

# “Marine Killed in Accident with Artillery Gun”

## Meet Nicola Vassallo, WW2 Platoon Sergeant U.S. Marine Corps

### One of Cranford’s 86

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As our quest continues to tell the story of our 86 hometown heroes we search the internet for the missing pieces of the puzzle that completes the picture that we have committed to paint each month. Sometimes our job is made easier when we get a call from a friend or family member of one of our honorees that has heard about our work. This month we received one of these calls.



Maria Vassallo reached out to our parade committee and identified herself as the niece of Nicola (Nick) Vassallo, the 71st on our list of 86. Amazingly she told us that her dad, Nick’s brother, John Vassallo, 89 years old is alive and well and living in Cranford. She went on to also tell me that Nick’s twin sister Anna Shultz (Aunt Dolly) age 96 is living in a care facility in Fanwood and the family patriarch Daniel (Dan) Vassallo had just celebrated his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday and is living in Roselle Park. She said he has the mind of a man half his age. I asked if it would be possible to get them all together for a conversation and a chance to reminisce about their memories of their departed brother. She said she would set it up.

Maria asked if I had any information yet about her uncle. I shared the information that we had on file at the Cranford Historical Society from The Cranford Chronicle from October 24<sup>th</sup> 1946. The headline read “Marine Dies in Auto Accident”. I heard Maria relay this information to her dad John, who sat beside her. I could hear his outrage in the background, her tone changed immediately. “My uncle Nick did not die in a car accident”. I asked if the family had any document from the Marines that would help us rebut the news clip that we held. She said she would check the family archives and hopefully bring it to our family meeting.

Two weeks passed as I was on vacation in New Orleans, the home of the new National WWII Museum. It was like my two-day training for a man writing the stories of 57 WWII heroes. After 10 hours of the most powerful museum experience of my life, I found myself re-energized to return home and complete the stories of our WW2 heroes.

On Saturday morning I arrived at the Roselle Park home of Dan Vassallo and was introduced to him and his little brother John, 89 a retired mortgage banker and a Georgetown University graduate. John was going to lead the group as he sat holding a photo album and a couple yellowed pieces of official looking papers. John was very happy





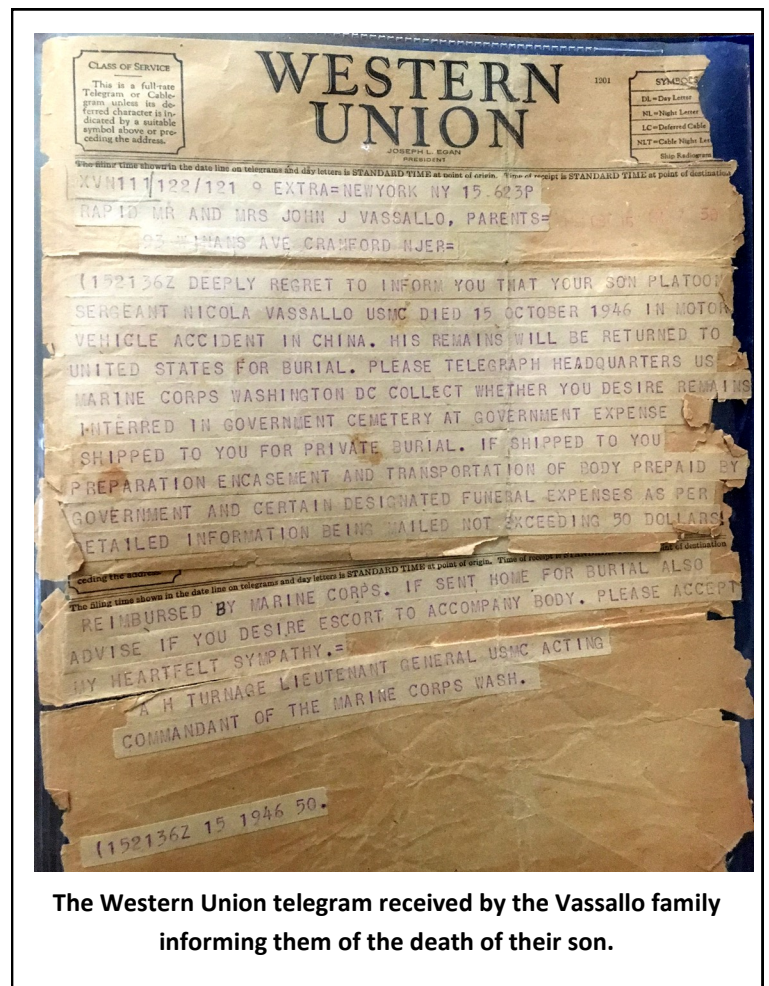
to be holding the hand written letter that they received from Nick's commanding officer explaining the nature of the accident that took his brother's life. He got right down to business. He said "I think you were looking for this letter, this is the explanation of the accident that will clear up any doubt about Nick's death". I was so happy to see that.

As we chatted the door opened and a woman walked into the living room. I extended my hand and introduced myself and told her I was here to write a story about Nick. She said "I knew him well" Her niece Maria said laughingly, "she should, she is his twin sister". We all laughed. Since everyone was there we moved around the dining room table and everyone started sharing their memories of their brother Nick that they grew up with at 93 Winans Ave. Cranford.

I asked if they could tell me what they remembered about Nick as a young man. The little brother John took the lead. He said Nick was a very affable young man with many friends. He was a much disciplined, organized and an exceptionally clean cut young man. Always groomed to the highest level and said by many to have movie star good looks. Aunt Dolly chimed in, "he was immaculate!" Her siblings all agreed and laughed. He was the first family member to enter the service, soon followed by Dan to the Army and then by the baby brother John to the

Marines as well. There were eight children in the Vassallo household, a first generation Italian family. Their father a hard-working machinist at Watson-Stillman, a hydraulic manufacturer in Roselle, the oldest, Dan, followed in his father's footsteps.

John went on to explain Nick's passage through the war, up to his death at age 25 on October 15<sup>th</sup>, 1946. After graduating from Cranford High in 1941 he immediately joined the American war effort with the Marine Corps. After completing boot training at Paris Island, South Carolina and sea school shortly after he was shipped off to the European theater on the USS Savannah, a light cruiser, in the Atlantic fleet. He participated in four battles including amphibious landings in North Africa, Sicily and Salerno. Ironically Salerno was the birthplace of both his parents. In the battle of Salerno on September 11, 1943 his ship was struck by 2 Fritz X radio controlled glider bombs (see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fritz\\_X](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fritz_X)), the pride of the German's new technological war tool chest. Of the approximately 850 men on board, 9 officers and 195 marines and seaman perished in the attack. A 30 foot hole was blown into the side of the ships #1 gun turret. Amazingly in 2 hours the USS Savannah continued the gun battle.



The Western Union telegram received by the Vassallo family informing them of the death of their son.

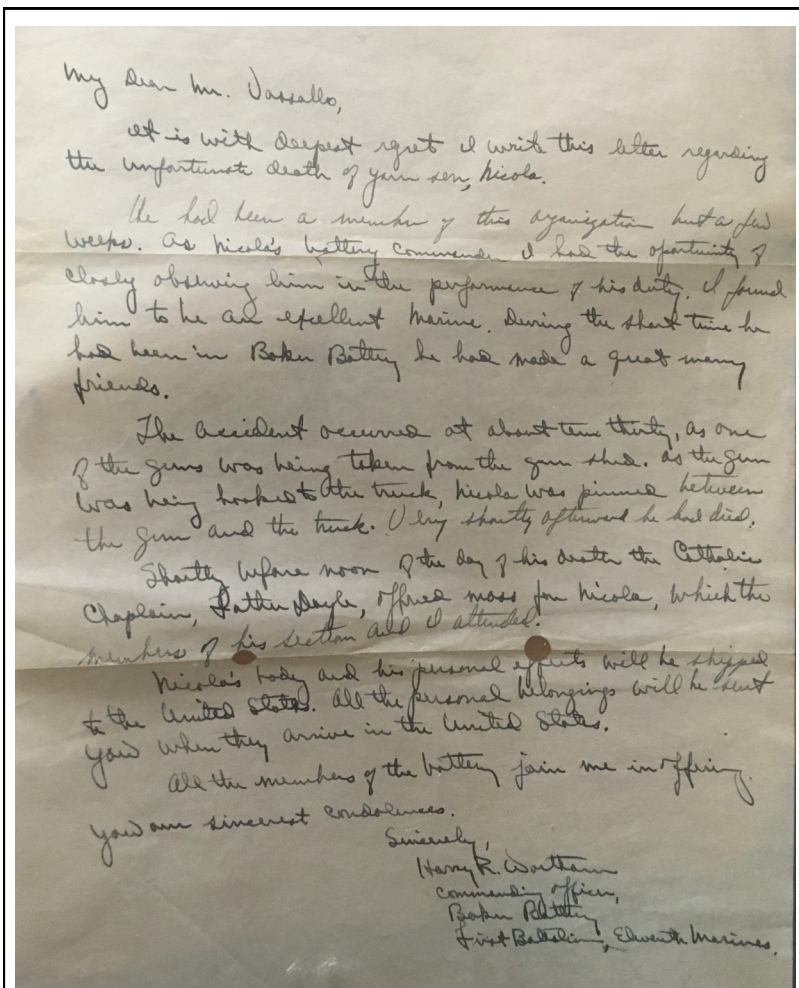
Go to <http://ww2today.com/11th-september-1943-uss-savannah-hit-by-german-glider-bomb> for more history of the battle of Salerno and the strike on the USS Savanna.

He returned to the states in 1944 and was stationed at Camp Lejeune, N.C. and served as an instructor at the Officer Candidates School and later was enrolled himself into Officer Candidates School in Quantico, Virginia. The school was disbanded 5 months later due to the end of the war. He was shortly after honorably discharged.

After only being home for a short time, Nick felt the call to return to service with the Marines and reenlisted in 1945 for a second term and was assigned to the prestigious Marine headquarters in Washington D.C. at 8th and I Street, as a courier. His brother John felt it was because of his professional demeanor and the way he

carried and presented himself. While there he was reunited with his platoon and took part in the dedication of the Iwo Jima Memorial. He remained there for 9 months before being shipped to Camp Pendleton, California, and then to Pearl Harbor, Guam, Japan and finally to Tientsin, China, the main Marine base in the far east. Although the official end of the war in the Pacific Theater ended with the surrender by Emperor Hirohito on board the USS Missouri, communist activity in China under Mao Tse-tung and the impending Chinese Civil war drew the attention of the American military in the area.

It was while in China that he met his end. The letter from the commanding officer that his brother John held in his hand, told of the accident that took his life. While moving an artillery cannon from a storage garage and attaching it to a truck, the gun rolled free and Nick was pinned between it and the truck. Very shortly afterward he died. Where I can see where they could write that his death came from an auto accident. I certainly thought more of an explanation needed to be written about the incident. In any case it shouldn't have been the headline of his obituary. I am happy to write a new headline to Nick's story today. I'm only sorry it took 71 years to do. An



**The letter written by Nick's commanding officer telling the details of the incident that took his life,**

interesting statement from his younger brother John, that gave me some perspective was this. "I don't know if you know this Don, but a platoon Sergeant in the Marines was a big thing then and it's still a big thing now.

Nick had become a very religious man throughout his time in the Marines. He served as a deacon of sorts and was said to have celebrated mass the morning of his death. John inserted an interesting fact that Commander Francis Don Kelly, director of the Chaplain Corps of the U.S. Marines who had worked closely with Nick, arranged for a very unique preservation of his remains. A vacuum sealed glass tomb was created and prepared that will preserve the body for over 100 years. He was buried in that tomb at St. Gertrude's Cemetery in Colonia.

Nicola Vassallo was an American Patriot and one of our Cranford86.