

Living History: Norman Crittenden recognized during Veteran of the Month ceremony

By Sherri Onorati

In 1863, in a letter to New York mayor George Opdyke, Abraham Lincoln wrote, "Honor to the soldier and sailor everywhere, who bravely bears his country's cause. Honor, also, to the citizen who cares for his brother in the field and serves, as he best can, the same cause." Today, we honor our veterans on certain days of the year, when they deserve to be honored all year long.

Barrie Foster, director of the Tipton County Museum, Veterans Memorial and Nature Center, and whose dream it was to honor a Tipton County veteran each month, has partnered with the Tipton County Veterans Council to do just that.

January 13th, marked the inauguration of the Veteran of the Month program, held at the museum. The first veteran honored was the Reverend Norman Crittenden, former pastor of Garland United Methodist Church. Russell Bailey, former Covington mayor, nominated Crittenden for the honor and opened the program.

"We're here this evening to pay tribute to Sergeant, Reverend, gallant Kentuckian, Norman Crittenden who answered the call of his country in 1943," said Bailey. "He spoke with great feeling and emotion of his experience in combat in war to our men's Bible study and this is just a small tribute to him."

Reverend Crittenden was born in Kentucky on Dec. 13, 1925 to Will and Ruth Crittenden. Like many young men of his era, he enlisted in the United States Army during World War II and was promptly assigned to the 98th Chemical Mortar Battalion where he saw combat in the Pacific Theater, mainly New Guinea, Luzon, Philippines and Wake Island. As a member of the 98th Chemical Mortar Battalion, Crittenden fought and served in four enemy held beach landings, fighting to drive back the Japanese. At the end of the war, the 98th had lost seven men, had 64 wounded in combat and fired almost 107,000 rounds.

After receiving a certificate of honor in recognition of his selfless service to our country, Reverend Crittenden spoke to those in attendance and gave a riveting 15 minute account of his time in combat on the island of Luzon, Philippines to an utterly silent room.

"I am so grateful to be a veteran of foreign wars of the United States of America," started Crittenden. "We fought for the freedom of the world. It wasn't easy. I have been to the end of the death march and it was terrible. I want to tell you a short story and it's taken me 50 years to be able to do so without crying."

During military operations against the enemy in the vicinity of Camp Mountain Province, Luzon, Philippines Islands on April 20, 1945, Sergeant Crittenden was a member of the chemical mortar platoon, which was firing in direct support of an assaulting infantry party whose objective was to seize new ground. During the advance, a flash back from a 4.2 inch mortar ignited nearby powder charges and set fire to the surrounding dry brush. As the fire gained headway, a large quantity of abandoned and dud Japanese hand grenades, mortar, small arms and artillery ammunition was caught in the rapidly spreading blaze. The resulting explosion showered dangerous amounts of exploding ammunition over the mortar platoon. Sergeant Crittenden, without regard for his own personal safety, and while exposed to flying fragments from the exploding ammunitions, remained at his mortar until his firing mission had been effectively accomplished. Before retreating to safety, he noticed several rounds of 4.2 inch rounds of ammunitions in the path of the fire, and with the aid of two other men, removed the ammunition to a less vulnerable spot before evacuating the area. His courageous conduct was largely responsible for the successful completion of the firing mission that was of greatest importance to the assaulting party. For his selfless actions, Crittenden was awarded the Bronze Star Medal by direction of President Harry S. Truman.

"It's great that we can recognize our veterans in a way that brings other people in and not just their families," said Kathy Desjarlais, the 2015 Chairman of the Tipton County Veteran Council. "It's open to the public and we're hoping that the younger kids will come and meet our living history."

"I'm not worthy," said Crittenden, humbled by the recognition program. "But I feel great!"

Among the many veterans who attended the program, VFW member Randy Martin was moved by the stories told by Crittenden.

“A lot of guys my age haven’t been through this,” said Martin. “It’s brings pride to hear these stories. That generation went through hell.”

Reverend Crittenden is a member of the Disabled American Veterans and the Tipton County Veterans Council, where he presently serves as Chaplain.