

Behind the Names

Part 1

VA facilities all over the country bear the names of Americans who made significant contributions to their country. Who were they? In this feature series, we take a look at the historical figures for whom some of VA's national cemeteries are named.

Many VA facilities are named for great Americans. Their stories reach back to the earliest periods in U.S. history and up through today, as Congress has recently enacted legislation honoring six contemporary Americans by dedicating VA facilities in their name.

In this first installment of a feature series, *Vanguard* looks at the men who, between 1813 and 1842, built the forts on which VA national cemeteries were founded.

Fort Mitchell National Cemetery

Located just over the Georgia line in Seale, Ala., Fort Mitchell was designated a national cemetery in 1987, but its graves date back to World War I. The fort itself was built by the Georgia Militia in 1813, offering protection to European settlers heading west and serving as a staging area for military excursions into Creek Indian Territory.



Historic Fort Mitchell

It was named for Georgia Governor David Brydie Mitchell (b.1766), a Scottish immigrant who at age 17 came to Savannah to settle his late uncle's estate, then chose to remain in America, becoming a citizen in 1789.

He studied law and over the years held many political and military positions, culminating in the governorship of Georgia, until 1813. America was then at war with Great Britain and Mitchell set about strengthening Georgia's defenses, including the building of Fort Mitchell on land he donated.

He was elected governor again in 1815, and supported legislation to outlaw dueling, having once killed an opponent, himself. He served only two years before resigning in 1817, when President Monroe appointed him as agent for the Creek Nation.

Of the national cemeteries surveyed here, Fort Mitchell is the only one not built on land acquired by the 1803 Louisiana Purchase, the bicentennial of which is celebrated this year. The six others, all built over a 40-year period following the

purchase, are Fort Smith, Fort Snelling, Fort Gibson, Jefferson Barracks, Fort Leavenworth and Fort Scott.

Fort Smith National Cemetery



*Fort Smith National Cemetery
in Arkansas*

At the edge of the Arkansas- Oklahoma border lies Fort Smith, Arkansas' second-largest city. Its beginnings lay in the founding of "Camp" Smith on Christmas Day, 1817.

The camp's original function was similar to Fort Mitchell's—to protect westward migration, in this case by keeping Europeans, particularly those selling liquor to Indians, off tribal lands until treaties were concluded.

It also served to keep peace between warring Osage and Cherokee tribes. The site was designated a national cemetery in 1867, but its earliest interments date back to 1819.

As was the Army's custom, Fort Smith was named to honor Brig. Gen. Thomas Adam Smith (b.1781), who commanded the western frontier forces that built and settled the post. Smith's military career led him to practically every corner of the young country. He participated in one of America's first clandestine military operations, the campaign to take eastern Florida away from European influence.

When diplomatic negotiations to secure Florida for America failed in 1811, the U.S. military planned an invasion by Georgia "Patriots" who would then offer the territory to the U.S. In March 1812, 180 Georgians invaded a small section of northeast Florida and offered to cede this land to America. The offer was immediately accepted.

Smith and his troops crossed into Florida and took command of the Georgians. Then began a campaign to wrest the remainder of the territory from Spain.

Smith's small force carried on for more than a year, battling Spanish reinforcements from Havana, British gunboats and Indians. By early 1814, the government secretly withdrew support for the Florida action and Smith was transferred to upstate New York to fight in the more urgent War of 1812.

Fort Snelling National Cemetery

At the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers in Minneapolis, Minn., lies Fort Snelling National Cemetery. It began as a stone fortress as early as 1805, but construction of a proper fort began in 1819.

Col. Henry Leavenworth began that construction, so the fort should have been named for him. But the harsh environment, which led to the deaths of almost one-third of his command within the first nine months, was too much for him.

He asked for and received a transfer. Subsequent efforts would one day find another fort and city named for him.

Col. Josiah Snelling completed construction of what was known as Fort St. Anthony in 1824. During an inspection of the fort, Gen. Winfield Scott, a friend of Snelling, was so impressed with its construction and the comforts it offered against the harsh Minnesota winters, he recommended the fort's name be changed to Fort Snelling.



Col. Josiah Snelling

Josiah Snelling was born in Boston in 1782. He joined the military to fight the great Indian warrior Tecumseh, and served with distinction through the War of 1812. He was considered a tough but fairminded commander. Some reports criticize him for alcohol-induced rages that turned his men against him. Whether they're true or not, he left the fort under a cloud of controversy in 1827 and died a year later.

By Robert Turtill, *Vanguard* staff

Note: This is the first in a series of features about the historical figures for whom some of VA's national cemeteries are named. In the coming weeks, Part 2 will feature Fort Gibson, Jefferson Barracks, Leavenworth and Fort Scott National Cemeteries.

Behind the Names

Part 2

VA facilities all over the country bear the names of Americans who made significant contributions to their country. Who were they? In this feature series, we take a look at the historical figures for whom some of VA's facilities are named.

Many VA facilities are named for great Americans. In this second installment of “*Behind the Names*,” we look at four Americans for whom national cemeteries are named.

Fort Gibson National Cemetery

In 1824, increasing tensions between the Cherokee and Osage Nations led the Army to construct “Cantonment Gibson,” a wooden stockade that ultimately gave rise to the community of Fort Gibson, the oldest in Oklahoma. For many Native Americans, Fort Gibson was the last stop on the “Trail of Tears,” the route used to force tribes from the east to western reservations.

George Gibson was born in Pennsylvania in 1775, coming from a family of soldiers. He joined the Army in 1808 and rose to the rank of lieutenant colonel, serving through the War of 1812. President Monroe then appointed him Quartermaster General under Andrew Jackson.



George Gibson

Gibson was ordered to supply Gen. Jackson's 1817-1818 campaign against Seminole Indians in West Florida. Instead of depending on private contractors for provisions, Gibson successfully purchased and transported all needed supplies, a job that earned him Jackson's high praise and friendship, lasting far into Jackson's term as U.S. President.

In 1818, he was appointed to the new office of Commissary General of Subsistence, which he held for 43 years. He earned promotions to brigadier general and then to major general for meritorious conduct, particularly in performing his duties during the Mexican War.

Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery



President Thomas Jefferson

Jefferson Barracks, located north of St. Louis, was named to honor revered former president Thomas Jefferson, who died just six days before the fort's establishment in 1826. It was the nation's first "Infantry School of Practice" and a gathering point for troops and supplies from the Mexican War through World War II. It became a national cemetery in 1866.

Thomas Jefferson, born in 1743 in Virginia, was a fine writer, but no public speaker. Known as the "silent member" of Congress, he drafted the Declaration of Independence at age 33. As the nation became separated by political parties, Jefferson assumed

leadership of the Republicans. Sympathizing with the revolutionary cause of France, he opposed strong centralized government and supported states' rights.

Jefferson assumed the presidency in 1800. He cut taxes, reduced the size of the military, the budget and the national debt. He projected American power into the Mediterranean by sending a naval squadron to fight the Barbary pirates who had been harassing American interests. Jefferson seized the opportunity to double the size of America by negotiating the Louisiana Purchase with France in 1803, even though he knew he didn't have the constitutional powers to do so.

Leavenworth National Cemetery

Henry Leavenworth was born in Connecticut in 1783, the son of an officer who served under Washington in the Continental Army. Leavenworth fought in the War of 1812 and then served in the New York State Legislature. He rejoined the military in 1818 as a lieutenant colonel and was detailed to Minnesota to build a post, but was transferred to Nebraska soon after construction began.

In 1827, Leavenworth was directed to locate a site on the east side of the Missouri River for "Cantonment Leavenworth," a permanent training and outfitting establishment near present-day Kansas City.



Henry Leavenworth

However, Leavenworth judged that the west side offered a more advantageous location and began construction even before he got final confirmation for the location change.

Called Fort Leavenworth by 1832, it became the oldest continuously operating military establishment west of the Missouri River. The oldest city in Kansas is Leavenworth (est. 1854) and was the jumping-off point for two major migration trails west.

The fort's cemetery became a national cemetery in 1862. The oldest gravesites date to 1827, when disease killed many of the soldiers during the post's first year of operation.

In 1834, Leavenworth was given command of the entire southwest frontier. He led an expedition against the Pawnee and Comanche Indians with such tact and skill that no blood was shed and Leavenworth obtained a treaty that satisfied the desires of the government. Leavenworth died of a fever in 1834, never learning of his promotion to brigadier general for his success in concluding that treaty.

Fort Scott National Cemetery



Gen. Winfield Scott

Fort Scott, located on the eastern outskirts of the city of Fort Scott, Kansas, was established in 1842 to keep a three-way peace between Native American tribes who were forced off of their lands in the east, the area's local tribes and white settlers. It was named for Gen. Winfield Scott (b.1786), one of the top military heroes of his time.

Scott, a native of Virginia, was the son of a Revolutionary War veteran. He studied and practiced law and when the War of 1812 broke out, he recruited a regiment and was promoted to the rank of lieutenant colonel.

While fighting in Canada, Scott was captured and held for one year. After a prisoner exchange, he returned to fighting. His actions in battle left him severely wounded, but won him a promotion to major general.

After the war, Scott traveled in Europe, studying military tactics. He returned in 1832 and participated in a succession of conflicts, "calming" actions, and diplomatic efforts.

He relocated Indian tribes and suppressed rebellions of those who had been

moved. His reputation was used to intimidate secessionist South Carolinians. He restrained unauthorized bands of Americans hoping to stir up revolution in Canada, and he helped negotiate a dispute between gangs of American and Canadian lumberjacks before an outright war could begin.

In 1841, he was appointed General-in-Chief of the U.S. Army, and held that position until his retirement 20 years later. Scott was known as “Old Fuss and Feathers” because of his penchant for military procedures and finery.

As a member of the opposition Whig party, he often clashed with President Polk, who considered him a political threat. He ran for U.S. President in 1852, but was defeated by Franklin Pierce.

He spent the last years of his life writing his memoirs and traveling in Europe. He died in 1866 and was buried at the national cemetery at West Point.

By Robert Turtill, *Vanguard* staff

Note: This is the second in a series of features about the historical figures for whom some of VA's facilities are named. In the coming weeks, Part 3 will feature two Medal of Honor recipients and the VA medical centers named for them.

Behind the Names

Part 3

VA facilities all over the country bear the names of Americans who made significant contributions to their country. Who were they? In this feature series, we take a look at the historical figures for whom some of VA's facilities are named.

VA facilities all over the country bear the names of great Americans. Who were they? In this third installment of our feature series, we look at the historical figures behind the names of two VA medical centers.

Two American heroes, both Medal of Honor recipients, earned the honor and respect of their countrymen, and VA honored them by naming medical centers in their memories.



Audie L. Murphy

Audie L. Murphy

The Audie L. Murphy Veterans Hospital in San Antonio, Texas, honors the most decorated U.S. combat soldier of World War II. He earned every decoration for valor this country could offer, as well as similar honors from Belgium and France. His life began in a family of poor Texas sharecroppers, and after the war, his achievements and contributions touched millions.

In January 1945, near Holtzwihr, France, 2nd Lt. Murphy's company was attacked by six tanks and waves of infantry. He ordered his men to withdraw to protective woods, but remained at his forward post ordering close-in artillery

strikes to support the withdrawal, a move that devastated the advancing Germans.

A U.S. tank nearby had taken a hit and was burning, threatening to explode. With the enemy closing around him, Murphy climbed onto the burning vehicle and used its machine gun to kill dozens of Germans, ultimately stopping their advance. The Germans tried to eliminate Murphy, only to be destroyed as they approached his position. He was wounded, but continued to fight until he exhausted his ammunition. He withdrew to his squad and organized a counterattack, causing a full withdrawal of the Germans. These actions earned him the Medal of Honor.

Murphy spent three years in active military service. He entered as a private, rose to the rank of staff sergeant, and was given a "battlefield" commission of second

lieutenant. He was wounded three times and survived nine major campaigns in Europe.

He was released from active service in September 1945. Actor James Cagney invited him to Hollywood to try his hand at acting, but the succeeding years were tough, with the movie industry offering only small parts.

Then in 1949, Murphy played himself in the Hollywood release of his autobiography "To Hell and Back." The film was a big hit, holding the box office record until the 1975 release of "Jaws." Murphy's place in Hollywood was assured and he went on to star in 26 films, mostly westerns, over the next 15 years. In 25 years of acting, he made a total of 44 films.

Murphy owned ranches throughout the Southwest, where he bred and raced horses. He was a prodigious gambler, betting on horses, sporting events and cards. It's reported that he won and lost fortunes.

He is also known as a successful poet and songwriter. His compositions have been recorded by Dean Martin, Eddy Arnold, Charley Pride, Jimmy Bryant, Porter Wagoner, Jerry Wallace, Roy Clark, Harry Nilsson and many others.

Murphy suffered bouts of depression, insomnia and substance abuse as a result of his war experiences. Recognizing his addiction to prescribed sleeping pills, he broke the habit by locking himself in a motel room for a week.

Audie Murphy suffered from what is today known as PTSD. Until the 1960s, "battle fatigue" and other war-related mental illnesses weren't discussed publicly. He was the first to do so, bringing national attention to veterans' mental health issues and making a lasting contribution to their treatment.

Audie Leon Murphy died in a Memorial Day weekend plane crash in 1971 while on a business trip. He was 46.

Alvin C. York

The Alvin C. York VA Medical Center in Murfreesboro, Tenn., is named in honor of "Sergeant York," a reluctant World War I draftee whose inner struggle and strength led him from near-conscientious objector to American hero.

He was born in the hills of Tennessee in 1887 and gained little more than a third-grade education. Up through his twenties, he was known as a backwoodsman with a deadly accurate shot, and a hellion who spent his time drinking, smoking and gambling.



Alvin C. York

In 1914, after a particularly hard night of drinking and fighting, his mother somehow convinced him to give up his way of life. Religious conversion soon followed. He joined the church and became an elder.

As he followed America's involvement in the war, he feared that "we were only fighting for a bunch of foreigners." York later wrote that he received assurance from God himself that the fight was a righteous one and that he would come out unscratched.

York was drafted at the age of 30. His church pastor prepared papers to exclude York from combat on religious grounds, but York refused to sign them. He was willing to serve, but refused to fight and kill.

Basic training gave York his first glimpse of the world beyond the mountains of Tennessee. He trained with the masses of urban draftees, but stood out as an expert shot, though he objected to firing at human silhouette targets.

After discussion and counsel with his superiors, York relinquished his pacifism. He was shipped to France in May 1918, and by the end of September, his unit had suffered many casualties to combat, artillery and gas attacks.

In October 1918, while fighting in the Argonne Forest, York's division was ordered to take a strategic hill and a nearby rail line. At zero hour, his unit went over the top of the trenches and, despite casualties, proceeded to take the hill.

They moved on to their next objective, the railway, but many in his company fell to withering German machine-gun fire. His unit was pinned down, surrounded on three sides by enemy machine-gun nests.

York and a few of his squad quietly moved around the German gun emplacements and ran into the headquarters of the enemy unit. They quickly took the entire command of largely unarmed Germans as prisoners.

York and his men planned to take their prisoners right through the enemy front line. Soon enemy gunners pinned them down again, but York found himself at a vantage point where he could see the German emplacements, but they had difficulty locating him.

As his men and their captives took cover, York began picking off the gunners one by one until he had killed more than 20 Germans. One of the German officers who had previously surrendered witnessed York's one-man assault on the German machine-gun nests and told him he would order their total surrender if York would just stop killing his men. York agreed and soon had nearly 100 prisoners marching back to friendly lines.

York was awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions, including killing 25 of the enemy, destroying 35 machine guns, capturing four officers and 128 men.

Upon York's return to New York City, he was singled out as America's greatest fighting hero. His hometown tried to build a new home for him, but left him with a half-finished house and a huge mortgage. He was wooed by big business searching for his endorsement of their products. He declined, saying, "This uniform ain't for sale."

York went on speaking tours to raise money for education, roads and job training in his native Appalachia. He considered running for public office, supporting Herbert Hoover in 1932 in opposition to FDR's promise to repeal prohibition. Roosevelt's New Deal policies brought him back into the democratic fold.

Alvin C. York died in 1964 after suffering a cerebral hemorrhage.

By Robert Turtill, *Vanguard* staff

Note: This is the third in a series of features about the historical figures for whom some of VA's facilities are named. In installment 4 of this series, we will feature two more individuals: One a world-class physician, medical school dean and influential chief medical director; the other, a popular U.S. Congressman and veterans' advocate.

Behind the Names

Part 4

VA facilities all over the country bear the names of Americans who made significant contributions to their country. Who were they? In this feature series, we take a look at the historical figures for whom some of VA's facilities are named.

In this fourth installment of our feature series, we look at the historical figures behind the names of two VA medical centers, one a world-class physician, medical school dean and influential chief medical director; the other, a popular U.S. Congressman and veterans' advocate.



William S. Middleton

William S. Middleton

William S. Middleton Memorial Veterans Hospital is physically connected to the University of Wisconsin Hospital in Madison, Wis. William Shainline Middleton, M.D.'s connection to both institutions goes back to at least 1955, when he left his post as dean of the university's medical school to become VA's chief medical director.

Middleton was an accomplished educator, physician and scientist. His service to medicine, veterans and country spanned more than 60 years, beginning in 1911 when he earned his medical degree from the Univ. of Pennsylvania. The following year, he began teaching at the Univ. of Wisconsin Medical School, becoming a full professor in 1933, followed by his

appointment as dean of the medical school, a seat he held for the next 20 years.

Middleton served with distinction in both world wars. As a captain with the British and American expeditionary forces in France during World War I, he was awarded the Victory Medal with seven battle clasps.

Between wars, he returned to the University of Wisconsin, where he continued to teach, as well as consult for the U.S. Public Health Service and the Veterans Bureau, which became the Veterans Administration in 1930.

In World War II, Col. Middleton was assigned to the Office of the Chief Surgeon for the European Theatre of Operations, serving as chief consultant in medicine. He taught medical officers at military field schools at various locations. For this service he was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal, the Legion of Merit with Oak Leaf Cluster, the order of the British Empire and the French Croix de Guerre with Palm.

After the Second World War, Middleton returned to his position as dean of the UW Medical School. He also acted as special advisor to the Surgeon General of the Army during the Korean Conflict.

Public service called again in 1955. Middleton took a leave of absence from academia and was sworn in as chief medical director for the Veterans Administration.

He was a member of the VA Special Medical Advisory Group, advising on the care and treatment of disabled veterans. He improved access to rehabilitation services, mental health and hypertension treatment. He also guided the development of VA research programs and he initiated the establishment of long-term patient care. He retired from VA in 1963.

His career led to many professional positions, including presidencies of the American College of Physicians, the Central Society for Clinical Research and the American Association for the History of Medicine. Dr. William S. Middleton died in 1975.

Clement J. Zablocki

The Clement J. Zablocki Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Milwaukee, Wis., honors the Democratic congressman who served his constituents for more than 40 years in the Wisconsin state house and the U.S. House of Representatives. He represented the 4th U.S. Congressional District for a record 18 consecutive terms.



Clement J. Zablocki (on left)

“Clem,” as he preferred to be called, was born into an immigrant Polish-American family on Milwaukee’s south side. Catholic and public school-educated, with a degree in philosophy and advanced training from Marquette University, he became a high school teacher. He was also an accomplished organist and choir director.

The dapper Zablocki was a short, squat man with a dark, Thomas Dewey-like mustache and a reserved demeanor. Remarkable for how unnoticeable he was, his style and physical stature endeared him all the more to the public. Above all, he was much loved in his community and a friend and advocate for veterans, though he wasn’t a veteran himself.

Defeated in his first attempt at state politics in 1939, he was elected to serve two terms as state senator for Wisconsin’s 3rd district beginning in 1942. In 1948 he began his career in the U.S. Congress, and was reelected to each succeeding

term for the remainder of his life, sometimes garnering as much as 80 percent of the vote.

His political views mirrored those of his hard-working Eastern European immigrant constituency, embodying working-class patriotism, staunch anti-communism and religious conservatism. Yet he was held in high regard by liberals on economic and foreign policy matters.

He was a frequent visitor to Milwaukee's VA hospital. In Congress, he rose through the ranks of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs and ultimately became chairman, one of Congress's highest ranking posts, in 1977.

His leadership style was one of reason and persuasion. Zablocki helped guide the passage of the War Powers Act of 1973 through Congress with enough support to override a presidential veto. This law, written in response to America's Vietnam experience, requires that a President obtain the consent of Congress before sending American troops abroad for more than 60 days.

Cong. Zablocki died in his Washington, D.C., office in 1983. The VA medical center in Milwaukee was rededicated in his honor in May 1985.

By Robert Turtill, *Vanguard* staff

Note: This is the fourth in a series of features about the historical figures for whom some of VA's facilities are named. In Part 5, we will look at three veterans whose names have recently been affixed to VA facilities by an act of Congress.

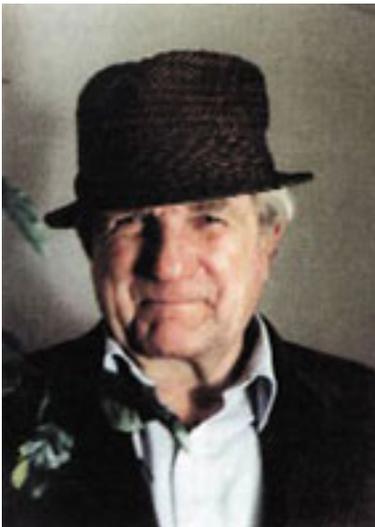
Behind the Names

Part 5

VA facilities all over the country bear the names of Americans who made significant contributions to their country. Who were they? In this feature series, we take a look at the historical figures for whom some of VA's facilities are named.

The previous installments of this feature series, we profiled four people behind the names of national cemeteries and four who have had VA medical centers dedicated to them. These men fought for their country, for their community and for the health of veteran and citizen alike.

In this fifth and final installment, we look at three veterans whose names have recently been affixed to VA facilities by an act of Congress -- two who served during World War II and went on to advocate for veterans, and one who is honored for how he lived, and how he died. They join the list of Americans whose leadership, patriotism, heroic acts, medical innovations and veteran advocacy efforts are commemorated by the dedication of a VA facility in their honor.



John J. McGuirk

John J. McGuirk

On May 7, 2004, the VA outpatient clinic in New London, Conn., located on the grounds of the United States Coast Guard Academy, was re-dedicated as the John J. McGuirk Department of Veterans Affairs Outpatient Clinic.

Born in Massachusetts, John J. McGuirk moved to New London with his family when he was a toddler. As a teenager, McGuirk's first job was as a lighthouse keeper on Race Rock Lighthouse at the edge of Long Island Sound. After he'd witnessed a large ship run aground on the rocks and watched the salvage company work the wreck, he knew he had to be a diver. He soon began working for that company.

McGuirk joined the Navy in 1943, continuing his civilian career as a hardhat salvage diver. After attending the Navy's salvage school in New York City, he was shipped to the Pacific, serving on the USS Layson Island. For the next two years, he dove on war's devastation, from the grim wreckage of Pearl Harbor through the South Pacific and finally to a 1945 operation to reclaim \$75 million in silver coins sunk by the U.S. and Philippine governments to prevent capture by the advancing Japanese in 1942.

At 6 feet, 4 inches, "Big John" was an awesome sight, equipped with a heavy, old style brass diving helmet and breastplate, full body canvas suit and weighted

shoes. If the nickname “Big John” wasn’t enough, he earned the name of “Bull” in the boxing ring.

After the war, McGuirk returned to New London, raised a family, worked in the salvage business and became an active member of the local American Legion. With particular concern for disabled and elderly veterans, he worked to promote improved care and to increase the number of VA health-care facilities in Connecticut.

McGuirk was instrumental in establishing the VA clinic that would one day bear his name. He died of a heart attack on Nov. 17, 2000, at age 83.

Victor J. Saracini

To those who knew him, Victor J. Saracini served as a symbol of where hard work and determination can lead. Even though he dropped out of high school, he went on to earn a college degree, and then through service to his country, attained his dream of becoming a commercial pilot.

After graduating with a Bachelor of Science degree in 1975, Saracini was accepted to the Navy’s Aviation Officer Candidate School. He was commissioned as an ensign in December 1975 and received his Naval Flight Officer wings the following year. Saracini served on S-3A anti-submarine warfare aircraft aboard the aircraft carrier USS Saratoga.



Victor J. Saracini

He was an esteemed and decorated officer with the Navy, having received the National Defense Service Medal, Navy E Ribbon and Expert Marksmanship Ribbon. In 1980, he separated from active duty and served in the Naval Reserve at Naval Air Station Willow Grove, Pa., where he was a crewmember on a Lockheed P-3 Orion. He left the military in 1985 with the rank of lieutenant.

After leaving the Navy, Saracini flew as a corporate and commercial pilot before joining United Airlines in 1985. In all, Saracini flew commercial aircraft for 16 years.

United Airlines Captain Victor J. Saracini died as the Boston to Los Angeles-bound 767 jetliner he was piloting was hijacked and crashed into the south tower of the World Trade Center at 9:03 a.m., Sept. 11, 2001. He left behind a wife and two young daughters.

Two weeks earlier, as Saracini celebrated his 51st birthday, his 13-year-old daughter Kirsten had given him a poem she wrote called “Years gone by.” She read it at the Sept. 18 memorial service attended by more than 1,500 people.

“And for all the years that come, I know one thing will never change, you will always be my daddy and I will always feel the same. I love you.”

Staff at the Philadelphia VA Medical Center had been searching for a location for a new outpatient clinic north of the city. On the day of the tragedy, they finally found the future site. Eighteen miles from Philadelphia, the new clinic is adjacent to NAS Willow Grove, where Saracini once served, and not far from his Bucks County home.

In November 2004 the outpatient clinic in Horsham, Pa., was renamed the Victor J. Saracini Department of Veterans Affairs Outpatient Clinic.



George E. Wahlen

George E. Wahlen

By Oct. 5, 1945, George E. Wahlen had spent seven months in military hospitals recuperating from wounds sustained during the battle for Iwo Jima. He would spend two-and-a-half more months and face three surgeries before finally going home. But on this day at the Marine hospital at Camp Pendleton, Calif., President Harry S. Truman presented him the Medal of Honor.

On Feb. 19, 1945, 20-year-old Navy pharmacist's mate Wahlen, a medic attached to the 2nd Battalion, 26th Marines, 5th Marine Division, went ashore with the initial wave of Marines tasked to take strategic Iwo Jima. For the next 13 murderous days, he treated the injuries of his comrades, dismissing the shrapnel he had taken to his right eye, shoulder and back.

On the last day Wahlen was on the island, he suffered a third wound when an exploding shell shattered his right ankle. "I bandaged myself up, took a shot of morphine and crawled over and started helping a Marine that had both his legs blown off," he recalled. Wahlen put tourniquets on the wounded Marine's legs, then tried to attend to another wounded comrade, but his injuries overcame him. He was soon evacuated.

Wahlen's Medal of Honor citation chronicles this final day of self sacrifice on the island, along with his courageous actions throughout 12 previous days as he saved many from his unit and 14 more from an adjacent unit.

After the war, Wahlen attended college and then joined the Army, serving in Korea and Vietnam. He retired from the military in 1969 with 23 years of combined Navy/Army service. Wahlen then spent 14 years employed at the Salt Lake City VA Regional Office.

During that period he was instrumental in establishing a state veterans cemetery and a nursing home at the VA hospital in Salt Lake City that now bears his name: The George E. Wahlen Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center. Today, he continues to volunteer his time for veterans in Utah.

By Robert Turtill, *Vanguard* staff