

This Week in Saratoga County History

SAVING PFC. GAGNON:

Saratoga County family lost 2 of 6 sons during WWII

Submitted by Christopher Carola May 10, 2023

Christopher Carola is a former Albany-based Associated Press reporter who has interviewed many area World War II veterans in his research of the impact of the war on local families. He will be telling their stories at Brookside Museum, Ballston Spa on May 24 7pm.



The Saratogian Summer 1944

On July 1, 1944, as World War II raged in Europe and the Pacific, a Western Union telegram arrived at the Saratoga Springs home of Aurora Asheych notifying her of the death in combat of her 21-year-old son, U.S. Marine Corps Pfc. Joseph Leonard Gagnon.

Two months later, she received word that another son, Army Pvt. Victor Francis Gaynor, 19, was reported killed in action in France.

Earlier that year, all six of Aurora's sons were in the military. From oldest to youngest:

- William "Billy" Gagnon, Air Force
- Stewart Frederick "Stanley" Gaynor, Army
- Roger L. Gaynor, Army
- Joseph Leonard Gagnon, Marine Corps
- Victor Francis Gaynor, Army
- Francis Alfred "Freddie" Gagnon, Marine Corps.

With the deaths of Joseph Leonard in the Pacific and Victor in Europe, that left four of Aurora's sons still in uniform, including Freddie, who at 17 years old was fighting on the island of Saipan,

where Leonard, as he preferred to be called, was killed on June 16, a day after the invasion of the Marianas Islands began.

According to an article published in *The Saratogian* in the summer of 1944, Freddie enlisted at 17 with the permission of his mother, who “did not believe at the time he would see active service at so an age.”

But with fighting on multiple fronts as the Allies closed in on the German and Japanese homelands, the U.S. military faced a manpower shortage heading into 1944. Teenagers fresh out of high school were being rushed through boot camp and sent to the front lines with minimal advanced training. Such was the case for young Freddie. According to that same *Saratogian* article, he was “sent to the South Pacific after basic training and saw almost immediate action.”

Freddie was assigned to the same outfit as his brother Leonard, the 4th Marine Division, which landed along with the USMC’s 2nd Division at Saipan on June 15, 1944. After Leonard was killed the next day, Freddie learned of the death and attended the burial on the island, according to *The Saratogian*.

After Aurora was informed of Leonard’s death, she “appealed directly” to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, asking that Freddie be sent back to the U.S., according to *The Saratogian*. It must have worked, for that same *Saratogian* story reported that Freddie, recently promoted to private first-class, had just completed a 31-day furlough at his mother’s Saratoga home at 236 Ballston Ave. His next posting was at the Brooklyn Navy Yard.

The six Gagnon brothers were all born in northern New York, near the Canadian border, to Louis Gagnon and his wife, Aurora Hainault. The couple also had three daughters: Aurora, Theresa and Marie.

In the mid-1930s, the family moved from Clinton County to Saratoga County. Eventually, all nine Gagnon children went to live with their mother’s brother, Victor Hainault, and his wife, Anna, in Greenfield Center. By the time WWII started, the children’s parents had divorced and their mother had remarried to Walter Asheych, a Russian immigrant who owned a large home on Ballston Avenue.

At some point, Stewart, Roger and Victor started going by the last name Gaynor. Family members still don’t know why.

While Leonard’s body was buried in a Marine Corps cemetery on Saipan, the location of Victory’s remains was unknown. Military records from his unit show he was reported missing as of Aug. 10, 1944, after being hit by artillery fire while out on a patrol with two other soldiers.

When Army Graves Registration Service units began searching European battlefields after the war for American soldiers whose remains hadn’t been recovered, they found out what had happened to Victor’s body.

According to U.S. military records from July 1946, Victor Gaynor and two members of his armored unit were killed outside a village near France’s west coast. German troops buried the two

other Americans, while the village's mayor buried Victor nearby, marking the grave with a cross topped by the dead soldier's helmet. Victor's dog tags were found with his remains.

In September 1946, the Pentagon notified Aurora Asheych that Victor's remains had been found and reburied in an American military cemetery in Europe. A month later, his uncle, Victor Hainault, wrote to the Pentagon to inquire if any of his nephew's personal items would be returned.

"I brought him up from the age of 8 mos (*sic*), until he entered the Army and I want to ask you a favor, if he has any personal belongings," Hainault, by then living in Saratoga Springs, wrote in a letter dated Oct. 16, 1946. "Would you forward them to me?"

Earlier that year, Congress authorized a program to return the nation's WWII fallen to the U.S. for reburial, should the families choose that option. Another option was to have their loved one re-interred in new American military cemeteries being constructed in Europe and the Pacific.

Aurora Asheych chose the first option.

In 1948, after she had filled out the required paperwork, her two fallen sons returned to Saratoga County for reburial within two months of each other, Victor's in April and Leonard's in June. Funeral services for each were held at St. Peter's Church, followed by burial in St. Peter's Cemetery on West Avenue in Saratoga Springs.

A large headstone with the Gagnon and Gaynor names marks the family plot where Victor and Leonard are buried under separate markers. Also buried there are brother Stewart, killed at 36 in a fire at his family's Saratoga Springs home on Sept. 21, 1956; sister Aurora Gagnon Hill, who died in 1991 at 68, and their father, Louis Gagnon, who died at 64 in Buffalo, N.Y., in March 1951, after being struck by a hit-and-run driver.

Aurora Asheych's husband Walter died in 1947. She married for a third time to Eugene Groulx. Aurora died at 76 in November 1974. Her obituary said she was a registered nurse and Gold Star Mother. She's also buried in St. Peter's Cemetery, not far from her ex-husband and three sons.

Freddie Gagnon, the last of the six Gagnon/Gaynor brothers to serve in WWII and the last surviving sibling, died at 89 on April 1, 2015. He and Pauline, his wife of nearly 70 years, lived in Saratoga Springs, where they raised their four children.

Sources: The Saratogian, Individual Death Personnel Files/National Archives and Records Administration, and family interviews.