

A Veteran, Home in Jamestown (1945)

*John Q. Barrett**

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At the eleventh hour on Monday, November 11, 1918, an armistice between Germany and the Allied powers went into effect. It was a temporary, later made permanent, cessation of hostilities in The Great War. It marked the end of what the world, including millions who had experienced it directly, hoped would be “the war to end all wars.”

In the United States, November 11 became Armistice Day, an annual commemoration of military heroism and the cause of world peace. In 1938, a U.S. law made Armistice Day a federal holiday. In 1954, another law renamed it Veterans Day, to honor U.S. veterans of military service in all wars.

Between 1938 and 1954, the intervening world events included, of course, World War II. It required, from the U.S., the greatest mobilization of soldiers, sailors, Marines, and airmen in the nation’s history.

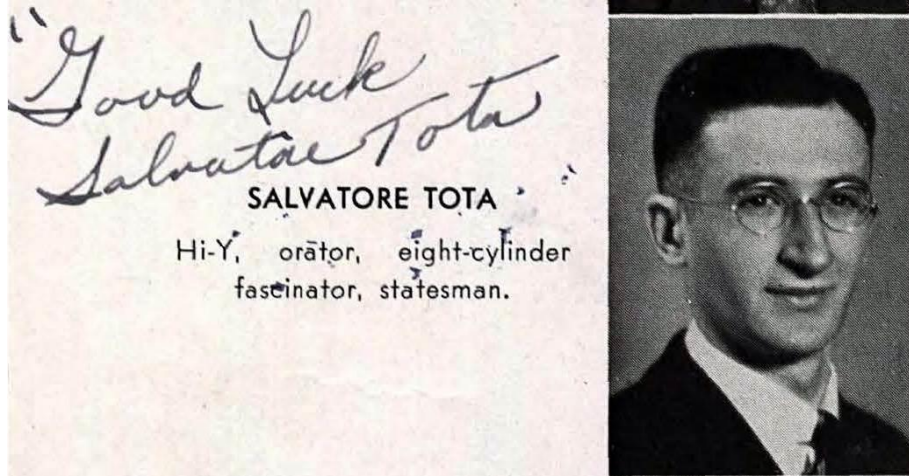
One of the U.S. veterans of World War II service was Samuel Nicholas Tota. He was born on July 4, 1918, in Elmira, New York. His name at birth was, it seems, Salvatore Nicholas Di Tota. By the time that he was in high school, he and his family lived in Jamestown in western New York State. At Jamestown High School, he was Salvatore Tota. He graduated in 1936.

* Professor of Law, St. John’s University, New York City, and Elizabeth S. Lenna Fellow, Robert H. Jackson Center, Jamestown, New York. I emailed an earlier version of this essay to The Jackson List on November 11, 2020.

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1936 Jamestown High School yearbook

Mr. Tota then attended Alfred University in Alfred, New York, about one hundred miles to the east. In 1940, while a college student, he registered for the U.S. military draft.

SERIAL NUMBER 3229	1. NAME (Print) Samuel Nicholas Tota <small>(First) (Middle) (Last)</small>			ORDER NUMBER 3187 3187
2. ADDRESS (Print) 59 Broadhead Ave. Jamestown Chautauqua New York <small>(Number and street or R. F. D. number) (Town) (County) (State)</small>				
3. TELEPHONE None	4. AGE IN YEARS 22	5. PLACE OF BIRTH Jamestown <small>(Town or county)</small>	6. COUNTRY OF CITIZENSHIP U.S.A.	
7. NAME OF PERSON WHO WILL ALWAYS KNOW YOUR ADDRESS Mr. Nicholas Tota <small>(Mr., Mrs., Miss) (First) (Middle) (Last)</small>			8. RELATIONSHIP OF THAT PERSON father	
9. ADDRESS OF THAT PERSON 59 Broadhead Ave. Jamestown - N.Y. <small>(Number and street or R. F. D. number) (Town) (County) (State)</small>				
10. EMPLOYER'S NAME Student - Alfred University				
11. PLACE OF EMPLOYMENT OR BUSINESS Alfred University - Alfred - Allegany N.Y. <small>(Number and street or R. F. D. number) (Town) (County) (State)</small>				
I AFFIRM THAT I HAVE VERIFIED ABOVE ANSWERS AND THAT THEY ARE TRUE.				
REGISTRATION CARD D. S. S. FORM 10-17105 <small>(over)</small>	Samuel Nicholas Tota <small>(Registrant's signature)</small>			

U.S. draft registration card, 1940

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After college, Mr. Tota became a social studies teacher in Youngstown, New York, on Lake Ontario north of Buffalo and Niagara Falls.

In 1943, he was inducted into the U.S. Army.

During the next two years, Private First Class Samuel N. Tota served, and fought, and survived, in the European Theater, including deep inside Nazi Germany.

After Germany's surrender, PFC Tota was ordered back to France, and then to England, and then back to the U.S.



PFC Samuel N. Tota (U.S. Army), circa August 1945

In August 1945, Private Tota, on military leave, returned to Jamestown to visit family. On August 24, he spoke at a Lions Club luncheon meeting at a downtown Jamestown hotel.

Private Tota told the group of his military service, including landing and fighting on Utah Beach in Normandy, France, on D-Day, June 6, 1944. He told how he, a member of a mortar squad, was in combat almost constantly for the next eleven months, concluding in Leipzig when Germany surrendered in May 1945. Tota described his interactions in Leipzig with U.S.S.R. soldiers. He told of seeing a liberated concentration camp in Germany. He told of being ordered back to Normandy after the surrender, and then to London. He told of race relations there—that U.S. Black soldiers were treated better in London than they were at home.

Private Tota also told of running into Jamestown's most famous son, Justice Robert H. Jackson, at the U.S. Embassy in London in summer 1945. Jackson was then based in London, serving as U.S. chief of counsel for the prosecution of Nazi war criminals. Tota also described seeing his contemporary William E. Jackson, the Justice's son—perhaps they had been together as boys in Jamestown schools—who was serving as his executive assistant in the project that soon would be heading to Nuremberg and the trial before the International Military Tribunal.

Private Tota told of his voyage back to the U.S. on the Queen Mary, and, most profoundly, of his joy in surviving.

The next day, Jamestown's evening newspaper reported on Private Tota's talk to the Lions Club.

That story, transcribed and reproduced below, headlined and focused first on Private Tota's chance meeting in London with Justice Jackson.

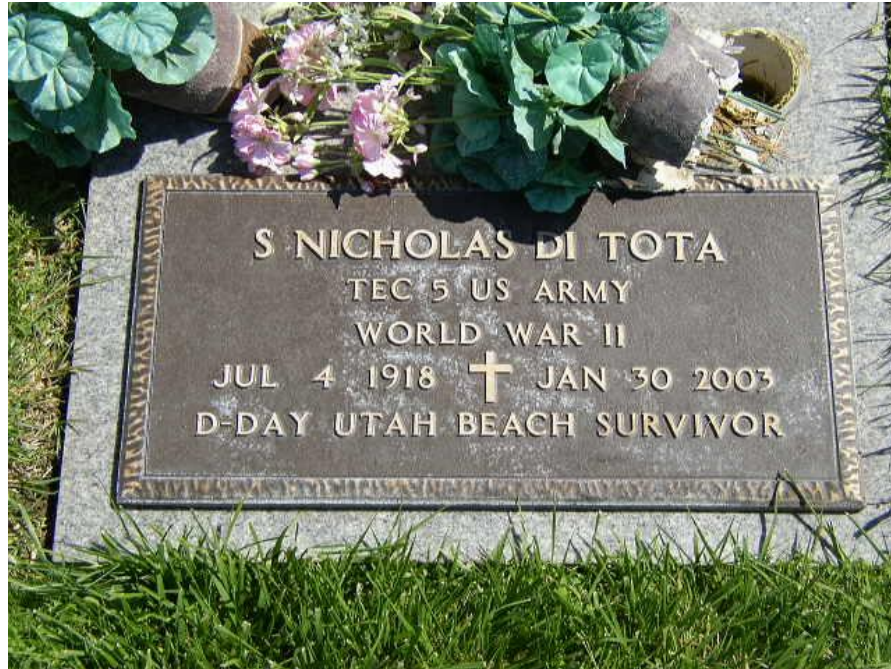
That meeting was notable. That Jackson, a leading world figure, sent greetings home through Tota must have interested Jackson's many friends and everyone in Jamestown.

But the story should have led with the greatest news, which was Private Tota's service and heroism.

Mr. Tota became, in later years, Nick DiTota. He moved to California. He was a teacher for decades and also worked as a realtor. He had a family and was active in his Catholic Church. He belonged, fittingly, to the Lions Club. He was a member of American Legion and served as

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commander of Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 7265. He passed away in 2003 when he was eighty-four years old.¹



St. Michael's Catholic Cemetery, Livermore, California

Thank you, S. Nicholas (“Nick”) DiTota (1918-2003), and thank you all U.S. military veterans, for your service.

* * *

¹ See *Obituaries, S. Nicholas 'Nick' DiTota*, PLEASANTON WEEKLY, Mar. 7, 2003, available at www.pleasantonweekly.com/morgue/2003/2003_03_07.obits7.html.

Jackson Says ‘Hello’ Through Returned GI

**Pfc. Tota Talked With Nazi Prosecutor
In London; Greets Lions at Lunch**

Jamestown Post-Journal
Saturday Evening, August 25, 1945

“A great big hello to Jamestown” from Justice Robert H. Jackson, chief prosecutor of Nazi war criminals, was delivered yesterday by Pfc. Samuel H. [sic—N.] Tota at a luncheon meeting of the Lions Club at the Hotel Samuels.

The soldier son of Mr. and Mrs. Nicholas Tota, 36 Foote Avenue, talked with Justice Jackson at the American embassy in London, shortly before he sailed for the U.S. aboard the Queen Mary recently after 16 months of overseas service, with the 87th Chemical Mortar Battalion of the First Army. He said he also saw Ensign William E. Jackson, USNR, son of the Supreme Court Justice, and reported that Ensign Jackson is assisting his father in the trial of the German war criminals.

“We certainly boarded the Queen Mary for our trip home with a different feeling than we had boarded the combat-bound Queen Elizabeth in April 1944,” Private Tota told the Lions Club. “There had been a good many times when we were under fire that we had given up all hope of ever getting home again.”

Private Tota, who was with the Fourth Division of the First Army in the seventh assault wave to go ashore on D-Day[,] was in combat continuously from that memorable sixth day of June, 1944 until May 9, 1945, with only 14 official days of rest.

The 87th Mortar Chemical Battalion with which he served fought with the First Army from the D-Day beachhead through the battles of Cherbourg, St. Lo, Falaise Gap, Mayenne, Mena and Liege in France, then across the Siegfried Line into Germany, battling its way through Hurtgen, the Ardennes, Eschweiler on the Ruhr, across the Roer River, through Duren and Erft, to Cologne. When General Hodges’ First Army reached the Rhine, the 87th Chemical Mortar Battalion was ordered to join the Seventh Army

near Nancy, France, for its initial assault on the Rhine. With the Seventh Army the 87th fought its way back into Germany through Zwebrucken, Kaiserslautern and Worms to the Rhine. With the arrival of the Seventh Army at the Rhine, the 87th Chemical Mortar Battalion rejoined the First Army with which it fought through the Ruhr pocket, Weser and Sarle and into Leipzig, toward the Elbe River. At Leipzig, contact with the Russians was established. Private Tota reported that V.E. Day occurred at that point in the First Army drive.

Russians Friendly

“We didn’t get to know the Russian soldiers very well because when we got to Leipzig we were ordered back to Normandy,” Private Tota pointed out, adding that his impression[s] of the Russians were chiefly that they were “friendly but brusque.”

One of five men in a mortar squad, he said that the mortar fired a 4.2 mortar shell and reminded that this mortar was for a long time guarded as one of the secret weapons of World War II.

“Its effective range was from 500 yards to three miles,” he reported, adding, however, that the battalion moved forward rather than fire that far. “It was so accurate that shells could be dropped right into the turret of a tank.”

Private Tota told the Lions Club of visiting a Nazi concentration camp, recalling that the “stench was so terrific” that he had to hold his nose as he walked through the camp. He remembered seeing some Russians forcing two SS troopers and a girl companion to crawl over the dead bodies.

He told of how the First Army, sure that the Germans had every crossroads in France zeroed [i.e., targeted], outwitted the Nazis by blazing roads with bulldozers.

He confirmed the reports on the devastation of France and Germany and opined that the reconstruction of these countries would be a gigantic task, which “only American ingenuity” could hope to accomplish, since the destruction of materials and industries presented almost unsurmountable obstacles.

Negroes Like England

Asked if it were true that the American Negroes were socially acceptable to the English, Private Tota said it would not be surprising if a great many Negroes remain in England after the war, rather than return to the United States, because they were so well treated there.

Private Tota wears the arrowhead, which indicates his participation in the Normandy Beachhead assault on D-Day, and the Presidential Citation ribbon. On his ETO [European Theater of Operations] ribbon, along with the arrowhead, are five combat stars which signify that he saw action at Cherbourg in northern France, in Ardennes Forest, in the Rhineland and in Central Germany.

Graduated from Jamestown High School in 1936 and from Alfred University, he taught social studies at the Youngstown High School prior to his induction into the Army July 23, 1943. He is spending a month's leave with his family here.

“It is truly glorious and heroic for a man to give his life for his country but, to me, it seems wonderful to be able to live for my country,” he told the Lions Club.[²]

² *Jackson Says 'Hello' Through Returned GI*, JAMESTOWN POST-JOURNAL, Aug. 25, 1945, at 10.

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TEN

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The soldier, son of Mr. and Mrs. Nicholas Toto, 26 Footh Avenue, talked with Justice Jackson at the American embassy in London, shortly before he sailed for the U. S. aboard the Queen Mary recently after 18 months of overseas service with the 87th Chemical Mortar Battalion of the First Army. He said he also saw Ensign William E. Jackson, USNR, son of the Supreme Court justice, and reported that Ensign Jackson is assisting his father in the trial of the German war criminals.

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BOY SCOUT ACTIVITIES

LAKWOOD TROOP 11

A Board of Review was held at the regular meeting at the Lakewood Club, Monday, at which Scout Barry Bourne passed his first class requirements and Scout John Kistner, Scoutmaster, and Scoutmaster Charles Mallard, Scoutmaster, passed their second class. The troop opened with a prayer. Scoutmaster Mallard introduced to the troop at a new member, Scoutmaster Kistner. Members of the troop committee were present and definite plans were made for the coming season. All former members of Troop 11 are asked to be present at the next regular meeting which will be held at the Lakewood Club, Tuesday, July 24, 1945.