

## **Background on Rocky Versace**

by Jerry File

Because the new elementary school in the west end of Alexandria is expected to have 44% of the students of Hispanic ethnicity, some citizens believe the school should be named with this in mind. While some characterize this as diversity, others believe it is racist and may become irrelevant because of future population demographics. If the School Board deems this an essential element, then a number of citizens believe the school should be named for Alexandria's Captain Humbert Roque Versace, US Army whose heroic leadership and patriotic conduct while a prisoner of war during the Viet Nam War resulted in him being awarded the nation's highest award for valor, the Congressional Medal of Honor posthumously.

Growing up on the Mt. Vernon Elementary School playground in Del Ray after World War II, "Rocky" Versace was subjected to the ethnic slurs of dago, wop, spic and others because of his Italian and Puerto Rican heritage. However, the schoolyard bullies soon learned that Rocky was a proud, tough kid who could defend himself if confronted or unduly provoked. He also had parents of significant accomplishment as his Italian American father was a West Point graduate and decorated Colonel in the U.S. Army while his Puerto Rican American mother was an accomplished author of children's books. In fact, one of her books later became the basis for Sally Fields' hugely popular "Flying Nun" television series on the ABC Network.

Coming from a devoted Catholic family, Rocky served as an altar boy at St. Rita's Church, played on the church's Virginia state championship CYO basketball team, and later commuted to Washington, D.C. where he became an honor student at Gonzaga College High School.

Upon graduation from West Point, he successfully completed Airborne and Ranger training and served in Korea. Later he successfully completed Intelligence, Advisory, and Vietnamese Language Schools before being assigned to Viet Nam to advise a Vietnamese combat battalion. Even though he planned to be a Catholic priest upon completion of his Army service and return to Viet Nam to help the displaced children, he extended his normal one year tour for 6 months. Later he was captured when his unit was overrun by a much larger Viet Cong unit in the Mekong Delta. After two years as a Prisoner of War under brutal conditions and torture, he was executed by the Viet Cong on September 26, 1965. The last contact his fellow prisoners of war had with Rocky was when they heard him singing "God Bless America". Because of his conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his own life above and beyond the call of duty, he became the first Army officer to ever receive the Congressional Medal of Honor for his inspirational leadership and heroic conduct as a Prisoner of War.

The citizens of Alexandria have erected a statue of Rocky as the centerpiece of the Viet Nam War Memorial where ceremonies take place each Memorial Day and Veterans Day to honor those Alexandria citizens who valiantly gave their lives during this war.

The name of Rocky Versace on an elementary school would give the students an extraordinary role model and inspirational patriot who exhibited the historical values of West Point, "Duty, Honor, and Country", for which he received the nation's highest award for bravery during warfare, the Congressional Medal of Honor!