

In their hearts and minds

By GEORGE H. NEWMAN

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Veterans Day is a reminder of the sacrifices of many Plant City families whose sons went to war and never returned.

The latest casualty, Army Spc. Eric Lembke, was buried Saturday. Since 2004, eight members of the military with local roots have died in the war.

Like many local families, Veterans Day has a deep meaning for Shirley and Melvin Missildine, whose grandson was killed in 2006 by a roadside bomb in Iraq.

The solemn holiday reminds the Missildines of the ultimate price paid by the grandson they largely raised, Army Pvt. Jody W. Missildine, and leaves them remembering a young man who grew up in their house and died a hero for his country.

"Jody grew up with us and was in many ways the usual teenage boy," Shirley Missildine said, tears welling in her eyes. "We were afraid for him while he was in Iraq. But he never let on that it bothered him at all."

Missildine visited his grandparents, his brother Jason and friends in late March 2006. He was killed eight days after his return to Iraq.

"He spent most of his time during those two weeks with his brother and their friends," Shirley Missildine remembered. "Like many of the young soldiers returning home for a brief stay, he wanted to have fun and whoop it up before returning to the war. He never complained. He was a soldier. He is a hero, a soldier who died for his country, and he will always be my baby boy."

Missildine was 19 when he died when his Humvee was hit by a roadside bomb in Tal Afar, Iraq.

Veterans Day is an important holiday for all Americans, said Tom Gill, commander of American Legion Post 26. The holiday commemorates the end of World War I in 1918.

"There is much to be done to keep our veterans in the hearts and minds of those in Washington, D.C., and all our supporters around this country," Gill said. "Much of our community service is done to promote good citizenship, patriotism and love of country. Veterans Day is a wonderful reminder of all those things."

World War II veteran Aaron Campbell, 92, has a deep respect for all who have served.

"Veterans Day means an awful lot to me," Campbell said. "I was proud to serve my country in a time of need and was glad to do it. My brother, George Dewey Campbell, joined the Navy after finishing the 10th grade. He was killed by the Japanese when they bombed Pearl Harbor. After George shipped out I never saw him again. I don't think we can do enough to thank the veterans."

Campbell served in the Army's 31st Division from 1941 to 1946.

"My first duty after leaving the states was as part of an Allied invasion in New Guinea, about 400 miles north of the Philippines," Campbell said. "One year later we were sent to the Philippines after the infantry drove the (Japanese) out of the islands," he said.

Campbell made his part in the liberation of the Philippines sound easy.

"World War II changed our way of life," he said. "Everything was different after the war."

Campbell, born near Hopewell Baptist Church, retired as director of Curley Funeral Home in Tampa.

Alvin McGary, a past commander of American Legion Post 26 who retired from the Air Force as a master sergeant and first sergeant, said, "Men and women of America have been on the front line of many battles all over the world to support and defend the Constitution and the principles of America.

"Selfless devotion to duty and love of one's country placed those men and women into harm's way. They should, and rightfully so, be honored by a grateful nation. Veterans Day is a time to say thank you to those military veterans who faithfully and honorably served our country and to show them that they are very much appreciated," said McGary, who works as a veterans employment representative for WorkNet Pinellas in Clearwater.

VETERAN TRIBUTES

Photo exhibit

The Plant City Photo Archives' fifth annual Salute to Veterans exhibit is on display through mid-January at its new facility at 106 S. Evers St.

The exhibit, which opened Nov. 7, includes hundreds of photos of Plant City area veterans, including those who served in World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, Iraq and other conflicts.

The exhibit is open today for Veterans Day from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. The archives' regular hours are 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays.

For information, call the office at (813) 754-1578 or go to www.plantcityphotoarchives.org.

Hopewell salute

Hopewell Funeral Home, 6005 County Road 39 S., will present its 24th annual Veterans Day program at 10:30 a.m. today in its chapel.

The theme is "Youth Honoring our Veterans," Hopewell employee Marsha Passmore said.

Students from area schools will offer patriotic speeches. Retired car dealer B.M. "Mac" Smith, a former Navy lieutenant commander who served from 1946 to 1957, "will offer words of encouragement for those serving in Iraq and Afghanistan with the lighting of the candle and prayer," Passmore said.

The program will include music by the Springhead Elementary School chorus, speeches and a special tribute to the troops serving abroad.

The one-hour program is a reminder of the freedom and liberties that Americans enjoy, Passmore said.