

Michael R Militello Bio

Look on the bookshelves of most business leaders today and you are likely to find one or more titles about military leadership and its business applicability on prominent display. For most of those executives, however, military applications to successful business are mere abstractions. If business leaders in Western New York wanted to learn from a flesh-and-blood warrior turned successful businessman, they could simply talk to Michael R Militello.

Militello's journey to becoming a successful businessman didn't start on a battlefield. His experience as an infantryman in Vietnam augmented with entrepreneurial instincts, an acute business sense, responsibility, commitment and the value for loyalty is the hallmark of Militello's reputation for excellence, a reputation he wears as proudly as his Purple Heart and Combat Infantry Badge.

Local Solider

But this isn't a trip that started in Vietnam or before he was drafted in 1968 when a student at the University of New York at Buffalo. While still a high school student on Buffalo's West Side, Militello saw an opportunity to stage and promote dances and live music performances in local VFW posts, that netted him and partner and friend Ron Adimey several hundred dollars a week. For Militello this was a way to help his family put groceries on the table for his five brothers and sisters.

"Our mother raised us on a waitress' salary, so it was important for all of us to pitch in," he says. After Viet Nam he would learn to fine-tune his apparently instinctive entrepreneurial skills into a distinguished career in the competitive restaurant and entertainment business. The ability to see opportunity has carried him to the pinnacle of western New York's hospitality industry. Today, he operates several of the region's most successful restaurants, helped his brother Bobby, an internationally-renowned jazz performers, open one of Buffalo's hottest music venues. Militello stands at the head of his class as one of Buffalo's native sons who works to make his city great.

It has been said that Buffalo is a big time city with small town relationships. What Militello has done, since those early days of high school record hops, is provide the "living room" where Buffalo can meet, enjoy great food and new friends in a comfortable atmosphere and cultivate those relationships.

When you see him today, moving easily among tables, shaking hands, greeting customers, it's easy to forget the bumps in the road. In 1974, a *Buffalo News* reporter reported that Militello, then 26, had built a bar empire with a trademark "Midas Touch." Six years earlier, he was fighting for something more important than his niche in the western New York hospitality trade. He was fighting for his life in the hospitals of Viet Nam, Japan and Valley Forge PA.

On Friday August 13, 1968, Militello was point man for his unit of the storied 25th Infantry Division. He'd been inducted into the Army only seven months earlier. He walked through a hedgerow and into a Viet Cong ambush. Bullets tore into both his legs, knocking him off the trail and behind a tree - a tree that probably saved his life. He returned fire when a friendly grenade left him blind, but helped to drive the attackers out into the open. Militello tied off the wounds to his legs with shreds of his belt and pants, crawling back to the rest of his platoon he blacked out. He awoke to more gunfire and took another bullet through the left thigh this time when the VC counter attacked. When helicopter gunships came on station to support the Americans he was medivaced to a field hospital in Chu - Chi.

Thus he began the next chapter in what would be a long and storied future. "A perfect ending to a perfect day," he now smiles when recalling that trauma. But the end of his combat duty was just the beginning of another chapter in Militello's life.

Surgeons and nurses fought a daily battle to save Michael's legs; his eyesight would have to wait. An artery had been completely severed and the viability of his left leg was in doubt from the trauma of the two bullets that ripped through the thigh and calf. His right calve had a similar bullet wound. Only the skill and the determination of the medical corps at the 12th Evac Hospital kept him intact.

"Our Doctors and nurses fought a war without glory and the only weapon they had was compassion beyond reward," he says. "He credits a nurse named Linda Pickard with saving his legs. She would come to me on her time off and irrigate the wound," he said. "I was told there was little chance of saving my left leg and the doctors put the right one on watch."

The Chinese have a greeting that says, "May you live in interesting times." They didn't coin that expression about Militello but they could have because times were to get even more interesting for the young man from Buffalo's West Side.

For the next two months, the wounded GI was shuffled to Army hospitals in Vietnam and Japan before being reassigned to the military hospital at Valley Forge PA. Militello's convalescence and rehabilitation continued and in December of that year, he was given leave for Christmas with the option of spending it in Buffalo's winter or with relatives in Miami. On December 19, 1968 he boarded an Eastern Airlines DC-8 bound for Miami. The next stop the airliner made, however, was Havana, Cuba. Militello's plane was skyjacked and the first part of his Christmas vacation was spent in Havana.

What do you do for an encore?

"I thought that my life would be headed for a more routine existence after the rarefied air of combat," he said. "But I guess routine just isn't part of my destiny."

Militello and two other servicemen in uniform were isolated from the remaining 145 passengers and spent 30 minutes being questioned by a Cuban military officer.

"The three of us were asked a string of questions about American military involvement in Vietnam," he recalled. "The whole thing was propaganda. The Cubans were very friendly but kept asking the same questions. There was no rough treatment from our hosts but we still didn't feel very comfortable."

Ten hours later, Militello and his fellow passengers did arrive in Miami and he did spend the holidays ensconced on the beach.

So how does this strange odyssey carry a man to a vantage point as a successful entrepreneur and businessman? According to Militello, "some of the best things in life happen by accident."

He recalls being discharged from the Army while still on crutches and coming back to Buffalo to pick up the pieces of his life, returning to finish his education at the University of Buffalo where he was first drafted as a sophomore. Like all returning veterans, he was entitled to unemployment benefits but when he tried to apply for them, he got a stark lesson in how America treated Vietnam veterans at that time.

"I walked into the office on my crutches and in uniform," he recalls. "I was new to all this, so I stopped at the 'Help' desk to ask about procedures. The women behind the desk looked at me with great annoyance and said go to the back of the line like everyone else. I tore up the forms, threw them on her desk and crutch-walked out of the office. I knew at that moment that if I was going to work I was going to have to help myself".

After a brief tenure as a bartender/student on crutches, Militello realized that in a college town like Buffalo, the bar business could be a lucrative enterprise so he started scouting out potential properties he could afford.

"That narrowed the field considerably," he said. "I laugh about it now but didn't laugh then. What I really did was buy myself a job when I bought Mulligan's with friend and Viet Nam vet Kevin Kell."

With a Buffalo police officer as a partner, Michael put \$500 down on the \$12,000 purchase price of saloon deep in the heart of Buffalo's tenderloin district know as Allentown. It was a rough place in a very rough part of town, but all they could afford. He and partner Kevin started applying lessons learned in Vietnam to his new career as a businessman.

"We started hiring Vietnam vets at the outset," he said. "There were a lot guys like us who came home needing a job. We learned a lot of about loyalty and commitment in Vietnam. When all you have to rely on is each other, you tend to do what you have to for your common survival. Vets were great hires because they worked hard and we're loyal to a fault."

Militello and his partner fast-tracked a timeline to get the bar ready for a St. Patrick's Day opening - a very big day for Buffalo's bar trade. His marketing savvy kicked in when naming the new establishment with a St. Paddy's theme and Mulligan's Brick Bar was born.

Militello started to build a loyal customer base hosting teen dances in high school. Many of the young people who partied the night away at Militello's high school dances were now of drinking age. Given Buffalonians tend to stick with what's familiar Militello found his dance crowd was now the core of his bar crowd. From that inauspicious beginning, his career took off like a rocket and he's never looked back.

The success of the Brick Bar in 1970 led to the opening of Mulligan's Museum of Fine Arts and Café on Buffalo's north side two years later. The Café was a favorite of celebrities as well as the Buffalo Bills', Braves and Sabres and the "in place" to dine and dance throughout the 70s and 80s.

His growing hospitality company then took over food and beverage service at Kleinhans Music Hall, the home of the world famous Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra. In 1973 he bought and renovated a large recreational complex, The Sunset Bay Beach Club, on the shores of Lake Erie about 35 miles south of Buffalo.

When Buffalo's Theater District began attracting thousands of playgoers to its venues, Militello saw yet another opportunity. He acquired the Bijou Grille in the heart of the District. Rather than make the Bijou just another restaurant, he introduced Buffalo to California Cuisine. Enlisting his sister Beatrice Montione and her 24 years of restaurant experience, Militello and family made the Bijou the happening place to be on theater nights.

Repeating a pattern that was now his trademark, his success led to expansion. First he enclosed an outdoor patio and increased his seating by 30 percent. Then he acquired the second floor of his building and equipped it to handle small and mid-sized private dining complete with its own display kitchen called The Bijou Club Level. The Bijou has become a staple of downtown entertainment.

Theater District officials have hailed Militello as an "entrepreneurial visionary who have not only survived but thrived during downtown Buffalo's lean times."

Capitalizing on Market Changes

For a lot of businessmen, that kind of success would be the end game of a career. Militello is not "a lot of businessmen." He once again recognized a need and used it as an opportunity. Michael opened a cigar bar across the street from the Bijou. The name? The Havana Club, of course - a reminder of an unexpected visit to that Caribbean city.

A major spin off of the Bijou success has been Food Arts Concessions, LLC that he started with long time friend Vincent Carriere in December 2000. Thus began his foray into the competitive corporate food service business. Food Arts Concessions LLC provides food service kiosks for area several hospitals and business and bids on corporate and recreational concession contracts. Food Arts already has sixteen locations throughout the region resulting from a contract with the community's largest health care providers, Kaleida Group of Hospitals and Niagara Falls Memorial as well as other local manufacturer Westwood Pharmaceuticals and the Amherst Recreation center.

“I have always wanted to build on the Bijou brand name and Food Arts Concessions will greatly assist in that effort,” he said. “We roast our own signature Bijou Brand of Gourmet Coffees and bake our own food products in our headquarters commissary at the Tri-Main Building giving us an edge over our out of town competition.”

Militello and Carriere are also partners in yet another restaurant venture, the Sonoma Grille, which debuted in June 2003 in suburban Amherst, NY. The Sonoma Grille has already achieved notoriety for its cuisine, décor, and impeccable service. To date this young company employees over two hundred employees, and is considered one of the fastest growing companies in western New York.

Having achieved his success in Buffalo, Militello never passes up a chance to give back to his city. In 1994, Buffalo elected a new mayor for the first time in 16 years. When the city wanted an inaugural ball to rival those that welcome in new presidents, it turned to Militello. In a very short time, he had planned and executed “Buffalo best party”. The city still talks about the grandeur of that gala event that raised \$200,000 for the Buffalo Police Athletic League.

“When you have achieved a reputation among your friends and neighbors, you never want to deliver a product that is less than excellence,” he says. “People expect quality but their expectations are never as high as the standards I set for myself. I like to do things right.”

This second generation Italian-American has done it right so often his name is synonymous with “doing things right” wherever he goes.

His motto has been and still is . . .something new is always needed.

Militello resides in Snyder, NY with his wife Marilyn and daughters Marilyn and Stephanie. His son Scott, wife Kate and granddaughter Lyla live near by.

Community Service

Erie County, Work Force Investment Board, Vice Chairman 1999 – 2005
 Market Arcade Film and Arts center, Board member and Treasurer 2000 – 2005
 Theatre District Association Board Member and Treasurer 1990 - 2001
 I Love New York Tourism board of commissioners 1977 – 1984
 Erie Basin Marina, waterfront development committee 1978 – 1980
 Presidents Council on Small Business 1978 -79

Military Service:

Viet Nam – Combat wounded 1968 – 69
 Royal Order of the Purple Heart –1968
 Combat Infantry service medal
 New York State Distinguished Service Medal

Education:

Graduate Lafayette High school 1964
 University of New York at Buffalo 1965- 67 (drafted) 69-70
 Business and Sociology major

For More information contact:

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MRM Hospitality Group:

MRM Hospitality Consulting Services LLC
 Sonoma Grille web: www.sonomagrille.com
 Bijou Grille web: www.bijougrille.com
 Food Art Concessions LLC/ Bijou Cafe’