

***One Life in Lodi* December 2010**

***Joseph DeProspro* by Artie Maglionico**

On a soft Spring morning in the month of May in the year 1943 a 20 year old kid from Paterson, NJ said goodbye to his sobbing mother and sailed to Europe to fight against Hitler and his Nazi war machine. His name was Joseph "Joe" De Prospro, who along with millions of other American men and women during WWII, proudly answered his country's call to arms. This is his story;

After attending Paterson Central High School for a year, Joe dropped out and entered a Paterson Vocational School where he graduated in 1939. "I went to work at the Silk City machine shop," recalls Joe. When the War broke out it was converted into a Defense plant. Because I worked there I was deferred from the Draft." Watching all of his friends being mustered into the Army was cause for many a sleepless night for Joe whose brother John was already in England awaiting orders. "Everyone kept asking me why I wasn't in the military?" remembers Joe. "They all thought that I was physically ill and I didn't like that. . . so, I enlisted!"

Joe. . . because of his kid brother, who was already serving. . . had to tell his mother that he was drafted. " She wanted me to stay home and work at the Defense Plant," says Joe. "It would have hurt her even more if I told her that I enlisted. . . after all, she already had one son to worry about." Joe left in May of 1943.

Joseph was immediately shipped to Fort Bliss, Texas where he received his basic training. From there he was sent to Fort Eustis, Virginia for combat training. Then it was off to Camp Livingstone, Louisiana where he joined the ranks of the 7th Army Artillery Division, Company 553, Battery C, as a private. The next thing Joe knew he was on a Liberty ship going to Europe. "I never had a chance to say goodbye to my parents," says Joe. "The thought crossed my mind that I might never see them again."

The 553rd landed in Scotland where Private De Prospro was assigned to a 40 mm cannon then to a Half Track that carried a 50 caliber machine gun. "Those guns were so loud that they had to hit me on the helmet to let me know when to stop firing," recalls Joe. "That's why today I'm hard of hearing."

From Scotland the entire Division landed in France to take part in the Invasion of Normandy. "We landed on Omaha Beach 3 weeks after the invasion," remembers Joe. "It was hell on earth!"

The 553rd marched directly into the battle fighting their way through the hedge rows of St. Lo giving fire power where it was needed. Dead soldiers from both sides bloodied the landscape and the cries of the wounded pierced the walls of hell and shook the gates of heaven. . . still the 553rd marched on

"We shot down a lot of German air craft," recalls Joe. "The 3rd Army. . . under George Patton. . . put plows on their Tanks and leveled the place so the rest of the men could

get through. . . my God, what heavy casualties there were ."

The Division began their march toward Antwerp, but at the last minute were redirected into Holland where they took part in the liberation of Maastricht. During the night German soldiers opened the flood gates forcing most of the 553rd to run for higher ground. . . "We lost a lot of men and equipment!" says Joe.

While in Maastricht, Holland Joe met a Sergeant from his home town of Paterson, NJ by the name of Frank Co Francesco. He informed Joe that his kid brother was serving with Patton's 3rd Army in Arlon, Belgium. "I managed to get a three day pass to visit my brother," remembers Joe. "I was happy to see him alive and well considering all the action he had seen in France."

After the liberation of Maastricht, Joe's division crossed the Rhine River and fought their way into Mannheim, Germany facing heavy resistance from the now desperate German Artillery installations.

Overhead, the Nazi "Buzz Bombs" screamed leaving a trail of smoke in their wake as they headed for England.

"Our position was coded King 55," says Joe. "We were ordered to fire our 40mm guns at will to keep those buzz bombs from reaching England."

German technology produced what was the first Jet powered war plane and the sight of them flying overhead was both surprising and alarming to the soldiers below. "We didn't know what they were or where they were coming from." They flew by so fast that we didn't have time to shoot at them."

Before crossing the Rhine into Germany with General Hodges of the 7th Army, Joe and two other soldiers were sent to the top of a nearby church steeple to see what was happening on the other side of the river. They were told not to tie up the line of communication and to use the phone only in an emergency. By night fall, tucked away in the church steeple, Joe and his two buddies. . . one of which was a sergeant. . . heard what sounded like approaching German Tanks. "It was a clanging sound," says Joe. "The kind that tanks make on bumpy terrain."

They immediately radioed the Commander who in turn asked the three soldiers how many tanks were approaching. Once the number was established at no less than six the order was given to the soldiers to climb down and seek cover as they were going to send 4 rounds of cannon fire over our heads. The next morning, Joe and his buddies climbed back up and waited for all the smoke to clear. When it did, they were shocked to discover that what they thought were fast advancing German tanks were in reality a herd of cows. "They were lying feet up in the middle of a pasture," recalls Joe. "The bells around their necks sounded like tanks. . . man did we catch grief for that blunder!"

Joseph was discharged from the Army in April of 1946 and returned to work at the machine shop in Paterson. A year later he married Miss Rose Paci of Lodi, NJ. Their vows took place at St. Joseph Church in Lodi in November of 1947. "I met her at a

dance in the St Mary's auditorium in Passaic," says Joe. "She was a good looking red head. . . I asked her to dance and the rest is history."

The couple moved upstairs from Rose's parents at 25 First Street and have been there ever since.

To earn extra money, Joe re-organized his 4 piece band called the 'Rhythm Mountaineers.' It was the same band that, in 1942, came in 2nd in a Major Bows amateur hour contest . "I played the Accordion," says Joe.

In 1948 Joe went to work for General Motors in Bloomfield, NJ, but was forced out in 1950 during a major strike. That same year Joe took advantage of the GI bill and took a course in printing. After completing the 6 month course Joe went to work for The Paci Press. . . located behind his First Street home. The Paci Family ran a popular community news paper called 'The Lodi Messenger.' Joe retired in 1982. The couple has two children. . . Lorraine and younger brother Joseph. They boast three grandchildren and two great grandchildren. Jo's community affiliations include: President of the Kiwanis Club, circa 1992, charter member of both the Elks Club and the VFW. . . 1950 . Joe was also a member of the planning board

"I have always supported our town the best that I could," says Joseph. "I raised my family here and always found Lodi to be a warm and friendly place to live."