

Fort Taber – Fort Rodman flag honors WWII veteran George Gomes

During the month of April, the 20th Lights for Peace flag to fly at the Fort Taber – Fort Rodman Military Museum honors the memory of George Gomes, a WWII veteran from New Bedford.

Gomes not only served his country as a member of the United States Army during WWII, he also served the city of New Bedford, working as a firefighter for 26 years. Gomes was assigned to station #9, located on Ashley Blvd. and retired from firefighting in 1980.

He was well known for his musical ability, as a talented drummer and singer. Gomes played for various local establishments and was a member of the Vin Perry Orchestra, playing at the Venus DeMilo for 20 years. Gomes was also a member of Gene Oliver Quartet and the choir at the First Congregational Church at Lund's Corner, in New Bedford.

Gomes was born on March 2, 1920, the son of the late George Sr. and Mary E. (Haddock) Gomes and passed away at the age of 94 on June 14, 2014. He was the husband of Sharon L. Gomes with whom he shared 21 years of marriage. He is also survived by his sister, Paula Barros of Wareham; his daughter Renee Dumond of New Bedford; four grandchildren: Jessica and Jennifer Dumond, Kailyn Lord and Julie Hitch; nine great-grandchildren and two nephews. He was the husband of the late Doris (Hayden) Howland and the father of the late Patricia Gomes. He was the brother-in-law of the late Charles Dumond.

George was involved with many organizations including the National Federation of Musicians Local 214, a life member of Disabled American Veterans Dr. C.E. Burt – Chapter 7, a member of the Heritage Country Club of Lakeville as well as the

Retired State County and Municipal Employees Association.

Mr. Gomes participated in an oral history project in 2012, conducted by Jasmine A. Utsey of the New Bedford Whaling National Historic Park, entitled "Having our Say: From Civil War to Civil Rights," which will serve to preserve his legacy. Lee Blake, President of the New Bedford Historical Society arranged the interview. Blake explains, "I am so pleased that this is another opportunity to highlight George, who was a kind man dedicated to his music and public service."

According to Mr. Gomes, he was of Cape Verdean and West Indian descent and faced discrimination and segregation throughout his life. He explained that during his early years he was fortunate to live on Park Street where "the people in the neighborhood were very good and friendly." He said that there were many different nationalities living in his neighborhood including West Indian, Irish and Jewish. He did however have to deal with discrimination and segregation later in life including in the military, trying to find housing once discharged from the military, as well as his initial experience working for the local Fire Department. While reading through the transcript of Mr. Gomes' interview, you get the feeling that he was a very humble man and took things in stride.

When he was young, he enjoyed taking part in social activities that included music, such as singing in the church choir and playing the horn. "I always admired the trumpet players and I finally, after begging, managed to get 50 cents down a week (for lessons) at the Clarence A Cook School. The instructor was Mr. Parks. He taught me the scale and I went from there mostly on my own."

Gomes left high school at the age of 17 to join the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). He explained, "It took young men off the streets. When I joined, you were just put on a train and they take you off. I went to Connecticut thinking I was the

only one. To my surprise, I met three other of the fellows that I knew from New Bedford. I remember sandbagging the Connecticut River during our first hurricane in 1938 for 24 hours. That was the program that helped during the Depression."

After serving in the CCC, he was drafted in the U.S. Army and served for 3 years as a Forward Observer and an Entertainment Specialist. "I was the entertainment Director for Lt. Brooks who was my officer in charge." Gomes played in a 12-piece orchestra doing USO shows in Boston and Springfield, MA. When he was sent over to Europe, he did shows in Macedonia and Italy.

Gomes received the Bronze Star for his service. When asked about the significance of receiving the medal he said "Well, it meant that we gave our all for our duties and we fought hard to receive it. It wasn't that we were fighting for recognition, we were fighting for our country."

Upon his return to New Bedford, Gomes joined the Civil Service and became a New Bedford Firefighter. During his interview, he explained that he was met with opposition regarding segregation at his first job. After roll call each morning, his Captain would call out orders to all the men, except him. His orders were written on a piece of paper and left on a desk for Gomes to read. "I never said a word, I just picked it up and did what I was supposed to do. One day he thought he had a dirty job and he called me by name. That's when I told him off in no uncertain terms." Gomes explained that the other men, "white fellows," started clapping. "That made me feel good. I knew that I was accepted as part of them and respected by them. We never had any problems (after that)."

After some time, he was promoted as a senior man on the apparatus and worked on the Rescue Boat. Eventually, he was assigned to an Engine. "I was like the utility man, so I knew I was doing alright."

He responded to calls during the 1970's riots. During one of those calls, he was singled out by one of the rioters and told him "we know where you live Gomes. In other words, they had been burning buildings and they were letting me know because I was a fireman that they were going to do something to me. But they never did."

Gomes served as a New Bedford firefighter for 26 years, from Oct. 5, 1954 until his retirement on Feb. 7, 1980.

Many thoughtful comments were posted on dignitymemorial.com to honor Mr. Gomes including: "George was a wonderful, kind and talented man," as well as, "Mr. Gomes was a member of the Gene Oliver Quartet for many years and performed as a talented vocalist and drummer. We were all blessed to know him," and "the choir in heaven now has one of the most beautiful voices I have heard. George touched the hearts of many of us in a very special way."

Linda Ferreira, of **Empire Ford of New Bedford**, researches the life histories of area residents. American flags are provided by Empire Ford of New Bedford. Flags are raised by the staff at Fort Taber – Fort Rodman Military Museum. Those who would like to honor a local veteran in the future can contact Ferreira at lferreira@buyempireautogroup.com.