LA GENERAZIONE PIÙ GRANDE

ITALIAN AMERICAN VETERANS IN WW II

By Melissa E. Marinaro, Curator, Italian American Program

"I WAS WALKING DOWN FIFTH AVENUE,"

remembers Joseph Pugliano of the 3rd Army's 5th Division. "I was walking and guys were coming out of Goldstein's Restaurant saying that they declared war and they bombed Pearl Harbor. I didn't know where Pearl Harbor was—just that it was a part of the United States. I never gave it a thought until they started drafting and most of my buddies were going. It seemed like a long time until they got to me so we went down to the draft office, me and my buddy next door, and said all our buddies are going except us and we thought maybe because we were Italian they wouldn't take us. [But] two days later we got a report—drafted. So he went to the Navy and I went to the Army. I was excited really. We thought it was a big deal to go into the Army. You're your own man."

Courtesy of the Argentine Family.

From 1926 to 1937, boys between the ages of 8 and 14 participated in *Opera Nazionale Balilla*, a Fascist youth group intent on indoctrinating young Italians in the ideals of the Fascist party and preparing them for future service in the Italian Army. Italian Americans who spent their formative years in Italy had no choice but to be members of the mandatory organization, which was integrated into their primary education. United States Army P.F.C. Tony (Michelantonio) Vaccaro, who spent his childhood in Bonefro, Italy, recalls,

"I didn't want to wear the Fascist uniform of *Balilla*, but they forced me to wear it. They wanted me to be a Fascist, you see."

HHC Detre L&A, 1999.0244, Beneficial Society of North Italy Oral History Collection, gift of G. Edward Paraggio.

Ten years ago, former Heinz History Center curator Nicholas P. Ciotola launched an ambitious oral history project to document the Italian American experience during World War II. He planned to collect the stories of veterans living in southwestern Pennsylvania for inclusion in the History Center's Detre Library & Archives. Along with James M. Zanella, an oral historian specializing in Italian American history, plus a team of transcribers, they gathered what is now known as the Italian American World War II Veterans Oral History Collection. This diverse collection of more than 40 audio interviews features the stories of gentlemen who served during World War II in the United States Army, Navy, Air Corps, and Coast Guard in the European and Pacific theaters.

Ciotola developed a specialized questionnaire to assure that veterans were thoughtfully interviewed about their lives and wartime experiences; along with documenting World War II recollections, the questions investigated how Italian American identity informed their service. Themes explored in the collection include: childhood in Italy and

Western Pennsylvania, civilian life prior to entering the armed forces, the call to duty, military training and deployment, overseas experiences, daily life in the military, stories from the front lines and combat, release from service, homecoming, and life after the war. Financed by a Culture and Heritage Grant from NIAF, the National Italian American Foundation of Washington, D.C., Ciotola's seminal project endures as a valuable part of the History Center's Italian American Collection and an incredible resource for scholars of World War II.

Why was it essential for the History Center to gather first-person accounts from Italian Americans when we are losing the stories of veterans from all ethnic backgrounds? While it's true that every community played a vital role in the American war effort, Italian Americans were in a unique position during the conflict: by the 1940s, Italians were the largest immigrant group in the United States with approximately 600,000 Italian nationals living in America. Italy's fascist dictator Benito Mussolini aligned his country with the Axis forces, who declared war against the United States in 1941, and, for the first time in history, made Italy an enemy of the U.S. This decision left American-born and naturalized Americans of Italian descent in a precarious state as they entered into a period of estrangement with their homeland. In Ralph Arlotti's oral history, he comments on his disappointment with Mussolini:

> I was very upset as an American, an Italian American, at Mussolini. Because I used to love Mussolini, I used to respect Mussolini…. I respected him as a great leader. I thought he was a savior of Italy. I thought all of this as a young kid…. then I come to this country and I still admired him for what he did. But when he got with Hitler and he being our enemy, I hated him. He betrayed me as an Italian and that fed me. I was very proud to be an American because I was fighting the lousy Mussolini that double crossed me, that let me down.

The *Soldier's Guide to Italy*, distributed to members of the 5th Army, begins by distinguishing the difference between Italians and Italian Americans, warning soldiers:

"you should remember that Italians in their own country, after 20 years of Fascism, are by no means the same as Italians you may have known in America."

HHC Detre L&A, MSS 0722, Virgil Cantini Papers and Photographs, gift of Jim & Lisa Seguin.

"[IN] THE BEGINNING ... MUSSOLINI WAS A GENTLEMAN.

He was a good one. My home town had no electricity, no water, and the streets were all dirt. When Mussolini came into power he got electricity, sewers, and the streets paved. Before, everyone was illiterate. But Mussolini came in and said, "You send your son and daughter to school or else. Then everyone started to learn.... when Mussolini declared war against the United States people started to turn against him. Not just me but everyone in my same position."

~ Sergeant Frank (Francesco) J. Genovese

Despite all his faults, Mussolini sanctioned several edicts that greatly improved life for Italians living in rural communities, chief among them the mandate that all school-aged children receive a primary education. Arlotti—a first-generation American born in Savuto, Italy—immigrated to Blawnox in 1937 from impoverished conditions in the Calabrese countryside. He enlisted in the United States Navy in 1944 and worked as a military tailor at a Naval base in Guam.

Arlotti's feelings about Mussolini reflect what many Italians and Italian Americans felt at the time—by forming an allegiance with Hitler, Mussolini negated his positive policies and ultimately altered the way his countrymen viewed him. First-generation American Sergeant Frank (Francesco) J. Genovese of the United States Army's 4th Infantry Division, officially nicknamed the "Ivy" or "Iron Horse" Division, was also born in the Calabrian countryside and echoes the sentiment:

> [In] the beginning Mussolini was a gentleman. He was a good one. My home town had no electricity, no water, and the streets were all dirt. When Mussolini came into power he got electricity, sewers, and the streets paved. Before, everyone was illiterate. But Mussolini came in and said, "You send your son and daughter to school or else." Then everyone started to learn.... When Mussolini declared war against the United States people started to turn against him. Not just me but everyone in my same position.

Italian Americans experienced feelings of confusion towards their ancestral home amidst the changing world order. Many, whether they wanted to or not, took a hard look at how they identified themselves; if a family or individual had not made the effort to assimilate into American society, this was when they made the painful decision to shed aspects of their Italian culture.

World War II became a turning point in the history of Italian Americans in the United

States. As Philip J. Passaro of the United States Army, a second generation American from Pittsburgh's West End with roots in Nusco in the province of Avellino, notes:

> When we were growing up and it wasn't until the Second World War that most of these Americans of Italian descent, they didn't even realize they were Americans. They were so reminded they were Italians because they were harassed and criticized so much…. It's a funny thing. When we got to Italy, the Italians were calling us Americans…. The Americans looked at you [as] Italian and the Italians looked at you, even though you were Italian, they looked at you as American because you're not Italian. You're of Italian parentage, I think, but you're not Italian…. When the war broke out never was there such a unified feeling among all the Americans. It was a great feeling because never I think were Americans so unified, I think, as they were in the Second World War.

As Passaro suggests, the concept of being "American" wasn't ingrained in every Italian American at the onset of the war. American-born children of immigrants identified more with the birthplace of their parents than the country of their own birth. For a large contingent of first and second generation Americans, participating in the United States Armed Forces became a part of the assimilation process and altered their perceptions of their ethnic identity. While enlistment numbers were once believed to be much smaller, a 1961 speech by New York Governor and future Vice President Nelson Rockefeller addressing the Italian American War Veterans of America cited that more than 1.5 million Italian Americans served in the United States military during World War II, a number that constituted more than 10 percent of the armed forces.

The challenge of self-identification and integration became especially difficult for some drafted into the service who had no choice but to learn English in order to fulfill their military training. First Gunner Corporal Angelo Cestoni Jr. of the United States Army, an Italian immigrant from Belluno in the region of Veneto, had only been in America for two years when he was drafted into the service. He affirms, "I couldn't read or write. After I was in there for a while, I had to learn the language, because I couldn't speak to anybody unless I spoke English. I couldn't speak Italian to nobody in there." In fact, Cestoni wasn't an American citizen at the time of his basic training and he did not receive his citizenship papers until he was stationed at Camp Wallace in Texas.

The blue mosque symbol in the United States 5th Army patch represents Oujda, Morocco, in North Africa, the location of the group's activation on January 5, 1943. Under the command of Lieutenant General Mark Clark, the soldiers in the 5th Army were the first Americans to see combat on the European mainland during Operation Avalanche in Salerno, Italy. In his oral history, United States Army Corporal Vincent Sirianni explained, "From Algiers we took a boat and went straight into Naples. By that time what happened was the Germans knew after we took Sicily that we were going to go into the mainland and they retreated all the way up to Naples and that's where they were going to make their next stand, actually in Salerno, which was very bloody. The sand was red that's how much blood we lost in Salerno."

HHC Collections, 2011.26.7, gift of Rosemary Sirianni.

Another Italian immigrant who had not yet naturalized, Mario S. Iafolla of the United States Navy, received a letter calling him to serve in the Italian Army. He remembers, "I had gotten a summons from Mussolini to report for duty in Italy because military training was mandatory in Italy and when you reached a certain age or when you reached that year. I got a notice to that effect that I was to go back to Italy to serve my 18 months. My father read it and tore it up. [He] said a few choice words and that was it." Iafolla, a native of Villetta Barrea in the province of

Oral history accounts confirm that food prepared in the camp mess hall was preferred over the C-rations and K-rations available during combat missions. Tony (Antonio) Alfonsi of the United States Army Air Corps described the food from the kitchen as just okay: "It wasn't bad. You had a regular meal." United States Army Corporal Lou Mafrice, on the other hand, was critical of the rations:

"They started givin' it down to the C-rations, where you got a can thrown at you.

It started out with baked beans, and hash, and then they started to make it better for you. They would get vegetables, and maybe put wieners in with the beans this time, and maybe a little bit what they feed a dog right now.... That's what you got. You got a can, and that's it."

HHC Detre L&A, MSS 0722, Virgil Cantini Papers and Photographs, gift of Jim & Lisa Seguin.

L'Aquila, enlisted in the Navy in 1939 with the permission of his father at the young age of 17. He spent 22 years in the Navy and retired with the rank of Master Chief Petty Officer.

World War II separated individuals from their immediate and extended families and placed them on opposite sides of the conflict. This was especially challenging for Italian American soldiers stationed in the Mediterranean. Pittsburgher Private First Class Robert P. Argentine Sr. of the 3rd Army's 400th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Battalion entered the military in December 1942. He wanted to volunteer for the United States Air Corps, but at the request of his mother, he waited until the draft called him to serve. Son of an Italian immigrant from Messina province in Sicily, Argentine was one of many servicemen ordered to fight near his ancestral hometown. In his oral history he told Zanella how close he came to meeting his paternal grandfather for the first time:

> I felt bad about it because you don't know if you're killing one of your relations.... My father had always told me that he was from Messina and never went into details. Well, while we were waiting in Salerno I tried to get a pass so I could go see my grandfather in Messina. It was only 60 or 70 miles but there was no transportation so I never went. Here I

> found out that my Dad had misstated [the city of] Messina, Piraino is right outside Termini Imerese of where we were and had I known it. But I didn't know that that's where he was I could have walked it. Maybe it was 10 miles away.

Argentine never had another opportunity to see his grandfather, though they conversed by letter. From these communications he learned his paternal uncles, who were fighting in the Italian Army, were missing in action and about the hardships his grandfather and the people of Sicily were suffering as a result of the war.

Unlike Argentine, some Italian American soldiers stationed in Europe during World War II had the good fortune to reunite with their extended family. United States Army Private First Class Albert DeFazio Sr. of Verona, Pennsylvania, was one of those lucky individuals. His parents were immigrants from Altavilla Irpina in Avellino province. While DeFazio was stationed with the 36th Infantry Division, known as the "Arrowhead" or "Texas Division," in the region of Campania, he was discovered by one of his relatives. In his oral history he recalls, "This [American] soldier comes around and he says, 'Hey is there anybody here from around Pittsburgh?' I says, 'Yeah I'm from the outskirts.' He says, 'There's a little Italian guy over here that's been asking everybody if there's anybody here from Pittsburgh.' So I goes over and I starts talking to him in Italian. It was my mother's first cousin."

After learning how close his unit was to his ancestral hometown, DeFazio secured a two day pass from his commanding officer and was permitted to travel to the town of Altavilla Irpina:

> I knocked on the door and I told him I got relatives up there. I told him, "My name is Albert DeFazio." I said my mother was Giuseppina Galasso. Well he says, "Galasso? Oh my God." He said,

Renowned Pittsburgh artist and educator Virgil Cantini sketched military life while serving in the United States Army's 30th Engineer Base Topographic Battalion. His depiction of switchboard installation class at Camp Crowder in Missouri illustrates the type of training United States Army Buck Sergeant Eugene G. Frediani received as a radio operator. Frediani explained, "I went to radio school and they sent me a big transmitter out and I took over the transmitter. Ninety percent of the time after that I was [the] radio man by myself. I did give classes sometimes on radio just so they would understand how it works in case something happened to me. Other than that, I was strictly radio operator."

HHC Detre L&A, MSS 0722, Virgil Cantini Papers and Photographs, gift of Jim & Lisa Seguin.

"You're my sister's son!" I met his sister, which is my mother's sister. Then I went over and met my father's brother. I stayed with him overnight. Then I went and met my father's sister and she was a nice, beautiful woman. "You have to come over here and eat." She made homemade *fusilli*, you know, *macaroni*, and I had to go over her house and eat. And I also met my godfather that baptized me. 'Cause he was in this country way back …. he went back to Italy, cause he had a wife, kids, he had a farm back there below the town…. I still have the pocket watch he bought me when he baptized me, still have it.

DeFazio fought bravely in the Italian Campaign, participating in the battles at Anzio and Monte Cassino. The Allies efforts to break through the German military's Winter Line and capture Rome resulted in a reported 105,000 causalities over the course of the entire operation. DeFazio received two Purple Hearts and the Bronze Star, the fourth highest individual military honor, for his service.

While the oral history collection documents the unique position Italian American soldiers were in during World War II, it also details aspects of Army life. Nearly all interviewees discussed their military training, recounting the specialized skills developed to prepare them for their branch of service. Private First Class Carmine A. Botti was a second generation American from Wilmerding with roots in Agropoli in the region of Campania. He was a member of the United States Army's 9th Infantry Division, dubbed the "Old Reliables," and received extensive training prior to being shipped to North Africa. Botti says:

> I went to the basic camp. That was in Camp Wheeling, Georgia. Then I went to Fort Bragg, North Carolina. They had the 9th Infantry Division there. The home base was there, and then there was the 82nd Airborne was based there. They showed you how to use your rifle, you know, how to be a soldier; in other words, no fooling around and all that. We ran every morning, did calisthenics in the morning, and went on the hikes, fifteen mile hikes. And then we went to Fort Bragg. They made us walk a quarter mile, run a quarter mile because somebody told us that the reason they was doing that was because the beach that we was gonna land on was a long beach, and they wanted us to be in shape.

Botti landed at Port Lyautey in Morocco and experienced immediate action upon arrival. While on an ammunitions delivery, he was injured by a German hand grenade and received multiple shrapnel wounds to the face, resulting in the loss of his left eye and nearly 20 operations. He managed to crawl to his company after the explosion and notify his sergeant of the location of the German patrol that had attacked his jeep before passing out. In 1944, while recovering in the hospital from the wounds he sustained in North Africa, Botti was presented with the military's second highest decoration, the Distinguished Service Cross, awarded for extreme heroism in action against enemy forces.

The collection also captures numerous overseas accounts, particularly of combat in the European Campaign. Staff Sergeant Walter J. Vicinelly was a second generation American born in Masontown, Pennsylvania, to parents from Bellagio and Castelnuovo in Northern Italy. Drafted in 1943 after graduating from high school, he was chosen to serve in the Medical Corps in the 9th Infantry Division. He witnessed the landings at Normandy on D-Day and deployed to Utah Beach the following day. He recalled how scared he was: "I remember my first day of combat hearing rifle shots, machine gun shots, you think everybody is shooting at you. Then as you went on, you got the attitude that you learned some with the experience you had, that you could get out of this. I can get out of this; I can do the best I can." As a medic, Vicinelly was stationed alongside the infantry in combat, ready to tend to the wounded:

> If there was rifleman going up there and a sniper shot at him, he's wounded, you had to go get him. If that sniper, he could shoot at you. Generally what you did was get the infantry to come with you, they would be shooting at the direction of where that shot came from. There had been times when I picked a guy up and put him on my shoulder and took him out of there when he was bleeding because if I left him there then both of us would have been shot and I dragged him out of there.

Vicinelly was awarded a Silver Star Medal, the third highest military decoration, for gallantry in action against the enemy for his service during the war. His training as a medic allowed him to work in mine safety and rescue after the war and he held the post of Commissioner of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania's Office of Deep Mine Safety.

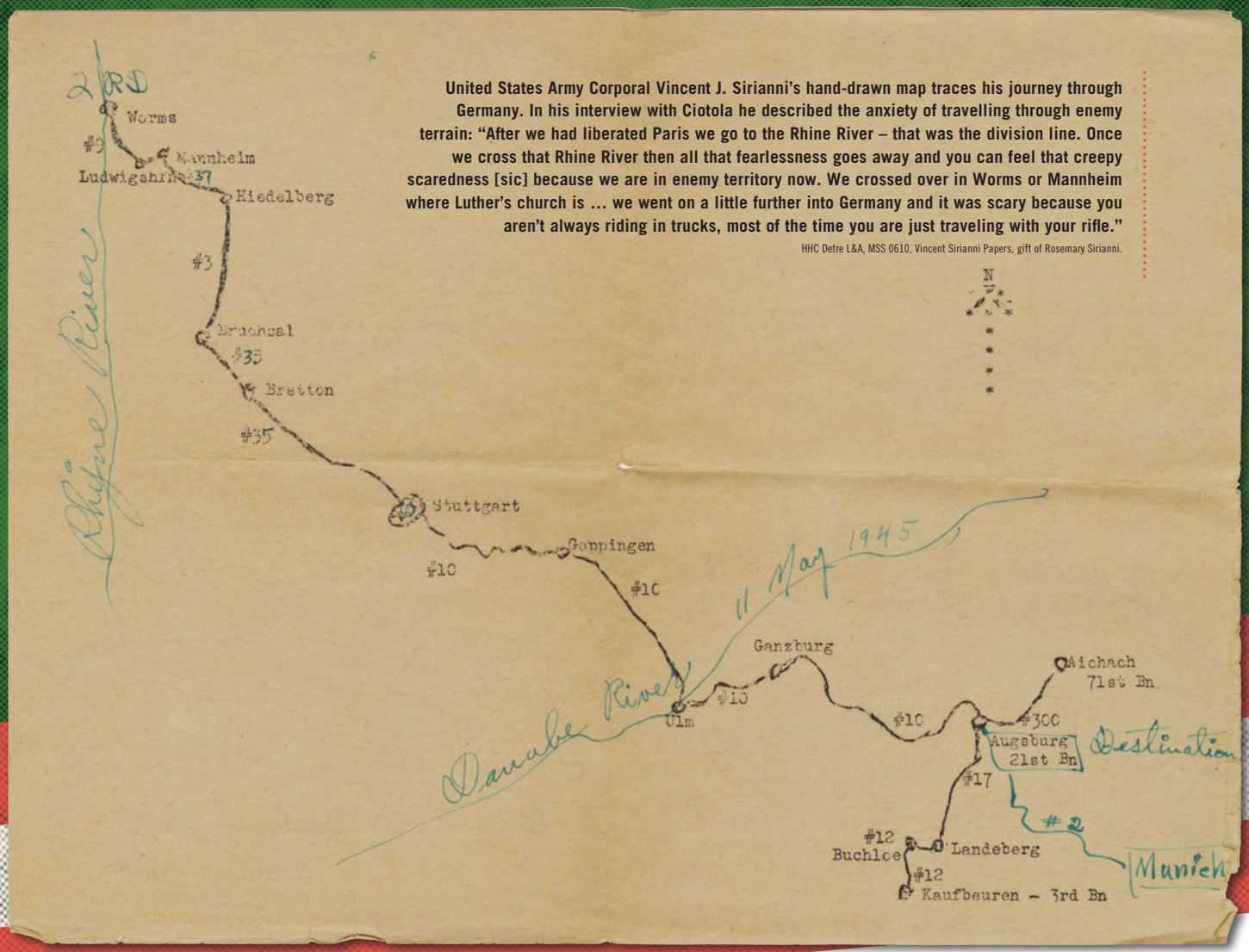
Like Vicinelly, Captain Ralph R. Cupelli also saw intense combat while stationed in Europe. A second-generation American born in Point Marion, Pennsylvania, he had roots in the Cosenza province of Calabria. A member of the ROTC at Penn State, Cupelli realized after the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor that he would be deployed into active duty in the United States Army. Cupelli joined the 10th Infantry Regiment of the 5th Division, known as "Red Diamond" or the "Red Devils," while stationed in England; he saw action in France and Germany, including the infamous Battle of the Bulge. Cupelli described to Zanella how his unit came to enter that conflict:

> We were on the Sarthe River and the 95th Division was over there and we were up in Metz. They pulled us out and we were going to replace the 95th. We were in trucks going over there to

United States Army P.F.C. Robert P. Argentine, Sr. (on the left), like many soldiers, confronted his mortality during the war. He described one close call during the invasion of Sicily: "It was a tough landing. We were under fire. I was very lucky I had an angel on my shoulder from surviving the German dive bombers.... [The Germans] dropped a bomb and I saw it was a 500 pound bomb. When I saw it coming down I thought my mother is going to feel awful bad. I had three and a half tons of ammunition. Here it came down but it hit four feet on the side of the truck.

I was right by the water's edge and water came up and hit me but the bomb never went off. I was just soaking wet. I was very lucky."

Courtesy of the Argentine Family.



United States Army Corporal Vincent J. Sirianni's hand-drawn map traces his journey through Germany. In his interview with Ciotola he described the anxiety of travelling through enemy terrain: "After we had liberated Paris we go to the Rhine River – that was the division line. Once we cross that Rhine River then all that fearlessness goes away and you can feel that creepy scaredness [sic] because we are in enemy territory now. We crossed over in Worms or Mannheim where Luther's church is … we went on a little further into Germany and it was scary because you aren't always riding in trucks, most of the time you are just traveling with your rifle."

HHC Detre L&A, MSS 0610, Vincent Sirianni Papers, gift of Rosemary Sirianni.

replace them and we got word right away to change direction, 90 degrees. We were going to go across the Sarthe River into Germany. We got orders to go up to Luxembourg, straight north. We were going to go east but we went north to Luxembourg. Really no sooner that we got off our trucks that we met Germans coming towards us. We had battle right there. That was the Bulge.… [The Germans] were damn good, the good ones. They got to the point where they had little rubbish around because they lost a million, million and a half men at that point. So anyhow from there we went through the Bulge and after the Bulge it was pretty rough all the way up to the Rhine River. We crossed a lot of rivers and river crossings are tough. In fact, General Patton said we had webbed feet. I mean, he thought we were one of the best divisions around.

Cupelli received a Silver Star Medal and Purple Heart for his service in World War II and was retroactively given the Croix de Guerre in 2004, a French military decoration awarded to foreign military forces allied to France. He remained in the Army Reserve for 28 years, retiring as a Lieutenant Colonel, and worked at U. S. Steel's Homestead Steel Works as a cost accounting manager.

There are also a few accounts in the collection of veterans directly involved with the liberation of concentration camps. Corporal Louis P. Mafrice of the United States Army was born in the Lawrenceville neighborhood of Pittsburgh to a father from the province of Reggio Calabria and a mother with roots in Lucca in Tuscany. Drafted in November 1942, he worked as a radio operator in the 13th Armored Division, nicknamed the "Black Cats," spending a portion of his service in Germany. In his oral history, he describes the reaction of the newly freed prisoners:

> When we came, if I'm not mistaken, it was in Bonn, Germany. When we came in, those people came busting out of there. They were just so happy to be free, jumping up and down. They circled us, they were so thankful. They were hungry, and they wanted to leave. They took the Germans' food, and they were so happy that we were there that they just embraced us. But we had to continue on, we couldn't stop, like I told you, we were not permitted. But we felt so sorry for this one young fellow, that we said, "What the hell [have] we got to lose, get in." So we took him as far as we could until we got caught. He was a Polish Jew. He was always in a concealed area, he just came along, he couldn't do anything. Our communication was not that great, he was just happy to be with us.

After returning from the war, Mafrice entered the United States Postal Service in 1947 and worked for the organization for more than three decades. He was one of thousands of veterans who attended the National World War II Memorial dedication in Washington, D.C. in May 2004.

Oral history accounts from the Pacific Campaign, though not as numerous as accounts from the European Theater, do feature prominently in the collection. Buck Sergeant Eugene G. Frediani of the Mount Washington neighborhood of Pittsburgh was drafted in June 1941 and served as a radio operator in the South Pacific with the 70th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Regiment. A second-generation American whose parents were from Livorno in the region of Tuscany, his unit experienced heavy combat against the Japanese while relieving Marines at Guadalcanal:

> We went to Bougainville, which is an island north of the Guadalcanal. Bougainville was a horrible experience. We fired our guns many times before that but this was the first time I ever made a landing under fire. The naval vessels blasted the shores before we landed. They put tons and tons of ammuni-

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~ Captain Ralph R. Cupelli

tion into the shores. Our planes dive-bombed the area where the Japanese were concentrated. They beat the Japanese back quite a few. The Marines went ahead of our battery. After all this bombardment that took place they suffered heavy causalities and we came onto the beach to set up our guns they were bringing the bodies of Marines out on stretchers. They had stretchers tied to the sides of jeeps transporting the Marines to shore to have them evacuated on hospital ships. Quite a few Marines were wounded plus a lot of them were dead.

Frediani's service took him north through the South Pacific to New Guinea and the Philippines, where he completed his stint after four years in the military. His discharge was a great relief to Frediani and his sweetheart as the draft forced them to postpone their nuptials (originally planned for June 25, 1941) until after his homecoming. Decades later, he became a chaplain for the South Hills Military Honor Guard Society, performing hundreds of military funerals for veterans.

A couple veterans of the Pacific Theater recounted close encounters with the atomic bomb in their oral history interviews. Staff Sergeant James Rodella, a second-generation American on his father's side, had roots in Vicenza in the region of Veneto. He joined the United States Army Air Corps and was trained as a top turret gunner, flying 42 missions in the South Pacific. Rodella returned from a mission to Nagasaki, Japan on August 9, 1945, when they received orders over the radio to clear out of the airspace:

> That morning we had hit Nagasaki. Coming back we listened to the command set and the one guy said, "All planes within a 50 mile radius of Nagasaki clear out." Then we heard the man say 'bomb away' and I'm thinking we just dropped 8,000-pounders on those people and now he's dropping another bomb. All of a sudden the sky lit up. We didn't know anything about it and when Japan surrendered they called us to all report to operations with our weapon. We were issued .45 caliber pistols for the flying crew so we had to take them. When we got over there they told us to take the clips out and put them in a box and clear the weapon and put them in another box. Then we had to take a piece of coat hanger wire and dip it in to a preservative that gunked up the mechanism for storage. When the whole squad had done this they told us, 'Okay fellows now we can tell you that the war is over.' So we had nothing to celebrate with…. No, we didn't know they had dropped them. We didn't know what it was. They never informed us on anything. People in this country probably knew as much as we did.

Like Rodella, second-generation American Michael J. Pennetti also experienced the atomic bomb, as well as the secrecy surrounding it, but under different circumstances. He was a Photographer First Class in the United States Navy born to Neapolitan parents in Bridgeville, Pennsylvania. Pennetti was a part of the unit that recorded and studied the effects of the atomic bomb tests at Bikini Atoll in 1945 and 1946. In his interview Pennetti recounted his encounter with the bomb during Operation Crossroads:

> I was shipped out to Bikini [on the *USS Saidor*] for the atomic bomb test. It was just going to be maneuvers. We didn't know about it until we were way out to the ocean and they told us what we were going to be doing…. We didn't see the bomb go off. We were ordered to turn our backs to the bomb area because the radiation and the light were so bright. I'd say about maybe five minutes afterwards we were allowed to turn around and look toward where the bomb blast was at.… You feel like a shockwave. You could feel it. It was very minor but it was there, in the water you could see the ripples.

As a result of his exposure to radiation during the testing in 1946, Pennetti lost his vision in one eye and subsequently had

it removed at the VA hospital in Aspinwall, Pennsylvania. He continued to work as a photographer after the war and eventually become the Chief Photographer for Allegheny County.

For many soldiers, their experiences in World War II yielded unexpected outcomes that set the stage for the rest of their adult lives. Yeoman First Class Vincent N. Lepidi of the United States Navy was one of several men interviewed who took advantage of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, known as the G.I. Bill. Upon return from his service in the South Pacific, he enrolled at St. Vincent College in Latrobe and earned his Bachelor of Science in Accounting. Lepidi explained the value of the bill:

United States Army Staff Sergeant Walter J. Vicinelly recalled the Medical Corps equipment in his conversation with Zanella: "you had two packs and it had all the first aid equipment you needed, compresses. Generally in the Jeep we carried metal splints if a guy had a broken leg. We carried morphine, blood plasma. That was about it, when we got to the aid station, there wasn't much they could do other than the first step to control bleeding. If he was in shock, treat him stat and get him an ambulance to get him to a field hospital as fast as you could."

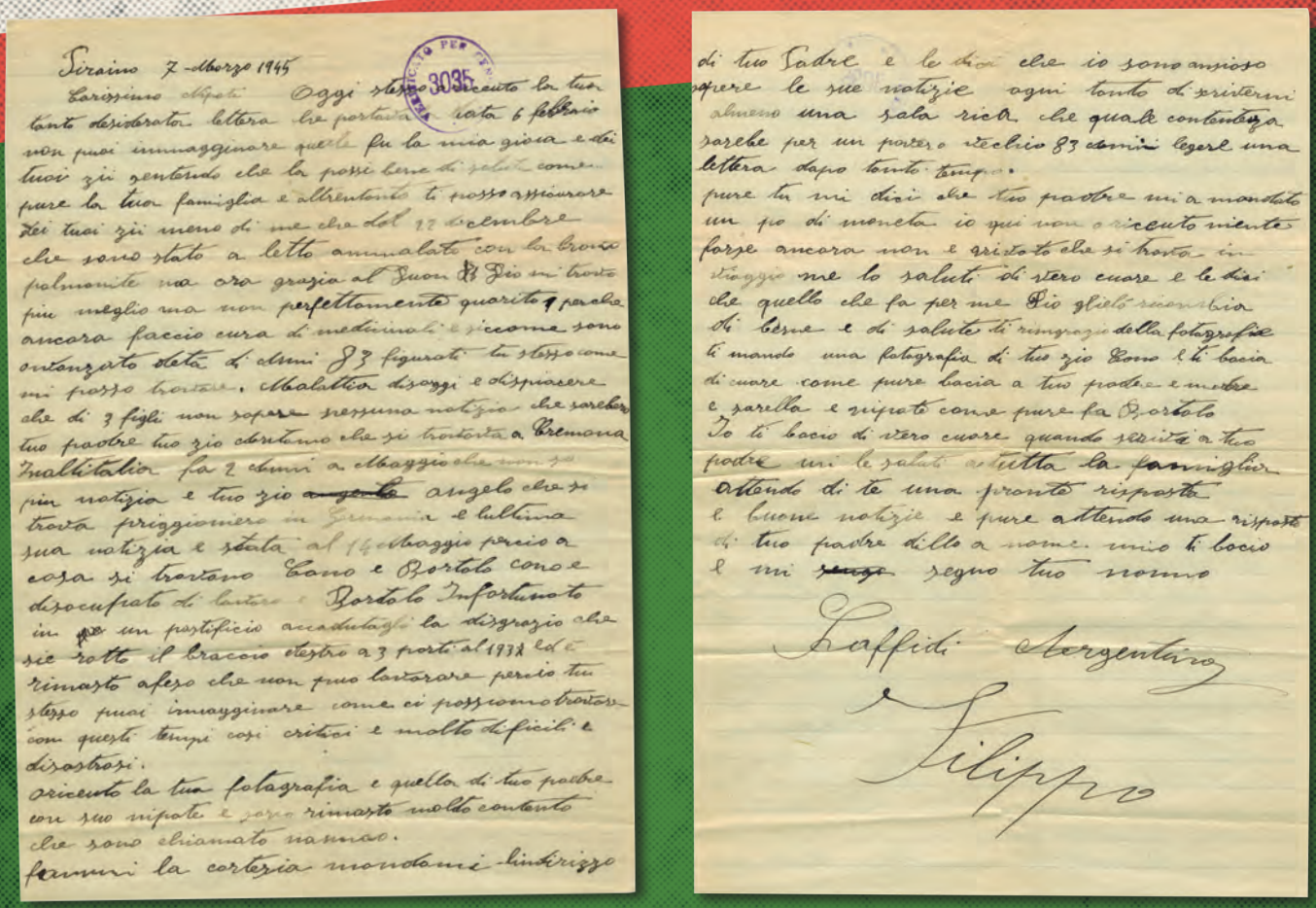
HHC Detre L&A, MSS 0753, Ralph V. Palermo Papers and Photographs, gift of Patty Onesta.

That was the best bill that ever came out of Congress in my book—the G.I. Bill of Rights of 1944. It produced a couple hundred thousand accountants, couple hundred thousand lawyers. It produced a lot of professional people the country needed at the time—engineers, lawyers.… That whole program only cost about 7 or 8 billion dollars at that time. They got that 7 or 8 billion dollars back tenfold because by the time these professionals started paying their taxes—these better educated men, they started their businesses—the country benefited. That was an investment in people—in the veteran. You can't go wrong if you invest in a veteran.

Besides offering education at an affordable rate, the G.I. Bill extended to veterans one year of unemployment compensation, low-cost mortgages, and low-interest loans. This allowed a generation of Italian Americans, who had been unable to afford homes or small businesses or a higher education, entrée to the American middle class.

A number of soldiers married their sweethearts after the war. Little did Paul (Paolo) Trunzo of Glassport know that being drafted into the United States Army in 1943 would result in him meeting and marrying his wife. After the end of the war, he stayed on in France and was assigned the task of planning dances to entertain the remaining American troops. In a conversation with Ciotola, he recollects how he courted his wife Olga:

> So, one of the girls I danced with was my wife. She wouldn't go out with me.… October there was a USO show coming to Met—the Rockettes. I persisted, I asked her again. And first she said no … then I went into my little office, and I'm listening to Chicago Cubs-Detroit



Piraino 7 - Marzo 1945

Carissimo Nipote Oggi stesso ho ricevuto la tua tanto desiderata lettera che portava la data 6 febbraio non puoi immaggginare quale fu la mia gioia e dei tuoi zii sentendo che tu posti bene di salute come pure la tua famiglia e altrettanto ti posso assicurare dei tuoi zii meno di me che dal 27 dicembre che sono stato a letto ammalato con la bronco polmonite ma ora grazia al Buon Dio mi trovo più meglio ma non perfettamente guarito perchè ancora faccio cura di medicinali e siccome sono entrato dietro di anni 83 figurati tu stesso come mi posso trovare. Malattia disaggi e dispiacere che di 3 figli non sapere nessuna notizia che sarebbero tuo padre tuo zio Antonio che si trovava a Cremona Italia fa 2 anni a Maggio che non so più notizia e tuo zio ~~angelo~~ angelo che si trova prigioniero in Germania e l'ultima sua notizia è stata al 14 Maggio perciò a cosa si trovano Cono e Bortolo cono è disoccupato di lavoro e Bortolo Infortunato in un pastificio accadutagli la disgrazia che si rotto il braccio destro a 3 parti al 1937 ed è rimasto afeso che non può lavorare perciò tu stesso puoi immaggginare come ci possiamo trovare con questi tempi così critici e molto dificili e disastrosi.

Ricevuto la tua fotografia e quella di tuo padre con suo nipote e sono rimasto molto contento che sono chiamato nanno.

Fammi la cortesia mandami l'indirizzo di tuo Padre e le dici che io sono ansioso sapere le sue notizie ogni tanto di scrivermi almeno una sola riga che quale contentezza sarebbe per un povero vecchio 83 anni legere una lettera dopo tanto tempo.

pure tu mi dici che tuo padre mi a mandato un po di moneta io qui non ricevuto niente forse ancora non è arrivato che si trova in viaggio me lo saluti di vero cuore e le dici che quello che fa per me Dio glielo ricambia di bene e di salute ti ringrazio della fotografia ti mando una fotografia di tuo zio Cono e ti bacia di cuore come pure bacia a tuo padre e madre e sorella e nipote come pure fa Bortolo

Io ti bacio di vero cuore quando scrivi a tuo padre mi le saluti a tutta la famiglia attendo di te una pronta risposta e buone notizie e pure attendo una risposta di tuo padre dillo a nome mio ti bacio e mi ~~segno~~ segno tuo nonno

Scaffidi Argentina

Filippo

In a letter from Piraino, Italy dated March 7, 1945, Filippo Scaffidi Argentina detailed some of the family's misfortunes to his grandson, United States Army P.F.C. Robert P. Argentine, Sr. Argentina wrote, "I have an uncomfortable sickness of sorrow because I haven't heard any news from 3 of my children. Of your Uncle Antonio, who is in Cremona in north Italy two years ago in May, I haven't heard any news. And of your Uncle Angelo that was imprisoned in Germany, the last news of him was on May 14th, but Cono and Bartolo are at home. Cono is unemployed, and Bartolo unfortunately fell in a pasta shop and had the misfortune of breaking his right arm in three places in 1937 and is angry that he cannot work. So you can imagine how we are in these times so critical and very difficult and dreadful."

Courtesy of the Argentine Family.

> Tigers baseball game, World Series, this [is] October 9th, 10th. The 12th, she knocked on the door and said "*Voglio andare con te* [I want to go with you]." And from that day on we were together every day. She finally realized that I was a good guy. She liked to get married with a white gown. So we were going to get it. So finally someone came up and said there is a family that has one and they want money, they want sugar, they want coffee, they want.… So we traded.

Trunzo and his French wife married in December 1945. A reported 60,000 servicemen married women overseas during and shortly after World War II; the War Brides Act, enacted on December 28, 1945, gave passage to approximately 100,000 foreign women and children as non-quota immigrants.

One unparalleled result of wartime service belongs to Private First Class Tony (Michelantonio) Vaccaro of the 83rd Infantry Division. Born in Greensburg, he was raised in Bonefro in the region of Molise. When the war broke out in Europe in 1939, the United States government recalled all American citizens living abroad and Vaccaro returned to Greensburg. He reported to duty in September 1943 and, by chance, became the photographer for his division's paper after a lieutenant noticed that he knew how to operate a camera. He worked as a combat photographer in France and Germany, occasionally developing film in his helmet in the field when he couldn't find local darkrooms to process his negatives. Vaccaro remained in Germany after the war working for Weekend Magazine, a supplement of the Army's *Stars and Stripes* newspaper, to record what he called "a visual theory of how to attain peace." In a conversation with Ciotola, he explained:

Sun Tsu, the Chinese philosopher who lived six, seven hundred years before the Advent of Christ, said in his book *The Art of War,* "If you want to win a war, make friends with the enemy." And I believed in that. So I remained in Germany to do this book [*Entering Germany: Photographs 1944–1949*]. I knew that the Americans were not going to make more enemies out of the Germans. I knew we were going to convince those people, "Hey, let's become friends, the war is over now. Let's not have another one 10 years from now." And that's what we did. So I remained in Europe to do this book, showing how we educated the children, how we intermarried *fraulines*, how we helped them with the Marshall Plan to start their factories again, the production. How we gave them packages, care packages. How we helped them at the Airlift of Berlin. And finally, after three years … I have pictures here where you see Germans looking at us very ugly. And then a year later, with the help that we gave them during the Airlift to Berlin, they're smiling at us. We began with children, really. Then girls came next. We married them, we took them back to the States. And pretty soon they imitated to become Americans.… So I sacrificed my reputation. Because if I had come back in 1945 with these pictures, I could have become famous. But I felt that this was more important. To show how enemies during the time of peace should try to become friends with each other … I show the intermarriage and how we helped them. How we rebuilt and helped them to rebuild, and that's the only way to do it. Do it with children. And with children, we can attain peace, anywhere.

Vaccaro returned to the United States in 1949 and worked for *Flair*, *Look*, and *LIFE* magazines, photographing famous personalities such as Marilyn Monroe, Pablo Picasso, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Sophia Loren. He published his images of Europe during and immediately after the war in two books, *Entering Germany: Photographs 1944–1949* (Taschen, 2001) and *Shots of War—Tony Vaccaro* (Oehrli Editions, 2004).

The excerpts from the Italian American World War II Veterans Oral History Collection highlighted here are only a fraction of the incredible stories captured on tape. This assemblage of accounts is as unique as the individuals that were gracious enough to allow the History Center to interview them. As varied as each narrative is, there is one sentiment that is made clear in nearly all of the oral histories in the collection—each and every man is honored to have served their country and proud to be an American. Naval Second Class Petty Officer and first generation American Bruno Rodi reflected on his service, stating, "I was very proud to serve my country. When Pearl Harbor was bombed, kids got out of school, they enlisted … a lot of people were volunteering then, they were very patriotic. The women went to work in ship yards, in factories, everyone chipped in. That's why I say this is a great country." This sentiment is reflected by Vincent Lepidi, who felt his service in the war was the "best thing that ever happened to me." His experience in World War II gave him a valuable life lesson: it "taught me how the other half of the world lives. How lucky it is to be an American."

The Italian American World War II Veterans Oral History Collection is available for research in the Detre Library & Archives at the Heinz History Center. The archive is open to the public Wednesday–Saturday, 10 a.m.–5 p.m.

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~ Bruno Rodi,
Naval Second Class Petty Officer