

The John Basilone Parade Committee is proud to announce that the Grand Marshal of this year's parade is Dominic Porcaro. During World War II Dominic served in the Navy on an escort ship that patrolled in the Mediterranean Sea. Sadly, after being interviewed for this article, Dominic passed away in July. However, he is still the official Grand Marshal – his son will ride in the car in the parade in his honor.

Dominic Porcaro was born in 1922. Like most of his era he was not born in a hospital, but at his home which was on Second Avenue in Raritan near the railroad tracks. As a young boy his family moved a few times, but they always stayed in Raritan as he later lived on LaGrange Street and then Third Street. During the early 1940s, his family moved to 27 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue.

Shortly after the U.S. entered World War II, Dominic, in June of 1942, volunteered for the Navy. (He was not the only family member to serve in the military as his brother Carmen was in the Army.) Dominic first attended Navy boot camp in Sampson N.Y. Upon completion, Dominic received additional training to qualify as a diesel mechanic. In mid-1943, he headed overseas, leaving from Staten Island. His first stop was Bermuda then to the North Africa theater of operations.

Dominic was assigned to the escort ship PC-542. While this was a small ship by World War II standards, just 180 feet long with 73 men serving on board, it was heavily armored. His ship escorted supply ships (called Liberty Ships) and troop transport ships throughout the Mediterranean Sea. Duty on a ship like the PC-542 was a very uncomfortable tour at sea. The ship at times rode like a roller-coaster. Often a significant percentage of the sailors were seasick. In addition to its rough ride, all areas of the ship were very cramped. Even living quarters were extremely compact. Space was so limited that there was barely enough room to store fresh water. Thus, bath water was rationed to just one bucket per man.

On the ship, Dominic was a diesel mechanic. He ensured that the ship's engines were operating smoothly. When it came time for battle, Dominic manned the guns.

Their ship took part in 4 major invasions. The first was the invasion of Sicily on June 10<sup>th</sup> 1943.

### **The Invasion of Sicily – The PC-542's Finest Hour**

On June 9<sup>th</sup> – 10<sup>th</sup>, 1943, the U.S. made their first invasion into enemy territory in Europe during World War II landing on the beaches of Sicily. (Sicily is an island just off the coast of Italy.)

During the invasion, his ship coordinated the movement of landing craft. They gave color signals to the various landing crafts (Higgins boats) to direct them to land on the correct beach at the correct time. This task was just a little hectic as it was the middle of the night, there were several beaches, many landing craft, and one other distraction - the enemy was trying to kill them. Since the invasion was at night, the cloak of darkness was a major advantage. However, once the landings began, enemy searchlights were shining at them from the heavily defended beaches. One of the lights found the small ship and lit it up for several seconds. They thought an accurate bomb might follow, but fortunately it did not. For the invasion, the U.S. had many battle ships just off shore with heavy accurate guns. After many minutes of the enemy search lights illuminating them in the water, the U.S. battleships accurately bombarded the powerful searchlights allowing the invasion to proceed in

darkness. However, one search light eluded the bombardment and was later determined to be a mobile light that could be moved around – a tough target. This last light gave them much trouble for several minutes. Finally, one of the U.S ships had enough and let loose with a tremendous salvo of firepower - one that was usually reserved for other heavy targets – and the last search light was out.

On one trip in toward the beach, they found that while the enemy's searchlights had been knocked out, they still had some flares remaining. These were low intensity in their lighting, but if the flare was directly over your ship you could be seen from far away. Indeed one flare - which was on a parachute - opened just above the ship. Previous while they were under the powerful searchlights they were further away from the enemy guns, but this time being so close to the enemy's guns and well lit made the crew of the PC-542 feel like their time had come. The flare's slow dissention downward on the parachute seemed like forever. But the flare finally went out before any firing came their way. Their boat would be fired on during the battle, which took several hours, but fortunately the bombs landed in the water.

With the dawn, the sailors saw some of the landing craft returning back to the larger ships. One passed near their ship. Two dead U.S. soldiers could be seen. Yes, this was war. During the night time they saw and heard the bombs and explosions, but now seeing the dead bodies of their fallen comrades in the calm of day made the war seem more personal.

That day the U.S. had been able to successfully land on the beaches at Sicily. The enemy offered some resistance especially in the beginning, but was subdued within hours by the U.S. forces. By days end, the harbors at Sicily were filled with U.S. and English ships. The PC-542 performed its duty well in the invasion – in fact they were the first ship to direct landings craft onto the enemy territory in World War II.

The day after the battle, Dominic and the crew, as usual, listened to the news broadcast from London on the ship's loud speaker. Listening to the news this day was an entirely different experience from past days, as this time they helped make the news they were listening to.

### **Other invasions**

The successful landing on Sicily was only the start of the battle. The U.S. ground forces would move across the island slowly taking territory from the defending Germans and Italians. A month later on August 11<sup>th</sup>, 1943, Dominic Porcaro and the PC-542 would take part in another invasion in Sicily - this time behind enemy lines at Brolo. They again coordinated the moving of landing craft to ensure a successful invasion. By August 17<sup>th</sup> the U.S. and British troops had driven all Axis powers - air, land, and sea - from the island thus the invasion of Sicily had ended as the U.S. had control of the entire island. The loss of significant harbors at Sicily by the Germans resulted in the U.S. gaining control of the Mediterranean Sea. The U.S. ships with men and supplies could then, for the most part, move freely about.

The PC-542 would take part in two other landings. One was the invasion of Salerno, Italy on September 9<sup>th</sup>, 1943 and the other the invasion of South France (near Frejus) on August 15<sup>th</sup>, 1944.

In October of 1944, the PC-542 was turned over to the French. France had been liberated a few months before and the now free men were glad to join the fight against their former occupier.

After giving the ship over to the French, Dominic's unit returned stateside at the end of 1944 to await a new assignment. At the beginning of August 1945 they learned that the assignment would be to go to the Pacific to join the fight against the Japanese. (Germany had surrendered in May 1945.) As they were at the military base preparing to leave for overseas, it was announced that Japan had surrendered. The war was over. Dominic recalled how everyone went crazy hugging each other. In an effort to keep the enlisted men from getting too wild, the officers ordered that everyone remain at the base that night. However, this was one time that the sailors disobeyed orders and they went to town to celebrate.

## **Reflection on World War II**

Talking with Dominic, he had several thoughts and stories about the war.

To sum it all up he simply said: "War is terrible, people do not realize it."

He was grateful to have returned from the war, as while serving he had doubts that he would survive as danger was always lurking. Often enemy planes were overhead, frequently powerful bombs went off around him, and there was the ever present danger of mines in the water.

While his ship managed to avoid being hit, other ships close by were not so lucky. In one of the invasions he saw a ship that was 200 feet in front of him hit an underwater mine. There was a large explosion and many men were killed. Dominic recalled that in that blast a Raritan guy, Jerome Niles, was injured. While Jerome spent time in the hospital he recovered and returned to Raritan.

One thing that he saw was that in the heat of battle the decisions made by officers were not always perfect. One time, with his ship anchored, firing began and an order was quickly given to move the ship. However, as soon as the ship began moving it was obvious that they were dragging the anchor. They were in the middle of a mined area at the time, this was very dangerous, but luck prevailed and the ship escaped unharmed.

While away from home, Dominic found reminders of home very uplifting. Dominic especially remembered how the packages of food from home were cherished as on the ship there was not much in terms of quality or quantity. When the letters from home came, Dominic was very thankful and he tried to answer them right away. When writing home, he was mindful of the censors, so he was careful not to say things that would be deleted. Dominick recalled that in one letter from his sister, she informed him that a guy from his hometown of Raritan, John Basilone, had been awarded The Congressional Medal of Honor. He was proud of his fellow resident as he knew the whole Basilone family. In fact, Angelo Basilone was his tailor.

Dominic Porcaro was discharged from the Navy in early 1946 and he returned to Raritan. In 1951 He married a Raritan girl Marie Fishetti. They moved out of Raritan to Bridgewater in 1955. He was a distributor for Schaefer Beer for many years. Then in 1969, he opened *The Hoagie Hut* on the corner of Route 28 and Adamsville Road in Bridgewater. It is still open today and owned by the Porcaro family.

For additional photographs and information on Dominic Porcaro, logon to [www.raritan-online.com](http://www.raritan-online.com).