



Sunday, September 15, 2002

COLUMNIST: Bill Nemitz

Brave soldier finally gets what he earned

Copyright © 2002 Blethen Maine Newspapers Inc.

AUGUSTA - Ask anyone who's known Rocco Gedaro since he came home from the infantry in World War II almost 60 years ago and they'll tell you they've heard the story.



"He tried for 25 years that I know of, but he couldn't make things happen," said Fran Collins, who's lived across the street from Rocco in South Portland for 43 years. "It took his daughter to do it. She's a good girl."

What Rocco's daughter did was set the record straight. Six months after Theresa Gedaro-Fox decided her dad had been ignored long enough, she stood in a small conference room at Camp Keyes Thursday and gave Rocco something he should have received on a battlefield in northern France 58 years ago.

His sergeant stripes.

"My God, I don't know what to say to her," Rocco said as a line of well-wishers, starting with Adjutant Gen. Joseph Tinkham of the Maine National Guard, took turns congratulating him. "This is just a shock to me."

It's also, for a 78-year-old man who thought his epitaph would read "Came in as a private, went out as a private," a promotion that comes cloaked in irony. Way back then, you see, the last thing Rocco wanted was three stripes on the shoulder of his field jacket.

"Sergeants," he explained, "kept dying."

He landed on Normandy Beach on June 8, 1944 (D-Day Plus 2), a replacement infantryman for Company C, 357th Infantry, 90th Division. For seven long months, he fought first at Normandy, then across northern France, then at Rhineland and finally at Ardennes.

Not long ago, a fellow veteran helped him set up his own Web site to chronicle his time on the front lines:



90th Division Association Personal Submissions

"An infantryman . . . has to seek cover behind a hedge, all the while he is being fired upon by the enemy with rifle fire, concussion grenades, machine gun fire, mortar shells and artillery," Rocco wrote. "He has to pray that he is not wounded or killed. He has to relieve himself often (pee)."

Rocco was one of the lucky ones. The closest he came to being hit was the day he reached back for the canteen on his belt and found it empty. To this day, he treasures the piece of shrapnel he found clanking around inside.

Like so many soldiers still in their late teens, Rocco fought bravely - and hard. One night in the French town of St. Susanne, his sergeant told him to direct a convoy from B Company past a fork in the village road.

"It was about midnight and I heard a truck coming and soon saw it approaching me," he wrote. "I said 'HALT' and jumped onto the running board. I asked 'B CO' and heard the driver say 'VAS IS.' I realized then that they were Germans. I jumped off the running boards and ran toward the buildings yelling 'JERRYS. JERRYS.' My squad opened fire on the truck as it started to move forward. It went about 20 feet and stopped."

Months later, as the Battle of the Bulge raged on, Rocco found himself at a first-aid station with frozen feet, awaiting evacuation to a field hospital. But the Germans counter-attacked and suddenly he was back on the front line with his feet wrapped in a blanket and a rifle in his hands.

"They told us that they expected the Germans to try to break out at this point and we were to hold our positions at all costs," he wrote. "Here are a bunch of wounded soldiers along with cooks, bakers, MPs and whoever else they could find. The Germans hit us hard and tried to break through our lines, but we held on."

At some all-but-forgotten point in this endless trial by fire, Rocco got promoted. His squad had been decimated during a brutal fire fight, leaving only him and his sergeant standing to greet the replacements.

"A captain came up to us one day and told the sergeant he was now a lieutenant and then he told me I was now a staff sergeant," Rocco said. "And that was it."

He's not kidding. No sergeant stripes. No makeshift ceremony. And, after he finally got home in one piece and got on with his life as a postal carrier, no official acknowledgement that Pvt. Gedaro was in fact Staff Sgt. Gedaro.

Shortly after arriving home, he contacted the Veterans Administration to set the record straight. No dice. He enlisted the help of then-U.S. Sen. Margaret Chase Smith. Sorry, he was told, but there's nothing anyone can do. Then in 1973, fire destroyed 80 percent of the Army personnel records at a storehouse in St. Louis and Rocco figured it was a lost cause.



"You can only go so far when the wheels aren't turning," he said. "I finally gave up."

But he didn't forget. Whenever the topic of World War II arose, there would be Rocco recalling the "shafting" he'd received by the Army after finally accepting the promotion he never wanted in the first place.

"He'd talk about it all the time," said Theresa, one of five children Rocco raised with his wife, Betty Jane, who died in 1992. "He'd say, 'In as a private, out as a private - and I was never busted for anything!' That was unheard of - and you could still sense his anger after all these years."

Six months ago, Theresa called Col. Roland LaPointe, Maine's director of veterans affairs, to see if something might still be done.

Together, she and LaPointe gathered all the material they could find - including copies of old records found here in Maine that supported Rocco's claim after all - and sent them to the Army Board of Military Corrections.

The board, well aware of the sloppy record-keeping that accompanied many battlefield promotions, quickly approved Theresa's appeal. Rocco, however, didn't have a clue.

Thursday morning, Rocco drove up to Camp Keyes to attend what he thought was an award ceremony for a longtime friend and fellow WWII veteran.

The friend did in fact get an award, but as the applause subsided, something totally unexpected happened.

A line of some 30 of Rocco's friends and relatives, led by Theresa, filed into the small room. Rocco looked from one face to another, dumbstruck.

Col. LaPointe clicked a remote and a slide appeared on the television monitor - a 58-year-old photo of Private Rocco Gedaro. He explained - as if anyone didn't already know - who Rocco was and how sometimes the military has a knack for screwing things up.

Gen. Tinkham, holding a framed copy of the formal promotion order, then asked Rocco to step forward. Everyone applauded - many swallowing back tears as Rocco, still stunned, rose from his seat and walked slowly to the front of the room.

Halfway there, he stopped, took off his glasses, pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed self-consciously at his watering eyes.

"Take a second," Tinkham said.

And with that, Rocco Gedaro was a private no longer.



90th Division Association Personal Submissions

LaPointe hit the remote and another slide appeared - the same photo, but with Staff Sgt. Rocco Gedaro across the top.

Theresa, beaming, pinned the medal with the three small stripes on her father's lapel and kissed him on the cheek.

"There," she said softly. "Now you're a sergeant."

Thanks to Columnist Bill Nemitz and Blethen Maine Newspapers Inc. for their generosity in letting us post this great story.

A special thanks to Rocky's friend Dan Sheridan for letting us know about this. [See Dan's website](#) for the story of his 90th Division father and more about Pvt (SSgt) Gedaro and also Pvt Eldridge Bragg another 90th Division Tough 'Ombre.