

Atlantic City memorial honoring World War II hero to be unveiled on 80th anniversary of D-Day

[Press of Atlantic City](#)

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May 21, 2024, in Atlantic city, view of the grounds around the Bernie Friedenberg Memorial at O'Donnell Park, where a memorial dedication will be held on June 6. Photo: Matthew Strabuk Press of Atlantic City Photographer.

ATLANTIC CITY, NJ (May 27, 2024) - Marco Polo Smigliani described his longtime friend and World War II hero Bernie Friedenberg as someone with the heart of a lion despite being short in stature.

“Bernie Friedenberg and I were friends for over 25 years,” said Smigliani, who is the chair of the Friends of Bernie Friedenberg Committee. “I think soaking wet, he weighed 125 pounds. Nobody wanted him, but he was very determined. Eventually, the Army took him as a medic. He was in every battle once he got over there, and although he was a small guy, he was a giant on the inside.”

So when Friedenberg died in 2018 at 96, his daughter Susan Friedenberg approached Smigliani about honoring her father’s legacy with a statue, an idea Smigliani was instantly on board with.

After 1,800 days, the memorial will be unveiled in O’Donnell Memorial Park at noon June 6, the 80th anniversary of the D-Day invasion.

“This is a labor of love,” Smigliani said. “This is about all of the sacrifices those who came before us made to allow us to stand here today and have all of the wonderful things we enjoy in this country. Freedom is not free, and they paid a big price for it.”

World War II veterans, Gold Star Mothers of America members and families of veterans are expected to participate in the festivities. Attendees also will be treated to a military flyover by the 177th Fighter Wing of the New Jersey Air National Guard and hear remarks from several speakers, including Susan Friedenbergs and retired Maj. Gen. John Hussey.

“It’s going to be a cool event,” said retired Gen. Doug Satterfield, co-chair of the committee. “The ceremony will be very patriotic. You don’t have to be a veteran to attend, and it’s free, so please come out and have a great time.”

The bronze statue, designed by Pennsylvania-based Fisher Sculpture, weighs 3,500 pounds and depicts Friedenbergs holding a wounded soldier in his arms on Omaha Beach during the D-Day invasion in 1944.

Smigliani used the radio and word of mouth to gather donations for the project, which originally cost \$250,000 but skyrocketed to \$1 million when Smigliani asked for changes.

“Originally, it was a simple statue,” Smigliani said. “Then I asked Tom Skyes from SOSH Architects if he could embellish it a little bit. He came up with a monument and the price jumped up to \$1 million. We’ve raised over \$1 million, and we’re still looking for funds to cover some other expenses.”

Smigliani has been involved in other veteran projects across the area. However, he said getting this memorial built was the most challenging of them all as COVID-19 and supply chain issues hindered the project.

“COVID hit right when we started fundraising, so that hurt us because we had to get \$1 million,” Smigliani said. “There were so many problems and red-tape obstacles. We were committed to push through it all though and get it done.”

Surrounding the Freedom Circle, where the statue was installed, are more than 28 granite inlays of each major battle during the war.

Future plans include adding an educational element to the memorial in hopes of bringing in students from local schools and Stockton University, Satterfield said.

“There is going to be engraving around the base of the memorial, and we’ll have kiosks at some point down the road,” Satterfield said. “We’re short both time and money, so a lot of that stuff is going to come later.”

Friedenbergs grew up in Atlantic City and was a freshman at Temple University in Philadelphia when Pearl Harbor was attacked Dec. 7, 1941. The following day, Friedenbergs decided to enlist in the military but was rejected by the Marines, Navy and Army due to poor vision.

However, Friedenberg remained committed to serving his country, and his persistence paid off when the Army brought him in as a medic.

Friedenberg served in many of the war's major battles, including Operation Torch in Algeria in 1942, the Fighting First campaign in Sicily in 1943, D-Day in 1944 and the Battle of the Bulge later that same year.

Friedenberg's job was to get wounded soldiers away from the front lines and render medical care to them. Smigliani said during D-Day, Friedenberg ran through a minefield and managed to bring five wounded soldiers to safety before an explosion.

"He is a true American hero in every sense of the word," Smigliani said.

Friedenberg received several honors for his service, including two silver stars for his actions on D-Day and in Germany, two bronze stars for valor and two Purple Hearts for wounds sustained in combat.

Upon returning home to Atlantic City, Friedenberg served as a member of the Atlantic County Veterans Advisory Board and commander of a Jewish War Veterans post. He also regularly spoke at schools until his death.

Satterfield, who spent 40 years in the military, retired as a one-star general in 2014 and moved to Galloway Township with his wife three years later. He got involved in the project after receiving a call from Smigliani and reading up on Friedenberg's past.

"A few years ago, Marco called me and said, 'Hey, you want to get involved in this memorial?' I said yes and got the book on Bernie Friedenberg," Satterfield said. "I'm just glad to be part of this team."

Smigliani said Friedenberg would be proud of what the group is doing for veterans if he were still alive.

"He would be thrilled that we're doing the right thing," Smigliani said. "Especially during this time because he loved America. He never imagined that he'd be the face of all of this. Bernie is the face, but this is for all World War II veterans, all the 405,000 that never came home, the 760,000 that were wounded, the 120,000 MIAs, and the 16 million who returned."

Mike Bongiorno, an Army infantry veteran from Egg Harbor Township, described his involvement in the project as the highlight of his life.

"It has been an absolute honor to be involved with this monument," said Bongiorno. "A couple of things happened, and they (Smigliani and Satterfield) needed some extra help. So I decided to jump in a few months ago and help any way that I could. It's been a blast getting to work with so many great people on this. We've had a lot of support from the community, and many have selflessly helped."

When people walk through the park and see the memorial, Satterfield wants them to not only think of Bernie but all of the veterans who made the ultimate sacrifice.

"We hope they think about the veterans who died and those who were wounded," Satterfield said. "There are huge numbers compared to other wars. I spent three years in combat, and that is

nothing compared to what these guys went through. Those men and women gave a tremendous amount. It makes me emotional to think about this, and this memorial will give people a better understanding of what those veterans had to go through.”

For more information about the memorial or to donate, visit bfww2.com.