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FEATURED

## 'Proud to be a veteran': Amherst man, 94, looks back on service as World War II combat engineer

By Justin Faulconer [jfaulconer@newsadvance.com](mailto:jfaulconer@newsadvance.com)

Jun 28, 2019



World War II veteran Billy Iseman, 94, pictured at his home in Amherst, was a combat engineer who served in a battalion that mostly built bridges in Europe.

Lee Luther Jr./For the Amherst New Era-Progress

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AMHERST — In the Amherst County high school auditorium shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, Billy Iseman heard President Franklin Roosevelt address the “date which will live in infamy” and announce the United States entering into World War II.

Iseman, 94, recalled during a recent interview in his Amherst home the school's principal usher in students that day to listen to Roosevelt's speech on the radio. When it was over, Iseman said, the educator looked over at the boys gathered and said: "Before this is over, some of you might be in it."

"And every one of us were in it," Iseman said.

While the former school building on Washington Street is gone, the memories of that day and the war experiences in following years remain fresh for Iseman nearly eight decades later.

Nearly two years after hearing the declaration of war in the auditorium, he followed his two older brothers into the global conflict as a combat engineer who helped build bridges. A self-described "scrawny kid" who weighed 128 pounds at the time, he was drafted into a war he previously thought might be over before he was old enough to join.

"I took a day off from school that day," Iseman said of registering on his 18th birthday. "I was so proud I was old enough to register. I had no idea I'd be in it."



Billy Iseman, right, draws a picture while his great-granddaughter, Ava DiBrango, 3, looks on at his home in Amherst.

Lee Luther Jr./For the news & advance Billy Iseman (right) draws a picture while his great-granddaughter, Ava DiBrango, 3, looks on at his home in Amherst.

For Iseman, the experience waiting overseas lay beyond his wildest imagination.

Born in 1925 and raised in a family of eight children on Depot Road, the lifelong Amherst County resident didn't leave his home county until he was about 15.

"A lot of people didn't have jobs," he said of the harshness of the Great Depression. "Times were tight."

His father worked for a building contractor when he had work. Iseman said he could count on one hand the number of people he knew in those days who had automobiles and very few had radios. The war hit close to home when his brothers were drafted in 1941 and 1942.



He has never forgotten Sept. 18, 1943, the day he passed his exam to enter the Army. His parents didn't want to believe at first a third son was entering the war.

"I never thought of it at the time but my mother had three sons in World War II and in Europe," Iseman said. "I can't imagine what that would have been like for my mother."



Billy Iseman, center, enjoys a recent afternoon with his great-grandchildren: Mason DiBrango, left, and Ava DiBrango.

Lee Luther Jr./For the Amherst New Era-Progress

He recalls leaving Amherst County on the train for basic training, not knowing anyone and having no idea where he was headed. Looking out the window, he gazed at signs saying Alabama, Georgia, Arkansas and other states as he traveled farther away from home.

"I said 'I'll never get back home,'" he said of the train ride. "The next morning we were still going. I said, 'How big is this country?'"

He underwent basic training in Oklahoma and also trained in Louisiana and Texas. Soldiers in training slept on the ground the entire time, he recalled. He didn't get over his homesickness until he finally was sent overseas and in September 1944, a year after

taking his entrance exam, he remembers standing on docks in England preparing to head to Normandy.

One of his brothers took part in the D-Day invasion while Iseman still was training. About three months after the invasion started Iseman arrived at Omaha Beach. His battalion of combat engineers suffered its first casualties on a minefield in Normandy and soon after was moved to Belgium, he said. The battalion mostly built bridges and most of the front was ahead of them.

“We built a bridge across the Rhine River,” Iseman said. “I think it was one of the longest bridges in Europe at the time.”

He recalls the soldiers in his group working on the bridge in shifts for 20 days and nights. His battalion once relieved an infantry unit on the front line in Germany and Iseman stayed in a foxhole for a week, he said.

When the war ended, he cried and was thankful he didn't have to go to the Pacific, he said.

“I was so happy I didn't know what to do,” he said of news of Japan's surrender.

Tragedy struck in 1945 with the death of one of his brothers, George, also known as “Clint” in Germany. The family decided he should stay buried in Europe, Iseman said. He and his daughter, Janet Abbott, have visited his grave in Holland and said people come and place flowers on the graves of soldiers in respect.

“We wouldn't take anything for having done that with him,” Abbott said of accompanying her father to Europe to visit his brother's gravesite.

Iseman returned to Amherst County at age 20 and four years later married his wife, Thelma, who died in 1995. He has lived in his home on North Main Street in Amherst for 55 years and has two daughters, two grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

He worked for the Virginia Department of Transportation in Lynchburg for more than 40 years before retiring. Three of his sisters — two in their 90s and one in her 80s — live nearby and they regularly eat meals together, Abbott said.

His other brother who survived the war, “Ike,” lived in the area until his death 23 years ago.

“I just loved hearing them talk about being kids down there and how much fun they had,” Abbott said of her father and uncle’s talks.

Iseman said he adjusted to life as a soldier, had many close friends and heavily considered reenlisting while in Berlin before coming home.

He and family members traveled to Normandy for the D-Day anniversary 13 years ago. On the invasion’s 75th anniversary on June 6 at the National D-Day Memorial in Bedford, Iseman was among World War II veterans honored during the ceremony, which was attended by thousands with Vice President Mike Pence serving as the keynote speaker.

“That was a great day. It made me feel proud to be a veteran,” Iseman said. “It was a special day for me, I’ll tell you.”

He recently suffered a neck injury from a fall and has worn a neck brace for nearly two months, Abbott said.

Courtney DiBrango, his granddaughter, said she enjoyed seeing people line up at the D-Day Memorial anniversary to get Iseman’s autograph. She said she’s glad her children Mason, 5, and Ava, 3, shared in that experience of four generations honoring her

grandfather's sacrifice.

"I wouldn't take anything for them being with him and seeing him treated with such respect," DiBrango said. "I loved that they got to see how important the job of the veterans was and the significance of what they did, along with the people who did not come home."

Iseman said he learned a lot during the war and serving was the second best thing to happen to him after his family. He hates to think where he would be if he didn't have that experience, he said.

"I wouldn't take \$1 million for my experiences. But I wouldn't do it again for \$1 million either."

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FEATURED

## Artist paints mural of Monacan culture on government building in Amherst

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Artist Esther Candari climbs up the scaffold to work on her mural on the side of the Goodwin Street building in Amherst on a recent afternoon. The Monacan image is from a recent photograph she captured of tribe members at the Monacan village at Natural Bridge State Park.



Photo by Lee Luther Jr./For the New Era Progress

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Kenneth Branham recalls walking through the Goodwin Street building in Amherst roughly a half-century ago and not feeling welcome while children in his family received their required shots for school.

“We felt like we were being rushed in there and rushed out,” Branham, chief of the Monacan Indian Nation in Amherst County, said while reflecting on racism the tribe faced in past years.

Now a mural depicting the tribe’s culture and history adorns the wall of the county government building, much to his delight.

Esther Candari, a local artist, recently completed the artwork she painted from a photograph she took of two Monacan women at the Monacan village at Natural Bridge State Park. Victoria Ferguson, who created the village 20 years ago with her husband, is one of the Monacans Candari said she photographed and incorporated into the mural.

The image shows two Monacan women kneeling while pouring water from one vessel to another, an action Candari said represents transference and continuation of culture and knowledge.

Candari, who is pursuing a master’s degree in fine arts at Liberty University, said she knows Amherst County Administrator Dean Rodgers from church and he approached her about the mural. With the blessing of the Amherst County Board of Supervisors and

\$600 in county money from Rodgers' public affairs budget to cover costs of supplies, Candari accepted and spent several weeks on a scaffold working on the project.

The daughter of two artists, Candari said she began taking art seriously in college and sees the project as a way to demonstrate positive change.

"What draws me to being a creative artist is the universality of communicating through visual symbols," Candari said. "Pictures can communicate much quicker and to a broader audience."

Rodgers related the idea of creating an image relative to the Amherst community, according to Candari. She said she is passionate about cultural diversity and felt it was a story worth telling.

"I was very quickly drawn to the Monacan Nation," Candari said. "I feel like there was a lack of good visual representation of that community."

It was her first time doing an outdoor mural, though she has assisted other artists with mural projects. Aside from the intense summer heat and occasional rain, she said she felt it went smoothly and she has received positive feedback from the tribe. "It challenged me to put some of my theoretical knowledge to use," she said, adding it gave her confidence to tackle and conquer similar projects in the future.

She said she hopes motorists and pedestrians passing by get a visual portal into Monacan culture and its symbolism of passing down heritage to future generations. "To me visual art can have multiple layers of interpretation," Candari said.

Painting a portrayal of the Monacans was a collaborative effort, according to Candari. Bringing artwork to a spot that generates some negative memories of past experiences for many tribe members was an honor, she said.

"In a deeper sense, I know it's been very meaningful for the Monacan community," she said of positive feedback she's received. "It was a healing moment for them."

Branham said she was quite impressed with the mural and felt she did a good job.

“It is a good example of something you would see in our villages,” Branham said of the mural’s image. “I’m happy we’re finally being included. We always felt we were the forgotten people in Amherst County.”

Branham said his first reaction when he heard of the mural’s content was surprise.

“We were very happy the way that went about it,” he said of the tribe’s image going onto county-owned property.

Rodgers said he is especially pleased the county can celebrate the Monacan history and culture through the artwork.

“We are very fortunate to receive the benefit of Esther’s talent as she is a great young artist with a long career,” Rodgers said. “I would like to see more murals done in town and am aware of other building owners that would be amenable to have one on their building.”

The mural comes a year after the Monacan tribe and others in Virginia received recognition from the federal government, a measure with multi-layered benefits they had pursued for years. Branham said the tribe is part of the county’s history and he is pleased to see it embraced more in recent years.

“It’s a good way of representing us, I think,” he said of the mural. “Amherst County is changing. They’re learning more about us.”

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## 'It's a way of life': Couple's love for miniature horses runs deep at Elon show barn

By Justin Faulconer [jfaulconer@newsadvance.com](mailto:jfaulconer@newsadvance.com)

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Tony Benvenuto works with Midnight Storm in the round pen to give the miniature horse a chance to work off some energy at the Standing Ovation show barn for miniature horses

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ELON - At age 80, Tony Benvenuto still can remember the teacher in sixth grade asking what he and other students wanted to be when they grew up.

The Amherst County resident and co-owner of Standing Ovation Miniatures, a haven for miniature show horses, didn't hesitate to answer.

"I was born to be a horse trainer," Benvenuto said, sitting in a show barn on a hot late September afternoon with the thick smell of the horses nearby in the Elon area. "I wonder how many in that same classroom did what they said they would. I know I did. It was my first love."

The close connection Benvenuto and co-owner Janet Lewis share with the horses is as gentle and peaceful as the pristine view of the mountains in the background of the show barn just off Virginia 130 on Albert Farm Road. The couple breed the horses and raise them to become show horses on a circuit of shows across the country from April to October on the Amherst farm and 11 acres of another farm in Concord.

Benvenuto calls the animals "my babies" and approaches them with a soft touch. A New Jersey native, he is in his 59th year training horses and recalls the beautiful breeds roaming on property adjoining his aunt's home and how he would find ways to lock his eyes on them.



“If I could hang out and look at them I was in heaven,” he said.

Lewis, who grew up in Detroit in a family-run Holiday Inn, also recalled the strong love of horses she had as a kid and admiring them from a distance because her mom didn't share the fascination. Her mother took her all over to see them and feed that love.

“My mom said the very first word I could actually say was ‘horse,’” Lewis said.

City life prevented her from having one until she moved to Florida and got her first horse, Jans Atta Girl, in 1985. She's about 34 years and still going strong today, Lewis said.

The couple started the miniature horse breeding business in 2000. Benvenuto came to Virginia from California, she arrived from Florida and they met, fittingly, in a barn.

“We always say it's not our business, it's our passion,” Lewis said.

At first Lewis said she didn't understand the attraction many had to miniature horses. She recalled picking one and bringing it to Benvenuto and discussing what they could do with him. The couple took him to a show, he won and they've bred many more since with an affection for the process to raise and train them before showing them off the masses.

“You have a standard you follow and try to breed to the best of that standard,” Lewis said. “Nothing's ever perfect, but you breed the best you can.”

The couple work with the handful of horses preparing for shows at the barn in Elon where Benvenuto lives, while Lewis has just more than two dozen former show horses or future ones on the Concord farm. They recently returned from an American Miniature Horse Association show in Fort Worth, Texas, from which they brought back a reserve world champion award for stock mare, the couple said.

The show horses are kept in shape and on a show diet for much of the year and get some off time as well. The couple do about a show a month for two-thirds of the year and go to states such as Ohio, Kentucky, Georgia, Maryland and Oklahoma, as well as Virginia,

in showcasing their miniatures.

“In the miniature horse world, the motto is they’re like potato chips. You can’t have just one,” Lewis said.

The couple said their work with horses has taken them all over the world and led them to encounter many people, a journey they’ve enjoyed. Benvenuto has mentored others on how to handle horses and said he likes to pass that knowledge on when he can.

“I know how hard it was for me being self-taught,” he said.

The partners also have a branch called New Beginnings at Standing Ovation, which focuses on raising Appaloosa horses, a breed they said is popular in the equestrian community. On what inspired the business’s name, Lewis said they had talked about striving to have show horses that would cause people to stand and applaud.

“It’s a way of life,” Benvenuto said. “It’s not for everybody. You’ve got to eat, sleep, think and breathe horses.”

The Elon show barn also is home to “Miss Virginia Tech,” a miniature horse born of a mare named Ginger and given that name in honor of the school’s Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine saving her mother’s life through surgery. Ginger suffered a devastating hip injury that could have led to her being put down if not for the college’s intervention.

Ginger took more than a year to recover and still roams the farm with her daughter. “She’s just like her mom,” Lewis said of Miss Virginia Tech, looking over with a warm smile as the two stood side by side. “She has won a lot [at shows]. She’s followed in her mother’s footsteps.”

While some bigger farms take as many as 30 miniature horses to shows, Benvenuto said, he and Lewis are content to take four or so when they hit the road. Their love for showing off the horses hasn’t slowed down and is as strong as when they started, Benvenuto said.

“I tell everybody I’m in it to win, no matter how old I am.”

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