

Tribute to military chaplains has Loveland connection

Resident Dick Stenbakken envisioned the granite memorial and followed the process through to dedication in Honolulu cemetery

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Loveland resident Dick Stenbakken, a retired U.S. Army chaplain wearing a World War II-era uniform, kneels next to the memorial to military chaplains in the Pacific Theater that was dedicated Dec. 13 at the National Memorial Cemetery in Honolulu. Stenbakken, who served in Vietnam, conceived of the memorial and saw the tribute through to the stone's placement, a two-year process. (Jamey Steiner / Special to the Loveland Reporter-Herald)

The first time Dick Stenbakken took in the serene beauty of the National Memorial Cemetery in Honolulu, he was a young Army chaplain on leave from Vietnam and facing another 100 days "in country" before his combat tour was up.

The fresh scars on the manicured lawn were a vivid reminder of the men and women dying in Vietnam and the possibility that some of his own soldiers — or he — could be joining them, he said of that visit in 1970.

On Dec. 13, the Loveland resident was back again among the tens of thousands of granite headstones in the cemetery, helping dedicate a marker memorializing all the U.S. military chaplains who have served through the years in the Pacific Theater.

Stenbakken, a retired colonel who served in the Army for 23 years, came up with the concept for a memorial to chaplains during a visit with friends two years ago to the cemetery in the Punchbowl Crater in Honolulu.

He said it took two years, countless phone calls, an 88-page application packet and a few miracles to get the stone placed. The Dec. 13 ceremony involved a number of military chaplains, including Maj. Gen. Paul Hurley, the Army chief of chaplains.

"The rabbi who was there is the head of the Jewish Welfare Board. He reminded us that this is the season of Hanukkah and Christmas — the season of miracles," Stenbakken said in an interview last week.

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Those "miracles" included close calls getting the 1,600-pound black granite slab shipped to California from India and through delays in customs, finding someone to drive it through the wildfire zone in Southern California, locating an air freight company to make a last-minute flight to Honolulu and arranging for the engraving company to work through the weekend to get the words chiseled in and bronze seals attached, he said.

"I had made a cardboard mock-up, full-size, just in case," Stenbakken said.



Dark sand from the beach at Iwo Jima fills some of the white letters in the memorial stone that was dedicated in the National Memorial Cemetery in Honolulu on Dec. 13. (Jamey Steiner / Special to the Loveland Reporter-Herald)

The 3-foot-wide memorial says: "Honoring Military Chaplains for service to God and Country in the Pacific Theater."

"It's a tribute to all chaplains," said Stenbakken, a Loveland resident since 2005 and a graduate of Campion Academy, the Seventh-Day Adventist school south of the city.

Stenbakken said he designed the memorial, raised the money for its creation and followed the application process through. He said a foundry in Loveland helped him get the three 5-inch-diameter bronze seals cast for the chaplain corps of the Army, Navy and Air Force.

During the dedication at the Punchbowl Cemetery, some of the participants sprinkled sand on the marker from the beach at Iwo Jima, the site of a bloody battle during World War II, and Rabbi Irving Elson read the famous eulogy given in 1945 for the American combatants who fell at Iwo Jima, Stenbakken said in an article he wrote about the event.

Hurley, the chief of chaplains, spoke of the importance of the memorial, Stenbakken said.

"It is important to have a marker to remind us of what we are here for," Hurley said. "As chaplains, we are here to take care of the souls and spirits of soldiers and their families.

"This memorial is for all chaplains," Hurley said. "This is a reminder of our past and how important it is to what we are doing now."

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Participants in a ceremony Dec. 13 dedicating a memorial to U.S. military chaplains in the Pacific Theater place sand from Iwo Jima on and around the black granite stone. They are, from left, Loveland resident Dick Stenbakken, Rev. Sarah Lammert, Bishop Derek Jones of the Anglican Church, Chaplain Jack Lea, Maj. Gen. Paul Hurley and Rabbi Irving Elson. (Jamey Steiner / Special to the Loveland Reporter-Herald)