



NYPD Anchor Club

And the Orphans/ Abandoned Children of St. Agnes Home and School for Boys and St. Dominic's Convent

During the middle to late 19th Century, the major cities of America teemed with immigrants and poor families. Many families could not care for their children. In many cases disease produced orphans or half-orphans, especially in the slums and immigrant neighborhoods. The large number of deaths during the Civil War aggravated the problem even more. The municipal governments couldn't or wouldn't make the effort to alleviate these problems. Private and religious charities were founded to fill the void. As the number of orphans and foundlings continued to grow, it was not possible to care for them in city asylums. This led to two innovations. First, city organizations extended their operations to rural counties, such as Rockland, to either give city children fresh air during the hot summers, or to house them in rural settings away from the teeming slums of the city. Second, orphans were placed on trains and sent to farm families in Upstate NY, or in the Central, Mid-West, and Western states, eventually even in Alaska. These trains became known as the Orphan Trains.¹

Since my family of six brothers and one sister were committed in January 1942 to two of Rockland County's many such "rural settings," in our case two Catholic homes, St. Dominic's Convent in Blauvelt and St. Agnes Home and School for Boys in Sparkill, a brief background is included on each of them in my attempt to respond to a recent request from the New York Police Department's Anchor Club (NYPDAC).

For over 70 years the NYPDAC (whose members also belong to the Knights of Columbus) contributed in many ways to making the lives of some of these children a bit brighter by taking them on yearly outings to Coney Island, Palisades Amusement Park, and other similar venues. With the closing of Coney Island this year, the NYPDAC is collecting any reminiscences former residents of any "Homes" may have of their involvement with them in past years. Some understanding of "convent life" is required in order to appreciate the true benefits of any "relief" these children may have enjoyed; that provided by the NYPDAC was substantial!



St. Agnes Home and School for Boys, Sparkill (Rockland County) New York.

¹ Genealogical Society of Rockland County (GSRC), Rockland Children's Homes and Other Institutions, <http://rocklandgenealogy.org/childrenshomes.htm#intro>

The St. Agnes Alumni Association (STAAA) is an association of former orphans and/or abandoned children who lived for as little as a year or two to as many as 10 to 15 years at St. Agnes Home and School for Boys in Sparkill, Rockland County, New York, located less than 20 miles from the George Washington Bridge Bus Station at 4211 Broadway, New York City using the Palisades Interstate Parkway (or alternately, Route 9W).

For a very small institution it is astounding that over 555 alumni of St. Agnes served in all branches of the military services during World War II alone, and even more telling that 39 of them were killed in action. Many others also served in subsequent wars.

During World War II when St. Agnes Coach, now Marine Captain Jim Faulk, had an “accidental” meeting on Guadalcanal with a couple of men who were also Alumni of St. Agnes. That small group made plans for building a gymnasium for “the House’s Kids” as the residents proudly became known (while others referred to them as “Convent Kids”) and shortly thereafter those plans came to fruition and the St. Agnes Alumni Association was formed.



Dom Yozzo drawing in early 1940s Newsletter

For 77 years, from 1905, St. Agnes Home cared for thousands of boys, and a small number of girls of all ages from broken homes or disturbed homes, and some with various emotional problems. Actually, St. Agnes began operations in 1884, when 25 boys were housed in a renovated, pinewood structure. By 1894 facilities had grown to seven buildings, with facilities for 300 children. In early February 1977 Sister Marie Jean Dempsey, President of St. Agnes Home and School of Children, announced the Board of Directors had voted on February 16, 1977 to phase out St. Agnes:

“Mounting deficits had virtually dictated the termination,” stated Sister Marie. St. Agnes Had become a victim of the fiscal problems in New York City and State. There had been a Freeze in Public Assistance while St. Agnes costs have kept rising.”

The campus building on Rt. 340 was 72 years old, and was "inadequate for carrying-out present-day child care programs." A five-story brick Gothic structure with stained-glass windows and multi-turrets was demolished beginning on October 25, 1979. The towering smokestack and power house were the last structures to be leveled in January 1980.²

A Newsletter was very much in place for the Alumni during World War II and eagerly received by the former "House's Kids" serving and fighting in all branches of the military services in every theater of military operations. Today, the St. Agnes Newsletter is sent to over 500 active members in the U.S. and overseas. It is assembled and printed by STAAA President Art Kingsley and his wife Gloria, the "old fashioned way" using a typewriter, copied, and stuffed by hand into a stamped envelope. Annual dues of \$10 sustain all expenses.

(?) NEWS LETTER
Vol. 11 No. 1

ST. AGNES ALUMNI NEWS BULLETIN

Here is News Letter No. 1 Vol. 11. We all here at St. Agnes hope you will enjoy it. How about starting off with Coach's letter? Here it is:

January 29, 1945

Men of St. Agnes,

I just now returned from Sunday Mass and believe it or not I found it most difficult centering my thoughts around the services. My thoughts were constantly following a Mass at Sparkill. When the small organ produced the notes of "Lord, I am not worthy" I sort of lost myself in memories of how that tribute was played and sung by sisters and boys at Sparkill. I vowed I would return immediately to my hut and at least start another letter to you, my best friends. All I ask is two hours free from any work or phone calls. Although 120 minutes isn't quite enough time to offer an expression of thanks for all your kind thoughts at Christmas time it will serve to let you know again that I am grateful and thankful for all your loyal friendships.

rst, let us hear from our president, Joe Rosen.

Dear Member:

Last Christmas morning, the nucleus of The St. Agnes Alumni Association was formed. The men who were visiting their Alma Mater hold an informal meeting after Midnight Mass. After exchanging war stories and Christmas greetings, our good friend, James Faulk, or as we know him, Coach, gave a stirring talk on the whys and wherefores of an Alumni Association. All the men present readily agreed with him. Through a suggestion by Coach, Joseph Rosen was elected Temporary President of The St. Agnes Alumni Association, referred to from now on as THE SAAA. A temporary Advisory Committee was also set up, consisting of Henry Holdner, Wm. Pizzala, Robert Rosario, Arthur Kingsley, and Dan Reilly. As secretary, we nominated John Sullivan, who had helped on our wonderful Newsletter. As Honorary Members and Advisors, we have Mother M. Beatrice, Sister M. Stella, Sister M. Ignatia, and Sister Wm. Vincent.

The purpose of our organization is twofold:

29Jan45 "News Letter" excerpt from Coach Faulk

1946—1st St. Agnes ALUMNI ASSN. News Bulletin

ST. AGNES ALUMNI
9 GLEN ROAD
HIGHLAND FALLS, NY 10928
TEL: 845-446-4091

FALL:06

Dear Alumnus/Friend:

We are going to start out telling our Alumnus/Friends who did not make it to the 60th Anniv. for one reason or the other, what a great day it was and a wonderful success. It started out 10:00 AM on the 19th of Aug/with a beautiful service at the Memorial Monument that Art Kingsley installed 10 yrs. ago in front of the Dominican Convent. When Art was talking to George Lynch, the Commander of the Piermont VFW he along with many others were unaware of the monument, after being told about it, George, Sister JoAnn Deas, Adm. & Art got together & arranged the ceremony. The Piermont VFW wanted to honor the 39 young men whose names were on the war memorial who made the great sacrifice during WW II & the Korean War. It started with Fr. Masterson, who

Fall 2006 St. Agnes Alumni Newsletter, Opening Paragraph

² Names On Our Land, Hardly a trace remains of orphanage, by Peter Krell, History Editor, Our Town, July 17, 1991

A note from Fr. Butler saying he received a check from John Antonacci & was sending him a thank you, he appreciated it, Father works so very hard but is extremely happy in his calling, he hopes someday he will be able to make the picnic. Jim Merna wrote that his brother Richey died July 4th after a long illness, he never complained he accepted it as a devout Catholic he is buried at Quantico Natl. Cemetery, he would have been 72 Aug. 7th. Our condolences to all the family, no matter what age it is it is difficult to lose a member of your family. Jim Also wrote his son John is a LTC, in command of a Marine BN. (the 1st Bn Fifth Marine Regt. deployed in July to Southeast Asia, he has already been to Iraq but says it's tough leaving wife & 2 small children, good luck to all. Harold Norris writes he went to HS the same time John Antonacci K.I.P. Always sad to report names in this column: Louis J Meade 2005.

Lucy Shermi 5/25/06. Roger Stanaitis 7/3/06 Richard G Merna 7/4/06
Our prayers & thoughts are with all their families. A memorial^{MA} will be said in November by Father Butler at the request of the Alumni for the deceased and their families.

Enjoy the great beauty of Fall another of God's miracles the magnificent colors it is just a picture this time of the year.

If you know of anyone who is not feeling well or recuperating from an operation & wants to be remembered please let us know, we will have a prayer list in our next letter. I know John Antonacci asks for your prayers, he is having difficulties with heart problems.

Also, please take 5 minutes each & every day to remember our men & women serving our country so we may have peace in the world, especially those in Iraq & surrounding areas, also remember their families who have to make sacrifices also. Thank you.

Till the next letter, stay well & keep in touch.

GOD BLESS ALWAYS.

1 Incl:



Fall 2006 St. Agnes Alumni Newsletter excerpt signed "Art & Gloria" Kingsley. As can be seen, the "style" of these Newsletters, typos and all, has not changed since they were printed for the first time during World War II. No one notices or cares about any "typos." We look forward to each and every Newsletter, and they are never long enough.

The former STAAA President, Joe Rosen, now deceased, was the "temporary President" for over 50 years until we made him 'Permanent President' at our 1996 Golden Jubilee dinner. During the end of his life Art and Gloria assisted Joe in his loving preparation of the St. Agnes Alumni Association Newsletter. The alumni association also has its own web site: www.stagnesalumni.org, rapidly growing in popularity and even includes copies of the "paper" St. Agnes Newsletter.

St. Dominic's Convent in Blauvelt is only a few miles from St. Agnes in the same County. Its history began in November 1878, when Sister Mary Ann Sammon and a few Dominican Sisters transported nine little girls under their care, to a residence far north of the city in Blauvelt, Rockland County. They had been living in the poverty and overcrowded conditions of New York City.³ Sister Mary Ann Sammon, a young immigrant inspired by the life of St. Dominic, walked the streets of New York City, gathering orphaned and homeless children. She brought them to her cloistered Dominican convent in New York City. The number of children needing care continued to grow. Eventually, Sister Mary Ann was sent to establish a home for these children. She began a new congregation of active Dominican Sisters in Blauvelt, New York.⁴

³ Source: <http://www.stdominicshome.org/about/history.htm>

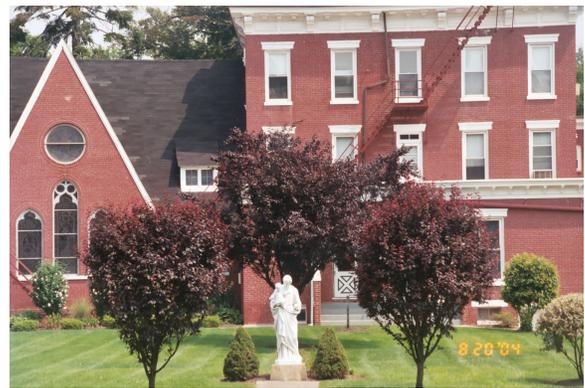
⁴ Source: <http://www.opblauvelt.org/aboutus.html>



Cottages at St. Dominic's Home, where children were separated from their siblings and assigned to different cottages



Statue of St. Dominic



Girl's Area and Visitation Center

(Photos by Gerald F. Merna)

On January 31, 1942, six Merna siblings, Gerald (12), Robert (11), James (10), Richard (8), Vivian (7) and Thomas (5) arrived at St. Dominic's; on that same day George (16) arrived at St. Agnes.

So what does this "background" have to do with the New York Police Department's "Anchor Club?" The short answer is, "a lot!" I'd like to think that *what the USO does for our fighting men and women, the Anchor Club does for the children of St. Agnes and St. Dominic's*, and many other similar institutions. On separate dates in 1966-1967 in addition to my regular duties I was assigned as "escort officer" for Roy Rogers & Dale Evans, Robert Stack, Henry Fonda, Floyd Patterson, and Wendell Corey on "handshake" visits they made to Marines in their "hooch's."⁵ I would later write this about those visits:

*"I think these visits gave a lot of Marines a good idea of whom and what kind of celebrities took the time to visit with us and say "well done!" To all of them, I'm sure I send the thanks of Marines everywhere for the minute, hour or day they made us forget our problems, and enjoy the thoughts of home and loved ones."*⁶

The Anchor Club brought this kind of "joy" and a change of pace into the lives of so many children that so many of them remember that to this day. Thus it is hoped that my "background" material will give members of the Anchor Club, past and present, a better understanding of the *real* value of the hours, days and months they contributed of their time, talent and money to us. It meant far more than they could imagine, and affected the lives of so many children in such a positive way.

⁵ A general term in Vietnam for wherever a Marine was living, be it a tent, foxhole, or other.

⁶ For pictures and full story see: <http://www.stagnesalumni.org/StoriesGenHochmuth.shtml>

They can share some of the “credit” for those institutionalized youngsters who, despite some untoward beginnings, went on to distinguish themselves in a variety of very successful and even spectacular careers that many who started life without these handicaps never realized.

A few days ago I received the Spring '07 issue of the St. Agnes Alumni Newsletter, the usual one-page, double-sided legal size sheet as shown in the above excerpts that covers more topics than one could imagine. Here is the mention of the request from Ken Lyons of the NYPDAC that resulted in this article:

ST. AGNES ALUMNI
9 GLEN ROAD
HIGHLAND FALLS, NY 10928
TEL. 914-446-4091

Spring '07

Dear Alumnus/Friend,

Sorry this letter did not reach you for Easter due to a death in our immediate family, our dear & very close niece, Joy passed away as the result of complications from diabetes, we were heart-broken .

We pray one & all had a Holy, Happy Easter and that you have a nice Spring & summer when it arrives.

Pg. 2

Masterson

Rec'd a phone call from Father ⁱⁿ Brazil saying how much he enjoyed spending the summer at St. Agnes & at the special dedication & the Annual Picnic, maybe you can come back this summer. Like you to know Father Francis Butler down in La. always remembers the Sisters & St. Agnes Alumni in his prayers, Father works so very hard in a poor parish & has no assistant, please remember him in your prayers. Just received a phone call from a gentleman named Kevin Lyons, he is the President of the Police Anchor Club. Kevin is arranging the ~~75th & last annual anniversary of Coney Island Outing July 10th 2007~~ at 11:00 AM below the cyclone, refreshments will be served. Kevin is seeking ~~INFO or stories attached to the Annual Orphans Outing from 1930-70 sponsored by the Police Anchor Club.~~ Anyone of you who remember those trips please contact him at: www.nypdanchor.org. or E-Mail kevin_lyons2nycrr.com. Home address is Kevin Lyons ~~8004 208th St. Morris Hills, NY 11427~~ Hills, NY 11427 ASAP. thank you. Tel: ~~917-299-9497~~.

Excerpts from SPRING 2007 STAAA Newsletter published by the Kingsley's re: NYPD Anchor Club Inquiry

As if that “notice” wasn’t enough, while I was in the process of writing this article, several STAAA alumni friends, John Antonacci, Bernie Neville, Joe Stanaitis and David Feliciano, STAAA Webmaster, sent me separate email messages calling that notice to my attention,. John and Bernie summed up very nicely what they remembered and how they feel even today about the Anchor Club, similar to comments echoed by many alumni:

“Jerry, want to make sure you received the letter from Art Kingsley...they (Anchor Club) have a web site, and they were the guys that supported the days events when we went to Coney Island and the Palisades Amusement Park...lunch, ice cream, and the rides. NOW Kevin Lyons, President of the NYPD Anchor Club, is looking for everyone’s stories and memories of these times gone by...I am sure they would appreciate our stories, etc...this will be the last annual outing...I am sure we all have a number of tales to tell...take care, ,stay well, Bern”

After I replied to Bern and copied the others, I told them I was writing this brief article. John Antonnacci, a retired NYPD Detective currently living in Brooklyn, told me he got his early inspiration from the Anchor Club to pursue his police career, now carried on by his NYPD Son, who Kevin Lyons knows, saying this:

“JERRY: I’M GLAD YOU ARE GOING TO WRITE A STORY. WE ALL LOOKED FORWARD WHEN THE BUSES WOULD ARRIVE (AT THE CONVENT). A POLICE OFFICER WAS ASSIGNED TO EACH BUS AND WE ALSO HAD A MOTORCYCLE ESCORT TO CONEY ISLAND. WHEN CONEY ISLAND SHUT DOWN (FOR THE SEASON) WE WENT TO PALISADES PARK. ONE YEAR AT PALISADES PARK MY BROTHER RALPH AND OTHER HOUSE’S KIDS WERE ON THE ROLLER COASTER AND THAT EVENT MADE MOVIE TONE NEWS, NARRATED BY JOE KING. AND IT LATER PLAYED AT THE ROCKLAND THEATER IN NYACK, NEW YORK.

AT CONEY ISLAND, IN STEEPLE CHASE PARK BY THE SWIMMING POOL AND UNDER THE ROLLER COASTER, WAS THE ‘BATH BEACH BOXING CLUB’ WHERE WE WOULD WATCH THE FIGHTERS WORK OUT ON THE SPEEDS BAGS.

I WAS SO IMPRESSED BY THE (ANCHOR CLUB) POLICE OFFICERS AND WHAT THEY DID HELPING PEOPLE (ESPECIALLY US CHILDREN IN THE HOMES) THAT I DECIDED I WANTED A CAREER IN THE POLICE DEPARTMENT HELPING PEOPLE AS WELL.

ON JULY 10TH I’M LOOKING FORWARD TO GOING TO CONEY ISLAND AND THANKING THEM IN PERSON. THEY CERTAINLY CHANGED MY LIFE-- FOR THE BETTER. (INCIDENTALLY, I SENT DOT INFORMATION ABOUT GWEN ALLEN IVEY BECAUSE I THOUGHT DOT MAY REMEMBER HER FAMILY; GWEN WAS IN MY CLASSES IN HIGH SCHOOL (CLASS OF ’54) AND WAS AT THE 50TH REUNION (WHERE YOU WERE THE GUEST SPEAKER). SHE WAS A LOVELY PERSON. GOD BLESS YOU AND DOT. LOVE JOHN AND AIDA.

PS. I JUST GOT OFF THE PHONE WITH KEVIN LYONS; HE PREFERS HIS PERSONAL E-MAIL AS FOLLOWS: kevinlyons@nyc.rr.com. HE ALSO KNOWS MY SON JOHN. GOD BLESS, JOHN A.”



Retired NYPD Detective John Antonacci



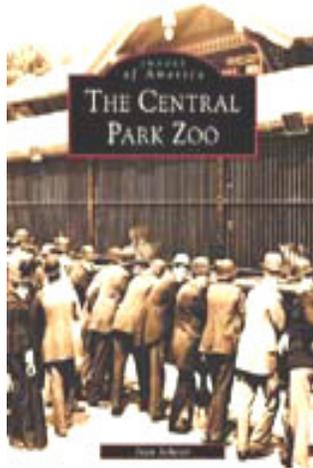
Story about John’s Policeman Son

And John has every right to be proud of his Police Officer son John, who was cited as a hero in a March 2006 New York Post story. Antonacci and another officer were shot on an early Monday while responding to a 911 call in Brownsville where cops said a 29-year old individual set a fire in a communal kitchen and locked himself in his room after screaming about "burning the devil." When the cops entered the 6-foot by 8-foot SRO apartment, they wrestled with that individual, who fired two shots, according to police. A third officer put his hand over the revolver's cylinder to prevent the gunman from firing another shot. John would not be

alive if he wasn't wearing his bullet-proof vest. So in some small but significant way, two-generations of police officers resulted in part because of the father's appreciation of what he remembered favorably from his childhood, the kindnesses of the Anchor Club, and the father in turn inspired his son to follow his career



Coney Island



Central Park Zoo



Palisades Amusement Park

(Stock Photos)

Checking the web site of the NYPD Anchor Club,⁷ the “Club with a Heart,” I learned it came in to being on April 22, 1922 by members of the New York City Police Department who were also members of the Knights of Columbus. While today their sole function is to provide for the widows and children of deceased Police Officers who died both in the line of duty and of natural causes, for over 70 years they have been providing the admirable tradition of annual excursions to Coney Island, the Central Park Zoo, and Palisades Amusement Park for widows and orphans—the latter including the orphaned and/or abandoned children of St. Dominic's Convent in Blauvelt, NY and St. Agnes Home and School for Boys in Sparkill, NY.

The Coney Island Amusement Park will be closing this year, which means that the Anchor Club's 2007 visit with orphans to that historic Park will be the last, even though the Anchor Club is planning to continue these “treats” in other venues in future years. For this reason, the NYPD Anchor Club is desirous of collecting stories and anecdotes of their activities with these children for all prior year visits to Coney Island. The Alumni of St. Agnes have been contacted to provide any memories, reminiscences or other information. As one of those Alumni, I am providing this account.

While I'm certain Mr. Lyons will receive many responses, ironically, this request for such remembrances comes at a time when I have been wanting to write about my youngest Brother, Thomas George Merna, or Tommy, now deceased, who remembered the Anchor Club for many years.

It's also ironic that as the youngest sibling he was the first to die after the oldest Brother George was killed in action. For this and other reasons his life was not all it could have been, perhaps in part because he served the longest number of years at both of these institutions. Our parents had ten children (though I've only been able to account for nine; a subsequent child my mother had after we were institutionalized would have been 11). My mother's mother, our grandmother, had 13 children. This is important in context in considering they were raising this large family in Bronx, New York, before, during and after the Great Depression. Tom was only *five* when he and five of his siblings (including our only Sister), as a result of being abandoned by our parents in New York City,⁸ were admitted to St. Dominic's on January 31, 1942, where he would remain

⁷ <http://www.nypdanchor.org/>

⁸ Our Dad had alcohol problems and we were told our mother had “died.” We did not learn for several years that she had gone to California for a new life and eventually had another Son by a subsequent marriage to George Kraus Sr.

for *eleven* years. Bad enough that we were relatively segregated at St. Dominic's, but each year one of us would graduate from eighth grade and transfer to St. Agnes to attend Tappan Zee High School in Piermont, NY (one town away from Sparkill). I can only imagine the trauma and loneliness he felt each year; especially when we *all* had left and he remained there *alone!* After eleven years Tom was also transferred to St. Agnes on July 3, 1953. Shown below is a picture of the seven Merna siblings with their Dad shortly after we entered St. Dominic's (oldest Brother George was visiting from St. Agnes). Large families were not unusual at St. Dominic's and St. Agnes in the 1940's and 1950's--there were also five Antonacci's Altomore's, Vincent's, Oryghyn's, and three each of the O'Rourke brothers and Molerio brothers. Also shown is a picture of the five Antonacci siblings:

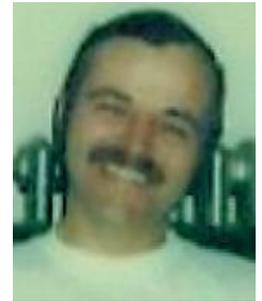


1942: The Merna Family ⁹



1941: The Antonacci Family ¹⁰

What does my Brother Tom's life have to do with the Police Anchor Club? Anyone who has been institutionalized for any time, especially for eleven to 14 years as Tom was, will tell you that in the totality of those years there are not very many pleasurable occurrences to remember. On more than one occasion Tom told me of his trips to Coney Island and Palisades Park with the Police Anchor Club while he was at St. Dominic's.



Thomas Merna: October 12, 1938 – May 7, 2000

⁹ Back Row Dad George F. Merna; Brother George C. (16-Killed in Action USN at age 19 in South Pacific); Center Gerald F. (12); James E. (10); Robert P. (11); Front Row: Sister Vivian, Tom, and Richard G.

¹⁰ Top row: Robert and Joseph; Bottom row: Ralph, Donald and John. Of the five brothers, Joe and Bob became Marines (Brother Jim and I met Marine Bob Antonacci in Korea), John joined the Army, and Donald enlisted in the Navy and became a Navy hero in Vietnam—his story can be seen at: <http://www.stagnesalumni.org/StoriesDonaldFAntonacci.shtml>

Kevin Lyons' request to Art Kingsley sent me searching through my scrapbooks, recalling and then locating a long treasured news clipping from the July 25, 1950 issue of the New York Times.



JULY 25 1950 THE NEW YORK TIMES
NEW YORK POLICEMEN ENTERTAINING YOUNGSTERS AT OUTING
Patrolmen John Griffin (left) and Edward Dervin with Rose Marie Sweeting and Thomas Merna at the Anchor Club's party for orphaned and crippled children in Palisades Amusement Park.

Special to THE NEW YORK TIMES.

Police Club Is Host to 5,000 Children; O'Brien Sticks Close to Merry-Go-Round

FORT LEE, N. J., July 24—Un- Impellitter was in the thick of the fun, too.
Children from Manhattan, Brooklyn and Staten Island arrived by boat from New York. Those from the Bronx, Yonkers and outlying areas came in by bus.
The Anchor Club comprised all the Knights of Columbus members of the Police Department. Inspector Thomas J. P. McVeigh made the arrangements with the amusement park and with those providing transportation.
Kenneth Collins, 12 years old, of the St. Agatha Home in Nanuet, N. Y., who had arrived with Commissioner O'Brien, summed up the feelings of the children by saying, "Gosh, I never had so much fun and so much to eat in my life!"

der its slogan of "Be a Daddy to An Orphan," the New York Police Department's Anchor Club was host to 5,000 orphans and crippled children at Palisades Amusement Park today.
Uniformed policeman, as many as could be spared, helped guide the youngsters around the dark, and many a bluecoat admitted he was more frightened than the youngsters on some of the breath-taking rides.
Police Commissioner William P. O'Brien was "daddy for a day" to many of the children, though he kept pretty much to the merry-go-round. Council President Vincent

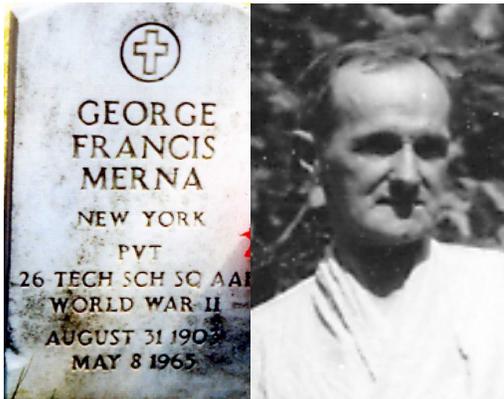
This article includes a picture of Brother Tom and a very pretty young lady (unknown to me but the first five letters of her last name, Rose Marie Sweeting, definitely describe her), seated together on a bench at Palisades Amusement Park. They are flanked by two "tall, dark and handsome" New York City Police Anchor Club Patrolmen, John Griffin and Edward Dervin. All four are obviously having a good time while enjoying ice cream cones.

Tom also wanted to join the military but was unable to pass the physical for some reason I am not aware of, so he was the only Merna brother that did not serve in the military, and I feel that concerned him. Upon learning our Mother was living in California, Tom went there after he was discharged from St. Agnes, joining his older brother Bob and Sister Vivian who had preceded him. Though the three of them “visited” with our Mother, apparently no permanent relationships resulted. Dot and I visited Tom where he worked for many years at a restaurant on Fisherman’s Wharf, San Francisco's most popular destination that features the Pier 39 shopping and a long coastal row of seafood restaurants, street vendors, and souvenir stores combined with a major fishing pier.

My Mother, who I visited twice in my life (on my way to Korea in 1952 and my way back from Vietnam in 1967) after being “placed’ in St. Dominic’s, probably sent me about five letters in all these years. In 1998 I was getting five a month and in the month before she died one a day! I still have every one of her letters. She died at age 92 on October 3, 1998 at a nursing home in Portland, OR; our stepbrother George Krause Jr., and his wife Sarah, whom I have never met, made all the arrangements.

Neither Tom nor Bob ever married, remaining in California, where they each later died, Tom at 68 in 2000 and Bob at 75 in 2006. Sister Vivian eventually moved to San Jose, CA to be closer to her two daughters Karen and Roberta. Brother Richard died on July 4th in 2006 one month before he would have been 73.

After our Dad was “relieved” of his parental responsibilities as a result of his seven children being placed in St. Dominic’s¹¹ he was drafted into the former Army Air Corps where he served briefly near the end of World War II. When he was stationed at Fort Dix, NJ, he visited us once or twice, bringing souvenirs of Fort Dix in addition to candy and other ‘goodies.’



Our Dad, George Francis Merna died at 61 Buried at Long Island National Cemetery



Our Mom, unknown date and unknown sibling



Stepbrother George Kraus Jr. with Mom. May 1964



George Jr. - Karen - Tommy Merna, Christmas 1961

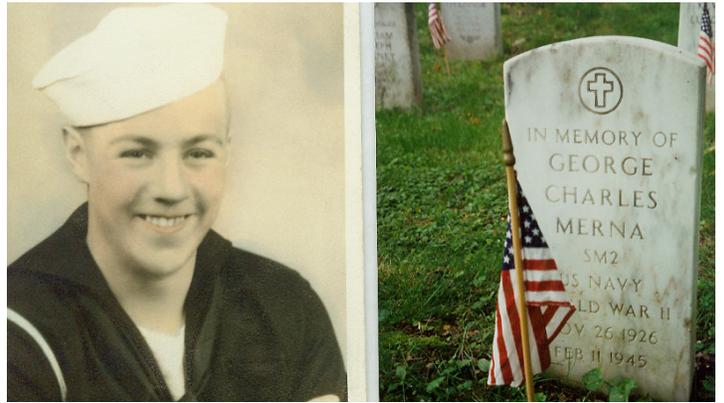
Dad was found dead of undetermined causes at the bottom of a New York subway station steps on May 8, 1965. I was still in the Marines and received a very short telephone call from one of my Aunts saying Dad had died over a week ago and the police had just identified him by his Army Air Corps fingerprints. She added that “Somebody” needed to “claim his body” or the City would have buried him in Potters Field.¹² My brother Jim and I instantly reacted, and drove straight to the Bellevue Morgue in New York City where we identified him and arranged to have him buried in Long Island National Cemetery. We also spoke to the Detective in charge of the case, who could provide no further information. We counted our blessings that he was a veteran and entitled to burial benefits.

¹¹ Oldest brother George went immediately to St. Agnes since he was already of high school age. When I arrived at St. Agnes from St. Dominic’s in 1944, George had already left at 17 to join the Navy. I was informed of his death while still at St. Agnes.

¹² A New York City Cemetery, commonly called Potter's Field, on Hart Island, the Bronx, in Long Island Sound. The Island is 101 acres, measuring approximately one mile long and one-eighth to one-third of a mile wide. Hart Island is not open to the public

On February 11, 1945 two torpedoes from the Japanese Submarine RO-50 sunk the LST-577 (Landing Ship, Tank) off the coast of Leyte in the Philippines. Our oldest Brother George was a Signaller Second Class, U. S. Navy on that ship and was below deck after finishing his watch. At lunch that week at St. Agnes, a Nun took me aside and gave me that devastating news. Until my fellow “House’s Kids” were later informed they could not understand why I cried returning to lunch. George’s official status was initially listed as “missing in action,” but soon thereafter was changed to “killed in action,” along with many of his shipmates and Army passengers.

George has a Headstone in Arlington National Cemetery in a Memorial Section provided for by Congress. Servicemen whose remains were never recovered, or were Missing in Action or cremated in other cemeteries, have the same Headstones as all other veterans whose remains are interred there. The former are distinguished by the words “*In Memory Of*” on the top of their headstone.



Headstone of George C. Merna (bottom left w-first wreath and far right) in Memorial Section I, Arlington National Cemetery
(Photos by Gerald F. Merna; Photo of George courtesy of U.S. Navy)

Brother Bob, a year younger than me, left St. Agnes to complete high school in New York City, temporarily living with our Grandmother Byers (our Mom’s Mother), and enlisted in the U. S. Navy in 1951. He served five years on active duty, including 16 months in the Korean War. He served aboard the destroyer escort USS McGinty (DE-365) on blockade and patrol duty in Wonsan Harbor, conducting numerous shore bombardments of Communist-held positions. Upon his discharge he moved to the Bay Area, living in San Francisco, Moraga and Walnut Creek. An avid sports fan and traveler, he ultimately retired from a career in the State Government of California.

Brother Jim enlisted in the Marines in 1950 and served for three years. He and I were fortunate to serve together for part of our 13-month tours in Korea with the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines. He earned his way through the University of Maryland by working summers on the Tappan Zee Bridge and other Rockland County construction, getting the job with a little help from Coach Faulk. During those summers he would live in with my wife’s parents, Tom and Helen Sedlack in Piermont. Jim retired after a successful career as a Public Relations Executive in several agencies of the Federal Government.

He and his wife Sue had five children, four boys and a daughter, Catherine Ann, who died of leukemia at age 15. She was named after one of our favorite Nuns at St. Agnes, Sr. Ann Catherine (they just reversed the order of her name). The oldest son, James Faulk Merna, was named after St. Agnes Coach Jim Faulk, and graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy; he is now an attorney. Another son, Marine LtCol. John Merna, is a veteran of Desert Storm *and* Iraq, and is currently the Commanding Officer of the same 1st Battalion, 5th Marines Jim and I served with in Korea in 1952. Their two other sons, Matt and Mike, are very successful private sector executives.

The last brother to enlist was Richard, yet another Marine, who served 15 months in Korea after Jim and I had departed for home. After attending the University of Maryland while working both in the private sector and for several government agencies, he became a 100% disabled veteran. He lived in Maryland in a VA-sponsored private home not too far from Jim's home for many years. In June 2006 he entered a Maryland hospital complaining of internal pain and died in the hospital 32 days later, on July 4th 2006.



1stLt Gerald F.



YN1 Robert P.



Sgt. James E.



Cpl. Richard G.



Sgt. Jim and TSgt Jerry, Korea

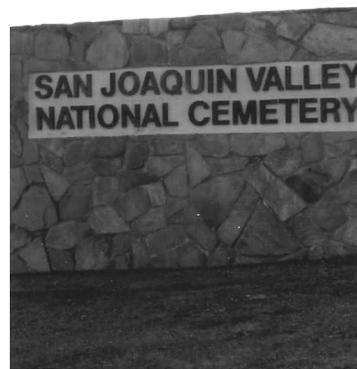
Sadly, this leaves Jim and me the two remaining Brothers of six, along with our Sister Vivian. George was the oldest being killed at age 19 (1926-1945), and Tom the youngest, dying at age 63 (1938-2000) in San Francisco, CA; they were the first two Brothers to die. In July 2006 we lost Brother Richard a month before his 73rd birthday (1934 – 2006) and less than six months later we lost Brothers Bob at age 75 (1931 – 2006). Jim and I arranged Richard's burial at the Quantico National Cemetery, and also traveled to San Jose, CA to bury Bob in the San Joaquin Valley National Cemetery, Gustine, CA.



Bob 1931-2006 Tom 1937-2000

Jerry 1930-

(Photos by Gerald F. Merna)



Bob's burial site



Quantico National Cemetery

Our only Sister Vivian probably had as tough a time at St. Dominic's as Brother Tom, if not even harder. First of all, she was our only Sister and though we brothers were separated into different cottages, at least we could



Vivian on her wedding day with Bro. Jerry



Vivian & Brother Bob



Karen and Roberta



Brother Tom & Vivian

see one another almost daily, and even get to play together on the playground and ball fields. All the girls at St. Dominic's were *totally* segregated from the boys with a playground separating the "boy's side" from the "girls side." This resulted in Vivian literally being completely cut off from seeing her five brothers. In my memory, it was rare to see the girls that much and we almost had to make an "appointment" to see our Sister! There was also a "convent kid" who was admitted the same time we were whose a sister I had a "crush" on, but we were lucky to even exchange a smile between us as we passed on the way to various activities.

Vivian certainly didn't have daily contact with us, and after she graduated from the eighth grade she was sent to another institution in Goshen, New York for an indeterminate time until she was handed off to a variety of foster homes. While she never gave me any "specifics," she made it clear those were not pleasant times for her, intimating that she was indeed mistreated while still missing her brothers a great deal. Once released, she was only "on her own" for a very short time when she met and almost immediately married her husband. I took the place of her father, and "walked her down the aisle."

She and her husband had a daughter but unfortunately the marriage didn't last very long. Her second marriage was to a career Marine stationed at Camp Pendleton, whom I met while there on my way to Vietnam in 1966. She and her husband had two more daughters from that marriage, Karen and Roberta, who were of immense help to Brother Bob when he became ill and almost totally blind, necessitating his moving to San Jose less than a year before he died in 2006. Vivian is currently married to another military veteran, Al Rendes, and they live in Arizona. Always a caring person, Vivian, a Licensed Practical Nurse provides care for elderly and disabled individuals. We keep in touch and have had a few visits back and forth.



Bob – Sister Vivian- Jerry



Uncle Ed Haiduk



LtCol. John Merna



Ensign James F. Merna

I was inspired to join the Marine Corps in part because of Brother George's death in World War II, (two years before I enlisted), and because my Uncle Ed Haiduk, a World War II Marine I was very fond of, "challenged" me to do so, saying I'd never make it, only using a much more colorful expression that I won't repeat here. Naturally I took up his "challenge" and tried to get into the Marines at 16 but got caught with a "forged" Baptismal Certificate, so had to wait to enlist on my 17th Birthday on April 1, 1947, a year after I ran away from St. Agnes. (When I made Sergeant Uncle Ed bragged to *everyone* about it; when I made Second Lieutenant he thought I "walked on water")! I served for 22 years, including 13-month tours each in Korea and Vietnam. While serving as a Master Gunnery Sergeant I was commissioned a Second Lieutenant, making me a "Mustang" Marine (one who "comes up through the enlisted ranks) and was promoted to First Lieutenant in Vietnam. I then completed two additional careers as one of the 34 Officers of the U.S. Postal Service (18 years), following which I worked another 12 years as a Director and Vice President of two major Defense Associations in the Washington DC area.

I still find it incredible that when I “left” St. Agnes in October 1946 at that young age (forgetting to get my “liberty card”), looking even younger than 16, I was able to get a job at the *Ludwig Bauman Department Store* (around the block from Macy’s and demolished many years ago) in New York City. Even *more* amazing was the job I got--delivering payroll envelopes around the building. What was so unusual about that? Well they paid the employees in *cash* in those days, and here I was, 16 years old, “on the lam” as a “run-away,” and toting trays of envelopes containing thousands of dollars around this huge multi-floor building and no one ever gave it another thought! If I’d have gone AWOL with those trays I’m sure there would have been a few “upset” bigwigs!

Our daughter Linda, a single Mom, recently retired from the federal government after a career in both the Legislative and Executive branches of the government. She is now working in the private sector while one son pursues a joint Master/PhD degree program and the other is just finishing his first year of college.

Our Son Jerry is an award-winning photographer in his spare time and just won a national *First Place Award* in the New York Barrett Art Center competition.¹³ He is a long-term Photographer for the U. S. Postal Service and in charge of the Photo lab at its Headquarters in Washington, DC. My wife Dot was my high school classmate at Tappan Zee High School in Piermont, NY, where she was born and raised, and we have been married for over 56 years.



Standing: Linda Merna Figura, Gerald T. Merna
Seated: Gerald F. Merna, Dorothy M. (Sedlack) Merna

¹³ ART Photoworks '07, March 17-April 28. Curated by Asher Miller, research associate at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The exhibition featured the work of 51 photographers from across the nation, 13 of them from the Hudson Valley. In past years, "Photowork" has had jurors from the Guggenheim, the Brooklyn Museum, and the International Center of Photography. The first-prize winner is a horizontal, black-and-white image titled "Sunset Promenade," by Gerald Merna of Sterling, Virginia. It features five dark, evenly spaced figures on a beach with the sun setting in the distance. www.barrettartcenter.org

The NYPDAC touches the lives of children abandoned to Homes, Convents and Schools all over New York in subtle but significant ways, be it in our own memories or those of our Siblings and fellow residents of these Homes. Anchor Club members can not possibly really know the depth of these feelings resulting from their caring and generosity toward these children. Their kindnesses have mitigated so many “wrong” feelings, depressions and frustrations by the caring and unspoken encouragement they provided. They were among those few¹⁴ who helped us “channel” whatever commiserations or desperations we had, real or imagined, as unwanted and uncared-for kids, and allow almost all of us to lead productive lives, as exemplified by John Antonacci becoming one of your very own, “inspired” by the Anchor Club to *want* to be one of them so that he too “could help others.” And that he did, for so many years, and continues to do so.

The joys and grief of childhood experiences are almost never forgotten, for many the grief never ends and the joys were never enough. This is borne out by the many stories and experiences we still share with each other at reunions, in emails and on the various web sites. It was as if we were all in “limbo” during those years, *literally* in an intermediate or transitional stage of our lives, not knowing what lay ahead for us. From what I have learned in my long life, this is not the normal feeling of children living in homes with their parents, though of course there are always exceptions. But we all worked through those feelings and experiences when we had to, and we will continue to do so, until we die!

I have written this “story” for the members of the New York Police Department Anchor Club, including sufficient information to enable them to fully understand at least one family of the many they have assisted. If anyone else who reads this learns anything from it, that’s well and good, and will have been more than worth the effort. Should any of the NYPDAC members, or others, glean further insight to just how much their kindnesses mattered, then that is truly a bonus.

It is hoped that Anchor Club Patrolmen like John Griffin and Edward Dervin, and all the other wonderful Police Men and Women who touched our lives in such meaningful ways, will enjoy “meeting” the Merna and Antonacci Families, not unique by any means, nor unlike the thousands of families the Anchor Club came in contact with in ways they possibly never thought, and allow them to say to themselves, “*Wow, I never knew...!*”

Nor do we who spent years of our childhoods in institutions through no fault of our own live in a vacuum--we know that individual members of the NYPDAC also had to overcome difficulties in their own lives (and in their current professions still do). Some of them may even have been committed to these same or other institutions before they became Police Officers, as none of us had “perfect” childhoods. But we are *symbolic* of the many families the Anchor Club personally touched at St. Dominic’s, St. Agnes, and so many other Homes, and hopefully through the many letters and stories I know they will receive, they will be able to see “upfront and personal” just how much of a difference that was. Long after each Anchor Club outing was over, they had to remember too that they treated us as the children we were. Speaking for the Merna family anyway, they helped us progress through the challenges that faced us the rest of our lives.

So many of the St. Agnes Alumni that we remain in touch with today and meet at our annual reunion in Piermont, NY, have similar memories. The request for “stories” by the NYPD Anchor Club, included as a *small* item in our latest Alumni Newsletter, will certainly be a *large* topic of discussion at the 2007 Reunion as we compare notes and talk about the responses that were made. I hope the NYPDAC will be able to share some of those responses with us, and I suggest using our website is one way to do this.

¹⁴ In addition to occasional visits from our Grandmother and two Aunts, and ladies from the Bronx Salvation Army where we sang in their choir every Sunday (after Catholic Mass in the morning), there were two other sources of *comfort* I recall. The Seminarians of Dunwoodie, NY would visit us regularly and “adopt” us in friendship, though I think we did as much for them. Also, we were at St. Dominic’s when Camp Shanks, the Army camp in Orangeburg, was built. It was from here that the GI’s shipped out to D Day and other European theaters. Many of the soldiers befriended us, and even wrote if they weren’t killed in Europe.

My generation is one that overcame childhood setbacks and produced many outstanding individuals who served in our military services and fought some of our Nation's wars to preserve our liberties and save our way of life. The next generations will more than exceed those accomplishments. While I am not a Police Officer, I *am* a Third Degree member of the *Knights of Columbus*, and know of the great contributions made by both organizations.

Mr. Lyons, President of the NYPD Anchor Club. please accept on behalf of your membership our hearty thanks and deep appreciation for all you have done, and will continue to do. The children whose lives you strive to brighten today are the citizens and leaders of tomorrow, the future Police Officers, military members, doctors, lawyers, home builders, owners of small businesses, and yes, even future members of the NYPD Anchor Club.

**Respectfully, and
Semper Fidelis**

**Gerald F. Merna
1stLt USMC (Ret.)**

**Potomac Falls, VA
gfmerna-usmc@verizon.net**

May 5, 2007



**Quantico Marine Band at NYPD September 11th Memorial Parade and Concert
www.quantico.usmc.mil/news.aspx?PID=1321&Sect...**





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May 6, 2007

**Mr. Kevin Lyons
President, NYPD Anchor Club
8004 208th Street
Hollis Hills, NY 11427**

Dear Mr. Lyons:

I am an alumnus of St. Dominic's Convent, Blauvelt, New York and St. Agnes Home and School for Boys, Sparkill, New York (and a member of the St. Agnes Alumni Association).

Your recent request for stories about the NYPD Anchor Club from any former children from these Homes who remembers and benefited from its many activities over the past 70 years or so, was in our current STAAA Newsletter published by Art and Gloria Kingsley, who you telephoned concerning this.

Attached is but one story about one family that not only remembers the wonderful things your organization did, and continues to do, for orphans and abandoned children, is sent not only to record this family's recollections, but to use the occasion by asking you to express our thanks and heartfelt appreciation for the wonderful activities you provide. You are indeed a very unique organization and your accomplishments in this area only lend to the already stellar reputation of the entire New York Police Department.

It was my pleasure writing this story, for reasons stated therein, and I hope in some small way it shows your membership what they have and will continue to accomplish, for the most vulnerable, neglected children in need of the caring you provide.

Sincerely, and Semper Fidelis,

**Gerald F. (Jerry) Merna
1stLt USMC (Ret.)**

PS I am also sending a copy of this to several St. Agnes Alumni, including the Webmaster of our on-line web site, www.stagnesalumni.org.