



Bill Jones

## WWII vet recalls invasion

Can you imagine lying in a shallow shell hole from early morning to late afternoon, a chunk of your thigh blown away, and with friendly and enemy artillery firing over you?

It was an experience Vernon Jones of Walnut Street will never forget. It happened Feb. 19, 1945, as U.S. Marines invaded Iwo Jima.

Born in Johnstown Aug. 10, 1926, Vernon was the only child of Tally and Thelma Jones. He quit Westmont Hilltop High School as a junior, "as soon as I was old enough," and enlisted in the Marines.

Jones was sent to California for his training and subsequently became part of the 27th Regiment. It was included in the Fifth Marine Division, which was formed on the West Coast on Nov. 11, 1943. The Marine Corps had been formed Nov. 10, 1775.

The division stopped briefly at Hawaii on its way to Saipan, where it joined the task force bound for Iwo Jima. Jones was in the first wave that hit the beach that morning, following heavy shelling and bombing. "Going in it was very quiet," Jones recalled.

"The first wave got in without any shooting at us. It almost seemed like a training exercise. The only thing we could hear was the roaring of our tractors."

Jones was part of a machine-gun crew and was carrying three 20-pound cans of ammunition as well as a carbine, grenades and his personal equipment. He had gone about 50 yards from the water's edge and realized he had lost his gunner.

"I dropped on my knees to look for him and there was a big explosion behind me," Jones said.

"It was terribly big. The force knocked me on my face and that saved me. There was another explosion and a piece of shrapnel tore out a piece of muscle behind and above my right knee.

"I yelled 'Corpsman! Corpsman!' but nobody came. I just laid there and prayed. After a while I raised my head and saw a shell hole about 15 feet ahead and I pulled myself up and into that shell hole and that's where I laid all day."

His first concern was that he would bleed to death but he needn't have worried. Despite the loss of a sizable chunk of muscle, the shell fragment was so hot it cauterized the wound instantly.

"I believe it was the longest day of my life," Jones said.

"I wanted to pray and the only thing I could think of was The Lord's Prayer. I prayed it over and over all day, and I wasn't praying silently. The louder the shelling got, the louder I prayed. I think that's what got me through."

Things got quite late in the afternoon and a Navy corpsman found Jones. He bandaged the leg and told Jones to drag himself back to the water, where a landing craft would take him to a hospital ship.

He remained on the ship for about a week as it went to Saipan. From there he was flown to Hawaii and spent six months in the Naval hospital in Honolulu. From there he went to the naval hospital at Portsmouth, Va., and was discharged in December 1945.

"I really felt sorry that I couldn't get up and keep going," Jones recalled. "I had trained so hard and I wanted to get going. It didn't seem right. After all that training, I was down and out already."

"But I'm not the kind of person who can point a gun at somebody and pull the trigger. I've often thought about if I had seen my first Japanese soldier and had to shoot him."

After his discharge, Jones returned to high school and graduated in 1946. After being laid off by National Radiator Corp. he went to Michigan and became a mailman, later transferring to the Johnstown post office. He retired in 1981 after 30 years as a carrier.

He was married to the late Norma Gale Frable and they had two sons.

Bill Jones is a retired senior writer for The Tribune-Democrat. His column appears each Sunday on this page.

# Officials tout high-tech growth

By JEFF MCCREADY  
TRIBUNE-DEMOCRAT BUSINESS WRITER

The region is slowly being transformed into a high-tech, medical research and energy center, said speakers at last week's Economic Summit.

They also say defense-related work has brought billions of dollars to area companies, allowing them to create or retain employees. Through the years, area companies have become qualified to do defense work that now accounts for about 5,000 jobs in Cambria and Somerset counties.

But the slow growth has translated into employers adding only a couple jobs at a time. Meanwhile, plant closings and large job losses make front page headlines.

"I see it everyday, one or two jobs being added," said William Locher, a vice president of First Commonwealth, one of about 250 people who attended the summit at University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown. "There have been some storm clouds, but we are a resilient people."

The local economic picture also has been hurt by cutbacks at Johnstown America Corp. and AmeriServ Financial and the loss of jobs through the acquisition of Promistar Financial Corp. by F.N.B. Corp. of Naples, Fla.

Locher, who works out of First Common-

## Experts: Job creation on rise

wealth's office at 217 Franklin St. in downtown Johnstown, thinks the jobs being created - such as in the high-tech and medical fields - are more stable positions.

The area has been hit hard by the loss of steel, coal and garment jobs - once its lifeblood.

The key to growth will be in regional cooperation, said Ronald Budash, executive director of Cambria County Industrial Development Corp. in Ebensburg.

U.S. Rep. John P. Murtha, D-Johnstown, points out that the Cambria-Somerset unemployment rate of 5.7 percent is just 0.3 of a percentage point higher than the national rate.

"Right now, the nation's steel industry is troubled, and if we were as reliant on steel today as we were 15 or 20 years ago, our unem-

ployment rate would be astronomical," Murtha said.

In February 1983, Cambria-Somerset led the nation with an unemployment rate of 26.6 percent.

High-tech initiatives such as the expansion of Conference Archives and the opening of C o n e m a u g h Informedics will be adding good-paying jobs, the state announced in September.

Johnstown Area Regional Industries, a two-county economic development agency, has opened a high-tech business incubator in Cambria City.

JARI President Linda Thomson said Windber Research Institute, a medical research unit now operating out of Windber Medical Center, is attracting corporate interest.

- And the weaknesses are ...**
- Respondents to this year's Economic Climate Study were asked to list the region's weaknesses. Here is what they said, in order of importance:
- Highway access.
  - Other transportation.
  - Labor unions.
  - Unemployment.
  - Political leaders.
  - Weak employee skills.
  - Lack of cooperation.
  - Negative attitudes.
  - Brain drain.
  - Need for development.

"We'll hopefully be building a multitenant incubator in the Windber area," Thomson said.

A Biotechnology Showcase now is being held yearly. Next year's event will be held in a conference center being built in downtown Johnstown.

IDC's Budash talked about the energy-related plants coming on line. There currently are three cogeneration plants in the Ebensburg area.

He pointed to the Reliant Energy plant being built near Seward to replace that aging coal-fired plant and a natural gas-fired facility planned for Jackson Township.

"This area is becoming the power alley of generation," Budash said.

Ronald W. Repak, executive director of Johnstown Redevelopment Authority, also noted progress. He talked about work going on at the Cambria Iron Works site, development of Sandysville Memorial Gardens and a planned expansion of the Greater Johnstown YMCA.

The authority will have to start over trying to develop the Sani-Dairy site in Kernville now that the Red Cross has ruled it out as a site for its new headquarters.

"We prefer a tenant with job-creating impact," Repak said.



Pauline Gordon sits at Pauline H.L. Gordon Mortuary at 662 Main St., Johnstown.

# Alive and well

## Mortician disputes health rumors

By RANDY GRIFFITH  
THE TRIBUNE-DEMOCRAT

Pauline Gordon is alive and well, thank you very much.

The feisty 84-year-old businesswoman wants everybody to know, paraphrasing Mark Twain, that the report of her death was an exaggeration.

"I made what they called a 'rapid recovery,'" Gordon said, describing an April incident that sent her to Memorial Medical Center by ambulance.

Now, months later, she is working hard to get the word out that she is still healthy and active in the funeral home business she has operated for almost 56 years. She took out ads in The Tribune-Democrat.

"Miss Gordon is in the best of health," the ads read. "She is NOT thinking about retiring."

She is also spreading the word in person.

"I'm getting out more," Gordon said. "I'm going to church, going to public affairs so they know that I can walk and I can talk and I'm still operating the mortuary."

The rumors started when Gordon was taken by ambulance from her apartment over Pauline H.L. Gordon Mortuary of 662 Main St., Johnstown.

Rescue workers broke in to get her, but Gordon said she was just too busy to answer the door. She spent several days in the hospital and Creighton Center, 1450 Scalp Ave., for rehabilitation.

"When you have Blue Shield and Blue Cross and Medicare, they are going to find something," Gordon said. "I was never unconscious; I was never out of my mind."

She continued to do business, even arranging a funeral from her hospital room.

That dedication and has kept Pauline H.L. Gordon Mortuary operating since 1946 and earned it a National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's Heritage Award in July. It was honored as Johnstown's oldest black-owned business.

Gordon has long been active in

**Faring well**

Pauline Gordon, 84, has taken out an ad to reassure her acquaintances and associates that she's fine, thank you.

**Gordon Mortuary**  
662 Main Street  
Johnstown, PA 15901  
**536-7243**

Gordon Mortuary is in full operation 24 hours a day.

Miss Gordon is in the best of health and she has been serving the public since December 14th and 15th, 1946.

She is NOT thinking about retiring.

Source: The Tribune-Democrat, October 21, 2002

the NAACP, becoming its first lifetime member in 1954.

"That was the year of the Supreme Court decision Brown vs. the Board of Education," Gordon said, recalling the groundbreaking decision that banned segregating public schools.

Gordon has broken some ground of her own. She was the first woman funeral director in Cambria County and continues as Johnstown's only black mortician.

Then there is the lifetime NAACP membership that cost her \$500. She said most people didn't realize she paid for the membership on the installment plan.

"I spent \$50 a year for 10 years," Gordon said. "To pay for it, I quit smoking Pall Mall cigarettes. They cost 25 cents a pack in those days."

She has also been a real estate investor, city alderman, traffic court magistrate and tax assessor, but Gordon doesn't consider herself a community leader.

"I am not a leader," she snapped. "I am strictly business."

Nor does she like to be considered a role model.

"For God's sake, don't call me a role model," Gordon said. "If I am a role model to someone that's up to them. To anyone else I'm just Miss Gordon."

Pittsburgh lawyer and Johns-

# Construction complaints spur changes

## City puts stop to early starts

By PETE BOSAK  
THE TRIBUNE-DEMOCRAT

Almost every morning, 72-year-old Paul Gelles gets an unwanted wake-up call at his home in the 300 block of Walnut Street - from the renaissance project forging ahead directly across the street.

"They come here too early in the morning," Gelles said, standing on his front porch as the sounds of progress echoed about the downtown neighborhood. "This morning it was 6:35, they started hammering."

"We were up at 6:35," he said.

But city leaders, upon learning of the complaints from The Tribune-Democrat, quickly put a halt to early starts last week because, as it turned out, they were illegal.

The 6 a.m. starts violated a city ordinance, which prohibits construction work before 7 a.m. and after 6 p.m. on weekdays, Johnstown Codes Enforcement Officer Mike Grandinetti said in a telephone interview.

If crews are simply staging, preparing for their day, it could be acceptable. But if construction is being done, complete with the noise that accompanies it, then it is a violation of the city ordinance, Grandinetti said.

"We're going to have to look into this," he said. "It has to be addressed."

The work is part of the much-anticipated \$25 million downtown renaissance - including a \$5 million convention center, \$6.5 million parking garage and \$8 million in renovations to Cambria County War Memorial.

Also ongoing downtown is the \$25 million expansion of UPMC Lee Regional on Market Street.

While residents accept the construction around Ideal Market - echoing city officials in saying it will be a great economic boost to Johnstown once work is done - they could do without the early wake-ups.

"It's noisy, it's dirty, it's dusty," said Walnut Street resident Roberta Weaver, 64, as she walked along the street. "The biggest aggravation are those big vehicles backing up - beep, beep, beep, beep. The city will be better off (for the project)."

"I just can't wait until they get it done," Weaver said. In the meantime, she said, she is getting used to the early morning racket.

City leaders and construction managers said they immediately would address the early starts.

"It's the first time I've heard that complaint," said city Councilman Adam Henger, a member of the committee overseeing construction. "Obviously, we want to keep to as minimal as possible the inconvenience to residents."

Henger said he contacted the project managers and made sure all contractors will be reminded of the ordinance to prevent future problems.

Those memos have gone out, said B.K. Horner, project manager at Foreman Program and Construction Management, in a telephone interview from his Vinco office. His agency is overseeing the convention center and arena work.

Pawlowski & Haman Associates, 430 Main St., is the architect overseeing construction of the parking garage.

Construction crews get into full-swing at 7 a.m. and typically work until 3:30 p.m., said Gary Marshall, on-site manager with Foreman Program and Construction Management.

"The masons start at 6 (a.m.) to get the mortar ready to begin at 7," Marshall said in a telephone interview from the job site.

But not anymore. City leaders and construction foremen put a stop to the early activity last week.

Usually at the conference center and parking garage site by 5 a.m., Marshall said he will be paying close attention to any noise. So far, he said, no one has complained to him.

"I'll make it a point to see what's going on," Marshall said. "This is the first I've heard of this."

Grandinetti said that, in nine cases out of 10, a warning takes care of the problem. But if code violations continue, the matter could be taken before a magistrate and fines may result depending on the violation.

Construction companies also can ask for and be granted a waiver if circumstances require a late night or early morning start.

"We're very hesitant to grant these waivers," Grandinetti said.

Joanne Mavrodis, 70, also of the 300 block of Walnut Street, said she has grown used to the morning noise and can sleep through it. The biggest problem for her is dust and dirt all over her porch and siding from the construction.

"The dirt is terrible," she said.

But she said the inconvenience, noise and dirt combined, will be well worth it once the renaissance project is completed. "You have to cope with it," Mavrodis said. "If you want progress, you have to put up with the dirt. We're hoping it will be better for the city and bring some new business here."



Gelles



Weaver

- More state, region news/A5, A6, A7, A8, A9, A11.**
- Grant boosts Penn State engineering program/A5.
  - The region in brief/A6.
  - Session likely to end quietly/A7.
  - Creek bank searched for body of baby boy/A8.
  - Woman make gains in Pa. political clout/A9.
  - The Big Picture/A11.