

Through the Eyes OF A Centenarian



Just months prior to his death, Ovid DiFiore '35—then the oldest living Regian—reflected on life, service to country, and the shared experience Regians “take with them for the rest of their lives.”

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In mid-November, I made my way downtown on the Lexington Avenue line for a conversation with Regis's oldest living alumnus, Ovid DiFiore. Ovid, who passed away in early February, was a member of the Regis class of 1935. Before conversing with Mr. DiFiore, I was chiefly interested in his military service in WWII. Regis was honoring the 100th anniversary of Armistice Day and the legacy of all Regis veterans, and what better way to commemorate this centenary than featuring the perspective of Regis's own centenarian veteran?

And while Ovid did share fascinating anecdotes about his time in the Signal Corps, I left the interview with so much more: a vivid picture of Regis as it stood eight decades ago. Throughout our conversation, Ovid—100 years young at the time—related stories of depression-era Regis and the Upper East Side with incredible clarity. Even in his second century, Mr. DiFiore was witty, humorous, and sharp throughout our chat.

He still remembered the day he received his acceptance letter. “My father was at a complete loss for words,” he said. “My father could only muster the word ‘wonderful’ over and over.” The year was 1930—just a year after Black Tuesday and the market crash—and Ovid's parents were already tasked with the financial burden of putting four of his siblings through parochial school. That Regis could offer a tuition-free private education was a windfall, to say the least. “At the time, most schools had troubles with money,” Ovid said. According to

him, even private schools had to cut back on uniform and book costs to ease the onus on parents.

In 1931, Ovid was set to begin his Regis experience. But there was one little issue—how to get there? When Mr. DiFiore (who hails from Fort Lee, New Jersey) matriculated to Regis, there was one key piece of infrastructure missing. “Those were the days before the George Washington Bridge was completed,” Ovid said. “There was no bus, so I had to go out of my way to get to school.” And so Ovid circumvented the issue by heading south, only to head back north. Like many current Regians, he found himself leaving in the pre-dawn darkness, even in September and June when the days were long.

But day-in and day-out, he did make it to the Upper East Side, which, in spite of a struggling market and widespread poverty, was still ritzy. “Oh, it was a fancy neighborhood, alright. There were people driving Bentleys, Rolls-Royces, Cadillacs. Sometimes people would complain if you so much as touched their cars.” And yet, it was precisely this high-class situation that often helped Ovid across the Central Park transverse. On a typical school day, he would ride the subway up to 86th Street. However, unlike the Regians of today, Ovid employed a special trick upon reaching the Upper West Side. “I usually hitchhiked across the transverse to get to school. Sometimes I'd get a good ride, sometimes I'd walk across.”

Though his commuting luck was sporadic throughout his first three years, in his senior year, he struck a veritable gold mine. “In my fourth year, I'd found



Opposite page: Ovid DiFiore '35 and his camera, which he used in his service as a photographer during World War II. This photo is also the cover of his 2008 memoir, *Melbourne to Manila*.

Above: Ovid in his old military uniform.

a chauffeur-driven car. The guy was wearing a uniform and everything. He was taking his boss—who lived on the Upper East Side on Park [Avenue]—to Amsterdam Avenue. On the way back, he'd pick me up, and we'd chat while going across the park. So here I am, a high school kid trying to save a nickel, and I'm being driven to school by a chauffeur in a limousine.”

Ovid also recalled a series of particularly memorable commutes. In one such instance, he found himself in a maroon convertible with a psychiatrist headed up to 179th Street (the bridge was completed in the middle of his freshman

year, with the bus station opening not long after). “The guy kept asking me how I felt about having to go to confession at school,” Ovid related. “He was fascinated by the idea of Regis.”

Another time, on a chilly fall day in his senior year, he was headed home across the park, when a driver of a horse and wagon offered him a ride (a much more common sight in the Upper East side in those days). When Ovid accepted, the driver hopped off out of his seat, and beckoned to Ovid. “I’ve got to train for the Police Academy test,” the man said, according to Ovid. “You drive the horse and I’ll run next to you.” And so, a 16-year-old Regis senior found himself

driving a horse across Central Park to commute home. “Though, I think the horse knew the way on his own,” Ovid added, laughing.

Though the commute to get there was long and often convoluted, in Ovid’s eyes it was all worth it. “It was a wonderful school,” he often reflected in our conversation. “It was strict though,” Ovid said, pointing to draconian JUG policies that often facilitated a very serious environment. “You’d be lucky to go even a week without getting JUG for something,” he mused, laughing. And though Regis has changed quite a bit since then—we now have two gyms, an updated chapel, resource centers,

trees in the quadrangle (this newfound arboreal presence was a minor shock to Ovid when he came back to visit many years later)—in many ways, its ethos has remained the same. Noting the changes, Ovid added that Regis “maintained its main principles—good education, good behavior, teachers that take you under their wings, and good Catholic principles for the young boys to take with them for the rest of their lives.”

After graduating in 1935, he didn’t immediately go to college. In those days, this was commonplace. He went into the workforce to attempt to help with his family’s financial burdens, hopping from job to job (including one at a film studio).



Clockwise from left: (1) Ovid and a military vehicle. He served in the signal corps in World War II stationed in Manila. (2) Photo of US General Douglas MacArthur, taken by Ovid. (3) Ovid (second from left) on rest and relaxation from the War.

On September 30, 1941, Ovid DiFiore enlisted in the Signal Corps of the U.S. Military, serving as a photographer (he had spent time as a young boy learning how to work a camera, and later practiced developing film in the Regis chemistry club and in his job at the film studio). In the service, Ovid traveled all over the Pacific (he recounts his travels in a book of photographs and letters, entitled *From Melbourne to Manila*). While in the Pacific, he established a rapport with General Douglas MacArthur's assistant (a major), and, through this relationship, photographed the famous general many times. "I was extremely lucky," he said, "in that I was able to make one of my passions a part of my military service."

In 1945, Japan surrendered to the United States, and World War II came to an end. Ovid and his fellow servicemen in Manila couldn't take a plane home, so they found a bit of an alternate route. They boarded a cruise ship called the *Matsonia* and sailed back to the continental United States. "I still remember the day when we arrived back in the U.S. Our ship was traveling through the Golden Gate. All the soldiers were on one side of the ship, waving to the people waiting for them to come home. The harbor was packed with civilians cheering for us. And because we were all on one side, the ship was leaning quite a bit. I thought it might tip over. When we arrived on land, they gave all of us a doughnut and a cup of coffee, and loaded us into trucks." Ovid then took planes back across the country, remembering with striking clarity the route he took: from San Francisco to Ogden, Utah to St. Louis to New Orleans to New York and then on to Newark. "My mother almost knocked me down the stairs when she first saw me. She was so surprised!"

After being discharged, Ovid attended Pace University, and subsequently spent thirty-five years at the same company. Throughout this time, he never forgot his roots at Regis. He often reflected on



Above: Photos taken by Ovid during World War II.

his time there, and recalled it with great fondness. At the Regis Centennial Gala, he brought three generations of DiFiore family members to celebrate. At the Waldorf celebration, he recalls that he was "the oldest alumnus there." He seemed bemused when he was asked to stand and the crowd cheered for him. "There was such an applause, as if I'd done something unusual," he remarked, laughing.

Regis was a vital part of Mr. DiFiore's life up until his passing this February. He related that a fellow member of his senior group also attended a Regis High

School—in Melbourne, Australia! "And they knew about us," he enthusiastically added. Ovid was tremendously happy with the direction he saw the school headed. "It has to change, sometimes. You can't stay totally static. There's no good in that. I'm glad it's maintained its mission while it's modernized!"

Even eighty-three years after graduating, Regis remained a key part of Ovid DiFiore's life. Perhaps he summed it up the most succinctly: "Regis was a big turning point in my life. There's no doubt about that."