

American armored division members, supported by tanks, move up to attack the enemy position on the Bastogne front in Luxembourg on Jan. 6, 1945. Pat Riccardi, of Syracuse, died later that month in Luxembourg. (AP Photo)

# HIS BIG BROTHER, ALWAYS



Joe Riccardi, a World War II veteran, holds a photo of his brother, who died in the war. (Dennis Nett / dnett@syracuse.com)

## WORLD WAR II VET STILL CARRIES GRIEF AS DEEP AS HIS LOVE FOR SIBLING WHO NEVER CAME HOME

A few days before the Fourth of July, I was doing some research at the Onondaga Historical Association in downtown Syracuse, yellowed newspaper clippings spread out on a table. They told about the day World War II came to an end, how tens of thousands of people flooded the streets of our city, how a reporter covering the joyous mayhem stepped off the street, into the lobby of the old Hotel Onondaga.

If a journalist wanted perspective, there it was: Everyone inside, it seemed, had been scarred by the war. A cashier had lost his only son. A telephone operator said she'd lost her boy. And a young "information clerk," Emily Riccardi, told the reporter that her brother Pat had been killed in Luxembourg. She told him she had another brother, Joe, in the Navy, "and she is hoping this means he will be coming home soon."

So I returned to the office, a question in my mind: Did Emily's brother make it back? I began checking around, a search that led me to Elderwood at Liverpool,

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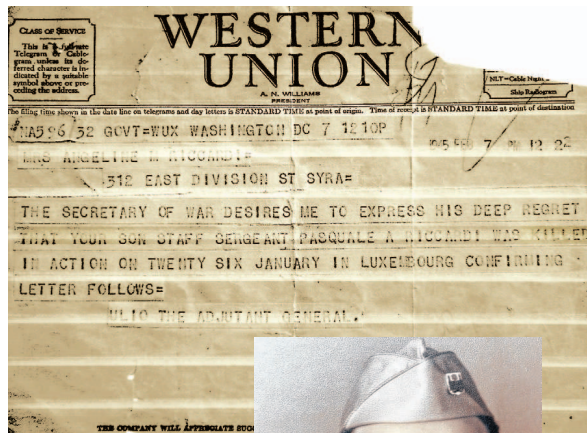


where Joseph Riccardi, 88, lives in the nursing home. I got in touch with the staff, who in turn called one of Joe's grown children, Angela Maroun.

She said she'd see me there, and I could talk with her dad.

We met last week, Joe wearing a Navy cap, his wheelchair pushed up to a table in the lounge. It'll be 70 years this August since Joe's sister saw that reporter downtown, and in a way this was the follow-up interview, because Emily — the last of Joe's surviving siblings — died two years ago.

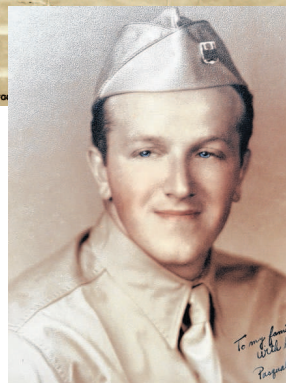
Joe said he was glad for a chance to talk about his older brother, whose photograph is still displayed in Joe's room. Then abruptly, without reservation, he wept. His hand went to his face. His shoulders heaved. He grabbed the wheels of his wheelchair, pushed back and



forth, until the grief drained from his face.

"Keep moving," Joe said. That's how all those guys did it, once they came home from the war.

He said he was fine, that he wanted this chance to honor his brother, whose real name was Pasquale, often shortened to "Pat." Those who knew him well called him "Bosker," a childhood nickname, Joe said. Sometimes Pat Riccardi signed that nickname as "Bosco" on old letters and photos carefully preserved by Joe's sister Louise, who — as Angela put it — was "the keeper of everything."



A letter from the War Department to Angeline Riccardi confirming the death of her son Pasquale, left, killed in Luxembourg in World War II. (Dennis Nett / dnett@syracuse.com)

(Provided photo)

# A lifetime later, brother's loss still vivid

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When Louise died, those papers went to Angela. This fall, she and her husband plan to travel to Luxembourg, where Bosker is buried in an American cemetery. Angela always dreamed of taking her dad on that trip, but his health makes it impossible.

He is glad, he said, that his daughter will tend to his brother's grave.

There was a big gap, a solid decade, between Joe and Bosker. "He was a great football player, a great baseball player," Joe said. He remembers, as a little kid, watching Bosker hit a ball so hard that it traveled over the old Townsend school and rolled down a hill to North Salina Street, back in a time when Joe could walk for blocks and every word he heard was in Italian.

He laughed, and the sound came as quickly, as fully, as the tears. A story, still vivid, after 80 years: He's a child, giving his mother some lip. Bosker walks in, kicks him in the behind, then lifts him up, drops him in a tub of tomatoes.

The message is clear: Respect Mom.

His brother was bigger than life, an outsized personality. He always attracted "a lot of girls," said Joe, who was maybe 14 when Bosker left for the war. A few years later, his brother still over there, Joe — who'd quit North High School — enlisted. In February 1945, on the day he was scheduled to depart, he went to say goodbye to his girlfriend, Jacqueline Renna.

He'd known her since kindergarten. After the war, they'd get married. The phone rang and a voice said: You'd better come right home.

His parents had received a telegram. Bosker had died in combat. Grief swept across the house.

"I fell on my knees in front of my mother," Joe said. "I'm supposed to leave tonight: What do I do?"

Joe was a teenager. The Red Cross gave him three extra days to stay home. Then he went to the New York Central station with his mother, and he got on a train to go to basic training.

In Buffalo, he had a few hours to burn during a stop. This kid who wasn't old enough to be out of high school went into the darkness of a movie theater. "I cried my eyes out," Joe said. He got back on the train.

Joe served on a supply ship in the Pacific. His wife died in 2004, but Angela still has the letters he sent her while he served, letters in which Joe expresses grief about Bosker on Memorial Day and jubilation about the end of the war, nearly three months later.

The wish made by his sister Emily, in the newspaper? That came true. Joe returned to Syracuse by train, got off alone and went

downtown to the Hotel Onondaga. Emily, who still worked there, let him take a shower. Then he walked to his house on Division Street, on the North Side.

His father was outside, hands in the soil of the garden. He was a "very peaceful" man, Joe said, a guy with a trained blackbird that often sat on his shoulder.

His dad turned, saw his son and said: "Hey, Joe!"

His mother, hearing them, came to the front door.

All these years later, Joe hangs onto that moment.

He became a bartender at a tavern on Willow Street. He was never a drinker, and serving drunks made him hate drinking even more. One day, sick of it, he didn't go to work.

"So I'm sitting on the steps," Joe said, "and the fella next door owns a (wholesale) grocery house. He sees me on the steps, he says, 'What are you doing?' I say, 'I'm looking for a job.' He says, 'You got a job, if you want it.'"

The neighbor hired him. Joe, who believes powerfully in fate, often contemplates that moment: If he isn't on the steps, maybe the neighbor just walks by, and maybe Joe Riccardi never goes into the grocery business.

Joe married the girl he met in kindergarten. He and Jacqueline raised their three children on the North Side. For a while, the Riccardi family ran a corner store.

About a half-century after he returned from the war, Joe said, the guy who left high school before graduation retired as a vice president within the wholesale arm of the old P&C grocery chain. Now, as a widower, he's at Elderwood, where he has time on quiet days for recalling all he can about his brother.

The story hardly ends with a yellowed clipping in a museum research room. Joe Riccardi came home, greeted his parents, built a life. But Joe thinks every day about what Bosker might have done. He'd met a woman named Betty in England while he was stationed there, a woman who stayed in touch with the Riccardis long after Bosker died. Would there have been grandchildren? Great-grandchildren?

In his 80s, Joe still wonders.

The war ended almost 70 years ago, and the Fourth of July was this weekend, so I put a question to this old veteran, so quick to laugh or come to tears: If there's one thing people should remember about his brother, about what his family sacrificed, what would it be?

"I think," said Joe Riccardi, "we kind of got to it, today."

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Joe Riccardi, a World War II veteran who lost a brother overseas, holds a photograph of himself from his Navy stint. (Dennis Nett / dnett@syracuse.com)