



David Venditta, a Pennsylvania journalist who has written extensively about veterans, delivered this speech in November 2012. He gave the speech at an event organized by the Lehigh County, Pennsylvania District Attorney's Veterans' Mentor Program. The program pairs veterans who are criminal defendants with veterans who serve as volunteer mentors.

It seemed like a neat idea to take Dan Curatola to an IronPigs game.

Dan is a World War II veteran. Army, 1st Infantry Division, hit Omaha Beach on D-Day in the first wave. I had interviewed him for a two-part story that ran in *The Morning Call* in 2009. He's also a big sports fan. When he was a boy, he went to Yankees games, saw DiMaggio play, kept scorecards of every game.

Sixth inning at Coca-Cola Park, a batter hit a line drive foul. We were in the upper right field bleachers. It was a scorcher headed our way. An instant later: It's *really* headed our way. Then: It's homing in on us! I felt a bolt of dread.

This old man beside me had survived the fighting in North Africa and on Sicily and on bloody Omaha, but he was not going to survive a minor league baseball game in Allentown. The ball was coming straight for his head and would hit him and kill him. I stood up and put my hands out, hoping to at least deflect it.

Dan did not get clobbered. The ball crashed into an empty seat directly in front of us. "What was that?" Dan said. He had heard it hit but hadn't seen it coming, because his eyesight was bad in the twilight.

I went to another 'Pigs game with Dan. I took him to the monthly meetings of the Battle of the Bulge vets in Walnutport, had him over for dinner, took him to D.C. to see the WWII Memorial, played checkers with him. He was unbeatable, said he was the checkers champ of Bethlehem in 1940.

He was really sharp. He picked up French in North Africa enough to be an interpreter in Normandy, and he spoke Italian like a native – learned it from his parents – and could speak with the Sicilians when he fought on their island.

And get this: A few days after D-Day he was critically wounded and ended up in a hospital in England. One day an Army nurse came into the ward with a guitar and sang to the guys -- a song she had written. Dan still remembered the lyrics and the tune, and would sing it for me at the drop of a hat.

The things I was doing with Dan were things I might have spent with my own father. He was also a WWII vet, a sailor, but he had drifted deep into the fog of Alzheimer's. He spent years at the veterans home in Spring City until he died there in 2004.

I'll always regret that I never asked Dad about his experiences in the war, and he never talked about them, except for this one: Dad went to Coast Guard radio operators school in Atlantic City, and when he graduated he had a choice of postings. He wanted to go where it was warm, so he volunteered for Argencia.

But Argencia is not Argentina, as he'd thought. Argencia is a port in Newfoundland. Instead of South America, Dad spent 1945 on patrol frigates in the North Atlantic, off the coasts of Greenland and Iceland.

Dad was too far gone in the mid 1990s when I wanted to ask him about a family member he knew well – my cousin Nicky, who was killed in Vietnam.

I hardly knew Nicky. He was five years older, we came from a big Italian family and we lived in different towns. I only remember that Nicky said hi to me once.

He was a 20-year-old Army helicopter pilot when he went to Vietnam in the summer of 1969 and he was dead in 11 days. I never gave him much thought, but in 1994 a group called the Friends of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial came up with a database that had information on each of the 58,000 Americans killed in the war.

The data sheet on Nicky had something on it that really knocked me for a loop.

The story that had always gone around about how Nicky died was that he was standing with a bunch of other guys waiting for a transport when an enemy rocket hit. He lost a leg, lingered for several days and died on the base in Vietnam.

The data sheet listed Nicky's death as non-hostile, an accident. What? What kind of accident?

The Army casualty office, and my own research over the years, filled in the blanks. When Nicky arrived in Vietnam, at the Americal Division base at Chu Lai, his first week was orientation. As part of that, he attended a classroom lecture on grenade safety. The instructor told about 40 guys in the class that when the grenade's released, you have five seconds. What are you gonna do? And then he deliberately fumbled the grenade onto the floor. On every other day, the grenade was inert and nothing happened. It was a scare tactic to see how the replacements would react.

But this M-26 fragmentation grenade, for reasons that were never determined, was live. It rolled under the table up front where Nicky sat with three other warrant officers and detonated. Nicky lost his left leg below the knee and died five days later at the evac hospital on the Chu Lai base.

The nurse who tended to Nicky as he lay dying lives in my neighborhood here in Allentown. Some of you might know her. She's the former nurse manager of the VA Outpatient Clinic, Lynn Bedics.

My search to learn as much as I could about what happened to Nicky took me to Vietnam to follow his path, to guys who had survived the blast, and ultimately brought me face to face with the instructor who tossed the grenade. He believes the explosion was not an accident but sabotage. Someone, he says, switched his grenades. We will never know for sure.

It wasn't enough that I knew the facts about Nicky's death; I needed to get to know Nicky, who was the son of one of my dad's brothers. I went to Nicky's dad and my other uncles. And they not only told me about Nicky, they also told me their own war stories.

This was a revelation. I didn't know I had this whole parade of uncles, and an aunt, who had served in World War II all over the map – the Aleutians, North Africa, England, the Pacific.

One of them died of a war injury five years after the war ended. That was my Uncle Sam. He would have violent seizures and would just conk out and come to. But nobody in my family could say how he got that way. An inch-thick file I got from the VA had the answer.

Uncle Sam was with the Army Coast Artillery on Bora Bora in the Pacific. He was involved in blasting coral to make harbors 16 hours a day and started to have seizures. Apparently the concussions damaged his brain. He was sent home and hospitalized. He told a doctor he was afraid that someday he might conk out and not regain consciousness. And that's exactly what happened one night in 1950. He

came home from a ballgame in Philly, got into bed with his wife, cried out and died. He was 32.

Uncle Sam, my other uncles, my dad, they were ordinary people who had seen and done extraordinary things in their youth, when the country called them to war.

They were like people all around us. We're losing them and they're taking their war stories with them to the grave, to be lost to the ages. You've seen the obituaries on any given day, one line: so-and-so served in the Army in WWII or Korea or Vietnam. That's it? That's all there is?

It was against this backdrop that I started interviewing veterans for The Morning Call in 1999 and I've stuck with it. I've done about 90 altogether. Last year the paper published a collection of my interviews in a book called "War Stories: In Their Own Words." To give you an idea of how important it is to preserve these personal accounts, about half of the 34 veterans in the book are gone, and that's been in the space of only a dozen years.

For the record, I am not a war buff or a World War II wannabe, and I am not a veteran. The closest I came was Vietnam, and we were pulling our ground troops out of there the year I got out of high school. So for me this is all about payback. It's my way of saying thank you for serving our country.

Dan Curatola is in my war stories book, and *he* is still living. But he isn't at his home in Bethlehem anymore, he doesn't play checkers and he no longer sings the song he heard an Army nurse sing at a hospital in England in 1944.

He's in the dementia unit of the VA hospital in Wilkes-Barre, winding down his life.

To read other stories by journalist David Venditta or to sign up for his blog, go to <http://warstoriesandveteranshistories.wordpress.com/>