


A SON'S WORLD WAR II DISCOVERY

Back to BATAAN

East Allen man tracks down the war horrors that haunted his father

By David Venditta
Of The Morning Call



From his bedroom at night, little Rick would hear his father in the kitchen directly below, shouting in Japanese, barking sharp commands. He'd been out drinking again.

It was the early 1960s, and Joe Szczepanski was collecting a military pension and working at a shoe factory. After his shift, he'd stop at a bar just a block from the house. He'd get home late, sit by himself and rant for an hour or more.

Rick, who was about 7, would have to get up for school the next morning, and the racket kept him awake. He knew it had something to do with POW camps during World War II. His father had told him about beheadings.

"My dad was a little bit screwed up," Rick Szczepanski now says. "He was suffering from post-traumatic stress, but nobody knew what that was at the time. ...You never knew when he was going to fly off the handle. He didn't physically take it out on us; mentally, though, he did. It was hard for the whole family."

A one-time amateur boxer from the coal country around Wilkes-Barre, Joe had stayed in the service after the war and would go on to another career, teaching Spanish at Bethlehem Catholic High School. But he had



Photo courtesy Rick Szczepanski

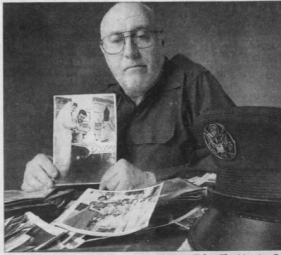
FORMER POW JOE SZCZEPANSKI holds his son Rick while relaxing with his parents, Michael and Anastasia, and his other son Thomas, at his parents' home in 1955. Below, Rick Szczepanski shows a photo taken on his parents' wedding day in June 1946.

MULTIMEDIA

VIDEO: Interview with Rick Szczepanski.

DOCUMENTS: Read what Joe Szczepanski told a war crimes investigator in 1947.

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a drinking problem and a hair-trigger temper that made life difficult for his wife and three sons.

As Rick got older, he found it easier to spend less time with his father

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Szczepanskil

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Sat, Jan 19, 2019

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FATHER was affected for decades

On the third day... one of the boys made a break to escape, and all of the boys were forced to dig their own graves and were shot down in the graves while they were singing 'God Bless America.'"

AN INVESTIGATION... resulting experience in a journal entry for an article on the Philippines.

After the war, his father never returned from surgery on his hand... he spent 12 months recuperating. The other man was unharmed.

ONE MAN'S MARCH

AN INVESTIGATION... resulting experience in a journal entry for an article on the Philippines.

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karenszczepanski55
Wed, Apr 19, 2017