



DeGlopper Memorial unveiling 'truly awesome'



Unwrapping the statue for the unveiling ceremony. Photo by Rob Haag



A close up of the Charles DeGlopper statue after unveiling. Photo by Josh Maloni



The unveiled Charles DeGlopper statue. Photo by Mary Ehde

BY MICHAEL J. BILLONI

It was an emotionally charged, patriotic, somber and extremely well-orchestrated military tribute to veterans. The unveiling of a life-sized statue of Private First-Class Charles N. DeGlopper in his hometown occurred in front of a large crowd with great fanfare on Saturday, June 5.

Toward the end of the two-hour program, Robert Praties, a lone bag piper playing "Amazing Grace," slowly marched on a gravel path from the KIA Monument, stopping in front of the 7-foot bronzed statue of the World War II hero, which was covered with a parachute.

Quietly, DeGlopper's nephews, Ray, Charles, Earl and George, along with Mike Bell, whose grandmother was the hero's sister, surrounded the granite base and carefully removed the covering to a thunderous applause. As the five men returned to join 50 family members, sculptor Susan Geissler smiled as she knew her goal was achieved.

"This was a very emotional project for me and the family because it was so important that we portrayed this young war hero as he was on that fateful day in Normandy when his actions saved his troop," she ex-

plained during a reception afterward at the Charles N. DeGlopper VFW Post 9249.

Ray DeGlopper, commander of American Legion Post 1346 on Grand Island and vice chairman of the DeGlopper Post Expansion Committee, presented the closing remarks on behalf of his family. Knowing what went into the volunteer committee's five-year journey that culminated with the unveiling, his well-crafted remarks could have been summarized in two statements, "We did it!" and "Thank you!"

He eloquently described how this project became a collaborative effort of the Island's VFW, American Legion, Loyal Order of Moose No. 180 and town officials discussing ways to beautify the DeGlopper Memorial site at Baseline Road and Grand Island Boulevard.

Eric Anderson of the Moose Lodge was selected as chairman. Dan Drexelius was chosen as property manager and he led the effort to have the vacant Exxon Mobile property donated to expand the memorial grounds. The committee then began monthly meetings. Chris Taylor of Certified AutoBrokers chaired the committee, charged with raising \$750,000. Keith Wegrzyn, a Grand Island High School grad-

uate and general manager of Russo Development, spearheaded the effort to design the grounds.

A major effort began by updating the Killed in Action monument at the southern end of the property to include those lives lost in the Vietnam War and Operation Iraq Freedom. Wegrzyn and former Supervisor Mary Cooke led a committee that took those 17 names and found photos and a short biography so their stories could be presented on their own metal and glass statue.

That required a number of volunteer efforts, including ASI Signage on Grand Island, Frontier Glass in Niagara Falls and Grand Island High School's engineering technology teacher Carl Koppmann. Since, 2017 Koppmann and students took a clear sheet of glass from Frontier, etched the entire description backward, and flipped the glass to what you see there today. Larry Bota of Bota Welding then mounted each plaque on a steel pole and placed them in concrete around the original statue.

Cooke and others worked tirelessly to find the historical information on the veterans along with locating the names of the 68 Islanders who served in the Civil War

and now have stones engraved in an area designated for them. In addition, there is a wall at the north end of the property that lists all Island veterans.

DeGlopper thanked the entire committee and recognized the unveiling committee chairs, Debbie Bota and Elsie Martino, for their tireless efforts to ensure the event was flawless. He then turned his attention to the statue.

"Bringing Charlie back to life was due to the exceptional talent of two people," he said before recognizing Ralph Sirianni of the Town of Tonawanda for the life-like drawing of DeGlopper, and acclaimed Youngstown sculptor Geissler.

In closing, DeGlopper thanked the community for its assistance in financial donations and time spent working at the site. "Thank you, thank you, thank you," he concluded to a standing ovation.

Maj. Gen. David Conboy (Ret.) of Grand Island served as master of ceremony and opened with eloquent words about Charles DeGlopper, saying his heroic actions during the Normandy Invasion on June 9, 1944, earned him the Congressional Medal of Honor - DeGlopper was the only

See UNVEILING continued on Page 2

Pride and patriotism prevail at dedication ceremony

BY KAREN CARR KEEFE

Participants and observers alike expressed a sense of pride, patriotism and unity at the DeGlopper Memorial Dedication Ceremony on Saturday, June 5.

For relatives of Pfc. Charles N. DeGlopper, the day was a long time coming, but brought a sense of completion. With the crowd there for the unveiling of the statue of the Medal of Honor winner who gave his life for his fellow soldiers in World War II, it was clear that his hometown was grateful for his heroic sacrifice and proud of his bravery.

On June 9, 1944, DeGlopper, a member of Company C, 325th Glider Infantry, saved members of his platoon from death at the hands of their Germany enemy in LaFiere, France. He sprayed the hostile positions with assault fire and, gravely wounded, knelt in the road and kept firing until he was killed.

Relatives of 17 Grand Island soldiers also killed in action expressed a belief and thankfulness that their loved ones will always be remembered in the plaques that now



Ray DeGlopper, nephew of Pfc. Charles N. DeGlopper and commander of American Legion Post 1346.

display their photos and heroic actions on behalf of their country.

A core group of Islanders has worked for five years to

ensure this tribute would occur, be witnessed by many and be remembered always.

Ray DeGlopper, Charles DeGlopper's nephew, addressed the crowd after the statue unveiling to describe the process of mapping out the DeGlopper Memorial and raising the funds for a statue, the KIA plaques and other aspects of the Memorial Expansion Committee's work.

DeGlopper, commander of American Legion Post 1346, said groundbreaking for the memorial took place in 2016.

"The development of this project moved along with grateful donations of time, money and effort. This project has been funded primarily by Grand Island residents," he said. "As we admire the components of this memorial site, we recognize the generous contributions of material, labor and the elements both seen and unseen. Representatives as young as the Boy Scouts, the high school students to our older residents were involved with every aspect of this project."

See PATRIOTISM continued on Page 10



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