

On Veterans Day, three vets reflect on their service and memories

November 11, 2016 By Carl MacGowan carl.macgowan@newsday.com



On Veterans Day, Nov. 11, 2016, from left, veterans Robert Spann, 91, Christina F. Carroll, 95, and Charles Darling, 85, all residents at the Jefferson Ferry Retirement Community in South Setauket pose with photos of themselves from the time they served. Spann served with the U.S. Army in Europe during World War II, while Carroll served in the Army Nurse Corp. Darling served in the U.S. Navy during the Korean War. (Credit: Newsday / John Paraskevas)

During his two years fighting in Europe during World War II, Robert Spann heard a sniper shot whiz over his head and survived a mortar blast that threw him into a pool of mud.

Friday, as he marked Veterans Day, the Bronze Star recipient said the holiday isn't just about service members like himself who survived close calls. He said he reflected on the soldiers, sailors, Air Force flyers and Marines who weren't as lucky.

"Veterans Day is for those who did not make it home," Spann, 91, said at the Jefferson's Ferry retirement community in South Setauket, where he lives. "To them goes all the honor and glory."

Spann was among many Long Islanders who paused Friday to remember the legions of Americans who fought in the country's wars. He and two other Jefferson's Ferry residents recalled their military service with a mix of pride and mourning, as they remembered comrades in arms who were killed or never were the same when they came home.

Christina Carroll, 95, an Army nurse during World War II, remembered treating soldiers at Mason General Hospital in Brentwood whose wounds could not be seen.

These soldiers returned from Europe suffering from "shell shock," she said. They often were treated with electroshock therapy, a controversial treatment for mental illness.

“Most of them were young boys, 18 years old,” she said, adding she accompanied many on their trips back home after they were discharged from Mason General.

“That was quite sad, because their parents had not seen them” since the soldiers had gone to war, Carroll said. “They would be waiting at the station and see them, and didn’t even know them.”

Charles Darling, 85, was far away from combat when he was with a Navy flight crew in Jacksonville, Florida, and Iceland during the Korean War. But the job still was dangerous — nine members were killed when a plane struck a glacier, he said.

Darling lamented that some Americans may not appreciate the meaning of Veterans Day, which originally was Armistice Day, marking the end of World War I on Nov. 11, 1918.

“It’s a day at the mall or a day off from work,” he said.

Spann, Carroll and Darling settled on Long Island after their military stints to pursue careers and raise families. Spann was a consulting engineer with Sperry Corp. in Lake Success; Carroll became an industrial nurse for Western Electric in Manhattan, and Darling worked for Gyrodyne in Saint James and Bethpage-based Grumman Aerospace.

Their memories of military service linger, some too painful to recall without trembling.

Spann recalled being the lone American soldier surrounded by the bodies of a dozen dead Germans after a battle.

“It affected me,” he said. “Even though they were the enemy, they were still dead men.

“When you think of someone 19 or 20 years old, you expect them to have a life expectancy of 25 or 30 more years,” Spann said. “When you go into combat, it’s more like 29 minutes.”