

Glenwood Springs

Post Independent

Veteran describes 'Heroes Among Us'

BY DONNA GRAY

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Four high school friends have given Veterans Day a special meaning this week.

Amid tears and laughter and often thunderous applause, the four men, alumni of the Garfield County High School class of 1944 who served in World War II, and other veterans in an audience of over 250 were honored at the Ramada Inn Tuesday in a tribute hosted by the Glenwood Springs Noon Rotary Club.

Hal Terrell, a World War II veteran and Glenwood Springs author of a newly published book, "Heroes Among Us," shared his story of 22 boys of the class of 1944 who went to war.

Three of his high school buddies, Charles Jackson, Bob Simillion and John Artaz, listened as Terrell told their stories and praised their heroism in war.

After a trip to Normandy, France, three years ago, and a visit to the American cemetery where D-Day soldiers are buried, Terrell knew he wanted to tell the story of the high school boys who went to war and came back as battle-hardened men.

"I wondered what happened to the boys from Glenwood Springs. ... I wanted to get in the right frame of mind so my feelings would be in touch with what I wanted to do. I wanted to find the right words to put in a book," he said.

Those words came hard.

"How do you explain what burning flesh smells like? How do you explain how a crew came back from a mission and lost 60 percent (of the boys) and the bunk next to you is empty?" Terrell said.

"Most of them were 18 years old; they'd enlisted when they were 17. We grew up in a hell of a hurry," Terrell said.

Terrell and his classmates grew up in Glenwood Springs during the Depression. Although many of them came from poverty, most returned to successful careers. And many died on the battlefields of Europe and the Pacific islands.

Glenwood Springs in the 1940s was typical of small-town America, where privations were a reality but life was



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good.

"None of us who grew up in Glenwood Springs knew we were poor," Terrell said.

Charles Jackson's family lived up Four Mile Creek. The house had no electricity, but Charles, who was a budding engineer, rigged up a generator to power a 25-watt lightbulb in the house. He also made his first radio at age 9.

"My first impression was he was so quiet and polite and blessed with more intelligence than most," Terrell said of his high school friend.

Jackson joined the Navy at 17 and was allowed to finish high school. He shipped overseas in 1945 and landed in Tsingtao, China, aboard an LST (landing ship tank), which Jackson laughingly called a "Large Stationary Target."

He came home in 1946 and enrolled at Colorado State University on the GI Bill. After college he worked for Westinghouse and then Sandia Labs in Albuquerque.

Bob Simillion's family was poorer than most.

"Of all the boys in the class of 1944, Bob probably had the hardest time growing up due to his family circumstances," Terrell said. Simillion was one of seven children, and his mother was divorced and raised the kids on her own.

Terrell spoke of his father's compassion for the struggling Simillion family.

Terrell's father was sheriff of Garfield County and the family was better off than many. A week before Christmas one year, his father called the family together.

"My Dad had a way with words. He could talk you into almost anything," he said.

He'd asked what the children wanted for Christmas and Hal was expecting a new pair of skis. That week his dad had driven down one of the alleys in town and saw the Simillions' coal bin was empty.

Rather than buying Christmas presents, his father said, they could use that money to buy the Simillions some coal.

His father said, "We could make a real nice Christmas for the Simillions, but that would mean no new skis. I said yeah, then I thought, damn, he got me again."

Simillion's brother Paul was killed on his last training mission a day before he was set for furlough home, just as Simillion completed Navy boot camp.

Simillion served in the South Pacific, and saw action in New Guinea, the Solomon and Marshall islands and the Philippines.

He returned home in 1946, married the following year and went to work for the Colorado State Patrol. Tragedy dogged him. His wife Pat and son both contracted polio. Pat died in 1953; however, his son recovered. Simillion lost his second wife Dannette in 1983 and 10 months later his son Patrick was killed in an accident at a power plant near Craig.

John Artaz's parents moved to Colorado from Italy in 1907 and settled on Missouri Heights. The family moved to Glenwood Springs in 1937. In 1944, Artaz joined the 11th Airborne, a paratrooper division. The 11th fought in New Guinea, and went on to liberate a string of islands in the Philippines. They freed American prisoners at the infamous Japanese prisoner of war camp, Los Banos, in the Philippines. The division also was in the

vanguard of the invasion of Japan after the atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima.

In 1947, Artaz returned to Glenwood Springs, married and took a job at the Ford Garage. He worked at Mesa State College, then in 1967 started a Hertz rental agency.

"I truly believe John is one of the gentlest and sweetest persons I know," Terrell wrote of his high school friend. "However, under that gentle facade there lives a true warrior."

Terrell himself served in the 9th Army Air Corps and flew 32 reconnaissance missions over Europe. He returned from war in 1946, married Leta, his wife of 56 years, and went to work at the Texaco station in Glenwood Springs. He became a Caterpillar dealer and worked for the company for 30 years.

State Rep. Gregg Rippe spoke for those present at the Tuesday night tribute. Hearing Hal Terrell tell his stories, hearing Charles Jackson and John Artaz and Bob Simillion speak of their friendship, he said, "If you listen, you can hear their goodbyes." To Terrell and the many veterans in the audience he added, "I hope you can hear our thanks and our love and our admiration." State Rep. Gregg Rippe spoke for those present at the Tuesday night tribute. Hearing Hal Terrell tell his stories, hearing Charles Jackson and John Artaz and Bob Simillion speak of their friendship, he said, "If you listen, you can hear their goodbyes." To Terrell and the many veterans in the audience he added, "I hope you can hear our thanks and our love and our admiration."

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