

Sgt. Maj. Walter James Sabalauski (Sabaliauskas) **LITHUANIAN AMERICAN WAR HERO**



By Henry Gaidis (Gaidys)

LITHUANIAN AMERICANS TAKE pride in the accomplishments of their fellow kinsmen, but the accomplishments of many frequently go unrecognized when individuals leave their ethnic communities. This situation is further compounded if the individual's immigrant parents

carried a Polonized version of their Lithuanian family name. Such is the case of Walter James Sabalauski, who is a legend in the annals of the renowned U.S. Army, 101st Airborne (Screaming Eagles) Division, but is virtually unknown to his own ethnic community. Although tens of thousands of Lithuanian Americans have served their country in the cause

of freedom, few can match the thirty-year military service of this Lithuanian immigrant, who was destined to be awarded, among his numerous decorations, his adopted nation's second highest military honor, the Distinguished Service Cross, for extreme gallantry at the risk of his life in combat.

If one searches the Internet, one will find countless references to this American military hero, who always stated that he was born in Lithuania, and read of his numerous military accomplishments. Little information, however, is provided about his early childhood, perhaps because of the Polonized spellings of the Sabaliauskas family name in official documents that contain such variants as Sabalauskas, Sabaluski, Sabalauski, Sabolewski, Sobelewski, and Sabelewski. It was only through careful research done by Tom Sadauskas, a noted Lithuanian American genealogist, that solid information concerning Walter's early life and immigration to America has been uncovered.

Available data indicate that Walter James Sabalauski was born Władysław Sabaluski (Lithuanian, Vladislavas Sabaliauskas) to Władysław (later William) and Elenora Sabaluski on March 31, 1910 in Tytuvėnai, in the Žemaitija region of Lithuania, which was then part of the Czarist Russian Empire. During that period, there was great hardship in the land. As many had done before him, Władysław left his wife Elenora and his infant son in Lithuania, in 1911 or 1912, and travelled alone to America to establish a new home for his family. As was common during that time, Elenora joined her husband about a year



OPPOSITE PAGE: Sgt. Maj. Walter J. Sabalauski (Sabaliauskas) is pictured during one of his tours in Vietnam. **ABOVE:** Sabalauski's birthplace, Tytuvėnai. The town is famous for its magnificent Baroque church and monastery.

later, leaving their infant son behind with family in Lithuania. In this way, many immigrants had two incomes available to establish themselves before sending for their young children. Apparently, William and Elenora were successful, because she returned to Lithuania in 1913 to get their baby son. We can only speculate that, because she was pregnant again, she had to quit work or, perhaps, wanted her second child to be born in Lithuania as well.

Unfortunately, the best plans often go astray. Such was the case with the Sabaliauskas family. While Elenora was in Lithuania, World War One broke out, which prevented her, her son Vladislovas, and her newborn son, Stanislovas, from returning to America. As a result, Elenora and the children were not able to rejoin William in the United States until after the Great War and the subsequent 1918-1920 Lithuanian War of Independence. The U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service Ellis Island records document that Elenora Sobolewska (Polonized married female name ending), age 34, and her two

children, Vladislovas (later Walter), age 11, and Stanislovas, age 6, arrived in America on November 20, 1921. Their place of birth is listed as Tytuvėnai, Lithuania, and their head of household listed as William Sabolewski, of 4644 South Paulina Street, Chicago, Illinois. So Walter finally arrived in America.

Although Walter's life in America was better than it would have been in Lithuania, the Sabolewski (Sabaliauskas, Sabalauski) family did not find a land of milk and honey and had to work hard to make ends meet. Young Walter grew up speaking Lithuanian at home and English on the street. A scrappy kid, he learned to box and earned his livelihood as a professional boxer from 1929 to 1937, when he fought thirty-three bouts, with only two losses. Certainly, one of his idols was Jack Sharkey, also born to Lithuanian immigrant parents, who was the American Heavyweight Boxing Champion from 1932 to 1933 and probably the most noted Lithuanian American of his era.

Not a lot is known about Walter's

youth, but surely the most memorable event of his early life was meeting and then marrying his childhood sweetheart, Bernice. Bernice was born on August 9, 1912 in Chicago to Antanas and Anna Petkus, who were also recent Lithuanian immigrants. She and her three brothers and sister likely all grew up playing with Walter in the neighborhood. Being typical Lithuanian immigrant families, both families would have attended mass at the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Lithuanian Catholic Church. Walter and Bernice were married in the parish church on June 8, 1935 and there began their long life together. Although times were tough, because the nation was still in the grips of the Great Depression, Bernice had a good paying job as a receptionist in a dental office and Walter's boxing career still seemed bright. Those joyful days ended abruptly, however, after Walter received injuries in a serious automobile accident that ended his boxing career. When Walter could not find suitable work, he joined the U.S. Army in June 1941 to earn a more stable income for his family.

After the December 7, 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Walter found himself in the thick of the fighting in the Pacific Theater. He took part in beachhead landings during the bloody battles for the Solomon Islands, Guadalcanal, and the Philippines, where he served with great distinction. During that campaign, Walter received the first of his eight Bronze Stars for bravery and the first of four Purple Hearts for wounds received in combat.

Although hundreds of thousands of his countrymen chose to leave military service immediately after World War Two, Walter, who had been promoted to Sergeant during the war, decided to make the U.S. Army his career. His reunion with Bernice was no doubt a joyful event, and the couple quickly renewed their



TOP: General William Westmoreland, commander of U.S. operations in Vietnam, awards the Distinguished Silver Cross to 1st Sgt. Walter J. Sabalauski for bravery during the Battle of Dak To. ABOVE: In this 1967 newspaper photograph, Sabalauski kisses his wife Bernice, whom he had not seen for 18 months, after his return from Vietnam.

married life. Military life, however, frequently requires a soldier to be away from his loved ones, and Walter was soon called to fight for his country once more. When communist North Korea invaded the Republic of South Korea in June 1951, the American forces in South Korea fought valiantly, but were forced fur-

ther and further south until reinforcements could arrive. During the Korean War, Sergeant 1st Class Walter J. Sabalauski served with the U.S. Army 187th Regimental Combat Team (Airborne) and the 25th Infantry Regiment. While Walter served in Korea, Bernice returned home, closer to her family and friends, and

lived at 6923 South Campbell Street in Chicago. She surely attended mass at the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church and prayed for her husband. Those prayers were answered when she learned that Walter had survived the wounds he received in Korea on June 14 and would survive another war. Military heroes receive medals and decorations for their service from a grateful nation, while their wives count their blessings in the number of times they return home. After the Korean War, Walter and Bernice lived a relatively quiet life on various army bases, including an assignment at the home of the 101st Airborne Division in Fort Campbell, Kentucky.

While hostilities in Korea had come to an end, anticolonial resistance continued around the world, resulting in the overthrow of French rule in Indochina and the establishment of a communist government in North Vietnam. With communist intervention growing in South Vietnam, the United States was drawn into yet another conflict.

Although military service in peacetime offers many rewards, in time of war and conflict not only the soldier, but his wife and children also bear some of the sacrifice his service requires. In 1963, Walter was sent to Vietnam for the first of three assignments as a U.S. Army military advisor to the 32nd South Vietnamese Ranger Battalion in its struggle against the communist threat. Walter's service during that tour of duty, like the others, was performed with honor and distinction. After a short period of time spent with Bernice, Walter was again called to overseas duty in 1965, when he was sent in a similar advisory capacity to the Dominican Republic, then under U.S. occupation. His return to Bernice was always a joyous event, but during all those brief moments of happiness both knew duty would soon call again.

In 1966, Walter was called to com-



Insignia of the Sabalauski Air Assault School.

bat duty and sent back to Vietnam, where his leadership and military skills were sorely needed by the ever younger and untrained officers and men that were being sent into combat. In early June of 1966, Walter took part in his most memorable battle.

While serving as the First Sergeant of Charlie Company, 2nd Battalion, 502nd U.S. Infantry Regiment, deep in the jungles of Vietnam, his unit came into direct contact with a battalion of the 24th North Vietnam Infantry Regiment. While under heavy fire and unable to maneuver, the American company commander called in air support to force the enemy to withdraw. The air strikes were initially successful and allowed Charlie Company to consolidate, reorganize, and establish a defensive position. While the unit was evacuating its wounded, Walter, in utter disregard for his own safety, repeatedly risked his life for his soldiers. For his extraordinary heroism, Sergeant First Class Walter James Sabalauski was awarded both the Distinguished Service Cross, our nation's second highest decoration for extreme gallantry and risk of life in combat, and the Silver Star, our nation's third highest decoration for valor in the face of the enemy.

Walter survived his second tour in Vietnam and returned home to Bernice. One again, the embraces and



In 1994, Ft. Campbell's Air Assault School was renamed the Sabalauski Air Assault School in honor of the brave Lithuanian American soldier who gave so much to his adopted country.

times were great. Walter received a well-earned rest when he was assigned Cadet Regimental Sergeant at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. There, this old combat veteran tutored our nation's future military leaders for two years before he was again called to combat. Although many his age were retired or looking to retire, in 1968, Walter returned to duty in Vietnam.

There the Old War Horse, who had been promoted to the rank of Command Sergeant Major (CSM), the highest noncommissioned rank in the U.S. military, of the 2nd Battalion, 502 U.S. Infantry Regiment, served another tour of duty with great distinction and honored both himself and his country.

Walter finally retired from the U.S. Army in 1971, at age 61, to spend all of the free time he wanted with Bernice in their retirement home in Brevard, Florida. During his years of service with the army, Walter was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, the Silver Star, the Legion of Merit, eight Bronze Stars, three Air Medals, six Army Commendation Medals, four Purple Hearts, three Combat Infantry Badges, a Master

Parachutist Badge, and Campaign medals for World War Two, Korea, the Dominican Republic, and Vietnam.

God graced Walter and Bernice until he was assigned to Post Everlasting on August 8, 1983. Command Sergeant Major Walter Sabalauski was buried with full honors at Arlington National Cemetery, and, after she passed away on November 26, 2004, he was joined forever by his beloved Bernice.

Awards and decorations are the usual honors a grateful nation bestows upon its military heroes; but in Walter's case, the U.S. Army chose to further honor this Lithuanian American's distinguished service. In 1994, the U.S. Army renamed its air assault training school at Fort Campbell, Kentucky the Sabalauski Air Assault School. Likewise, may his fellow Lithuanians never forget the service given by this war hero to his adopted country. LH

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