

THE ALABAMA VETERAN

Kay Ivey
Governor

Fall 2019

W. Kent Davis
Commissioner



DATES TO REMEMBER

- * Columbus Day
October 14, 2019
- * Halloween
October 31, 2019
- * Veterans Day
November 11, 2019
- * Thanksgiving
November 28, 2019
- * Christmas
December 25, 2019

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Commissioner's Corner



Veterans Day is just around the corner and I urge everyone to support Veterans Day events.

Veterans Day is an important day because veterans have paid their debt or made their contribution to ensure that our great nation remains strong, democratic, and free. It is a day to speak up for those who put their lives on the line for their fellow Americans—a day to remember and renew our commitments to these brave men and women. Whether it was on the beaches of France, the Islands of the Pacific, the Chosin Reservoir in Korea, Hamburger Hill in Vietnam, the sands outside of Baghdad or in the mountains of Tora Bora, our fighting men and women have always led the way and shown the world what makes the United States the greatest country in the world.

Alabama has a rich heritage of patriotism, military service and sacrifice. Those attributes are something that Alabamians are exposed to at a very early age. Everyday citizens go out of their way to thank veterans, but it is highly appropriate that we single out one special day on which we can all gather together and with one voice to say “Thank You” for all our veterans have done and continue to do to serve our country.

As I go across the state and engage with military members, veterans and their families, and those who support them, it is truly amazing to witness the patriotism that Alabamians display every day. From all corners of our state, urban and rural, and every place in between, it is quite evident that Alabama is a special place, and we in the department are honored to engage with you. The bottom line is, our state is a good place to hail from and a great place to live, especially if you are a veteran. I am proud to be a native Alabamian and a veteran!

I challenge each and every one of you to reach out to veterans, regardless of what era they served in, and do all you can to show them how much you appreciate them and their service. Please take the time to acknowledge their great service and sacrifice by supporting and observing special events to commemorate their contributions which enable us to continue the freedoms that we currently enjoy. I would like to turn President Kennedy’s phrase to say “ask not what a veteran can do for you but what you can do for a veteran.” Keep up the great work and do a good deed for a veteran today!

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Bill Nichols Earns National Award

The Bill Nichols State Veterans Home was one of four Alabama nursing homes receiving national recognition for reaching a high achievement in health care quality—the American Health Care Association's 2019 Silver–Achievement in Quality Award.

The award is the second of three distinctions possible through the American Health Care Association's (AHCA) National Quality Award Program, which spotlights providers across the nation that have demonstrated their dedication to improving quality of care for residents and patients in long-term and post-acute care.

"We are honored to receive the award recognizing the home's efforts in providing quality care to the veterans of Alabama," Kathryn Fuller, director of the home, said. "It's rewarding to be recognized with a prestigious quality award that exemplifies the standards that guide what we do every day. Every person working at Bill Nichols has made a commitment to quality, and I am proud of them for following through on their commitment."

The AHCA's National Quality Award Program challenges nursing home providers to achieve performance excellence through three progressive levels—Bronze, Silver, and Gold. At the Silver level, members develop and demonstrate effective approaches that help improve organizational performance and health care outcomes.

According to the AHCA/NCAL website: "At the Silver Award level, applicants continue to learn and develop effective approaches that help improve performance and health care outcomes. The Silver criteria, based on the Baldrige Excellence Framework, provides applicants with a thorough assessment of how their organization works, its effectiveness, and tools for improvement in their approaches. The Silver level gives a clear pathway for recipients moving to the highest honor of recognition, the Gold–Excellence in Quality Award."

The 2019 Silver National Quality Awards will be presented at AHCA/NCAL's 70th Convention and Expo in Orlando, Florida on October 15, 2019.



Thane Myles receives information for homeless veterans from Brenda Eberly, Montgomery County Assistant VSO, at Montgomery's homeless standown on September 6.

VSO Assists Homeless Veteran

Robert Foshee, veterans service officer for Covington County, always goes above and beyond.

A veteran recently rolled into his office in a wheelchair and stated that he had not eaten in over a week. The veteran was staying at a motel and was out of money. Foshee gave him a bottle of water, a banana, a bag of potato chips and an orange that he had in the office. He also let the veteran use the conference room to plug in his wheelchair and to charge his phone. Other employees in the building also gave the veteran food; he ate everything.

Foshee talked to Karen Sowell, the county administrator about the situation. She in turn called Greg White, the county commission chair, who contacted the local Econo Lodge and got the veteran a room at no charge.

Later, Foshee found the veteran

behind the bank looking for a place in the grass to bed down for the night. When he told him the county had gotten him a room, the veteran burst into tears.

Foshee helped the veteran to the front of the bank and waited patiently until a man walked up to the ATM. He asked him for assistance in getting the veteran into his truck because the chair was very heavy. They got the wheelchair loaded up and Foshee took him to the hotel. There he got another gentleman to help unload the



wheelchair and then settled the veteran in the room.

This was an incredible gesture by the Covington County Commission. But, none of this would have happened if it had not been for the compassion of Foshee and his seeking help for a fellow veteran. It also shows the support that our service officer has in his county.

POW/MIA Recognition Ceremony



The American Legion Auxiliary presented roses to POW/MIA and Gold Star families.



The missing man table was set up to honor the fallen, missing, or imprisoned military service members



The keynote speaker for the ceremony was 98-year-old George Mills, a World War II prisoner of war in Germany for five months between 1944 and 1945.

Williamson Wins Bodybuilding Competition

Ray Williamson, the Baldwin County Veterans Service Officer (VSO), got started in bodybuilding when he was hired in October 2013.

“When I came here, I got a membership to the YMCA,” he said. “I would go after work and work-out a little bit because I realized I had a desk job; if I didn’t do something I’m going to weigh about 400 pounds real quick.”

His main goal was to get some exercise and watch what he ate. A few months later, he joined Jason’s Fitness gym. He worked out during lunch and then again after work—two 30 to 40 minute workouts Monday through Friday.

Williamson has always been interested in nutrition, so he looked into the diet aspect of growing muscles. “A lot of people think that if you want to get big muscles, you have to go lift weights, which is true,” he said. “But there’s a lot of people who work out regularly but don’t realize that 60 to 70 percent of what’s required for bodybuilding is diet, not exercise.”

Williamson said that exercise is important but nutrition is much more important. “All food is broken down into three categories—protein, carbohydrates or fat or it’s not food,” he said. “So if you’re going to build muscles you have to get a certain amount of protein every day.”

He said that, in a sense, he’s been on a diet for five years, just eating the right things. “Normally I’ll have a half dozen eggs over easy in one sitting and then I have one or two cups of yogurt with 12 grams of protein,” he said. “When I come back from the gym I might have a protein shake; then a big can of tuna, which has over 50 grams of protein, with light mayo and pickle relish on a romaine lettuce wrap. In the evening I’ll have a regular meal without a lot of carbohydrates.”

When Williamson is getting ready for a show, he’ll start a 1,500–1,800 calorie a day diet, getting at least 150 grams of protein so that he doesn’t lose muscle, just fat. He was down to about 6 percent body fat at his last show.

“People think bodybuilding is just getting big muscles. Most bodybuilders don’t look massive; those are the powerlifters,” he said. “Your bodybuilders are lean.”



Williamson started getting ready for his first competition, which was to be at the end of April, in January 2019. Three weeks later the show was cancelled but there was a show in Pensacola in mid-April. He had about 3 ½ months to lose almost 30 pounds.

He entered eight categories for a novice. “You’re backstage getting pumped up, doing different exercises to try to get your muscles full of blood,” he said. “The judges look at vascularity, leanness, size and symmetry. You don’t want to have one leg bigger than the other.”

Williamson won a number of trophies from that competition, some against 20–30-year-olds and others in the over 50 division. He recently competed at Fort Walton Beach, winning five 1st place trophies and one 2nd place trophy.

Because of his recent wins, Williamson qualifies for the national competition in Pittsburgh next year. If he places in the top two, he’ll receive a pro card which makes him a professional bodybuilder.

“What I’d really like to do when I retire from this position is to open my own gym and become a trainer,” he said. “If you have a pro card it’s no problem being a trainer and getting clients.”

Williamson plans to continue training and competing. “I continue to learn more about nutrition and keeping my joints healthy. I’ve learned that by God’s grace and training smart I can maintain good health,” he said. “It’s a great feeling when at 57 you can go up against the younger guys and look better than them.”

Meet Your VSO

Rhonda Jackson has been the Clarke/Monroe County veterans service officer (VSO) for more than six years. Prior to taking the VSO position, she served 22 years in the Marine Corps as an Airfield Operations Manager.

She enjoys being a VSO in the communities she grew up in. "I believe in serving something greater than self and this job allows me to do just that. I recognize the opportunity to change someone's life; impact their quality of life—for the better. It is both fulfilling and rewarding," she said.

One of her most memorable cases was a Vietnam veteran who came in seeking assistance with medications for Parkinson's and assistance with getting a wheelchair ramp for his home. "I reached out to the local American Legion post and they installed a wheelchair ramp at no cost to the veteran. But, I also filed a claim for conditions related to Agent Orange exposure," she said.

Jackson said that her district manager always emphasizes how important it is to be attentive and thorough when veterans visit their offices. The situation brought everything full circle for Jackson. "I could have stopped at enrolling the veteran in healthcare and attempting to get a wheelchair ramp and he would have been content," she said. "But, it was bigger than that for me."

The veteran was rated 90 percent initially, but was subsequently granted 100 percent after deferred items were decided. He later became a resident at the William



VSO Rhonda Jackson goes over Vietnam veteran Clarence Young's benefits.

F. Green State Veterans Home where, due to his rating, his residency was free of charge.

Jackson had a commander in the Marine Corps that ended every formation by saying, "Do the right thing, even if no one is looking." Assisting the veteran in obtaining benefits was not going above and beyond her duties as VSO. "It was simply the right thing to do," she concluded.

Birmingham Area Veterans Receive the Korean Ambassador of Peace Medal

The Jefferson County VSO office sponsored a special ceremony for veterans who were unable to attend the Ambassador of Peace medal ceremony in Montgomery on November 16. In addition to the medal, the veterans received an official proclamation that expressed the everlasting gratitude of the Republic of Korea and its people for the service performed by American veterans in restoring and preserving the country's freedom and democracy. Veterans honored were Wilburn Brooks, Paul Carlson, Ralph Collins, Harvey Dial, Theron Harden, James Hellums, Joseph Hosmer, Bobby Jenkins, Edward Oglesby, John Stubert and Donald Wideman.



75 Years Later, These WWII Vets Remember

Beatrice Price

Ninety-five year old Beatrice Price, a Col. Robert L. Howard State Veterans Home resident, served as one of the first African-American nurses in World War II.

She graduated as a registered nurse from the Grady Memorial School of Nursing in Atlanta before the war started. After the war started “they were begging all the nurses to join up,” she said. “We had recruiters at school every week or so.”

Because a woman had to be 21 to join the Army, she spent a year in Trinity Hospital, waiting until she was old enough to be accepted. Shortly after turning 21, she joined the Army and was sent to work at a hospital in Fort Devens, Mass. She was the first African-American nurse to be promoted to head nurse at the hospital.

While at Fort Devens Gen. George Patton was admitted to the hospital. “He was badly injured—shot in the abdomen—and they sent him to the ward I was in charge of. He was my patient for a couple of months,” she said. “No one wanted to be assigned to him because he had a terrible reputation—everyone called him old ‘Blood and Guts,’ because they said that’s all he wanted to see. He was as sweet as he could be though. He didn’t show any of that toughness that he showed on the battlefield.”

After two years in the Army, Price transferred to Lockbourne Army Air Base in Columbus, Ohio, to help care for the Tuskegee Airmen. “They needed a nursing staff to keep them going,” she said. “Even if they weren’t hurt by the enemy, there were planes crashing or injuries all the time. It was exciting every minute and I enjoyed



working with them tremendously.”

Price said that the Tuskegee Airmen had to have someone look after them on a daily basis. “It was so interesting working with them. If they did foolish things, I’d treat them like they were my own kids, even though I was about the same age as they were,” she said. “We took care of their medical needs and made sure they were in good shape. Our job was to keep them flying.”

After four years in the military, Price returned home and continued her nursing career at the Birmingham VA Medical Center, where she worked for 34 years. “It’s said that for everything, there is a season, a place and a time,” she said. “There’s nothing in the world I could have enjoyed more than nursing. It has been the most rewarding career I could possibly imagine. I’ve had a rich, full life, and I’ve just been in the right place at the right time with the right things somebody was looking for.”

Robert Curl

D-Day veteran Robert Curl remembers approaching the beaches of Normandy on June 6, 1944, feeling “scared to death.”

Curl, a 94-year-old resident at the Col. Robert L. Howard State Veterans Home in Pell City, enlisted in the Navy in 1943, one day after graduating from high school. Following boot camp and navigational radar training, he was sent to amphibious training at Little Creek, Virginia. Almost a year later, he led a first wave into battle.

“They told me I’d probably get killed, but I decided right then and there that I was going to do my job,” he said. “I wrote a letter to my mother and I told her that I wished I had been a better son. I thought that was the end of me.”

Curl operated a radar on a 14-man Landing Craft

Control (LCC) vessel, guiding the boat filled with soldiers to Omaha Beach. He said that the invasion of Normandy was supposed to take place June 5, but due to heavy seas, they were told to turn around. “We left again on June 6, and were followed by thousands of ships all carrying barrage balloons attached to the ships with steel cables,” he said. “The troopships rendezvoused several miles offshore and soldiers were to climb down large cargo nets from the deck to the landing crafts below.”

“My LCC was assigned to lead in the first wave on Omaha Beach and stay there 1,000 yards off the beach for each successive wave to follow us.” Curl studied maps and a scale model of Omaha Beach—buildings, roads, fences and even grass—that showed everything about the area. “I was operating a new-fangled thing called a virtual image plan position indicator reflectoscope. With

the small map that was issued after we embarked for Normandy, I was to superimpose the radar image over the map and find the correct landing place on Omaha Beach," he said.

"We began leading the first wave into the beach as the Germans starting firing from the pillboxes. They could tell that we were the control ship because of the radar, so they kept shooting at us," Curl said. "The first three waves of soldiers were wiped out completely. We recovered the bodies of a lot of soldiers who drowned because the sea-swells sank their DD tanks."

After three weeks Curl and the LCC crew were dispatched to Sardinia to prepare to lead the first wave in the invasion of Southern France. "I was very thankful and lucky to be alive during those three weeks in Normandy," Curl said.

Three months after the successful invasion, they were sent home on a 30-day leave. "My dad was a Methodist preacher and I got home on a Sunday night. He was up in the pulpit getting ready to preach when I came walking in," he said. "Dad stopped and said, 'Bob, is that you?' and I said, 'yes Sir.' He said 'we'll have the benediction now.' He never did preach that night."



After the leave, Curl was assigned to a new rocket ship equipped with gyro-stabilized rocket launchers. "We had almost reached Eniwetok when the atomic bomb was dropped, which ended the war," he said. "We were sent stateside, and I was honorably discharged in March 1946."

After returning home, he got married. "We were married for 69 years," he said. "She passed in 2015 but we had a wonderful life together."

Curl says he'll never forget his time in the service. "I was ready to give my life for this country. I would do it again in a heartbeat," he said.

William Massey



Seventy-five years ago, William Massey was fighting with 8th Air Force as a B-17 pilot. Massey, a 98-year-old resident at the Col. Robert L. Howard State Veterans Home, had never been in an airplane when he was

sent to pilot training. "I had never even been off the ground, although my Mama did take me up to the fourth floor of a store one day," he said. "Piloting seemed to come easily for me. I didn't get scared flying at thousands of feet high."

He did get scared flying over Germany though. "When you see the tracer bullets coming past you and see them hit you, it makes a true believer of you," he said. "I was terrified but I don't believe I ever got scared enough to quit."

Massey flew bombing missions over Berlin and bombed quite a few industrial areas in a rural valley. "I bombed the Kiel Canal; cut off that route that was supplying Germany with their gas," he said. "We bombed ball bearing manufacturing plants, glass furnaces and plants that converted steel into various

thickness. It was our intent and purpose to take Germany out on the air and we did."

At the time, pilots flew 25 separate missions and then their tour of duty was over. Massey was on his 19th mission when things didn't work out too well for him. "I was not supposed to fly that day but the pilot on the schedule showed up at his airplane still intoxicated," he said. "His men said they would not fly with him and I was the only left to fill in. I was in the wrong place at the wrong time and got shot down."

Massey bailed out at 26,000 feet. "It is cold up there—the temperature at that altitude will run about 30 degrees below zero!" he said. "Anyway I didn't have my parachute on, just had it in my hand when the plane blew up. I worked with it, but my hands were so cold and stiff that I couldn't get anything done. I just kept falling and all of a sudden I felt warmer air. I decided to try one more time and I got the left buckle hooked to the parachute."

The ground was still coming so I took a chance and pulled the rip cord with just one attachment," he continued. "I pulled it and it unfolded perfectly and all of a sudden it just popped open. We hit the ground and luckily we were uninjured."

He and his crew of two others made it to a French encampment. "I never did get captured by the Germans. I evaded them and made connections with the French Underground and more or less just stayed out of sight,"

he said.

Massey fought and harassed the Germans for 76 days with the Underground, blowing up railroads, trestles, and sabotaging any kind of German transport facilities. "The Underground was quite adept at blowing this up. After a few days with them I realized the intensity of the hate by the French against the Germans and vice versa."

Supply planes came in to resupply the troops and he and his crew were able to get back to England. Massey then came home and was an instructor at Hendricks Field in Florida. "They closed that field to B-17 training because it was evident then that the war was coming to an end because Germany was just about out of

everything—from gas to food to plants and refineries," he said.

Massey says he'll never forget his time in the service, D-Day, or those who didn't come back. "And I would do it again in a heartbeat. You can bet your boots I would fight for this country if all I could do was get behind a tree and shoot a rifle or a shotgun.

"There will never be another America and she knows how to fight for freedom, liberty and security. I wouldn't trade it for anything," he said. "We've got so much to be thankful for. Thank God I'm an American and I'm proud to shout it."

Hilman Prestridge



Seventy-five years ago, more than 160,000 Allied troops, 5,000 ships and 13,000 airplanes landed on the beaches of Normandy as part of the largest seaborne invasion in history.

Col. Robert L. Howard State Veterans Home resident Hilman Prestridge was in one of the first boats to land on Omaha Beach on D-Day, June 6, 1944. "They made me an honorary Bedford Boy because I was in the same boat as the Bedford Boys," he said. The Bedford Boys were members of a National Guard infantry unit based out of the small town of Bedford, Virginia. When the company assaulted Omaha Beach that morning, there were 35 soldiers from the town assigned to the unit. By the end of the day, 21 had been killed with four more dying before the end of the campaign. On that day, the town of Bedford suffered the greatest proportion of losses of any town in the United States, and the men were forever immortalized as the Bedford Boys.

Prestridge, from the small town of Lineville, Alabama, was only 18 when he was joined the Army in 1943. "I knew I was going to be drafted, so I beat the draft notice by three weeks," he said. He was sent to basic training at Fort Bragg, N.C., and then went on to field artillery training. He trained for six weeks before transferring to the Army's Amphibious Force.

After completing amphibious training, Private First Class Prestridge boarded the Queen Elizabeth and travelled to England to prepare for the invasion of Normandy. After the amphibious assault training was completed, the force boarded an LST (tank landing ship) and prepared to cross the channel. Once they were on the LST, they learned that they were in the first wave of the initial assault force with an objective of Omaha Beach. He said the Amphibious Forces were supposed to make the invasion on June 5, but there were 20-foot sea swells. "On June 6, waves were down to 12 feet, so we landed," he said.

The primary objective at Omaha was to secure the beachhead. "The boat brought us close enough so that we could go over the side and be in waist-deep water," Prestridge said. "Going over the side probably saved my life because three were killed when the ramp dropped. I know that I was scared to death"

Although they took the sea wall in 12 hours, Prestridge was in battle for 18 days before other soldiers took over. "We drifted all over France until the Germans were defeated then we were put on a ship going to Japan," he said. "Three days out from Staten Island, they dropped the bomb. They had no idea of what to do with us, so we just told them to send us home."

He was discharged shortly thereafter and returned home to Lineville. The first thing he did upon arriving home? "I went to see my girlfriend." He married his girlfriend and was married to her for 59 1/2 years.

He returned to Omaha Beach several years ago. "It brought back a lot of memories for me," he said. "I walked straight to the place where I landed. Seventy years had gone by but I still remembered it in detail."

Prestridge also visits Bedford and the National D-Day Memorial every year. He said he'll make the trip again in March but that trip will probably be his last. "I'm getting old and it's getting harder to get around," he said. "I'm just going to relax from now on."