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**A Brief Biography of James Steccato by Artie Maglionico, Borough Historian**

On Christmas Eve 1944 in Luxembourg Germany, Lodi's James Steccato almost lost his life when Nazi war planes descended upon his platoon in a surprise bombing raid. James leaped from his 40mm anti-aircraft gun just as the shell creased the air above his head. "If you hear the shell coming, you have a chance." says James "It's the one you don't hear that gets you!"

Today, 56 years later, the sounds of WW II still echo in James's mind. Though he returned safely to his town of Lodi, he has only to recollect the chaos of war and suddenly he's there again on the field of battle defending his country, The United States of America.

James Steccato was born on Passaic Street in Lodi on January 4, 1925 and has remained a resident for the past 75 years. His parents Louise and Maria came over from Sicily in the early 1900's. After settling in New York City for a while, the couple crossed the mighty Hudson and were Lodi bound. "They lived on Home Place at first," said Steccato "then over to Passaic Street where myself, two brothers, and two sisters were born. Upon arriving in Lodi, James's dad took a job as a dressmaker at a nearby sewing shop.

After graduating from Roosevelt Grammar School at the tender age of 16, James went to work at the Garfield Coat Company. There he stayed until May 12, 1943...the day he was called upon to serve in the Armed Forces in Europe where the war was raging on. "I remember the day the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor." recalls James "December 7, 1941. Me and my friends were walking out of the Montauk Movie house in Passaic NJ. We heard it the minute we hit the side walk."

At 18 years of age, James was in the Army, suffering the rigors of basic training at Fort Ustice, Virginia. After a short stay in Camp Shanks NJ, the young soldier was assigned to the 456<sup>th</sup> AAA Auto Weapons Battalion. Together with Batteries A, B and C, James was sailing over to Europe in what he describes as "one of the biggest convoys of 1943." Aboard the ship Empress of Australia the men of the 456<sup>th</sup> were being transported below decks, below the water line. Not an enviable position especially when being fired upon. If that happened, chances were you weren't making it top side.

On the English Channel, during the war, this was a soldier's biggest fear, and, for the men upon the Empress of Australia, that nightmare was fast becoming a reality. "We hit a mine!" recalls James. "The men were startled and began to panic." James noticed that the shock of the explosion had caused a plank to fall onto the hatch that led top side. Seeing that, James climbed up to the escape hatch and managed to move the plank aside just enough so that he and his ship mates could squeeze out. "I thought we'd have to abandon ship." said James "luckily it wasn't necessary."

From the English Channel, the 456<sup>th</sup> made its way into Normandy, France and were

soon fighting their way out of the Hedge rows of Saint Lo where they were experiencing a heavy ground and air attack. Finally after days of being under siege the German onslaught was put to rout by US war planes. " We were saved by B- 17s B-24s and English Spit fires." remembers James " They were a very welcome sight."

After the close call at Saint Lo, James's battalion traveled throughout France guarding General George Patton's 3<sup>rd</sup> Army. "We spent most of August at the Seine River putting up pontoon bridges." said James. "That was before the liberation of Paris." During his stay on the coast of France, James was assigned to a trailer-pulled, 50 caliber, quadruple mounted, air cooled machine gun. Each container held over 500 rounds of ammunition. James's 3<sup>rd</sup> Army anti-aircraft battery held the record for shooting down the most enemy planes, a total of 394. More than 271 German Planes were shot down in early August as the Luftwaffe attempted to stem a breakthrough in Frances Cherbourg Peninsula. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Army was later commended by General Patton as well as the 1<sup>st</sup> Army's General Omar Bradley.

By the end of WW II, James had fought in no less than five major battles ...the Battle of the Bulge, Normandy, The Seine River, Northern France and Central Europe. "I was there until the end of the war," said James. He arrived home on a troop ship named The America and was discharged from military service on October 28, 1945. In the spring of 1946, James married Angelina Appio of Paterson NJ. "We lived in her Paterson home and then back to Lodi." he said "In June of 2000 we'll have been married for 54 years."

The Steccatos have one child, a son by the name of James L., and have two grand children, James E. and Victoria. James retired in 1990 from Brooks Brothers where he was employed as a material cutter. " I was proud to serve in WW II." said James, " and can only hope that our young people never forget the sacrifice that was made in the name of freedom." Since his return from the War in Europe in 1945, James's first rule of survival has remained the same. "Keep listening for those shells." he maintains "It's the one you don't hear that gets you!"

The following is a letter which was sent to the 456<sup>th</sup> Battalion from General George S. Patton. The letter is addressed to "The officers and men of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army and to our Comrades of the XIX Tactical Air Command."

*In the period from January 29 to March 22, 1945, you have wrested 6,484 square miles of territory from the enemy. You have taken 3,072 cities, towns and villages, including among the former: Trier, Koblenz, Bingen, Worms, Mainz, Kaiserlautern and Ludwigshaven.*

*You have captured 140,112 enemy soldiers, and have killed or wounded an additional 99,000, thereby eliminating practically all of the German 7<sup>th</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> Armies. History records no greater achievement in so limited a time.*

*This great campaign was only made possible by your disciplined valor, unswerving devotion to duty, coupled with the unparalleled audacity and speed of your performance*

*on the ground; while from the air, the peerless fighter bombers kept up a relentless round the clock attack upon the disorganized enemy.*

*The World rings with your praise; better still, General Marshall, General Eisenhower and General Bradley have all personally commended you. The highest honor that I have ever attained is that of having my name coupled with yours in these great events.*

*Please accept my heartfelt admiration and thanks for what you have done and remember your assault crossing over the Rhine River at 2200 hours last night assures you of even greater glory to come.*

**Note -8-2-2010...what a remarkable story this is...what a remarkable man. James passed away a few years ago and left behind an important legacy...FREEDOM!**