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Medal of Honor monument ceremony to be held Wednesday in Eastchester

Janie Rosman
jrosman@lohud.com

EASTCHESTER - A long-awaited Congressional Medal of Honor monument recognizing three local residents who received the prestigious honor will be formally unveiled Wednesday evening at Memorial Park.

The ceremony will commemorate Bronxville resident Richard O'Neill, a World War I veteran, and Robert C. Murray, who died in the Vietnam War and posthumously received the Medal of Honor in 1974.

A third veteran, Army Air Force Maj. Ralph Cheli, will be recognized for his heroism during a bombing attack 1943 in New Guinea.

"We're honored to have a monument that represents the brave men from our area," said Tuckahoe Mayor John Fitzpatrick.

Plans to build a Medal of Honor memorial in Tuckahoe in 2007 were shelved because the project would have required moving and refurbishing an existing WWI monument.

The statewide veterans committee opted to build the monument outside Mount Pleasant Town Hall, where it was dedicated last year.

"When that happened, (Eastchester) Supervisor (Anthony) Colavita picked up the ball and said, 'Let's build a monument here in town,' " Fitzpatrick said.

Their collaborative efforts with Bronxville Mayor Mary Marvin will culminate in a solemn moment twice canceled due to inclement weather.

The ceremony was initially scheduled for June 13, then postponed until July 1.

Last month, American Legion Post 9979 Commander Frank Morgenthaler spoke emotionally about the upcoming ceremony.

"If you're going to honor servicemen, then do it top-shelf," he said. "Who puts a ceremony together during the evening midweek? You should have to block off traffic for something like this. Neither this (new) monument nor the ceremony will do justice to the men they're supposed to honor."

Morgenthaler was also not happy that the monument was not built in Tuckahoe.

"I feel the same way I did two and a half years ago when they (trustees) gave excuses why it couldn't be

put in there (Tuckahoe)," Morgenthaler said.

Architect Peter Gaito, who designed the Gold Star Mothers Memorial in the same park, said the Medal of Honor memorial represents its significance.

"The congressional Medal of Honor is somber - not an abstraction - and I wanted a formal appearance," Gaito said.

Two soldiers, one with a WWI helmet, the other in a WWII helmet, hold a flag.

The quote, "What we are is God's gift to you. What you become is your gift to God," attributed to retired U.S. Army Col. Roger Donlon, is inscribed on a plaque attached to one of the stone pillars.

Donlon served in the Special Forces and received the first Medal of Honor for serving in the Vietnam War.

Cheli's name was included after Bronxville resident Michele Soulli learned of the second-generation Italian while doing research for the American Legion Fallen Heroes program.

"When I got the call, I started looking into it to see if he (Cheli) did in fact live in Eastchester," Soulli said. "I'm honored to be representing the Cheli family and to have gotten his name on the medal."

Soulli, Colavita, county Legislator Vito Pinto, VFW Post Commander Robert Foster and Morgenthaler decided that although Cheli had lived in Eastchester just one year, he also deserved recognition.

Gaito and Eastchester resident Pat Pilenza, project manager, donated their services for the project.

"I want people to sit (in the park) and feel like they're in an enclosure," Gaito said. "The memorial gives people something to think about when they leave."
