The Golden Book honors IU alumni who have served their country in times of war.

By Pete DiPrimiio

Notes:

ETTERS ON A PAGE. THAT’S THE EASY WAY TO LOOK AT IT. It’s a book of names, a few bits of details and dates, written in script. Dee Rockwood, MS’79, a Bloomington, Ind., elementary school teacher by profession, a calligrapher by passion, worked in whatever spare time she had, so that days became weeks and then months to memorialize what had been unorganized lists scrawled onto index cards and stuffed into shoe boxes.

It’s called the Golden Book, and its hundreds of pages — totaling about 10,000 names — list all the “sons and daughters” of Indiana University who served in battles ranging from the War of 1812 to World War II.

But names are meaningless without the stories behind them. These were people who lived, loved, sacrificed, and often died. “Killed in action” is the way it’s described, but that just touches the surface.
For the truth you have to dig deeper, past the locked glass case that protects the nearly 60-year-old book from time and touch. Newton is both. There is an enemy to defeat and a career to start. He had no intention of waiting out the war as a POW. Camp 59 is not Alcatraz. Escape is possible for those who are willing and brave. Newton is both. There is an enemy to defeat and a career to start. He's had a bust in his image. There's more, of course, but we won't start there.

Flash back to 1944. Former IU student Robert Alvey Newton, a U.S. Army tank gunner and escaped POW, has found sanctuary in the Italian town of Santa Vittoria. After six months, German SS troops find him and another escaped American and order them to go to the nearby Osso River to gather firewood. Several years later, their families arrived to take the place of the 2,000 prisoners who flee Camp 59 during the war. The Germans returned to the Viozzi house and ordered everyone out, instantly recognizing the Americans. Cesare said a spy in the town must have told the Germans about the Americans.

The Germans took the Americans to a small wooded area near the house, blew a hole in the wall, and shot 130 rounds directly at them to show the family for breakfast. Two German soldiers returned on motorbikes and went straight for the Viozzi house, even though other families were hiding escaped prisoners. The soldiers raised their guns and ordered everybody out, instantly recognizing the Americans. Cesare said a spy in the town must have told the Germans about the Americans. Cesare made a bust in his image.

Robert Alvey Newton, left, with his fellow tank crew members of the U.S. Army’s 1st Armored Division. Newton was captured in 1943.

Robert Alvey Newton, who attended IU from 1938 to 1940, plans to return to the nearby Osso River to gather firewood.

Additional insight was provided from Italian historian Filippo Ierano, who interviewed Cesare Viozzi for a story that appeared in a July 2001 Italian publication. Cesare was just a young boy when his parents took in the Americans.

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Russell Church’s last fiery seconds on earth left him with a choice — obey his orders and, perhaps, jeopardize the lives of his fellow soldiers; or disobey, complete his mission, and buy his decimated unit some desperately needed time.

He had seconds to decide …

Church had been a varsity swimmer at IU, graduating in 1939. He was athletic and charming and popular. He also was tough and fiercely competitive. He swam out the men he served with.

In September of 1941, he was a lieutenant stationed in the Philippines as a pilot in the Army Air Corps. One day members of his unit and the 17th Pursuit Squadron, went swimming. A soldier got caught in the undertow and was pulled out to sea. Church swam out and kept him afloat until other soldiers could get a boat from a nearby village and rescue them. He was honored for his actions.

By December of 1941, United States officials knew there was a strong likelihood the Japanese would attack, but did little to prepare. Many believed the Japanese would hit the Philippines first because it was closer to Japan. Instead, on Dec. 7, 1941, they attacked Pearl Harbor. Nine hours later, they invaded the Philippines.

Most of the American planes were destroyed in the initial attack. The ones that survived (mostly P-40 fighter planes with shark mouths painted on the noses) were just used for scouting the area. The Americans couldn’t afford to lose any more planes in battle.

By Dec. 10, the Japanese had landed near the Philippine town of Vigan, where Church and his unit were stationed. Five days later, Japanese troops and 25 planes had settled onto a nearby field. Americans decided to attack. The mission was led by Lt. Boyd “Buzz” Wagner, who had already shot down four enemy planes. He needed a wingman and picked Church, one of the squadron’s most experienced pilots.

According to AirForce-Magazine.com story by John L. Frisbee, Wagner went first and dropped six 30-pound fragmentation bombs on Japanese planes neatly positioned on the field. Church was next, but by then the Japanese had started shooting. Church’s plane was hit and burst into flames. Wagner ordered Church to turn back and bail out. Church did not. He knew the Americans couldn’t afford to waste this opportunity. It might help the squadron hold on until reinforcements arrived. It might save lives. So he dropped all his bombs, destroying many Japanese planes as he could before his P-40 crashed, killing him.

“I know that Church knew he was facing certain death when he decided to remain with his planes,” Wagner told Frisbee. “What Russell Church did at Vigan was the most courageous thing I have ever seen in this Pacific war.”

Church was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for his bravery. It was reported the Japanese saw his self-sacrifice and buried him with full military honors.

And then …

John Summerlot can’t help himself. Every time the McNutt
Center manager is in the Memorial Union, which is several times a semester while teaching a Veterans Experience class, he stops by to check out the Golden Book.

“We do a tour of the Union and look at the Golden Book,” he says. “I sometimes take my (McNutt) RA staff there. They’ll say they’ve glanced in the room before, but never knew what it was. Part of my job is telling the rest of the university this place exists.”

Summerlot, a Mississippi State graduate working on an advanced degree in education at I.U., digs to find the Golden Book stories people want to hear. He researches university archives, ROTC archives, library files, and anything else he can find.

“John has spent more time than anybody I know looking at all the various pieces and files,” says Margaret Baechtold of I.U.’s Veterans Affairs Office. Adds Summerlot: “Many of the stories come out through digging. A lot of them were put into files and sat there until they were turned over to the archives. You find them while looking through a letter here, a newspaper clipping there. Summerlot is a former Marine and a student at the University to exist.”

The Golden Book is a good reminder that there still is that respect and appreciation for those who have provided the opportunities and security that’s necessary for a place like Indiana University to exist.

One of those to appreciate was Richard Owen, an I.U. professor of geology who became a Union colonel in the Civil War. In 1862 he was put in charge of Camp Morton, a prisoner of war camp outside of Indianapolis. He treated his Civil War. In 1862 he was put in charge of Camp Morton, a prisoner of war camp outside of Indianapolis. He treated his prisoners with respect and dignity, actions that were not duplicated at other Union prisons.

After the war, when the Confederate soldiers returned home and heard about the mistreatment of other captured soldiers, they decided to honor Owen by commissioning a bronze bust in his honor. Sculpted by Belle Kinney, it depicts Owen in a Union military uniform with his arms folded across his chest, looking to the right, stern but fair.

The original bust was dedicated in 1913, two years after his death, and is in the Indiana State Capitol in Indianapolis. A replica is in a Memorial Union entryway near the Memorial Room.

And then there was the Tommynoun. That’s short for the Thompson submachine gun, one of the most popular weapons used by criminals and police during the Prohibition era. It was invented by John T. Thompson in 1919 and was originally conceived as a weapon for trench warfare. It was known as the Louisville.

Thompson attended I.U. for a year before moving on to West Point. His father, James, was a military science professor at I.U. when Thompson was in the 1870s. “People don’t often think of I.U. as a place for engineers and great weapons,” Summerlot says. “But one of the most infamous weapons of the early 20th century was invented by an I.U. student.”

History shows that one of the most dramatic early naval battles of the Civil War involved the Union’s Monitor and the Confederates’ Merrimack. It was the first naval confrontation between two ironclad warships, and they basically fought to a draw on March 9, 1862, as part of the Confederates’ attempt to break the naval blockade of Virginia. The biggest significance was the worldwide impact it had. Great Britain and France immediately stopped building wooden ships and began making iron vessels.

An I.U. student, W.C.L. Taylor, reportedly was a soldier on the Monitor. He later fought in the battles of Second Bull Run, Chancellorsville, Spotsylvania, and Petersburg.

Don’t forget Paul McNutt, a 1913 I.U. honors graduate, a member of the Indiana National Guard, a World War I veteran, governor of Indiana during the 1930s, and ambassador to the Philippines. McNutt Center is named for him.

And then there were the student volunteers who in the summer of 1916 saw action in the Texas-Mexico border war involving Pancho Villa, the famous Mexican bandit and revolutionary leader. “It was hot and miserable there,” Summerlot says. “A lot of the starting football team was on that unit. They came back in time to start fall semester.”

Their return couldn’t prevent a 2-4-1 record, I.U.’s sixth straight non-winning season. The Hoosiers did beat Florida (the Gators weren’t the power they are now) and DePauw, and lost to Purdue.

“Some of the people who served in the War of 1812 have stories as part of the Oral History Archive that Greathouse had been promoted to brigadier general. “He would have been the youngest brigadier general in American history,” Summerlot says. “After the war, Gen. Sherman was asked who was the bravest man he’d fought with. He said it was tough because everybody was brave, but if he had to identify somebody, it would be Col. Greathouse.”

Greathouse, too, is a name on a page. And so much more.

The Memorial Room of the Indiana Memorial Union hosts the Golden Book, which lists the names of Indiana University alumni who served their country in the wars of the republic. The book also lists the names of donors whose funds were used to construct these IU buildings: the old Memorial Stadium, the Memorial Union, and Memorial Hall in the Agnes E. Wells Quadrangle.

The Original Tommy Gun

The Tommygun was invented by John T. Thompson in 1919 and was originally conceived as a weapon for trench warfare. It was known as the Annihilator.
The book, which rests on a base made from a hand-carved mantle from an old Roman palace, is displayed in the Memorial Room (dedicated in 1969), which is located across from Starbucks in the Memorial Union.

The room includes a pair of religious-themed stained glass windows. One, titled “The Flight into Egypt,” shows Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus riding a donkey and is estimated to be more than 700 years old. The other, called “The Epiphany or Adoration of the Kings,” is more than 500 years old. Both came from Indianapolis Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Booth Tarkington, who acquired them from the collection of an Austrian count and used them in his Meridian Street home. They were donated by Mr. and Mrs. H. Frederick Willkie, who bought Tarkington’s home after he died in 1946.

On the floor is a bronze plaque with the inscription, “In memory of the sons and daughters of Indiana University who have served in the wars of the republic.” Tradition says no one should step on the plaque.

There is also a portrait of William Lowe Bryan, IU’s president from 1902 to 1937. It was under his leadership that the drive to build the Memorial Union was proposed and completed in 1932. The digital display of the Golden Book sits beneath the portrait of Bryan, across the room from the printed book.

At one time the Golden Book was left open and its pages turned daily. Now it is preserved in a locked glass case. — P.D.