

March Veteran of the Month

By Sherri Onorati, Special to The Leader

Andrew Wiley Dunavant, a veteran of both World War II and the Korean War, was honored last week as the Veteran of the Month for March during a celebration held at the Tipton County Museum, Veteran Memorial and Nature Center.

His only son, Tommy Dunavant, Tipton County Emergency Management Director and interim Covington Fire Chief, spoke of how proud his family is of his father's military service.

"We're extremely proud of our father and there was one who was more proud than us... our mother who passed away a year and a half ago. Growing up, daddy didn't talk very much about his service. Once in a while he'd say what took place, but he just didn't talk about it a lot. The men who fought in World War II, the Korean Conflict – they were true men. This was the greatest generation. All of them, they were tough men and gentlemen and it continued all of their lives. Daddy's commitment to veterans has always been extremely strong," said the younger Dunavant proudly.

One of Dunavant's greatest fans is his great-grandson Bo Dunavant, son of Brad and Sarah Dunavant and who the family says, has inspired Dunavant to open up about his time in the service.

"If he told a story, it was a very short story," said Tommy, Bo's grandfather. "He really just started opening up about it to his great grand kids. Bo is really interested in the military and he started asking questions."

"Granddaddy Andy has always been Bo's super hero," revealed Bo's mother, Sarah. "He's never been into Batman or Spiderman, he's always been into Granddaddy Andy."

Born to Andrew Leonard Dunavant and Mary Wiley on Oct 14, 1924 in Ripley, Tenn., Dunavant, known to family and friends as "Andy," was a junior in high school at the height of World War II when he received notification that he had been chosen for the draft.

"I was drafted as a junior in high school," Dunavant told the gathered crowd of family and friends. "I got my notice when I was 18. They called me and I didn't ask for deferment. I said I was going in and that's the way my military career started."

Dunavant was sworn into the United States Army on March 24, 1943 at Fort Oglethorpe, Ga., as a private and shipped off to Camp Butner, Durham, North Carolina for basic training. After his initial induction into military life, he was assigned to the 272nd Field Artillery Battalion as a supply clerk. Dunavant and his unit were transferred to Ft. Bragg, N.C., where the battalion switched from the 105mm Howitzer to the 240mm in preparation for deployment.

The 272nd Field Artillery Battalion was a part of the First U.S. Army, V Corps, 190th Field Artillery Group, under the command of Colonel Wallace Wade, who, before the war, was the head football coach for Duke University. In 1944, Wade led his battalion overseas, headed towards European Theater Operations. Heavy fighting prevented their landing on Omaha Beach, and instead, the battalion landed on Utah Beach. Once in Europe, Private Dunavant and his unit participated in several historic campaigns including the Battle of the Bulge and the Crossing of the Rhine, serving in Northern France, Ardennes, Rhineland and in Central Europe.

Dunavant spoke of his experiences during the Battle of the Bulge, the largest and bloodiest battle fought during WWII. More than 600,000 Americans were involved in the battle with 75,000 casualties and approximately 8,400 killed. Great Britain Prime Minister Winston Churchill later called the battle, “The greatest American battle of the war and will, I believe, be regarded as an ever-famous American victory.”

“I’m thankful for the good lord for taking care of me and for seeing me through the trials and tribulations of everything I went through,” he began. “We landed in Utah beach ‘cause we could not land on Omaha ‘cause of the heavy fighting. It was D+61 when we started our adventure through northern France and ended up in the Battle of the Bulge. It was 19 below zero and about 18 inches of snow on the ground and we huddled up in everything we could find to stay warm.” Dunavant recalled his unit had arrived in the vicinity of the mass murder of American prisoners of war by the Germans, immediately after it happened. The incident was later called the Malmedy Massacre.

“We shot down two German planes and took four German prisoners. One bomb landed close enough to put a hole about that big in my truck,” gesturing with his arms out wide, “but thankfully, I wasn’t in the truck,” he added, laughing with the crowd.

The unit moved into the Rhineland area after the battle, and Dunavant, now a sergeant, worked in the service battalion until his transfer home in January 1946 and his honorable discharge on Jan. 27.

After his arrival home, the 22 year-old Andy Dunavant married the love of his life, the former Miss Doris Moore on Jan. 27, 1947 in Tipton County and started a family, which soon included six children – one son, Tommy Dunavant of Covington and five daughters, Mary Grace Davis of Smyrna, Edith Dunavant and Becki Coulston of Covington, Jane Rice of Owensburg, Ky., and Jean Nix of Las Vegas, Nev., and now, 22 grandchildren and 10 great grandchildren.

Military service was in Dunavant’s blood and his strong commitment and duty to his country called to him even during peacetime. He joined the Tennessee National Guard as a Staff Sergeant, telling his wife he might as well earn some money. The family soon moved to Memphis and when the drive to Covington for drilling purposes proved to be too much, Dunavant transferred to a closer unit.

“I transferred to the 196th Field Artillery in 1950 and we were active in August of that year and was sent to Korea,” he said. “It was just about as cold and seemed worse [as his time in Europe during WWII].”

Dunavant was injured shortly after arriving in Korea and was sent to the hospital in Pusan with malaria, and then later to Osaka in Japan.

Although in country for 10 months, Dunavant quietly told the crowd that he “missed a lot of real bad conflicts in Korea.” After his discharged from the hospital, he served as a motor sergeant until his release and transfer back to the U.S. in December 1951, where he was once again discharged honorably.

Tommy Dunavant and his father returned to Belgium last year for the 70th anniversary of the Battle of the Bulge, sponsored by Forever Young, a non-profit out of Collierville, which grants wishes for senior veterans.

“Daddy is 90 and last year we got the chance to travel to Belgium for nine days during the Battle of the Bulge’s 70th anniversary,” said Tommy. “We had a lot of time to talk about his experience.”

During Vietnam, Dunavant was once again called to serve and his commitment to America’s military never wavered. This time, he held the rank of major with the Tennessee Defense Force and was responsible for assisting the soldiers and families of those serving in Vietnam apply and receive benefits.

Kathy Desjarlais, the 2015 Chairman of the Tipton County Veteran Council, read Dunavant’s certificate of honor, “It is with heart felt appreciation for your tireless efforts in support of our United States military, the Tipton County Museum, Veteran Memorial and Nature Center in partnership with the Tipton County Veterans Council gratefully acknowledge the selfless service of our veteran of the month for March 2015.... Your dedication to our country is commendable and an honorable addition for the fight for freedom throughout the world.”

“It’s great to have leadership like you in our posts to help mentor our younger generations,” added veteran Randy Martin, thanking Dunavant for his service. “We’d like to thank you for what you’ve done for this community.

Tipton County Veteran Service Officer Philip Nelson also thanked Dunavant for his service. “You were in Europe and my dad was on the other side in the Philippines and if y’all hadn’t done what you’d done, we’d either be talking German or Japanese. Thank you so much!”

“These are the stories that aren’t ever heard, the stories that the general public doesn’t know, that there are veterans like Andy Dunavant who got out in 19 inches of snow in 18 below zero temperatures, for us,” said Covington Mayor Justice Hanson. “That’s pretty powerful and not everyone can do that. Battle has change. Its still life or death and we’re still fighting for our freedom but battle was so much different then and the technology wasn’t there. They were often walking into the lion’s den and didn’t know it. They really were the greatest generation. Mr. Andy is a treasure for our community and to have his health and to still be able to recount all of these stories is amazing.”

Not one to let his age slow him down, these days Dunvant can be found helping veterans whenever he can and participating in veteran events, and he is a fixture in the annual Veterans Day parade where he keeps the other participants in step with his cadence calling.

“Last year he had to ride because he had just had a pacemaker installed and that about killed him,” said daughter Becki Coulston, laughing. “He kept saying, ‘Who’s going to lead them?’ Our mom was as proud of his military service as he was. She couldn’t walk and was in a wheelchair but she would stand up for him.”

“I appreciate this museum,” said Dunavant. “I appreciate all these people coming out and supporting the museum and coming out in my honor. I feel very honored to be recognized and to be able to express what took place during those two wars and I thank the lord for carrying me through what I have gone through.”

Staff Sergeant Andrew W. Dunavant is entitled to wear the European-African-Middle Eastern (EAME) Campaign Medal with four bronze stars, the Army Good Conduct Medal, the Distinguished Unit Citation and the Korean Service Medal with two bronze stars.

The Veteran of the Month program is sponsored by the Tipton County Museum, Veteran Memorial and Nature Center and the Tipton County Veterans Council. Sponsors of the monthly event include Tipton County Veterans Council, Patriot Bank, The Bank of Tipton and Munford Funeral Home. Underwriters include the VFW Post 4840 and the Disable American Veterans Auxiliary in Millington. The next honoree will be named on Tuesday, April 14 at 6:30 p.m. The public is invited to both make nominations and attend the ceremony.