

MEMORIAL DAY – May 31, 2021

Remarks by Joseph Fagan – West Orange Township Historian

It's great to be back this year to mark the 153rd anniversary of what began as Decoration Day three years following the end of the Civil War. Last year our annual Memorial Day Service fell victim to the many cancellations due to the worldwide pandemic. Our spirit was bruised but not broken and we are once again gathered to honor the memory of our fallen veterans.

Since we last met for this occasion, we have lost our beloved VFW Post Commander Ralph Panciello. We remember him today with reverence and gratitude for his profound commitment to our veterans on the 100th Anniversary of the founding of VFW Post # 376 in West Orange.

Since we last met for this occasion we also are once again reminded why West Orange is known as New Jersey's most decorated community. A ride down Main Street is now a ride down a canyon of heroes. Of course, I'm talking about the Hometown Hero banners which can now be seen from the Eagle Rock section to the Valley. Their pictures peer back at us and bring alive a stark reminder of the commitment and sacrifice made by all our veterans.

In the direct vicinity of Town Hall alone we are surrounded by many of the Hometown Hero banners. I will mention a few of their names but by no means does it diminish the service of any of our Hometown Heroes. There just isn't enough time to tell all their stories.

The late Ralph Panciello and Gary Englert now overlook this ceremony which they were part of since 1999. The picture of former West Orange Mayor James Sheeran hangs in the shadow of the same building where he once served while in office. Two young men Dylan Pennel and CJ Morgan were high school friends who can be seen next to one another directly across the street.

Pennell and Morgan were 2015 graduates of West Orange HS and choose to go to the military academies at Annapolis and West Point. Despite different career paths in the military and the friendly rivalry that created they had a deep mutual respect, love, and admiration between them. Dylan Pennell is currently on active duty with the US Navy. I spoke to him earlier this week by text message to congratulate him on his reassignment to Norfolk. His dear friend CJ however was tragically killed in the service of our country. His death on June 6, 2019 is a sobering reminder that the dangers our veterans face are not always in harm's way. CJ was lost in a training exercise not far from West Point that injured 19 of his fellow cadets. There is no doubt CJ would have achieved great things in his life because his contagious smile already had made this world a better place. His death speaks volumes to the sacrifice veterans are willing to make and the emotional pain it can inflict on their families forever. It is the core reason why we are here today least we forget.

As we honor those who have fallen let us also take this occasion to remember our Hometown Heroes who are no longer with us. One is Sonny Ciamillo who passed away last year and his banner hangs across the street on the corner. He was born in 1921 and grew up on Lafayette Street in West Orange. Sonny served in the US Navy as a gunners mate during WWII. He was aboard the battleship Massachusetts in 1942 off the coast of Casablanca in North Africa when the US Navy fired the first salvo of the Atlantic war. Sonny was part of the crew manning the 16" gun in turret 1 that fired the shot. When the order was given to fire, it was Sonny's job to make sure all crew members were clear from the massive gun's recoil and it was on his command the historic shot was actually fired down range and into history. By the end of the day the Massachusetts had fired 786 of the 800 rounds she held in her arsenal. In the process the Massachusetts not only sank an enemy battleship but contributed to the sinking of five other hostile ships. The US Navy had flexed its muscle but Sonny's journey into history was not yet over.

Once in the Pacific theater Sonny volunteered to transfer from the battleship Massachusetts to the aircraft carrier the St. Lo. During the Battle of Leyte Gulf in October 1944 Japanese warships were firing upon the St. Lo from close range. Sonny and his crew were firing their 5" gun from the port side of their ship focusing on enemy warships fast approaching on the horizon.

Suddenly, crash diving out of the sky from behind a blinding sun came an aerial attack like never before. It was the first Kamikaze pilot attack of World War II ever seen by the US Navy. Sonny explained to me how they quickly concentrated their anti-aircraft guns on the attacking plane but failed to stop it. The plane crashed into the flight deck erupting into a fireball only yards from Sonny's position. He was blown skyward and hurled 60' into the water by the forceful explosion without a life vest.

A US Navy pilot returning to the ship was unable to land on the carrier engulfed in flames and saw the men in the water and dropped a inflatable life raft. Sonny and 3 others were somehow able to reach the raft and climbed aboard while a fierce naval sea battle raged around them. They were surrounded by blazing fires from smoldering oil slicks and could hear the desperate cries of fellow shipmates. They were helpless as they drifted among the dead and injured and within a half hour Sonny and the men in the raft witnessed the St. Lo sink. In my last interview with him he explained to me how they did their best aboard that raft but they were injured, scared, and alone in the vastness of the Pacific Ocean. Until they were rescued survival was difficult and one of the four men in their raft perished and was given an unceremonious burial at sea.

Sonny was eventually plucked out of the Pacific and recovered from his injuries. He waited 67 years however before he shared the details of his experience with anyone. I'm forever humbled he chose me to tell it to.

After the war Sonny worked for the Town of West Orange for 53 ½ years before retiring. The Kamikaze attack on the St. Lo killed 143 and is considered the first of World War II.

Translated into English Kamikaze means "divine wind" but for Sonny on that historic day his life was saved by the divine wind of fate.

Although we gather together in remembrance of those who have fallen let us also remember the way each of our veterans lived. We come this day not to mourn them - but to praise them and to thank them. Our flag doesn't fly because the wind moves it, it flies because of the last breath of each man and woman who died protecting it. They will forever be our West Orange hometown heroes.