

Friend Of Veterans Heading West With Busy Retirement Plans

BY TERRY POPE

Jess Parker will leave next week for the state of Washington. Along with the usual luggage, Parker will carry with him some unfinished manuscripts he hopes to complete and publish while in retirement there.

"Like all aspiring writers, I have about six books that are half done," said Parker.

His last day at the Brunswick County Veteran's Services office is Oct. 17. He plans to move on the 20th to Sumner, a small town of about 5,000 people just east of Tacoma.

"I know I'm not going to sit at home and not become involved," said Parker, who has headed the local veteran's office for eight years. "One of the things that I'm going to miss when leaving here is my involvement with the community."

Parker is one of 85 county veteran services officers in North Carolina whose job is to aid veterans and their widows in the filing of claims and when seeking assistance. There are also five state district officers that work for the N.C. Division of Veteran Affairs.

During Parker's tenure at Brunswick County, he helped establish an honor roll of county natives who have died in battle. A plaque that hangs in the county administration building at the government complex in Bolivia bears the name of veterans who gave their life for America's freedom, soldiers from the Revolutionary War to the most recent conflicts.

"That is still a unique memorial," said Parker. "It has at least one member from each branch of service."

The N.C. Association of Veteran's Services Officers met last month in Wrightsville Beach, where they presented Parker with a certificate of appreciation for his years of service.

In eulogies he delivers on behalf of veterans, Parker repeats a simple message but one that helps identify a special bond. "Veterans show a kinship that transcends all other relationships, because we are military veterans."

Born at Walden's Creek, a community near Southport, Parker served 22 years in the U.S. Navy. He grew up in the Mill Creek community and attended Bolivia School until his parents moved to New Hanover County in 1945.

In 1980, he returned to Brunswick County and soon thereafter became head of the veteran's office, succeeding Cleon Hewett.

"It was like coming home," said Parker. "I was a native but had been gone for over 30 years. I always tell people, you can be a newcomer in Brunswick County for as long as you want to be."

The first book he hopes to complete is an account of naval actions during World War II, but told from a different perspective.

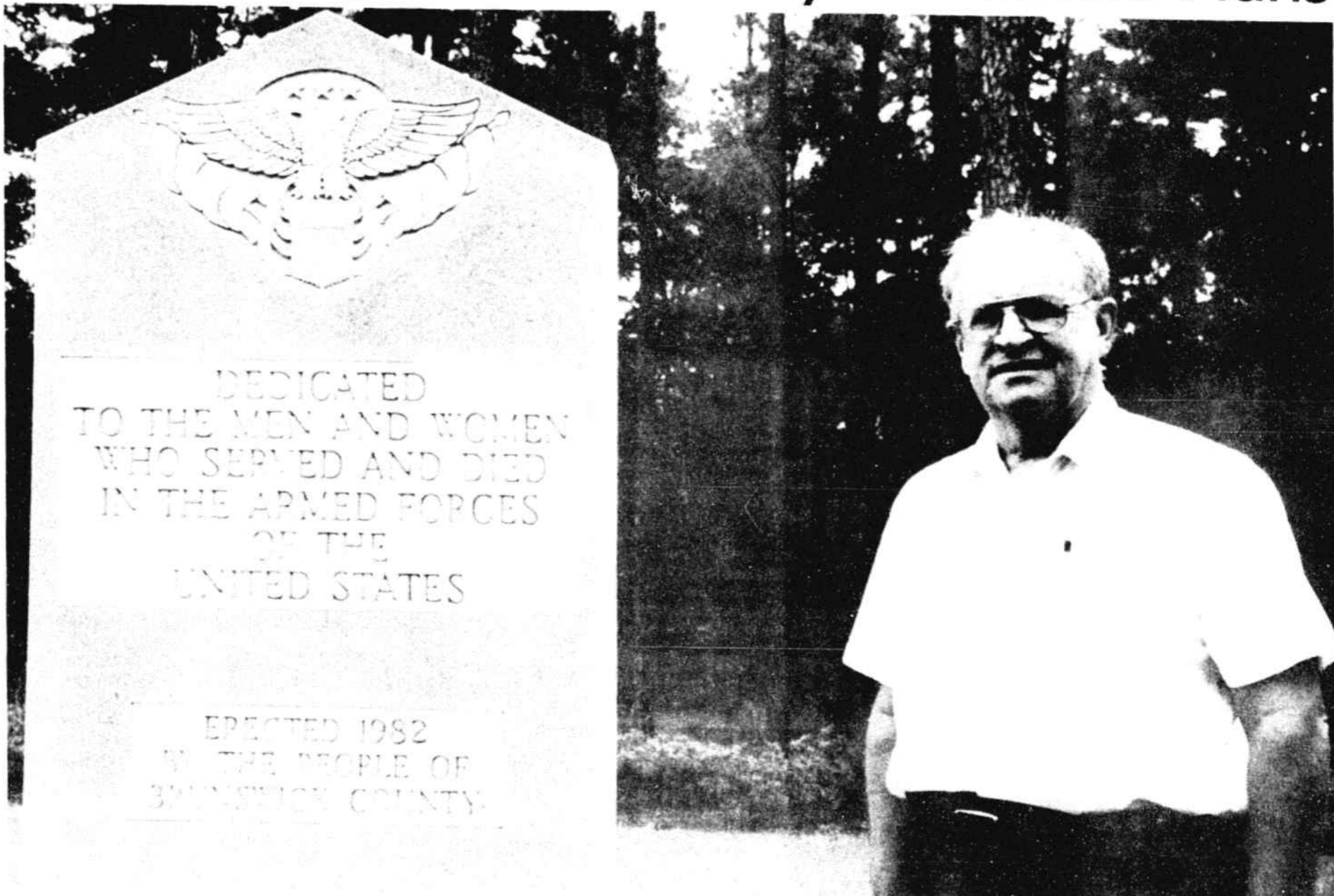
"All of us know about World War II from the eyes of the admirals and high-ranking officials," said Parker. "No one knows the history from the eyes of the enlisted men."

Parker was a student of politics, which should serve well for another novel he's planning that will feature local and state government officials he has met, only this story will be fictionalized.

Other books in the works will feature the 22-year naval career of someone with "sea stories and lies" to share and another on the advent of a hurricane season, from his years of living on the Brunswick County coast.

Retirement, Parker said, isn't a time to settle down and quietly become inactive. He tells his friends, "Someone has to go along to bait the hooks."

"One of my concerns is how this office will be handled by county government when I leave," said Parker, who hopes his longtime assistant, Judy Hayes, is promoted to fill his seat.



JESS PARKER hopes veteran services won't be overlooked in Brunswick County after he leaves for retirement next week. STAFF PHOTO BY TERRY POPE

"She's the logical one to take over," said Parker. "The Veteran's Service office is too important to the community not to be supported by county government."

But for Parker, it hasn't been all work—there have been the fun times as well.

He recently passed his title as "Head Bullshooter" to a successor, Cecelia Gore of Ash. Parker founded the Brunswick County Bullshooting Contest in 1984 as an outlet for frustrated veterans who had a few things to get off their chest.

The contest expanded and is now an annual storytelling event offered as part of the entertainment at the N.C. Oyster Festival held next weekend at Seaside. It is now called North Carolina's Greatest Bullshooting Contest.

"We had an unhappy group of veterans that had been fighting with county government," said Parker, who called for a countywide bull session for veterans and non-veterans to get together and to talk.

"We decided that night to crown a champion," said Parker. That champion was Henry Williams of Shallotte. The following year, Foxy Howard of Southport was the winner.

In 1986, the contest became part of the Oyster Festival, sponsored by the Veteran's Service office and the South Brunswick Islands Chamber of Commerce.

"It is a moment in time of nothing but fun," said Parker. "Anyone could participate, only you had to be either a veteran or a non-veteran. It just caught us in a moment of time."

Parker is also the designer of the official Brunswick County flag that flies in front of the government complex in Bolivia.

The move to Washington will be like going home again, for it's where Parker spent years raising a family.

He has granddaughters there that he wants to visit for the first time.

On the 17th, he'll clear the war memorabilia from his office wall and head West.

"This is the only job I've had where I can actually say that I wanted to come to work," he said. "People come here with tears in their eyes and some come in laughing. Sometimes they come with tears, but leave laughing."

But it's time to move on; now he has a few stories to share that he hopes will find their way into print.

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