

2 Navy Veterans Set Sail for a Day at the Casino

Written by Administrator
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Photo



Dominick Morea, 89, left, and Al Dembro, 86, at the Empire City Casino in Yonkers on Tuesday. Credit Victor J. Blue for The New York Times

It's not exactly ["On the Town"](#) when these two sailors get together for some gambling.

Dominick Morea, after all, is 89. Al Dembro is 86. Both move significantly more slowly than when they served in the United States Navy in [World War II](#) in the Pacific.

Both are native New Yorkers, and they now live across West 58th Street from each other, near Columbus Circle. They live alone independently and have come to rely on each other's company and care. They meet every morning on the street for coffee and go out for breakfast on Sundays.

Every couple of weeks, they hit the slots at the [Empire City Casino](#) at Yonkers Raceway, and Tuesday — [Veterans Day](#) — was one of those days.

"It's something we enjoy, but it's not like we're burning through our rent money or anything," Mr. Morea said.

Mr. Morea pulled his Ford Escape out of his building's garage and picked up Mr. Dembro in front of the Hudson Hotel, a now-chic spot where Mr. Dembro has lived in an inexpensive rent-stabilized apartment since 1968.

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Mr. Morea, who lives inexpensively himself, wore a chunky Navy commemorative ring on his left ring finger, and a “[World War II](#) Veteran” baseball hat.

He helped Mr. Dembro into the car, loaded Mr. Dembro’s walker into the back and then helped buckle him into the passenger seat.

“If there’s one thing that the war taught us, it was to look out for one another,” said Mr. Morea, a retired shop teacher. “There’s not many of us left, and when I see another vet, I feel something special toward them because they sacrificed the way I did.”

Once at the casino, Mr. Dembro, who has had several heart operations, stepped out carefully and said, “It’s not easy, I tell you.”

Mr. Morea, swaggering through a sea of electronic slot machines, said, “There’s one machine here that’s ready to hit; the trick is to find it.”

He led the way to a bank of slots labeled “Quick Hit.” They sat several seats apart and began pumping money into the flashing slots.

“I don’t give him advice and he doesn’t give me advice,” Mr. Morea said. A woman at the slot machine next to him spied his hat and thanked him for his service.

Watching the computerized slots spin, Mr. Morea recalled growing up in the South Bronx during [the Great Depression](#), one of 17 children. He sold newspapers, and stuffed his knickers full of empty Coca-Cola bottles at Yankee Stadium to redeem. He also helped his father, an ice delivery man, carry heavy ice blocks up to cold-water flats on Third Avenue, he said.

He was drafted at age 18 in 1943 and became a radioman third class on the light cruiser Vincennes, he said.

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“At that time, you thought the war meant either life or death for the world,” said Mr. Morea, who recalled seeing the aircraft carrier [Intrepid](#) get hit by kamikazes. Then there was the devastating typhoon off the Philippine coast that sank three destroyers.

In the carpeted comfort of a casino, he compared the randomness of the slot games to a sailor’s fate in the South Pacific.

“You had hundreds of kids going down on each of the tin cans,” he said, using Navy jargon for the destroyers. “That could have been me.”

After 29 years teaching shop at a public high school in Chelsea, Mr. Morea worked until last year as a substitute teacher at an East Harlem high school, where the students nicknamed him D-Block, after a rap group, a name that the teachers and principal also used for him.

Mr. Morea, who turns 90 next year — on June 6, D-Day — cashed out and walked over to Mr. Dembro, who was rapidly losing money.

“I had people winning on both sides of me, but my machine wasn’t listening to me,” said Mr. Dembro, who grew up in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, and enlisted in the Navy as a teenager near the end of the war. He served as a seaman on the submarine rescue ship Greenlet.

Mr. Dembro went on to serve for six years as a Port Authority police officer but left the job, he said, because he “hated it down there in the tunnels.” He later worked as a bartender, he said.

Heading out, Mr. Morea helped Mr. Dembro back into the car, and once back on West 58th Street, he helped him back to the Hudson Hotel. Mr. Dembro wound up losing the entire \$300 he had brought.

Mr. Morea came out ahead on the day, by \$3. He assured his old Navy buddy that he would have better luck their next day out on the town.

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“You’re due, Al,” Mr. Morea said, and then he told him he would see him in the morning.

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