

On Saturday November 8th an unveiling ceremony was held for Raritan's Wall of Heroes. The wall honors those in Raritan who died in World War II. Each fallen hero is represented with a "Tribute Frame" containing a photo and the original newspaper article that told of their death.

The idea for this tribute began a few months ago. The frames were to be unveiled in a ceremony and displayed permanently in the Raritan Municipal Building. The town council approved the idea and discussions began as to the type of ceremony which would be appropriate to honor these brave men.

Their deaths occurred almost 70 years ago in World War II which could make it difficult to locate surviving family members. One possibility was to have a small ceremony where the unveiling was done by local politicians. However, this author together with historical consultants John Pacifico and Peter Vitelli, deemed it proper to have each frame tribute to be unveiled one frame at a time by the family and friends of the fallen heroes. With the passage of time, can we find more than a handful of them? Do we even know who the family members are? My historical consultants, two Raritan kids ages 77 and 87, know a few, and for others they know someone who may know the whereabouts of a niece or nephew. Finding others will be a challenge.

We made our list of fallen heroes and began our search.

First, we requested assistance from the public in a recent book. *"Raritan's Finest Hour – The Story of Raritan During World War II"*. In the back of the book we ask for information about several of those KIA. From this, the niece of Walter Jacobs contacted us. Walter was the only soldier for whom we had no photo. We did not even know where he lived. She has photos and good scrapbook. Walter Jacobs, once the hero we had the least information about, is now one of the hero's that we have the most information about. The family has proudly agreed to attend the unveiling at town hall.

Another call from the book came from Gene Moretti, whose brother Joseph Moretti is being honored. Gene, whose house this writer has been to several times, inquired if I was still looking for information on Alfred Zanoni. Gene advised that Alfred was one of his best friends and that he has a dozen photos and can help us with family contact info as well.

Next, we put an article in *The Breeze* requesting family contact information for certain individuals which resulted in a few calls with the requested information. One call was from an old neighbor of Dominic Baldini. She explained that Dominic had one sister who is deceased and had no children, so family would be difficult to find for him. If needed, she volunteered to represent Dominic at the unveiling ceremony. She recalled that the day before Dominic left for the war, he treated her with an ice cream at Raritan's Candy Kitchen. We are honored to have her unveil Dominic's "Tribute Frame".

To further search for family members, we turned to the internet site whitepages.com to search the last name of the soldier as well as the last names of any married sisters that were mentioned in the 1940s newspaper articles. Several addresses were found for each of the names we queried. We designed a standard inquiry form that was mailed to each of the possible relatives, i.e. "We are looking for the family of _____ who was killed in World War II to attend a ceremony on November 8th....." The post office returned many of our letters. Some of the letters found their mark and we received calls from

nieces, nephews, and in-laws. Those who responded are very enthused. Many say that this tribute is long overdue.

Our hopes to find the family depended on how common the last name is. One of the honorees, Charles Dougherty, had a very interesting war story. He served on submarines in the Pacific during World War II. His first sub was honored for sinking numerous Japanese ships while his skipper was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. Great story, but since the last name is so common, I felt that I had little chance of finding his family. The original newspaper article did not list the names of any siblings to aid in our search. Using the internet, I discovered information about his sub that was sunk. It listed who was on the ship and it told some facts about Charles Dougherty. That webpage also has a contact email that I responded to with a note requesting any information on Charles Dougherty. To my pleasant surprise, I quickly received an email with the names of the siblings of Charles Dougherty. Previously, the number of possible Dougherty's in our search was in the hundreds, but now with the first names, the search was narrowed to a few. I sent out my letters and received a call from his sister Betty. She replied that she would not miss the unveiling ceremony for anything.

The usually reliable FACEBOOK that I use for searching for people gave me just one lead. That one lead, who shall remain anonymous, was the only one that had no interest in attending the ceremony. That unpatriotic fellow was even named after the fallen hero. Oh well, there is always one.

Eventually, we found a family member or neighbor for the majority of our heroes. For those that we could not find, we enlisted the aid of a local veteran to do the unveiling.

Those unveiling the frames include one daughter, Frances Capetta for Frank Esposito. One brother, Gene Moretti for Joseph Moretti. Three sisters: Betty for Charles Dougherty, Dorothy for Peter Petras, and Josephine for Walter Jacobs. There is a variety of other types of relatives. There are several nieces and nephews, a sister-in-law, a second-cousin, and one "son-in-law of a cousin". A heartfelt thanks to all that have agreed to attend.

In the planning for the ceremony we had to make some decisions.

The lobby that will hold the "The Wall of Heroes" is too small for any ceremony, therefore the unveiling of the frames will be done in the multipurpose room in the Raritan Municipal Building. But that has some limitations. A quick count of the number of men we are honoring and the number of family members attending shows that the multipurpose room will be pushed to capacity. Thus, while we can hold the event there, we cannot invite the public as there is simply no room available.

To fully honor each hero, an individual table top display will contain his photo, a picture of the house he lived in, the 1940s newspaper article about his death, and any additional photos that we have.

After months of planning and searching, the big day had arrived.

The "Master of Ceremonies" is John Pacifico. He begins:

“Raritan has had many men and women who fought in all our wars – beginning with the Revolutionary war. During World War II almost 1000 served – that was more than one fifth of the town’s population. In that war, 25 of them made the supreme sacrifice while defending our freedoms and our way of life. Today we honor these men.”

The first frame to be unveiled is for Dominic Baldini. A short bio is given and the story is told of how the day before Dominic left for the war, he took the girl across the street for ice cream. Then that same girl, now 70 years older, is called up to do the unveiling. The first frame is done – and the first tears are shed.

The ceremony moves through the 25 men in alphabetical order. One of the women doing the unveiling uses a walker. Two others use canes. Family and friends have been told in advance that they can say a few words, but most decline. Jim Fidacaro, a nephew of Alphonse Matteis, does say a few inspiring words.

He first talked about his Uncle and then quoted from a Veterans Administration website. “ These men have stood and will continue to stand as reminders that freedom is purchased at a very high cost. Our debt to these heroes can never be repaid. Our gratitude and respect must last forever.”

The ceremony finishes. All went smoothly. A unique event, an emotional event, and a very special event.

As stated before, while the “Tribute Frames” have now been individually unveiled, they still need to be mounted on the wall on the second floor of the Raritan Municipal Building. The website raritan-online.com – will post when this is done. That same website has information on our fallen heroes and pictures of the unveiling ceremony.

The Wall of Heroes was made possible by a donation from Ed Danberry of Civic Duty Partners.