

My name is Leonora Drzymala and my father is the late Charles Giacomino. He served in the 551st Parachute Infantry Battalion in Company A.

My father was born in 1920, the 4th and youngest child of Italian immigrants. He grew up in what was called, "The South End" of Albany, New York in a largely Italian neighborhood during the Great Depression.

His father was a tailor by trade. When his father was fairly young, he had a stroke that left him paralyzed and unable to work. My dad left school after graduating from the 8th grade and he went to work to help support his family. In his teen years, my father started hanging out at the 'Y'. He learned how to box, he began lifting weights and body building. He also joined in with a group of young men and learned the art of hand balancing from a guy who was an ex-circus performer and strong man. He and the other guys went around to the local parks and pools, showing off and demonstrating their hand balancing skills. All of the photographs of my father during the late 1930's and early 40's show him looking mighty fit :). He didn't drink and he didn't smoke. He was all about being physically fit.

In these early years he also learned how to play guitar and he began working professionally as a musician. It was the era of big bands and his skill at rhythm guitar provided plenty of work with a variety of local bands.

My dad was drafted into the war in 1943 at the age of 23 and he served until 1945. His brother was already serving in the army having entered in 1941 and he was a sergeant. It appears my dad was drafted at an older age than most and I think this may have been because he was supporting his family. We often asked him why he became a paratrooper. How could he be daring enough to jump out of an airplane? My mother often answered for him and she said it was because of the extra pay the paratroopers got. While that may be partly true, I think it was his physical fitness and the strength and stamina he already possessed when he entered the army that made him a perfect candidate for the paratroopers.

Of all the things about my father, though, the main thing that I remember about him was that he was a very quiet man.

In some circles, his nickname was Harpo. Like Harpo Marx, he was silent but, he was also a bit of a rogue and a kidder. He had a great sense of humor and he liked to have fun by being a little bit silly. But, if asked, I believe most people would remember my father for his silence.

I'm going to jump ahead now to the years after the war, after he met and married my mom in 1947, built a little ranch house out in the country in 1952, and had three daughters, of which I am the middle. By the time I came along in 1959, the war was many years past.

My father never talked about the war.

But, the walls of our basement were hung with photos and things he brought back from the war... there was a big Nazi flag, a knife in a leather sheath with names of army buddies etched into it. There were two guns, and an assortment of other fascinating odds and ends. I spent all of my growing up years

looking at these photos and items on the wall. None of the photos were ever explained to me and I would try to figure out what they were all about. Who were those smiling Italian children my father was holding in that photo and why did they have cigarettes in their mouths? Who was that grinning man named Charette and this other guy called "Stample the Card Shark"? And why was there a picture of my father digging a hole? In my child's mind, I was jealous of my father holding another child and I thought the hole he was digging was in our backyard. These photos were never taken down from the walls of our home until I personally took them down in 2015, sixty-three years later.

My father never talked about the war.

But, sometimes, at the dinner table, he would get this mischievous look in his eye while my mom was setting the food on the table and he'd suddenly call out. "Is everybody happy!?" And we sweet little daughters would shout back, "48...49...50! Some shit!! (Only most of the time we didn't say the "Shit" part because our mother didn't like that.) How his eyes twinkled when we yelled this with him. He was a mischief maker all right. I still have no idea what this chant was all about, but I had always assumed it was something from the war.

My father never talked about the war.

But, he kept a trunk packed with uniforms and parachute silk for decades. When I was 12 years old it was all the craze to wear army jackets. I remember asking my dad if he had anything from the army that I could wear. He took a brown canvas jacket out of that mothball filled trunk and he let me wear it. It was wonderful! It had lots of pockets with snaps. One chest pocket had zippers. I could hide notes and money and forbidden cigarettes in all those pockets. It was the coolest jacket ever and I was really proud to wear it. It fit me perfectly. That was the crazy thing; my father had been about the size of a skinny 12 year old girl when he wore that jacket.

My father never talked about the war.

But, one time violence visited our quiet little dead end road in the country. One day a pick-up truck raced up our road. Apparently the driver didn't know it was a dead end street. We all rushed to the picture window in time to see the truck screech to a stop right in front of our house. Two men struggled in the bed of the truck and one man was knocked off and onto the ground. We watched, horrified as the man struggled to stand and then collapsed. My father ran from the house to the injured man as the truck sped away. He called for a towel and told us to call the police. We watched from the window, too afraid to go out, and saw my dad hold the towel to the dazed man's bleeding head. The man had been hit in the head with the prongs of a gravel rake and it had punctured his ear and head. My dad knelt by his side, holding pressure on his wounds until the police arrived. I saw something different in my dad that day. It was thirty years after the war and yet I saw my father's training kick in as though he was on the battlefield, right in front of our house. He was amazing.

No, my dad never talked about the war to us.

But, every so often, during a meal or a lull in conversation, he would say something like, "Forty years ago today I was sleeping on top of a piano in France." Or, "thirty-six years ago on this day I was freezing in the snow." He never elaborated on these comments and he wouldn't say more even when we tried to coax him to do so. Of course, as children, we always asked him, "Did you shoot anybody in the war?" He always answered no. If we asked, "well, then did anybody shoot at you?" His answer would be, "Oh yeah."

My dad never talked about the war.

But, he wore his Airborne patches and emblems *everywhere*. On his hat, on his belt buckle, on his suit lapel, and on his car's bumper. And he planted a huge metal flagpole in our front yard and proudly flew the American flag on every occasion. He was very proud of our country and of his service as a paratrooper.

In 2015, at the age of ninety-three, we moved my mom from the home she and my dad built in 1952. My dad had been gone for ten years. My mom sold the house to one of our cousins. He was going to renovate it. The following year, after my mom passed away, my sister and I visited the house and our cousin showed us the work he had done on it. It was hard to be there, there were so many memories. He told us to come down to the basement; he wanted to show us something. He had taken down all the paneling and partitions that my dad had put up over the years so that now the basement stood wide open as it had when the house was first built. We stood in the center and scanned the dim basement and we saw bright colors on the walls. After a moment of confusion, I realized we were looking at a mural painted on the cinderblock walls. It spanned an entire three sides of the basement. The murals depict a scene from the war. There are planes flying across the top and parachutes falling from the sky. There are snow covered mountains and black smoke billowing up from the ground. My father painted this sometime in the early 1950's and then covered it over with paneling. Here were some of his memories from the war. And there it still sits. I stood there with my hand over my mouth and tears in my eyes. All those years and I never knew it was there.

So, my father never talked about the war. But he really didn't need to, did he? The war was all around us and it never went away.

After the war, my dad lead a quiet, simple life. (Well- as simple and quiet as a wife and 3 daughters would allow) He had a pretty Italian wife who was a good cook and a talented singer and pianist, he had a little house in the country with a big vegetable garden, and we had family all around us. He and my mom formed a band and played music all throughout their married life. Our home was filled with music, the smells of really good food... and the memories of war.

There were two things I know my dad strongly disliked- traveling and snow. There's much we can surmise about that.

It wasn't until after my father passed away that I came into possession of his war things and his scrapbook. Among his belongings was a copy of, "The Left Corner of My Heart" by Dan Morgan. It has an inscription on the inside cover from one of his war buddies, Joe Cicchenelli. I took it home to Virginia and read (and cried) my way through it. For the first time it truly sunk in what my father had experienced during the war and particularly his time as a paratrooper in the 551st. For the first time, I knew what he saw and what he experienced. All the things he never spoke of were overwhelming to me. I was compelled to know more, to read as much as I could in an effort to know my father better. In my reading, I read Gregory Orfalia's book, Messengers of the Lost Battalion. You can't imagine my surprise when I came upon a passage on page 123. There in print was my father's name! It reads, "Dysentery swept through the unit, probably from bad water. At one point 75 percent of the men suffered from it. In the evenings a huge radio in the care of a Scottish unit nearby drowned out their moans with news of the bogged-down invasion force at Normandy and the attempted breakout at the Falaise pocket. To distract themselves, Bill Hatcher, Joe Edgerly, Gene Cherry, Ted Bass and a few others from the 551st decided to put on a floor show to entertain their Scottish counterparts. Hatcher played clarinet and Charlie Giacomino played guitar. A lieutenant did a striptease of his combat arms, fatigues, parachute boots, even his underdrawers. The Scots brayed loudly."

Of all the events in the war that my dad could have been mentioned in, it was his guitar playing and silliness that is memorialized in print.

Two years ago I was able to find that grinning man named Charette in one of my father's photo. He was still alive and we corresponded for a few months before he passed away in 2015. One of the first memories he shared with me about my father was that he recalled him marching with a guitar on his back. He said my dad had a rifle slung over one shoulder and a guitar over the other. That was my dad.

There are more stories I've learned and another chapter of my dad's war service after he was transferred after the Battle of the Bulge into the 504th PIB. That will be for another time, perhaps.

I think the important thing I've learned is that we keep searching and asking questions about these amazing soldiers and about that time in our history. It breaks my heart that these men are gone and so few remain with us, but their stories, such as my father's, are still surfacing and beg to be told. It is up to the next generations to keep their stories alive.

Thank you :)