

One Life in Lodi : Where Our First Hero Fell

A Brief Biography of Nicholas J. Nicosia

By Artie Maglionico

The memories of war are haunting since they creep into soldier's dreams like demons that carry with them the groans of battle and the stench of death. That is where the war rages on! There during a fitful sleep the face of a hero appears and his name becomes written in stone among the honored dead.

Nicholas J. Nicosia carries with him the memories of WWII some 66 years after the sound of the last cannonade shook the landscape.

The fourth of seven children, Nicholas was born in New York City on June 24, 1919. His parents, Frank and Benedetta, arrived in NYC from San Fratello Sicily in the county of Messina in the fall of 1905. In the spring of 1920 Frank gathered his family, which by then included Frances, Tom, Kay, and Nicholas, and crossed the mighty Hudson into the friendly little Borough of Lodi New Jersey. Once there the Nicosia family, on the verge of having another mouth to feed, took up residence among the rolling hills and fertile pastures of Bell Avenue. "We lived at 235 Bell Avenue." Recalls Nicholas "that's where my sister Betty and my brothers Jimmy and Fred were born."

As did many Italian Immigrants who arrived in Lodi during that time, Nicholas's father found employment at the United Piece Dye Works. The vastness of this textile mill was such that it was a city within a city. The red brick buildings sprawled across the heart of Town like a Medieval Fortress. Its giant smokestacks, tan in color, scorched the heavens with billows of fiery smoke. The Saddle River was the mills' lifeline and close to its muddy banks, on Arnot Street, stood an ominous looking black water tower that stood almost as tall as the smokestacks behind it. Printed across the belly of the tank, facing south, were the bold white letters UPDW. Owned and operated by the Blum Family the UPDW employed no less than five thousand workers and was the biggest mill of its kind in the USA. It was second in the world only to a mill in France in size and capacity. "My father was a mill hand," said Nick. "He put in a lot of hours to support his family."

To supplement their income, the Nicosia family opened a small candy store next to their Bell Ave. home. "Money was scarce back then," recalled Nick. "Families had to grow their own food and livestock and rely on state aid." For his first holy communion, Nicholas recalled sporting a brand new suit thanks to state funding...tie included. "I received it at St Joseph Church under Pastor Falzone," said Nick. "Like me, many of the kids got their clothes from state aid."

Nick's childhood friends, most of whom were Wilson School classmates, included Jimmy Alesso, Dominick Branca, Buddy Daleo, Anthony Bellino, Nick Mancuso, Frances Basalotta and Charley Nucifora. "We played baseball on a field located on the corner of Grove Street and Bell Avenue," remembered Nick. "The name of our team was the Grove Athletic Club."

Nicholas's stay at Lodi High School was short lived. Like many young men growing up in the 30's, Nick was forced to leave school and go to work to help support the family. "I went to work at Macaluso's

Bakery on East Place and Washington Street,” said Nick. “After that, it was Terry’s Dairy on Paterson Avenue.” It was there that he met his then future wife Sara R.Nasuta of Garfield. The handsome couple would often stroll down Lodi’s cozy main street hand in hand passing The American theatre, Ben’s Beer Garden, Sallow’s Shoe Store, Focarino’s Stationery, a bowling alley, the Reformed Church and a French bakery owned by the Poalilio family.

On April 14,1941, with the threat of war looming over America like a storm cloud, Nick along with his friends Al Nucifora, Anthony Fogge, and Anthony Lodico enlisted in the Army. Then on December 7th of that same year Japanese war planes attacked the US Naval Base at Pearl Harbor, causing mass destruction and the killing of thousands of American lives. From that moment on for every American, young and old alike, life would never be the same. “I was days away from coming home, “recalled Nick. “ It was not to be.” Nick was immediately sent to Indian Gap Pennsylvania where he joined the ranks of the 28th Infantry Division. From there he was sent to Camp Pickett Virginia where he was promoted to Staff Sergeant by General Omar Bradley. After a short stay in Boston the 28th set sail for England to take part in the War in Europe.

“ The 28th was supportive to the 112th infantry regiment,” explained Nick. “We were known as the 229th Field Artillery Battalion Battery B.” Soon after arriving in England , the 28th was sent to the city of New Castle. There in the dankness of the early morning fog , American and Allied forces prepared for the Invasion of Normandy France...D day! “ It crossed my mind that I might never see my wife again,” recalled Nick. “ It was an empty...sickening feeling.”

In a matter of days Nicholas, now a Master Sergeant in charge of supply, and the entire Division would be fighting their way through the hedgerows of France. “ Those hedgerows’ were over 6 feet high and as hard as cement,” observed Nick. “They served as German defense lines.”

The 28th Infantry Division arrived on Omaha Beach nine days after the initial landing. Nick remembers the scattered lifeless bodies of American GI’S whose blood stained the littered sand. “Seeing my first dead American was a nightmarish experience that haunts me even now,” Said Nick. “We hid the dead under mattress covers until the next Company came to pick them up.”

The men of the 28th were soon digging in under a vicious Nazi assault. Once the soldiers made their way into the hedgerows, they were being shot at from all directions. German rifles and automatic weapons were placed behind each row while 88mm cannons backed the front lines. “We were caught in a deadly cross fire,” recalled Nick. “German sniper fire came at us from all sides.” Mines, booby traps, machine guns and tanks took their toll on American lives lost. There was little protection against the German onslaught. “ Still” says Nick, “ We pressed on.”

After finally fighting their way out of hedgerow country, the 28th fought on to liberate a town called Colmar under General A. Cota. “ Street fighting and hand to hand combat was a dirty and deadly business.” Says Nick “ It left much death and destruction on both sides.”

The 28th fought their way through France, Belgium, Luxembourg and the Ardennes always maintaining relentless pursuit of the crumbling Nazi war machine. When the fighting was over the grim statistics

were doomed to appear...1,841 Americans killed in action from the 28th Division, 7,787 were wounded of which 305 died, 2,106 injured, 5,133 missing in action and 21 POWs. German prisoners taken by the 28th Division from July 1944 to May 1945 numbered 8,661. { taken from the 28th Infantry Division Year Book }

Among Nicholas's war time memories is the story of a young private by the name of Henry Phelps whom Nick met briefly in 1942. "He sketched a picture of me before he shipped out," said Nick. "We met again later at the Battle of the Bulge." Their reunion was short lived, for soon after their meeting Phelps was killed in action. "Both hands were blown off," recalled Nick who was nearby at the time. "I have the sketch with me till this day." In 1966 Nicholas sent a copy of the sketch to Henry's daughter Stanlee who was born while Henry was fighting in Europe...the two never met.

Other war time memories include meeting "Old Blood and Guts" General George S. Patton Commander of the 3rd Army. " We were attached to Patton's 3rd Army during the battle at Colmar France" said Nick . " He was truly larger than life." Nicholas remembers with honor the men he served with: Corporal William D. Smith, Sergeant Mike Sparano, Private Frank Fregoe, Corporal Charles Adkins, Corporal Fred Nelson, 1st Sergeant Harry Fowler, Private John McGrey, Corporal William Wilkins, Private Jim McKeever and Private Doug Nesbith who was killed in action at Colmar. " They were my war time buddies," said Nick proudly. " Many of us still keep in contact but the number is fast dwindling"

After the German surrender in August of 1945, Nicholas returned home and into the awaiting arms of his wife Sara and his first born son Frank. They moved in with Sara's parents in Garfield. "It helped us to save the money to buy our own home," said Nick.

Nicholas went into the poultry business with his brother-in-law Dominick. They named it, appropriately enough, Nick and Nick Poultry. The store was located at 6-8 Farnham Avenue in Garfield and served some of the biggest restaurants in the area including Terribole's in Lodi. A year later the Nicosia family relocated to their dream home on Paterson Avenue in Lodi. After closing the doors to the poultry store in 1961, Nick became employed as a dock hand for the Red Star Express where he retired in 1982. In 1983 he became President of the New Jersey Retirement Club and is past Commander of the VFW.

Nicholas and Sara { deceased } have four children: Frank, Kenneth, Eileen and David. They boast 7 grand children and 4 great grandchildren.

" I enjoyed my life in Lodi," said Nicholas. "The people, the places and all of my experiences have kept Lodi in my heart...It was a great town to come home to."

Even the whisper of war unleashes the sentiments of those who fought and lived. Nicholas was there. He heard the crying of angels and felt the trembling of the earth where our first hero fell.