

# Preserving Our Stories: A Military Family's Legacy



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## **World War I (April 6, 1914 to June 28, 1919)**

My grandfather, Victor was born in a small mountain village in southern Italy near the Adriatic Sea. He came to the United States at age 16, landing at Ellis Island, New York. He spoke no English and entered his new country with very limited resources. These included a few extra pairs of pants, a few shirts and a few dollars. Eventually, he settled in Baltimore, Maryland, where he lived with his older brother Tony (Anthony) and his family. In his desire to be self-sufficient he worked hard at developing a new skill and with support and training from Tony became a master tailor.

In 1914, Victor received a letter from the Italian consulate in New York advising him that all Italian male citizens were required to serve in the Italian army. He was ordered to appear for induction no later than December 1, 1914. As an immigrant who loved his new country, he never appeared.

In 1917, at the age of 24 and only in the country for eight years, he enlisted in the United States Army, and served as a member of the 313<sup>th</sup> Infantry, 79<sup>th</sup> Division, and 157<sup>th</sup> Brigade. He was given the rank of Corporal and fought in the Battle of the Meuse Argonne, France, from September to the middle of November, 1918. In that battle alone, the Americans lost 26,277 men and 92,250 were wounded, making it the bloodiest battle in the history of World War One (Hickman, 2). My grandfather lay among the wounded.

In early December, 1918, Victor's name appeared in the *Baltimore Sun* in what was known as the "Current Listing of Wounded." Both his immediate and his extended family were unaware of the extent of his injuries because all news of war and its men came without much speed or regularity. My grandfather's family did not know if he succumbed to his wounds or if he was still alive, and if alive, they had no idea of the seriousness of his wounds. It was four months—120 long days and nights when they finally received notice of the extent of his injuries and learned that he was indeed alive. His discharge papers indicate that he suffered from artillery shrapnel wounds. As a small child I recall hearing the story about how he was shot in his left hand and lower back. He was also subjected to mustard gas, which resulted in a dry cough and bronchial infections as a young man. In addition, he was totally bald in his twenties, something we always contributed to the gas. Like many soldiers of that time period, he never mentioned any of his sufferings in our time together. He was always happy in my presence spoiling me with Hershey ice cream bars, Italian breads and cheeses, and occasional small sips of beer.

In August 1919 Victor received the World War I Victory Medal, also known as the "Inter-Allied Victory Medal," awarded to U.S. Military who served in Europe. In December 1920 he received the Meuse Argonne Victory Metal (Defensive Sector) as well as one other medal which I am unable to read since the one-hundred year old metal's lettering is worn away. Some years later his service was recognized in a letter from President Truman; my grandfather kept this commendation among his most treasured possessions.

By the end of World War I my grandfather had been away from his mother, father and some brothers and sisters still living in Italy for more than ten years. He attempted to return to Italy to see them, but was unsuccessful due to emerging conflicts in Europe. Finally, in 1939, after thirty years away from his family in Italy, he was packed and ready to go

to visit when he received a phone call from the Department of State of the United States informing him that if he returned to Italy, he could be inducted into the Italian Army because Italy still required all males to serve and the United States could not guarantee his U.S. citizenship protection.

World War II further delayed his return to Italy until 1955. By this time, all of his immediate family had died. His desire to be an American citizen, and his desire to defend his new country, cost him his extended family relationships and many of his nuclear family relationships. His physical health and sometimes his emotional health were also compromised by his service. He never wanted to talk much about his experiences of war, nor, the family that he left behind in Italy. One can only imagine what he gave up to be an American yet he loved his new country and did everything possible to honor it including eventually becoming a Fourth Degree member of the Knights of Columbus and a member of the Lions Club.

The many remembrances of World War I during these centenary years (2014-2018) should inspire us to tell the stories of veterans like my grandfather, remembering his service like that of other War I veterans, thanking them even now by telling their stories of the sacrifices they made to keep our world free.

### **World War II (December 8, 1941 to September 2, 1945)**

The sense of duty and love of country was also instilled in my grandfather's son, my father Victor. On December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941, when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, my father was on a train to Washington D.C. to visit his cousins. He heard of the attack while he was in the train station in Washington and recalls that "Life in the United States changed immediately." He observed that the U.S. population became extremely active militarily: everyone wanted to enlist, both men and women.

Mandatory mobilization of all males ages 18 to 40 went into effect. When he was 15 he recounts that the war was not progressing well for the United States so he decided to take his chances and enlist in the U.S. Army Air Force on the day after he graduated from high school.

My father recalls that although my grandfather never talked much about his military service, he strongly suggested that my father try for an officer's commission and definitely stay out of the infantry. He told my Dad it would "make his life more tolerable." By August, 1944, at the age of 17 my father was on a troop train headed to Mississippi for basic training.

My father reminds me that the Air Force was not a separate entity at that time, but part of the Army. Some three years later, the Air Force became a separate entity and so he was formally discharged from the Army and immediately enrolled in the Air Force. He actually has two discharge certificates.

While in basic training, my father was recommended for the first class of crew training for the new B-29 planes and studied for eight weeks in Denver, Colorado; he was then sent to Tampa, Florida, where his crew was assembled. They flew in trainings each day preparing to fight in war. While there, he was promoted to Sergeant, a rank he held throughout his service.

In a training accident on a B-29 while trying to evacuate, my Dad went out an escape hatch onto the wing to find water aflame with burning gasoline and oil. He dove through the flames into complete darkness. When oil burns it produces a dense black smoke. Under the flames and in the dark of night he could see nothing. Suddenly he saw a pair of boots, one on each side of his head less than a foot away. It was another crewman doing a scissors-kick, which closed onto my father's head before he could react. He was kicked in each ear simultaneously. He can only recall getting out of the water and being in the hospital. Both memories are vague. His ear drums were broken and his inner ears became infected and eventually, after several years, he began to lose his hearing. This

accident has resulted in his total deafness today. He is one-hundred percent VA certified disabled from these injuries.

Although at the time, the accident slowed my father's ability to participate fully with his other crewmen; it did not stop his strong desire to defend his country. He soon geared up for his departure to the South Pacific. These orders changed in a matter of hours and he and his crew were quickly rerouted to Europe. They traveled to Le Havre, France, by boat. This is the renowned area now known as Normandy. He recalls upon their arrival the massive destruction in and around the harbor, including sunken ships and bombed buildings that were reduced to rubble. It was on the boat some days away from landing in Le Havre, France, that they heard of the unconditional surrender of Germany to the allied representatives in a Reims, France, schoolhouse on May 7<sup>th</sup>, 1945 and a day later in a second surrender in Berlin by presidential proclamation. It should be noted that despite Germany's surrender, no peace treaty was ever signed by Germany and none exists to this day. Thus, this news did not stop their advancement into a still unsettled and extremely dangerous European theater.

From the boat, the men were put directly onto a train made up of boxcars. In Europe the boxcar was called "forty and eight." Each car could accommodate forty men and eight horses. Their designation was unknown to my father and his crew. After several days they were told they were headed to Berchtesgaden in Bavaria, a trip that would eventually last four days and nights for both men and horses.

The railroads in France and Germany had received special attention from the U.S. Air Force as well as the Royal Air Force of England. Damage to the tracks was so extensive that the trains never moved faster than fifteen miles an hour. As my father's train headed East into Germany there were trains going west out of Germany loaded with GI's hoping to go

home. They smiled and waved as they passed each other, all in need of connection to their homeland.

As part of the occupying forces now in Germany, my Dad was assigned to a “Photo Reconnaissance Group” near Nuremberg that used the Douglas A-26 (Invader) planes. This eventually made sense to him as the A-26 used the same gunnery system as the B-29. The A-26 was much smaller and—with two engines, a pilot and a gunner—considerably faster than the B-29.

My father’s crew was active in mapping through photography the major destruction of Germany in the days, weeks and months following the surrender. They flew over the bombing targets and took pictures to determine the extent of the damage and to make sure that there was no further aggressive action by the Germans. The pilot was the photographer. The nose of the A-26 held a very large camera permanently mounted to the plane. To take pictures the pilot had to aim the plane by diving towards the target from about 4000 to 5000 feet. The gunner rode in a small compartment about ten feet behind the pilot; he could not see where they were going, but only where they had been; he controlled two .50 caliber machine guns in the event the plane was attacked.

A second mission of his “Photo Reconnaissance Group” was to process the pictures taken by other members of the reconnaissance teams who were on the ground. My father and his crew were responsible for the photographic development of thousands and thousands of pictures that came to his unit for development and processing. These photos were primarily pictures taken of the death camps in Poland, including Aushwitz-Birkenau (April 1940 to January 1943), Belzec (March 1942-June 1943), and in the death camps in Germany, including Flossenbürg (May 1938-April 1945), the concentration camp on the outskirts of Nuremberg the town where he was now stationed. Some seventy years later he can still vividly recall many of these photos in graphic detail. Detailed photos were images of naked bodies, packed five feet high and twenty to twenty-five

feet long, ten to fifteen feet wide. So many heads, legs, faces that most of the time he could not look at what he was developing. Next to these bodies, more captured prisoners who were shot in place as they dug the mass graves to bury those who the Germans had already murdered. There is no doubt in my father's mind—having witnessed a massive holocaust, killing tens of thousands of people, mostly Jews—that evil truly exist in our world. It was not until the spring of 1945 that the true extent of the Holocaust was known (Olson 359). It was only through vivid and undisputable pictures of skeletal, emaciated murdered men, women and children, narrative storytelling by those who survived and those who bore witness and eventually testimony at major tribunals like those at Nuremberg that the world would come to know the true extent of these atrocities.

A third mission which was not part of photo reconnaissance was an assignment given to my father by his father, my grandfather back home. My grandfather was a lover of beer, especially Reading beer; he was a frequent visitor to that local beer's distributor. Mr. Newman the owner was of Jewish decent and many in his family had not escaped Europe prior to the start of the war. He made a special request to my grandfather to ask my father to see if any of his family who once resided in Nuremberg survived the war and the death camps. My Dad was sent their last known address which he found only by searching through old street maps since most of the town had been destroyed by the bombing of Allied forces. After much searching he eventually was able to find some family members living in the basement of what was once their family home. They survived the war by living in a carved-out hidden cave in their basement which was now under all the rubble. To the best of his ability he helped Mr. Newman's family members to find whatever resources they could in the midst of a devastated town and country. Since they did not speak English and my Dad did not speak German, he was never able to ask how they

survived the war in a German town with a least three known concentration camps.

My father's observations were that life in Germany was not easy for anyone. There was no electricity, few buildings were left standing, rubble blocked the streets, and there were no stores for the simple supplies needed for daily living. In addition, there was no place to go with so many service members coming and going and little organization. My Dad lived on a base with an airfield once built and occupied by the German Air Force. The airfield allowed him easy access to his plane and kept the crew close at hand, always ready to go on a minute's notice.

In addition to his daily flying missions, my Dad attended the Nuremberg War Crimes Trials. This famous series of trials of accused Nazi war criminals was conducted by a military tribunal from the United States, France and the Soviet Union and were based in Nuremberg, Germany. He got to sit in on several occasions during which he said that all the "top bad guys" were on trial for their crimes against humanity. The trial was easy to follow as all the testimonies were translated into five languages. All the spectators wore earphones that enabled them to select their language. Sixty plus years later he still remembers some of the vivid details of the testimony and the brutality they revealed.

It was at the Nuremberg War Crimes Trails that the extent of the horrors of the Nazi Holocaust became known to the world. It was also the first time that human beings were charged with "crimes against humanity," a term that unfortunately is still used today to prosecute others who commit war atrocities. Eventually, twenty-two men from various military positions stood trial. They included some of the military personnel closest to Adolf Hitler. Martin Bormann, Secretary to Hitler and Head of the Nazi Party (in absentia), Rudolf Hess, Deputy to Hitler and Nazi Party Leader, Ernst Kaltenbrunner, Chief of Security Police including the SS and the Gestapo along with Hermann Goering, Second in Command to Hitler, were just a few of those men who stood trial for their

crimes against humanity (Taylor 4 ). Eventually, nineteen of those twenty-two would be found guilty. Twelve were sentenced to death by hanging. The other seven were sentenced from ten years to life in prison. Bormann (guilty in absentia but never found), Kaltenbrunner, and Goering were three of those sentenced to hang while Hess was sentenced to life in prison. Goering committed suicide by cyanide the night before his sentence was carried out (Minow 116). The graphic testimonies and horrifying pictures my father witnessed during the days he attended the trials still haunt him to this day. Some pictures of the death camps were pictures he thought he and his crew had developed but he could not be sure since they were responsible for the development of thousands of them.

During these same months my father was based in Nuremberg, he also remembers guarding two planes located on the German airfield that were carrying bodies of dead service members back to the United States. It was very dark and the smell of the dead hung over the entire area. This too is a vivid memory of his service. One can certainly understand why these very powerful memories would remain with him to this day; however, he only began to share these stories this past year. Perhaps the rather recent deaths of many of his Air Force buddies, his approaching eight-ninetieth birthday, a recent trip to the World War II Memorial in Washington and his recently discovered desire for the legacy of his service to live on pressed him to the point of avoiding his stories no longer.

Finally, as part of the occupying army in Germany, my Dad was able to access an Army jeep and a German prisoner of war driver to travel into different parts of Europe. It was during this time that he got to do something his father, my grandfather, was unable to do while he served in Europe. He was able to travel to Italy, visit my grandfather's home town (Roseto) and meet many of our relatives. When he got to his father's town he was surrounded by relatives, hugs and kisses, and food and wine

flowed in a long overdue celebration. This was the only story he ever shared with his extended family until just recently, perhaps because it was the only happy memory of his service while stationed in Germany.

Six years ago (2007), my father was contacted by a woman in Pennsylvania who said they shared the same last names; she was from Italy and thought they might be related. He went to meet her and it turned out that her grandfather and his father were brothers. She remembers my Dad coming to their home town in Italy right after the war ended. She was nine years old at the time and one of the crowds of greeters.

My Dad spent twenty-six months in the Army/Air Force and it was a major part of his life; it was a tremendous experience—something he will “always remember.” Evacuating the B-29 plane had a long lasting effect on his life as he eventually went totally deaf from the accident. His deafness has changed his life in ways that he never imagined or expected. He was now a wounded warrior. He has received services from the Veterans Administration for the past thirty-five years and is now one-hundred percent disabled. Unlike my grandfather, he never received a “Victory Medal” for his wounds but I believe his victory is evident each day of his life as he makes every effort to communicate to his family, friends, war buddies and those around him.

### **Operation Iraq Freedom (OIF; 2001-2010), Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF-2003-Present and Operation New Dawn (OND; 2010-Present)**

I am eternally proud of my grandfather and father, two of my heroes for their service to our country and our world in these two world wars. Both experienced the long-term consequences of that call to service without considering the suffering it would cost them. It was not until both of them were well into their eighties that they began to share their war stories. Perhaps they wanted their families to know their military legacy

so that this piece of their past would live on in our family; perhaps they wanted to tell stories; perhaps they were just too tired of keeping the horrific memories of their service from those they loved.

Throughout history storytelling has been one of the most important practices of those who have returned from deployment in a war zone. There are many war stories, including Homer's epic narrative war poem, *The Iliad*, that are as relevant today as they were thousands of years ago (Shay 13). Yet some patriots share their stories verbally, without ever writing them down. When those who fought for and protected our nation are no longer able to share their stories of duty, honor and courage, we must find a way to capture and preserve them. One way of doing so is through an understanding of the power of narrative storytelling. As a form of communication, the narrative can help tell the story giving shape and meaning to the soldiers' experiences of war. Narratives can also help us to understand the experience of the soldier and the unimaginable emotions, feelings and unique experiences caused by war (James 2-3).

Narrative storytelling provides a window into the veterans' world of war. This window can help civilian personnel, including family members, understand the unique experiences that veterans experience during war time and provide for us an opportunity for new insights, a deeper understanding of their experiences and a vivid account of their encounters. It can help the civilian population to acknowledge that these wars are our wars and that we sent those who volunteered to fight (Bowling et al. 451-458). By recognizing veterans' war stories, we are providing a way of capturing their unique stories for a lifetime providing for society a narrative history into their experiences of war. These narratives can be used to "convey a shared social heritage that transcends generations, location, and culture" (Morie et al. 2).

This paper uses a first person account in a historical narrative format to tell the story of service of my grandfather (WW I), father (WW II) and

myself, the founder and director of The Pennsylvania branch of The Soldiers Project, PA. Personal experiences with my grandfather, father, and now veterans of Iraq (OIF) and Afghanistan (OEF) inspired me to tell our family story of service and heroism. I hope that this story will live well into the future, that we might never forget those who keep our nation safe.

According to Coles knowing our heroes stories of service, putting meaning to what we have learned and experienced through those stories and experiencing their “moral energy” offers us a link between “stories and service” (23). It is from my grandfather’s and father’s commitment to service, duty and honor and my father’s narrative storytelling of his service and the fact that the United States was engaged in war in Iraq and Afghanistan with two million plus service members, that I was moved to do my part to help our present-day veterans.

In 2010 I began to explore the possibility of starting a branch of The Soldiers Project in the state of Pennsylvania with the hope that my service would help veterans like those in my own family to tell their stories. Though our caring professional team of trained clinicians’ we provide veterans the opportunity to communicate their story in their own words and experiences giving meaning to these experiences with the hope of addressing the many invisible wounds of war. By doing so veterans can form a “coherent narrative to their past lives and combat experiences to their lives going forward” (Bragin 317).

The Soldiers Project is a national program founded in 2004 by, Dr. Judy Border, MD. Its primary mission is to provide mental health services to post 9/11 veterans and their loved ones. These services are provided free of charge by trained volunteers and licensed social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, professional counselors and marriage and family counselors throughout the state. There is no cost and therapy (a way of narrative storytelling) is provided for as long as it takes to bring the veteran “all the way home”.

In addition to individual, group and family counseling provided by the Pennsylvania branch, we also offer ongoing trainings to all clinical volunteers and the general public statewide. These trainings are provided predominantly by doctors who are highly experienced clinicians in their specialized fields. They make every effort to educate others on the importance of understanding Military Culture, Post-Traumatic Stress, Traumatic Brain Injury, Moral Injury, Military Sexual Trauma, Life after War and a host of other important educational areas that help those who wish to help post 911 veterans including those veterans who have recently served in Iraq and Afghanistan. Of late, we have begun to explore ways to reach out to family members of veterans with a focus on the children exploring ways for these children to tell the stories of their own experiences and where possible, those of their veteran family members. These children are often overlooked in the helping process, yet they are just as important as our veterans. They too are survivors of war having had a parent or sometimes two deployed, more often than not, multiple times.

As the Director of The Soldiers Project, Pennsylvania, I also have the opportunity to join forces with many local, state, and national individuals and programs to work to enhance services to post-9/11 veterans and their loved ones. These include the Veterans Administration, Army One Source, Student Veterans of America, the Yellow Ribbon Programs at several Colleges and Universities, Student Veteran Centers, the Governor's Advisory Council-Veteran's Service Behavior Health group and many programs and services whose primary missions include helping all veterans of all wars.

As I work to be of service to our veteran community and to build national, state, and local resources that will help these veterans and those they love, I cannot help but think of my own grandfather and father whose service cost them dearly for most of their adult lives. Their personal

stories and journeys during World War I and World War II motivate me to deliver and at times create as many resources and opportunities for our present-day veterans as I can. Creating new opportunities for storytelling by our veterans and their loved ones may open a door that, at least for my family, remained closed for many hidden years.

Like my grandfather's and father's stories of the "Great War" and World War II more stories still need to be told. When veterans are no longer able to share their stories, it is our responsibility to do so. As Homer did in his *Iliad*, we, too, must tell the stories of veteran warriors from our past as well as those of our newest veterans and establish avenues to do so. Much storytelling remains for us to understand their history, experiences and memories of war. Let us each find new ways to help them tell their stories and when they are no longer able, let us be the ones to do the telling.



Sister Nancy DeCesare, IHM, PhD has over thirty plus years of experience working in the fields of administration, Social Work and teaching. She started her social work career as a frontline social worker on the streets of New York City and has held high level positions including executive director. Presently she is an associate professor of human services at Chestnut Hill College, Philadelphia PA. Sister holds a master of Social Work from Marywood University, and a master of Public Administration from New York University's prestigious Robert F. Wagner School of Public Service. She received her PhD in Clinical Social Work from the Shirley M. Ehrenkraus

School of Social Work, New York University. She is a member of the National Association of Social Workers, a member of the Academy of Certified Social Workers, a Board Certified Clinical Social Worker and a licensed clinical social work in both New York and Pennsylvania. In 2010, Sister started the Pennsylvania branch of The Soldiers Project for the State of Pennsylvania, a network of volunteer clinicians providing community based mental health services to post 9/11 veterans free of charge.

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