



By Richard D. Czerniawski

TRIBUTE TO THOSE WHO GAVE (AND GIVE) THEIR LIVES

Today, 30 May 2022, is Memorial Day. Memorial Day is not just a long holiday weekend for our pleasure. It is a time when we remember and honor military personnel who sacrificed with their lives so that we might enjoy life, freedom, and an elusive world of lasting peace—people like my Grand Uncle, Joseph Giardina.



Grand Uncle Joe was my Grandmother's baby brother. He was born in Messina, Italy, located in the northeast corner of Sicily. He came to America as a young boy with my Great Grandparents, Catherina and Joseph Giardina, and his five siblings. They settled in the Bensonhurst section of Brooklyn, New York.

Grand Uncle Joe wanted to become an accountant. But when the Second World War broke out, he enlisted in the Army Air Corps, the predecessor to today's U.S. Air Force, where he served as a gunner and, later in his career, a radioman. Grand Uncle Joe was involved in some critically important, highly dangerous missions. He received the Distinguished Flying Cross for one of his many missions, which my Great Grandparents hung proudly in the parlor of their home.

The Japanese took Grand Uncle Joe prisoner in the Philippines. The family did not know what had become of Joe, whether he was alive or dead. The War Department

did not know. He was merely listed as MIA, missing in action.

Grand Uncle Joe endured thirty-nine torturous months in a Japanese prisoner of war camp. The family suffered, in their way, along with him. They gathered every evening around the dinner table, tearfully praying that Joe was alive and well and would return home to them one day.

I saw photos of Grand Uncle Joe from when he first enlisted. He was a big, strong, handsome young man. He looked like the actor John Gavin of fame in the 1950s, who later became U.S. Ambassador to Mexico. I also saw photos of Grand Uncle Joe taken shortly after his liberation from the prisoner of war camp following the surrender of Japan. In those photos, he looked like he was 100-years old, having survived brutal internment. (See or read "Unbroken" for a glimpse of the kind of brutality he suffered.)

Grand Uncle Joe's homecoming was a joyful surprise and gift from God to the family. Indeed, it felt like a miracle. He made a career in the Air Force and achieved the rank of CWO 4 (Chief Warrant Officer).

During his career, he served two tours of duty in Japan, the nation that had held him captive and treated him and his fellow prisoners inhumanely. But Grand Uncle Joe, like the Giardina family, was a sweet man and held no bitterness towards what were then enemies of his adopted country or towards his captors.

Grand Uncle Joe retired to Stony Point, New York, near West Point, which he and my Grand Aunt frequented. He lived a rich, full life well into his nineties when he passed. Grand Uncle Joe was buried at Arlington National Cemetery with full military honors. I attended his burial. He was indeed an inspiration to me.

My Grandmother, Jennie Giardina Napoli, presented him as a role model to me. When I was a mere boy, she told me stories of his courage, sacrifice, and strength to forgive his enemies. Her stories of his deeds undoubtedly contributed to my serving in the military, albeit another branch of the service (U.S. Navy). Grand Uncle Joe didn't hold it against me.

During his captivity, in the darkest hours of his life, he imagined the war's end. He imagined rejoining his family and marrying his sweetheart, Angelina, who was with him throughout his long life. He envisioned the potential for lasting peace.

Take this moment to quiet your mind, salute, and give thanks to Joe and those many military men and women who, out of their love and devotion, have unselfishly paved the way for us to live in freedom and peace.

Let's give thanks to those like my Grand Uncle Joe who sacrificed on our behalf.

Peace and best wishes,

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