

The Vacaville Cousins Who Gave Their Lives

By John Rico

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PERHAPS YOU WOULD LIKE TO KNOW - Writing about past wars, and especially those bits of news which saddened many Vacaville families, is not what any writer would choose to elaborate on. But from time to time such informative information may be beneficial to residents here today.

Let's take the names of the two veterans organizations here and go briefly into the history of just how the names were applied.

The American Legion Post, organized here in 1919, not long after cessation of hostilities of World War I, honors two native Vacaville young men who were casualties of that conflict.

Private Frank Rago, 22, native-born son of Mr. and Mrs. James Rago, pioneer English Hills fruit ranchers north of Vacaville, became Vacaville's first casualty of World War I, losing his life in action on September 18, 1918, in one of the fierce ground battles in France.

Another young Vacaville native, William Ellis Christopher, 23, also the son of local area fruit ranchers Mr. and Mrs. B.F. Christopher, was gassed in action in France, and died in a hospital there on November 9, 1918.

There was jubilation in Vacaville and around the world when it was announced an armistice ending hostilities had been signed on November 11, 1918. But, the parents of young Rago and Christopher were not to receive the sad news of the loss of their sons until weeks after the armistice had been signed.

The local Legion Post honors these two young men by using the name: Rago-Christopher Post of the American Legion.

Although not war casualties, Bryan Talbot and Walter Hilden, also from Vacaville, died in hospitals from natural causes while serving with the Armed Forces.

World War I was the war to end all wars, but 33 years later the United States became entangled in World War II following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

Again Vacaville's young men, and women, were off to war. Among the hundreds in uniform from Vacaville was Michael Libonati, Jr., a Vacaville native, and also the son of local area pioneer fruit growers.

Young Libonati, a graduate of Vaca High, had become a second lieutenant in the Air Force, and was to see unending service as a bombardier aboard a Flying Fortress on missions over Western Europe.

It was a sad day in January 1943 when the War Department notified the young man's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Michael Libonati, that their son, 24, was missing in action over Western Europe.

For many weeks following, the bewildered mother, carried on correspondence in an attempt to ascertain the fate of her son. At one point she was given assurance by the boy's squadron commander, that he was a prisoner of war of the Germans; but as time rolled on Mrs. Libonati was to receive word from another source verifying the death of her son, who was struck by flack while operating his guns in a Flying Fortress. The plane crashed behind enemy lines.

In 1918, native-born Frank Rago was to be Vacaville's first casualty of World War I, and 35 years later, his cousin, Michael Libonati, was to be Vacaville's first casualty of World War II. The local post of the Veterans of Foreign Wars honors the name of Second Lt. Michael Libonati Jr. With more than 500 young men and women from Vacaville having worn a uniform in World Wars I and II, it is a strange coincidence that the first local casualties in these two wars were related.

And a bit more interesting is the fact that Rago, Christopher and Libonati came from pioneer, fruit ranch families.

It is almost impossible to compile a complete list of casualties among Vacaville young men who served in World Wars I and II, Korea and Viet Nam. But through press releases at the time, here are some of those who gave their lives in World War II:

Gene Baxter on Guadalcanal in January 1943.

Robert Parrott, who died in a bomber crash in Wyoming in March 1943.

Charles Buckingham, co-pilot of a Flying Fortress, killed in action in Europe in March 1944.

Robert Rayborn, one of hundreds of Marines to lose their lives on Iwo Jima in March 1945.

John Drachnick, field artillery liaison pilot, killed over Luzon in February 1944.

Seaman Manuel Gonzales went down with the Bismarck Sea off Iwo Jima in February 1945.

Dale Brazelton, a Vacaville Marine, killed on Okinawa in April 1945.

Gordon Beecroft, a pilot, shot down over the Pacific in August 1945.

George McInnis, killed in fighting in Italy in July 1945.

While this list is far from complete, it does help to impress on all of us that wars did sadden many homes.

While the names of the young men mentioned above are not perpetuated, the community and the nation owe the men and their families a deep debt of gratitude, because each and everyone gave his all so that those who remained behind could perhaps live in a more peaceful world.

But since World War II we have been involved in conflicts in Korea and Viet Nam, which took a total of nearly 90,000 American lives. There never seems to be a peaceful end.

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