

Behind the Names

Part 5

VA facilities all over the country bear the names of Americans who made significant contributions to their country. Who were they? In this feature series, we take a look at the historical figures for whom some of VA's facilities are named.

The previous installments of this feature series, we profiled four people behind the names of national cemeteries and four who have had VA medical centers dedicated to them. These men fought for their country, for their community and for the health of veteran and citizen alike.

In this fifth and final installment, we look at three veterans whose names have recently been affixed to VA facilities by an act of Congress -- two who served during World War II and went on to advocate for veterans, and one who is honored for how he lived, and how he died. They join the list of Americans whose leadership, patriotism, heroic acts, medical innovations and veteran advocacy efforts are commemorated by the dedication of a VA facility in their honor.



John J. McGuirk

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On May 7, 2004, the VA outpatient clinic in New London, Conn., located on the grounds of the United States Coast Guard Academy, was re-dedicated as the John J. McGuirk Department of Veterans Affairs Outpatient Clinic.

Born in Massachusetts, John J. McGuirk moved to New London with his family when he was a toddler. As a teenager, McGuirk's first job was as a lighthouse keeper on Race Rock Lighthouse at the edge of Long Island Sound. After he'd witnessed a large ship run aground on the rocks and watched the salvage company work the wreck, he knew he had to be a diver. He soon began working for that company.

McGuirk joined the Navy in 1943, continuing his civilian career as a hardhat salvage diver. After attending the Navy's salvage school in New York City, he was shipped to the Pacific, serving on the USS Layson Island. For the next two years, he dove on war's devastation, from the grim wreckage of Pearl Harbor through the South Pacific and finally to a 1945 operation to reclaim \$75 million in silver coins sunk by the U.S. and Philippine governments to prevent capture by the advancing Japanese in 1942.

At 6 feet, 4 inches, "Big John" was an awesome sight, equipped with a heavy, old style brass diving helmet and breastplate, full body canvas suit and weighted

shoes. If the nickname “Big John” wasn’t enough, he earned the name of “Bull” in the boxing ring.

After the war, McGuirk returned to New London, raised a family, worked in the salvage business and became an active member of the local American Legion. With particular concern for disabled and elderly veterans, he worked to promote improved care and to increase the number of VA health-care facilities in Connecticut.

McGuirk was instrumental in establishing the VA clinic that would one day bear his name. He died of a heart attack on Nov. 17, 2000, at age 83.

Victor J. Saracini

To those who knew him, Victor J. Saracini served as a symbol of where hard work and determination can lead. Even though he dropped out of high school, he went on to earn a college degree, and then through service to his country, attained his dream of becoming a commercial pilot.

After graduating with a Bachelor of Science degree in 1975, Saracini was accepted to the Navy’s Aviation Officer Candidate School. He was commissioned as an ensign in December 1975 and received his Naval Flight Officer wings the following year. Saracini served on S-3A anti-submarine warfare aircraft aboard the aircraft carrier USS Saratoga.



Victor J. Saracini

He was an esteemed and decorated officer with the Navy, having received the National Defense Service Medal, Navy E Ribbon and Expert Marksmanship Ribbon. In 1980, he separated from active duty and served in the Naval Reserve at Naval Air Station Willow Grove, Pa., where he was a crewmember on a Lockheed P-3 Orion. He left the military in 1985 with the rank of lieutenant.

After leaving the Navy, Saracini flew as a corporate and commercial pilot before joining United Airlines in 1985. In all, Saracini flew commercial aircraft for 16 years.

United Airlines Captain Victor J. Saracini died as the Boston to Los Angeles-bound 767 jetliner he was piloting was hijacked and crashed into the south tower of the World Trade Center at 9:03 a.m., Sept. 11, 2001. He left behind a wife and two young daughters.

Two weeks earlier, as Saracini celebrated his 51st birthday, his 13-year-old daughter Kirsten had given him a poem she wrote called “Years gone by.” She read it at the Sept. 18 memorial service attended by more than 1,500 people.

“And for all the years that come, I know one thing will never change, you will always be my daddy and I will always feel the same. I love you.”

Staff at the Philadelphia VA Medical Center had been searching for a location for a new outpatient clinic north of the city. On the day of the tragedy, they finally found the future site. Eighteen miles from Philadelphia, the new clinic is adjacent to NAS Willow Grove, where Saracini once served, and not far from his Bucks County home.

In November 2004 the outpatient clinic in Horsham, Pa., was renamed the Victor J. Saracini Department of Veterans Affairs Outpatient Clinic.



George E. Wahlen

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By Oct. 5, 1945, George E. Wahlen had spent seven months in military hospitals recuperating from wounds sustained during the battle for Iwo Jima. He would spend two-and-a-half more months and face three surgeries before finally going home. But on this day at the Marine hospital at Camp Pendleton, Calif., President Harry S. Truman presented him the Medal of Honor.

On Feb. 19, 1945, 20-year-old Navy pharmacist's mate Wahlen, a medic attached to the 2nd Battalion, 26th Marines, 5th Marine Division, went ashore with the initial wave of Marines tasked to take strategic Iwo Jima. For the next 13 murderous days, he treated the injuries of his comrades, dismissing the shrapnel he had taken to his right eye, shoulder and back.

On the last day Wahlen was on the island, he suffered a third wound when an exploding shell shattered his right ankle. “I bandaged myself up, took a shot of morphine and crawled over and started helping a Marine that had both his legs blown off,” he recalled. Wahlen put tourniquets on the wounded Marine's legs, then tried to attend to another wounded comrade, but his injuries overcame him. He was soon evacuated.

Wahlen's Medal of Honor citation chronicles this final day of self sacrifice on the island, along with his courageous actions throughout 12 previous days as he saved many from his unit and 14 more from an adjacent unit.

After the war, Wahlen attended college and then joined the Army, serving in Korea and Vietnam. He retired from the military in 1969 with 23 years of combined Navy/Army service. Wahlen then spent 14 years employed at the Salt Lake City VA Regional Office.

During that period he was instrumental in establishing a state veterans cemetery and a nursing home at the VA hospital in Salt Lake City that now bears his name: The George E. Wahlen Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center. Today, he continues to volunteer his time for veterans in Utah.

By Robert Turtill, *Vanguard* staff