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Albert H. Small Normandy Institute: The Price of Freedom

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Frank P. LaBella of the 83<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division

1921 - 1944



## I. PREFACE

Mankind has witnessed a multitude of struggles for power socially and physically among other aspects. The world as a whole has faced many battles, though World War II in specific showed how explicitly these forces play a role in the safety of the general public. In addition, World War II publicized the human aspect of being a soldier, a perspective often overlooked in favor of the portrayal of a government weapon or pawn. Society isn't typically aware of the lengths people go through to protect our communities, which is why our purpose is to bring light to some unsung heroes. Even so, some soldiers are left undocumented in the effort of recording every soldier, given that it takes a lot of time and concentration to appropriately document their lives.

The objective of the Albert H. Small Normandy Institute, as well as our own objective, is to prove that freedom requires sacrifice. In order to obtain this, we congregated sources that we found to be certified. This biography is made to honor not only TSgt LaBella, but the sacrifices he made with the soldiers alongside him. In addition, we hope to honor his family; we would like to especially thank his nephew, Mr. Ralph Caprio, who had helped us an innumerable amount of times throughout our research.

## II. EARLY LIFE

Frank was born August 26<sup>th</sup>, 1921, to Michael and Mary LaBella. Michael and Mary had moved from Sicily to Norristown prior to Frank's birth, making him a 1<sup>st</sup> generation Italian immigrant. He was born in Norristown, PA, where he spent most of his life. He shared a working-class home with his parents and four other siblings.

Though acknowledged as a student of the Class of 1939, Frank was thought to have dropped out of Norristown High School and found himself working as a truck driver for a local construction company. Little is known about his life prior to his leave, though during his free time, he and his friends were thought to have gone roller skating. It is believed that he met his soon-to-be wife, Mary "Betty" Harbaugh, at Art's Skating Rink (located in Conshohocken, PA). As a couple, they enjoyed going to see the latest movies and attending events held by the local Italian-American club.<sup>1</sup>

## III. FAMILY

Frank and Mary decided to have children not too long after their marriage. They had two children: their first son, Frank Jr., and their second son, Michael. Due to a heart defect, Frank Jr. had lived no longer than 6 months, passing away during May of 1942. Michael had been born on April 9<sup>th</sup>, 1943.<sup>2</sup> Michael LaBella was known as a family man<sup>3</sup>, though he had a disagreement with his mother, Betty, when she remarried after Frank's

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<sup>1</sup> Ralph Caprio, e-mail message to author, April 10, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Ralph Caprio, e-mail message to author, April 10, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Ralph Caprio and Fran Caprio, interview with author, May 17, 2019.

passing away. He also seemed to have a disagreement with Mary in terms of the burial of Frank's body, often going back and forth between a cemetery in Norristown and Arlington National Cemetery.<sup>4</sup>

#### IV. MILITARY SERVICE

Not long after leaving high school, Frank enlisted in the National Guard in February of 1941 at the age of 19. His unit's headquarters were located on Harding Blvd in Norristown, PA, where it is still standing today.<sup>5</sup> He later became a member of the 331<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, part of the 83<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division. The 83<sup>rd</sup> Division is noted for relieving the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division and liberating Nazi camps. Frank became a platoon sergeant at age 22, where he was described to be forceful, serious, and mature for his age.

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Frank could not make it to Omaha Beach with the rest of the 83<sup>rd</sup> Division, but he did participate in the hedgerow struggles in Caraten in addition to the St. Lo-Perrier's Road offensive on July 25<sup>th</sup>, 1944.

#### V. DEATH

Frank had died in the midst of a Nazi counterattack, however his body had been reported missing for over 20 years prior to its discovery. While leading his platoon during the attack, he was last seen being carried to medical aid to tend to his wounds. The Nazi counterattack was brutal— only 110 people out of about one thousand came back from

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<sup>4</sup> Files provided by St. Louis. Historical Society.

<sup>5</sup> Ralph Caprio and Fran Caprio, interview with author, May 17, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Ralph Caprio and Fran Caprio, interview with author, May 17, 2019.

their battalion. An artillery center had exploded, demolishing a bridge over the Taube River. In order to escape being captured, many soldiers attempted to cross the river regardless of the bridge's demolition. Frank had been one of many who attempted, carrying the weight of his wounds, as the sudden attack disrupted his treatment. There is no definite answer as to how Frank died, though there are possibilities that it may have been due to his wounds or execution by a Nazi soldier.

In 1964, Frank's remains had been uncovered during the construction of a French farmhouse near Auxais, France. No personal effects or identification tags were recovered from his remains. He was sent through the United States Mortuary in Germany and identified on the basis of his race, height, estimated weight, estimated age, shoe size, and dental characteristics. He was awarded the Bronze Star and Purple Heart medals posthumously.