Narrative on the life of William G. Godburn
by Susanna and Julianna Bennett, August 2012

"*We make a living by what we do...but we make a life by what we give.*" These words are best defined as indicated: by portraits of lives. The great and incomparable Sir Winston Churchill, who spoke these words, himself painted them in living color. Hundreds of living pictures have since been filled with the silhouette of the American G.I. One such portrait, painted in red, white and blue colors, captures the full and generous life of William Godburn.

Bill Godburn pours into his community the way a fire hydrant pours into a water hose—effusively, incessantly, unreservedly. It's an appropriate analogy considering the fact that the Meriden Fire Department was almost like a second home to Bill for over 30 years.

As a young twenty-nine year old who had already spent three years in the uniform of the U.S. Army Air Corps and after the war worked for several years [redacted] at Factory H of the International Silver Company, Bill applied and was accepted at the Meriden Fire Department for the position of substitute fireman. A photo of nine strapping new appointees appeared in the local newspaper several months later titled, "Rookie Firemen." The irony was almost comical. In 1954, Bill Godburn was anything but 'rookie.' Those gentle blue eyes had seen a lot: military training that can make or break the average man; ugly bombing missions with the mighty Eighth U.S. Army Air Corps; a grueling Air Offensive over Normandy and the Rhineland; the liberation of France; the thin, emaciated bodies of POW's as he flew them home at the close of the war. No, Bill Godburn was anything but a rookie. When he planted his feet once again on the soil of his beloved America, he wasted no time in cranking open that fire hydrant heart of his and flooding his community with dedicated service. For every ounce of pain and ugliness he had seen, Bill dished out three ounces of goodness, determination, honesty and responsibility. He headed up Boy Scout Troop #20 at Hanover School in South Meriden and joined the Hanover P.T.A.; he was later appointed as its president. He started Boy Scout Troop #34 at Holy Angels Church, his home parish where he was also Eucharistic minister, served as the troop's scoutmaster for 20 years and later became a member of the Central Connecticut Scout Council. He coached Little League for 12 years and played softball on two teams himself: the Catholic War Veterans and the Fire Department Softball team. He joined and became a significant working member of the South Meriden Somer Club, the Rotary Club of Meriden, the American Legion, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the Antique Veterans and the Association of Retired Police Officers, Firefighters and Widows, for which he also served as secretary for 13 years, just to name a few of the many places he served.

The average citizen would feel a tint of exhaustion just hearing the long list of activities and contributions Bill Godburn shoveled into his community, much less to try on his shoes for a day. But Bill is not an average citizen nor has he been content to offer a mediocre sampling of service to a city and country he loves. He puts his whole heart into everything he does.

By now it comes as no surprise that Bill's name was also found in circles of leadership. The committees and societies he helped to lead ranged from education to conservation to charity. He helped to start the Meriden YMCA Men's Club and served as the president of the Tri-Town Golden "K" Kiwanis Club. He served on the School Building Committee, the Hunter Golf Commission, the Public Utilities Committee, the board of directors of the Kuhn Center, the Conservation Commission, the Republican Town Committee, the South Meriden Revitalization Committee, the Quinnipiac River Association, and the Meriden Turner Society. Here it was that Bill demonstrated a keen understanding of the finest exhibition of true leadership: servanthood. A leader is not above the people: he works for them.

On the side, Bill found time to dabble in oil painting and his living room is now adorned with half a dozen of his beautiful pieces of artwork. He once gave one of his paintings to a doctor friend to hang in his office. Bill laughed heartily at the memory. "When the doctor took it home to show his wife, she said, 'That's not going to the office, I'm going to hang it up right here in our home!'" Bill painted one particularly beautiful picture of the American flag superimposed with a bald eagle. The inscription reads: "*One Flag, One Symbol, One Country.*" He presented it to the mayor of Meriden and it now hangs in the town hall.

Meriden is the spot on the map that defines Bill's birthplace, childhood and entire adult life and is part of his heart. When Bill was considered for a promotion from substitute fireman to regular fireman, letters of commendation shed light on how this man, then aged 31, was viewed in his community. In a letter to the mayor of Meriden, one gentleman wrote:

"*It is indeed a pleasure to write in behalf of a candidate who I feel would be a credit to any organization that he might associate with...He is one of our outstanding citizens and for many years has been Scoutmaster of one of the finest troops in the city...He has the respect of all and is held in high regard by all the boys in his troop as well as all who know him in Meriden. He is a man with outstanding ability and fine character and the people of Meriden should be proud to have him as one of their servants...*"

Only a month after obtaining the deeply desired appointment as a regular fireman, Godburn was promoted to the position of Assistant Fire Marshal. In spite of the rapid promotion, Bill took his new responsibilities seriously and in stride. After serving in this capacity for three years, the Board of Public Safety appointed the well-deserving William Godburn to the full-throttle position of Fire Marshal. But Bill Godburn already had his throttle thrust fully forward in every position leading up to this appointment and now applied the same level of earnestness and hard work under this commanding title. As he later remarked in a public letter, "Bear in mind…whomever you select [to be fire marshal] is not infallible, and can only perpetuate and carry into effect the office of fire marshal to the best of his ability." This much he did, and did well.

Fire Marshal Godburn knew how to have fun on and off the job. "When I put on demonstrations, I tried to make it interesting and educational," he says. "With the kids, I would tell them about the origin of volunteer fire departments. I got a hold of a Smokey the Bear outfit somewhere and had a fireman dress up like Smokey the Bear. I enjoyed it, and they enjoyed it."

His heavy public speaking schedule took him to audiences of all ages and settings: hospital staff workers, nursing home patients and employees, dimple-cheeked elementary school students and bank employees in silk ties. His favorite, though, were the nurses.

"I thought the nurses were the greatest people in the world," Bill grins. "They were such dedicated professionals, and I told them that. I said, 'You girls are really something.'" Bill went once a year to the old Meriden-Wallingford Hospital to teach the graduating class of student nurses about fire safety. He went to great lengths to make his presentations personable, interesting and engaging. "One time I brought a hospital bed outside and had a nurse lay down on it." He chuckled easily, recalling the memory. "We put a fireproof blanket over her and I built a fire on it and showed them how to put out a fire on a patient's bed with newspapers." By the time the student nurses graduated, they were equipped for fire emergencies from knowing how to put out small fires to how to remove patients from a burning building. "I taught them different carries that they could do and walks, and how to handle patients," Bill

says. "I had fun doing my job, because I tried to make it fun for them, fun for me, and at the same time they're learning. You never close your mind. There's always something new that you can learn. I'm still learning!" the 87-year-old veteran laughed.

Fire Marshal Godburn believed in thoroughness and responsibility and he made sure he knew the many guidelines and rules concerning fires and safety precautions. This required an up-to-date knowledge of the state laws as well as city laws regarding fire hazards. After completing an inspection, Fire Marshal Godburn made sure an honest and informative report was given to the owners involved.

When Godburn was promoted to Fire Marshal, the position was part of the Building Department. To separate it and make it its own, Bill had to create and develop an operational and functioning office from the ground up. By the time of Bill's retirement, he had completed this task with flying colors: he created and developed a comprehensive filing system as well as forms for various inspections and fire investigations. Some of his investigations and reports were published in the American Society of Safety Engineers so that their members all across the nation could learn and benefit from his excellent work.

In the middle of battling blazes, directing and coordinating fire fighters and their equipment and cleanup processes, Bill used his head and remembered to take pictures along the way. He used these to compile educational picture slide shows to reinforce his lectures and illustrate his points about how a fire develops and spreads, what aggravates a fire, as well as common causes that can lead to major fires.

As is customary with fire officials, the name Fire Marshal Godburn was appearing consistently in the newspaper now, reporting on the happenings and missions of the Meriden Fire Department and the people they served. It was not just his name that was becoming well known: he had a substantial reputation of professionalism and admirable character to back it up. Both name and reputation crept outward for miles and he was often called upon by officials in other towns who knew that he would be an invaluable asset in sharing with them from his extensive experience in fire and building laws.

After being so intensely submerged in such a fast-paced and engaging career, retirement, though welcomed by Bill, was not a happy day for the men in his department. His assistant chief sighed regretfully, "Bill, I hate to see you go: you're gonna be a hard man to replace." Retirement, however, did not mean a decrease in Bill's involvement in his community. He was far from done. It seemed only natural that Bill Godburn would be asked to deliver speeches at gatherings on Memorial Day and Veterans Day. Ever the teacher at heart, Bill took the opportunity to educate his audience in his allotted speaking time. He might give an overview of the history of the American flag, or Memorial Day, or national events spanning the lifetime of a World War II veteran. Always he tried to stir the hearer's heart and mind into understanding, remembering and cherishing the heritage, privileges and freedoms that were purchased and preserved for them by the sacrifices of generations who had gone before. He frames it this way: "There are four defining forces that have ever offered to die for you: one is Jesus Christ; two is the American G.I.; three is the American firefighter and four is the American police officer."

One has only to see Bill gazing on an American flag caught in the morning breeze to recognize that this man's love for his flag runs deep. "For me," Bill explains, "the American flag epitomizes, for the most part, all that is good. Nowhere has a single symbol provided so much to so many. Not only in war but in peace as well, the flag is there. Wherever there is a

need for food, clothing or medical aid, you will see the American flag." The disrespect and unpatriotic treatment of our flag by some confuses Bill. "I don't understand Americans who will burn and trample on the very symbol that has provided them with so much in their life here in America. How one can connect this type of action with free speech, I do not understand. No one ever guaranteed any American a free ride. That is not what this country is all about. Americans today are a free and independent people because of the sacrifice of so many American servicemen. Many of those who have died on foreign soil in World War One and World War Two were the sons and grandsons of people who immigrated to this country from Europe and Asia because they saw a better life, and this better life is epitomized by the American flag." When speaking of the flag, Bill likes to tell people, "When you are asked what you are, say with all the pride you can muster, 'I am an American, and this is my flag.'"

He firmly believes that God is a significant focal point in our country's history and future. "I am confident," he asserts, "that our Lord will see us through this present conflict. Therefore, let us, as one people, show our God He is not forgotten either here at home or abroad." That phrase, 'one people' is important to Bill. He is quick to emphasize that although we, as a people, come from many different backgrounds, religions and customs, we are first and foremost Americans. "Many consider this mixture as if we were a 'mixed salad,' and embrace the word 'diversity.' There can be no unity when people in authority use the word 'diversity.'" He contends, "Diversity means division. We are first and foremost Americans with one country, one flag, one symbol (the eagle) and one language (English)."

When Bill looks ahead to the future of our country, he sees the need to return to our former values—the same values for which he fought and for which his buddies died. "We, the veterans of World War Two have done our part," he challenges. "Now, it is up to you. The future of this great country is in your hands. Don't let it down. If you, as Americans, turn your back on God, why, may I ask, should He care about you? It is time to remember and return to those Christian values that made us a 'Great Nation.'"

Bill often thinks ahead to the future generations growing up around him, and the children yet unborn. He put together an album with pictures and short biographies of veterans and gave a copy to the city of Meriden. "It's not just about the veterans featured," Bill points out, "it's really about all veterans of all wars, represented by these men. I kind of like to think that some day, some kid will come in and look through and say, 'Hey, that's my great grandpa,' or, 'that's my great-uncle', and he'll be proud."

In recent years, Bill had an opportunity to travel to Washington D.C. with American Warrior, a non-profit organization that takes WWII veterans to see the Memorial set up for them in D.C. as well as other national monuments. All expenses are paid, meals provided and guardians appointed to aid the veterans during the trip. For Bill, this enormous gesture of kindness and gratitude on the part of American Warrior was a monument in itself. "How do you go about thanking somebody who thinks enough about the World War II veterans to do this for us?" Bill asks. For one who did so much for his country and city, his response is humbling and reveals how much a simple but sincere "thank you" means to these men. "The memorial was nice," Bill continues. "But standing there, you think of all the guys who didn't come back. I try not to go back to those days too much."

Looking back over his long and full life, Bill reflects, "Pretty much my whole adult life has been given to serving my country and my community." A life given. It makes a striking portrait and a fine blueprint for the next generation to follow.