

KENNETH RAY WADDELL

1929 – 2012, KOREAN WAR

U.S. MARINE CORPS, STAFF SERGEANT

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Kenneth Ray Waddell was born on May 10, 1929, in Rivesville, Marion County, West Virginia. He was the fourth son of John Marshall Waddell and Blanche Katie DeMoss, who lived in Preston County prior to Kenneth's birth but moved in search of better work opportunities.

Rivesville was a major mining community. Conveniently located at the junction of two railroads (the Baltimore & Ohio and Monongahela Railway), it provided key transportation access to West Virginia's coal industry. Marion County possessed the state's leading coalfield by 1900, and was still a major producer during World War I despite being superseded by other parts of West Virginia.

After the war, however, coal production declined sharply, and the Great Depression threw significant challenges at West Virginians a decade later. Kenneth Waddell was born just a few months before the Great Depression touched off in late 1929. Nevertheless, his father was able to retain his job in the mines, working for Virginia & Pittsburgh Coal & Coke.

Kenneth's mother cared for Kenneth and his siblings John, Joseph, Robert, and Ruth. The Waddell children attended grammar school in a one-room schoolhouse before moving on to Rivesville High School, where Kenneth earned some of the best grades in his class and served as president of the Student Council.



Waddell had a strong work ethic both inside and outside the classroom. He found a job as a farmhand during the summers between his freshman and junior year, earning 20 dollars a week which he used to support the family. He harvested crops and raised livestock at Curnutte Farm. He later worked for the Baker & Sweeney Coal Company.

Those 30 dollars a week from the coal company were more profitable than farm work, but the monotonous tasks failed to satisfy Waddell. Above all else, he wanted to go to college and continue

his educational journey. After losing a scholarship, he sought other options that would allow him to continue his education and explore the world beyond Rivesville.

The Waddells' strong tradition of military service eventually provided the way forward. Kenneth's father served in World War I, seeing frontline action during the Oise-Aisne and Meuse-Argonne campaigns. All three of Kenneth's brothers served in World War II: one in the Army, one in the Army Air Force, and one in the Marine Corps. Kenneth later recalled that his brothers' stories of service "were so impressive to me." Military life, Kenneth reasoned, would allow him to serve his country, see the world, and fund his education. His mind made up upon graduation, he enlisted in the United States Marines on July 6, 1948, at the recruiting center in Clarksburg, West Virginia.

Immediately after joining the Marines, Waddell shipped out to Parris Island, South Carolina, for basic training. Kenneth landed in a harsh new world, where Marine enlistees were housed and trained on an isolated island amid the Low Country's saltwater marshes. The intentional isolation was a training tactic to keep new recruits' attention and focus on their ever-present drill sergeant. Kenneth experienced homesickness, South Carolina's high temperatures, poor quality food, and severe drill instructors during his time at basic training. He recalled, "I'm sure I shed some tears before I went to bed in those 10 to 12 weeks of basic training." However, the months of agony paid off. By the time he finished, he felt ready for anything that the Marines could throw at him.

Waddell's first assignment took him to Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. He spent 1949 stationed in Camp Lejeune or aboard vessels like the USS *Okaloosa* (APA-219) and USS *Meeker County* (LST-920). The next year, he worked on the USS *Randall* (APA-224) and USS *Salem* (CA-139) in the Mediterranean Sea with the 6th Marine Regiment.

Besides occasional bouts of seasickness, the months on the water were pleasant experiences and the



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young Marine learned a great deal. Each of the voyages that Waddell took with the Fleet Marine Force (FMF) expanded his knowledge of the coastal United States and the world. He visited some 20 countries during this tenure, including Jamaica, Portugal, Gibraltar, Turkey, Greece, and Italy.

He had a particularly notable sojourn in Rome. His commanding officer arranged for Kenneth and 25 other Marines and sailors to take a week-long tour of the city, which included a special audience with Pope Pius XII. Though the Marine was a devout Baptist, he never forgot his encounter with the leader of the Catholic Church. The pontiff shook hands with every American and asked them questions. "When he came to me, he asked me where I was from," Waddell remembered. "Well, I didn't say West Virginia, I said Rivesville, West



Waddell training his machine gun recruits.

Virginia! He just looked at me and he went on to the next person.”

In the summer of 1950, Waddell and his unit were practicing amphibious landings in Malta and Crete when they learned of the outbreak of war in Korea. That June, Communist North Korean forces of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) invaded South Korea, intent on reunifying the peninsula under the regime of Kim Il-Sung. Republic of Korea forces, reinforced by an American contingent, soon found themselves backed into a steadily shrinking corner of the peninsula.

The United Nations responded with armed intervention. In the early stages of the war, U.S. Marines were one of the most readily deployable bodies of troops. Waddell and the Marines

stationed in Crete boarded the troopship USS *Bexar* (APA-237) and sailed for the Suez Canal. In early September they made landfall in Kobe, Japan, a journey of over 5,000 miles. There, Waddell and his comrades were redesignated 3rd Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division. Retraining and reequipping for the fight in Korea commenced.

General Douglas MacArthur, Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers, decided the Marines would launch a bold counterattack to dramatically reverse the momentum of the North Korean advance. His proposed amphibious landing at Inchon (also, *Incheon*)—a large harbor well-defended by North Korean troops—required a massive land, sea, and air operation with bombers, fighters, and 250 naval vessels supporting an initial assault by the 1st Marine Division.



Waddell in Korea (center, with coffee cup).

MacArthur’s Operation Chromite launched on September 13, 1950. DPRK defenders were caught by surprise, and U.N. losses were surprisingly light. The Marines drove aggressively inland, securing the crucial port and the nearby Kimpo airfield. Reinforcements poured in by sea and air.

Waddell and the 7th Marine Regiment did not participate in the initial landings, but arrived on September 21 after fighting in the area had ended. The newly arriving troops were tasked with marching 20 miles eastward to retake Seoul, the capital of South Korea. Waddell witnessed distant firefights throughout his march, livened by a few instances of closer action. “You’re firing at them and they’re firing at you, you hit the deck or jumped in the ditch,” he later described.

Waddell’s second firefight occurred a few days later and proved more memorable. As he observed some of his fellow Marines fighting in a nearby cluster of hills, his commander rushed up and ordered,

“Waddell, you and your squad place your machine gun on that hill!” Waddell gathered his section and secured the elevation as ordered, even though “the bullets were coming right at you.” None of his Marines were hurt that day, and by the end of the month United Nations forces successfully retook Seoul.

U.N. troops now pushed into the heart of enemy territory, rolling up the North Koreans past the pre-war border at the 38th Parallel. MacArthur sought to repeat the Inchon victory with a similar landing on North Korean soil, this time at the port of Wonsan. The intended operation would insert the Marines behind enemy lines once more, bypassing DPRK defenses and cutting off more of their retreating troops.

However, North Korea seeded thousands of Soviet naval mines into the harbor waters at Wonsan. After a South Korean vessel met its end in the minefield, a comprehensive harbor sweep was

deemed critical before sending in fully laden troopships. The USS *Henrico* (APA-45) brought Waddell to Wonsan, but the Navy’s decision to clear mines from the harbor delayed the disembarkation. It wasn’t until October 28 that the 7th Marine Regiment stepped foot onto the beach.

The Marines marched north from Wonsan for hundreds of miles, encountering disorganized pockets of North Korean resistance along the way. The enemy was whipped, it seemed. The war would soon be over and the Americans would be “home by Christmas,” was the growing belief of the troops advancing through the increasingly rocky, mountainous and cold terrain of North Korea toward its Yalu River border with China. The overconfident refrain “home by Christmas”

had been a popular sentiment during the American Civil War in 1861. Its optimism proved just as misplaced in 1950.

U.N. reconnaissance reported increasing numbers of communist Chinese troops infiltrating across the border into North Korea during October and November 1950. MacArthur blindly discounted the possibility that China was preparing to enter the war (as it had threatened to do if U.N. troops approached its Yalu River border). Ignoring the signs of massive military buildup left U.N. forces woefully unprepared when hundreds of thousands of Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) troops launched a surprise offensive at the very end of November, just as the weather turned bitterly cold. Across North Korea, U.N. contingents were cut up,

cut off, and sent reeling southward in retreat. Even the Marine Corps found itself surrounded near the Chosin Reservoir, an artificial lake nestled within a steep range of hills in the center of North Korea.

The 7th Marine Regiment arrived in the area with the rest of the 1st Marine Division on November 25 amid cold conditions. Commanders tried to secure parkas, sleep packs, and gloves, but even those precautions did little to prevent frostbite. The cold weather coupled with the harrowing terrain set the ominous tone felt by the exposed military men. “As an old West Virginian who lived in the hills,” Waddell remembered, “I was thinking, ‘if we’re gonna march up this thing, and there’s all them hills around us, we don’t have much cover, and if we’re gonna fight, I hope we can get back down these hills!’” Now that he had attained the rank of corporal, Waddell had to worry about more than just his own skin.

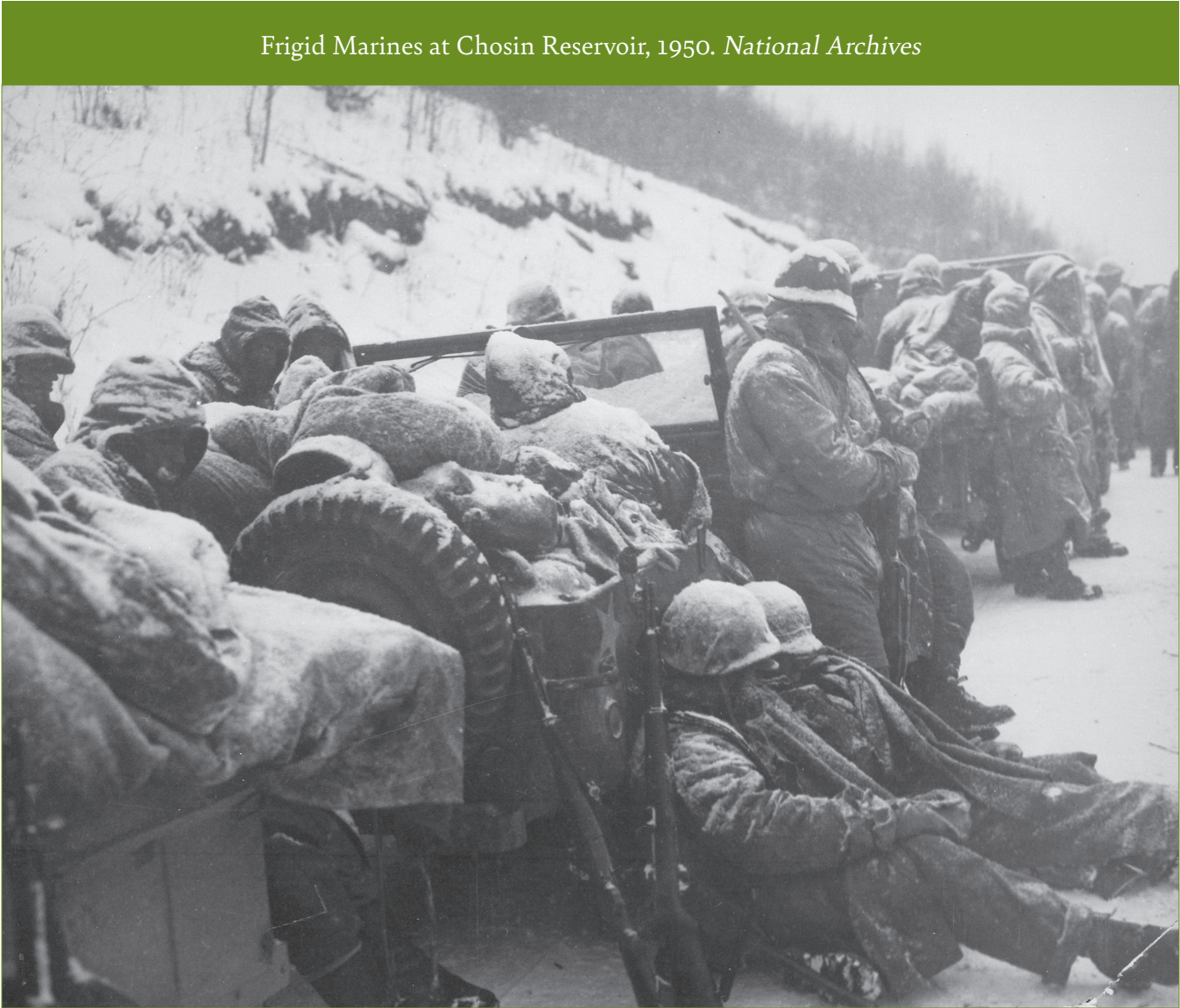
On the night of November 27, his concerns became grim reality when thousands of Chinese troops poured from the hills. Waddell met the onslaught with his machine gun crew. For hours—in negative twenty-degree temperatures—the Marines unleashed whatever they could on the Chinese, but wave after wave of PLA troops kept coming. Three men in Waddell’s squad were killed outright. Soon after, Kenneth was hit in his right leg. The shock of the injury caused him to roll down a nearby hill.

Waddell heard the piercing shouts of nearby soldiers and saw streams of tracer rounds illuminating the night. Even if he stayed alive, he didn’t think his unit could locate him in the chaos. However, a familiar figure appeared from the darkness—a young troublemaker Marine Waddell often called “the knucklehead.” Relief flooded Kenneth as the young man offered to drag him to safety. “As he’s pulling me up, the fire is still going on,” the wounded Waddell recalled, “and I can see the bullets hitting in the snow and not one of those bullets hit [him] or me.”

Knucklehead took Waddell to an aid station, whose personnel were overwhelmed by the number of



In his Marine Corps dress uniform.



Frigid Marines at Chosin Reservoir, 1950. *National Archives*

casualties. A Marine medic took off Waddell’s boot for a quick examination and forgot to put it back. Frostbite set in on Kenneth’s toes in minutes. Another medic had the foresight to cover Waddell with a tarp to protect the rest of his body from the deadly temperatures.

In a grimly comedic episode, covering Waddell led to the corpsmen mistaking him for dead because the corporal was so still. When he awoke, Kenneth informed the medics of their mistake, and they soon evacuated him via helicopter to a Mobile Army Surgical Hospital (MASH) unit. On December 9, a full 12 days after his injury, he finally secured a bed in a stationary military hospital in Kobe, Japan.

As Waddell fought to heal, the men of the 1st Marine Division struggled to maintain their perimeters and morale. Major General Oliver P. Smith, the 1st Marine Division’s Commander,



The Marine and his new bride, Elizabeth, 1954. Waddell Family collection

ordered the evacuation of seriously wounded men like Waddell, while the relatively unhurt leathernecks prepared to fight their way out of the deadly hills around the reservoir.

The subsequent withdrawal—a carefully coordinated, desperately fought 13-day, 70-mile breakout—removed the Marines from the field of battle, but not before they significantly crippled the Chinese forces. The Chinese won an important tactical victory, but had lost too many men and too much equipment to continue the offensive as planned.

Meanwhile, Kenneth Waddell rested, recovered, and briefly retrained during his month’s stay at the Kobe hospital. He rejoined the 3rd Battalion, 7th Marines in January 1951, manning stationary defenses in central Korea. With the front relatively stabilized, however, the Corps saw an opportunity to recognize and reward some of its combat veterans. Kenneth Waddell received a promotion

to sergeant, and in mid-April 1951 he boarded a transport ship in Busan, Korea, bound for San Diego.

Waddell trained recruits in southern California until June. He then took command of a security detachment in Norfolk, Virginia, where he began contemplating the future as his term of enlistment neared its end in July. To his surprise, however, his time with the Corps was “involuntarily extended for a period of 12 months” due to the ongoing war in Korea. Kenneth’s civilian future had to wait until mid-1952.

After a promotion to staff sergeant in 1952, his superiors recommended Waddell for Officer Training School. The idea was tempting, but he had other plans. There was someone at home he wanted to see.

Elizabeth Jane Rider knew Kenneth Waddell from their one-room schoolhouse in Rivesville, where they first met in sixth grade. They both attended Rivesville High School and even went to prom together. They exchanged a few letters while Kenneth was serving abroad, but the contact was sporadic because, as Waddell later admitted, he was reluctant to spend his free time writing.

Their mutual spark reignited when Waddell took a buddy home on furlough to Rivesville between his stints at San Diego and Norfolk. After introducing his comrade to his high school sweetheart, his friend said, “If I had a woman like that waiting at home for me, I’d be out in a heartbeat.” When his discharge finally went through on July 6, 1952, Kenneth followed that advice and went back to Fairmont. The couple married in 1954.

Kenneth said goodbye to four eventful years of service when he departed Norfolk. However, July 1952 marked a new beginning for Kenneth. His military career entitled him to the benefits of the GI Bill, which he used to acquire a college education. He enrolled in Fairmont State College (now University) in the fall of 1953. The dramatic transition was “kind of scary,” he remembered. “The

first semester was terrible, the second semester was ok . . . and then things kind of opened up and I got along great.” He received his undergraduate degree in secondary education in 1957. He followed this with a master’s degree in education from Antioch College in Ohio, and later did graduate work in physics and chemistry at West Virginia University.

After leaving Fairmont State, Kenneth became a high school teacher in Piqua, Ohio. Elizabeth was pregnant with their first child at the time and did not want to be far from her family. As a result, Kenneth made the nearly 300-mile trip back to Fairmont every weekend. Commuting was difficult, but the Ohio teaching gig accrued valuable experience that Kenneth used to secure jobs closer to home, eventually making his way back to Marion County.

His time in the Marion County school district included stints in Barrackville, Fairview, East Fairmont, and West Fairmont high schools. Late in his career, he left Marion County to take a job in Staunton, Virginia. After a year away from Elizabeth, who also worked as a teacher, he moved

Waddell the civilian, circa 1960, outside the family’s Marion County home.



back home and finished out his teaching career at Elkins Mountain School in Randolph County.

During his time at East Fairmont, where he worked for over a decade, Waddell taught courses in biology, human physiology, advanced science, and feneral science. A lover of gardening and the outdoors, he served as the faculty advisor for the school’s Conservation Club and received the Conservation Teacher of the Year Award in 1976. He earned extra money for his family by chaperoning student social events and teaching summer school.

Although he had no particular interest in tennis, he agreed to coach the inaugural men’s and women’s teams after students asked him to step in. When students get “involved in extracurricular activities, I feel it exhibits an awareness of pride,” he told the yearbook staff one year. His multitude of activities and devotion to education led to his election as president of the West Virginia Science Teachers Association in 1977.

Waddell’s devotion to his students mirrored the attention he gave his five children: Deborah Jane, Kenneth Randolph, Linda Jo, Kimberly Ann, and David Alan. Although he claimed to be “pretty tough as a parent,” his children displayed great affection for him and appreciated the attention he paid to them. Kenneth attended most of their sporting events, led the local Boy Scout troop, taught the kids how to garden, and sang the Marine Corps hymn to put them to sleep. When Debbie’s car got stuck in the snow, he walked miles to help her out, even though he had a deep hatred of the cold weather stemming from his Korean War days. When his kids grew up, he and his beloved Elizabeth took comfort in caring for a golden retriever named Chosin.

As his choice of lullabies and dog names suggests, Kenneth was incredibly proud of his military service. That service was attested by a Bronze Star Medal (United States Armed Forces decoration awarded for heroic service in combat zone), the United Nations Service Medal (awarded to



Waddell and his father’s World War I Marine Corps portrait.

individuals who served in the Korean theater under the U.N.), the Purple Heart (U.S. military decoration awarded to wounded soldiers), and the Navy OCC Medal (awarded to commemorate services performed in enemy territory).

However, the most important things he received from the Marine Corps could not be pinned to a uniform. “In the Marine Corps, being so disciplined and tough taught you to never give up,” he said. “The other thing the Marine Corps taught me is commitment.” Certainly, the veteran committed himself to as many service organizations as possible. These included the Marine Corps League, Disabled American Veterans, the 1st Marine Division Association, Chosin Few, Men of Chosin, and the Military Order of Devil Dogs. He served as the West Virginia state commander of the Military Order of the Purple Heart, in addition to his work for the Veterans of Foreign Wars. He made it a point to keep in contact with his veteran friends, even when they moved away.

Kenneth also loved his Fairmont community, as is evident from his membership in numerous local organizations and active participation in the local First Baptist Church. His health declined as the new millennium approached, however, and frequent dialysis treatments took their toll on his free time.

In 2005, he and Elizabeth moved south to Bridgeport, Harrison County, where he could more easily access health care. He continued to be active at his new home by taking Chosin out for walks, meeting with fellow Marines, spending time with Elizabeth, and even sitting for oral history interviews with a college student—as well as his grandson. Kenneth died of natural causes on September 12, 2012, in Fairmont.

Kenneth’s life was filled with journeys around the world, but he left it within miles of where he was born. Waddell recognized the importance of keeping the legacy of veterans alive. His words remind generations of Americans why his life story is worth remembering: “I really am so impressed with the fact that our country is so interested in our veterans today. . . . What we’re doing today is recognizing how important those experiences are . . . and how the tradition of living in America is so important.” He is interred in West Virginia National Cemetery in Pruntytown.



PLACE OF INTERMENT:
West Virginia National Cemetery
SECTION 5
SITE 353



Kenneth Ray Waddell with one of his dogs. He named another of his beloved canines “Chosin” after the famous Marine campaign in which he fought.

Waddell Family collection

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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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.

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.

