

Eve Samples: WWII veteran wants public memorial for his fallen shipmates

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Proposed location: Memorial Park, Stuart

To donate: Make check payable to "USS Franklin Memorial Plaques," mail to Samuel Rhodes, 1867 N.E. Ridge Ave., Jensen Beach, FL 34957

Sixty-eight years ago this month, when a Japanese bomber dove through low-hanging clouds to strike the USS Franklin, a war correspondent aboard the aircraft carrier penned this account of the attack:

"Scenes of indescribable horror took place on the flat top," wrote Alvin S. McCoy of the Kansas City Star. "Men were blown off the flight deck into the sea, burned to a crisp in a searing white-hot flash of flame that swept the hangar deck, or trapped in compartments below and suffocated by smoke."

Sam Rhodes witnessed the devastation. His ears still ring from the sound of the bombs exploding off the shore of Japan.

Then an 18-year-old water tender on the ship, he had laid down on his bunk that morning of March 19, 1945. Moments later, the force of the explosion slammed his body into the overhead.

He spent the next 24 hours working alongside other survivors to put out fires and dump ammunition to save the ship they called "Big Ben."

Incredibly, they did save it.

Now, at 86, Rhodes is working to preserve its memory, too.

I visited Rhodes and his wife Elaine this week at their Jensen Beach home, a modest but charming brick house that Sam Rhodes, a retired homebuilder, constructed himself.

On a shelf in the living room, they keep books about the Franklin and a block of the ship's original

teak flight deck.

Hanging on a wall near the dining table is a Zippo pocket lighter that Sam used to help fire up a boiler on the listing ship after the attack.

Those are the personal mementos Sam Rhodes cherishes — but he has visions of a much more public memorial to his ship.

For the past two years, Sam has been trying to find a permanent home for three large granite plaques that list the names of 965 men who were killed in action on the Franklin (out of 3,200 on board).

"All these men were buried at sea," Rhodes said. "There's no cemetery for them. There's no cross or anything like that."

Sam sees Memorial Park in Stuart as the perfect place for a remembrance.

"Before I kick the bucket, I'd like to see these things get put up," Sam told me with a smile.

The city of Stuart has agreed to give his monument a spot near the back of Memorial Park, but he's on his own when it comes to raising enough money to build the 7-foot-tall, 8-foot-long wall. It's designed to hold the granite plaques, which already have been paid for.

Sam and Elaine are hoping the community will help cover the cost of the wall, which they estimate will run between \$2,000 and \$3,000.

They are not the types to let history slip away. Even their neighborhood bears markers of their personal past.

When Sam was working as a builder, he had an opportunity to name some of the roads in the communities he built. Near their home, he named one Elaine Street for his wife and another Media Avenue for the town in Pennsylvania where he was born.

I asked him what it would mean to have a public memorial to those who were killed in action on the Franklin.

When he responded, it was the only time he choked up during our interview.

"I'd feel that I've done what I could for my shipmates," he said.

Just as he never abandoned the Franklin, he's not abandoning this cause.

Eve Samples is a columnist for Scripps Treasure Coast Newspapers. This column reflects her opinion. Contact her at 772-221-4217 or eve.samples@scripps.com (<mailto:eve.samples@scripps.com>).