

The Journal News

SERVING THE LOWER HUDSON VALLEY SINCE 1850

WWII vet recalls how Children's Village counselor saved him from D-Day

By SHAWN COHEN (Original publication: June 7, 2007)

DOBBS FERRY - Sgt. Varca, where are you?

For the 63 years since Allied forces invaded the beaches of Normandy, Emil Steinitz has been trying to find Varca - his former guidance counselor at Children's Village in Dobbs Ferry who gave him a last-moment D-Day reprieve.

After Steinitz was drafted into the U.S. Army in World War II, then-Sgt. Varca appeared by his bunk shortly before the epic invasion and had him reassigned to avoid the battle.

"I've tried for years to find him and want to thank him for saving my life," said Steinitz, an 82-year-old retiree from Long Island. "A lot of my buddies got killed on D-Day. I was saved because of Mr. Varca, Sgt. Varca. One of the biggest miracles of my life."



CV Alumnist Emil Steinitz (l) with his son Bruce.

Steinitz was sent to Children's Village, a residential center for troubled youngsters, from 1941 to 1942 because he had repeatedly skipped out of his public school in the Bronx. Varca, as his guidance counselor there, offered him advice and set him up with several jobs.

"I was one of the bad kids when I came to CV, and they called me 'Overnight Steinitz' because I ran away about four times there," Steinitz said. "Mr. Varca helped me. I learned I could do anything I set my mind to because of him."

On campus, he joined the Reserve Officers' Training Corps and rose to become a captain of the program. A year after graduating, he was drafted. The machine gunner was shipped to England in May 1944 and was days away from fighting in the largest air, land and sea attack the world has ever seen. He then ran into Varca at a camp where both were stationed.

"I got back from breakfast, and there was this sergeant standing by my bed," Steinitz recalled. "He just happened to be Mr. Varca of Children's Village. He just happened to be in charge of everyone coming through that camp."

"Emil, what do you want to do?" Varca purportedly asked Steinitz, then a scared 19-year-old. "What do you mean, what do I want to do?" Steinitz replied.

"We have all kinds of schools here," Varca advised him. "What's the longest?" Steinitz asked, then enrolled in an 8-week radio operator course.

Meanwhile, on June 6, 1944, more than 150,000 Allied soldiers crossed the English Channel and invaded the Normandy region of France, charging into withering fire from an entrenched, heavily fortified German force. When it was over, the Allies had suffered nearly 10,000 casualties, including about 4,000 dead, but "Fortress Europe" had been breached. It was the beginning of the end for Nazi Germany and Adolf Hitler's dream of world domination.

Jack Vier, an 89-year-old from Rye, was there. He recalled arriving on the beach, carrying a 70-pound backpack, with a job of rounding up German prisoners of war. "You hope shortly after you experience it that you'll forget it, but you never do," said Vier, who shared his memories yesterday with two fellow veterans of the invasion. "You remember every ... detail."

WWII vet recalls CV counselor

Steinitz said he feels grateful to have missed it. "I lost a lot of friends," he said, and added, "I undoubtedly would have been killed."

Steinitz, who later fought in the Battle of the Bulge, returned to the United States, got married, raised two children and worked for the Defense Department as a freight rate analyst. Years later, he returned to Children's Village and went back several times, each visit asking if anyone knew how to get in touch with Varca. His most recent trip was in the summer of 2006, when he went with his son and sat down with the current president, Jeremy Kohomban.

"I was honored that he would choose to sit down and tell me this story," said Kohomban, whose grandparents fought for the British in WWII. "He cried when he was on campus. He said he took great pride in the fact he was coming back to Children's Village and that he was able to talk about it."

But neither Kohomban nor anyone else there knows how to get in touch with Varca, if he is still alive. Part of the reason is that many campus archives were destroyed in a fire in the early 1990s. And he doesn't even know Varca's first name. Steinitz has all but given up faith that he'll ever find Varca.

"I'm 82 and he was older than me," he said. "I've just about given up hope. But I just have to say, thank God he came into my life."