

The Mokena VFW William F. Martin Post 725 proudly celebrated the restoration and preservation of the World War II cannon on Veterans Day. One of Mokena's veterans returned to a final resting place in Pioneer Cemetery.

Escorted by World War II re-enactors, a restored 1943 US Army M5 anti-tank three-inch gun, made its way south on Wolf Road to the cemetery to be placed on a new concrete pad.

On Veterans Day, in addition to ceremonies honoring the men and women of the armed forces, there was a dedication of Pioneer Cemetery, which was designated as a Will County Historic Landmark nearly one year ago; a rededication of the grave of Mokena founder Charles Denny, a veteran of the Revolutionary War and the return of the restored cannon.

The 74-year-old anti-tank gun has been on display at Pioneer Cemetery since 1946, brought there by the Disabled American Veterans and the Mokena Civic Association.

Years of corrosion took its toll on this historic piece of artillery. It was missing a large piece of one of its trail legs, its white paint badly chipped, its barrel obstructed, and parts were immobilized with rust. The original tires were dry rotted and buried several inches into the dirt.

Jim Hogan, commander of the Mokena's William Martin VFW Post 725, enlisted the help of former Mokena Mayor Joe Werner and his Veterans Garage in Posen. It's a comfy place, where veterans, friends and patriots drop by, work on military vehicles, talk shop, or explore the war memorabilia displayed here. It was the perfect project for those who hang out at the Garage — where they typically maintain and restore military vehicles. They drive the vehicles in local parades, haul donations in them for veterans food drives, or display them at local veteran-related events. The Garage — now a 5013C non-profit corporation — has been in its current location, 14846 McKinley Drive, for three years, having moved several times — always to a bigger space. Former Mayor Werner, who never served in the military but considers himself a patriot, said that he established the Garage to honor his father and father-in-law, both World War II veterans. While they have restored numerous vehicles, this was their first cannon.

Mayor Werner said it would have been easy to sandblast it, fix a few things and send it back out. But they wanted to make it historically correct. In addition to time, they also had mechanical expertise, a lot of patience, elbow grease and a network of friends and business owners willing to donate to the cause. In some instances, it took hours of beating on a part to free it loose from decades of rust. There were hours of research to make sure they had all the right pieces. Crown Painting, of Frankfort, donated media blasting and painting services — replacing the white with an Army green. Handles, legs, lock arms, leg lunettes, springs and the gear box cover had to be custom fabricated to match the original part that was missing or damaged — and were done for free by South Suburban Welding, Illini Foundry and Barber Spring. Rusted hatch pins were removed and replaced, and the heavily corroded breech block mechanism was cleaned until its parts moved with ease. New rims and tires were among the final touches. Many other companies offered significant discounts, as the folks at the Veterans Garage toiled for about 400 hours — often working evenings and weekends, Werner said, estimating that all this labor and material would have run about \$50,000.

Mayor Werner believes that people need to keep the sacrifices of the military in the forefront of their minds and the preserved cannon is a very visible reminder of this. While little is known about Mokena's acquisition of the World War gun, Werner has well-documented the restoration process in words, photos, and a list of 18 men and at least a dozen companies that participated in the effort, along with the village of Mokena and its Public Works department.

The newly restored cannon will be fenced off. After all this effort, Werner said he wants to research the brief military service of the M5 anti-tank gun, one of 2,500 made during the war.

The word is out, however, and the Veterans Garage has been asked to restore another cannon for the village of Lansing and a missile for Oak Forest.
