

SILENT HEROES

How a teacher and her students recovered the stories of a pair of World War II veterans from Alabama



Student Audrey Price reads aloud a eulogy for World War II veteran Addie Belle Raybon Bozeman, at Alabama National Cemetery. Photo: Callie Outlaw.

By Callie Outlaw



Callie Outlaw, a history and English teacher at Tuscaloosa Academy, was selected as a researcher for National History Day's 2026 Silent Heroes program: "Untold Stories from the U.S. Marine Corps in World War II." This nationwide initiative is run by AHA's partners at National History Day thanks to a grant from the

Veterans Legacy Program at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. The goal: Equip teachers, and their students, to tell the stories of America's "silent heroes" of the past.

I was looking for professional development opportunities when I came across Silent Heroes. It seemed like someone had created the project in a lab to appeal to me. I love historical research and cemetery preservation, and I wanted to get better at incorporating original, real-world research opportunities for my students. This project certainly checked those boxes.

Students would write eulogies for each veteran and create a research profile for the National Cemetery Administration database. Another huge appeal of the project was the chance to work alongside my students as a collaborator, instead of being solely a facilitator.

I was honored that my application was approved; Tuscaloosa Academy was selected to research veterans buried at Alabama National Cemetery in Montevallo. Eight girls from grades 10 to 12 signed on to the project, and we set about choosing the veterans we would profile.

The first veteran we selected was **Hubert Albert Awtrey**, a Birmingham native. We were intrigued by Awtrey's rank of pharmacist's mate, second class. He was in the Navy but served alongside Marines as a combat medic since the Marines don't have a medical branch. Awtrey served in several brutal campaigns in the Pacific, including Cape Gloucester, Peleliu, and Okinawa. After the war, he served in the Army Reserves,

worked at a lumber company, was a firefighter with the Birmingham Fire Department, and eventually became a prominent home builder. He died in 2014, at 89.

We also wanted to honor the service of a female veteran. We chose **Cpl. Addie Belle Raybon Bozeman**, a Bibb County native who served as a switchboard operator at the Marine Corps barracks in Washington, D.C., helping to manage crucial communication lines between the States and the war fronts abroad. Corporal Raybon, yet to marry, clearly thrived. Her commanding officer recommended her promotion to sergeant just before the war ended. She spent her post-war life working for the federal government in San Diego, California. Bozeman moved back to Alabama, in Hueytown, in 2009. She died a decade later, at 98.

We discovered there was a vast difference in the amount of information available about each of them. Mr. Awtrey's life was well documented in newspaper stories, his military file, and even a book. The details for Ms. Bozeman were sparse. She was orphaned as a teenager, married only briefly, and had no direct descendants. Researching Mr. Awtrey taught the students how to wade through a deluge of information and find the most compelling pieces of a life to share. Researching Ms. Bozeman provided a more difficult lesson — sometimes

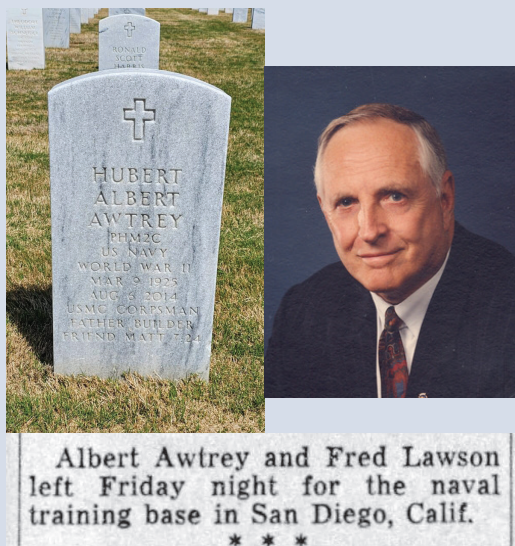
the information you want is simply gone, and no amount of digging can turn it up.

Telling their stories

The project culminated in a visit to Alabama National Cemetery, where we read aloud the eulogies that the students wrote. That was a powerful moment to experience. The cemetery was beautiful and serene. The girls' words were thoughtful. And the cemetery director — Mr. Herman Watkins, a U.S. Navy veteran himself — was an incredible guide.

After months of focusing so closely on two individuals, our visit was also an important reminder of the scale of American sacrifice. The students were struck by the enormity of the grounds, as well as the diversity of belief emblems on the tombstones. And they were heartbroken by how many young veterans, far too young, are buried there. It was a moving occasion and one of the highlights of my teaching career thus far.

I came away from the Silent Heroes project with a commitment to make this part of my curriculum moving forward. I can't wait to help another group of students uncover the legacies of other Alabama veterans whose stories deserve to be heard. ■



Search these veterans by name at nhdsilentheroes.org/gallery to read their Silent Heroes profiles and watch their eulogy videos. Callie Outlaw's student researchers were Quale Beito, Gracie Brooks, Karis Langkawel, McCarley Mooror, Elle Nguyen, Quynh Nguyen, Audrey Price, and Stacy Rose.