



VETERANS DAY

Memories of those who served



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EMPTY PARK, FULL HEART

Veterans advocate remembers those who made a difference

BY BILL WILSON

wwilson@annistonstar.com

This year, the familiar faces at the Veterans Day Ceremony at Centennial Park will be a memory, as the annual event has been canceled due to COVID-19.

Normally the pageantry of the day includes a parade in downtown Anniston and the ceremony at the park, where area veterans are saluted with speeches, music and a tribute to fallen comrades.

Ken Rollins, a veterans advocate and organizer, said it is the first time in 30 years the event has had to be canceled.

The veterans observance isn't alone as a casualty of COVID. Organizers have also had to cancel the Memorial Day ceremony, the law enforcement ceremony and the 911 remembrance ceremony.

Continued on Page 4



Ken Rollins

Photo by Bill Wilson / The Anniston Star



Photo by Stephen Gross / The Anniston Star

Eli Henderson salutes during the 27th Annual Veterans Day Ceremony at Centennial Memorial Park in Anniston in 2017.

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Eli Henderson

Photo by Bill Wilson / The Anniston Star

Continued from Page 2

"Everything has had to be canceled at the park this year," Rollins said.

"It's been draining to me," he conceded. "However, realizing the circumstances we are under, it's nobody's fault and it's just the right thing to do. But it's really sad that we don't get to do that. We don't get to go up there and honor our fellow veterans."

He noted that a major Veterans Day parade in Birmingham was canceled as well.

"We'll be all right," he said.

Over the years, personalities who have taken part in the ceremony have passed away, leaving memories and stories.

Rollins highlighted some of the notable figures who played a huge part in the success of the ceremonies over the years.

Eli Henderson: 'He was just a doer'

Eli Henderson and Rollins were close friends. Henderson, an ex-Marine, was a regular at the various veterans ceremonies and always greeted everyone with a broad smile, quick wit and heartfelt sincerity.

Henderson died in August at the age of 83, following com-

Continued on Page 5



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Fouad Khalil Aide

Photo by Bill Wilson / The Anniston Star

Continued from Page 4

plications due to COVID-19.

"I've dialed his number three times in the past two weeks. It's just a habit. We talked at least three times every week," Rollins said.

When Henderson was in the hospital with COVID-19, Rollins tried to call Henderson's family members one day to check on him, but no one answered their phones. Rollins then dialed Henderson's cell phone, expecting a family member to pick up.

"Eli answered that phone from his hospital bed, and even though his voice was not that clear, he got out two, 'I love you's.' Two hours later he died," Rollins said.

"He was just a doer," Rollins added.

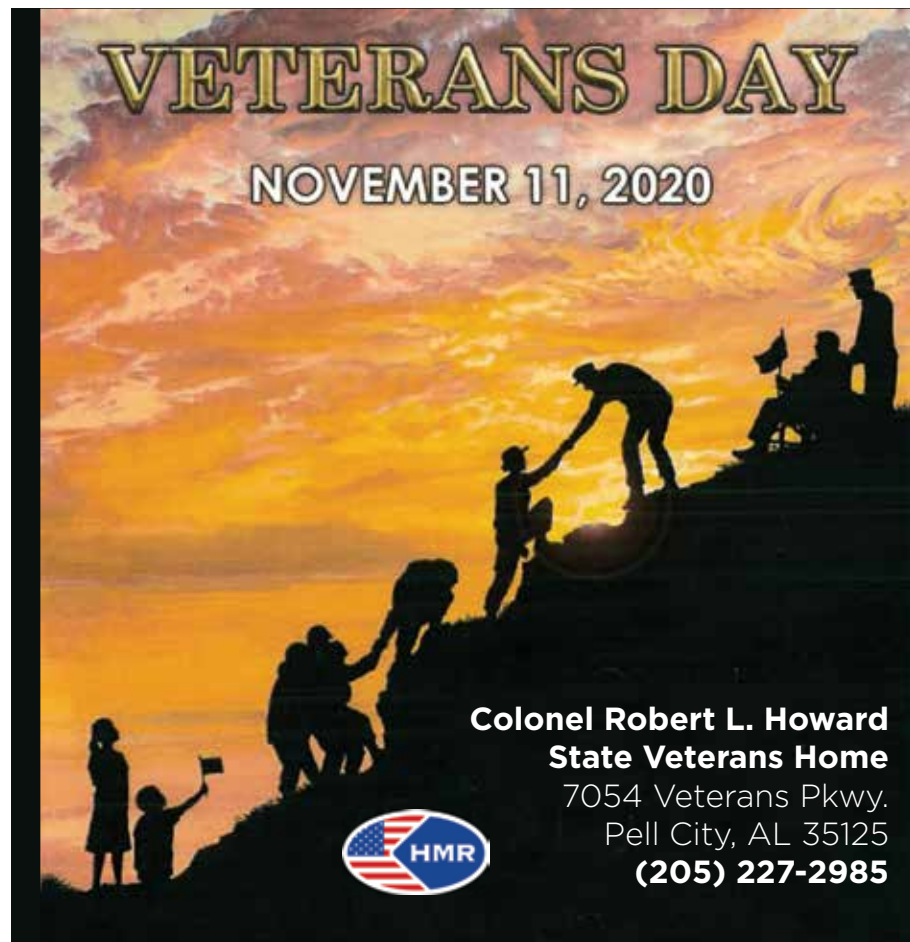
As a Calhoun County commissioner, Henderson represented District 3 but would go out of his way to help anyone no matter which district they lived in, Rollins said.

One time, a woman in Piedmont called the commission office to complain about wild dogs in her yard, Rollins said. Even though it was not in Henderson's district, he instructed animal control to tend to the mongrels.

Fouad Khalil Aide: 'Bigger than life'

Maj. Fouad Khalil Aide was a participant in the fallen comrade ceremony. Aide was a decorated veteran and served three tours in Vietnam and was reactivated to serve in Desert Shield/Desert Storm. Rollins said he misses Fouad most of all.

"I've got his beret in my vehicle and it's there for a reason, so every time I open

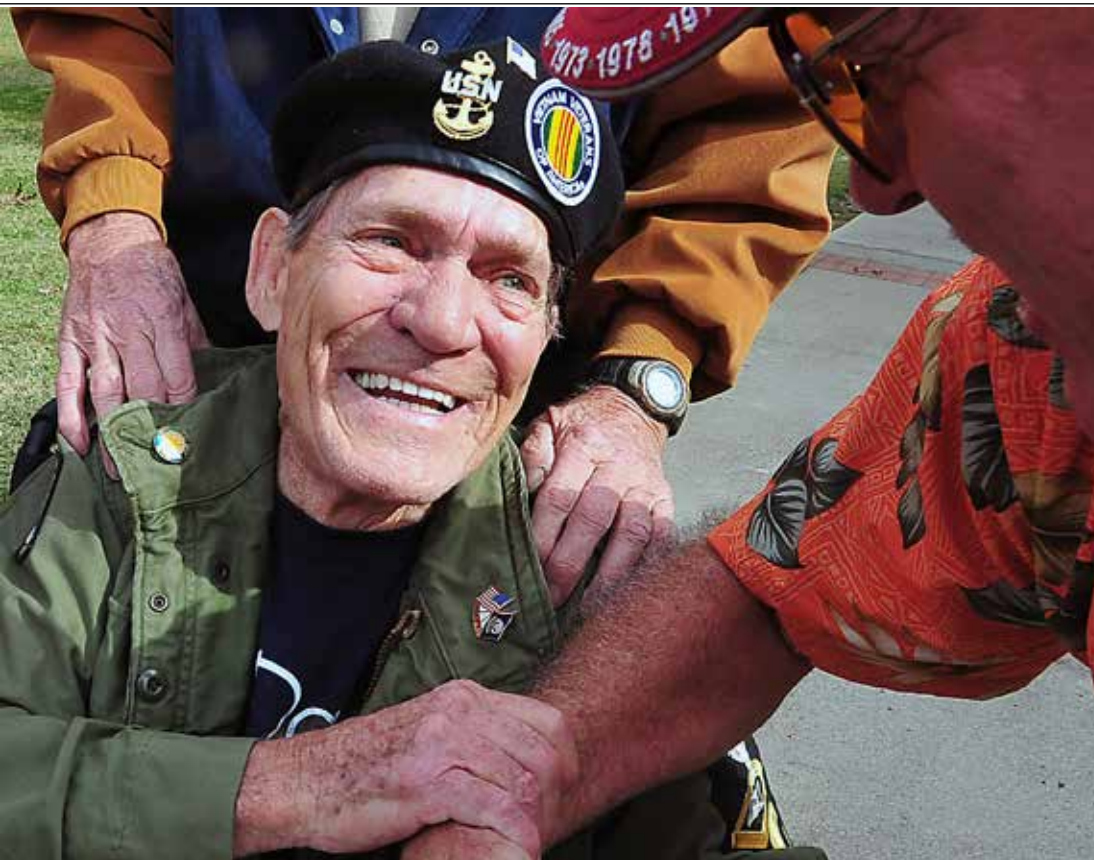
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Howard Norton

Photo by Bill Wilson / The Anniston Star

Continued from Page 5

that door that's the first thing I see ... that beret with all those pins on it," Rollins said.

Rollins said he still keeps in touch with Fouad's family since his death in 2009.

Rollins said that of all of the participants in the various Memorial Day and Veterans Day ceremonies, he misses Fouad the most.

"Fouad was a bigger-than-life person, of all things he did from being a linguist — he spoke all these languages — he was over all these foreign officers out there at Ft. McClellan, he was a military policeman, he was a wounded combat veteran of Vietnam."

Rollins said if you had a puzzle of a patriot and a veteran, that puzzle would be Fouad.

Howard Norton: 'He would do anything for anybody'

"Howard was a character, but a good kind of character. To this day, his name is tossed up quite frequently," Rollins said.

Rollins said that Norton, a Vietnam veteran, had a Plymouth automobile that he had wrecked and it could only turn to the left.

Norton lived in Blue Mountain and would drive that afflicted vehicle to the Waffle House on Quintard.

"He couldn't turn right and go down Quintard, so he had to turn left," said Rollins.

Continued on Page 7

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Norton had developed an intricate maze of streets to follow, so that he could arrive at the Waffle House without having to make any right turns.

When he was ready to leave, Norton had to find someone to pull him sideways a little bit to get him out of the parking lot, Rollins said.

"He was a character," Rollins said. "He would do anything for anybody, anytime, anywhere. He was not just a talker. As a matter of fact, Centennial Park would probably never have gotten built if not for Howard."

Dan Long: Always ready to help

Rollins remembers the first time he met Dan Long. "I addressed the first young Marine group he had," Rollins said. "We had a relationship: I'm Army and he was a Marine, and we had a lot of fun picking on each other."

Long was the Commandant of the Allan Ray Chaffin Detachment #1329 of the Marine Corps League in Anniston.

"If I had somebody in need, I called Dan," Rollins said.

One time, Rollins said, a member's mother was about to be kicked out of a nursing home because of a \$5,000 bill.

"I called Dan, and within two hours he had raised \$5,000," Rollins said.



Dan Long

Submitted photo

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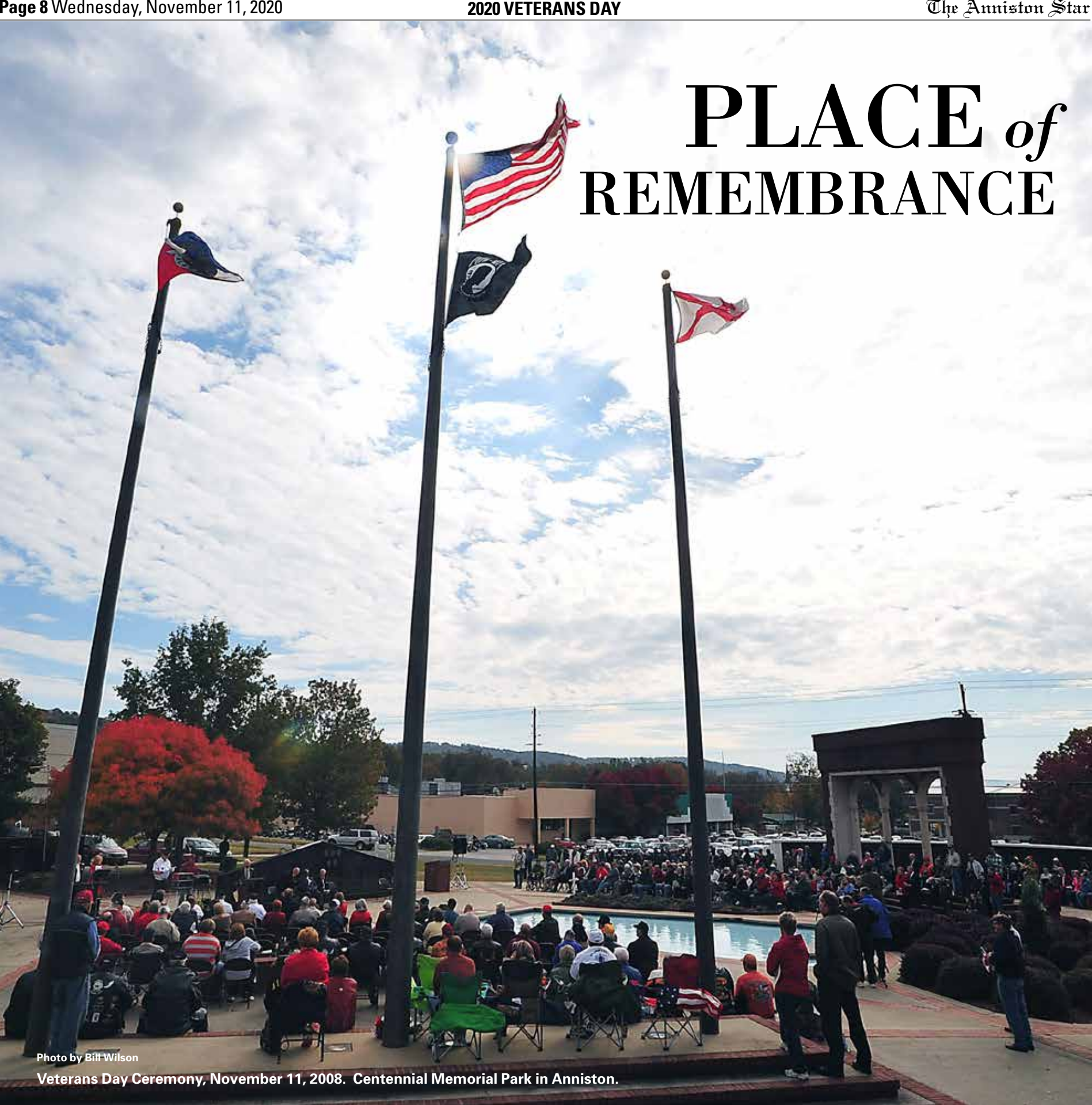


Photo by Bill Wilson

Veterans Day Ceremony, November 11, 2008. Centennial Memorial Park in Anniston.

Centennial Park is crowded with the spirits of each name on the black granite walls

BY BILL WILSON

wwilson@annistonstar.com

In July of 1990, Ken Rollins signed a contract with a contractor to build a Vietnam memorial. The City of Anniston had given him permission, and the Alabama Legislature had given him the green light.

"I had no money, but I had a location," Rollins said. "Sen. Gerald Dial had gotten that legislation approved for me, him and Doug Ghee. So I had the authorization, but I had no money," Rollins said.

Rollins said that Howard Norton went to Eli Henderson to solve the financial shortcomings to make the park a reality.

Centennial Park will be empty this Veterans Day, but it will be crowded with the spirit of each name on the black granite walls.

Rollins wrote a poem as a tribute to his comrade Allan Ray Chaffin, who died in Vietnam in 1967. The poem, entitled "Name on a Wall," is at the park not too far from Chaffin's name on the Korean War wall.

Rollins said he wrote the poem after talking with Chaffin's mother about how he talks to the names of the fallen on the memorial walls.

"They are real. They are not just phone book names," Rollins said.

"I touch the names and I talk to them and say, 'What would you have been had you lived?'"



Photo by Bill Wilson

Photos of two past veterans: Howard Norton and Maj. Fouad K. Aide.

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‘Hard to forget’

Piedmont man was part of Normandy invasion of 1944

BY BRIAN ANDERSON

The Anniston Star

Editor's note: This story was originally published in 2014. Roland Cronan passed away in 2015.

Roland Cronan said it was hard to grab the rocks on the beaches of Normandy because they were covered in blood. He was just thankful it wasn't his own.

It had been 70 years since the Piedmont native and World War II veteran participated in one of the largest operations in U.S. military history. On June 6, 1944, Cronan and hundreds of thousands of other Allied troops landed in Normandy, France, where they pushed into German-occupied territory. Cronan, just 21 at the time, said he knew he could have ended up like many of the young men who died in France. He even shared a conversation about it with a fellow soldier on the beach that day.

“He said, ‘Alabama, you can kiss seeing the States again goodbye,’” Cronan said. “We didn't think we were going to come back home.”

If it was up to Cronan, he wouldn't have been a veteran. At 19, the Piedmont man who said he had never traveled farther than Jacksonville or Gadsden found himself drafted and off to Camp Hood, Texas, for basic training.

“I remember coming home and my mother had the letter, and I asked, ‘What's that?’” Cronan recalled. “I knew because she was crying, it was serious.”

Two years later, he was in France, and part of history as an infantryman on the front lines in Normandy.

Cronan smiled when asked about his military service, and admitted he got nervous talking about it. Although he insisted there were a lot of great memories from his military duty, what happened on D-Day was hard to put into words, even though he thought about it every night.

“It's hard to forget,” Cronan said. “But it's hard to explain.”

After the war, Cronan returned to Piedmont and to his wife, Frances, whom he had married two years before being drafted. He worked in the cotton mills before retiring. It was exactly the life he would have lived had he not

gone to war, he said. Cronan said he would have liked to have gone back to France to see the memorial to fallen soldiers, but never had the opportunity to do so.

He said he was happy to have stuck to his hometown all his life, a community he said he loved and cherished. In fact, even more than old war stories, Cronan liked to tell what happened to him shortly after going to the Dug-

ger Mountain Assisted Living home in Piedmont. Around Christmas time, a group of high school students came to sing carols to the residents, and they were especially excited when they learned of Cronan's military history.

“They all came in and hugged him around the neck,” said Daniel Pointer, a close friend of Cronan's who visited him often. “And they all said, ‘Thank you for your service.’”



World War II veteran Roland Cronan of Piedmont, photographed in 2014.

Trent Penny/Anniston Star file



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‘We had our orders’

Anniston veteran recalls D-Day, Allies’ push across Europe

BY GRAHAM MILDRUM

The Anniston Star

Editor’s note: This story was originally published in 2009.

On June 6, 1944, more than 160,000 Allied troops, 5,000 ships and 13,000 airplanes cracked the western wall of Hitler’s Fortress Europe at a series of rocky beaches and cliffs called Normandy.

Hilman Prestridge was there when boats struggled through 20-foot waves to send men into German defenses. He was one of the first to wade ashore into a nightmare of bullets, explosions and twisted wire on D-Day.

Prestridge landed on Omaha Beach, the same stretch of sand and rock immortalized in books, magazines and the 1998 film “Saving Private Ryan.”

His boat’s pilot dropped him and his fellow soldiers in waist-deep water, leaving them to wade ashore with 60 pounds on their backs.

“We were trying to get on soil, the Germans firing on us, the Germans firing at us,” he said.

Ahead of them lay a network of cannons, mortars, machine guns and hard-eyed men.

Prestridge was reluctant to talk about exactly what happened on the bullet-swept beach. He skipped around the event, talking about a unit he didn’t serve with, or a theological invasion of Japan.

“We had our orders to do what we done and we done it,” Prestridge said.

He was keenly aware of the invasion’s importance in history, as the starting point for the Allies’ push into Western Europe. But he refused to take too much credit for his role in the event.

“The war is war, regardless of where

you’re at,” he said. “And it’s not pretty.”

He served with the Army Amphibious Force, trying to help the mass of men involved in the largest invasion in history.

He wasn’t originally intended for such a role. Trained for field artillery, he was headed to the Pacific to fight the Japanese. But his orders were amended, sending him to Europe instead.

The Pacific artillery unit to which he’d been assigned was later wiped out — the first point, he said, where he realized God was watching out for him.

Continuing his story, Prestridge said he jumped to the vicious fight for the French city of St. Lo. Four divisions of U.S. troops battled for, lost and retook the small town after cutting through a messy landscape of ditches, walls and hills.

Then the Army took him out of the fight. He saw his brother-in-law head toward the front as he marched back. Prestridge almost joined him at the Battle of the Bulge, Germany’s final attempt to break the Allied line.

Prestridge said God, once again, stood in the way and kept his unit from going to the frigid battlefield, where many U.S. soldiers froze to death. Others were taken prisoner.

He said he and his brother-in-law still debated who had it harder — Prestridge’s rush across dangerous open space at Normandy, or his brother-in-law’s slow grind across a frozen battlefield.

Prestridge said he didn’t think of the war as much as he used to, and he won’t say much about what happened that day at the beach. However, all too aware of his membership in the shrinking fraternity of World War II veterans, he worked to make sure the terrible hours of that day are not forgotten. He was active, along with other veterans, in raising money to build the D-Day Memorial in Bedford, Va.



Steven Gross/Anniston Star File

WWII veteran Hilman Prestridge, photographed in 2016 at the annual Memorial Day ceremony at Centennial Memorial Park in Anniston.

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'Never forget'

Pearl Harbor survivors reflect on that infamous day

BY CAMERON STEELE

The Anniston Star

Editor's note: This story was originally published in 2010.

On the morning of Dec. 7, 1941, 24-year-old Glenn McNeill was asleep in his bed at the U.S. Army's Schofield Barracks in Oahu, Hawaii.

22-year-old George Murray, also stationed at Schofield Barracks, was headed to work at the chemical weapons depot on the island.

While McNeill slept and Murray went to work, U.S. Navy officer Paul Joyce was shining his shoes on the U.S.S. Utah, a battleship stationed in Pearl Harbor. Once his shoes were spotless, Joyce planned to make a trip inland to Honolulu, where he wanted to celebrate a promotion to second-class petty officer with "a girl he was sweet on."

Meanwhile, 19-year-old William Nestor was already on his way to Honolulu from Fort Barrette, an Army installation in Oahu where he was stationed as a sea-coast artillery officer.

But neither Nestor nor Joyce would make it to Honolulu that day. McNeill would be startled awake by bombs and the whirring of airplane engines. Murray's work to secure the chemical weapons stored at the island depot would become more important than he ever imagined.

Their lives changed forever after Dec. 7, 1941, but all four of them lived to tell the story of the morning the Japanese launched their attack on Pearl Harbor.

"I'm very proud of it," Joyce said as he, McNeill, Murray and Nestor gathered around an Anniston living room to tell that story.

Nestor agreed, pointing out that although all four men lived through Pearl Harbor to fight in several longer, harsher battles, the Japanese attack that sparked America's entry into WWII is something they think about every day.

"We'll never forget it," Nestor said. He

gestured to the cup of coffee in his hand, the newspaper on the living room table in front of him and the television set in the corner next to where McNeill sat. "Different things remind us of it (Pearl Harbor) every day, from war films on TV to newspaper articles. And the one thing we'll never forget is all the friends who died."

"Yes," McNeill agreed. "To be here alive today, I'm so grateful."

'Remember Pearl Harbor'

"What I remember is the smoke, the airplanes in the sky," Nestor said, quietly sinking back in the oversized armchair where he sat, falling into the memories of a 19-year-old boy on a Sunday afternoon trip to Honolulu:

As Nestor and his friends drove their pick-up truck along a dirt road overlooking Pearl Harbor, they noticed thick, black smoke rising from the water.

Nestor said he and his friends stopped the truck, jumped out and ran to the edge of a cliff to peer down at the Harbor.

"We stood there ... we could see sailors dropping off into the water. We could see fire and smoke," Nestor said.

Tears rimmed Joyce's eyes as he listened to Nestor speak of watching the attacks from the cliff.

"At first, we thought the attacks were sabotage (from someone stationed at Pearl Harbor)," Nestor said. "But a man pulled up behind us and pointed up. We looked up and saw the aircraft for the first time. We were shocked. No one expected an aircraft to come that far at that time."

As Nestor and his friends hurried back to their artillery posts at Fort Barrette, Joyce was struggling to find a way off the overturned U.S.S. Utah. The Japanese had struck the ship with a torpedo, causing it to flip on its side.

Joyce was trapped underwater, surrounded by dead and dying sailors. As water poured through the portholes, Joyce maneuvered his way out of a half-jammed hatch and into the water. He swam to the beach with two other men and managed to save a drowning sailor

on his way towards shore.

"I cannot say I was scared. I cannot say I wasn't," Joyce said. "I just know the good Lord was with me, and I stayed at the beach in the water until it was all clear."

Back on the island of Oahu, at the Schofield Barracks, McNeill and his fellow infantrymen raced to assemble their defense positions on the island.

As he prepared to get into position, McNeill remembered passing the burning, sinking battleships in the harbor.

"I was looking ... staring at the ships as they burned, but I didn't have time to pay any attention with the planes flying overhead."

Meanwhile, Murray's attention was focused on the chemical weapons depot

as he tried to ensure the attacks didn't cause a dangerous chemical leak. As the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, Murray raced across Oahu handing out gas masks to civilians in case such a leak occurred.

Murray shook his head as he remembered and said it feels like yesterday and another lifetime all at once.

The Pearl Harbor veterans said they get together for a lunch date every month to exchange war stories they've all heard one hundred times over by now. The four met after ending their military service stationed at Fort McClellan.

"I still got my underwear and ring I wore during the Pearl Harbor attack," Joyce said as his friends laughed, clapped and murmured. "It's true!"



Bill Wilson/Anniston Star File

Pearl Harbor survivor Glenn McNeill passed away in 2012 at the age of 95.



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