

VETERAN JOURNAL

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CONTENTS

- 2 Remembering the forgotten
- 4 Guard stands up for homeless vets
- 5 Remembering the Forgotten War
- 7 Homes celebrate Veterans Day
- 8 New Jersey honors its veterans
- 9 The Rohna
- 11 General visits veterans
- 12 Carnival comes to Menlo
- 13 Soldiers and Airmen aid veterans
- 14 Veterans honored at medal ceremony
- 15 Memories of the Grove Car Show
- 17 Around the Homes
- 18 Abandoned veterans remembered
- 19 Laurent honored; Trees get facelift
- 20 Early holidays for Vineland residents
- 21 Airmen bring holidays to veterans
- 23 Veterans Service Offices



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COVER: Honor

Members of the Brigadier General William C. Doyle Memorial Cemetery Honor Guard stand at attention prior to the start of the 25th New Jersey Mission of Honor ceremony at the Brigadier General William C. Doyle Memorial Cemetery at Wrightstown, N.J., Oct. 6, 2016. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Master Sgt. Mark C. Olsen/Released)

Remembering the forgotten



Photos by
Master Sgt. Mark C. Olsen
New Jersey National Guard Public Affairs Office



Previous page: Members of the Brigadier General William C. Doyle Memorial Cemetery Honor Guard carry the American flag and an urn containing the remains of a veteran during the 25th New Jersey Mission of Honor ceremony at the Brigadier General William C. Doyle Memorial Cemetery at Wrightstown, N.J., Oct. 6, 2016. This page, left: Honor Guard members salute a veteran's remains. Right: Dignitaries salute as Honor Guard members carry an American flag and an urn containing the remains of a veteran. Below left: New Jersey Lt. Gov. Kim Guadagno, addresses attendees. Below right: Urns containing the remains of 10 veterans await interment after the ceremony.



25th Mission of Honor memorial honors 10 veterans



GUARD STANDS UP FOR HOMELESS VETS



Left: Capt. Cheryl Gow, 108th Medical Group, New Jersey Air National Guard, takes the blood pressure of Charles McDougald, a homeless veteran, during the North Jersey Stand Down at the John F. Kennedy Recreation Center in Newark, N.J., Oct. 8, 2016. Right: Spc. Amber Boone, right, and Sgt. Ashley Antoci, both with the 250th Brigade Support Battalion, New Jersey Army National Guard, serve homeless veterans food.



Story and photos by Pfc. Derek Vasquez, 444th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment

New Jersey National Guard Soldiers and Airmen gave back to those who served during the annual Northern New Jersey Stand Down for Homeless Veterans Oct. 8, 2016, at the John F. Kennedy Recreation Center in Newark.

Approximately 500 homeless veterans attended the event, which aims to provide them with food, clothing, and access to the services they need to help them get back on their feet. A difficult task, especially with an event that relies entirely on volunteers, but one that is achievable due in large part due to the New Jersey National Guard Airmen and Soldiers, according to

the event's coordinator.

"We wouldn't be able to put this event on without the National Guard," said Jack Fanous, Executive Director of GI Go Fund, the organization that hosted this year's event.

Fanous said it is so valuable to have Soldiers and Airmen in uniform help with the event. Seeing people in uniform come out to serve them not only brings the vets comfort, but also serves a deeper emotional meaning.

Airmen from the NJNG's 108th Medical Group, based out of Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, provided the homeless veterans with check-ups.

For Capt. Cheryl Gow, 108th Medical

Group, there is a sense of camaraderie in providing these services to homeless veterans.

"They feel like they're getting help from somebody that knows what they've been through," she said.

It is not just the vets who take away something from this event; those in uniform took away a sense of fulfillment in aiding their former brothers and sisters-in-arms.

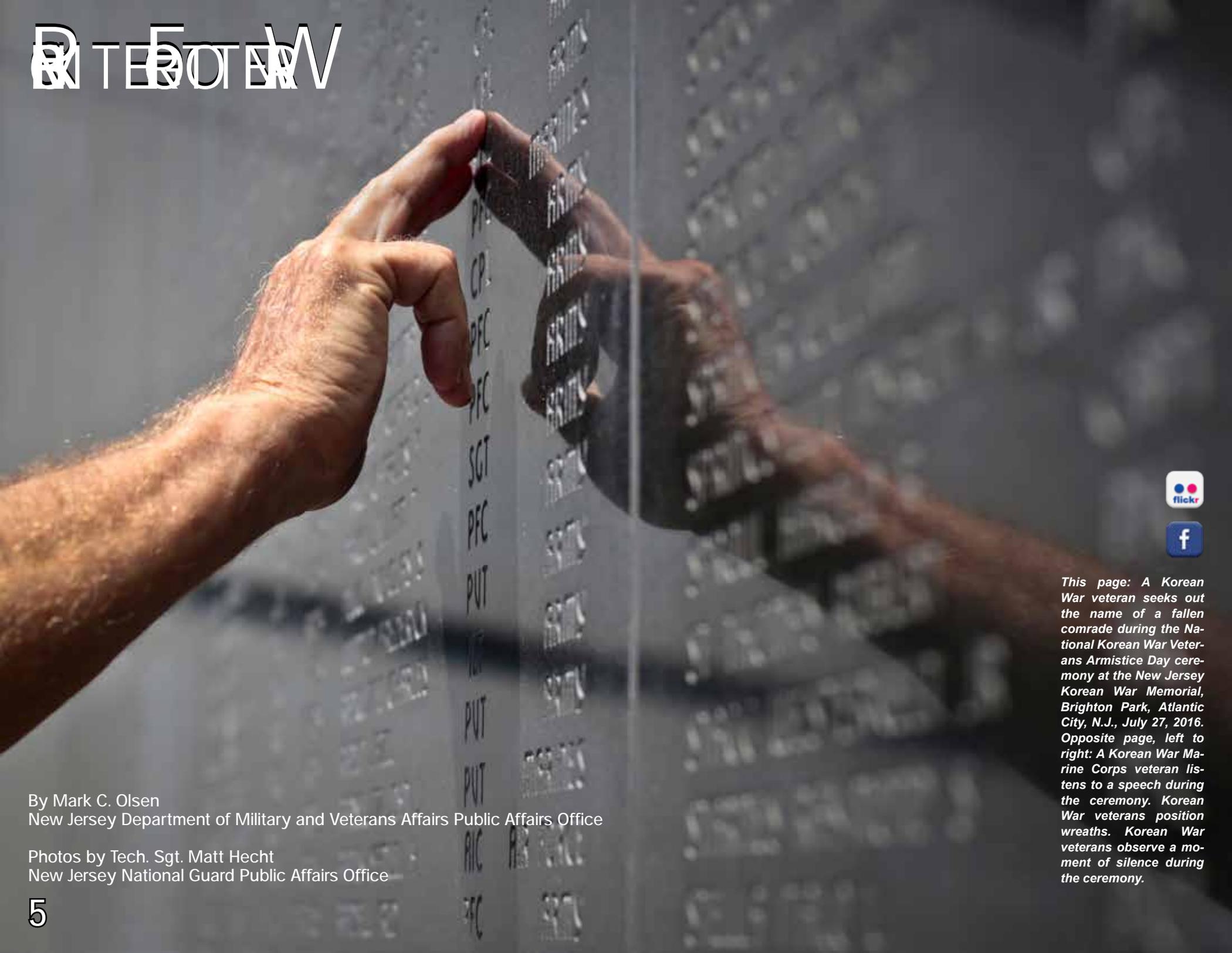
"It's nice to help the ones who came before us," said Spc. Amber Boone, E Company, 250th Battalion Support Brigade.

Boone, who served food to the vets with an infectious smile, said it was a humbling experience to hear their stories and

their thoughts on the Army of today.

Currently, there are approximately 6,000 homeless veterans in New Jersey. A number that is slowly on the decline since they started this initiative about 10 years ago according to Fanous.

"While people say to me, 'Oh, you're going to have 500 people at an event. That's great. Congratulations.' To me that's not a good thing," said Fanous. "I don't want 500 homeless veterans coming to this event. I'd rather five, and hopefully, I get it to the point where there's none."



This page: A Korean War veteran seeks out the name of a fallen comrade during the National Korean War Veterans Armistice Day ceremony at the New Jersey Korean War Memorial, Brighton Park, Atlantic City, N.J., July 27, 2016. Opposite page, left to right: A Korean War Marine Corps veteran listens to a speech during the ceremony. Korean War veterans position wreaths. Korean War veterans observe a moment of silence during the ceremony.

By Mark C. Olsen
New Jersey Department of Military and Veterans Affairs Public Affairs Office

Photos by Tech. Sgt. Matt Hecht
New Jersey National Guard Public Affairs Office



To this day, the Korean War remains the Forgotten War.

Coming five years after World War II, the war is often overlooked because of the lack of attention it received while it took place and in the years after it ended. Americans did not experience the same mobilization and rationing that occurred during World War II. And while the Cold War was just beginning, Americans were enjoying the post-World War II prosperity to be concerned about a war in a place that few had even heard of.

On July 27, 2016, veterans and public officials gathered for the 63rd Anniversary of the signing of the Korean War Armistice at the New Jersey Korean War Memorial located on the Boardwalk in Atlantic City.

The ceremony included tributes from U.S. Rep. Frank A. LoBiondo (R- 2nd Dist.), Consul Who Seok Oh, Repub-

lic of Korea; Brig. Gen. Michael L. Cunniff, the Adjutant General of New Jersey, and Raymond L. Zawacki, Deputy Commissioner for Veterans Affairs.

“Anyone who forgets the Korean War is not only doing a grave disservice to the memories of those who gave their lives and the sacrifices made by every Soldier, Sailor, Airman, and Marine who served there, but to forget that war is to fail to acknowledge how their actions helped shape the course of history,” said Cunniff.

Korean War Veterans Association members from the Thomas W. Daley Jr., Chapter #54; Central Jersey Chapter #148, Taejon Chapter #170, and Atlantic County Chapter #234, in cooperation with the New Jersey Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, hosted this annual event.

“The men and women who served in the Korean War rallied to our nation’s need by responding to a threat that could have had catastrophic consequences for the United States and the free world had it been ignored,” said Cunniff.

The New Jersey Korean War Veterans Memorial was created to ensure that future generations remember and honor those who served and the freedom they preserved. The United States involvement in the war resulted in 33,742 dead and 92,134 wounded.

“Although it is a small thing to do in comparison to the blood spilled by those who served in that war,” said Cunniff. “We here in New Jersey created this memorial to at least ensure it is not forgotten.”

“Anyone who forgets the Korean War is not only doing a grave disservice to the memories of those who gave their lives and the sacrifices made by every Soldier, Sailor, Airman, and Marine who served there, but to forget that war is to fail to acknowledge how their actions helped shape the course of history.”

BRIG. GEN. MICHAEL L. CUNIFF, THE ADJUTANT GENERAL OF NEW JERSEY



Above left: The Color Guard from the Marine Corps League John Basilone Detachment 190, present the colors during the Veterans Day ceremony at the New Jersey Veterans Memorial Home at Menlo Park Nov. 11, 2016. Bottom left: Earlier in the day local veterans placed a wreath next to the eagle in front of the Menlo home built by the Middlesex County Vo-tech school. Above right: The New Jersey Veterans Memorial Home at Paramus held their Veterans Day ceremony Nov. 10, 2016, in the facility's multi-purpose room. During the ceremony, Air Force ROTC cadets presented the colors while the Army Field Band from Fort Meade, Md., entertained the residents. The Bergen County Police Chief's Association presented a \$500 check to the home to support various programs for the residents. (New Jersey Department of Military and Veteran Affairs photos by Krynn P. Westhoven/Released)

NEW JERSEY HONORS ITS VETERANS



Story and photos by Master Sgt. Mark C. Olsen, New Jersey National Guard Public Affairs Office



Above left: New Jersey Lt. Gov. Kim Guadagno, second from left, and Brig. Gen Michael L. Cunniff, third from left, The Adjutant General of New Jersey, listen to the invocation during the annual Veterans Day ceremony at the Brigadier General William C. Doyle Veterans Memorial Cemetery, North



Hanover, N.J., Nov. 11, 2016. Above right: Lt. Gov. Kim Guadagno, second from right, and Brig. Gen Michael L. Cunniff, left, prepare to inter the ashes of 2,731 American flags at the conclusion of the Veterans Day ceremony.

On Nov. 11, 2016, Soldiers and Airmen of the New Jersey National Guard, joined with representatives from various veterans' organizations along with New Jersey Lt. Gov. Kim Guadagno and Brig. Gen. Michael L. Cunniff, the Adjutant General, honored the men and women who have served America at the Brigadier General William C. Doyle Veterans Cemetery.

"We celebrate Veterans Day at public gatherings such as this because we know the measure of a nation's greatness can be seen in

its willingness to recognize those who have sacrificed on its behalf," said Cunniff at the Cemetery in North Hanover Township, Burlington County.

President George Washington observed: "The willingness with which our young people are likely to serve in any war, no matter how justified, shall be directly proportional to how they perceive Veterans of earlier wars were treated and appreciated by our nation."

"We are fortunate to live in New Jersey, because this is a

state that takes care of its Veterans," said Cunniff.

The ceremony also included a flag retirement service, wherein the ashes of 2,731 flags were entombed.

"We may not have as many Veterans in our midst as we once did. But the ones we have, we should treasure," said Cunniff. "Their sacrifices helped make this nation a shining beacon of freedom for the rest of the world."

Veterans Day, which was originally called Armistice Day, commemorated the end of World

War I on Nov. 11, 1918 at 11 a.m. Since then, the holiday has been observed at the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month. In 1954, the name of the holiday was changed to Veterans Day to honor those who had served in World War II and the Korean War. Today, the holiday honors veterans of all wars.

The Brigadier General William C. Doyle Veterans Memorial Cemetery is New Jersey's sole state-operated veterans' cemetery. Dedicated in 1986, it is funded jointly by state and federal dollars

and is under the management of the New Jersey Department of Military and Veterans Affairs. More than 61,000 Veterans and their spouses are interred at Doyle.

A partnership between NJD-MAVA and the New Jersey Mission of Honor has allowed for the burial of the unclaimed remains of more than 151 veterans at the Cemetery. The remains of the men – some of whom served as long ago as World War I had gone unclaimed for an average of 26 years – now have their final rest at Doyle.

THE ROHNA

Story by Riley Stewart

Photo and illustration by Mark C. Olsen
New Jersey Department of Military and Veterans Affairs
Public Affairs Office



Everything was gone! The brave ship's guns were silent.

Gone also were 1,138 people, the majority of them American troops.

The British transport ship, HMT (His Majesty's Transport) Rohna had been sunk by an aerial attack.

My great-grandfather, Charles Stewart, was on that ship.

The Rohna was part of a five ship convoy from Oran, Algeria, to Alexandria, Egypt. My

great-grandfather, who was with the 31st Signal Construction Battalion, was among the more than 2,000 personnel on board. Most of the troops on board were destined for the China Burma India Theater.

At 4:30 p.m., Thanksgiving, Nov. 26, 1943, the convoy was attacked off the Algerian coast by German air force Heinkel 177A heavy bombers escorted by Junkers 88 heavy fighters and dive bombers. The Heinkels were

carrying radio-guided, rocket boosted glide bombs – an early type of precision-guided weapon.

My great-grandfather was on deck talking to his friend that he had known since he was sixteen. Suddenly, the gray public address box came to life.

"We're under attack! Go to your Battle stations," blared from the speaker.

During the attack, the convoy ships' guns prevented the

bombers from effectively using the glide bombs from striking the ships.

Except for one.

One glide bomb sliced into the Rohna's port side, flooding the engine room, disabling the electrical equipment preventing the pumps from functioning. In addition, six of the 22 lifeboats were destroyed. Fortunately, the ship was equipped with more than 100 life rafts.

My great-grandfather, followed by his friend, headed to

the lifeboats.

The fire spread until the ship was on fire, the deck became crowded with troops.

My great-grandfather sprinted to different parts of the ship with his buddy to try to get off. The bottoms of the lifeboats were so rotten that you would just fall through.

Finally, scared to death, he and his friend went to the highest point of the ship and hung on to the antenna. He wondered how he would make



it out alive. They lost their grip and fell into the water. He looked for his friend, but it was dark: The sinking ship had pulled him under.

My great-grandfather was floating on two pieces of debris from the ship. He kicked with all his power to get away from the suction from the sinking boat. His struggles to get to a boat with group of crew members that was one hundred feet ahead of him were useless. But he couldn't get to them because

the suction of the boat was too strong for him to handle.

For 48 hours my great-grandfather floated alone in shark-infested water. He was tired, hungry, and thirsty with the smells of smoke and rotting flesh around him. Grieving for his friend, he felt angry and alone.

Finally, another military ship spotted him and pulled him out of the water. He felt extremely grateful to be picked up, but was wary of

being with strangers.

Once on land, my great-grandfather ended up fighting with Australian combat forces for six months.

In the end, American and British ships rescued 819 men. History records the Rohna's sinking as the largest loss of American troops at sea in a single incident.

Mark C. Olsen contributed to this story.



Geraldine Stewart, right, wife of deceased World War II veteran Army Technician Fifth Class Charles V. Stewart, looks at her husband's awards with her granddaughter, Riley Stewart, after a ceremony at the New Jersey Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, Lawrenceville, N.J., Dec. 6, 2016. Stewart did not have a set of her husband's awards until Riley wrote a paper about her grandfather as part of a school project. Geraldine's son, Barry, received a set of his father's awards for his mother after writing to the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis, Mo.

General visits veterans

Story and photo by Staff Sgt. Shawn Morris
99th Regional Support Command Public Affairs Office



Maj. Gen. Troy D. Kok, commander, 99th Regional Support Command, assists Navy Vietnam veteran Joseph Boyle.

“If it weren’t for our veterans, I wouldn’t be where I am today,” said Maj. Gen. Troy D. Kok, commanding general of the U.S. Army Reserve’s 99th Regional Support Command.

Kok emphasized this debt while visiting military veterans and spouses Jan. 28, 2017, at the New Jersey Veterans Memorial Home at Vineland.

“My purpose for coming and visiting these veterans is to thank them for their service,” Kok explained. “It’s everything they’ve done throughout the years that has allowed our military and our country to be as great as they are.”

Kok met dozens of veterans and spouses during his visit, spending time with each man and woman in order to share his gratitude and learn about their experiences.

“It’s a way that I pay back,” Kok said. “It’s about a military person getting with a military person.”

“It’s just such an honor to be able to shake the hands of these young men and women, and I do say ‘young’ men and women because they become that when we start interacting,” he continued. “I watch the expressions on their faces as they remember the importance of their service and what they did.”

“There’s great value in our Soldiers connecting with our veterans.”

MAJ. GEN. TROY D. KOK, COMMANDER, 99TH REGIONAL SUPPORT COMMAND

“Our veterans love to connect with a military person,” said Allyson Bailey, chief executive officer of the Veterans Memorial Home here. “As soon as Major General Kok talked to them – actually, as soon as they saw the uniform – they become a different person than I interact with every day, and that was amazing to see.

“When you have a high-ranking military leader willing to take their Saturday and come down and talk to our residents, that is really priceless” said Bailey.

Bailey and her staff service 300 residents in the state’s oldest operating veteran’s home, having originally opened its doors in 1899. The facility has provided long-term care to New Jersey veterans of every war and armed conflict since the War of 1812.

“Our history is so very important to remember, and the veterans who are in these homes are a part of our history,” said Kok. “We have so many people around the United States who say to me, ‘Thank you for your service,’ but when do I come back and thank veterans for their service?”

Thanking and spending time with veterans is a passion Kok would like to see imbued in all Soldiers.

“There’s great value in our Soldiers connecting with our veterans,” he said. “When I was younger, I never understood the value of meeting veterans. I didn’t realize the value of that interconnection, and what happened to me was that by the time I recognized the value, I was older and they were gone.

“There are so many of these veterans, and they’re absolute heroes,” he continued. “I want to impress upon a younger Soldier to take advantage of what I did not.”

Kok plans on continuing to visit veterans in homes and other venues where he can express his gratitude for their service.

“It’s all about service, and it doesn’t matter when we did that service – it’s a matter of being willing to do the service,” he said.

CARNIVAL COMES TO MENLO

Students from Rutgers University in New Brunswick hosted a Veterans' Appreciation Day at the New Jersey Veterans Memorial Home at Menlo Park Oct. 11, 2016. "A Day at the Carnival" included games from bowling to horse racing for the residents to participant with the college student volunteers. Rutgers t-shirts and other items were given away as prizes, with Italian ice and pretzels as the featured snacks. The Menlo Home town square was filled with residents and fellow veterans from the New Jersey Veterans Memorial Home at Vineland who came up for the event. (New Jersey Department of Military and Veteran Affairs photos by Kryn P. Westhoven/Released)



SOLDIERS AND AIRMEN AID VETERANS



PHOTOS BY MASTER SGT. MARK C. OLSEN, NEW JERSEY DEPARTMENT OF MILITARY AND VETERANS AFFAIRS PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICE



Above left: Spc. William R. Lancaster, 119th Combat Sustainment Support Battalion, New Jersey Army National Guard, cooks hamburgers during the Stand Down. Above right: Pfc. Jeannerie Lopez, left, 119th Combat Sustainment Support Battalion cooks sausages for the homeless veterans attending the Stand Down. Below: Maj. Lisa Robinson, left, clinical nurse, 177th Fighter Wing, puts a band aid on a homeless veteran after giving him a flu shot. Stand Downs are grass roots, community-based intervention programs to help veterans' battle life on the streets.

Above: Senior Airmen Jennifer Heller, right, and Melissa Seel, both aerospace medical technicians with the 177th Fighter Wing, New Jersey Air National Guard, check a homeless veteran's blood pressure during Stand Down 2016 at the National Guard Armory in Cherry Hill Sept. 23, 2016. Below left: Senior Airman Taylor Trani, left, a aerospace medical technician with the 177th Fighter Wing, puts a band aid on a homeless veteran after giving him a flu shot. Below right: Master Sgt. Andrea Devincenz, left, aerospace medical technician with the 177th Fighter Wing, takes the blood pressure of a homeless veteran. The Stand Down at the Armory provided more than 200 homeless veterans with access to healthcare, mental health screening, substance abuse counseling, social services - food stamps and unemployment, legal services, religious counseling, a hot meal, a haircut and winter clothing.



Veterans honored at medal ceremony

Story and photos by Kryn Westhoven
New Jersey Department of Military and
Veterans Affairs Public Affairs Office

Lt. Gov. Kim Guadagno joined Brig. Gen. Michael L. Cunniff, the Adjutant General of New Jersey, in presenting the New Jersey Distinguished Service Medal and other state military awards to 15 veterans at the Bridgewater Commons Mall Sept. 20, 2016.

The recipients came from multiple counties and included three veterans who served in both Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom. The Vietnam veteran lapel pin was presented to two veterans as part of the 50th anniversary commemoration of the war.

The ceremony marked the start of a two-day visit of the veterans outreach kiosk, where veterans and their family members can learn more about benefits and entitlements that they could be eligible to receive. The Veterans Outreach Program is an effort by the New Jersey Department of Military and Veterans Affairs to talk one-on-one with veterans and their family members about the



Above: Raymond L. Zawacki, Deputy Commissioner for Veterans Affairs, New Jersey Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, addresses attendees at the Bridgewater Commons Mall Sept. 20, 2016. Left: Brig. Gen. Michael L. Cunniff, left, the Adjutant General of New Jersey, presents the New Jersey Distinguished Service Medal during the ceremony.



wide variety of state and federal veterans' benefits.

The New Jersey Distinguished Service Medal was originally issued in 1858 for those who distinguished themselves in the New Jersey State Militia, but was used infrequently until re-authorized by Gov. Thomas Kean in 1988 and it is New Jersey's highest military award. Since its re-authorization in 1988, more than 30,000 medals have been awarded to New Jersey combat veterans.

In order to be eligible for the New Jersey Distinguished Service Medal, you must meet all the following criteria: currently be a resident of New Jersey, have been a resident of New Jersey at the time you

entered into military service, have been honorably discharged, and have proof of having served in combat while on active duty during wartime. The medal can be awarded posthumously to the next-of-kin of a veteran who meets the criteria.

Anyone interested in applying New Jersey military awards, or for additional information, call 1-888-865-8387.

For additional information visit: www.nj.gov/military/veterans/awards/distinguished_service/index.html



Memories of the Grove Car Show

PHOTOS BY TECH SGT. MATT HECHT
NEW JERSEY DEPARTMENT OF MILITARY AND VETERANS AFFAIRS
PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICE



Residents of the New Jersey Veterans Memorial Home at Vineland had the opportunity to revisit the cars of their youth during the Memories of the Grove Car Show Sept. 25, 2016. The Home's parking lot served as the display area as dozens of car enthusiasts brought their classic vehicles – ranging from World War II Jeeps, 50s roadsters and trucks to 70s muscle cars – for residents and guests to inspect and enjoy.





Around the Homes



Klemow #1

Members of the Rutgers University football team visited the New Jersey Veterans Memorial Home at Menlo Park to present resident Sam Klemow with a football jersey made especially for him, with his last name and the number one on the back July 27, 2016. When the team found out that he was 101 years old, they decided to give him an honorary jersey. (Courtesy photo)



Grandparents Day

Grandparents Day was celebrated at the New Jersey Veterans Memorial Home at Paramus Sept. 11, 2016, with residents and family members enjoying ice cream and entertainment by Mary Taylor. (New Jersey Department of Military and Veterans Affairs photo by Kryn Westhoven/Released)



Lottery visits Menlo

Dorothy De Los Reyes, right, Assistant Supervisor of Recreation, New Jersey Veterans Memorial Home at Menlo Park, hands out a New Jersey Lottery themed Monopoly game to one of the residents during the lottery's visit at the Resident's Council meeting on Aug. 30, 2016. The New Jersey Lottery commission made a stop at the Home's town square as part of the lottery's "Where the Money Goes" tour that explains how the lottery proceeds benefits education and institutions, like the three veterans homes. Door prizes like a New Jersey Lottery themed Monopoly game, t-shirts, and hats were given out during the meeting. (New Jersey Department of Military and Veteran Affairs photos by Kryn P. Westhoven/Released)

Abandoned veterans remembered



Army Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps Cadets from Pemberton Regional High School place wreaths on the graves of the remains of an abandoned veterans during a wreath laying ceremony at the Brigadier General William C. Doyle Veterans Memorial Cemetery, Wrightstown, N.J., Dec. 8, 2016. New Jersey National Guard leadership and members of state veterans' groups along with Army Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps Cadets from Pemberton Regional High School and members of New Jersey's Mission of Honor placed 186 wreaths on the graves of the remains of abandoned veterans. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Master Sgt. Mark C. Olsen/Released)

Laurent honored; Trees get facelift



Laurent recognized

Brig. Gen. Kevin Keehn, New Jersey Air National Guard commander, left, presents the New Jersey Distinguished Service Medal and the New Jersey Korean Service Medal to E. Larry St. Laurent during a ceremony Oct. 22, 2016, at the Jackson Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 4703. The ceremony coincided with the Township of Jackson dedication ceremony where Jackson Drive was co-named SFC E. Larry St. Laurent Place. St. Laurent served for four years in the Army, including two in Japan and one in Korea where he fought in the battle to retake Seoul. He was promoted to the rank of sergeant first class at the age of 20 and is the recipient of numerous military honors, including the Purple Heart and five campaign stars. In 1952, he served as a service officer for the Jackson Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 4703. He went on to serve for 14 years as the director of the Ocean County Veterans Service Bureau. St. Laurent has been an officer in several veterans' organizations, including the Disabled American Veterans and the Military Order of the Purple Heart. He served as the chairman for the New Jersey Korean War Memorial Committee to build the Korean War Memorial at Brighton Park on the Boardwalk in Atlantic City. The committee was responsible for selecting a site, developing and administering a competition for the Memorial's design, and raising \$3 million to build it. St. Laurent also served on the World War II Memorial Commission, which is located at Veterans Park across from the New Jersey State House in Trenton. (New Jersey Department of Military and Veteran Affairs photos by Chuck Robbins/Released)



Volunteers prune cemetery's trees

More than five dozen volunteer arborists fanned out across the Brigadier General William C. Doyle Veterans Cemetery Sept. 20, 2016, to prune trees to beautify the grounds and enhance the safety of visitors to the nation's busiest state-operated veterans' cemetery. The volunteers were part of the Saluting Branches organization, which cares for trees at Veterans cemeteries across the nation during its annual day of service. (New Jersey Department of Military and Veteran Affairs photos by Kryn P. Westhoven/Released)

Early holidays for Vineland residents



Residents of the New Jersey Veterans Memorial Home at Vineland, N.J., unwrap their gifts during the Second Winds Dreams' event Dec. 21, 2016. This is the sixth year that the Second Wind Dreams Organization and the Vineland Boscov's department store have treated the Home's residents to an early Christmas. Each year, the residents write what gift they want on a tag, which is hung on a Christmas tree in Boscov's. Shoppers and employees then chose a tag and purchase the gift for the residents. The Boscov's staff wrapped and delivered more than 300 gifts for the residents. (New Jersey Department of Military and Veterans Affairs photo by Mark C. Olsen/Released)

Airmen bring Holidays to veterans

Story and photos by Master Sgt. Mark C. Olsen, New Jersey National Guard Public Affairs Office



Tech. Sgt. Jane Hunter, left, and Senior Airman Lena Santiago, center, both with the 177th Communications Flight, and Master Sgt. Benjamin Hemme, 177th Maintenance Squadron, all with the New Jersey Air National Guard, practice singing holiday carols with fourth graders from the Seaview Elementary School in Linwood, N.J., during the 16th Annual Holiday "Songfest" at the New Jersey Veterans Memorial Home at Vineland, N.J., Dec. 13, 2016.

This time of the year, the residents at the New Jersey Veterans Memorial home in Vineland get a special visit.

No, not from Santa Claus.

Every year, for the last 16 years, Airmen from the 177th Fighter Wing, New Jersey Air National Guard, team up with fourth graders from Seaview Elementary School in Linwood, N.J., to bring the holiday spirit to the Vineland Home residents.



Master Sgt. Jamie Nieves, center, 177th Civil Engineer Squadron, gives World War II Army veteran Charles Crabiel a holiday card.

This year was no different

On Dec. 13, 2016, 18 Airmen and more than 80 grade schoolers sang carols and passed out cards to the Home's residents during the 16th Annual Holiday "Songfest." It also gave them the opportunity to connect with veterans who helped shape this nation's history.



“This is the opportunity to give them something back for their service.”

STAFF SGT. EILER GOMEZ MEJIA, 177TH LOGISTICS READINESS SQUADRON



World War II Army veteran Ed Leheny, right, listens as Airman 1st Class John Cucci, center, reads Leheny's story about how Ed met his brother, Leo, during the Battle of the Bulge on Dec. 25, 1944, to fellow Tactical Air Control Party Airmen with the 227th Air Support Operations Squadron, Tech. Sgt. Steven Haskins, left, Tech. Sgt. Kane Lawlor, second from left, and Staff Sgt. Harry Nieves, second from right, at the New Jersey Veterans Memorial Home.

The Vineland residents are a mixture of veterans from World War II, the Korean and Vietnam Wars, as well as Operations' Desert Storm/Desert Shield and veterans' spouses.

“These veterans have a lot of stories to tell; they have done things I never dreamed of doing, just listening to them is an experience,” said , and Junior Enlisted Council president.

That was the case for Master Sgt. Jamie Nieves, 177th Civil Engineer Squadron, along with 227th Air Support Operations Squadron members Tech. Sgts. Steven Haskins and Kane Lawlor, Staff Sgt. Harry Nieves, and Airman 1st Class John Cucci, when they met resident World War II Army veteran, Ed Leheny.

Leheny, who is 95, shared with them

his story about how he met his brother, Leo, on Christmas day during the Battle of the Bulge. Leheny had not seen his brother since the war began.

The story had appeared in the magazine Veteran Journal and had photos of Ed and Leo in their uniforms. The fact that Nieves, Haskins, Lawlor, and Cucci were close to the same age as the two brothers in the photos was certainly not lost on them; it also gave them a different perspective about Christmas.

“My family is from Alsace Lorraine,” said Nieves. Alsace Lorraine was the site of some of the heaviest fighting during the Battle of the Bulge.

As in years' past, the Airmen and the fourth graders divided up into groups and

travelled throughout the Home singing carols and passing out cards to the residents.

“We met at Seaview; we picked up the kids' donations and brought them here, and now we're going to sing some carols and hand out some cards,” said Staff Sgt. Stacey Lazaro, 177th Logistics Readiness Squadron.

Lazaro, the 177th Junior Enlisted Council's vice president, was in charge of coordinating this year's event.

“The 177th is donating \$200 to one of the (Home's) ongoing funds, which provides money for the veterans to attend sporting and entertainment events,” said Lazaro.

“I think it's a great cause,” said Gomez Mejia. “This is the opportunity to give them something back for their service.”

This was Gomez Mejia's third visit to the Home.

Up until three years ago when the Junior Enlisted Council took over the visit, Chief Master Sgt. Tim Donovan, 177th Maintenance Squadron and Senior Master Sgt. Michael Monteith, 177th Maintenance Squadron, had been in charge of coordinating the event.

This year, as in previous two years, Donovan and Monteith lent their vocal talents to the mix. Donovan even boasted about working on his singing through karaoke practice.

While Santa has yet to make his appearance at the home, the meaning of the holidays came early for the residents, the fourth graders, and the Airmen.



Chief Master Sgt. Tim Donovan, left, 177th Maintenance Squadron, sings for Marine Corps Vietnam veteran Bobby Kulinski during the 16th Annual Holiday “Songfest.”

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479 W CLINTON STREET
DOVER, NJ 07801
(973) 366-0245 / 8347 / FAX: (973) 366-0360

SUSSEX SCHEDULE

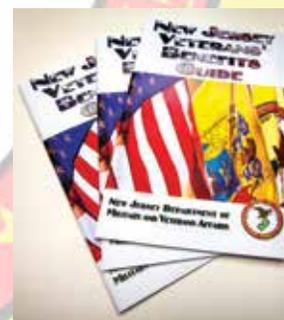
FRANKLIN ARMORY (THURSDAY/ALT FRIDAYS)
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973-827-4020 FAX: 973-827-4024

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