



Remembering D-Day, Italian American Style

Jerry Krase (June 03, 2009)



There are many Italian American World War II heroes. Between my wife's family and mine we have about a dozen or so. To name a few: her Uncles Joe, Frank, Anthony, and Sal, and my Uncles Matthew, Jerry, and Tommy served in every theater of war. All of their lives are worth knowing. Frank Sabia's is one that continues to be an important part of ours.



Memorial Day weekend came early this year. Ever since they changed things to create more 3-day weekends so they can sell more things, the dates of holidays make little historical sense. The "real" Memorial Day of May 30th was established in Washington, D.C., on May 5, 1868 by John A. Logan, Commander-in-Chief of the Grand Army of the Republic who ordered that: "The 30th day of May, 1868, is designated for the purpose of strewing with flowers or otherwise decorating the graves of comrades who died in defense of their country during the late rebellion, and whose bodies now lie in almost every city, village, and hamlet churchyard in the land. In this observance no form or ceremony is prescribed, but posts and comrades will in their own way arrange such fitting services and testimonials of respect as circumstances may permit....." The federal law that change Memorial Day from its traditional May 30 date to the last Monday in May took effect at the federal level in 1971. The last Monday in May this year (2009) was the unmemorable May 25th.

Veterans Day is another confusing holiday to honor military veterans. It is usually observed on November 11, but if it occurs on a Sunday then the following Monday is designated, and if it occurs on Saturday then either Saturday or Friday can be designated. Evidently the holiday was first proposed in 1953, by an Emporia, Kansas shoe store owner named Al King who wanted to expand Armistice Day beyond the celebration of World War I veterans (and then to sell more shoes to them). President Dwight Eisenhower signed it into law on May 26, 1954 and Congress amended it on November 8, 1954, replacing "Armistice" with "Veterans" (and then probably left DC for their usual extended Christmas vacation). Since I am anti-war "Vietnam Era" veteran, on both Memorial Day and Veterans Day I celebrate it, and incidentally annoy my wife, by asking, at any store that displays the flag, for a "Veteran's Discount." Since I never get a discount, it is clear to me that people have little respect for veterans but like having the day off at our expense.

This year the confusing "day off" for Memorial Day has been further confounded by French President Nicolas Sarkozy who, according to Charles Bremmer writing in The Times upset the "...British with Obama D-Day visit." Evidently Nicolas had used some suave pressure to get Barack to drop by at "... the Normandy beaches on June 6 to commemorate the D-Day landings of 1944 and celebrate Franco-American ties." Then les crepes hit the fan as the Brits, Canucks, Polaks as well as myriad other wartime allies felt insulted because they were left out. Even though Sarkozy didn't want to share the Obama glow-light with them, he relented and invited his allies, however he forgot "the" Queen whom, from what I understand, was not amused. In any case, Uncle Frank Sabia and Uncle Joe Carbonaro were inexplicably left off the VIP invite list, but neither of them can make it to the commemoration anyway. Uncle Joe passed a way a few years ago and Uncle Frank prefers to stay at home with his wife Evelyn in Glen Cove on Long Island in a house attached to the one that Uncle Joe and Aunt Ann had lived in. Evelyn and Ann were sisters and Frank and Joe were neighboring brothers-in-law.

On Memorial Day this year, my wife and I spent part of the afternoon watching a video our daughter Kathryn took at Frank and Evelyn's house five years ago. Kathryn had wanted to capture her last two living uncles on my wife's side telling war stories, as well as spend some time with her aunts. Uncle Joe was his usual silent self, so it was Frank who got the starring role in the video. Uncle Frank's war story began when he got married, in his US Army uniform, to Evelyn at St. Blaise (Italian) RC Church in the Italian section of Flatbush, Brooklyn that people then called "Pig Town." It was September 18, 1943 and Uncle Frank said that three days later he went to England for training. On the tape, Aunt Evelyn said something inaudible (ineffable) about their honeymoon. Then the conversation got more interesting as Kathryn asked about D-Day.





Army Assault Forces Normandy 6-7, June, 1944

Uncharacteristically, Uncle Joe answered first and said he was on Normandy's Omaha Beach to which Uncle Joe countered, you were only there "D+3. I landed D+1. On D Day, I was sitting out in Channel while the First Infantry Division went in first." Uncle Frank manned a 155 Howitzer and the "big guns needed emplacements first." During Operation Overlord, Frank was a member of the 186th Field Artillery Battalion that was part of V Corps and also assigned to the 101st Airborne.

According to US Army historians: "Omaha Beach (and therefore Uncles Frank and Joe were) was crucial because it "... linked the U.S. and British beaches. It was a critical link between the Contentin peninsula and the flat plain in front of Caen. Omaha was also the most restricted and heavily defended beach, and for this reason at least one veteran U.S. Division (1st) was tasked to land there. The terrain was difficult. Omaha Beach was unlike any of the other assault beaches in Normandy. "

Uncle Frank proudly, and gratefully, noted that his unit didn't lose any men on the beach that day. He added, in order for the Allied Forces to proceed across France they also needed the big guns to clear out German troops who were entrenched behind hedge groves. With the 186th, he continued on across Europe all the way to Czechoslovakia, taking time along the way to participate in the Battle of the Bulge, as well as the Remagen Bridge and Ruhr Dams operations. It was the Battle of Bulge that brought Uncles Frank and Joe together as they never would have imagined, or wanted. It seems that Joe's infantry unit was one of those which pushed too far forward and was shelled by Frank's unit. Frank and Joe like to joke about that. (I guess it doesn't make sense to complain at this late date.) Like most veterans I know who saw combat, Frank and Joe seldom talked about the experience without prompting and when they did they made it clear that they don't consider themselves heroes in any way. It was something they felt they had to do for their families; a lot like going to work and shoveling snow; and coming home for dinner, or coming inside for a cup of something hot. Below are the families Uncles Frank and Joe came home to as they were celebrating D+336.

V-E Day May 8, 1945 (D+336)



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