Gust John Damascus

The Fallen Cougars Project

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Introduction and Context

The modern city of Spokane is a sprawling and continuously growing metropole. While the state of Washington is a singular political unit, the cascade mountains that divide the state into eastern and western regions have had a serious impact on the development of the state over time. While the city of Olympia is the recognized political capital of Washington State, people living east of the cascades only pay it nominal attention. "east-siders" are much more likely to recognize Spokane as the economic and political hub of their region. Today Spokane is the de facto capital of eastern Washington's "Inland Empire." However, that has not always been the case, in the nineteenth century Spokane was just like all of the other towns in the region, a tiny agrarian outpost, except it spelled its own name wrong.

Originally just a trading post intended to conduct business with the local Native groups, the post gradually grew as the Spokane River made it suitable for small scale settlement. As the nineteenth center wore on more people came to the area to take advantage of newly discovered mineral wealth, especially gold in the Idaho Panhandle and British Columbia. In 1873, James Nettle Glover officially founded the town of "Spokan Falls," a phonetic spelling of the name that was used for a decade before the "e" was added to the end, and the "Falls" was chopped off.[1] By 1880 the town had a population of 300. Anyone that has seen the Mel Brooks classic *Blazing Saddles* knows how important railroads were to local economies. In 1881 the Great Northern

[1] Laura Arksey, "Spokane Falls (later renamed Spokane) is Incorporated as a first-class city on November 29, 1881." Located: https://www.historylink.org/File/9176 Accessed: June 8, 2022.

Railway reached Spokane and in 1883 linked to the transcontinental line. Spokane's prime position at the center of the railroad established it as the Capital City of the Inland Empire. By 1909 the Hamlet with a mis-spelled name had 100,000 inhabitants. By the 1920's the mining economy was in decline and gave way to timber and agricultural production. [2] It was into this Spokane that Gust John Damascus, the son of Greek immigrants, was born and came of age. Gust Damascus had both brains and brawn. An accomplished high school student and pitcher on the Central High School baseball team, he majored in civil engineering as a Washington State Cougar in Pullman. Many men with Gust's education and future prospects would have stayed out of the conflict. But Gust was not one of those men. He put his college education to work for his country when he volunteered to fight as a combat engineer in the greatest military conflict in human history.

Early Life

John Damascus and Anastasia Muagapolous were both born in Greece. John was fifteen years Anastasia's senior and he immigrated to the United States at the age fourteen in 1899. Anastasia followed seventeen years later in 1916. They married in October of 1919 and settled in Bellingham, Washington. In 1921 they welcomed their first baby boy, Nick, the family. Wasting little time, the couple welcomed their second son to the family the following year and gave him his father's first name for his middle name, Gust John Damascus. Three years later, in 1925 they welcomed a third son, Demitri, to their growing brood. By 1930 the family had moved and settled down in Spokane, Washington. The 1930 census shows that the family had expanded not only through the young John and Anastasia, but also by taking in Anastasia's sister Helen. Helen

[2] W.H. Kensel, "Inland Empire Mining and the Growth of Spokane, 1883-1905," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, vol. 60, no. 2 (April, 1969) Seattle: University of Washington Press, 84 – 96.

moved into the family home with their seventy-two-year-old mother, Eugenia and her own eleven-year-old son, Demeter. Every member of the family spoke both Greek and English, except for Eugenia who only spoke Greek. John supported the family through his career as a merchant at a Lake Resort in Spokane, and Helen worked as a clerk at an unspecified local business.[3]

Young Gust had a busy upbringing in Spokane. While attending local primary school, Gust took part in many different community programs. In 1930, the *Spokesman-Review* newspaper published an article on fellowship week in which "Many nations represented in costumes and musical offerings. Flags of all nations were used in the decorations and picturesque costumes of many countries added a colorful note to the affair." Many children donned the cultural garb that represented their own ethnic backgrounds. And like any good descendent of Pericles "Little Gust Damascus, of Greek parentage, gave a recitation."[4] In 1934, the Damascus family took part "in the order of AHEPA, a fraternal organization for Americans of Greek origin . . . the sixth annual picnic of Mount Olympus chapter" at Franklin Park. Gust was in the boys aged 8–14-foot race and came in first place. He later won the pie-eating contest for the same age group.[5] Gust played baseball through his high school years and maintained good grades at North Central High School. In 1939 he graduated in a class of 332 students, the largest class in the history of the school, reflective of the ever-growing populace of Spokane.[6]

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[3] United States of America, Bureau of the Census. Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration. Located: https://www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/6224/images/4547533_00964?pId=112712835 Accessed: June 22, 2022.

[4] *The Spokesman-Review* (Spokane, Washington) November 14, 1930. Located: https://www.newspapers.com/image/567329958/?terms=Gust%20Damascus&match=1 Accessed: June 20, 2022.

[5] *The Spokesman-Review* (Spokane, Washington) July 30, 1934. Located: https://www.newspapers.com/image/567605308/?terms=Gust%20Damascus&match=1 Accessed: June 20, 2022.

[6] *The Spokane Chronicle* (Spokane, Washington) March 27, 1939. Located: https://www.newspapers.com/image/564315262/?terms=Gust%20Damascus&match=1 Accessed: June 20, 2022.

1939 proved to be a most tragic year for the Damascus family. While the family had grown, listing a fifteen-year-old son, James, and a daughter, Eugenia (named after her grandmother) born in 1933 to the census, Gust's father and patriarch of the family, John, passed away. The 1940 census does not mention young Demitri, either. Anastasia filed the census in Seattle, Washington, but still lists the children as living in Spokane. Though both Nick and Gust were old enough to be on their own by 1940, the younger children were not. It is difficult to ascertain the living arrangements for the children. Anastasia moved to Cherry Street in Seattle after John's passing where she worked as cashier at a local restaurant.[7] After graduating from North Central, Gust attended Lewis and Clark college in Spokane before making the decision to continue his education at Washington State College in Pullman, Washington.

WSC Years: "He was very proud of his college, and very fond of his President."[8]

Gust took to college life with the same vigor he had back home in Spokane. He declared a civil engineering major and maintained impressive academic performance through his career Washington State College President E.O. Holland wrote that during his years on the WSC campus Gust "made an excellent record; his graduation in June 1943 with high honors was a fitting close to a fine college career."[9] That is putting it mildly. *The Spokane Chronicle* ran a story in which Gust was inducted into Tau Beta Pi, a scholastic honorary society for engineers.[10] In the 1943 Chinook yearbook, Gust is also listed in the Sigma Tau fraternity, a member of the

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[7] United States of America, Bureau of the Census. Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration. Located: https://www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/2442/images/m-t0627-04381-00094?pId=66282889 Accessed: June 23, 2022.

[8] Letter from Anastasia Damascus to WSC President E.O. Holland, September 13, 1948. Located in Washington State University Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections (MASC) War Records Box 1, Folder 6.

[9] Letter from E.O. Holland to Anastasia Damascus, November 2, 1944. Located in Washington State University Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections (MASC) War Records Box 1, Folder 6.

[10] *The Spokane Chronicle* (Spokane, Washington) April 9, 1942. Located: https://www.newspapers.com/image/568546207/?terms=Gust%20Damascus&match=1 Accessed: June 21, 2022.

Society of American Engineers, and the American Society of Mechanical engineers. The *Spokesman-Review* remembered him as "an active campus figure." Unfortunately, while Gust worked tirelessly to carve out a life for himself and his family, the world plummeted into chaos. World War II in Europe had raged in Europe since Nazi Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. The fascist government, under the leadership of Austrian-born dictator Adolf Hitler, waged war throughout Europe. They conquered both Denmark and Norway in April of 1940, followed by Belgium, the Netherlands, and tiny Luxembourg in May of that same year. Most astonishingly the Germans managed to conquer France in just 39 days, following up that light-speed victory with a massive aerial campaign against the United Kingdom. In 1941 the Germans turned their military aims to the east, conquering Yugoslavia and Gust Damascus's ancestral homeland of Greece in April before betraying and invading the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941. They then made a mistake they did not need to make. Largely to appease their Japanese allies and to satisfy Hitler's ideological fanaticism, but also with an eye to destabilizing American politics, Germany then declared war on the United States on December 11, 1941. By the time Gust was set to graduate from WSC, the United States was dragged into World War II, and as his mother so eloquently wrote "I was and still am so proud of my boy. He worked so hard, had many ambitious plans for his life's work, yet was willing to give it all up for his country and honor."[11]

[11] Letter from Anastasia Damascus to WSC President E.O. Holland, September 13, 1948. Located in Washington State University Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections (MASC) War Records Box 1, Folder 6.

For Honor and Country: Gust Damascus in War and Death

Gust was not the only member of the Damascus family to take up arms for the Republic. Both brothers also joined the military in timer of war. John Damascus, despite listing a "crippled left leg" possible from Polio, even left his scholarship position at the art institute of Chicago to fight in the war.[12] Gust had become a handsome man when he signed up for the service. With a square jaw, big eyes, and the olive skin ubiquitous among people of the Mediterranean, he listed his height at 5'10, weighing 173 pounds with black hair and brown eyes. He registered for the Draft in Colfax Washington, with his application approval coming through on April 19, 1943.[13] In his time remaining at WSC, Gust continued his stellar academic performance, winning academic honors that more than 3,400 students competed to achieve.[14] After graduating Gust began his training for the service. In November of 1943 *The Spokesman-Review* ran an article with the headline "Former W.S.C. Men studying at Harvard," explaining that:

> In further preparation for building military roads, three army lieutenants—all 1943 engineering graduated of W.S.C.—are not taking a seven-week course in soil mechanics at Harvard University. They are: Lieutenant Richard Busch, Uniontown; Lieutenant Joel Johansen, Everett; and Lieutenant Gust Damascus, Seattle.[15]

After his training was completed, Gust was assigned to his unit.

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[12] World War II Draft Registration Card, Records of the Selective Service System. Nick Damascus. Located: https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/53496652:2238?tid=62391298&pid=160070833937&queryId=add46d57c067f18428152570b6ebc18d&_phsrc=xkp20&_phstart=successSource Accessed: June 24, 2022.

[13] World War II Draft Registration Card, Records of the Selective Service System. Gust John Damascus. Located: https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/36879160:2238?tid=62391298&pid=160070833937&queryId=add46d57c067f18428152570b6ebc18d&_phsrc=xkp5&_phstart=successSource Accessed: June 24, 2022.

[14] *The Spokane Chronicle* (Spokane, Washington) March 22, 1943. Located: https://www.newspapers.com/image/564337836/?terms=Gust%20Damascus&match=1 Accessed: March 22, 1943.

[15] *The Spokesman-Review* (Spokane, Washington) November 14, 1943. Located: https://www.newspapers.com/image/564315262/?terms=Gust%22Damascus&match=1 Accessed: March 24, 2022.

As a university educated engineer and an officer, Gust was assigned to one of the unique units in the United States Army Air Corp. He was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the 902 Engineer Air Force Headquarters Company operating out of Bray, Berkshire, England. The 902 was attached to the Ninth Air Force and would play a pivotal role in beating back Nazi forces in Northern France and establishing a beachhead for allied forces to conduct operations on the continent. The 902 was responsible for building vital bridges in combat zones that allowed Allied armor, vehicles, artillery, and much needed supplies to flow to troops across the front. Equally important, they were assigned to building airfields. Air power was the dominant advantage that the Allies, especially the Americans, relied upon when fighting the battle-hardened Wehrmacht, men like Gust Damascus made this crucial advantage possible. After the D-Day landings on June 6, 1944 the Allied forces, including the 902nd and Gust Damascus pierced Axis lines and formed their beach head. As Allied forces battled German armies through July, engineering companies engages in combat and constructed the vital logistical infrastructure needed to carry on the war effort. On August 22, 1944 Gust Damascus was killed in action in Northern France as Allied forces fought to break through German defenses. The news of his death hit those that knew him and the institutions that benefited from his presence hardest.

Gust Damascus Remembered:

On August 21, 1944, the Spokesman-Review published an obituary with a picture of Gust in his military uniform. As word spread, WSC President E.O. Holland penned a letter to Anastasia Damascus: “I was grieved when Registrar Bernard informed me the other day that your son, Second Lieutenant Gust John Damascus, was killed in action in France” wrote President Holland. “I know this letter can do little to relieve your sorrow; yet I hope it may be some satisfaction to you to know that your son is remembered with respect and affection by

those of us who knew him while he was at the State College of Washington."[16] Anastasia penned her thoughts in a thankyou letter to President Holland. She wrote that "I am praying that his sacrifice with that of thousands of other fine boys will not be in vain, and that my other boys may return to me." Both other Damascus brothers did indeed return to their mother, they survived the war and lived out their lives back home, though forever absent the presence of Gust and everything he would have done with his exceptional skills and talents. As newspaper articles, the Chinook yearbook, and the Damascus family grieved the loss of Gust, President Holland set out to ensure that WSC men that lost their lives to make a "finer, brighter world for those who are to follow them" were remembered accordingly.[17]

President Holland endeavored to create brochures and memorials for each and every WSC man that lost his life battling the tyranny of Nazism and Imperialism. In a tragic case of bad timing, it took several years for time Gust's remains to be returned home. When they were finally returned the states in 1948, President Holland was out of town on university business. Letters between Holland and Anastasia reveal that they had both hoped President Holland could have been present. Gust Damascus is forever immortalized in gold letters inscribed on the World War II memorial located at his alma mater in Pullman, Washington. He was laid to rest in the Veterans Memorial Cemetery at the Evergreen Memorial Park in Seattle, Washington. President Holland sent a memorial plaque to Anastasia, as he did with all other Fallen Cougars. He also plans for more memorials and a brochure with all fallen cougars biographies in it. Unfortunately, the planned brochures were never completed. The Fallen Cougars Project is a modern day incarnation of President Holland's desire to properly memorialize, remember, and thank those

[16] Letter from E.O. Holland to Anastasia Damascus, September 22, 1944. Located in Washington State University Manuscripts Archives and Special Collections (MASC). War Records Box 1, Folder 6 and War Records Box 4, Clippings Folder 20A.
[17] Ibid.

Cougars that sacrificed their lives so that all could live free. We hope that this research, this biography, and the accumulated efforts of the Fallen Cougars team do justice to his memory and sacrifice.