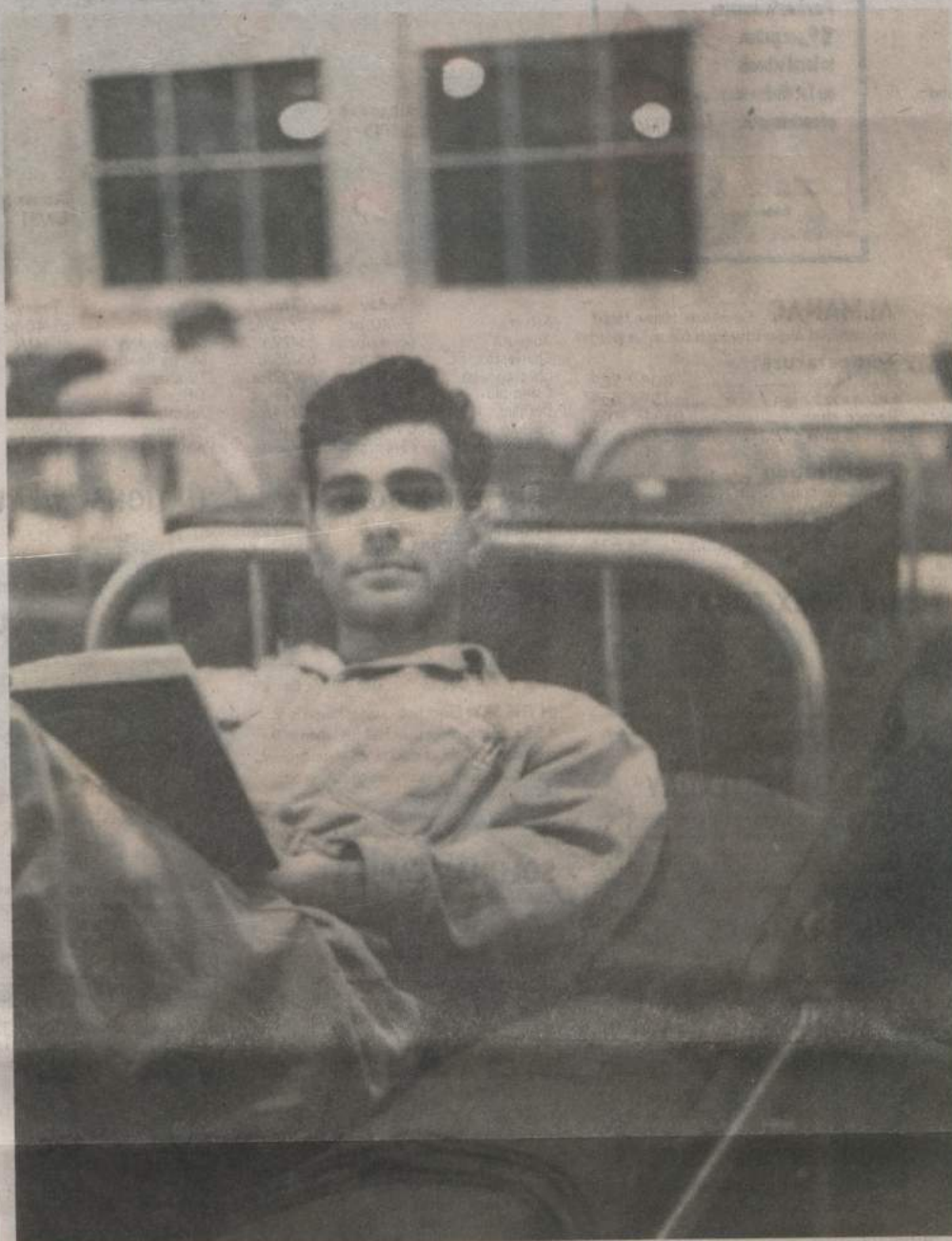


## Savannah's George Gannam: A tradition born of tragedy



An undated photo of George Gannam relaxing in a barracks. (Photos courtesy of the City of Savannah, Research Library & Municipal Archives)

On Pearl Harbor Day, Benedictine once again pauses to honor area's first casualty of WWII

BY CHUCK MOBLEY

Special to The Morning News

Youthful, handsome and ambitious, George K. Gannam was going places in the peacetime Army. Just 22, he was already a staff sergeant, certified as a control tower operator, and primarily served as a radio operator.

By early December 1941, he'd further qualified as an aviation cadet and was scheduled to depart his permanent duty station at Wheeler Field, Hawaii, for training. If he graduated from that rigorous program, George could then pin pilot's wings on his uniform.

All that had been set in motion by a typewritten letter he'd mailed to the Adjutant General's Office in June 1939, asking for "detailed information" on joining the Army Air Corps. "This has been my ambition for a good many years, and I feel certain that I can succeed. I graduated with the class of '38' from Benedictine Military School as a first sgt. in the cadet corps," the letter stated.

A reply came a couple of weeks later from Staff Sgt. Cecil Mayes, an Army recruiter whose Savannah office was in the Post Office Building. Mayes invited George to "drop by ... at your convenience, as I have from time to time assignment (sic) for the Air Corps and other choice assignments."

George enlisted in August. After basic training, he was stationed at Fort Moultrie in Charleston, and then was transferred to Wheeler, and assigned to the 18th Pursuit Group, which flew P-39, P-40 and P-400 single-engine fighters.

### IF YOU GO

- **What:** 75th Anniversary of Dec. 7, 1941 – Memorial Review in Remembrance of Staff Sgt. George K. Gannam, and other Fallen BC Heroes of World War II.
- **Where:** The cafeteria of Benedictine Military School, 6502 Seawright Drive.
- **When:** Seating will start at 9 a.m., the program will start at 9:20 a.m.
- **Details:** The program is free and open to the public.



BC cadets, friends and family at the first flag-raising at the Gannam house in March 1942.

# GANNAM

FROM PAGE 1A

George's experiences eventually led him to Hawaii and a place in United States history. And as the nation commemorates the 75th anniversary of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Savannah residents and

Benedictine Military School will pause again Wednesday to honor Gannam, who became Savannah's first casualty of World War II.

## Back home in Savannah

George came from a close-knit Catholic family. His parents, Karam and Annie Gannam, were from Sidon,

Lebanon. Amid frequent persecution of Christians in what was then the Ottoman Empire, they each emigrated to America, but did not meet until after their arrival. They were married on April 22, 1907, in New Hampshire, and moved to Savannah in 1919, the year George was born.

For a time, Karam operated a confectionery on West Broad Street. He sold that business and moved to 53rd and Hopkins streets, then a rural area adjacent to a sawmill run by the Reynolds and Manley Lumber Co. The family ran a grocery store at their house, stocked with produce they had grown.

The Gannam family eventually grew to seven — Karam and Annie; sons Anthony, Nazer, George and Michael; and daughter Mary.

George, though he was stationed thousands of miles away, communicated frequently by mail with his family, friends and the local bishop. "Everything here in the islands is practically the same as it always is (beautiful) in every respect. Really, you should come over and see what it's like," he wrote to Nazer, who was in the Navy and stationed in Virginia.

Still, his mother was worried. She had asked him not join the Army, but, with the confidence of youth, he had promised her he'd return safely.

## 'A date which will live in infamy'

Though he was planning for flight training, the Army had arranged a temporary assignment for him, a radio school at Hickam Field, an Army installation nestled against Pearl Harbor. He was there on Sunday morning, Dec. 7, 1941.

His sister Mary remembered hearing radio accounts of the Japanese attack.

"My first thoughts were



Karam Gannam watches as ROTC cadets pass in review during Pearl Harbor Day ceremonies on Dec. 7, 1966, at Benedictine Military School. The program, sponsored by George K. Gannam Post 184 of the American Legion, was in honor of Gannam's son, an Army Air Corps sergeant killed in the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor and the man for whom the Legion Post is named. (Buddy Rich/Savannah Morning News)

of George, about his safety," she said in a 1991 Morning News article. "We didn't hear anything ... we waited and waited and waited for word. It was Wednesday (Dec. 10) before we heard that he was dead. Then everything went to pieces."

The terse notification — which read, in part, "your son George was killed in action in defense of his country at Hickam Field" — was delivered by telegraph, remembered Phyllis Saraf, George's niece. "No military person came with dignity to break the news gently and with dignity, just that terrible little envelope delivered by the Western Union delivery boy."

The next day, the Dec. 11 edition of the Morning News carried a brief account. "Sgt. G. K. Gannam killed in Hawaii: He becomes Savannah's first fatality of the war," read the headline. The tele-

gram had been sent from Fort McPherson in Atlanta.

George's mother "could not stop grieving," and "never was the same" after that day, said Saraf.

## Stories about Pearl Harbor

Several versions of what happened to George have been printed. "At the time of the bombing, George was just back from Mass, and was headed to the mess hall. He was a religious person," his brother Anthony said in 1991. Another description stated he was moving toward an airplane hangar when the bombs began to fall: In a slightly different version, he was hit while helping other soldiers push planes to safety as the attack continued.

A 1941 account, attributed to a Catholic newspaper in Denver, said George was

taken to an Army hospital. A Catholic chaplain, seeing the wounds were fatal, comforted George and gave him the last rites.

He was buried at the Schofield Barracks Post Cemetery. (His body was later re-interred at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, better known as the "Punchbowl," where more than 13,000 other American casualties of World War II rest.)

## Start of a Savannah tradition

On another Sunday morning, Feb. 22, 1942, the Gannam family and BC staged a simple ceremony at 53rd and Hopkins streets to honor George and keep his spirit alive.

Walter Ehrenreich, acting

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# GANNAM

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adjutant of the student battalion, read a statement that said, in part, "We, the present cadets of Benedictine Military School, dedicate ourselves to the cause for which George Gannam died and we pledge our youth and manhood to the establishment of world peace."

George's parents then presented an American flag to a BC detail, and it was raised to the top of a just-installed pole. Two wreaths were placed at the foot of the flagpole, a BC bugler sounded "Taps," and the school band concluded the observance with the national anthem.

## Ceremonies at City Hall

Karam and Annie were among the guests at city hall on Dec. 7, 1942, the one-year anniversary of Pearl Harbor and George's death. As the event started, city marshal Robert F. Downing presented an arm bouquet of red roses, held by a red, white and blue tulle, to Annie.

Mayor Thomas Gamble honored George's sacrifice, and that of "all Savannah boys who have been reported as dying in action," the Evening Press reported.

The Rev. Father Gregory Eichenlaub, the principal of BC, presented a large photo montage of George to Gamble. "In accepting (the portrait) for the city, I can assure all that it will be cherished as a precious memorial, dedicated to all American boys who fell in line of duty in this war," the mayor said.

The picture was hung in the mayor's reception room, where it stayed for many years. It is now in the Municipal Archives.



Karam Gannam, left, father of Savannah's first World War II hero, George K. Gannam, is presented a flag on Dec. 4, 1958, for his son's memorial plot from Eddie Burns, commander of George K. Gannam American Legion Post. (Bill Garbutt/Savannah Morning News file photo)

## The American Legion and BC

Tragedy again struck the Gannam family in June of 1943 when Annie died. "Her grief took her to her grave," Phyllis Saraf said.

On Dec. 7, 1945, Karam was joined at the house by BC Cadets, and members of a new organization, American Legion Post 184 of Thunderbolt, the George K. Gannam Post.

"The post voted to make

the laying of (a memorial) wreath at the site an annual affair," the Dec. 8 edition of the Morning News said.

Karam Gannam resolutely kept the faith, continuing the daily flag routine, and hosting the annual memorial service at the family homestead. In the late 1940s, however,

the Pearl Harbor ceremony moved downtown to the BC campus on Bull Street, adjacent to Sacred Heart Church.

It was also held, at least one year, at Forsyth Park. A Dec. 6, 1960, story in the Evening Press announced the "military review and memorial service" would be

## GANNAM COLLECTION AT SAVANNAH CITY HALL

The city of Savannah has posted a far-reaching online exhibit on Staff Sgt. George K. Gannam, who was mortally wounded on Dec. 7, 1941, during the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The exhibit includes family photos, service photos, correspondence and newspaper clippings.

To access it, go to [savannahga.gov/gannam](http://savannahga.gov/gannam).

There is also an artifact display in the council chambers. To see it you must attend a city council meeting, or arrange a tour of city hall. The tours are on the first Tuesday of each month, and start at noon. They are free, but space is limited, and reservations are required. You can register online by visiting [savannahga.gov/firsttuesdaytours](http://savannahga.gov/firsttuesdaytours). Tours can also be arranged for high schoolers and adult community groups by calling Luciana Spracher of the City's Research Library and Archives at 912-651-6411.

staged in south end of the park. Gen. Lester Bork, the commander of Fort Stewart, was the speaker, and the BC cadets marched, along with ROTC units from Savannah and Groves high schools.

In 1963, BC trucked out to its current location on Seawright Drive, and what has become known as Gannam Day is now held on the parade ground there.

Karam, who became an American citizen in 1952, died at age 100 on Nov. 28, 1980, just a few days before the 39th anniversary of George's death.

## A treasured time capsule

As Gannam Day grew in size and stature, and became ingrained in the city's fabric, the family held tight to what they had left of George — particularly the contents of his Army foot locker. Its delivery, soon after his death, had been a traumatic experience. Inside, besides his possessions, were Christmas presents he'd bought for his mother and other relatives.

Eventually, the contents

were placed in a cedar chest. It passed to Joe Gannam, Michael's son. He told me to "hold onto it," remembered Joe, a Savannah attorney. After some years, Joe decided to turn the collection over to the city.

He contacted the department last year, said Luciana M. Spracher, the director of the city's Research Library and Municipal Archives. He was looking for someplace where the items could be preserved, and made available to the public.

Now completely catalogued, the collection contains pictures, negatives, certificates, clothes, correspondence, and a box camera, along with socks, pencils, shaving razors and soap. "It's like he went to work and never came back," said Spracher.

A small notebook that George used to track his spending touched her deeply when she noticed that the last entry was on Dec. 5, Spracher remembered. The realization of how quickly and unexpectedly his life ended caused her to choke up. "You don't know what's going to happen."