

Victory Day becomes a hot topic in governor's race

Maj. Gen. Reginald A. Centracchio, sitting in what would become a very hot seat, was told by the American Legion's Anthony DeQuattro: "General, I hope you've got your flak jacket on."

The commander of Rhode Island's National Guard needed his battle armor when he fielded some very tough questions from the United Veterans Council of Rhode Island on Thursday night.

The council, representing the state's major veterans organizations, also put David Green in the hot seat, and, as with Centracchio, showed him little mercy.

For its monthly meeting at the VA Medical Center in Providence, the council had invited the candidates for governor and lieutenant governor to discuss their stands on issues important to veterans.

But it came down to one issue. And you can bet the farm on this: there will be a Victory Day in Rhode Island for a long, long time.

Centracchio represented Republican Governor Almond at the candidates night. Green pinch-hit for his wife, Myrth York, Almond's Democratic challenger for governor. (The candidates for governor had a previously scheduled debate in Newport.)

Centracchio began the session by reading off a list of what he said were the Almond administration's accomplishments for veterans, including a soon-to-open, 30-bed unit for dementia patients at the Rhode Island Veterans Home in Bristol.

But the general did not mention Victory Day, the August holiday celebrated in Rhode Island to mark the end of World War II.

The council has lobbied against various attempts in the General Assembly to do away with Victory Day, which many Rhode Islanders refer to as V-J Day — Victory Over Japan Day. That doesn't sit well with the Japanese or Japanese Americans, who see it as an affront.

Rhode Island also has an informal holiday on Victory Day weekend called Bay Day, as a way of celebrating the state's coastline and Narragansett Bay, and to take some of the heat off the controversy surrounding Victory Day.

After making his statement on behalf of the governor, the first question to Centracchio was about Victory Day, and he said the governor supported Victory Day and always will.

Then why did the governor embrace Bay Day in August and dedicate "two outhouses at some state beach" while ignoring veterans events, DeQuattro said. He didn't wait for an answer.

DeQuattro also said the governor supported a bill from the business community, killed by the council's



DAVE MCCARTHY

Veteran's journal

lobbying, that would have allowed businesses to open on Victory Day without paying employees overtime, and allowing the employees another day anytime during the year.

"Our feeling is that once that's done, what's the sense in having the holiday," DeQuattro said.

"He's totally ignored Victory Day, and that's a slap in the face to all World War II veterans," DeQuattro added. "And suddenly he's in favor of it because it's an election year."

Centracchio reiterated that the governor stands behind Victory Day. He also said that people need a better understanding of what Victory Day stands for and the sacrifices made in World War II. Then, he said, they will be more likely to support Victory Day.

"The people of the state, the people of the country, need to be educated," Centracchio said.

"He should be the state's educator," DeQuattro countered. "He's the governor."

Representatives of the various organizations also complained of Almond's alleged lack of access. Centracchio pledged he would talk to the governor about setting up meetings between veterans organizations and the governor.

Green may have been enjoying all this. In fact, he began his comments by telling the council: "We get it. The point you made here tonight is that the governor doesn't get it. We will listen."

He also pledged that York, if elected, will hire a full-time veterans' coordinator for her office.

If Green was feeling good, the tenor soon changed.

Ennis Bisbano, the former Bristol school superintendent and an Am-Vets representative to the council, told Green: "You say now you get the message loud and clear. How come she didn't get it for four years?"

Bisbano said that when York was in the General Assembly she supported bills, in four successive years, to abolish Victory Day.

Green said that when York was in the legislature she represented a liberal constituency from the East Side of Providence that was against Victory Day. Now, as a statewide candidate, she has heard from the other side, and knows how divisive the issue is.

"I tell you her commitment is to

Victory Day," Green said.

He also said that on this past Victory Day his wife was at the VA Medical Center helping to hand over a \$30,000 check to the DAV from the General Assembly to help with van transportation for invalid veterans.

"That's where we were on Victory Day and that's how we feel," Green said.

The candidates for lieutenant governor — Republican incumbent Bernard Jackvony and Democratic Senate President Charles J. Fogarty — made appearances and got the kid-glove treatment from the council, as compared with Centracchio and Green.

Both Jackvony and Fogarty have championed veterans issues, and the council said it was grateful.

Jackvony is the only general officer who is a veteran, having served in the Marine Corps during the Vietnam War. Veterans have frequently turned to Jackvony for that reason, expressing thanks for his "open door" policy.

On the key question, Jackvony pledged that he and the Almond administration will support Victory Day. Said Jackvony: "It would be like changing July 4th because it offends the English."

Fogarty gave a list of spending that he and his colleagues approved for veterans in the last session of the General Assembly.

But the veterans, again, wanted to know about Victory Day. "My position on Victory Day is that Victory Day should remain Victory Day. There are 12 other weekends in the summer and some other weekend should be Bay Day," Fogarty said.

He also said there is "very little support" in the House or Senate for abolishing Victory Day.

"It's like changing history," Fogarty said. "It's part of our history, and we shouldn't change history."

PC remembers

On Saturday, a group of World War II veterans will gather at Providence College to honor 37 of their classmates and comrades-in-arms who were killed in action.

The ceremony will be in Slavin Center, '64 Hall, at noon, with Rhode Island Supreme Court Chief Justice Joseph Weisberger as the speaker.

In the spring of 1943, some 380 soldiers were assigned to the Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP) at Providence College.

The Army paid their room, board and tuition costs. They were to get an education and officer status.

The goal of the program, conducted at more than 120 colleges and universities around the country, was to provide the Army with a leadership corps after the war ended.

But in March of 1944, the program was abruptly cancelled by an Army in need of replacements and reinforcements.

The men from Providence College were shipped off to Tennessee to join the 328th Infantry Regiment of the 26th Yankee Division.

The division went overseas and fought the Germans from October 1944 through the end of the war, including the bloodiest land battle in history — the Battle of the Bulge.

Robert Deasy, a professor of history at Providence College, said the ASTP soldiers "helped preserve the future of Providence College," which had been about to close because of a lack of students. It also led to approval of the college's request for a permanent ROTC program, which started during the Korean War.

For WWI vets

The National Guard Association of Rhode Island will help any living World War I veteran or his family with the paperwork necessary for bestowing France's National Order of the Legion Honor.

The Legion of Honor medal is France's highest honor. France is awarding the medal to surviving World War I veterans in commemoration of the 80th anniversary on Nov. 11 of the armistice that ended the war. (The award will not be given to deceased veterans.)

For information, write the National Guard Association of Rhode Island, Command Readiness Center, 645 New London Ave., Cranston RI 02929, or phone (401) 942-4989. The contact is Maj. Ric Scholfield.

American Legion

Oldies night: The Auxiliary at

William Shields Post 43, 662 West Shore Rd., Warwick, is having "Oldies Music" from 7 p.m. to midnight Friday at the Post. Tickets are \$8 and include hamburgers, hot dogs and French fries.

Korean War Veterans Association

Monthly meeting: West Bay chapter 2 will meet at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday at Coventry Memorial VFW Post 9404, South Main Street, Coventry.

WAVES National

Meeting set: Ocean State Unit 118 will meet at 1 p.m. Saturday in the fifth-floor auditorium of the VA Medical Center, Chalkstone Avenue, Providence.

Seabee Veterans of America

Monthly meeting: The Rhode Island chapter will meet at 8 a.m. Saturday at Bickford's restaurant, Jefferson Boulevard, Warwick. All past and present Seabees are invited.

Coventry Veterans Council

Meeting set: The council will meet at 7 p.m. Thursday at Coventry Memorial VFW Post 9404, South Main Street, Coventry. Plans will be made for Veterans Day activities.

Meeting notices and story ideas may be sent to Dave McCarthy, Providence Journal, 1700 G.A.R. Highway, Somerset, MA 02726; or E-mail him at dmccarth@projo.com.