

Honor & Heritage:

Garner to salute veterans with new memorial

ONBOARD A WORLD WAR II battleship and under attack by kamikaze planes, Leon Bagwell was a long way from the family farm outside Garner.

A gunner's mate, Bagwell loaded and fired ship guns "so big that they were hard to even pick up," a job that would permanently damage his hearing.

"I pure cried in my bed, my ears were hurting so bad," said Bagwell, now 87.

He lost friends in battle, witnessed burials at sea, and wondered about his brothers, also in military service. And he was onboard the USS Nashville when it was hit by kamikaze fire, killing more than 130 crewmen and officers.

But despite the hardships of wartime service, he says he was never afraid.

"My first night on ship, a storm came up and we started dragging anchor. I helped pull it up; from then on I was recognized as a good worker. I was proud of that," Bagwell said. "I wrote my mama not to worry."

Bagwell volunteered for duty, serving in the U.S. Navy from 1943 to 1946 following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. He participated in seven separate invasions in the Philippines aboard warships such as the USS Cofer.

Among Bagwell's naval duties as a Petty Officer 3rd Class was "running the barge," or protecting and transporting the admiral. Bagwell says it was good duty that probably helped spare his own life.

"I was very fortunate that I was the one the admiral picked. ... We had to keep everyone from knowing where he was," he said.

While traveling to ports in Australia,

New Guinea, Gibraltar and Spain, Bagwell focused on coming home to his high school sweetheart, Millie.

"She had a beautiful smile. We loved each other from day one," he said.

They married in April 1946, one month after he was honorably discharged from the Navy, a union lasting until her death in 2007.

Post-war, Bagwell became a successful life insurance agent, then worked with the U.S. Postal Service until retirement. He was also a part-time farmer, and charter member of the Carrboro Farmers Market.

He's still proud of his military service, and appreciates the thanks of strangers who note his oft-worn Navy cap.

"To be a veteran has always felt good," he said. "I'm proud to be an American; always have been, always will be."

Veterans or not, we can all be patriots: That's the premise behind a new veterans' memorial in Garner honoring the service of local men and women, like Bagwell.

"What our veterans put on the line, especially those that gave all, is a debt we can't pay," said Harold Annis, chair of the Garner Veterans Memorial Advisory Board. "We should, at the very least, recognize and honor them."

"This touches every person in our community, either directly or indirectly," added Faye Gardner, board vice chair. "We see the

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World War II veteran Leon Bagwell treasures his Navy cap, hard-earned war medals and a knife found during his service. A young Bagwell and his bride-to-be, Millie, are in the photo.

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pride veterans have, and we want to acknowledge their sacrifices.”

Local veterans are also among members of the nonprofit Garner Veterans Memorial Committee, formed in 2006 to begin planning. In 2009, the Town of Garner donated a memorial site at Lake Benson Park, and has pledged \$25,000 to the project in 2012.

“We couldn’t have found a better site,” Annis said, “in the park, beside a running trail, with a great vista falling to the lake.”

“Interactive and educational” are the words he uses to describe the memorial design, selected via a statewide competition won by Wake County firm Clearscapes Architecture + Art.

Lead architect on the project is Mong Pen Yueh, a Garner resident.

Yueh says while most veterans’ memorials are designed for a specific conflict, the Garner Veterans Memorial Committee wanted a site that honors all veterans since the birth of our nation in 1776, and through future conflicts.

“Each segment represents one decade in the history of the United States,” she said. “Inside the memorial, larger panels on one side list the wars the nation was involved in during that decade. Smaller panels on the other side list local veterans who lost their lives in those wars. As you walk through the memorial, you are walking through history.”

The panels offer details on U.S. conflicts, with benches placed to recognize decades of peacetime. Panels will be added for future decades.

As funding allows, plans also call for audio capabilities at the memorial, and the addition of soldiers’ personal stories.

The project’s overall price tag is \$500,000.

The committee met its first financial benchmark of \$150,000 in gifts and pledges in May, and is now aiming for the \$250,000 mark.

Magdy Saad chairs the Business Committee for fundraising, and says its efforts are being well received.

“We’re encouraged by the success so far,” he said. “We don’t have to sell the vision — the vision is there.”

A longtime Garner businessman and Egyptian-born citizen, Saad says he’s honored to play a role in this “once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.”

“Being a foreign-born citizen, you never take freedoms for granted,” he said. “I have seen the other side, and know we’ve got to keep working to keep these privileges.”

The memorial is on target for completion by Veterans Day 2012. Once the \$250,000 benchmark is met, the remaining funds will be raised through the sale of memorial bricks to the public.

Honoring any veteran, the bricks are expected to go on sale in early 2012 and will be used to create a “walkway of honor” at the memorial site. Standard size bricks will cost \$125, and 8x8-inch bricks \$200.

“The Garner Veterans Memorial has great artistic value, economic development value through tourism, and educational and cultural value. All we’re asking is that every patriot do what he or she can do,” Gardner said.

Saad said, “Our veterans provide us our freedoms and our position as a world power. The memorial commemorates them and has an educational element so worthy, to help even schoolchildren realize what veterans have done for them.”

For more information on the Garner Veterans Memorial, or to make a donation, visit www.garnerveteransmemorial.org. **TE**



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— Harold Annis



The Garner Veterans Memorial design, seen here in architects’ illustrations, is interactive and educational. The memorial will be built at Lake Benson Park in 2012, to honor local heroes past, present and future.





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