

Francis J “Fritz” Mullen

1923-Present



Fritz Mullen was born in 1919 and raised in Cortland, NY, working at his family's store after school. Fritz worked for IBM in Endicott, NY after high school until he was drafted at age 19 in early 1943.

He served in the Army Air Corps during WWII, completing 32 missions in Europe as a top turret gunner in the B-24 Liberator and B-17 Flying Fortress. Fritz participated in the D-Day invasion on June 6, 1944. His bombers took shrapnel damage many times during these missions, with several casualties. The crew was forced to bail out after barely crossing the English Channel westward on one mission. Fritz had returned stateside, and was training West Point cadets how to fly planes at Stuart Field in Newburgh, NY when Japan surrendered on August 15, 1945.

Upon returning from the war, Mullen was among the founding members of the Cortland Veterans of Foreign Wars chapter. The VFW social hall was soon moved to 76 Main Street to accommodate growing membership, and veterans enjoyed time watching television, playing the slot machines, buying drinks at the bar and socializing with their fellow veterans and friends. Mullen was a member of the Chapter's "Last Man Standing Club." As veterans passed away, their glasses were turned over -- Fritz Mullen is the final member. The VFW hall is considerably quieter today, with many veterans having passed away, moved from the area, or unable to participate in club activities because of old age. Of Cortland County's 3,080 World War Two veterans, it is estimated that fewer than 100 remain. Fritz is proud of his service to his country, but the VFW is a little lonelier as time has passed.

Mullen Office Outfitters was founded on February 1, 1913 by Frank and Charles Mullen, Fritz's father and uncle. The business was originally called the Mullen Wallpaper and Stationary Company and was located on North Main Street in Cortland, where the Key Bank parking lot is today. On February 1, 1915, the business moved to 28 Main Street, where the Mullen brothers leased a store front. In the mid-1920s they purchased the building outright, and soon expanded into office supplies and furniture in the ensuing decades. Fritz's uncle Charles Mullen died in 1952, and Fritz took more responsibilities in the store. The wallpaper part of the business was discontinued in 1953, and the store was renamed Mullen Office Outfitters, Inc. Fritz's brother Joseph Mullen joined the family business in 1954, after returning from serving in the Korean War.

During this period, Cortland was a prosperous manufacturing center with an economy driven by good paying factory jobs, the State Teacher's College at Cortland, and a bustling downtown shopping district lined with stores of every description. But beginning in the 1970s, major industries closed or left town and Cortland's downtown began to decline. Large malls and shopping centers opened on the outskirts of town, further drawing business away from the family-owned stores that lined Cortland's Main Streets. As the years went by, Mullen office Outfitters was forced to adapt. The business eventually offered printer cartridges, computer cables and printer paper, and blank CDs in order to remain relevant and profitable in a changing world. Eventually, Fritz was the sole remaining family member left to operate the century-old business.

As commerce transitioned online and brick and mortar storefronts struggled to pay increasing expenses, Fritz Mullen made the difficult decision in January 2018, to close Mullen Office Outfitters.

Fritz Mullen represents the best of small town America. He proudly and honorably served his country during World War II, and returned home to operate his family's business and serve the

Cortland area through honesty and integrity. When asked how he would like to be remembered in the Cortland community, Fritz said that "I always try to be fair with people and don't take advantage of people... the way my father told me, years ago when I first came here."

Mullen's Office Outfitters may be gone, but Fritz continues to embody what it means to be a community member.



Sources:

- 'Last Man's Club' a lasting legacy to lives of local World War II vets, Cortland Standard, Kevin Conlon, .Nov 11, 2017
- V-J Day: August 14, 1945 – The day of peace, Todd R. McAdam, Managing Editor, Aug 15, 2020
- Mullen Office Outfitters nears end of 105-year run, Robert Creenan, Jan 2, 2018