

A checkmark shows the dining-room-table-sized boulder that fell on Ethan at the Christmas tree farm. All photos courtesy of Jeanie Baird

‘God’s glory ascended on that mountain’

Carrollton grandmother credits ‘miracle’ with saving 8-year-old’s life at Christmas tree farm

By Stephen Faleski
Staff Writer

Every year after Thanksgiving, Jeanie Baird and her twin 8-year-old grandchildren, Ethan and Annabelle Chrisman, make the 200-mile drive from their home in Carrollton to meet up with Baird’s son, Jarred, his wife, Jen, and Ethan’s and Annabelle’s cousins, Grayson and Connor, at the Snickers Gap Christmas tree farm at the base of Virginia’s Blue Ridge Mountains in Loudoun County.

The annual holiday outing that began four years ago has become a family tradition, one they never expected would turn life-threatening this year. Jarred had been helping Baird load a freshly cut blue spruce tree into her truck on Nov. 24 when she received a frantic phone call from Jen just after 5 p.m.

Ethan had been hurt while playing further up the mountain, Jen told Baird.

“We knew it was very bad the way she sounded,” Baird said. “My son took off running up the hill.”

When Baird called back, Jen told her that Ethan had been playing beneath a boulder that had slipped and fallen on him. Baird shouted for help to passers-by, several of whom joined her in running toward the scene.

When she arrived, she found Ethan pinned beneath a rock the size of her dining room table. His entire body was covered, she said.

As the seconds ticked away, Baird lost track of time but estimates from her phone records that Ethan remained pinned beneath the weight for roughly 10 minutes. Baird characterizes what happened next as “one miracle after another.”

Nine men who had followed her to the scene were able to lift the boulder. Others began praying aloud.

By the time they’d pulled Ethan out he was unresponsive. The force of the impact had likely stopped his heart, first responders told the family.

But as fate would have it, a nurse, emergency medical technician and retired police officer trained in CPR were also among the bystanders on the mountain that evening, and were able to resuscitate him.

“God’s glory ascended on that mountain,” Baird said in a Dec. 4 Facebook update on Ethan’s condition. “There was a nurse counting his breaths and a man that did mouth to mouth we would love to meet.”

By 6 p.m. that evening, a helicopter had flown Ethan to Inova Fairfax Medical Campus in Annandale.



Ethan will have to wear a back brace and orthopedic boot for the next four to six weeks but aside from that is back to his usual self. He even helped decorate the Baird family Christmas tree.

“We’re getting names gradually,” said Baird, who’s now reaching out on Facebook and through word of mouth to try to find and thank each bystander on the mountain that day.

“We’ve even heard from the nurse who was on the helicopter,” she said.

At Inova, doctors discovered Ethan’s left lung had collapsed and fitted him with breathing and feeding tubes. They also attached an electroencephalogram, or EEG, to Ethan’s head to watch for brain waves but warned the family of a possibly months-long road to recovery.

“He didn’t respond for the first day and a half, didn’t move, didn’t talk, didn’t do anything,” Baird said.

Then, one day, he started kicking his feet. Another day, he opened his eyes. Then, he tried to pull his breathing tube out and started talking.

On Dec. 1, seven days after the accident, Ethan was discharged at 6 p.m., the exact time he’d arrived by helicopter a week earlier. According to Baird, doctors have described his rapid recovery as “beyond resilience.”

“He has a couple little fractures in his back,” Baird said.

Prior to leaving the hospital, Ethan’s family made contact with the person who had administered chest compressions to Ethan on the mountain.

Ethan will need to wear a back brace and orthopedic boot for four to six weeks, Baird said. But other than that, Ethan’s life has largely returned to normal.

“He’s playing board games and putting together lego toys,” Baird said.

Since returning home, Ethan and Baird have received an outpouring of support from local churches and even from international missionaries in Canada, Switzerland, Kenya and Nigeria.

“I have had so many responses,” Baird said.



From left are Ethan and Annabelle Chrisman and Grayson and Connor Baird sledding down the grassy hill at the Snickers Gap Christmas tree farm.

Firefighters save heart attack victim's life

By **Stephen Faleski**
Staff Writer

After playing in an Oct. 18 adult co-ed softball game at Nike Park, Curtis Bryant told his wife, Neysa, that his chest felt tight.

The 48-year-old, who by day operates heavy equipment for the tree clearing and removal business that bears his name, had no history of heart issues, but his worsening symptoms during the drive home worried Neysa enough to insist he pull over and let her take the wheel. By the time the couple reached the intersection by Ringo's Donuts in Smithfield, Curtis told her he was experiencing chest pain.

Fearing the worst, Neysa made the split-second decision to pull into the parking lot of the fire station on South Church Street rather than head home, and not a moment too soon. Four firefighters immediately responded when she rang the station's doorbell at 10 p.m. When Curtis went into cardiac arrest while still in the family's truck waiting for an ambulance, Fire Lt. Stephen Tate began CPR –

an act Neysa credits with saving Curtis' life.

Employees and customers of Freedom Farm in Carrollton, where Curtis works and Neysa rides horses, on Nov. 5 presented the firefighters on duty the evening of Curtis' heart attack with a \$1,200 donation.

"Our first thought was to do something for the Bryants, then we started thinking about doing something for the fire department," said Peg Seals, owner and head trainer at Freedom Farm.

"All the customers love Curtis," said Renee Bevan, who's been a friend of Neysa's and fellow rider at Freedom Farm for roughly 20 years.

The group purchased \$600 in Q-Daddy's Pitmaster BBQ gift cards for each of the firefighters and gave another \$600 cash donation to the department itself.

Neysa, to this day, isn't sure what possessed her to head to the fire station. She's friends with one of its members whose children attend the same school as hers, and was trying to reach him on her cell-phone when she rang the

station's doorbell. Neysa has no doubts that had no one been there late into the evening, Curtis "would not be here."

"If they had not had quality trained personnel at that department, we would be having a different conversation," Neysa said.

Curtis was first taken by ambulance to Sentara Obici Hospital in Suffolk, then airlifted to Norfolk General, where he spent five days.

Two of the firefighters on duty the evening of Oct. 18 – Tate and Michael Savi – are what the department refers to as "live-ins."

According to the department's website, the South Church Street station has 10 private rooms that members can move into rent-free, with internet, cable, shared bathrooms, laundry facilities, a commercial kitchen and gym. Live-ins are required to be employed full-time or be a full-time student, and must provide at least 60 hours of on-duty time per week.

"Somebody's always at the station," said Deputy Chief Charlie Kempton.

The live-in program pre-



Customers and employees of Freedom Farm in Carrollton presented members of the Smithfield Volunteer Fire Department with donations totaling \$1,200 in the form of a \$600 check to the department and individual Q-Daddy's BBQ gift cards for firefighters collectively valued at \$600. The donations are in recognition for lifesaving efforts by live-in firefighters the evening of Oct. 18 when they resuscitated a man experiencing cardiac arrest. (Photo submitted by Renee Bevan)

dates the South Church Street station's 2010 construction, when the department was operating out of its downtown station on Grace Street.

"It was started with two firefighters that lived at that station," Kempton said.

Another requirement for live-ins is that they be certified firefighters, Kempton said. The department requires all of its firefighters, live-in or not,

to be trained in CPR.

"Big as this county is growing, we need more peo-

ple like that around here," Neysa said.

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'I figured I was going to die'

Centenarian World War II veterans, honored by Cypress Creek, recall service

By Stephen Faleski
Staff Writer

World War II veteran Elmer Mack, at age 23, never expected he'd be living life at 100-plus.

When he and his company stormed a beachhead at Nazi-occupied Normandy, France, roughly two weeks after the June 6, 1944, D-Day invasion that killed more than 9,000 Allied troops within 24 hours, Mack had "no thoughts of surviving."

"It was still like D-Day; they were still trying to wipe us out, and they almost did," Mack said in a Veterans Day video interview shown at a Nov. 11 banquet hosted by the Cypress Creek Homeowners Association. "We formed little pods of people. I was the only communicator. I had a weapons carrier and a signal guy with a code machine and a phone system. At Normandy, I lost so many upfront that when I went in, I figured I was going to die."

Mack, now 102, is one of two centenarian Army veterans living in the 450-home Smithfield subdivision. The other, John Holland, is 105.

According to Homeowners Association President Jim Parks, who is himself a Navy veteran, the development is home to 188 veterans across all branches of the armed forces, accounting for 41% of the community's populace.

Mack told the Times on Nov. 13 that, prior to his military service, he'd floated among a variety of jobs, including working on an assembly line building school buses and ambulances.

"He could work on any car; he got that from his father," Mack's daughter, Bonnie Huber, said.

He was drafted in 1943 and was assigned to the Army Signal Corps at Fort Crowder for his typing ability.

His combat helmet became dented when a sniper's bullet grazed it. During another brush with death, a bullet once penetrated the back seat of a vehicle where Mack was to have been sitting.

When other Normandy veterans were released from their service at the war's 1945 end, Mack, then a corporal, stayed behind in Paris for a year to handle communications between then-President Harry S. Truman and then-Secretary of State James Byrnes – a job that carried top-secret clearance. When Mack returned to the United States, he spent the next 8½ years at the Pentagon, followed by a career at Langley Air Force Base, where he once had a chance meeting with the late astronaut-turned-U.S. Sen. John Glenn.

When Mack's wife, Betty, died in 2022, he moved to Smithfield to live with Huber.



Elmer Mack, now 102, was 23 at the time of his participation in the storming of the beaches at Normandy, France, during World War II. Pictured above with his daughter, Bonnie Huber. (Stephen Faleski/The Smithfield Times) (Service Photo courtesy of Bonnie Huber)



A POW/MIA table was set up at the Veterans Day dinner hosted by Cypress Creek residents.

Holland, who was born and raised in Hampton, was studying to be a veterinarian at Virginia State University when he was drafted into the Army, niece Mary Ridley told The Smithfield Times.

"He has a love for horses," Ridley said, describing her uncle as "mild-mannered" and an "easy-going guy."

Holland's father George, who taught military science at what is now Hampton University, had always hoped his son would eventually join the military, Ridley said. George had been a highly decorated Army infantry captain during World War I in one of several segregated divisions known as "Buffalo Soldiers."

The name, according to the Smithsonian National Museum of African History and Culture, was coined by Native Americans who fought against such units in the late 1800s, either for the soldiers' dark curly hair that resembled a buffalo mane or the ferocity with which the soldiers fought. Black soldiers had embraced the moniker by the United States' 1917 entry into the first world war.

George "believed a Black soldier could lead as well as a white officer," Ridley recalls.

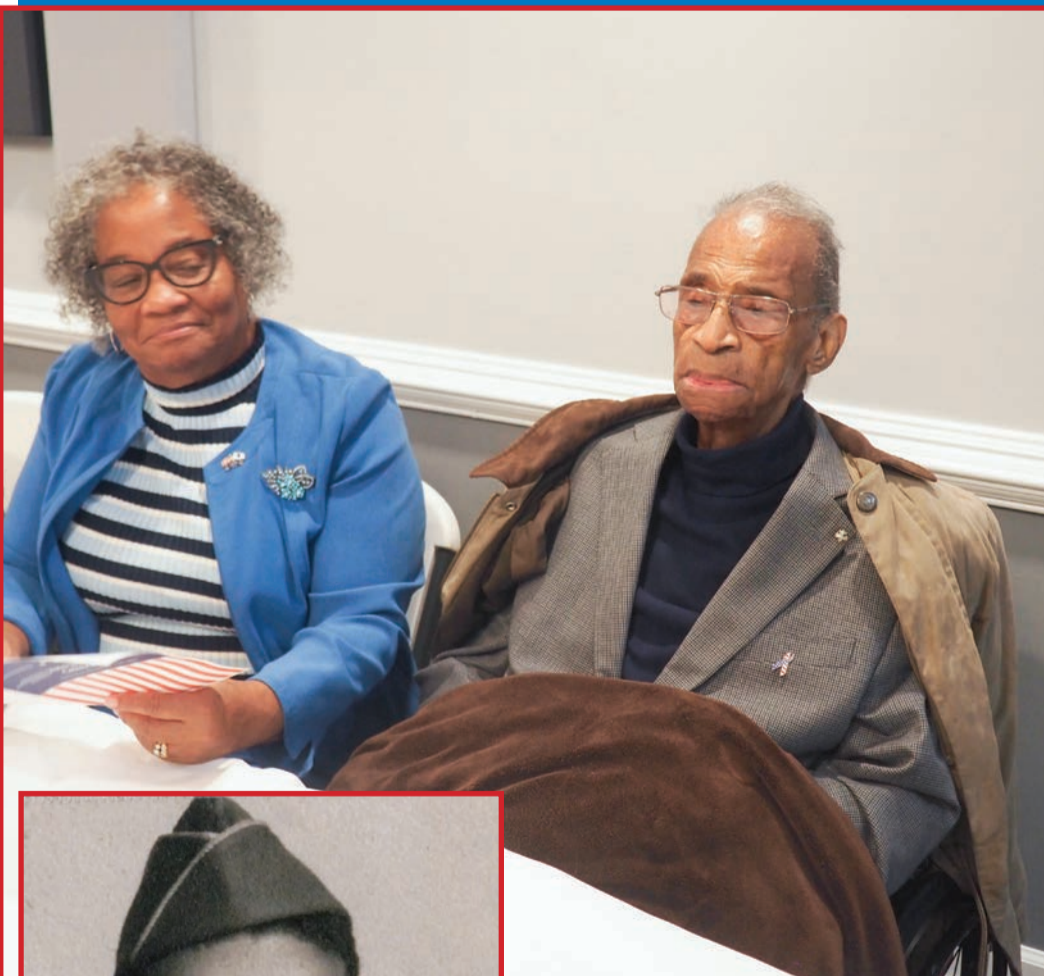
John, unlike Mack, never saw combat. Holland, due to his schooling, was able to enlist as a staff sergeant in the Army Air Corps when he reported in 1942 to Fort Meade. He was then assigned to a clerical role in the American Theater, referring to World War II soldiers whose postings were located within or just off the coast of the continental United States.

Holland never returned to college after the war. Instead, he settled in Lincoln, Nebraska, and took a job with the Burlington Railroad, eventually rising to the position of head steward. Without children of his own, Holland returned to the Hampton Roads area to live with Ridley in 2006, settling in Cypress Creek.

"Wherever we go we bring him with us," said Ridley, who has continued the family's tradition of service as a former officer-rated civilian employee of the Pentagon.

The Cypress Creek Homeowners Association hosted a dinner to honor its veterans the evening of Nov. 11, in stark contrast with the frosty welcome Parks received upon returning home from the Vietnam War. Parks recalls how travelers at the airport had "spit on us" when he and his company set foot on American soil after spending a year fighting what was by then a highly unpopular, decades-long conflict.

"Our uniforms may have been different colors, but we all served under the red, white and blue," Parks said.



John Holland, now 105, was 24 in 1942 when he was drafted into the Army. Pictured above with his niece Mary Ridley. (Stephen Faleski/The Smithfield Times) (Service Photo courtesy of Mary Ridley)

