

A life of self-sacrifice—a tragedy

By VINCENT T. LEONARD

I have written about Joey Pasha before, but his story bears retelling, especially in a year when our nation has managed to celebrate two Veterans' Days.

Strictly speaking, Joey wasn't a veteran. He volunteered, before the US entered World War I, not to carry arms; but to rescue the wounded of the European armies.

His short life was a story of self-sacrifice. His tragic death was a fitting climax.

His name does not look Italian,

yet all his borebears came from Italy. The Pasha family came to Aptos from San Jose around 1900 — Joey, his widowed mother, his small brother, Johnny, and his uncle, Charles (Bud) Pasha. They rented the "Brady cottage," then on the west bank of Aptos Creek about 100 feet north of the present Cabrillo Highway crossing.

The family presently found more spacious housing, but a few years later, after Mrs. Pasha had developed a case of tuberculosis

that the doctors pronounced incurable, they found that the Brady cottage had been moved to "the back street" in Aptos village, and they rented it again.

For more than 5 years, Joey did all the shopping, cooking, laundry, housekeeping and nursing of his dying mother — all this while attending school full time and keeping his younger brother clean, neatly dressed and well behaved. He was robbed of all happy leisure of youth, but, while he became a very serious

person, he never lost his contagious smile or his warm friendliness toward all his neighbors.

He had large bright-blue eyes that were remarkably expressive. I can remember one session of sledding on the dry grass of one of our pasture hill-sides when Joey's very fast sled hit a concealed rock and sent him speeding downhill on the seat of his pants. He remained so still when he came to a stop that I thought he was injured. But the look he gave me spoke, not of pain, but of deep embarrassment. "Get me one of your strips of sacking," he begged. (He had watched me sewing gunnysacks together for winter curtains for my rabbit hutches.) He wrapped the rough strip of jute around him, and, amid the thoughtless laughter of the gang of sledders, stumbled rapidly away in his awkward skirt, muttering "I should have known better!"

Then Pearl White came to Aptos with her company of move makers. They had decided that the back street (now Valencia Street) was an ideal setting for an episode in a "Western." Almost everyone in the village crowded around to watch the filming, and the director used his megaphone to press them into use as extras. Apparently Joey caught the eyes of both Miss White and the director, for they got him aside and talked to him earnestly then sent for him to come to Hollywood. His own happy letters and bits fed to local papers by the studios showed that he was employed regularly in minor roles. His Aptos friends felt confident that Joey was on the way to stardom.

World War I was under way when Joey made his Hollywood debut, and Pro-Allies sentiment was running high. Shocked by newspaper accounts of the suffering of the wounded on the battlefields because the French and British medical corps were overtaxed by the high rate of casualties, many Americans formed ambulance corps that volunteered for services behind the Allied lines. Hollywood formed one such unit and Joey volunteered, over the protests of his uncle and his brother.

Mrs. Pasha had gone to her final rest in the Aptos Catholic Cemetery several months before Joey's first contact with the movie makers. The village had assembled in the old chapel on the high ground of the graveyard and had agreed heartily with Father Henry O'Reilly's high praise of Joey for his long, devoted care of his mother, "Unselfish," and "heroic" were among the words used by the priest and echoed and re-echoed by the congregation.

Among my mother's



Vincent Leonard visited the neglected grave.

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mementoes, I have found a letter from Joey describing his boredom with the routine of training camp and his fervent desire to get moving and do something useful. Poor youngster! He did not realize how quickly his desire to get moving would be realized. In less than a month's time he would be at the battlefield, volunteering with another American boy to evacuate a wounded French soldier from an area still under enemy bombardment.

The official announcement to his family said that a shell had exploded directly above the stretcher, killing the wounded man and his two bearers.

Joey's war-torn remains were met in Santa Cruz with a solemn civic tribute. The cortege moved slowly up Pacific Avenue, and when the ceremony was over, a number of dignitaries followed his coffin to his grave, beside his mother's in Aptos. The little mound was heaped with floral tributes, but no one thought of any permanent marker for the grave until Joey's uncle, Charles (Bud) Pasha visited it some days later and erected a simple white wooden cross of his own making.

Into the arms he had embedded two strips of black wood bearing in white letters Joseph Pasha.

Bud also erected a cross for the mother, Louise Pasha.

I visited the site a few days ago. Someone had shattered the upright shaft of Joey's cross, then forced the stub remaining into the soft earth. Beside this pitiable relic there is a bronze medallion, its lettering obscured by filth. Three dead amaryllis stalks mark the foot of the grave.

Charles Pasha, aged and living in retirement on Mar Vista Court, is no longer able to care for the grave. He was crippled and blinded in a fall a few weeks ago.

The only other relatives living now are Charles Pasha, Jr., a ranger at Seacliff State Park, now on sick leave and residing on Cox Road, and Joey's younger brother John, who lives and works in Los Angeles and is seen in Aptos only at long intervals, when he parks his camper here overnight.

The local Post of the American Legion met for a ceremony at the grave every Decoration Day for several years. But, as its members age, they have felt incapable of the effort.

Perhaps some patriotic American or local society may some day recognize the generous sacrifice of a young life and promising career "that others might live," by erecting a suitable monument to Joey's memory.



JOE PASHA
"Unselfish . . . heroic"