

# JAMES EDWARD BARNETT

1927 – 2002

U.S. AIR FORCE, SERGEANT

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**James Edward “Ed” Barnett was born in** Kingwood, West Virginia, on March 14, 1927, to Hattie M. Barnett (née Randall) of Sommerly, West Virginia, and Robie H. Barnett of Fincastle, Virginia. Ed was the seventh of 13 children in a household of 16 people, including extended family, living along the West Virginia Northern Railroad on Kingwood’s outskirts.

The seat of Preston County, Kingwood offered employment opportunities in the coal and timber industries. These jobs attracted Hattie and Robie to the area sometime during the 1920s. Both had grown up in coal mining families and were themselves part of a larger migration of Black coal miners moving into and through West Virginia’s mining towns in search of work and a better life. Hattie’s father mined coal in southern West Virginia’s Fayette County, to which significant numbers of Black miners flocked between 1890 and 1910.

Prior to settling in Kingwood, Robie found work with the Jamison Coal & Coke Company in Farmington, Marion County, where the rich Pittsburgh coal seam made the mines a major employer. After the final move to Preston County, Hattie became involved in their community’s church as she raised the children, while Robie labored as a miner with the Miller Coal Company in Kingwood.

The family eventually moved to a 14-acre rural plot of land outside town where they cultivated vegetable gardens and fruit orchards, and raised horses and other livestock. In time, the Barnett ponies would become a local curiosity. They built a baseball field on their property and gained local renown as players. A local history volume features



*Barnett Family collection*



Children exit Arthurdale school in 1936. The Preston County homestead project, personally sponsored by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, was only a few miles from the Barnett’s home but voted to accept no Black residents.

*Library of Congress*

photographs of the “Bombers” baseball team, which traveled to play against regional towns such as Grafton. Team photos from the 1940s include Ed’s brothers Earl and Bobby, as well as his future brother-in-law Frank Cavallier.

The Great Depression that swept the nation when Ed was a boy did not spare West Virginia. Unemployment reached as high as 80 percent in some counties, with extractive industries like mining and timber hit particularly hard. The Barnetts felt it, too: Robie reported being unemployed in April 1930. To earn extra income, Robie used his pony teams to haul coal up from deep within the local mines.

First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt visited West Virginia in the early 1930s. Upon witnessing the condition of unemployed coal miners not so different from Robie Barnett, she helped establish a federally subsidized homestead town called Arthurdale less than 10 miles from Kingwood. Arthurdale was not welcoming to the Barnetts, however. Though the experimental community was designed to function cooperatively, the first homesteaders for the project voted to ban both Jewish and Black miners from residency. It was a harsh reminder that

the government’s assistance was not always equally available to all citizens.

Segregation was not limited to federal government programs, either. State laws and institutionalized racism took their toll, as well. Preston County, for example, did not have a high school for its Black residents. Instead, when Black students completed eighth grade in Preston County, they were issued instructions on how to take a bus from Kingwood to Monongalia High School—a trip spanning more than 30 miles. The bus left Kingwood at 6:00 a.m. and began its return from Morgantown at 5:30 p.m. Pursuing secondary education thus meant arriving two hours before school opened and staying in Morgantown for two hours after school ended.

Some Black Preston County students, including two of Ed’s older siblings, transferred and completed a few years at Monongalia High School, but many others did not and entered the workforce without a secondary education. Like most of the state, schools in Preston County were not integrated until 1954. Young Ed went no further than eighth grade and eventually, like several of his brothers, followed his father into the coal mines. Jobs remained scarce in 1940s Appalachia. With



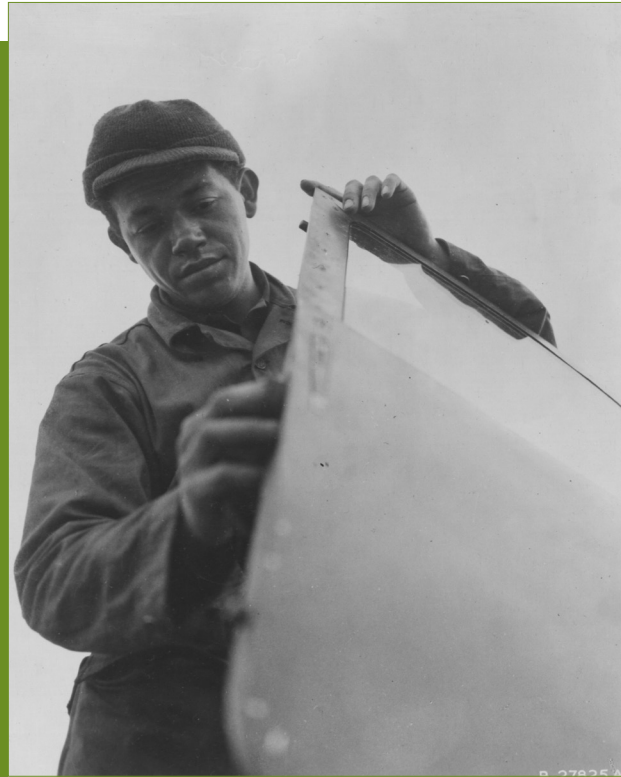
eleven children still in the home in 1940, the labor of all hands helped keep the family afloat. Ed's older brother Earl worked on road projects with the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Ed himself started mining coal in the summer of 1944.

Mining was one of the largest industries in Preston County, employing some 1,300 men across 30 mines to extract over 1.5 million tons of coal that year, much of it going toward America's war effort. When Ed entered the workforce in 1944, World War II was in its fifth year, and the United States had been involved since the end of 1941. Coal was used to produce American steel, power trains, and keep the war effort at maximum pitch. In 1943, the federal government assumed control of coal mines to mitigate labor disputes, and production surged along with the mass production of munitions, vehicles, and other war products.

National coal output had reached record numbers by the time 17-year-old Ed took the position of pumper in Mine Number One of the Miller Coal Company, where he probably worked alongside his father. The job was responsible for pumping groundwater out of the mineshafts which, if left untended, would refill over time and obstruct the miners' work. Since pumping did not entirely fill his shifts, Ed helped load coal into mining cars and push them out from underground.

When James Edward Barnett turned 18 in March 1945, however, he began to look for opportunities outside Preston County. In October, he joined the Army, and was in Camp Atterbury, Indiana, at the end of the month under a three-year enlistment with the Army Air Corps. But within five days of attaching his signature to the contract, the Air Corps discharged and transferred him to the Army Air Forces.

Ed may not have even known there was a distinction between the two branches. The Army Air Corps (AAC), created in 1926, was the older of the two, and in the early days of the Second World



Army Air Forces mechanic William Gould, 1944. *National Archives*

War, the AAC operated as a minor branch of the Army. In 1942, however, it was effectively replaced by the creation of the larger, more independent Army Air Forces (AAF)—though the former was not technically dissolved until the creation of the United States Air Force as its own, independent branch in 1947. To a confused Ed Barnett, who had been enlisted for less than a week, it was probably a distinction without a difference.

Ed proceeded to Sheppard Field in Wichita Falls, Texas, for nine weeks of basic training. Upon completion, he received assignment to the Pacific Theater's Philippines-Ryukyu Command, based at Harmon Airfield on Guam, in the Mariana Islands. It was from Guam and neighboring islands that B-29 Superfortress bombers had laid waste to Japanese cities and dropped the first two atomic bombs just months before Ed's arrival.

The young soldier crossed an ocean for the first time and arrived in the Marianas in April 1946. His

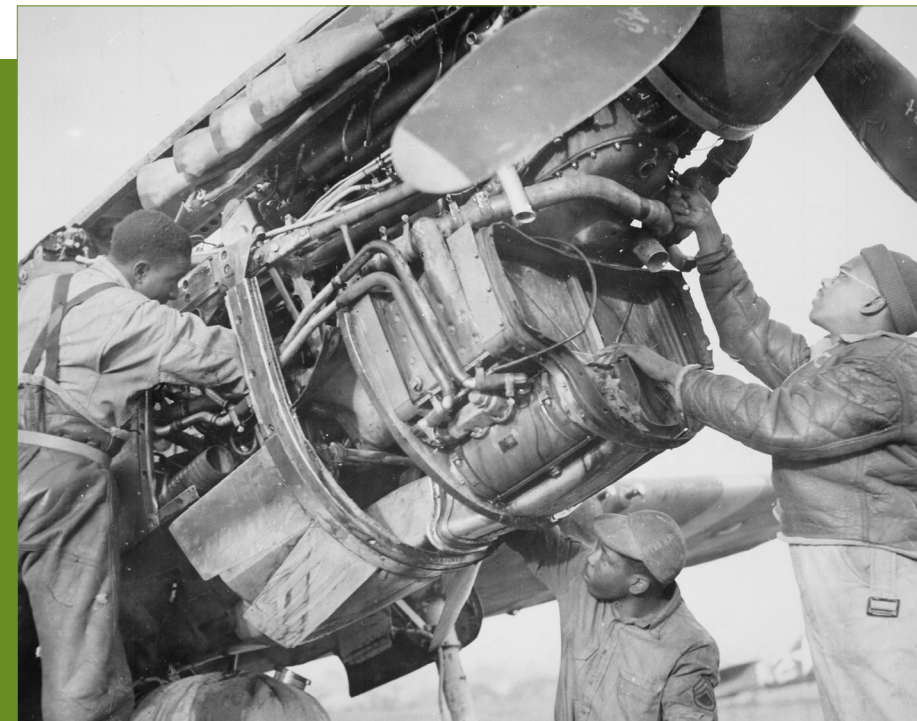
home was now the 435th Aviation Squadron, in which he trained to repair automobiles. He quickly learned some of the job's hazards by severely lacerating his right middle finger on a machine fan blade within a few months of arriving. The hand bothered him for the rest of his life whenever he worked in the cold.

An inclination towards electrical work earned him a Skilled Electrician's certification. Ed was a hard worker and excelled as a mechanical and electrical repairman, earning promotions to corporal on January 21, 1947, then to sergeant two months later—a surprising jump, especially in a downsized peacetime military. His professional development continued with a 10-week automobile repair course which certified him as a mechanic.

While earning these promotions, Ed received news that his father, Robie, had passed away. The old miner had injured his leg, resulting in a blood clot and subsequent heart attack. The Army rejected Ed's request for a furlough to attend the funeral, offering no explanation. Ed's oldest brother Earl assumed many of Robie's responsibilities in the care of the large Barnett family.

On July 26, the National Security Act of 1947 authorized the formation of the United States Air Force (USAF) as an independent service branch, coequal with the other military branches. The old AAF and AAC both folded into the new USAF hierarchy. It was a new day for air power in the U.S. military, but certain old problems followed the new branch as it adjusted to its independence. Chief among these bugbears was racial segregation.

Despite courageous service performed by Black citizens throughout the nation's history, racist attitudes dominated American military policy through the end of World War II. The end of the conflict brought about mass demobilization, but in its new role as a global superpower, the U.S. still needed millions of men in uniform to garrison new bases across Europe and the Pacific. Black enlistment remained very high in the postwar years because "many wanted the security of a military career, preferring not to re-enter a hostile society." The Army Air Forces even allowed its total number of Black recruits to surpass a ten-percent quota mandated by an armed forces committee. But segregation held the AAF back from giving these soldiers access to anything but menial roles.



A trio of Black aviation mechanics repair a P-51 Mustang fighter of the 99th Pursuit Squadron—the famed "Tuskegee Airmen"—on campaign in Italy with the 15th Air Force in 1944.

Though Black servicemen had proven themselves time and again in each of America's wars, equal opportunities were not immediately forthcoming after World War II.

*National Archives*



Ed and Betty. *Barnett Family collection*

There were indicators in 1947 that the new Air Force was growing annoyed with the lack of solution. An advisory board that included World War II aviation legend James Doolittle, hero of “Doolittle’s Raid” on Tokyo, told the USAF that integration was coming, like it or not: “You are merely postponing the inevitable and you might as well take it gracefully.” Whether he knew it or not, Ed Barnett was an eyewitness to these tectonic shifts in American military policy.

Ed bounced around to various units on Guam, repairing diesel engines with what his family called “a stern resolve to work without complaint.” He remained at Harmon Air Force Base until February 2, 1948, when he departed on a ship for the United States. The same day, President Harry S. Truman delivered a speech to Congress. “I have instructed the Secretary of Defense to take steps to have the remaining instances of discrimination in the armed services eliminated as rapidly as possible,” he declared. “The personnel policies

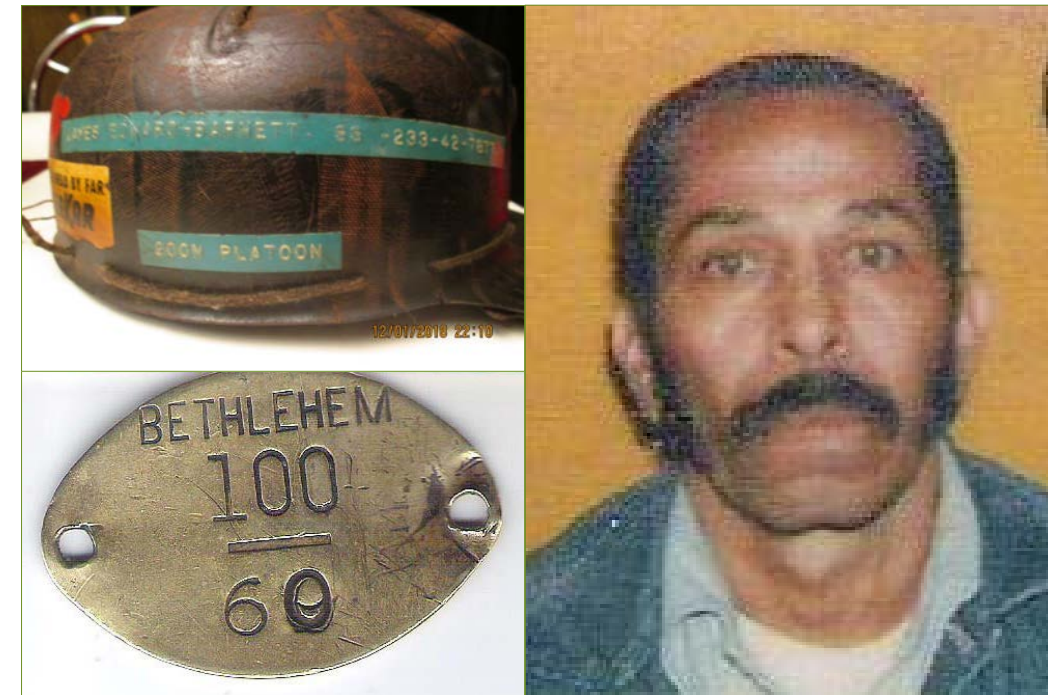
and practices of all the services in this regard will be made consistent.” It was a landmark day for civil rights, made complete when the president signed Executive Order 9981 in July, abolishing racial segregation in the armed forces. Air Force leadership now had a clear mandate to reorganize opportunities for Black troops.

Ed spent that spring and summer at Kelly Air Force Base in Texas. On October 30, 1948, he reached the end of his three-year enlistment and took his honorable discharge—having witnessed firsthand the birth of the Air Force and the death of official segregation in the military.

A much more skilled Ed Barnett returned home to Kingwood, West Virginia, bringing with him all his military expertise and certifications. He settled in with his mother, Hattie, and most of his siblings on their farm just outside of town. Hattie worked as a manager at a local restaurant and inn. His adult siblings were all working in the coal mines, as maids, or as waitresses. The youngest were still attending grade school.

Pittsburgh University was near enough to give Ed a chance at reviving his education, but he was unable to afford the tuition. As a veteran, he was eligible for educational funds via the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (the “GI Bill”). The bill’s benefits were supposed to apply to all veterans equally, but Black veterans reported obstacles obtaining low-cost mortgages, vocational retraining, or advanced educational opportunities. Many Black veterans stood their ground and insisted, often successfully, upon receiving the benefits to which they were entitled—but higher education roadblocks quickly appeared in the form of informal race quotas, or race-based questionnaires that found ways to circumvent the spirit of the law.

Instead, Ed applied the skills he learned from the military to become a certified electrician in the coal industry. His employers recognized his skills



Helmet, identification tag, and Barnett himself from Ed’s mining days.

*Barnett Family collection*

and work ethic, and promoted him to fire boss at Bethlehem Mines in Barbour County.

The former soldier now had time to think of other things in life, too. In the early 1950s, Ed met Betty Jo Cavallier, member of a White family that rented farmland from the Barnetts. Despite a nine-year age difference (Ed was 28, Betty Jo was 19) and the societal obstacles to their relationship, they took long strolls together around the Barnett tract. The farm was full of livestock, gardens, apple and cherry trees, and a hill with blueberry bushes. Reminiscing on how the couple met, Ed’s family likened it to the Fats Domino song, “I Found My Thrill on Blueberry Hill.”

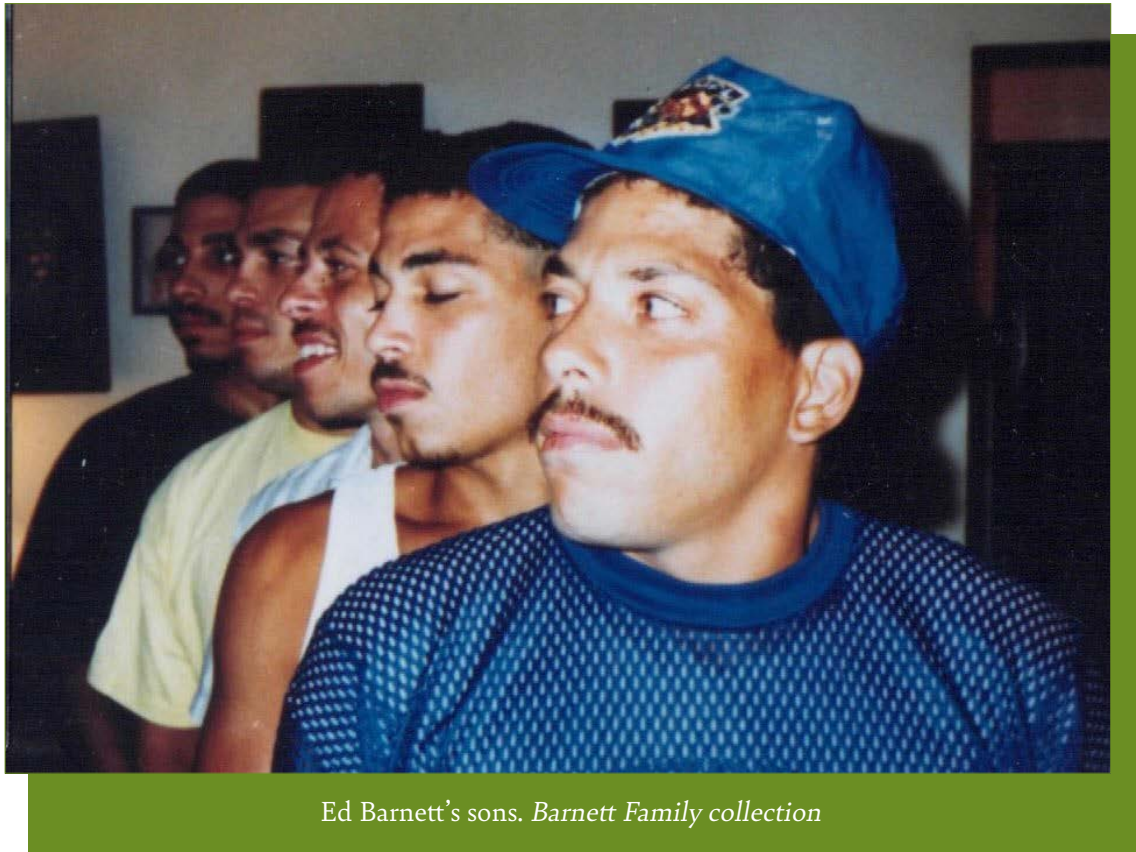
While the Kingwood community as a whole raised no objections to the interracial relationship, later Ed and Betty were honest with their children about the challenges they faced. They were unable to marry until after the U.S. Supreme Court handed down its decision in the 1967 case of *Loving v. Virginia*, which legalized interracial marriage. After over a decade together, Ed and Betty wed in Simpson, West Virginia, on July 2, 1969.

Following their wedding, the couple moved to Brownton in Barbour County where Ed and his brother Bob found new mining jobs. Together, Betty and Ed had a total of eight children: three daughters and five sons. Betty worked part-time as a health care provider, while Ed advanced his career through education and extra shifts.

At some point, the family lived in a large home in Galloway that had once been a boarding home for local coal miners. Ed’s children remember not only the home’s three stories and numerous bedrooms, but the proximity of local baseball fields. Like their father and uncles, the Barnett children loved organizing pick-up baseball games with cousins and friends.

Coal mining jobs eventually entered a long period of irreversible decline as mechanization replaced workers. During a period of layoffs in 1982, Ed found himself out of work but eager to gain new skills. So that Ed could take additional safety training to become an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT), Betty went to work as a housekeeper at the local Holiday Inn in Bridgeport.





Ed Barnett's sons. *Barnett Family collection*

Like her husband, Betty started at entry level but quickly rose to a lead role, in this case as the head housekeeper.

Ed's Air Force training in automotive repair served him well throughout his life. He frequently worked on his Ford truck or his siblings' vehicles—when not already busy working on the family home, or volunteering to construct an announcer's box for Philip Barbour High School's athletic field. Later, after Ed bought the family's permanent home in Brownton, he invested many hours into repairs and plumbing.

Ed enjoyed education and kept his mind sharp. He loved to learn and built shelves to store all his books. *National Geographic*, *Popular Mechanics*, numerous encyclopedias, and several books on plumbing and electricity rounded out the collection. Intellectual games were a favorite, and evidently he was fond of challenging friends and neighbors with math problems. Ed always won.

When both Ed and Betty suffered from health complications late in life, the family ensured they went to the same nursing home. From her second-floor room, Betty could visit Ed on the first floor. On July 13, 2002, however, James Edward Barnett passed away at the age of 75. Betty was able to attend his funeral, and remained relatively healthy until she passed four years later on September 22, 2006, at the age of 61. The two are buried side by side in the West Virginia National Cemetery in Pruntytown, West Virginia.



**PLACE OF INTERMENT:**  
West Virginia National Cemetery  
**SECTION 1**  
**SITE 36**



ABOVE: The extended Barnett family, circa 2019



LEFT: Ed and Betty Barnett later in life.

*Barnett Family collection*



# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The West Virginia National Cemeteries Project is a program of the West Virginia Humanities Council, funded in part by the Veterans Legacy Grant Program of the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs and initiated in 2021. Biographies produced as part of this program are composed by West Virginia high school students and West Virginia University graduate students and PhD candidates, who conduct original research on veterans interred at the Grafton National Cemetery or the West Virginia National Cemetery, both of which are located in Grafton, Taylor County, West Virginia.

As home to one of the nation’s first national cemeteries—founded shortly after the Civil War—the community of Grafton has longstanding traditions of honoring America’s veterans, including the longest continuously celebrated Memorial Day parade in the United States. The Grafton National Cemetery, located in the heart of the city and founded in 1867, is typically the endpoint of each year’s parade. Since the Grafton National Cemetery began to run short of space during the 1960s, the West Virginia National Cemetery was dedicated in 1987, just a few miles outside of Grafton.

The West Virginia Humanities Council is proud to thank the following organizations for their participation in the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project: West Virginia Archives and History, the West Virginia University history department, Taylor County Historical and Genealogical Society, Taylor County Public Library, Grafton High School, and University High School, among many others.

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For readability, bibliographies have been omitted from this publication. Student research for these biographies relies heavily on primary sources—census records, city directories, draft cards, muster rolls, and more—made available digitally through Ancestry and Fold3. Yearbook repositories and the digitized collections of many universities and archives have been invaluable resources. Most newspaper research was conducted digitally via Newspapers.com, NewspaperArchives, and the Library of Congress’s *Chronicling America* database.

Servicemembers’ Official Military Personnel Files (OMPFs) and Individual Deceased Personnel Files (IDPFs) are another essential part of project research, provided free of charge in most cases by the National Archives through standard records requests.

As the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project has grown and matured, the team has found that new sources sometimes surface for veterans researched in prior project years. To better maintain a “living bibliography” of all its veterans, a single master document is kept up on the project’s webpage under the “Programs” tab at [www.wvhumanities.org](http://www.wvhumanities.org).

Views and opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, National Archives of the United States, or any other federal agency. For more information about the Veterans Legacy Memorial and the Veterans Legacy Grant Program, visit [www.vlm cem.va.gov](http://www.vlm cem.va.gov).

