

Stories of U.S. Veterans in Hospice Care

Addressing the
Special Needs of
Veterans
at End of Life



William Cocco remembers the miracles that saved him in World War II

The privilege of caring for war heroes is just one more reward in a long list of reasons for loving hospice work. Delaware Hospice patient, William G. Cocco, of Hockessin, is an honored veteran who served in WWII.

Experts caring for veterans have found that memories of the horrors of war, sometimes bottled up for years, can surface as the end of life nears, bringing on higher levels of stress. But William Cocco, who survived some harrowing events, returned from Europe in 1945 and told his stories to whomever was interested. He looks back on those experiences now “as if in a dream,” without stress.

William was 22 when he joined the Army in 1940, during World War II. As an Italian, born in Italy but raised in the USA, he requested a non-combatative posting, “so I wasn’t shooting anyone from my Italian family,” and was assigned and trained as a medic.

William joined the 30th Infantry Division, 117th Regiment in England, as they were preparing to board a Navy battleship headed to Normandy Beach.



William said, “We were the 3rd wave to arrive at the beach. We stayed safe in the hedgerow area, until we were ready to move on through France. We then

moved through this territory at such a fast pace, that we moved ahead of plans and into grave danger. Our own planes were dropping bombs on us, not realizing that we had arrived at a certain point earlier than expected. We also moved faster than our ammunition supply, putting us in even more danger.”

It took about two weeks, William remembers, to travel through this area and the number of casualties grew heavy. “There were so many wounded soldiers to care for that I had little time to worry about the shelling all around me.”

Little did he know that the worst was to come. “We forged on to the Battle of the Bulge, where Germans surrounded us. It was impossible to proceed to a safe destination to care for the wounded, so we were forced to set up a hospital wherever we could. I was appointed commander of this operation and in charge of directing the other soldiers to retrieve the wounded. But I personally felt that I had to be the first one to enter an area to be sure it was safe for my men. I just couldn’t send anyone else in first.” At last, troops cleared the Germans out and they were able to gradually move their wounded to a safer place.

Reflecting back, William felt God’s protection through some of his worst moments. “Near the Rhine River, our troops walked right into the line of fire. Bullets were popping all around us in the hundreds. One bullet hit my helmet and bounced off it. Another miracle occurred when I was awakened one night by a force from God telling me to ‘get up and go to care for the wounded,’ and I did just that. I am glad I did, because the house where I had been sleeping was destroyed by a bombshell.

“The most unforgettable miracle, however, was when I stepped on a mine and it did not go off. I am so thankful to God for pulling me through those awful ordeals of war.”



For his efforts in World War II, William was awarded a Bronze Star and a Citation for Bravery.

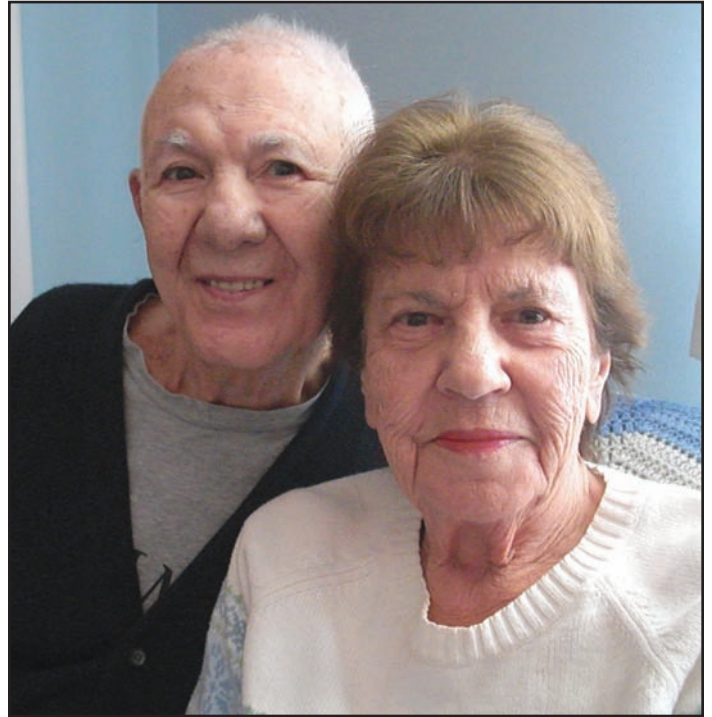
After returning to his home in Delaware, William met a beautiful young woman named Rose while “jitterbugging” one night on a cruise boat which traveled from New Castle’s port to Philadelphia. They fell in love, married, raised three children, and have been together for 64 years.

William’s physician referred him to Delaware Hospice one year ago, with a decline in his physical condition. Rose said, “Our doctor told me one day it was time to talk about future care options for William, but I made it clear that he would be cared for at home. He suggested that we call Delaware Hospice, and we’re so glad we did.”

Delaware Hospice’s care team visits Rose and William regularly. One of his nurses, Eileen Challenger, RN, said, “Mr. Cocco is one of my best patients because he does what he should do—rests as much as possible, and reports to us any changes in his condition so that we can help him feel better.” Social Worker Drew Biehl remarked, “Both Mr. & Mrs. Cocco seem to gain much support from Delaware Hospice’s visits. Mr. Cocco enjoys quiet conversations and the opportunity to talk about his WWII experiences, his career at Chrysler, and his love of dancing with his wife.”

Rose said, “We are so grateful for Delaware Hospice. Everyone on their staff is just wonderful. Everyone should know what a comfort it is to have them near you.”

By: Beverly Crowl and Jean Cocco



William Cocco and his wife Rose have enjoyed 64 years together. (Photo by Beverly Crowl)

Hospice and palliative care provides comfort and quality of life to veterans with life-limiting illnesses and their families. An intra-disciplinary team provides expert care and strives to meet the needs of veterans. The team includes: physicians, nurses, social workers, chaplains, certified nursing assistants, and specialized volunteers. Care is provided in the veterans’ home setting, wherever that may be. All veterans are entitled to a hospice benefit through the veteran’s administration program.

Delaware Hospice is committed to serving our veterans. In 2009, Delaware Hospice was awarded one of 18 “Reaching Out” grants through the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization, whose purpose was to increase access to hospice care services for rural and homeless veterans.



William “Sarge” Tucker attends his 75th Memorial Day Parade

Delaware Hospice patient Bill “Sarge” Tucker of New Castle attended his 75th Memorial Day Parade in Wilmington. He served as a messenger as he sat in his wheelchair, quiet and dignified, dressed in his highly decorated military uniform, reminding us that Memorial Day is about remembering and honoring. At the same time, he told everyone that he was there thanks to Delaware Hospice, conveying the message that hospice represents choice and quality of life.



Sarge joined the Air Corps at 18 years old in 1943 and was sent directly to Europe where he served in Italy and Germany during World War II. He returned in 1947 but remained in the Air Force Reserves for 43 years, supporting military efforts through the Korean War, Bay of Pigs, and the Vietnam War. He helped establish the 46th Aerial

Port Squadron and served there as First Sergeant.

Sarge earned high honors and a reputation for excellence and discipline. The Master Sergeant William J. Tucker Diamond Award was established to recognize members of the 46th Aerial Port Squadron who display “the high standards set by one of the unit’s “Founding Fathers,” and the first 46 APS First Sergeant, William J. Tucker. The person selected annually for this award must exemplify the highest standards of military dress and



appearance, fulfill the Air Force core values, and convey an honest spirit of patriotism.”

His strong sense of patriotism was established at an early age with the role model of his father who also served in the armed services. Sarge marched in his first Memorial Day Parade at the age of 8, playing his trombone, and hasn’t missed one since except for the years he was abroad in WWII.

When asked which parade was the most memorable, he replied, “I guess this one.” Sarge didn’t expect to make it to this one. When his nurse, Nancy, heard of his history of parades, she didn’t hesitate to assure him, “We’ll get you to that parade, don’t worry!”

Vice President and former U.S. Senator Joe Biden honored Sarge in his remarks: “I want to say something about a guy I find to be the epitome of what my father’s generation was. Bill “Sarge” Tucker is sitting over here in his uniform, and this is his 75th Memorial Day Parade in Wilmington. “He represents everything that we hold dear. His is a true definition of patriotism, not a phony patriotism of ‘flag waving’ and





Vice President & former U.S. Senator Joe Biden, William “Sarge” Tucker, Delaware Hospice Nurse, Nancy Farmer, and Rita Tucker at Sarge’s 75th Wilmington Memorial Day Parade.

letting everyone else do the work. This is a guy who is here with his friends from Delaware Hospice; a guy who insisted on coming to this parade.”

“I’ve been an admirer of Sarge for a long time, but I mean this from the bottom of my heart. You are everything this nation stands for. Whenever you were called, you answered the call and you never, never, ever forgot. While millions of people have confused Memorial Day with a holiday as opposed to a day of solemn memory, you have never forgotten the folks

you left behind, or the ones who came home with you. And you have continued to think of every new generation of veterans.

“I told Sarge, ‘Thanks for being here today,’ and he said, ‘I wouldn’t be here but for my Delaware Hospice nurse, Nancy, and my wife, Rita.’”

“I told the folks from Delaware Hospice, if there are angels in heaven, they are all from hospice.”

Photos and story by: Beverly Crawl

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Veteran John Ross remembers Pearl Harbor

With the onset of Alzheimer's disease, John Ross' memory isn't what it used to be, but his memories of the attack on Pearl Harbor 68 years ago are vivid.

John was 18 when he joined the U.S. Navy early in 1940. He said, "I didn't have great prospects after high school and decided it would be a good idea." He loved being on a ship and traveling, and on the morning of December 7th, 1941, he was looking forward to touring Oahu island with a fellow sailor.

John was standing out on deck of the USS Selfridge destroyer early that Sunday morning when he suddenly saw planes circling the harbor. "I assumed



they were our guys, holding practice exercises, so I wasn't paying much attention. I saw the lead plane drop a torpedo in the water, and I still didn't catch on. I thought, 'Holy mackerel, that's dangerous practicing in the harbor.' Sometimes they did practice with non-explosive torpedoes, which would hit the water and sit there. But then I saw an explosion and began to realize that either that was a huge mistake or we're under attack."

"It's funny what goes through your mind. I immediately wondered how the Germans managed to reach us here in the Pacific. Within moments, however, we

got a better view of the attacking aircraft and you couldn't miss the bright red "rising sun" insignia of Japan."

John turned to a friend beside him, who was too shocked to even speak. "He just kept shaking my arm and pointing, but he couldn't talk. The naval air station in the middle of the harbor was in flames. Suddenly it seemed everything was blowing up. I watched the battleship Arizona sink to the bottom of the harbor with men trapped inside."

The USS Selfridge had just returned from Australia and hadn't refueled. John said, "We couldn't do anything but sit there. My battle station was up high by the bridge, and I saw an airplane aiming at me. I didn't want to run—and appear cowardly—so I sort of walked as fast as I possibly could to a safe side of the bridge."

"Things were pretty hectic, to say the least, but we were well-trained and everyone did their job. We had to break into the metal cabinet of our ammunition locker as no one there had a key, and then we were able to fire back at our attackers. I managed to put a few holes in one aircraft with the 50 caliber machine gun at my battle station."

As soon as the raid was over, John's destroyer was refueled and they got underway. Leaving the harbor, they passed another huge battleship, beached, and laying on its side. John thought the whole Japanese navy would be out there, "But we only found one submarine to fire on." As far as casualties on the USS Selfridge, he said, "We were pretty lucky. We only had one sailor injured when he slipped and fell."

For the next few years, John served as a medic, patrolling the islands of the Pacific with both the Navy and the Marine Corps. One of his worst experiences of those years occurred in Guam. John





remembered, “We had to drive a mile or so over a reef with our jeeps, which were sort-of waterproof, as we were being shelled by the Japanese. My jeep quit about halfway in. Fortunately I got a tow from an amphibious tank going by, who pulled me the rest of the way. I can tell you it was pretty uncomfortable for a while.”

Another incident in Guam touched John. “A native girl approached our camp to ask me, as the medic, to come help her ill sister. We took the ambulance, and the girl directed me way back in the hills. As soon as I saw her older sister, I knew she was seriously ill. So I loaded her on the ambulance and got her back to the camp for the doctor to do what he could to treat her. Years later, back in Philadelphia, I received a letter addressed to ‘John Ross, US Navy, Philadelphia.’ It was a letter from that girl thanking me for helping her sister.”

John was eventually transferred to an air station in Georgetown, Delaware. One night, he went to a dance in Seaford where he met a special young woman, named Pansie. They were married soon after and enjoyed 63 years together and a wonderful life with their son and daughter. He attended the Wharton School of Business on the GI bill, and worked for Ford and then the Burroughs Corporation, where he became Director of Contracts.

John became familiar with Delaware Hospice when Pansie was tragically diagnosed with brain cancer. He said, “I still miss her every day and I always will.”

With a progression of Alzheimer’s disease, John and his family rely again on the expertise of Delaware Hospice’s staff. John appreciates the support, especially of his nurse who comes in to check on him regularly, and his certified nursing assistant who provides personal care.

By: Beverly Crowl



Pearl Harbor survivor, Veteran John Ross met Pansie at a dance in Seaford after his discharge from service. They married soon after and enjoyed 63 years together.

“I watched the battleship Arizona sink to the bottom of the harbor with men trapped inside.”



Veteran hospice patient with Alzheimer's Disease revisits childhood years with hospice volunteer

It was just a case of luck that Jackson Lynn became the poster boy for the Merchant Marines in the early 1940's, when they were posting fliers to promote war bonds. "I was in the right place and the right time," recalled Jackson. "I was working in an office in Washington D.C. when someone came in looking for a marine to photograph for the posters, and I was there." Jackson's photo and the war bond poster became quite famous.

It was also luck that Jackson Lynn was referred to Delaware Hospice fifty years later, where he and his family found the special care they needed as well as a great gift in the form of Andy Parezo, a Delaware Hospice volunteer.

Jackson's dependency on his family had grown during this past year with the diagnosis and progression of Alzheimer's disease. Jackson's granddaughter, Corina Beatty, said, "I never would have considered hospice care for my grandfather at this point. But we needed help, and a nurse who knew our situation quite well referred us to Delaware Hospice."

As primary caregiver, Corina was hesitant to take this step. "I prefer to be in control, to do everything myself and to know that I've done all that I can. I



didn't feel I could trust an outsider to help with his care. Now, after several months with the Delaware Hospice team, we feel like a burden has been lifted and Jackson looks forward to their visits as well."

A nurse comes once a week to check Jackson's symptoms and medication. A social worker makes sure the family doesn't need anything, a chaplain visits regularly to chat, and a certified nursing assistant helps with personal care a couple of times a week.

Corina said "We've grown to have complete trust in their staff and such peace of mind with their 24-hour on-call service. If we have a question, we pick up the phone and always get an answer within a brief period of time. If our nurse doesn't know the answer to a question, she will contact his physician and find the answer immediately."

"We're so pleased with the care, but the most amazing gift is our Delaware Hospice volunteer, Andy Parezo."

Jackson Lynn and Delaware Hospice volunteer Andy Parezo share childhood memories during weekly visits.



When Andy Parezo accepted his volunteer assignment to go and visit with Jackson once a week, no one realized that Andy and Jackson shared memories of childhood and young adulthood—years in which Alzheimer’s patients tend to have strong memories.

Andy said, “When I received the assignment, Jack’s name rang a bell, but I didn’t recognize him. As we spent time together and chatted, one remarkable coincidence after another was revealed. Jackson and I are the same age. We both grew up in Washington D.C. where we graduated from different high schools in June of 1939. We both attended Wilson’s Teacher College the next fall, where we remember wearing the obligatory green necktie and green and white felt beanie which were the school colors.

“A few years later, I married a woman who lived near his home, and Jackson and I met on the bus, where we remembered seeing each other at Wilson’s Teacher College. I discovered that Jackson had married Nancy, a friend of mine from high school. Both of us joined the service shortly after that.

“On one of my visits with Jack, I mentioned that I had been in the army air corps in Greensboro, NC. Jackson suddenly shouted out, ‘BTC10!’ It turns out that Jackson had been part of the permanent cadre at Greensboro, although we never saw each other while stationed there. As a permanent cadre, he lived off-base with Nancy. As a private trainee, I was confined to base until I’d been there long enough to get a pass.”

In 1975, Andy moved to the Eastern Shore. Jackson had also been transferred to Salisbury by his employer. So they both lived once again in the same neighborhood--at one point within a few blocks of each other--and didn’t know it!

Corina grew emotional when she talked of Andy’s visits with her grandfather. “He has good days and bad days; but when Andy comes, he perks up and becomes so animated. Those are his best days.”

Andy and Jackson talk about people from the past and about Washington D.C. as it was in the 1930’s and 40’s. They remember movie theaters and especially the local amusement park, called Glen Echo Park. Jackson said, “My friends and I used to steal rides on the roller coaster. We’d wait for it to slow down at the bottom of the hill, and then jump on. It wasn’t really dangerous, just greasy.”

Corina and her husband, Jim, agree that having Andy visit is one of the greatest bonus factors in the whole deal. Corina said, “It really gets my grandfather going. His brain works; he remembers things that he hasn’t thought about in a very long time. For us, it’s so good to see.”

Jim agreed, “On the good days, I love to listen to the two of them talk because I’m really interested in history. Some things are so amazing, like going to the World Series baseball game in the 1930’s to see the Washington Senators play. Tickets were fifty cents! And Jackson can tell me exactly which trains and buses he took to get here and there.”

Andy Parezo has been a Delaware Hospice volunteer since 2000. But this case has been exceptional. “When Jackson piped up with ‘BTC10,’ I actually got chills realizing he had been there, as this base was only in use for a year. You never know who you’re going to meet as a volunteer, but this has been truly a remarkable assignment.”

By: Beverly Crowl

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Emilio “Ace” DiTolvo recalls his time in the Marines and the wonderful memories with his wife Mary



Emilio “Ace” DiTolvo is an honored WWII veteran who served the United States Marine Corp for slightly over three years. Entering the Marines on December 15, 1942 and separating January 1, 1946, he knew when he entered the service at age 18 that his life would change.

As Ace reflected on his past life, he sat in his recliner gazing out the window and would smile at the thought of his memories. Ace was first stationed in Parris Island, South Carolina to complete his boot camp training. After completing the necessary training he went on guard duty at the Anacostia Naval receiving station in Washington D.C. Little did he know that fate had ironically set in. Ace was focused primarily on serving the United States to the best of his ability; never did he think he would meet the love of his life while doing this. Ace stated, “I met Mary over the phone. I would call to check in with the officer of the day every half hour and she was the phone operator. We talked for three months before we ever met. We met half way between the phone office and my post. We were both off duty at the time and it was in the

early hours of the morning. I remember thinking she was very nice and cute.”

The only Marines at the Receiving Station were at the Navy “Brig.” “I was in a different building called the Camouflage Workshop. As long as the Marines were in the U.S., we guarded the Naval Installations,” Ace remembered. While Ace worked at the Naval Receiving Station, he then married Mary at age 19 on September 19, 1943 in Bethesda, Maryland.

Ace was transferred to the Torpedo Plant in Alexandria, Virginia. After Alexandria he was then transferred to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. This is where Mary found a job at the Naval Yard. While Mary stayed in Philadelphia, Ace was transferred to Camp LeJune, North Carolina, where he had advanced combat training. After being properly trained, he was shipped to Guam where he joined the 3rd Marine Division and was on standby. He was in a “mortar platoon” where he was behind the lines. “We weren’t on the front lines like the majority of the Marines. I was in replacement Battalion,” Ace stated.

During the time Ace was stationed in Guam, he would send Mary money that he earned or the winnings from his gambling. Mary and her father compiled all of hers and Ace’s money and found out they had enough money saved to put a down payment on a motel and restaurant. Once Ace was honorably discharged from the Marines, Mary had their business already “up and running” as Ace referred to it. MD’s motel and restaurant was the name of their business. The motel was outdated in the early 50’s by all of the new motels in town. It had ten cabins. The restaurant was prosperous but the cabins went down hill due to the competition, according to Ace.

When Ace and Mary bought the restaurant it had Gulf gas pumps outside. He ripped them out and expanded the 50-seat restaurant to 150 seats. Ace said he “introduced pizza and spaghetti to the Valley.”



He was also a franchisee to “Chicken in the Rough.” This was a technique that was patented and copyrighted, which consisted of “frying the chicken on a grill with the lid over it, which kept the chicken juicy and flavorful” as Ace remembered it. This was the life Mary and Ace had shared for 27 years.

Ace recalls Mary passing away in the year 1991. They had already sold MD’s and were in St. Petersburg, FL where she was in a nursing home.

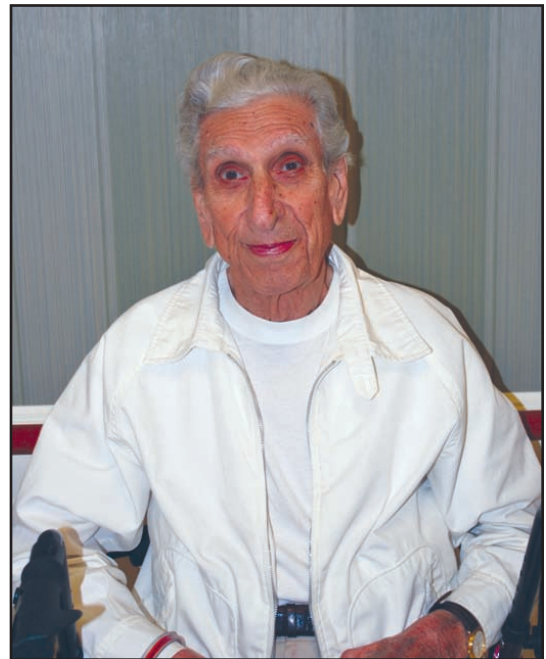
Prior to her passing, a Hospice in Florida stepped in. Within the first week of their services they provided Mary with an air mattress to help comfort her. Ace stated “this meant the world to me because at least she would be comfortable.”

Ace is now a Delaware Hospice patient in the Delaware Veterans Home. Before coming to the Delaware Veterans Home he lived alone in Long Neck, Delaware. He had become ill and needed Delaware Hospice’s help. He stayed at the Delaware Hospice Center in Milford.

As Ace sat in his recliner remembering his time at the Delaware Hospice Center, he said, “They treated me...I couldn’t expect anything more. They were wonderful. They did anything and everything to make my stay enjoyable. And the atmosphere of the room and their positive attitudes made me feel better than if I was at home.”

He was then discharged back to his home in the community. After trying his best to care for himself he decided it was time for around the clock care. This is when he reached out to the Delaware Veterans Home. He currently is a resident at the long term care facility where he continues to receive hospice care. He said, “I couldn’t say enough about them, their treatment and attitudes are great.”

By: Jessica Nowacki



Emilio "Ace" DiTolvo

“By working together we can assure that veterans who are near end of life have access to high quality hospice and palliative care.”

- Reaching Out to Veterans Partners





CONTACT INFORMATION

Delaware End-of-Life Coalition
www.deolc.org

Delaware Hospice, Inc.
800-838-9800
www.delawarehospice.org

Delaware Veterans Home
302-424-6000
www.vethome.delaware.gov

Wilmington VA Medical Center
302-994-2511 ext.5310
www.myhealth.va.gov

State Veterans Service Officers
800-344-9900 or 302-739-2792
www.veteransaffairs.delaware.gov

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