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Exhibit Wall dedicated, flag replaced in Veterans Day ceremony

By NANCY SORRELLS For The News Virginian Nov 12, 2018



Members of VFW Post 2216 and American Legion Post 13 replace the worn and weathered American flag with a new Stars & Stripes on Monday in a special flag changing ceremony at the Wilson General Hospital Memorial Monument and Exhibit Wall in Fishersville on the site of the WWII army hospital.

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Photo credit: NANCY SORRELLS

FISHERSVILLE— On June 26, 1942, the farm fields around the village of Fishersville began a transformation. A year later when the first wave of wounded soldiers arrived at the new Woodrow Wilson General Hospital, the 652 acres of farmland had given way to a fully-staffed hospital with 135 single story brick buildings and 2.5 miles of sheltered walkways all designed to care for sick, injured, and wounded military personnel during World War II.

On Monday, the Veterans Day holiday, a small ceremony was held at the site of the former hospital and current educational and rehabilitation complex, to remember the story that unfolded on the grounds. The purpose of the day's event was to dedicate the memorial monument and exhibit wall now established on the former hospital grounds, and to replace the American flag at the monument with a new one.

From the time that the hospital opened its doors during WWII until it closed in 1946, more than 4,000 soldiers were cared for and rehabilitated, enabling them to return home and lead productive lives after the war. After WWII, the property was declared surplus and repurposed with the dual vision of rehabilitation and education. Half the site became the world's first state-owned and -operated comprehensive rehabilitation center — now called the Wilson Workforce and Rehabilitation Center. The other half became Wilson Memorial High School and the Valley Career and Technical School. Originally, all three facilities, plus a neighborhood full of housing for employees who worked in the schools and center, were located in the single-story hospital buildings. Gradually through the 1960s and 1970s most of the original structures were demolished.

However, the history, along with a few of the original hospital buildings, remain. Several years ago a book and a video documentary called “Hope Reborn of War” was researched and written about the site from cornfield to the hospital to the facilities on the site today in the 21 st century.

The memorial project to honor and preserve the story of that hospital that transformed the community began in 2015 with an idea spearheaded by Robert Ham, a masonry instructor at the Valley Career and Technical Center. He wanted to make sure that the story of the site was remembered even as those who worked and were cared for at the military hospital faded away.

In 2015, the Augusta County School Board donated the property across the road from the current technical center and in the shadow of the largest cluster of remaining WWII brick hospital buildings. The idea was to build a monument and an exhibit wall to honor the nation's soldiers stationed at and treated at the hospital, as well as their caretakers, both military and civilian.

The tall brick monument with an eagle on top and a memorial plaque as well as the flagpole were all dedicated on Memorial Day in 2016. On Monday, the small wall — designed to reflect the look of the original hospital buildings that surround the site — was dedicated. The wall has a large-screen monitor where visitors can view all or some of the “Hope Reborn of War” video documentary that chronicles the history of the site. The memorial site also has paved walkways and an asphalt parking area.

The memorial wall and the monument were designed with architectural elements reflective of the look of the hospital buildings. The brick courses are even identical to those on the hospital buildings. Tech school students helped with the masonry work for the memorial.

Helping with the Veterans Day dedication on Monday were Veterans of Foreign Wars Post no. 2216 and American Legion Post no. 13. Together they conducted the flag changing ceremony and VFW Post Chaplain Bill Surratt thanked everyone for coming and in particular thanked Ham.

For his part, Ham said that it was a community effort.

“I am a good one to stir things up and this was a good thing to stir up,” he said, noting that over 35 businesses and individuals contributed to the memorial project. “Everybody that I asked said: ‘What can I do?’ and then they said: ‘What more can I do?’”

He pointed in particular to the Augusta Homebuilders Association and to Zach Straits, general manager of Builders FirstSource.

“I took a sketch of what I had in mind to Zach and he stopped his men from whatever work they were doing and got them going on it,” Ham explained.

Ham said that “all the materials from the doors to the digital key pad, to every shingle came from them.”

“Robert sold me on the mission of what they were trying to accomplish. Like many folks in the area, I didn’t know about the history of this site. We were just happy to help,” said Straits.

Virginia Del. Dickie Bell also said a few words at Monday’s dedication.

“It is a great honor to have had a small part of this project,” said Bell. “This place is a living history site. Anytime we can honor our military and our flag, I am happy to be a part of it.”

After Bell spoke, the VFW and American Legion color guard solemnly lowered the tattered flag. One member of the color guard gently gathered the worn Stars & Stripes in her arms while others carefully unfolded a bright new flag and pulled it skyward to flap in the breeze.

