

Local War Heroes

This article summarizes presentations made at the November 20, 2018 meeting of the BAHR at Brookside Museum by Jim Richmond, Lauren Roberts and Paul Perreault on four local war heroes from Saratoga County who served in four different wars.

JAMES GORDON – REVOLUTIONARY WAR (Jim Richmond)

As the Lt Colonel of the 12th Albany County Militia, Gordon led his men from the Ballston District throughout the American Revolution. The Militiamen engaged in many military support activities during the war, including rounding up suspected Tories, manning local stockades against invasion, supporting the American army during Burgoyne's invasion, and marching westward in response to British and Indian raids in the Mohawk Valley.

In October, 1780 200 Loyalists and Mohawk Indians launched a surprise attack along Middleline Road in Ballston, pillaged the homes of the settlers and captured 25 of Gordon's Militiamen and carried them off to Canada. Throughout their two-year imprisonment, Gordon worked tirelessly to lessen the suffering of his men in prison by seeking redress from the British officers, and appealing directly to the Governor General of Canada, Sir Frederick Haldiman. His efforts bore some success, but when he himself was taken from house arrest to prison in Quebec City, Gordon escaped with several other Ballston militiamen and undertook a harrowing journey through Maine to safety. During this trip it was his fellow soldiers that rescued him from certain death.

Gordon returned to Ballston where he served his community as Supervisor, State Assemblyman and two terms in Congress during the Washington Administration. He died in 1810 and is buried in Briggs Cemetery in Ballston.

ELMER ELLSWORTH – CIVIL WAR (Paul Perreault)

In a War that would give history such men as Lincoln, Grant, Lee, Jackson, Sherman and Booth, no name was more famous in May, 1861 than that of Elmer Ellsworth. Born in Malta and raised in Mechanicville, he was the first Union Officer killed in the War. Leading his regiment across the Potomac to occupy Alexandria, he was shot as he seized a large Confederate banner that had flown atop a prominent hotel and was seen from the White House.

His body was taken to the White House and waked in the East Room with members of the Lincoln family and the Cabinet in attendance. Details of the death and funeral arrangements consumed most of the front page of the NY Times in the two days following. The body was taken by train to New York City where 10,000 people viewed it and on to Albany where he was honored in the State Capitol and finally on a special train to Mechanicville for burial. Today he rests in the Hudson View Cemetery.

THOMAS J. FARNAN – WORLD WAR I (Lauren Roberts)

Thomas "Tim" Farnan was born on April 4th 1896 and grew up in Stillwater on the Neilsen farm located on what is today the Saratoga National Historical Park, where his parents were sharecroppers. At age 21, Tim entered the service as part of Company L, the "home company" for Saratoga County and became part of the 105th Infantry in NY's 27th Division. His brother, John "Jack" Farnan also entered into service and went overseas as a cavalry man.

In the fall of 1918, the 27th Division took part in a major offensive aiming to drive the Germans into retreat, including the battle to break the Hindenburg Line. Tim Farnan, one of those soldiers tasked with breaking the line, wrote a letter home to his sister Marie about his experience going “over the top.” This letter was published in a few local newspapers, including *The Saratogian* on Saturday, November 23rd, 1918. An excerpt:

“I’ll never forget as long as I live the morning of the 29th of September. We went “over the top”. I would like to tell you all about it but don’t think they will let me. But we will have to celebrate that day every year after I get home. It was the day that the 27th Division broke the Hindenburg Line. You ought to have seen the trenches they had there, and the dug-outs! Why some of them were fifty feet deep, and all cement too! In some of them you could get a whole battalion.

The morning we went over the top was the prettiest sight I ever saw. We were all lying in shell holes waiting for the order to go over. Things were just as quiet, only once in a while a shot. It was just beginning to break day when the artillery and machine guns opened up and we started over. Then the signal lights began going up, red, green, yellow, all colors. It certainly was great. About that time Jerry started slinging over his shells, but we kept right on going. You could see wave after wave of khaki and their bayonets flashing in the scene. It was some sight – no getting out of it.”

Tim Farnan was lucky to survive this battle which claimed over 6,500 casualties from NY’s 27th Division. He returned to Saratoga County after his discharge where he married and raised a family. Special thanks to the Farnan Family for sharing information on Tim and for keeping his story alive.

LEONARD SCHALLEHN – WORLD WAR II (Paul Perreault)

On June 16, 1944, Lt. Leonard Schallehn, a 23 year old Army Air Corp pilot from Saratoga Springs was shot down as he flew his 46th mission over northern France. After several unsuccessful attempts to bail out, he put the plane into a dive, pulled back on the stick and rolled it..... “coming out like a cork.” He landed successfully and ran into the woods. Three days and thirty miles later, he contacted the French Resistance but his troubles were not over. Because he had lost his dog tags, he was made to answer three questions to prove that he was not a German in disguise. Fortunately, he knew who had won the World Series the previous year, what a chocolate sundae was and how far it is from Saratoga to Montreal. Sixth-five days after being shot down, he was rescued by Patton’s Third Army.

Returning to Saratoga in 1946, he married and fathered two daughters. He and his wife Eunice returned to Europe for a number of reunions with Andre Rougeyron, the leader of the French Resistance who had saved him.