

## John Gouras

In 1940, John Gouras was living the American dream, having become a naturalized citizen of the country he referred to as “The greatest country in the world!” at just 35.

At just 15 years old John immigrated to the US from Patmos, Greece, which was occupied by Italy at the time. He arrived with only a handful of English words and less than a handful of money. But, he embraced his new home and took advantage of every opportunity presented to him. John started out as a busboy, working his way up through the restaurant business, learning as much as possible and saving every penny he earned. In 1928, he partnered with his brother-in-law and bought his first restaurant in Jackson, MS, achieving his dream.

Even when a fire destroyed his first restaurant, John remained positive. John and his partners boldly built the Mayflower Café in the midst of the Great Depression, which remains one of the most successful restaurants in Jackson. Located near the capitol, its most frequent customers were senators, representatives, as well as the state’s governors. John had a gregarious and warm personality, and was known to make friends with everyone that visited his restaurant.

When the United States entered World War II, John felt the call of duty. He enlisted in the Army Air Force on February 19, 1942, and was based at MacDill Field in Tampa, Florida. Soon after World War II began Gen. William L. Lee was named supervisor of training for B-26 groups at MacDill Field. This is likely where John and Gen. Lee first met. In April of 1943 Gen. Lee assumed command of the 49th Bombardment Wing, the bomb wing that John was assigned to.

In early 1944, John embarked out of Camp Patrick Henry-New Hampton Roads to Oran (as part of the 49<sup>th</sup> Bomb Wing of the Fifteenth Air Force) and then to Italy. John, by now a technical sergeant, worked as a supply officer under Gen. Lee at the headquarters level. But he also served as Gen. Lee’s unofficial “assistant” and the two developed a strong friendship, despite their differing backgrounds and ranks.

Gen. Lee hosted several strategic meetings with the various bomber wing commanders, including Gen. Nathan Twining. Gen. Lee knew he could count on Sgt. Gouras to prepare and host a delicious banquet for all of his military

guests, using his restaurant expertise. John was honored to help and Gen. Lee often invited him to join his senior guests in conversation. John was comfortable around everyone, regardless of their rank and authority, so he naturally bantered with Gen. Twining, Gen. Lee, and other distinguished leaders.

John was honorably discharged from the service at the end of 1944. He returned to the Mayflower Café and the restaurant business in Jackson, MS.

In 1946, he revisited his birthplace on the island of Patmos, which by now had been reunited with Greece. Now that World War II was over and Italy had been defeated in large part due to the efforts of the Fifteenth Air Force, including the 49<sup>th</sup> Bomb Wing, Patmos had been reunited with its Greek motherland. This was the first time in John's lifetime that Patmos was officially part of Greece. Imagine how proud he must have been!

John married Anna Gazis in 1946. They settled in Jackson and had 2 daughters (Anastasia and Jeannie). John was a well-loved Jackson fixture, as well as a successful businessman and restaurateur. He passed away in 1980.

John and Gen. Lee maintained their lifelong friendship after the war through correspondence, personal visits and phone calls. Gen. Lee and his family visited John's family enough times that the guest room was christened as Col. Lee's room!

In retrospect, it is interesting that these two seemingly opposite people grew into such close friends. Thrown together by war, the two united through their shared values: a strong work ethic, deep loyalty, and a passion for their country.