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Countywide : Ceremony Will Honor WWII Hero

BY ROBERT BARKER

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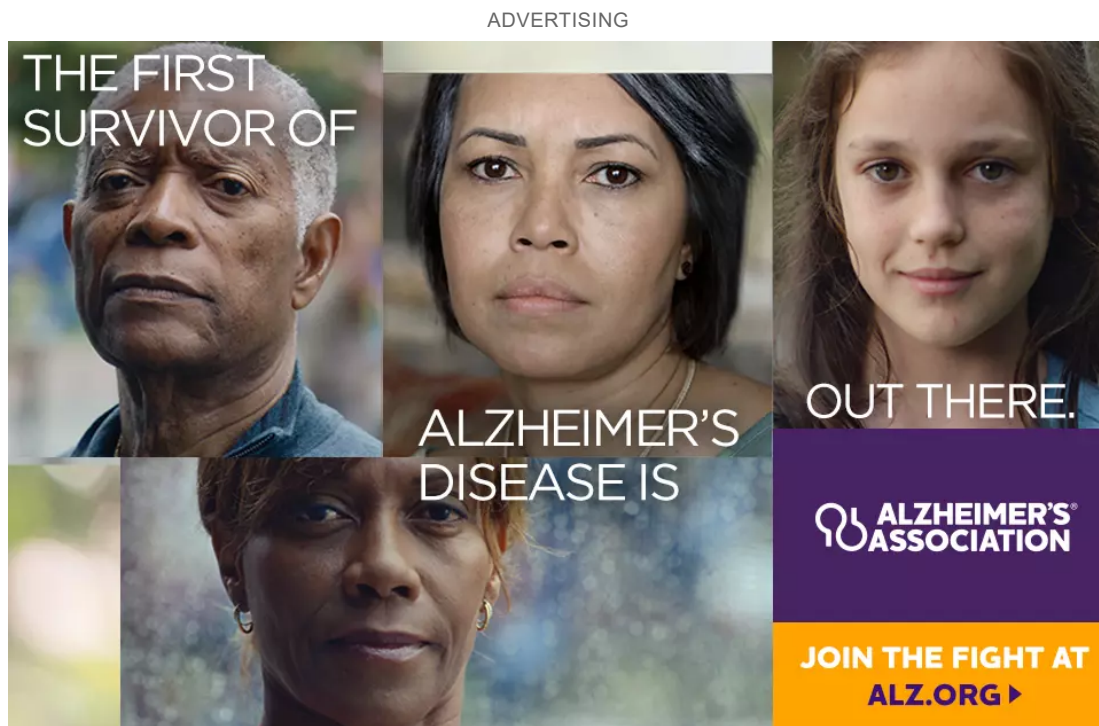
A stirring saga of World War II, the bombing of the aircraft carrier Franklin and the heroic rescue of 300 trapped sailors by the late Garden Grove resident Donald A. Gary, will be memorialized at a local park Saturday.

Gary, then a young Navy lieutenant, made three dangerous trips below deck to lead choking and suffocating shipmates to safety through a labyrinth of dark and smoky ventilation ducts.

For his deed, President Harry S. Truman awarded Gary the Medal of Honor in 1946. Gary died in Garden Grove in 1977 at the age of 73.

Despite Gary's efforts, 724 men were killed in the attack by an enemy bomber and ensuing explosions less than 60 miles off the coast of Japan. Somehow, the devastated ship didn't sink. It inspired a book, "USS Franklin, the Ship That Wouldn't Die."

The Franklin was the most decorated ship in U.S. Navy history while destroying 233 enemy aircraft and 64 enemy ships.



Its crew members received two Medals of Honor, 18 Navy Crosses, 22 Silver Stars, 110 Bronze Stars, 265 Purple Hearts and 233 letters of commendation.

Gary, who attained the rank of commander before leaving the Navy, moved to Garden Grove after the war and became a neighbor of Evelyn Newcomb, who has led efforts to place a memorial in a local park.

"I made a promise to his wife when she was dying (in 1986) that I would keep Don's name and the Franklin name alive. I had heard so much about the Franklin. I knew I had to do something," Newcomb said.

Newcomb's promise, which she acknowledged has exceeded her "wildest expectations," will be made good Saturday at the Donald Gary Bicentennial Mall in a park setting in the Civic Center area near the intersection of Euclid Street and Acacia Parkway. The ceremony comes 47 years and a day after the bombing of the Franklin.

There will be three black granite plaques with the names and ranks of 913 men killed in action in the Franklin's World War II battles in 1944 and 1945.

A fourth plaque will bear a picture of the Franklin and the likenesses of Gary and Lt. Cmdr. Joseph Timothy O'Callahan, the ship's chaplain and another Medal of Honor recipient. O'Callahan delivered last rites to gravely wounded sailors, fought raging fires and threw live ammunition over the side so it wouldn't explode on the ship.

For her efforts to preserve the memory of the heroic events, Newcomb was made an honorary crew member of the Franklin. She expects about 2,000 people at the memorial ceremony, including Franklin shipmates who will fly to the event from around the country.

Principal speakers will be two former officers who served on the Franklin, Lindsay Morgan and Steve Jurika.

Placentia resident Mary Hart, whose brother, Robert Wakefield, 19, a Minnesota native, was killed in the attack, said she is grateful that there will at last be a memorial to the men of the Franklin.

A navigator, Wakefield was in the second seat of an airplane, waiting to take off, when the armor-piercing bomb hit and killed him.

"He was one of the young men who didn't get to live their lives," Hart said. "They should be remembered."

Garden Grove is the first of three cities to be selected as the site for a USS Franklin memorial. The others will be dedicated later this year in the Boston area and in Bremerton, Wash.

Planning the local dedication ceremony with Newcomb is Sam Harry, of Fullerton, a Franklin survivor.

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