Unit Badge, Meritorious Service Unit Plaque, and Philippine Liberation Medal.

PHOTO COURTESY OF EDWARD W. CICCOLELLA



**Historical
interview by
Martin J. Pociask
with Edward W.
Ciccolella on his
experiences in
the Philippines
during World
War II, including
one of the first
helicopter medical
evacuations
in history.**



PHOTO OF MEDALS (ABOVE) COURTESY OF EDWARD W. CICCOLELLA. BELOW: U.S. ARMY PHOTO



Edward Ciccolella was one of the pilots who medically evacuated 70 wounded soldiers by helicopter during battles in the Philippines. The helicopters were stationed on two floating aircraft repair depots called Aircraft Repair Units (Floating) (ARUF). The ships were converted Liberty ships, manned by Merchant Marines, defended by Navy gunners, administered by the U.S. Army Transportation Corp. Helicopters from the 5th and 6th ARUF Units performed all of the 70 Philippine medical rescues. Mr. Ciccolella was stationed aboard the 6th ARUF.

R-6A helicopter with litter delivering a wounded soldier for medical attention.

ROTOR: Hello Ed. Can you tell us a bit about your childhood; where were you born and where did you go to school?

Ciccolella: I was born in Albany, New York. My childhood was pretty normal; I went to a Catholic grammar school run by nuns, and to a high school of Christian Brothers.

ROTOR: When did you join the military?

Ciccolella: I enlisted when I was a senior in high school in 1943.

ROTOR: How did you get started as a pilot? I understand you were in one of the first classes of helicopter pilots?

Ciccolella: At school in Ocala, Florida, I trained in a Stearman biplane. I did basic at Macon, Georgia in a BT15, then in an advanced twin engine AT10 at Columbus Missouri. Shortly after graduating and getting my wings I was sent to Chanute Field Illinois, to helicopter school. Immediately after finishing there I was shipped out. I spent several weeks in Lae, New Guinea doing nothing, there were no choppers anywhere. Then I went up to Hollandia, New Guinea for several more weeks of doing nothing! From there they sent me to the island

of Morotai in the East Indies, where I continued to do nothing! Finally I was sent up to Palawan, the southernmost island of the Philippines — aboard a Liberty ship where they had choppers.



ROTOR: How many student pilots were there at the helicopter flight school?

Ciccolella: To the best of my recollection, I'd say there were about six or eight of us.

ROTOR: Can you talk about your training days?

Ciccolella: I graduated from two-engine advanced school, and my first assignment was at Chanute Field. Not my happiest days, as we all were praying to get to fighter

training. My first flight in a chopper nearly gave me a heart attack! After two solid years of fixed-wing flying, the instructor took me up to 2,000 feet and pulled the air speed back to zero, at which time I was halfway through bailing out!

ROTOR: Where was the unit formed?

Ciccolella: I was unassigned when I went overseas, and I hooked up with the 6th ARUF when I got to Palawan.

ROTOR: When did the helicopters join the unit?

Ciccolella: There were already two R-4Bs at Palawan when I arrived, and when I got up to Manila Bay we swapped them for two R-6As.

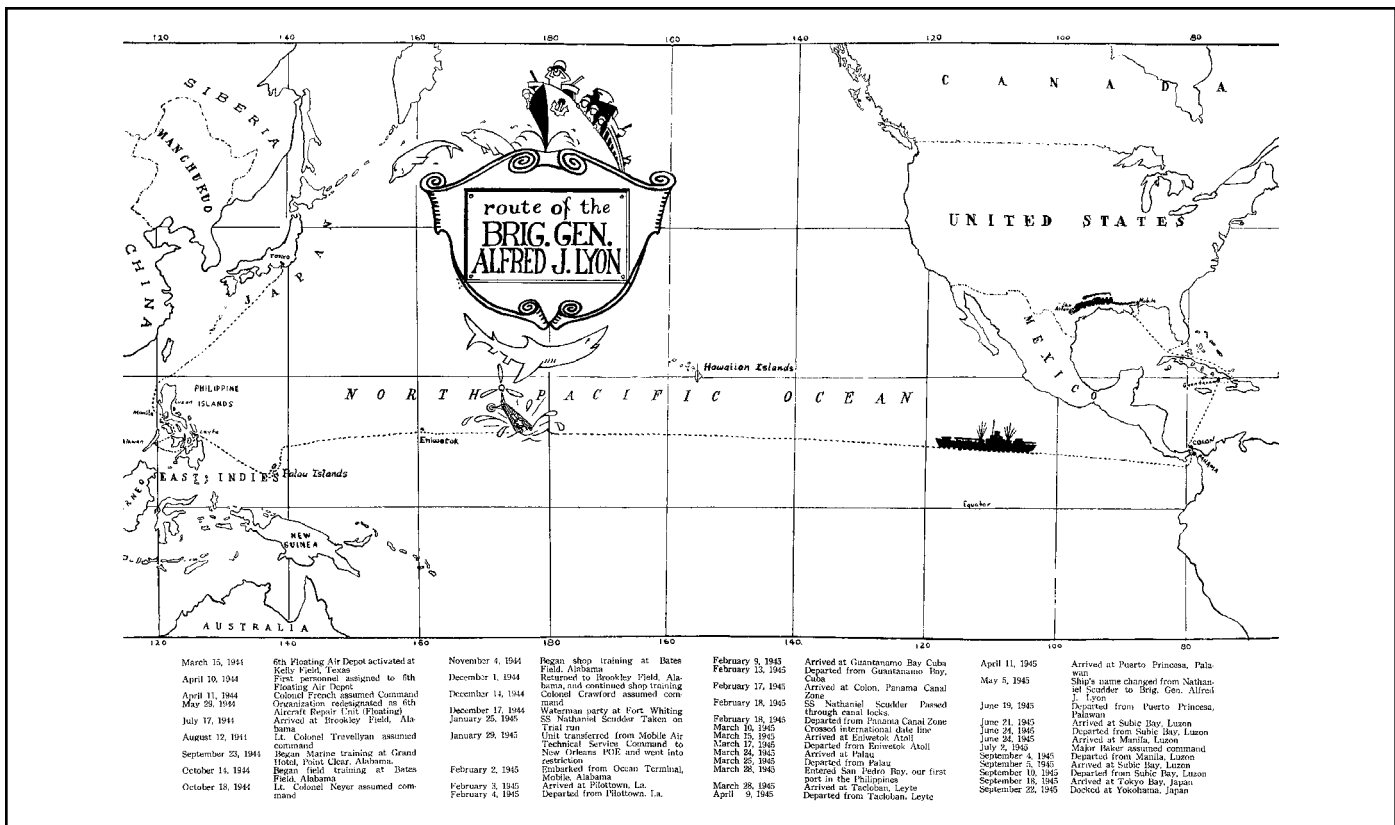
ROTOR: The 5th and the 6th ARUF were in and around Manila and Leyte. I understand the 3rd was in the Iligan Gulf, and the 1st and 2nd were in the Marianas; all were shipped out to the Pacific from Mobile, Alabama. Ed, for the record, I have listed as pilots on the 5th ARUF the following: First Lieutenant Robert W. Cowgill, Second Lieutenant Louis Carle,

and First Lieutenant Harold Greene. On the 6th ARUF there was First Lieutenant James H. Brown, Second Lieutenant John R. Noll, and yourself. On the 5th ARUF, Robert Cowgill rescued 17, Carle rescued 17, and Greene rescued two wounded soldiers. The total rescued by 5th ARUF pilots was 36. The 6th ARUF reportedly rescued 34 more wounded soldiers. How many were rescued by Brown, Noll, and yourself?

Ciccolella: I don't really remember Cowgill or Noll, but Carle and Greene were classmates of mine. Jim Brown was with the 6th when I joined it. As I recall, I



Special orders documents and authorization of Bronze Stars for Southern Philippine and Luzon campaigns, and assignment to 2nd Emergency Rescue Squadron.



Timelines and route of the Brigadier General Alfred J. Lyon

evacuated 13, and I think they were the first for the 6th ARUF.

ROTOR: How long were you with the other pilots on the 6th ARUF?

Ciccolella: I was only with them for a short time. Right after war's end I was sent up to Clark Field as the sole chopper pilot. Most of my time was spent flying C-47s, except for the 13 rescue flights I made in the chopper.

ROTOR: Have you seen or communicated with any of the other pilots since the war?

Ciccolella: Unfortunately not.

ROTOR: Can you recall any on-ship experiences involving helicopters?

Ciccolella: One day, while en route, the ship's commander decided the gunners needed firing practice.

Where on earth he got that idea from I'll never know, but he came up with a six-foot balloon, shaped just like a huge hot dog! He wanted it strapped to the side of one of the R-4Bs, brought up to 1,500 feet, and then released to be used as a target for the 50-caliber machine guns. The crew chief rigged up a lanyard, which the pilot could pull to eject the balloon,

and after mounting it outside the chopper, all was ready. The chopper lifted straight up and slowly moved away from the Liberty ship. Just as he cleared the flight deck, the engine sputtered and quit, and chopper, pilot, passenger, and balloon dropped into the Pacific Ocean! They lifted the men out and back aboard within minutes. They were unharmed except for their

temperament. The giant balloon had been tied to the air-intake side of the chopper, and immediately was sucked onto it and very efficiently killed the engine! There was no second attempt at target practice.

ROTOR: What was it like on the Brig. General Alfred J. Lyon, the Liberty ship that you were on while stationed in Manila Bay?

Ciccolella: Actually, to be honest it was pretty boring. Manila was still

Nichols Field



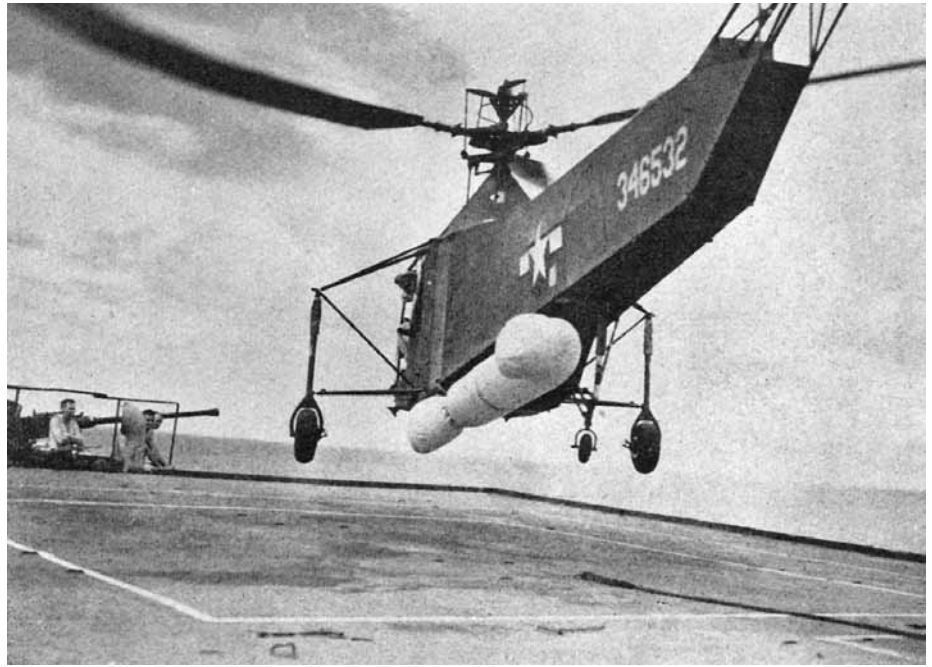
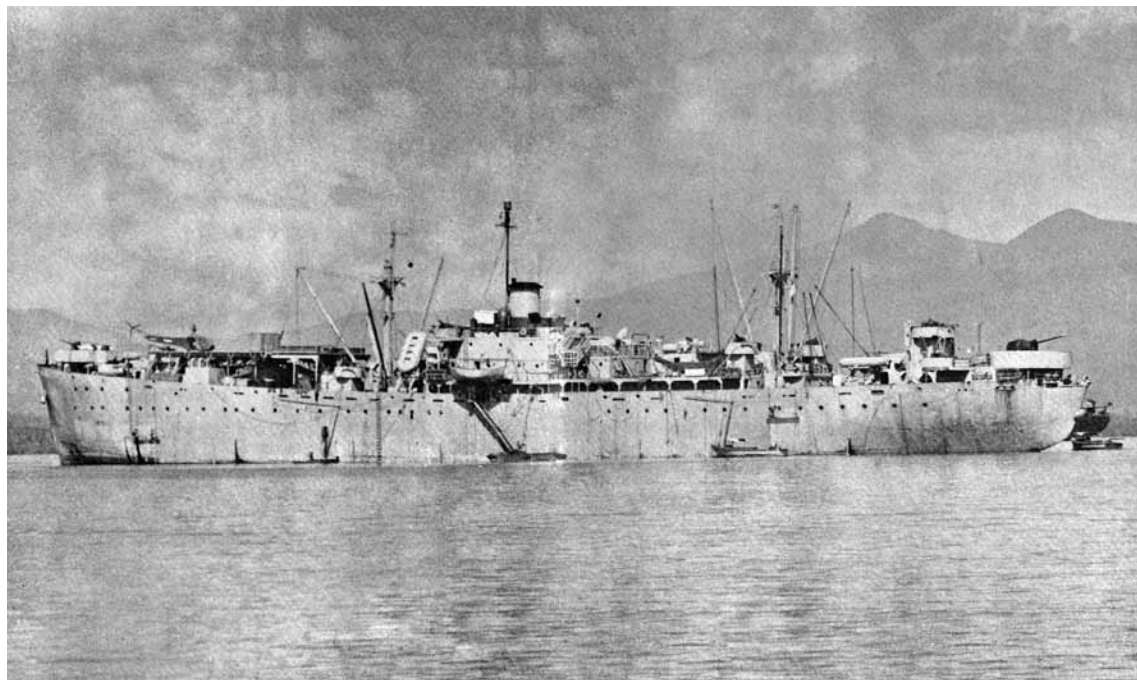


6th ARU helicopter pilot, Lt. James H. Brown (left) and T. Frank Crowder (right).

trying to recover from the war. There were signs everywhere of the historic battle when the 101st Airborne took the island. I experienced very little activity except for taking a trip out to Corrigador in an R-6A. I've always wondered if my landing in the courtyard of that fortress was the first ever. Unfortunately it seems very little use has been made of the installation since the war's end.

ROTOR: Can you recall any of the particulars of the rescue events that took place in that arena during the summer of 1945?

Ciccolella: Oh yes! On my very first trip in, the infantry boys had cleared off the top of a small knoll overlooking a valley and laid out a big "X" on it to lead me in. It turned out that our guys had secured that knoll and the high ground behind it while the Japanese were concentrated in the valley. It was late afternoon; there was maybe only an hour or so of daylight left. Just as they were preparing two wounded GIs to load onto the helicopter, gunfire started. It went on for about



R-4 helicopter taking balloon aloft: Riding inside, Lt. James H. Brown and Frank Crowder.

five minutes, and then ceased. I was told that the other side was getting ready to make its move, and that it would be too risky for me to attempt to leave until things settled down. The GIs showed me to a foxhole, equipped with an army blanket, and suggested I get in and keep my head down. Nothing happened until a few hours after dark, when the gunfire started again. The GIs had strung a long wire halfway around the part of the hill overlooking the valley, and

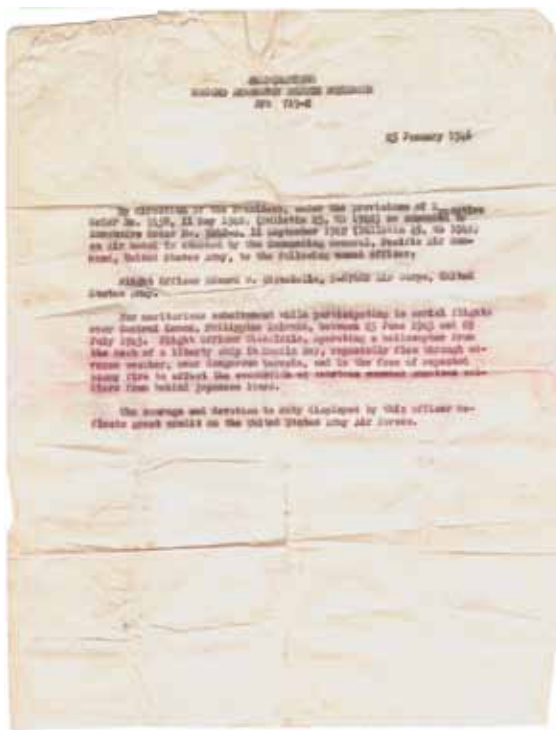
hung dozens of cans from K-rations on it, then filled each can with stones and pebbles. It was near impossible for an opposing soldier to crawl up the hill without disturbing that wire and making the tin cans rattle. I must have laid there for hours with only a .45 cal. pistol — until things quieted down again and I managed to get a few hours sleep. Next morning all was quiet, the GIs loaded the wounded on board, and I took off for Nichols Field in Manila, where I was met by

Brigadier General Alfred J. Lyon [6th ARU(F)]

an Army ambulance that took over. I made 12 more flights to the knoll, but the rest were uneventful, although I was told I was taking ground fire on a couple of them. I was awarded the Air Medal for these missions, but I'll always believe that the thing that qualified me was that night in the foxhole. Several weeks later I got an invitation from the Commanding Officer of an infantry outfit based in Manila for dinner in their Officer's Club. As we were all getting seated, I hear "Hello Chick" and I look up. The officer opposite me was Lt. Jim Jennings — my across-the-street-neighbor in Albany New York. I've known him since my childhood! Don't tell me it isn't a small world!

ROTOR: You mentioned that you and the other pilots were shot at during these rescues. Where did you fly your missions?

Ciccolella: I would usually fly out of Clark Field and then go due east for about 20 miles into the mountains.



Letter of Commendation

ROTOR: The 5th ARUF pilots removed the left seat to create space for the wounded, strapped down for evacuation. Some of the 6th ARUF pilots, I'm told, strapped their wounded to a stretcher alongside the helicopter. What can you tell us about these methods?

Ciccolella: What we did was to run two 1½-inch pipes through the lower fuselage and weld a Navy metal stretcher to each side of the chopper.

ROTOR: How did you all keep track of the rescues? They happened so quickly and under such extreme conditions.

Ciccolella: Well, for me I only made 13 trips, so it wasn't that hard to keep track.

ROTOR: How was the maintenance of the helicopters handled?

Ciccolella: As far as I remember we had two mechanics that were trained by a Sikorsky technical representative.

ROTOR: Did you have any leave opportunities to explore or have experiences with the locals that you can recall, either in one of the towns or villages?

Ciccolella: The only leave I had was a glorious three weeks in Australia.

ROTOR: Being war, I'm sure you saw some things that left a lasting impression on you. Can you tell us about some of them?

Ciccolella: Well, the first thing that comes to mind is the first trip I made into the city of Manila. It had a major river running through it and I recall standing on a bridge looking down on the river and seeing body after body floating down it. It was really gruesome. I also had occasion to go into the baseball park and witness the devastation left by a major fire. They told me that the Japanese and the GIs ended up in the two dugouts firing at each other!

ROTOR: How did you spend the rest of the war?

Ciccolella: To be honest, I was just waiting for an opportunity to get on a boat and get myself back home.



Some of the 6th ARUF pilots strapped the wounded to a Navy metal stretcher welded by two 1½ inch pipes to the helicopter.



Delivering another wounded soldier.

ROTOR: What were you doing on V-J Day?

Ciccolella: I was on the Liberty ship in Manila Bay. That was obviously a great day, but I do remember a rather sad incident. That night a couple of fighter pilots, who evidently had been celebrating heavily, took a couple of P-51s up to “play.” They collided and both were killed.

ROTOR: After that, how long did you remain in the military?

Ciccolella: It was a little over three years.

ROTOR: When were you discharged? What did you do when you got back to the States?

Ciccolella: I got out August 1946. I’ll tell you; I drank quite a lot of beer then, which was only five cents a glass!

ROTOR: Did you bring back any souvenirs?

Ciccolella: Yes, indeed. I have a sword and scabbard made by a Filipino out of a Jeep axle, and a carved mahogany “swagger stick” made by a red-haired pigmy in the Dutch East Indies.

ROTOR: That’s really interesting. So, when you returned home after the war, where did you live?

Ciccolella: I went back to Albany, New York.

ROTOR: What career path did you follow? Did you continue to fly helicopters?

Ciccolella: I became a technical writer and editor, and a proposal manager for General Electric in defense work.


ROTOR: Have you ever attended any reunions?

Ciccolella: No, I haven’t.

ROTOR: Were you married before, during, or after the war?

Ciccolella: I married Ruth after the war, and we have one daughter and a grandson.

ROTOR: I would like to thank you Edward for sharing your amazing story with us. Your testimony documenting the earliest use of helicopters for medical evacuation while under fire is an important historical footnote in aviation history.

Ciccolella: Thank you. It was a pleasure speaking with you. It’s important that people know about these early helicopter rescues. 

Martin J. Pociask is Director of Communications for **HAI**.

Editor’s Note:

The two Heritage interviews in this issue of *ROTOR*[®] are part of a series relating to events surrounding the medical evacuation by helicopter of 70 wounded soldiers, from active combat zones in the Philippines to hospitals and field hospitals for treatment. Without the helicopter, many of the injured would have died.

Special thanks to the interviewees, Edward Ciccolella and Bill Garbo for sharing their experiences with the readers of *ROTOR*[®] magazine and the general public. Their stories help to preserve helicopter history, before it is lost to the sands of time.

I wish to acknowledge Fred M. Duncan, whose earlier investigative work helped to collect and preserve some of that history, Roger Connor of the Smithsonian Institution for his assistance and generous access to that great institution’s historical files, and former HAI Chairman, Steve Sullivan, who brought this story to my attention.