

TEARS AND FEARS

LeLacrime e Pauro

September in Pittsburgh always has been a strange month for weather. School classes start in this month and this signals the end of summer. Cool weather is expected, but 50% of the time the temperature is in the 80's and at times in the 90's. In 1969 the weather temperature was mostly in the 80's; too warm for football, but fall in Western Pennsylvania means football no matter what.

In this year of 1969, I had just graduated from Nursing School at St. Francis Hospital in Pittsburgh. I had just taken my state board tests and had passed and was working daylight hours at the Veterans Hospital at Leech Farm. I was going through an orientation period and that allowed me to work all daylight shifts until the training period was over.

We always had dinner between 5 and 6 PM. This was convenient because the kids had activities and had to be transported, mostly at 6:30 and 7 PM

On Friday, September 19th around 5 PM we were having our dinner in the dining room. I always sat on the north end of the table with the window at my back. The window was wide open. The weather was hot and air conditioning was an alien experience for us in these years of slim pickings. Our house was on North Avenue in Verona and the back of the house was on the north end of the property. The house was on North Avenue with a back yard that overlooked the valley between Verona and Oakmont. The valley was wide open from my house to Plum Street in Oakmont; a distance of about 1,000 yards. At times I could hear the traffic on Plum Street. On that fateful day with my back to the window and eating my supper, I heard two muffled explosions. Not too uncommon as noise from Plum Street carried over the valley. As usual I continued to finish my supper. A phone call rang out then, not too uncommon. The phone always rang at supper time because friends always knew we were home at this time, getting ready to leave for the evening activities. But this call was unlike any call from the past. I can't recall who it was, but the message was clear and remains vivid in my mind. "A Verona policeman had been shot" was the tragic salutation. I know my first word was "where". The person who called I must have known well, still remains a mystery to me. That part of the story is not complete without his identification. No matter the message, tragic and unforgettable. I made calls of my own then, the information was mixed up. Shooting was in Oakmont, maybe not a Verona policeman. This happened about 45 minutes from the first call. The incident happened around 5 PM, the muffled explosions must have been the shots that were fired. I had heard them.

I decided to go down to Verona about one-half hour after the initial call. Verona was scary, the street where the police station was teeming with police officers, Verona, Oakmont, Penn Hills

and Pittsburgh were there. I can't recall how many, but there must have been 40 to 50 police there. The Verona police station was set up as the command post. Blackie DeLellis, Verona Chief of Police was talking to some of the police. I stayed my distance with many others of the town. The police were heavily armed. Town's people were crying and an aura of fear was evident. I talked to some of the people there and the initial story was that Joe Zannella, a Verona policeman had chased a car that had been reported as stolen. The Pittsburgh police had sent out the information. The car came through Verona and Joe spotted the car and followed it across the Viaduct and then the car turned onto Plum Street, where it had stopped. No one knew exactly what happened, but the fugitive in the car shot at Joe two times. He was hit in the chest and died. Tragically, while I was enjoying my supper, he was dying.

The main street was sort of crowded by the townspeople who gathered in small groups, we remained very quiet. There were tears in many of the eyes and fear was prominent. That day lasted hours and hours. I had an anxiety that I never felt before. I was angry and scared.

In previous Septembers Joe Zannella made history by his football prowess on the high school team and this September he made headlines once again. This story did not end here, but this one day in my life is forever indelible in my memory.

Frank W. Santucci, September 2014