

## Veterans join Tennent students to honor sacrifices

By James Boyle Correspondent | Posted: Tuesday, November 11, 2014 4:30 pm

Tom Thibault's memories of the military's "dream sheet" drew laughs, smiles and nods of recognition from fellow veterans on Veterans Day.

The paper, handed out toward the end of basic training, offered new soldiers a lot of possibilities, and thin promises. Commanders assigning personnel would rarely use them.

"I became a parachute rigger, trained to prepare parachutes and other life-saving equipment for pilots of the Vigilante airplanes in Vietnam," said Thibault, a guest speaker at William Tennent High School's Veterans Day observance. "Those memories have become fonder, and it looks better now than it did back then. I learned a lot and grew up quickly."

Thibault peppered his remarks Tuesday with jargon and shorthand that hit home with vets, but sailed above the heads of students and civilians commemorating the day at the school's Veterans Memorial Wall.

Recollections of the Great Lakes Naval Training Center and Vietnam vets reciting their 50-year-old service numbers by heart underscored the unbreakable bonds that exist among the military.

Thibault and Arno Vorwerk, commander of American Legion Post 800, were invited by Tennent student Connor Cicchitti, who helped organize the event with the school's alumni association as part of his Eagle Scout project. Cicchitti spent the past few months forming special speaking events with local veterans at the Upper Southampton library.

"This is the last part of my project," said Cicchitti. "I always had an interest in military history, and I thought it was important to give people a chance to hear from the people who defended our country. They deserve to be heard."

The school's Veterans Wall is adorned with pictures and plaques recognizing alumni and staff that served over the decades. This year, 32 names were added to the wall, along with special items donated by alumni.

"The wall is something that is definitely appreciated by our students," said Principal Dennis Best. "Every day I see several of them respectfully looking at the names and checking out the artifacts."



Rodger Lewis, class of '85 salutes during a Veteran's Wall Rededication Ceremony held Tuesday for local residents who have served in the U.S. military at William Tennent High School in Warminster

This year's new additions include a copy of Lee Teter's print "Reflections," a well-known image of a veteran holding his hand against the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington D.C., as the memorial reflects several soldiers from each branch. The framed picture, along with a sketching of the book cover for "Another Kind of War Story," signed by the Vietnam War nurses who provided the narratives for the book, were donated by veteran Harold "Skip" Shultz, a 1963 Tennent graduate.

The wall now holds a glass vial that contains sand from Omaha Beach in Normandy, donated by former Tennent chorus instructor Lucy Carroll. She collected the sand when she led the school's Madrigal Singers on a trip to Normandy to represent Pennsylvania in 1994, during special ceremonies honoring the 50th anniversary of D-Day.

"The students performed at the D-Day cemetery, and they understood the power and importance of what happened there and the sacrifices that were made," said Carroll. "Tears ran down their faces as they sang."

That respect has not waned since then, says Best. The school schedules a bus trip with veterans to the national monuments in Washington, D.C., each year, along with smaller events with each branch of the military hosted at Tennent.

Class of 2006 alumnus Justin Gindhart encouraged the audience to take their appreciation of the military beyond Veterans Day by donating money or volunteering time to help local charities such as the Honor and Courage chapter of the national Operation Ward 57 nonprofit. A veteran suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, Gindhart serves as a mentor to other soldiers coping with mental and emotional trauma from their injuries. The program hosts an annual fundraising race at Warminster Community Park, and the organizers are always looking for helping hands.

"It's a completely volunteer group," said Gindhart. "Nobody gets a paycheck, and proceeds go to grant programs that help returning wounded veterans while they wait for the VA to process their paperwork. That process can take up to a year, and in the meantime they need a ramp for their wheelchair or food on the table."