

A SHORT BIOGRAPHY OF THOMAS JOSEPH ABRUZZINO

The following are facts about my uncle, Thomas Joseph Abruzzino, whom I have never met, but who is very close to my heart. Thomas was born on April 22, 1923, in Clarksburg, West Virginia in an area called Glen Elk, primarily an Italian community where each family was closely-knit to every other family. He was the youngest son of Anthony and Kathryn Abruzzino with six brothers: Johnny, Sammy, Tony, Pat, Joe, Frank and an older Sister, Rose Marie Ferris, my Mother. He was known to his family and friends as Tommy.

Thomas had a small physique, but handsome, and gifted intellectually and athletically. He attended Washington Irving High School, where he was both an honor student and a fine athlete. However, his gifts did not end at that point, because he also became an excellent self-taught artist, and drew amazingly accurate likenesses of Snuffy Smith, Li'l Abner, plus those of Alley Oop and the others, this was before Disney's Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse appeared on the scene. He always carried a steno pad with him, and could sketch a portrait with ease and accuracy as is indicated in a sketch he made of a Philippine lady.

After he graduated from high school, he decided to join the Navy in order to learn a trade, and did so on December 5, 1938. He wanted to serve his country and visit far away places, such as Pearl Harbor and Waikiki Beach, Hawaii. He was always the kind and generous man, he never ceased to send letters and gifts to his family. He never failed to ask about his dad, and the rest of the family. And the gifts he sent home were very special. He was especially close to my brother, Anthony, so he sent him a white, tailor-made Navy suit, and would always mentioned Anthony in his letters. He sent my Mother some beautiful handmade pillow cases and a hand-made bed spread containing the words, "To Sister, From Tommy." We still have those precious gifts and letters. My Mother would send him packages and pictures of the family. He replied to one of the family pictures by saying,

"say 'Lady' you looked like a beautiful dutchness and the two kids were cute not saying that Anthony looks like an old salty sailor without his sea legs. Now that I seen you all just on a small piece of paper I want to see you all very much. Anyway I have at least something to look at when I am moody. Louie, ought to be proud having three cute kids and a devoted wife. Give him my regards."

In one letter, he told Mother that in a very short time he would be discharged from the Navy, where he had learned to become a metalsmith, and was looking forward to working in Clarksburg, or failing to gain employment there, would look to the West Coast.

He mentioned being at Cavite in the Philippines, and then flew to Sebu and Iloilo. And because his squadron was always advancing, it was called the Suicide Squad and the Pioneers. He also mentioned having spent fifteen days aboard the USS Langley, an old aircraft carrier, plus some days aboard the destroyer, USS William H. Preston.

When he was stationed in the Philippines, his naval squadron chose him to play the point guard on their basketball team, where he quickly became the "spark plug" of the team. His team would fly to Manila twice a week in order to play with some colleges and universities. One time he won a watch in a tournament, always a generous person, he sent the watch back home so that his brothers could take turns wearing it! His team won the Asiatic Fleet Championship

In one of the letters from Thomas he stated.

"Just a couple of days ago I took another examination for advancement. I won't be eligible until May, but if I connect I will be first class (AM1/C) which will be almost the tops. To be chief is my aim. The way it is now if war breaks out I will automatically become AM1/C and if I am already 1/C I will then be chief of the highest of all rates of an enlisted personnel."

My Uncle must have passed his examination to become an Aviation Metalsmith , 1/C because the records from the National Archives refer to him as AM 1/C. Thomas would have been so proud and happy knowing this. So I will now refer to him as Thomas Joseph Abruzzino, Aviation Metalsmith, 1/C.

After November 12, 1941, his letters stopped! On March 9, 1942, a telegram from the Navy informed the family that Thomas Joseph Abruzzino, Aviation Metalsmith, 1/C, USN, was missing--pending further information. We know he survived the Batton Death March because records show he spent three years as a POW in Bilibid prison camp, where he and others were starved, mistreated and denied medical care.

During my uncle's imprisonment, my family would receive a signed, typed postcard every six months, informing us that he was "just fine." Naturally, all the family was

overjoyed, because it assured us that he was alive and that there was a chance that he would return home. These cards were circulated, thought out the family because everyone was concerned about his welfare.

When the Japanese realized that the island prison camp was about to be captured by American forces, they decided to take the POW's to Japan and use them as slave laborers. While in route to Japan, his ship, The Arisan Maru, one of a number of infamous ships called "Hell Ships", was torpedoed by an American ship that was unaware it was carrying American prisoners. And so on October 24, 1944, the 1,777 prisoners aboard went to their grave somewhere in the Bashi Channel. When some of the prisoners tried to board the Japanese rescue ship, they were easily beaten off because, they were too weak to struggle. These brave men had fought so hard to stay alive, but most of them failed. Only five of them survived.

Japan was one of the countries which did not subscribe to the provisions of the Geneva Convention which spelled out treatment which POW's were to receive. Consequently, a war crimes tribunal was held. Edward Lochbihler, Chief Petty Officer, USN, Serial # 181-68-43 testified by saying,

"one of the track bosses, a Japanese civilian called "Pistol Pete" used an iron bar about ½" in diameter and about 2' long to beat a prisoners. I watched him break the ribs of one prisoner while beating him with this bar. The prisoner's name was Abruzzino, an Aviation Metalsmith, 2/C. That was my uncle.

I am so proud of him and all the others. One of the tragedies of our generation is that so many young people have no idea of what those men went through for our country. I personally did not realize the extent of those brave men's sacrifice until I started to do research regarding my uncle's experiences. Some of what I discovered broke my heart.

Thomas missed so much in life. He was so young when he entered the service, and, of course, never married, never had children, was unable to pursue a career as an artist, and was denied so many other possibilities. There is some consolation for my Family to know that Thomas was awarded a Purple Heart, Gold Star and WWII Victory Medal. These medals have been lost over the years, but we are heartened to know that they will be replaced.

Revised on 5/11/2004

Thomas Joseph Abruzzino

World War II Medals

BRONZE STAR

Criteria: The Bronze Star Medal is awarded to any person who, while serving in any capacity in or with the Army of the United States after December 6, 1941, distinguished himself or herself by heroic or meritorious achievement or service, not involving participation in aerial flight, in connection with military operations against an armed enemy; or while engaged in military operations involving conflict with an opposing armed force in which the United States is not a belligerent party.

Established: February 1944

PURPLE HEART

Criteria: The PH is awarded in the name of the President of the United States to any member of the U.S. Armed Forces or any civilian national who, while serving in any capacity with the U.S. Armed Forces, has been wounded or killed in any of the following circumstances:

- (a) while engaged in combat against an enemy after April 5, 1917
- (b) while serving in combat with friendly foreign forces of the United States after April 5, 1917
- (c) as a result of a terrorist attack after March 28, 1973
- (d) as a result of military operations while serving as part of a peacekeeping force after March 28, 1973

Clearly an individual decoration, the Purple Heart differs from all other decoration in that an individual is not "recommended" for the decoration; rather he or she is entitled to it upon meeting specific criteria.

Established: Originally established on August 7, 1782 as the Badge of Military Merit by General George Washington. It was reestablished by the President of the U.S. per War Department General Orders 3, 1932 and is currently awarded pursuant to Executive Order 11016, April 25, 1962, Executive Order 12464, February 1984 and Public Law 98-525, October 19, 1984.

PRISONER OF WAR MEDAL

Criteria: Authorized for all U.S. Military Personnel who were taken Prisoner of War during and armed conflict, and who served honorably during the period of captivity after April 5, 1917.

Established: March 1985

NAVY (WWII) GOOD CONDUCT

Criteria: The NGCM is awarded to recognize 4 years of continued, active duty, enlisted service at above average conduct and proficiency.

Established: April 26, 1869

AMERICAN DEFENSE SERVICE MEDAL

Criteria: For service in the U.S. Armed Forces for one year during the 'Limited Emergency' proclaimed by the President on September 8, 1939, or during the 'Unlimited Emergency' proclaimed by the President on May 27, 1941. The one year must have been between September 8, 1939 and December, 1941.

Established by order of the President: June 28, 1941

AMERICAN CAMPAIGN MEDAL

Criteria: For service in the U.S. Armed Forces within the American Theater of Operations from December 7, 1941 to March 2, 1946.

WORLD WAR II VICTORY MEDAL

For service in the U.S. Armed Forces between December 7, 1941 and December 31, 1946

PHILIPPINE DEFENSE MEDAL

Criteria: Awarded by the Philippine government to U.S. troops for combat service in the defense of the Philippines from December 8, 1941 to June 15, 1942. The service member is awarded one medal for meeting either of the criteria below. A bronze star is worn if the service member meets both criteria.

- (a) was a member of the Bataan or Manila Bay Forces or of a unit, ship or airplane under enemy attack during the above period
- (b) was assigned or stationed in the Philippine territories of water for at least 30 calendar days during the above period

Established: 1945

Army Superior Unit Award

Criteria: Awarded to US Army for the outstanding meritorious performance of a unit in a uniquely difficult and challenging nation under extraordinary circumstances. The unit must display such outstanding devotion and superior performance of exceptionally difficult tasks to set it apart from the above other units with similar missions.

SERVICE des PRISONNIERS de GUERRE

俘虜郵便

NAME Thomas J. Abruzzino

NATIONALITY American

RANK Aviation Machinist Mate first class

PHILIPPINE MILITARY PRISON CAMP NO. 4

郵便はがき

To: Mr. Louis Ferris,

Boomer, West Virginia,

United States of America

比島俘虜收容所
検閲済

U.S. CENSOR



THIS SIDE OF CARD IS FOR ADDRESS



Mrs Louis Ferris
Box 285
Boomer, W. Va.
U.S.A.



IMPERIAL JAPANESE ARMY

1. I am interned at—Philippine Military Prison Camp No. 4

2. My health is—~~excellent~~ good; ~~fair~~ ~~poor~~

3. Message (50 words limit)

Dear Sister: Received your letter and the package from home, which I enjoyed very much. Glad to hear that you all are in good health. Please do not worry about me, I am in good health and the best of spirit.

Give my regards to Louise *Thomas J. Abreyne* and the kids. God bless you, Your loving brother.

Signature

Dear Rosie:

Here I am in H. San with a few hours liberty and I jotted down a few lines to let you know of my delay in answering your letter. We are about 3,000 miles from Honolulu and it is pretty hot. The people are pretty nice and I'm having a swell time.

We will leave here some time today for Manila. I'll write you from there.

As ever

Tommy

Mary, the following points are things I wrote down after reading the letters that my Uncle Tommy sent my Mother.

- Thomas Joseph Abruzzino, was an Aviation Metalsmith, 2/C he was in the 2nd Squad (UP-102), he said they were called the Suicide Squad Pioneers because they were always advancing.
- He was in PatWing 10
- He was on Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, Hawai. At one time he lived on the Langley Aircraft Carrier for awhile. He was also on Wake Island.
- Some of the guys he mentioned in his letters were Anthony Zinni, Frank Bartos, "Bud" Sterns, Sam Genteel, and Pasty Albert.

DEATH MARCH



"So you are dead. The easy words contain
No sense of loss, no sorrow, no despair.
Thus hunger, thirst, fatigue, combine to drain
All feeling from our hearts. The endless glare,
The brutal heat, anesthetize the mind.
I can not mourn you now. I lift my load,
The suffering column moves. I leave behind
Only another corpse, beside the road."

Lt. Henry G. Lee...A Soldier Poet.