

Beverly Citizen

June 30 - July 6, 2011

WickedLocalBeverly.com

Vol. 15, No. 33 75 cents

GREATEST GENERATION

He was 'Shot down over Italy'

Book tells true story of one soldier's survival during World War II

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The year was 1944, the United States was engaged in World War II and Army Air Corps aerial gunner William Lanza's plane was shot down over Nazi-occupied Italy.

The story of what happened to Lanza and the six other members of the crew of the B-25 bomber was detailed in the 2010 book "Shot Down Over Italy," written by Lanza's nephew, John Lanza.

Recently John Lanza was at the Franco American Club and Fortunato VFW Post 545 in Beverly, sharing the veteran's story after years of forced silence. The event was part of the VFW's new speaker series.

"People like a good story," John said, of his uncle's story. "Particularly if it's true."

Audience members listened intently as John detailed the experiences of the crew, as little was known, even by their families. John said family and friends knew his uncle was missing, but didn't know what happened to him after he was shot

down.

Airmen who escaped capture and evaded the enemy with clandestine aid could not talk about their escape and evasion experiences for fear of jeopardizing the lives of those who helped them. These men had to certify in writing that they would keep their escape and evasion experiences secret.

For 60 years, William Lanza desperately wanted to share his story, and only now has he been able to reveal the secrets of his survival.

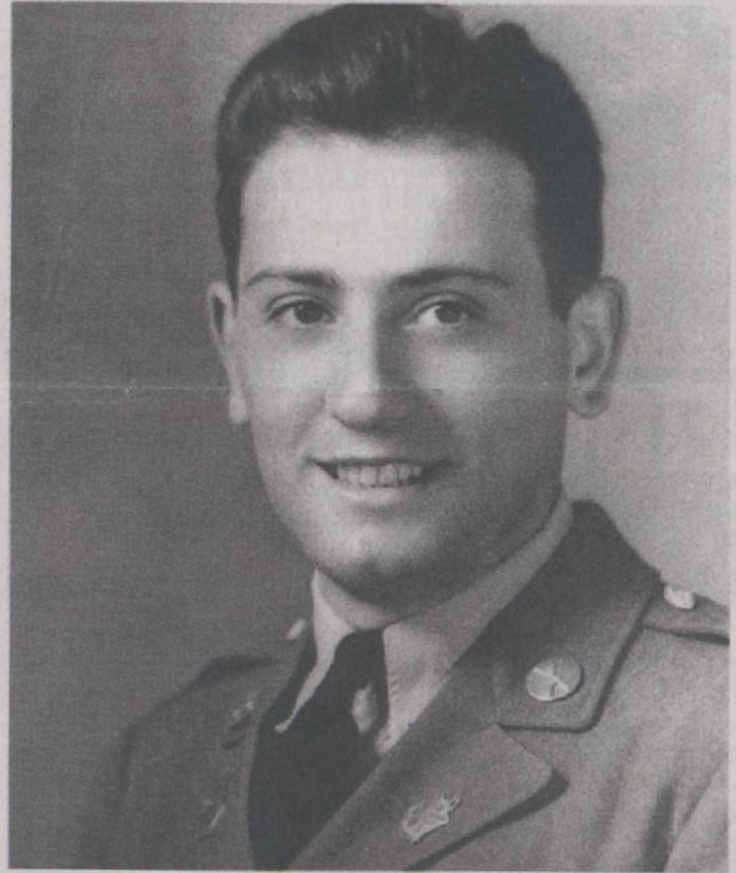
One of the few World War II veterans still alive today, the 94-year-old, who was unable to attend the June 13 book discussion in Beverly, is happy that his story can finally be told.

"I'm so glad that John did this book for the fact that I did get a lot of help and I felt that someone should write something about these people that helped me," William said in an interview. "It was a brutal war. It was tough."

John explained he never imagined the stories his uncle would tell until he heard them for himself.

"It's amazing what you can learn when you listen to your uncle," John said.

Perhaps the most incredible part of William's story is how he managed to evade capture after his plane was shot down in Italy. He and



Sergeant William A. Lanza during World War II.

COURTESY PHOTO

another American airman, Alfred Todd, evaded capture for two months by hiding in a cave.

"People sacrificed and risked their own lives to help us," William said. "I was awful lonesome. My God, it was the most lonesome thing in the whole world. I was away from home and constantly hiding. I was within

talking distance of the enemy."

Lanza explained he was familiar with the techniques of camouflage, which allowed him to successfully hide himself several feet away from the enemy without being detected, although he remained in constant fear he

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would be discovered.

"You do what you have to save your own life," William Lanza said.

After the war, he returned home and married Yola DiGiulio and raised three daughters in Revere.

In June 2006, when William's nephew John began asking him what had happened when he was missing in action, William told him he was bound to secrecy. John immediately set out to discover if his uncle was still required to remain silent, learning the document his uncle had signed was declassified in 1995.

For four years, John bonded with his uncle and jarred the elder man's amazing memory with information from his research and interviews.

"He's a good story teller," John said. "My aunt joked that if you don't shut my uncle up, he'll go on talking for two weeks. But she greatly underestimated him because he didn't stop talking [about his experiences] for four years."

William said his nephew contacted hundreds of people to get the full story and poured hours of research into the book.

"I was surprised at how hard John worked to get all the information. I never realized how talented of a man he was," William said.

"He would ask me a question and not stop until he got the answer he wanted."

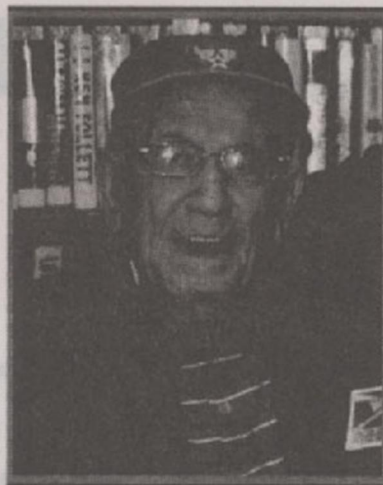
Throughout the process, John pieced together a captivating true story with many fascinating aspects, including a pilot who put his crew's safety above his own, airmen who trusted partisans with their lives, partisans who risked their lives to honor this trust, airmen who as prisoners of war survived inhumane conditions and the families of those who served that struggled to deal with the cruel realities of war.

"When you spend four years on a project like this, you really appreciate those who fought to preserve our precious freedoms and realize that our freedom was not freedom," said John.

John added his uncle's story was an important one to tell, because his survival was dependent upon those who helped him.

"What makes my uncle and I very happy is that the families of the crew, and the partisans in Italy who helped my uncle and another crew member, Alfred Todd, evade capture, like the book," said John.

The book also delves into William's life before the war, and what drew him to combat. John explained that on March 6, 1941, when his uncle was only 24, he went to war. At first, he served in the Infantry but when he learned that the Army Air Corps was looking for aeri-



William Lanza, 94, a veteran of World War II poses during a book discussion in Revere in 2010. Lanza's plane was shot down over Nazi-occupied Italy in 1944 and he escaped capture by hiding in a cave for two months.

COURTESY PHOTO

al gunners, he signed up, as his upbringing near Logan Airport created a keen fascination with airplanes.

"He's a wonderful man and it was a pleasure bonding with him for four years on this book project," John said.

William Lanza trained as an aerial gunner in the United States and arrived in Italy for combat duty on March 3, 1944. Almost three months later on May 26, he was shot down over Italy on his 28th combat mission.

"I'm happy that I served, but it wasn't easy," William said. "I'm glad I did my part. I don't regret it one bit. I'm 94 years old and I've had a great life. If I didn't do what I did to survive I wouldn't be here today."