

We Honor Veterans Newsletter



January 2023 Edition

2023 Welcome Home Vietnam Veterans Day Celebration

Gilchrist's annual Welcome Home Vietnam Veterans Day Celebration is a day to honor and thank the men and women in our community who served during the Vietnam War. This Welcome Home celebration honors the veterans in our care as well as all of the veterans and their loved ones in our community. This celebration is one of the many ways Gilchrist recognizes the unique needs of veterans and thanks them for their sacrifice and service to our state and our country.

The 2022 Welcome Home event was very successful. Here are comments from several of those who attended this special event last year:

- Welcoming us Vets home has been a great thing to do for us. Some of the stories helped my wife to understand more of what I/we experienced.
- The excitement just seeing my fellow Vietnam Veterans again.
- Thank you for remembering our Vietnam Vets. So many of us are suffering from war related illnesses and this event lets those veterans know that they are not forgotten.

The 2023 event will be held on Saturday, March 25th. Gilchrist is excited to announce that our keynote speaker is **Rocky Bleier**, four-time Superbowl Champion and Vietnam Veteran. For more information about Rocky, go to: [Home | Rocky Bleier](#)

Mark your calendar and watch the Gilchrist website (link below) for more information. Go to "Events" and you will see the link to the "Welcome Home celebration."

[Providing care at every stage of serious illness - Gilchrist Cares](#)

You can watch the video of the 2022 Welcome Home Vietnam Veterans Day Celebration on the Gilchrist website:

[Welcome Home Celebration for Vietnam Veterans | Gilchrist \(gilchristcares.org\)](#)

William Smanko - Navy & Air Force Veteran

A small percentage of Americans have served in the military. An even smaller

percentage of those have served in more than one branch of the military. William Smanko served in both the United States Navy and the Air Force – making him a member of a very unique group.

William Smanko was born in Woodbridge New Jersey in 1928, and moved to Rahway, New Jersey when he was ten. After graduating from high school, he enlisted in the Navy V5 program. The purpose of the V-5 Naval Aviation Cadet (NavCad) program was to send civilian and enlisted candidates to train as aviation cadets. Candidates had to be between the ages of 19 and 25, have an associate degree or at least two years of college, and had to complete a bachelor's degree within six years after graduation to keep their commission. Training was for 18 months and candidates had to agree to not marry during training and to serve for at least three more years of active-duty service.

After the Navy, Smanko attended St. Louis University, earning his degree in aeronautical engineering in 1951, then went on to join the Air Force. After the Korean War broke out, he was assigned to Wright Field Development Center in Dayton, Ohio for two years.

After leaving the Air Force, he joined Westinghouse as an applications engineer in the Baltimore Air Arm Division in 1953.

William Smanko met Susan Mary Infantino in the Poconos and they were married April 7, 1956. They had three daughters: Barb, Patty and Nancy.

In 1958, he was promoted to Manager of Military Requirements and later held positions such as Director of Marketing for Corporate Market Research (a job which took him to Pittsburgh where he remained for eight years), marketing manager for the Defense Company, general manager of Systems Development Division, and finally department manager for Ground Radars.

Throughout his career, Smanko worked with many divisions within Westinghouse – such as the Electronics Division and Marine Division – and on many important projects like the AWG10 Pulse Doppler, F15 bid and UKADGE. Smanko retired from Westinghouse in the mid-1980s.

William Smanko was recently honored with a Salute to Service Tribute conducted by Gilchrist staff and veteran volunteers. The tribute included opening and closing prayers, the National Anthem, Pledge of Allegiance, and patriotic music including the Navy and Air Force songs. William was presented with a certificate from Gilchrist, a We Honor Veterans pin from the Veterans Administration, a hand-made patriotic blanket, and a thank-you card from a school student. The tribute concluded with a formal salute by veterans in uniform and the singing of God Bless America. William proudly returned the salute.

Following the tribute, William commented that “The surprise was exceeded only by the honor.” Spoken like a true military veteran.



William Smanko in the Navy



William Smanko in the Air Force



William Smanko Honored by Gilchrist Team

WWII Air Force Veteran Max Geller

Lt. Max Geller of the 15th Air Force, 451st Bomber Group, 724th Bombardment Squadron, spent the 1944 holiday season at the Foggia Airfield complex in Italy – his second December away from home since he turned down an engineering scholarship to join the Army in June 1943. For the week of December 25, 1944, Lt. Geller likely was assigned to fly either mission #172 (Target: Wels Marshalling Yard, Austria), or mission #173 (Target: Oswiecim Oil Refinery, Poland). Or, maybe he was not assigned to either of these missions, having flown one of the four missions of the previous week, such as the bombing of the Blechhammer Oil Refinery in Germany on December 18 and 19, 1944, or the attack on the marshalling yards in Linz, Austria on December 20, 1944. Perhaps he flew all of those missions, as well as others just days later, such as the attack on the Udine factory and Trento Rail installations in Nazi-occupied Italy.

Max Geller had to survive 25 missions to complete his tour of duty. He knew that the

odds were against him: the 451st Bomber Group was one of the most battered groups in the 15th Army Air Force: in 216 missions, 135 B-24 Liberators were lost -- losses which he experienced, up close and personally. The bombardier of Lt. Geller's crew flew with another crew for one mission in February 1945 -- and was shot down. Lt. Geller watched young men his own age parachuting from burning planes, only to be shot on the way down by German soldiers. When he flew missions over Croatia, he was reminded by his commanding officer to keep a bullet for himself if his plane went down; if they were caught, the Croats (nonsignatories to the Geneva convention) would torture them to death. After one mission with very heavy losses, Lt. Geller walked down the now-deserted road to the Officer's Club, past the empty huts that the day before had been alive with young men just like him. Day after day, mission after mission, he saw the personal belongings of fellow aviators who didn't return cleared away, replaced by those of newly arrived young men. Was his turn next?

But against all odds, he did survive. How this 20-year-old kid from the Bronx was able to maintain his composure and continue to do his duty, day after day, mission after mission, is amazing. He once told his daughter that being Jewish was part of what kept him going: he knew that Hitler was murdering Jews and that he, of all Americans, should be willing to put his life on the line. Perhaps he also was motivated by the aerial photos of the ovens of Auschwitz that he picked up at camp headquarters -- and carried with him for decades thereafter. Perhaps he just had, as they say, "the right stuff."

After the war Lt. Max Geller returned to civilian life. He graduated from City College of New York with a degree in Political Science. Max worked for the Social Security Administration until his retirement in the 1970's, and then for the Maryland Department of Juvenile Services until he retired at age 86. Max also was a talented and versatile musician who performed regularly with ensembles throughout Baltimore, delighting his family and audiences for decades with his clarinet, saxophone and harmonica.

The war stories that Max shared with his family were sprinkled with elements of humor, but his children know that he always carried with him painful memories of those terrible days. They once offered to take him to Easton, Maryland to tour the inside of one of the three surviving B-24 Liberators; he said he never wanted to see the inside of that plane again. When asked if he ever fell asleep on those long bombing missions, he said he was too terrified to sleep. The itinerary of a cruise the family once considered taking together stopped in Croatia; he said that he still couldn't bear to set foot in that country.

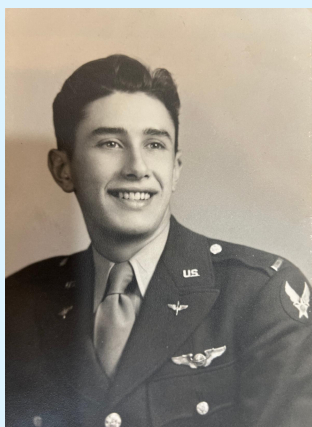
This past August, Max Geller was honored with a Salute to Service Tribute conducted by Gilchrist staff and volunteers. In attendance were Max's wife, Joyce, his five children and their spouses, as well as many of Max's grandchildren, great-grandchildren, stepchildren and friends. The tribute included the National Anthem, Pledge of Allegiance and the presentation of the *We Honor Veterans* pin from the Veterans Administration. Mr. Geller also received a certificate from Gilchrist, a thank you card made by an elementary student, and a special handmade patriotic blanket. Max Geller was given a formal salute by veterans in uniform (including his daughter Ruth and her husband Frank -- both Navy veterans). The tribute concluded with the singing of God Bless America and was followed by a reception.

Lt. Max Geller was the youngest and last surviving member of his 10-man crew. Although the decades had taken a toll on his memory, to the end he remained humble and grateful to his fellow B-24 crew members. His response to praise for his wartime accomplishments was always the same: "I didn't do it alone." Max Geller passed away at home on October 23, 2022, at the age of 97, surrounded by his family.

Story written by Max Geller's daughter Ruth



Max Geller and his wife Joyce, daughter Ruth and her husband Frank (back right) with the Gilchrist veteran volunteers



Lt. Max Geller



PhotoScan by Google Photos

Max Geller and flight crew (Max is in the back row – far right)

WWII Marine & Purple Heart Recipient Daniel Smith

Daniel Smith was born on December 19, 1921. He joined the Marines in 1944 even though he had two children and a third on the way. Daniel went to Parris Island for boot camp and then to Camp Lejeune where he was trained as a machine gunner. He was trained as part of a heavy machine gun team where he learned to feed the ammo into the weapon.

Following training, Daniel headed for Camp Pendleton in California. Daniel liked to tell the story about being on the train from the East Coast to California for deployment where he had KP duty the entire time. He said the first night his platoon fed the troops before eating themselves, a rookie mistake as they ran out of food and went hungry themselves. Thereafter, they ate first, then served everyone else!

Daniel shipped out with the 1st Marine Division heading to the South Pacific. He staged and trained on the island of Pavuvu in preparation for the invasion of Okinawa. Daniel's

transport to the Japanese islands was a converted cruise ship holding 6,000 Marines, and they had no military escort. He was sea sick the entire trip.

Daniel received the Purple Heart for a back wound caused by shrapnel from a mortar round in May of 1945, just six weeks into his time on Okinawa. He spent two weeks recuperating on a hospital ship then returned to his unit. While fighting on Okinawa, they suffered through a huge typhoon that hit the island.

After the atomic bombs were dropped and the war was declared to be over, instead of going home with his unit, Daniel was sent to China to help search for Japanese soldiers who had crossed the border. The Marines were also in China in the event of action against the Chinese communist forces fighting the Chinese government. Daniel finally arrived home in December of 1945.

Daniel met Sara Johnson when they were in high school in Cecilton on the eastern shore of Maryland. They were married in 1939. Daniel and Sara had four children: Ben, Bill, Sandra (Sandy) and Bob. They also have 7 grandchildren, 19 great grandchildren, and 22 great-great grandchildren. Daniel and Sara were married 81 years. Daniel liked to joke that they were "born married!"

Following serving his country in the Marines, Daniel had a storied career as a professional and volunteer fireman. Professionally, he was the Fire Chief for the Aberdeen Proving Ground for 20 years. He also was an active volunteer fireman for Cecilton for six years and Aberdeen for 67 years. In the Aberdeen VFD he served in numerous positions including Fire Chief and as a longtime member of the Board of Directors. He was a training officer for Aberdeen and also an instructor for the Maryland Fire Extension Service and an appointed Member of the Maryland Fire Prevention Commission for 17 years. During his last few years on the VFD he performed normal firefighting duties, including driving a fire truck until he was 88 years old! He received numerous awards and honors for his fire service.

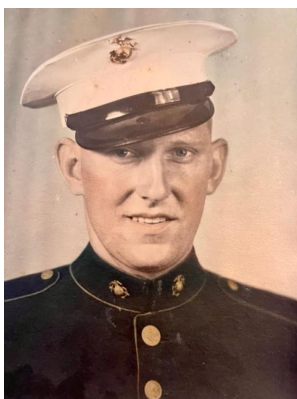
This past September Daniel Smith was honored with a Salute to Service Tribute conducted by Gilchrist staff and volunteers. Many of Daniel's family and friends were in attendance.

The tribute included the National Anthem, Pledge of Allegiance and the presentation of the We Honor Veterans Pin from the Veterans Administration. Daniel also received a certificate from Gilchrist, a thank you card made by a Cub Scout, and a special handmade patriotic blanket. Near the conclusion of the tribute, everyone sang God Bless America.

Daniel was given a formal salute by veterans. At 101 years old, Daniel Smith, proudly wearing his Marine Corps cap, returned the salute. One of the Marines in attendance leaned over to Daniel after the tribute and whispered Semper Fi. Daniel immediately replied in a strong voice: Semper Fi.



Daniel Smith with the Gilchrist Team



Marine Daniel Smith



Marine Daniel Smith Saluting Fellow Veterans

Vet Cafes

A Vet-to-Vet Café is held for veterans at a healthcare or residential facility and allows them to come together to talk about their military service. This past year Gilchrist veteran volunteers conducted 14 Vet Cafes in a number of facilities. These veterans love to meet and share stories of their time in the military. Here are a few Vet Café photos.



Brightview White Marsh



College Manor



Lorien Encore Columbia



Oak Crest



Sunrise Columbia

Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs

The Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs was created by the State Legislature in 1999 as an executive agency with the mission of assisting veterans, active-duty service members, their families and dependents, in securing benefits earned through military service. The Department's origin follows the history of the Maryland Veterans Commission back to 1924, when the Soldiers' Relief Fund Commission was formed to administer a State relief fund for disabled veterans of World War I.

Under the Department of Veterans Affairs are five major programs:

- The Service and Benefits Program
- The Charlotte Hall Veterans Home
- The Cemetery and Memorial Program
- The Outreach & Advocacy Program
- The Maryland Veterans Trust

The Department is assisted by the Maryland Veterans Commission; the Maryland Veterans Home Commission; and the War Memorial Commission.

To learn more about the Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs, go to: [Veterans Home Page \(maryland.gov\)](http://www.maryland.gov/veterans)

Uniform Smiles

After years in the military, the soldier survived mustard gas and pepper spray and was proud to finally be able to call himself a *seasoned* veteran.

Please Share

If you enjoyed reading this edition, please forward a copy to other veterans that you know so that they can also enjoy the newsletter. If you are reading a shared copy and would like to receive your own copy of future editions, please send an email with your

request to wehonorveterans@gilchristcares.org.

Looking For a Few Good Volunteers

Would you like to be a Gilchrist volunteer? We are always looking for volunteers – especially those who have military experience. Our military veteran volunteers are involved in Salute to Service Tributes for veterans under hospice care, visiting public schools to talk about military service, meeting with veterans to talk about their military service, supporting our annual Welcome Home event for Vietnam Veterans, and many other activities.

If you would like to learn how to become a volunteer, contact Gilchrist at wehonorveterans@gilchristcares.org.

We Want Your Input

If you have suggestions for content you would like to see in future issues of the Gilchrist We Honor Veterans Newsletter, please contact us at wehonorveterans@gilchristcares.org.



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