

# A salute across the ages to an old squad leader

Frank Bellotti went off to a war that forever changed his life — and his country

By [Thomas Farragher](#) Globe Columnist, Updated June 5, 2021, 1:36 p.m.



Former state Attorney General Francis X. Bellotti wears his 1946 Olympic jacket. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

HINCHAM — He's 98 now, nearing the century mark in a life in which he has known sweet political victory and the bitter taste of

defeat. But in many ways, Francis X. Bellotti remains the kid who grew up in Roxbury where he acquired essential survival skills he's never forgotten.

He learned to stick up for himself. To never back down. To take a punch. And throw one.

A fighter. A scrapper. A survivor.

That's who he was before he was elected to public office for the first time in 1962 when he became Massachusetts' lieutenant governor, the first step on a political journey that would lead to the state attorney general's office, and then to the tributes and decorations that he keeps in his tidy home here.

Those decorations kept coming. And keep coming still.

And that's why Frank Bellotti on Sunday morning – on this D-Day anniversary – will be recognized for what he did before he acquired his law degree, or notched his first electoral win.

“It's crazy that Frank never really talked about what he did,” said Geoff Leard, director of the Boston Frogman Swim, 5-kilometer open water event that supports the Navy SEAL Foundation and will take place at 8 Sunday morning in Boston Harbor. “It goes to show that he embodies his generation of quiet, humble individuals who did their job and did not seek any recognition.”

And, as the decades rolled by, never forgot.

“No, those things you never forget,” Bellotti said of his war years. “After the war, we used to date things from the war. Some guy we'd be talking to would say, ‘Geez, that was a year and a half after the war.’ Everything was ‘after the war’ for almost the next 10 years.”

It shaped his life and a generation. It shaped who he became.

“Yeah,” he told me, flashing a sly smile. “A guy who ran for governor three times and lost.”

If that is part of the essential Bellotti biography, so is this:

Decorations for his service in the European-African theater in World War II and the Asiatic Pacific Ribbon with one star. And then there is this notation on his military record: “Scout and Raider Officer, Intelligence Officer.”

Scout and Raider. If former attorney general is part of who Frank Bellotti is, his work as a young man as a scout and raider during World War II was surely at least as formative.

“It was a top-secret group,” explained Joe Flaherty, who is married to Nina, the fourth of Bellotti’s 12 children. “People who were in incredible shape. He carried something like a telephone pole as part of his training. And they lost some people in that training.

“They needed people who were in great shape. Who were great swimmers. Who were athletes. Nobody in your group was an average person.”

Bellotti looked up from his chair.

He did not disagree.

He was in charge of 54 men back then. “I’m the last one,” he said softly. “Let me tell you, those guys were all super athletes.”

It became part of him that he never fully let go of. He still rises at 4:30 each morning.

“I do my exercises in my chair,” he said. “I shave. I take my medicines. I’ve got diabetes, so I take my blood. Then I work out for a couple of hours every day. Then I go back to bed for an hour. Then I get up and work out in this room and I do what I have to do. I’ll show you.”

And then he does, demonstrating an exercise regimen that could make you weak-kneed just watching it from the couch.

Bellotti weighed 203 pounds when he was in the Navy. Today, he weighs 170.

“I was 5-foot-9-and-a-half then and now I’m 5-7,” he told me. “If I live another 10 years, I’ll disappear.”

He’s the last – or one of the last -- surviving member of those scouts and raiders he still remembers.

Two years ago, when he didn’t receive his annual membership card to the Sino-American Cooperative Organization, created during World War II, he called to inquire.

“I said to the guy, ‘There were 2,500 of us, mostly scouts and raiders and some Marines and some Army guys.’ So, I asked him: ‘How many of us are left out of the 2,500?’ And he said, ‘About 25.’ So that’s two years ago. There’s probably only about 10 of us left now.”

He paused for a moment as if to let all of that sink in.

Frank Bellotti has been married now 72 years to his bride Maggi. Theirs is a long love story. A cherished partnership. A long road well traveled.

“When you’re 18 years old, you feel like you’re invincible,” he said. “All of us. You’re plucking a kid from where he’s growing up and saying, ‘You’ve got to do this.’ And I did.”

He was Ensign Francis X. Bellotti then. Now, he’s one of the last standing World War II squad leaders, the man who will show up at Piers Park on Marginal Street in East Boston on Sunday.

He’ll remember his days as a member of the Navy Olympic Team. “I was in the four-man swim team that won for the whole Pacific Ocean area,” he told me, and then displayed his old team jacket, its leather sleeves faded with age now, to prove it.

Faded with age, yes. But it can still carry emblems of achievement, nonetheless.

And so Frank Bellotti will be in East Boston on D-Day Sunday as his solemn promise to never leave a comrade behind is

renewed.

“It’s not just the award,” Bellotti said of his special honored guest status on Sunday, “but that they would remember that I served there and I was in the Scouts and Raiders, which they consider their first special forces operation ever.

“And that’s very important to me. Because that’s the outfit that I admire.”

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