Frisco veteran recalls WWII
An 84-year old World War II veteran from Frisco remembers his fellow soldiers
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BY DREW ANDERSEN
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FRISCO — Sitting at the dining room table of his condominium, a jovial Jack Cowger visibly saddened at the mention of the word “Marines.”

His eyes brimmed with tears as the World War II veteran recalled seeing his fellow soldiers “all chewed up” on the operating table while working as a scrub nurse in the Navy Hospital Corps.

“I don’t think it bothered me so much then as it does now,” he said.

Stationed aboard the hospital ship USS Rescue (AH-18) as a teenager, Cowger bore witness first-hand to the devastation hot metal can wreak on the human body. He took off his glasses to clear his eyes and mastered himself.

“I don’t think we’ll talk about the Marines any more,” Cowger said.

Veteran’s Day isn’t an opportunity for Cowger to reflect upon how much he did for his country. It’s a chance for him to remember his fellow veterans who did so much for him.

Cowger becomes more of a rarity each day. The ranks of World War II veterans diminish by approximately 850 former soldiers daily. As of May of this year, just over two million United States World War II veterans were still alive.

Cowger’s story
As a 17-year old high school senior, Cowger saw the writing on the wall. As soon as he graduated and turned 18, he would be drafted. As so many of his peers did, Cowger preemptively enlisted in the Navy in 1944 so as to choose which branch of the military he would serve under.

“I didn’t want to sleep on the ground at night,” he said. “I didn’t think a foxhole sounded very comfortable.”

Cowger had two older brothers who both joined the Navy, so the youngest sibling followed in their footsteps. He opted to become a Corpsman, serving the Navy's hospital system.

“I didn’t want to shoot anybody because I figured they’d be a better shot than I was,” Cowger said.

One day after graduating high school, Cowger made his way to the Naval Station Great Lakes in North Chicago, Ill. He underwent four weeks of combination boot camp and Corps training before heading to Brooklyn, N.Y., in December of 1944 to catch the USS Rescue. The Rescue was undergoing an operation to transform her from a submarine tender to a hospital ship, and by early 1945 it was deployed in the Pacific theater to support the Allies' efforts against the Japanese.

During the trek to the pacific, Cowger trained to become a scrub nurse for the ship’s surgeons.

The job fell into Cowger's lap, “mainly because the other guys they asked thought it meant scrubbing the floor,” he said.

The USS Rescue arrived off the coast of Japan near the end of the 82-day Battle of Okinawa, where 50,000 Allied troops were lost. Despite constant threat of air attack, Cowger and the staff of the rescue helped fill the ship near its 798-bed capacity and delivered the wounded soldiers safely to the Allied base on Guam.

“It wasn’t uncommon to work 20 of 24 hours,” Cowger said. “We’d sleep for about 15 minutes, then be up and at it again.”

Schools honoring Veterans’ Day
* Frisco Elementary has invited veterans to speak to students in the classroom and participate in an assembly to honor local veterans.
* Breckenridge Elementary will host on honorary flag raising at 8:45 a.m.
After supporting fleets in the South China Sea, the crew of the Rescue got word that the United States had the atomic bomb, and that the end of the war was imminent. On September 2, 1945, the Rescue arrived in Tokyo Bay with the 3rd Fleet, where Cowger and the rest of the crew witnessed the signing of the Japanese Instrument of Surrender on the USS Missouri — marking the end of World War II — from less than a half mile away.

Cowger took leave in Yokohama as the Rescue took on prisoners of war from camps in Japan. He said the Japanese civilians were polite, even offering Cowger into their homes and offering tea.

“I have to admit, I didn't drink the tea,” Cowger said. “I just didn't have that trust yet.”

Cowger was honorably discharged later that year, having devoted two years of his life to the military before the age of 20.

After the war
Having served two years overseas, Cowger was eligible for four years of college through the G.I. Bill. Cowger decided to pursue a career in medicine, but he did not use the bill to finance his undergraduate education at Hastings College in Hastings, Neb. Instead, Cowger saved the bill to finance his four years at Kirksville College of Osteopathic Medicine in Kirksville, Mo.

He moved to Aurora where he grossed $29 in his first month in practice as an osteopathic physician. Two of Cowger's patients had been victims in the Bataan Death March and actually rode the Rescue from Yokahama to Guam.

“They didn't get charged very much,” Cowger said.

In 1960, Cowger's friends Jody and Charlie Anderson bought the Frisco Lodge and introduced Cowger to Summit County. Two years later he bought an acre of land where the Condo Creek Condominiums now stand. Cowger built an A-frame triad on the site, and years later built the condos that now stand there, saving one for himself where he now resides with his partner, Elaine Fogle.

“I really enjoy it up here,” Cowger said of Summit County. “They're gonna have to haul me out of here, because I'm not leaving.”

SDN reporter Drew Andersen can be contacted at (970) 668-4633 or drewa@summitdaily.com.