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FAIRCHANCE EXCHANGE CLUB PAYS TRIBUTE TO MEDAL OF HONOR WINNER

Uniontown, PA – Fairchance native Alfred L. Wilson was a World War II medic whose heroic actions led to him being posthumously awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor – the only Fayette County WWII veteran to receive the honor. He received one more honor on Saturday, when memorial plaques were dedicated at his final resting place, Maple Grove Cemetery in Fairchance.

The plaques were sponsored by the Fairchance Exchange Club, and club President Chuck Dean said the idea to upgrade Wilson's gravesite came about through a conversation with U.S. Marine Corps veteran Bill Miller.

"I was doing some electrical service for a gentleman who is also a veteran (Miller). He wanted to visit the gravesite," Dean said.

Dean and Miller headed to Maple Grove Cemetery, where they found that though Wilson's gravesite wasn't in poor condition by any means, "it was okay, but we could do better by him."

So, Dean brought a proposal before the Exchange Club.

"They were behind me 100%. They said, 'Do what you've got to do,'" he said.

With the help of Mountain View Cafe owner Bill Layhue, another U.S. Marine Corps veteran who donated \$2,400 of the \$4,000 cost, Dean moved forward with the project.

Dean said Layhue wasn't the only one who volunteered to help. Greg Sindi donated a ton and a half of stone to the project, Jake Rider donated the pedestal stand for the placard, and James Willard provided the cemetery lot. Josh and Hank Franks donated their time and service to enamel the plaques.

"There have just been a multitude of people who have opened up their wallets and their hearts," Dean said.

Still another was Harry Dice of Harry's Custom Meats in Smithfield, who Dean said donated 200 hamburgers for Saturday's dedication, which has become a sort of community festival. Dean said the local Shop n' Save is even sending a food truck.

But running through the celebratory atmosphere is the thread of Wilson's heroism and sacrifice.

The dedication will include a singer, as well as a 21-gun salute and the playing of "Taps." Wilson's niece, Carolyn McKinney, will serve as the keynote speaker.

McKinney wrote a book about Wilson titled *The Gentle Giant of the 26th Division*. It is in its second reprinting, and Dean said McKinney will bring 100 copies to the dedication, to be given to the first 100 veterans in attendance.

McKinney said she first learned of her uncle's actions while cleaning out her mother's attic, something she had done several times.

"I had cleaned it for years, and then in 1989, (my mother) dropped a box of letters in my lap," McKinney said.

The letters were from Wilson, detailing his experiences as a member of the 328th Regiment of the 26th Infantry Division – a division McKinney pointed out featured another American hero, Sgt. Alvin York. Upon reading the letters and learning of her uncle's Medal of Honor, McKinney said she felt compelled to learn more and to share his story.

She contacted Bill Walls, who had served with Wilson as a fellow WWII medic. He in turn got her in contact with Robert Clapp, the secretary of the 328th Division. She explained the family connection and asked Clapp to get the word out that she was searching for anyone who had known her uncle during the war.

"I got calls from all over the country," she said. "I bet you I got 15 or 20 calls from men who had known Alfred."

Among them was his commander, and McKinney said the first thing he told her was, "We loved that boy."

Over the course of her interviews, she learned that Wilson's platoon was shelled near Bezange-la-Petite, France, and many of the men were wounded, including Wilson himself, who had injured his left arm and his right leg. Even with his injuries, the young medic began to treat his fellow soldiers, first by crawling to them and then by propping against a tree when he could no longer crawl and having the wounded brought to him.

At the suggestion that he let himself be treated, Wilson said, "Take me out last."

Wilson continued to treat the wounded until he lost consciousness. He died of his injuries on Nov. 8, 1944, at the age of 25.

"As the saying goes, he was a man among men," McKinney said.

She said she is pleased that the plaques are being installed in Wilson's honor.

"It's a good thing to do," she said. "Alfred deserves to be remembered and not forgotten. That's why I wrote the book – so he would not be forgotten."

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