

Photograph provided Tim Ghianni with his father, Emilio Joseph "Em J." Ghianni, a World War II veteran, college football player and coach, successful business leader, and beloved father and grandfather who died recently at age 96.



**Embodiment of Greatest Generation**

# Tough to say goodbye to 'damn nice guy' I called Dad



**TIM GHIANNI  
STREET LEVEL**

The last-ever Nashville Kiwanian to fight in World War II kicked his horse in gear, or whatever you call it, rode hard, trying to save my life ... no big deal for a man who helped save the whole world just a few years before.

My palomino ran wild, tearing for the

woods, as I gripped the saddle horn, the reins flying wildly out of my reach.

This was a job for The Lone Ranger, according to TV heroes of the era. But this hero was Dad, the Kiwanian mentioned above who – just days after his Sept. 9 death – was saluted for his mentorship, leadership, giving heart, kindness ... and as the club's final World War II veteran.

His heroism on horseback, though, was not that many years after he'd fought entrenched Japanese and hung out with MacArthur in the Philippines. Dad was a young water heater salesman taking his wife and two boys on a family vacation to Wolf Lake Dude Ranch. It was at least 60 years ago, one of our annual family vacations, when another "dude" – a mean teenage girl (there still are too many of those) – slapped the butt of my horse, causing it to bolt from the pastoral trail ride and full-speed gallop toward the woods, where low-hanging branches threatened even the low-slung head of a relatively small child (me).

Riding as fast as he could, my dad – Emilio Joseph (aka Em J.) Ghianni caught up with my runaway palomino and perhaps, even, saved my life. The guy – who during the war had been more at home in the Jeep named "Doty Lou" for my mother when he drove through the jungles around Manila – somehow had become an expert horseman, at least when his younger child was in danger.

Bet you didn't know cowboy heroes came from the mean streets of the Italian section of Buffalo, where in the 1920s and early '30s juvenile violence peaked when Italian and Irish kids met at the middle of a bridge and threw potatoes at each other until the other side ran off. The next day, they'd be back at football practice together, preparing for another run at the state title.

I suppose Lone Ranger-level heroism is – or, sadly, in most cases, was – commonplace among those who, like my dad, saved the world ... but quietly put decorations and medals in bottom drawers so they could live the middle-American life they'd fought to preserve.

I thought of the runaway horse incident as memories tried to salve my hollow brain and burning heart when Dad died Sept. 9.

As I told a church filled with family, friends and spiritual and civic leaders at his funeral: "God" and "Country" are the two words that best describe my dad and his 96½-year journey.

Those words guided millions of honorable souls. Some died in battlefields for those two words. Others used them to guide their lives' long second act, the peaceful pursuit of middle-class life they deserved.

Dad was one of approximately 348 American World War II veterans to die Sept. 9. That's the average daily death toll.

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**>> GHIANNI**

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The number has been higher, but fewer are dying now ... since fewer are left.

He was among the 16 million young Americans, mostly schoolboys really, to enlist when their country needed them. The National World War II Museum in New Orleans, which I contacted after he died, states there are less than 400,000 of these heroes still alive. In 10 years or so, they'll all be gone. On God's parade ground.

In addition to God and Country – both of which he used as his unflinching guideposts – my dad's loves included his family, pets and football.

Oh, and the business world, where he demonstrated the unequivocal value of the handshake principle during his years working around the Midwest, then as an executive overseeing the entire country's sales and image from the former Comfortzone national headquarters on Sidco Drive.

At Dad's funeral, my brother, Eric (there are only two children, and I'm the "baby," though he looks the part, and I'll agree with those who think he's the "nicer" Ghianni boy) told mourners that years ago he worked with my dad.

Eric noted that when he was advertising director for Comfortzone, one of the things he noticed, cherished, was that Dad would seal half-million-dollar deals with a handshake. He trusted his fellow humans. Cross him? Lie to him? Well, I'll just complete that thought by saying he was born just shortly after his parents got off the boat from Italy. Italians are loyal and trusting. Violate that trust, you are dead to them. It's a principle I inherited, by the way. My brother, perhaps not so much.

Dad worked his way up to CEO of the swimming pool manufacturing corporation that was owned by his wing man, so to speak, in the Philippines.

Dad and Walter Vallett Jr. were lieutenants of adjoining companies whose task it was to secure the islands from the scattered pockets of Japanese. War bound the two men together forever. They and their wives shared adjoining married student housing at Michigan State after the war. Phones were so scarce they shared one that was in the Vallett apartment, with a hole cut in the wall so Mom and Dad could reach it from their closet.

Dad went on to become an educator, although Walter eventually persuaded my dad to join the company his own father, Walter Sr., had founded in Detroit.

More on that later, though I will note that Walter, who I knew my whole life, died Jan. 6, 2018, another old soldier gone.

Before I move on, I want to note that Dad's driving force was my mother, Dot Ghianni, who died 20 years and roughly a week before he did. He never got over that loss. She was his "rock," the person he leaned on when building his successful careers as a football coach at an all-black high school in Pontiac, Michigan, and then as a salesman and executive and finally CEO of Comfortzone.

Mom died of the same congenital lung disease that took her brother and sister, although Uncle Joe's disease was quicker to the kill thanks to flamethrowers in the Battle of the Bulge. Aunt Shirley simply



Photograph provided

Em J. and wife Dot, who preceded him in death by 20 years, out on the town.

could not quit smoking, even as the disease advanced. Mom didn't smoke. She just died.

God's importance in Dad's life began with his Catholic upbringing in the Italian section of Buffalo. The Como bar was right around the corner, if I remember correctly, as I do sometimes. My folks both finished their lives as members of Brethren Cumberland Presbyterian Church in Brentwood.

Just like everywhere he was called, my dad was a leader, serving as elder, Sunday School teacher, past president of the men's fellowship and on the building expansion committee.

He has also served as director and committee chair Nashville Kiwanis Club, on the Nashville Rescue Mission board, Operation Stand Down board, Nashville University Club board, past commander and program director American Legion Post 5, lifetime member Post 5 VFW and Military Officers Association of American and was a lifetime member of the 42nd Rainbow Infantry.

He also was a 30-year season ticket holder to Vanderbilt University football and a member of the Vanderbilt Commodore Club, a charter member of the Sports Council, senior executive of the Nashville Chamber, and served on the Forrest Hills Planning Commission.

One of my happiest memories of time spent with my dad was on one of the vacations my own family and I took him on in the years since Mom died.

Those trips included a ballgame in St. Louis, where we caught a Cardinals game and ate on The Hill, the wondrous Italian community whose famous offspring include Elizabeth Avenue neighbors and best pals Joe Garagiola and Yogi Berra.

"It ain't over till it's over," Yogi said. For Dad it was over about 5:30 p.m. Sept. 9.

We also took him to New Orleans, where he looked up Marilyn Monroe's skirt .... Actually, it was a giant Mardi Gras parade replica of Marilyn in her famous "Seven Year Itch" pose, with the skirt blowing up from the subway grate. It took no urging at all to get him to pose under that skirt. My dad was a man of action.

We took him to the beach a few times and tried to keep him from illegally feeding our breakfast toast to the seagulls.

But my favorite trip was when Suzanne, our kids, Emily and Joe, and I took him to see the then-new World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C. He was shaken and stirred by what he saw, and he began telling war stories. Edited, I'm sure, as he really didn't want to relive the horrors he survived.

If you've been fortunate enough to know a WWII veteran, let alone be among his proud kids, you know they never really want to talk about the war.

They'd been carefree boys who were handed rifles and told to go out and do whatever it took to save the world. They did. And they put it behind them. Blood didn't equal glory to them. They were just doing their duty to the country they loved. Many of them, like Dad, were the children of immigrants, who knew this, the greatest country on earth, needed to be protected.

We chose the Memorial Day Weekend for our trip to D.C., getting a hotel near the Capitol so we could walk over for the annual concert on the West Lawn. If you've seen one of those concerts on public television, you know the most moving part comes when the veterans are asked to stand as their branch's song is played.

I was prepared for Dad to stand when the caissons came rolling along for the Army song. And I was damn proud of him when he did, with his American Legion Post 5 Commander cap on.

But the surprise came when he climbed to his feet when the Marine Corps song about the Halls of Montezuma, the shores of Tripoli, etc., played.

I had no idea that he had been a leatherneck for a day.

"I enlisted in the Marines, and I was in there for one day before they discovered I was colorblind and told me I should join the Army," he explained.

Seems the ability to read colored signal flags was a Marine Corps requirement.

So Dad proudly served in the Army, first as a member of the Rainbow Division preparing for the invasion of Hitler's Europe, before they sent him to officers' candidate school, which he left as a lieutenant, bound for duty in the Philippines.

In addition to battles, he provided security as an MP in the war crimes trial of Tomoyuki "Tiger" Yamashita, who

had, among other things, been charged with "the rape of Manila." Very literally.

Dad laughed about his other big headline-grabbing duty. Lieutenant Ghianni was in charge of making sure his company picked up the cigarette butts, rocks and other obstructions, getting the beach nice and tidy for the photo opportunity when Gen. Douglas MacArthur fulfilled his "I Shall Return" vow.

I really do wish it was true that old soldiers never die. But Dad didn't fade away, either.

He had married my mom in a military ceremony at Camp Fannin in Tyler, Texas, before they began processing him for the Pacific Theater.

When war was over, he got off the ship at Fort Ord, kissed the ground, ordered a hamburger and a tall, frosty glass of milk ... and then he called his wife. He told this anecdote often. I'm not sure if my mom liked coming after the burger and the milk.

Regardless, he made it home from war and built the life that eventually included me and my brother.

And it included a lot more creatures, great and small, during the decades. Mom and Dad were compulsive rescuers of animals, including a one-legged sparrow they allowed to live out its life in their home.

Probably not too many CEOs come home to as many as five dogs and three cats, mostly strays they'd rescued, pour himself a glass of Chivas Regal, sit down ... and have a one-legged sparrow land on his shoulder.

That was life in the Ghianni household. Heck, after they moved to Nashville in 1972, my folks lived basically on the edge of the woods and, occasionally, a snake, poisonous or otherwise, would visit their patio ... one even curled up in the corner of the family room one night.

Most souls would kill snakes like that. Not Dad. He'd grab them behind the head and down the tail a bit and carry them back into the woods, although usually the woods across the street from the house.

He didn't want to kill anything. Perhaps he saw too much of that back in the Philippines. Oh yeah, and he also would have faced the wrath of Mom, who wouldn't even kill a spider, brown recluse or otherwise.

Never wounded by bullets or bayonets, he almost died of a case of poison oak that he got while running through the jungles, chasing the Japanese. "I spent three weeks packed in ice," he would say of that experience.

I never pushed him to talk about the deaths of the Japanese soldiers who were fighting for the islands long after the war was over. After I took him to see "Flags of Our Fathers" – Clint Eastwood's magnificent tale of the battle for Iwo Jima – my Dad and I had a hamburger and a tall, frosty glass of milk (or something like that) as he told me about tunnels filled with enemy troops with nothing to lose, gunfire, mines, grenades and flamethrowers. The smell of death.

He did not push his chest out when describing these battles that had stayed inside him for decades. He just spilled

# Opportunities to be heard on TennCare changes

By Kathy Carlson

The state is proposing big changes to TennCare, which provides health care services to 1.4 million people or roughly one in five Tennesseans.

The proposal would turn a program that receives open-ended funding from the federal government into what the state calls a modified block grant – a set amount of federal funding for many but not all of TennCare’s services. It also would remove many regulations that the federal government has placed on TennCare and other Medicaid programs.

The state argues less regulation will help the state better tailor TennCare – its

version of the federal Medicaid program that provides health care to lower-income people – to the needs of the state.

It also argues that the way TennCare is financed, with an open-ended match of funds from the state, rewards the state for spending money and punishes it for saving money.

Members of the public – that’s you – have through Friday, Oct. 18, to send written comments about the draft proposal.

Hearings will be held on the proposal Oct. 1, 2 and 3. The Nashville hearing will take place Tuesday, Oct. 1, 2 p.m., at Family and Children’s Service, Training Room B, 2400 Clifton Ave.

A hearing will be held Wednesday, Oct. 2, in Knoxville at the Burlington Branch of the Knox County Library, 4614 Asheville Highway, in the community meeting room, at 2:30 p.m. EDT.

The hearing for West Tennessee is set for Thursday, Oct. 3, 2:30 p.m., in the program center of the Jackson-Madison County Library, 433 East Lafayette St.

Official notice of the proposed change is online at [www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/tenncare/documents/2/Amendment42ComprehensiveNotice.pdf](http://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/tenncare/documents/2/Amendment42ComprehensiveNotice.pdf). There are several links in the official notice with details including the proposal itself, how to comment and how to attend a hearing.

Medicaid was established under federal law in 1965. TennCare was born when the state added a managed-care component, which the federal government approved in 1994.

Both state and federal dollars fund TennCare, which covers primarily low-income pregnant women, children and people who are elderly or have a disability. In Tennessee, the state covers about 35% of costs. TennCare’s budget is about \$12 billion, with 65%, or about \$7.8 billion, coming from the federal government. Under the block grant proposal, TennCare would receive about

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them out, softly, with melancholy not celebration.

Death was not something my dad celebrated, even in the kill or be killed jungles, which he left long in his past. Someplace, my brother and I haven’t located it yet, there is a hari-kari knife that he had brought home as a souvenir.

The rest of his war “souvenirs” – hats, clothing, patches, belts, canteen – were not treasures. My brother and I grew up not long after that war, and playing war was a major entertainment for kids in the 1950s. We wore Dad’s clothes. He didn’t care. That war was won.

As a 7-year-old kid, I didn’t know why other kids at Dickinson Elementary School were shunning Myron Okuba, the son of Japanese Americans, who lived a couple blocks from our house. My parents, my dad, encouraged that friendship. War was over, if you wanted it to be. My dad did.

We took family trips. When in New York City for the World’s Fair in 1962, we made sure to stop at Jack Dempsey’s joint in the Brill Building. The landmark was owned by the former heavyweight champion of the world. Dad liked boxers, as he had been his weight-class champion in the Rainbow Division.

It was the same excitement he got when we talked about my long semi-friendship with Muhammad Ali that began when I was a sports editor. Perhaps when Dad fought, he floated like a butterfly and stung like a bee, but I’d guess he clubbed foes into pulp.

We traveled the South, where, if I recall correctly, he was slightly embarrassed when he and Mom had to get a ranger to rescue my brother and me from Davy Crockett’s cabin. Eric had locked us in. But he had no exit strategy.

Out in the Black Hills of South Dakota, my dad hollered “Here, kitty-kitty-kitty” when trying to coax the bison to his car. I never understood why, but he and Mom roared with laughter every time. I guess, given his roots, I should call the great beasts “buffalo.” In any case, they didn’t respond to his beckoning, which probably was a good thing.

We usually went to Buffalo for Easter,



The Ghianni boys, Eric, Em J. and Tim.

Photograph provided

but then came the first time we went on Thanksgiving. My brother and I were young and naive.

Grandma Ghianni and Aunt Rita, with the help of my Mom and Aunt Frances, laid out the traditional turkey, dressing and mashed potatoes Thanksgiving spread. So, Eric and I dug in. I didn’t notice the amused look on Dad’s face, though, as he held back. What we didn’t know, what no one had told us, was that after the table was cleared of that Pilgrim stuff, Grandma would load it all back up again with pasta, braciolo, meat balls, ravioli, the works.

Dad laughed at us as we bravely dug in. I can’t remember if we made it to the pumpkin pie or ricotta cheesecake or Grandma’s fabulous pizzelle, those anise-flavored Italian waffle cookies.

Toward the beginning I mentioned his love of football. A halfback on a Buffalo squad that won the state championship twice, his plans were to play at Michigan, but then the war got in the way.

After he came home, he played at Michigan State and coached at Michigan, before he did a stint as a high school history teacher and coach in Pontiac. Those young black men, once they began turning old, still sought advice and occasional companionship from the guy they called “Coach.”

Dad left coaching to go into the business world to better provide for his family, but the love of that game never ceased.

This football season, one of the things I already miss are the phone calls at halftime of the Tennessee or Vanderbilt or Tennessee Titans games. Even the Saturday marquee games, featuring the likes of Texas and Alabama and his beloved Michigan Wolverines. We’d talk about what we’d seen, what we thought. I looked forward to those discussions even more than the games.

Occasionally there was a \$5 wager involved. I think he still owes me, but I’ll write those losses off as personal gains.

I need to mention the Music City Miracle. For the few years right after Mom died in 1999, my dad – when he still was agile and had stamina – would come over to our house on Sundays to watch the Titans. He’d always cheer for the Titans ... unless they were playing the Buffalo Bills.

He was in our living room when Lorenzo Neal fielded the kick, handed it to Frank Wycheck, who lateraled it to Kevin Dyson who tore down the sidelines for the game-winning touchdown that eliminated Buffalo from the playoffs and opened the door for the Titans’ greatest glory.

I had jumped from the couch and was cheering and pounding the floor as the play was underway. My dad sat still. “That was not a lateral, that was an illegal forward pass,” he said when I looked back over my shoulder.

He never got over that. Even last football season, there was mock bitterness

from Dad. Since I now get final say: “Dad, it was a lateral.”

Long ago in my newspaper career, my pal Rob Dollar, the police reporter, and I, associate editor and columnist, determined that the highest compliment one could hand out was to call a person a “damn nice guy.”

I was a bit uneasy when I said it at the church funeral, but it’s true: My dad was a damn nice guy. Always will be, in my heart.

And damn, I miss him.

One last thing: My dad loved music. He passed that love on to me. Heck, he and some of his friends even borrowed my collection of Elvis and Chubby Checker, Chuck Berry and Duane Eddy 45s for my dad’s 40th birthday party. Eric and I laughed as we watched the decidedly un-sober dance party from the top of the stairs.

Anybody who knows me knows The Beatles play an important role in my life and soul. Heck, Dad played a role there, as well. Even though he was a confirmed Sinatra guy – I went with him to see Frank at the Opry House decades ago – Dad went out and bought me “I Wanna Hold Your Hand” as soon as we saw the Fabs on “Ed Sullivan.”

I’ve been hooked now for 56-plus years and counting. My dad didn’t listen to their music much and couldn’t name the individual Beatles, of course; but he did have a fondness for songs by “the one that got shot.” Imagine ... a WWII lieutenant who had a favorite Beatle. ...

I’m going to borrow a line from the last full song the Beatles recorded 50 years ago as I think about the unquestioning love displayed by the hundreds of mourners at the church Sept. 14 and by the Kiwanians and others who have reached out since Dad’s death: “And in the end, the love you take is equal to the love you make.”

I need to add that in the week before he went in for his final hospital stay, Dad told me he kept getting visits from his mother, who died decades ago. He said she kept telling him to do something, but he never could remember what it was.

“What do you think that means, Tim?” he asked after recounting each visit.

I didn’t want to tell him what I thought it meant, but I’m almost certain he found out for himself late in the afternoon of Sept. 9.

I’m sure they serve great meatballs in heaven.