



VETERANS
DAY 2024

With respect, honor and
gratitude to those who served

OXFORD

Veterans to learn about benefit changes, other services at library event

BY ASHLEY MORRISON
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OXFORD — The Oxford Public Library is gearing up to host a veterans fair that will offer a number of resources to former service members and their families.

On Nov. 14 at 10 a.m., the library, in partnership with the Veterans Administration, will host the event job-fair style, bringing in representatives from various agencies that serve veterans as well as different departments within the VA.

These agencies and representatives will provide resources for veterans and family members on topics such as compensation claims and health plan enrollments. Agency representatives will be present at the fair to allow the vets to shop for whatever they might need, some of which will be providing on-the-spot signup options, library director Amy Henderson said.

The Elks Lodge of Oxford will be providing lunch for those who attend. According to VA representative John Pinion, the annual event is expected to see its largest participation yet due to the inclusion of an on-site claims clinic.

“We’re going to be doing a claims clinic where the Federal Benefits Administration will actually be there processing claims for veterans on-site, so they will have computers set up to help veterans understand compensation and pension claims, have them file for these claims, have them get an update on where their claim is. So there’ll be a lot of things there that day,” Pinion said.

The reason fairs such as this one are important, according to Pinion, is that the veterans have benefits that can sometimes be confusing, especially when the laws are constantly changing. Bringing all of the resources to one place can help folks navigate their benefits more easily.

For example, the PACT Act — which is a law that enhances VA health care and benefits for veterans exposed to burn pits, Agent Orange and other toxic substances according to the VA’s website — introduced significant changes to veterans’ benefits in March of this year, making many



Social media

The Oxford Public Library is gearing up to host a veterans fair that will offer a number of resources to former service members and their families.

conditions presumptive.

The informational fair aims to educate veterans about these changes and how they affect their benefits. Veterans from various eras, including Korea, Vietnam, and other war zones, may have their benefits affected by the PACT Act.

The following companies and

programs will have representatives at the library during the fair at 110 East 6th Street in Oxford from 10 a.m. until 1 p.m.

- The VA Homeless Outreach
- VA Primary Care Healthy Living Team
- Health Care for Homeless Veterans
- Intimate Partner Violence

Assistance

- MyHealtheVet (VA)
- Bradford Health
- First Command Financial
- Medicare advisors
- Alabama Employment Service
- 22zero
- University of Montevallo
- National Guard Family

Readiness

- Sexual Assault Response Coordinator
- Visiting Angels
- Veterans Upward Bound
- Alabama Department of Veteran Affairs
- Disabled American Veterans
- Federal Veteran Benefits Administration

The Anniston Star

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Victor Hernandez plays Taps on the trumpet during Anniston High School’s annual Veterans Day program held on Nov. 9, 2023.

‘I wanted to serve’

Anniston students learn the meaning of freedom during Veterans Day program

BY BILL WILSON
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Anniston High School was full of patriotic thank yous Nov. 9, 2023, for the annual Veterans Day program.

The program — saluting the men and women of the Armed Forces who have served our country — was held in the school’s auditorium, which was decorated in red, white and blue that provided a patriotic backdrop for various speakers and musical tributes.

Before she addressed the hundreds of students, keynote speaker Tion Wright, a student at Jacksonville State University, said she is not only speaking to the students but veterans who attended the program.

“I do what I do for the people before and the people after me,

and to me they’re the people who are after me (referring to the students) and I hope that they can one day do the same thing that I’m doing,” she said.

When Wright took to the podium she stressed the benefits of being in the National Guard.

“I have received a lot of benefits from the National Guard, it definitely has helped pay for school,” Wright said.

Wright said when she was in the JROTC at nearby Vincent High School she studied a lot and participated in community service.

“For me service is giving what we cherish for others,” Wright said, “I joined to serve and I’ve given a lot of my time but I know it’s worth it especially the people who are in front of me and the people behind me.”

Wright then doubled down on

thanking veterans.

“For those who are retired from serving, thank you for your sacrifice, for your commitment in everything you do for our country,” She said.

Wright told the crowd if they see a veteran to remember to thank them for their service, for their sacrifice and their courage.

“Remember to thank those that are currently serving and those who are away from their families, it’s not easy to do what we do but we do it,” she said.

Next to speak was Chris Holmes who has served four years in the Army and six in the National Guard.

“As far as Veterans Day for me, it’s a blessing to me, I didn’t have to serve but I wanted to serve,” she said.

“For me, being in the military has been everything, I joined two

days before my 21st birthday so today is my Army anniversary. If I would have stayed in I’d be in for about 17 years now,” Holmes said.

“For me, this is not an easy job, the military will take a lot, but it also gives and it’s a wonderful thing, if you want to join it, hey, go for it,” she said.

Holmes retired as a sergeant and is now the president of the JSU Student Veterans of America.

Before the program when asked if she would do it all over again Holmes quipped, “Where’s the pen?”

1st Seg. Randy Serna, Anniston High’s JROTC instructor, encouraged students to understand the meaning of freedom.

“Freedom means a lot of different things for a lot of people. On Nov. 11, on the 11th day, the 11th hour, the president of the

United States considers this day a national holiday,” Serna said.

Serna spoke about a battle overseas when the Army fought a long battle against the Taliban.

“They fought all night long, they fought so much that they ran out of rounds, and so they had to fight hand-to-hand at some point. I’ve been to that place,” Serna said, “If you want to know what freedom is, go to one of those countries and you will come back thankful and and you’re glad that you live in the United States of America.”

Serna encouraged everyone to thank a veteran.

Both the Anniston High band and choir performed such patriotic melodies as Proud To Be An American and America The Beautiful.



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‘Thank you for the sacrifices’

Veterans Day saluted at Centennial Memorial Park

BY BRIAN GRAVES
The Anniston Star

In 2023, the extended remembrance weekend came to its climax as the 33rd annual Veterans Day ceremony at Centennial Memorial Park was held on the morning of Saturday, Nov. 11.

This year’s ceremony will be head on Monday, Nov. 11, at 11 a.m.

Ken Rollins, the veteran who both originated the event and the park which stands as the state’s salute to all its veterans, welcomed those who attended despite the cold and drizzle.

Among those welcomed was a 99-year-old veteran of World War II who was visiting from Clay County.

When Rollins asked if he remembered his serial number, the gentleman recited it strong and clear of voice more than 75 years after his discharge from the Army.

“You won’t find one of us that do not remember our number,” Rollins said. “When we raised our hand [to take our oath], they told us we didn’t have a mama, we didn’t have kids or anybody. We belonged to the Army and we had a serial number.”

Cleburne County Probate Judge Ryan Robertson and his wife, Mitzy, provided the musical grace notes for the morning beginning with the national anthem.

Calhoun County Circuit Court Clerk Kim McCarson continued her role of introducing the special guests of the annual ceremony.

“There are several dignitaries here today among you, but our veterans are our true heroes and dignitaries,” McCarson said. “I thank you for the sacrifices that each of you have made so we could all enjoy our freedom today.”

Col. Craig A. Daniel, who recently assumed his post as the 38th commander of the Anniston Army Depot, was



Photos by Ashley Morrison/The Anniston Star/File

ABOVE: A woman lays a flower at the foot of a battlefield cross during the ceremony. RIGHT: Young Marines salute during the fallen comrade ceremony.



made my morning all worth it,” Daniel said.

Daniel said all in attendance came with a common purpose — “to acknowledge those who have served and sacrificed in defense of this great nation.”

“Today, we celebrate all veterans that have served,” Daniel said, “We remember and honor the veterans that have made the ultimate sacrifice including the names of over 10,000 of Alabama’s finest that line the walls around you. We celebrate the nearly 400,000 veterans living across Alabama today.

Regardless of the branch of service or the conflict in which they served, our veterans have earned and continue to earn our undying gratitude.”

The Young Marines performed the traditional Fallen Comrade Ceremony and family members were invited to lay roses at the memorial.

Bagpiper Brian Conary played “Amazing Grace,” the Marine Corps League shot the Honor Volley, and the sound of “Taps” brought the ceremony to a close.

called upon to make the main address of the morning.

“To see a 99-year-old veteran of World War II be able to walk up here, say some words and walk back to his seat has

VETERANS PRESENTED AMERICAN FLAGS AT JACKSONVILLE CIVIC CLUB MEETING



Sgt. 1st Class Kenneth Walker of Anniston presents American Flags to the veterans in attendance at a Nov. 9, 2023, meeting of the Jacksonville Exchange Club. Walker spoke to the civic club about the history of Fort McClellan. FROM LEFT: Chapter president and former state representative Koven Brown, Jerry Parris, Jaydie Boozer, Walker, Eric Sloughy, T. Frank Smith and Joe Mizerak.

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‘Out on the gun’

An 18-year-old grows up during war

BY SHERRY KUGHN
The Anniston Star

At his Oxford home in 2022, World War II veteran Plemer East had plenty to say about the year and a half that he and fellow soldiers spent chasing Germans out of eastern France.

The 100-year-old was only a 17-year-old senior at Lineville High School when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. He understood America had begun drafting young men to fight in the war, and he took it in stride when he was called up for military service. By his birthday in September of 1942, he was 18 and old enough to be drafted.

“I registered,” he said, “and they drafted me the following April of 1943.”

Before then, he had never traveled outside of the Lineville area, except for a senior class trip to the nearest tourist attraction, Oxford Lake.

He reported for service in Clay County and then took a bus to Fort McClellan to be fitted for his uniform. He left behind a praying mother, father, two brothers and a 15-year-old girlfriend named Ruth.

By the time another year had passed, he found himself on the beaches of southern France around August or September of 1944 with orders to liberate the towns and villages from the Germans who had occupied the area for the previous four years. Before he arrived, he had been trained as a rifleman on a Browning automatic rifle, known as the BAR, but he had to make a quick adjustment and become what superiors told him to be, a machine gunner, the heavy hitter in battles who was the target of the enemy.

“I knew machine gunners usually didn’t live long,” East said.

East’s role in the war

East and the five fellow members of his squad with the Third Division received a short lesson on operating a water-cooled machine gun, probably a Browning M1917A1.

“I had to learn to use it really fast,” he said. “It was a .30 caliber. It came in three parts or maybe two, and it needed about a gallon and a half of water.”

He formed a circle with his hands about the size of a navel orange and tried to show how the gun fit together.

“It was a good gun,” he said.

When it was broken apart, the gun and its tripod had to be carried across the shoulders by two soldiers in addition to their backpack. One soldier carried 51

pounds and the other carried 33 pounds. Three soldiers carried two boxes of ammunition each, and then there was a squad leader.

How the next few months developed

During the fall and winter of 1944, the soldiers walked from town to town, village to village, but sometimes they rode on a truck or a tank.

Day after day they walked, always facing injury or death. The soldiers were surrounded by falling mortar shells and artillery in some towns, and they found others were quiet. They moved in all kinds of weather, crossing small rivers, rounding bends, and climbing over hills.

As a machine gunner, East had to provide cover for the riflemen, firing over their heads toward the enemy. Sometimes, on the good days, the enemy seemed to melt away as the Americans moved forward. Some of the French townsmen wore dark armbands with the large initials “FF” stitched on them. The letters stood for “Free Forces Interior,” but the soldiers changed the name to “Free French.” The soldiers did not fire on those wearing the armbands.

“We got a break occasionally,” East said. “We would get a day to rest behind the lines. Mostly, though, we moved every night before daylight. We had to get to the point where we were not scared, but there was always danger from the German soldiers we were chasing out. It’s either you or them, and sometimes you outsmarted them and sometimes you didn’t.”

At some point during the event, East became his squad’s leader, and he was promoted to the rank of sergeant.

Alsace-Lorraine

The unit had left the beaches of Southern France in either late August or early September. By Christmas of 1944, it had reached the outskirts of Alsace-Lorraine, an area between France and Germany. Ownership had often passed back and forth between the two, depending on the political situation. East was 20 by then. The Americans found an intact farmhouse on the outskirts of Alsace-Lorraine. Members of the French family living there were kind and fed the soldiers a hot meal.

“We were supposed to move everyone out of the house and take it over,” he said. “The French family had helped us, so we moved them upstairs and took over the bottom floor. By then, the weather was cold.”

Christmas came, and the family killed a hog to feed the soldiers. Before he ate, East remembers being “out on the gun” and pausing to



Sherry Kughn/The Anniston Star

World War II veteran Plemer East, 98, holds a U.S. Medal of Commemoration for his service in the 3rd Division that successfully carried out a campaign known as the Dagoon Operation.

listen to two or three children singing “Silent Night” in French. Soon, he was called in to get his meal.

“The day after Christmas, the people got a message that they had to leave the house,” East said. “‘Why?’ they asked, and then they asked us to feed their horse and cow. We told them we might be leaving too, but whoever replaces us, we’ll tell them, and we did.”

East’s unit moved out two or three days later and arrived at the Vosges Mountains, walking all day in six to eight inches of snow.

On top of the mountains, the Americans had to stay alert. Half had to be on duty while the other half rested. They spent 12 days and nights without a hot meal, bath or even a shave.

During East’s time to rest, he, being the squad leader at that time, chose to sleep beside the gun in case he was needed, which almost proved to be disastrous. Because he had lain so long without moving around, his feet froze. He had to go on sick call for a few days because he was struggling to stand. A medic gave him three red pills and told him to put them in water and then soak his feet, which he did using his helmet as a basin. The pills, probably an antiseptic, worked. He began walking more normally but had trouble feeling his toes for months afterward.

“Throughout the rest of

the war,” East said, “I never went on sick call again.”

Crossing the Siegfried Line and the Rhine River

Eventually, the unit moved off the mountains and headed toward the North Sea. They had no idea the Battle of the Bulge was taking place, which was the German army’s last stand. All they knew was that they had to cross the Rhine River, comparable, East said, to the Mississippi River.

Before they reached it, though, the intensity of the gunfire became fierce, and East’s squad got separated from its unit.

The German’s defensive line, called Siegfried Line, was near the Rhine, with 18,000 concrete bunkers, soldiers called them “pillboxes,” concrete rooms with narrow pane-less windows from which the Germans fired weapons. The line had barbed wire, tunnels and tank-trap ditches. The Siegfried Line was 400 miles long. Americans and allies had been destroying sections of it since the operation’s beginning.

When East’s squad approached the area, the only way they could counter Germans’ incoming fire from the line was to walk alongside it until they could pass through. East was still the squad leader and had been told to tell his men to walk behind the tanks. He

knew the situation was too precarious, so he dodged bullets and went from tank to tank, asking the operators if he could fit a few of his men inside. He was able to find a place for each of them.

“We made it through that,” East said.

Next, they had to move across the Rhine on boats as snipers on bridges were bearing down on them.

East and his squad, still separated from their unit, got into a boat. There, he saw his first outboard motor, which didn’t do them much good. The engineer who was supposed to be operating it had disappeared.

“There was an old boy from Minnesota who was familiar with outboard motors, and he said there was some dirt on the motor preventing it from cranking,” East said. “We had to paddle back to the bank, and by that time another boat had come back to get a load. We jumped in that boat, and he got us to the place we were supposed to go.”

Afterward, East’s men finally caught up with their unit.

Near Hitler’s hideout

By the spring of 1945, the unit made it into Austria. They had heard about Hitler’s hideout in Berchtesgaden, the second seat of government where Hitler

had relaxed and partied before and during the war. Capturing the hideout, known as Eagle’s Nest, had become an objective for the American and allied forces.

East’s unit wasn’t far from a town. They found themselves walking beside their tanks on a highway heading in when their superiors told them to get on the tanks.

“Since they told us to do it, we didn’t think we’d get shelled,” East said. “We got on them and the tanks speeded up. As we were going down our side of the highway, we looked and in the other lane, walking in the opposite direction were unarmed German soldiers walking four abreast. We figured they had surrendered. We got into the town and learned the British, French and Russians all were bringing their flags. By then, we knew that Hitler had either been killed or had committed suicide.”

Coming home

In January of 1946, East came home. He was 21 years old by then, no longer the 17-year-old boy who had searched for dimes and quarters to pay for that senior trip. He was a seasoned soldier coming back into the family fold.

The day after he arrived home, sitting at Lineville High School, was his brother, Gerald. The teacher asked him why he was squirming at his desk so much. He had a good explanation, East said, “Perm’s come home last night.”

Looking back, East doesn’t remember as many stories about coming home as he does the ones of the grueling, often cold, heavy and hard days of walking across France.

He was in a new world. East’s 15-year-old girlfriend was 18 years old by then. By September, he had married her. Also, he had made other two big strides: He had begun working for Alabama Power Company and had bought his first car.

“I had gotten a car pretty quick,” he said, “and I had never thought I’d own one.”

Today

As East sits in his home, surrounded by family photos and the glassware his late wife had loved, he thought back over his days in the war. He said being a soldier had made him a disciplined man. He remembers how, even while they were in France, he had learned that his mother had taken a job packing ammunition at Brecon in Talladega to help her bring her boy back home.

“We soldiers knew all of America was behind us,” East said. “I wonder today, if attacked,” East said, “Americans would support each other like that.”

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Ohatchee veteran is a hero to many

BY SHERRY KUGHN
The Anniston Star

Command Sgt. Maj. John Williamson, retired, is a 92-year-old Vietnam veteran who sometimes finds it hard to talk about war. However, after retirement he found a way to express himself concerning his military career: He wrote a book.

During interview in 2023, Williamson shared not only the first book he wrote, "From Lamp Oil to Cyberspace," but also he shared a second book about life after his career. Williamson wrote his memories only for family members, and he charged them to keep the books and his military memorabilia in the family.

Williamson, a West Virginia native, was an ambitious 11th-grader who dropped out of school in the late 1940s because a wreck in a coal mining truck almost killed his father, an electrician for the company. When the family realized he could no longer work, he managed to get young Williamson a job hauling coal. However, no matter how hard he worked, he could not make enough money to help the family and have money left over for himself. Also, he said his boss always cut corners and would not keep the company's trucks in good working order.

One day while Williamson was driving, the truck's brakes failed. He careened down a steep road knocking coal out on all sides of his truck. He steered for his life as he weaved in and out among other vehicles on the road and veered around sharp curves. Recently, he chuckled as he shared the story, but the incident changed his life's direction. It caused him to enlist in the Army in September of 1949.

He told his parents about enlisting and, as wary as they were about his decision, they accepted it. He wrote about that time, "It (joining the military) proved to be a memorable experience and one which served to prove to me that I had found my calling."

Williamson served in several ways in the military, and the Army moved him to Alaska, France and Germany for a few years. Years later the military deployed him to Vietnam where war was raging.



Photos by Sherry Kughn/The Anniston Star/File; courtesy photo

LEFT: Command Sgt. Maj. John Williamson served during the Vietnam War and was later assigned to Fort McClellan where he oversaw soldiers in the chemical school and the military police school there. RIGHT: Williams wears his dress uniform when he was serving.

By then, he was a first sergeant in an air cavalry unit of 180 soldiers who used helicopters as they moved throughout the country.

"The unit's role was in reconnaissance of the enemy," Williamson said. "We had to find them and help the units penned down and in trouble."

During that time, he rose to the rank of command army major, and he earned the respect of his fellow soldiers because of his effectiveness as a leader and the compassion he demonstrated.

During one conflict, his helicopter managed to land and help soldiers involved in a helicopter

crash. Williamson's quick and valiant actions that day earned him admiration from his soldiers. He didn't elaborate while telling the story, but he said he knew he had saved lives.

"You'd think I had walked on water," he said as he sat in a recliner in the den of his home.

One of those men who never forgot Williamson's encouragement thanked him a few years ago.

"Not long ago, I was flying in a commercial airplane," Williamson said, "when a man tapped me on the shoulder and introduced himself as Gary Qualley. I remembered that he had been an



infantry platoon leader who had served under my leadership."

Qualley was thrilled to find his former officer and later sent Williamson and his family a video, which he and stepdaughter Freda England shared during the interview.

"During a firefight," Qualley said on the video, "I sustained a gunshot wound to both legs at close range. Both femurs and an artery were shattered. I had extensive nerve and muscle damage and was in and out of consciousness. Before reaching the hospital, I regained consciousness, and as the staff was cutting off my fatigues, a man ran alongside me. It was John, and he said I'd be OK. Just seeing someone I knew was a huge comfort in a group of strangers. He also visited me after surgery. He was a demanding troop leader, a tough soldier who ran his troop with precision, but he had compassion."

Later, Williamson learned Qualley did not lose either leg.

"That 51-caliber round that hit him was almost as big as my thumb," he said as he held up his hand. "I only came alongside Qualley, but things didn't always work out for some of my other soldiers."

Twice during combat, Williamson was wounded and has the scars and purple heart medals to remind him of war's dangers.

"Oftentimes during my career, I would find it surprising that what I felt was so rewarding, like I was doing what I was destined to

do. I was satisfied with the role," he said.

Regardless of the tough times that come with fighting a war, Williamson also told in his book about the camaraderie he and his fellow soldiers shared. He wrote how they sometimes sneaked a few smokes into the barracks, and even a few illegal beers at other times.

Also, in his book, he lists his 20-plus medals, badges and ribbons and writes about them.

"I took great pride in all of these awards and hope that some of you will take charge of them after I relinquish control," he wrote.

The day after the interview, family members arrived at Williamson's home to drive him to Atlanta. They were flying with him to Fort Hood (now Fort Cavazos) in Killeen, Texas, for a reunion of soldiers.

Sitting near Williamson during the interview was Freda England who said her stepfather was a hero to many veterans and to his family.

She said when he retired, he began working at Fort McClellan as an installation sergeant major.

Williamson thought back on those years.

"At Fort McClellan," he said, "I was over the soldiers in the military police school, the chemical school and other areas there. 'I was responsible for the 'good order and discipline' for 10,000 or so soldiers."

"He was and is a hero," England said.

Soon after he began working at Fort McClellan, Williamson suffered the heart attack, but recovered. He retired from the military in September of 1978.

Williamson thinks back throughout the years and holds on to the love he has had for his children and stepchildren, which he said are all the same to him, and also he loves his grandchildren.

Besides sometimes grieving the soldiers lost in battle, Williamson also grieves the death of his wife, Betty Densmore Williamson. They met at Fort McClellan where she worked, fell in love and stayed married until her death 10 years ago.

"We had many, many happy years together," he said.

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