

98-Year-Old Veteran Dons Uniform, Salutes America Day Before Death

The old soldier was determined to hang on for one last Veterans Day, one last salute.

Then Justus Belfield, known as “Jay,” told people he was ready to go “home.”

Which he did—the very next day.

In honor of Veterans Day, Belfield, a 98-year-old World War II veteran, donned his Army uniform one last time, even though he was too weak to leave his bed at an upstate New York nursing home.

The Daily Gazette of Schenectady reported that Belfield had worn his uniform every Veterans Day since he and his wife moved into Baptist Health Nursing and Rehabilitation Center in Glenville, outside Albany, several years ago. On Nov. 11, the former master sergeant wasn’t able to get out of bed to participate in the facility’s Veterans Day festivities, so he had the staff dress him in his uniform.

A photograph accompanying the newspaper’s story published Friday shows Belfield saluting while lying in bed. The nursing home staff said he died early last Wednesday morning.

Belfield, originally from Utica, spent 16 years in the Army. In December 1944, during World War II, Belfield took part in the Battle of the Bulge and earned the rank of master sergeant. He received several discharges over the years and each time re-enlisted right away. He also served during the Korean War, when he worked as a recruiter in Syracuse, New York.

Belfield told the newspaper last year that he never regretted serving in the military.

"It was a good thing to do," he said in the interview on Veterans Day last year. "I loved it because it was my country. It's still my country."

Ailing health prevented Belfield from participating in October's Honor Flight to Washington, D.C., to see the war memorials. Instead, local veterans presented Belfield with an Honor Flight T-shirt in his room at the nursing home, according to Albany's WTEN-TV.

Two Patriot Guard members who had become friends with Belfield visited with him on his final Veterans Day. One draped a flag over the armoire in his room.

When the veterans' parade came down the hall Tuesday afternoon, the participants stopped and looked in on their fellow soldier.

After the festivities, Camp helped Belfield remove his Army jacket and he spoke to her.

"He says, 'I've gotta go,' and I said, 'Where do you have to go?' and he says, 'Home,'" Camp recounted with tears in her eyes. "And I said, 'It's OK, Jay. You've had a long journey. Close your eyes. Go home.'"

Belfield and his wife, Lillian, had six children, 18 grandchildren and 28 great-grandchildren.

He was buried last Friday in a military graveside service with honors at Gerald B.H. Solomon Saratoga National Cemetery in upstate New York.