

The Greatest Generation

Honoring Tony LaPenna

8967 Deer Point Drive is located at the end of the street -- on the literal point of Deer Point. It is a distinctive red cottage that has become a landmark-lakemark over the years. Not surprisingly because of the superb view, it was the first cottage to be built in the Hiawatha zone. And for 30-plus years, it was the summer vacation residence that Tony and Marion LaPenna enjoyed.

He deserved it. By all accounts, Tony was a remarkable man. He was a 1943 graduate of Grand Haven High School where he was elected class president for each of his four years there. While still in high school, he enlisted in the Army Air Corps and subsequently served in World War II as a non-commissioned officer with the 390th Bomber Squadron.

He went to gunnery school and with classmates studied European geography as if their lives depended on it. For many, it did.

Tony was a ball turret gunner, a dangerous position in that you had to fit into a very confined space while firing your weapon. The ball-turret gunner was the first on board and the last out. He had to be in place in a fetal position for the entire trip. A poem on the subject ends with the line that if you die there, they wash you out with a hose.

Thus Staff Sargeant LaPenna became a prisoner of war, interred in Poland at Stalag Luft IV. He endured several "death marches" as prisoners were moved from camp to camp to evade the Allies as they advanced. He earned a Purple Heart amidst other honors.

Sure enough, Tony's plane was hit by flak and went down with only three crew members surviving. This was on or about Oct. 25, 1944, a few months after D Day when the Allies were advancing across Europe.

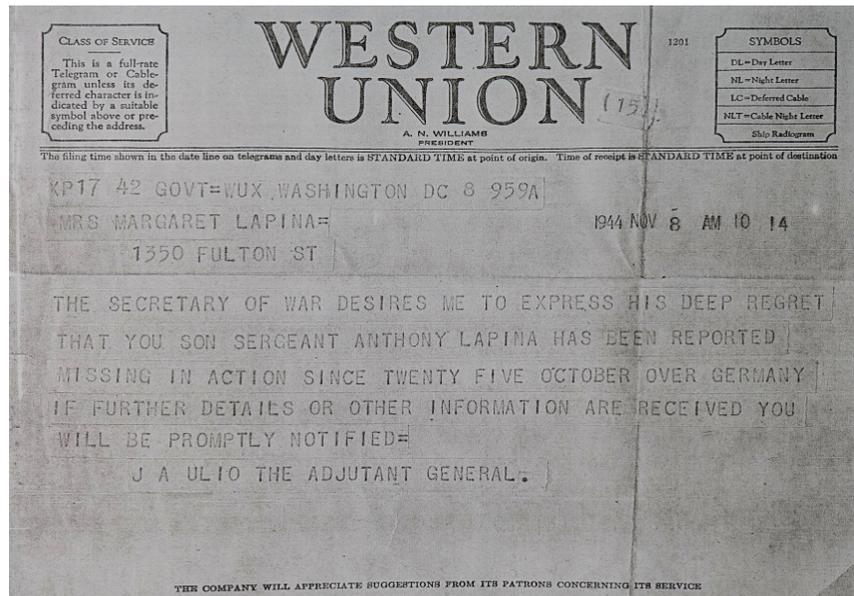
A Western Union telegram was sent to the LaPenna family by the secretary of war informing them that Tony was reported missing in action over Germany.

A bit later, Lt. Rodney Hale, the pilot of the lead plane in that squadron wrote to them to say that he saw that plane go down but thought he saw three parachutes which gave the family some hope. According to Tony's son Mike, Tony's mother upped her Mass and Rosary activity to twice a day.

In the meantime, Lt Hale's entire squadron

was lost over Germany a few days after he wrote to the LaPenna family.

Staff Sargeant LaPenna survived having his plane shot down but became a prisoner of war, interred in Poland at Stalag Luft IV. He endured several "death marches" as prisoners were moved from camp to camp to evade the Allies as they advanced. He earned a Purple Heart amidst other honors.



Nov. 8, 1944. "The Secretary of War desires me to express his deep regret that your son Sergeant Anthony LaPenna has been reported missing in action since twenty five October over Germany. If further details or other information is received, you will be promptly notified."

Signed: The Adjutant General

Tony returned home from the war to marry his high school sweetheart, and then pursued a college education under the GI Bill. A graduate of Western Michigan University, he also earned degrees from MSU and the University of Wisconsin. For years he was a teacher and coach at Grand Rapids Central.

After earning advanced degrees in guidance counseling, he joined the staff at Grand Rapids South and eventually became a counselor at Grand Rapids Junior College. He retired from there as Dean of Admissions and Registrar. In 1994, he was honored at GRCC by being named Faculty Emeritus.

Tony was president of the Michigan Association of Guidance Counselors and the Grand Rapids Toastmasters Club. He was also active at Blessed Sacrament Parish and in the Grand Rapids Catholic Diocese, serving on various committees related to Catholic education.

In the early '70s, Tony and Marion were in good position to pounce when the opportunity came to purchase a cottage on one of Bills Lake's prime locations – the point of Deer Point -- in that they had previously owned two other cottages in the area. Over the years they added a front porch and a second floor and, of course, enjoyed the splendor of the lake with four children, ten grandchildren, and three great-grandchildren.

A standard response upon hearing about the death of someone who lived nearby is to say, "He was a wonderful person and neighbor." But in Mary Vanderhyde's case, Tony helped save her life. When she exhibited heart attack

symptoms, Tony immediately put Mary, a former Bills Lake Association president, in touch with his son Bill who is a cardiologist. In a very short period of time, Tony was also knocking on the Vanderhyde door to offer directions to the hospital and soothing support. "I truly felt that God put me in Tony's care because he knew I needed help," says Mary.

And not surprisingly, he was active with regard to Bills Lake activities. "Marion painted a huge banner to hang on the association ground to advertise the Lakefest," says Mary. "They hosted the paddleboat races on the Fourth of July for as long as I can remember and we moved to the lake in 1985."

Tony's fondness and appreciation for his days on Bills Lake reaches beyond the grave. The Anthony and Marion LaPenna Scholarship Fund at Grand

Rapids Community College provides educational opportunities for deserving high school graduates. His son Mike and grandson Patrick are particularly eager to help qualifying students in the Bills Lake community.

In failing health, Tony could still occasionally be seen last summer out on his dock at sunset. "He waved as we rode by," says neighbor Craig Kidder, "even though according to his children he was not doing well even then."

A certifiable member of what Tom Brokaw has termed The Greatest Generation, he might have, in retrospect, been waving goodbye to a life extraordinarily well-lived in a location where "passing it on" --- something he did all of his life -- has an even greater meaning.



This is Tony inspecting a reconditioned B-17. The family commissioned a flight in 2004 so that he could go up again but he declined to go into the "ball."

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