Donald Young is a World War II veteran, retired Cabrillo College professor, novelist and poet who writes on his IBM Selectric.

Donald Young

Longtime professor mines his own World War II history in his writing

By TERRI MORGAN

APTOS — When Donald Young was a student at Princeton University in 1943, an Army colonel told him and other potential recruits if they enlisted, they could select their rank and position.

Young accepted the offer, saying he wanted to be a lieutenant in the artillery.

“I ended up as a buck private in the infantry,” Young said with a wry smile.

His World War II experience, along with a sense of humor, prompted him to write a novel, “The Battle for Snow Mountain,” albeit after a bit of a delay.

“It took me 60 years to write this one, because it took 50 years to make sense of what happened,” said Young, an Aptos resident who celebrates his 90th birthday later this week, on Thursday, Oct. 17.

The novel, which one reviewer calls the most powerful anti-war novel he’s read, is a fictionalized account of Young’s experiences as a casualty replacement in Europe. During a five-month period he took part in the Battle of the Bulge, was wounded, captured by the Germans, and survived several bombings before being liberated by the Russian Army. The Purple Heart recipient returned to Princeton after the Army and met Albert Einstein on the campus in 1946 and the poet T.S. Eliot two years later.

After earning his master’s degree from Harvard, the novelist, poet, short-story writer and story-teller began his long career as an English professor.

Young retired in 1992 after teaching English at Cabrillo College for 35 years and was finally able to spend most of his time writing.

“It was very hard to write while teaching at Cabrillo,” Young said. “After I retired at age 70 I had nothing to do and could write all day every day.”

Young, who had written two novels during his teaching career, completed eight books of poetry and four novels and short-story collections after retiring. He says he is proud of his three most recent books: “The Battle for Snow Mountain,” “The Ascending Star and other Stories,” and “A Minor Engagement.”

Young has no plans to slow down. He says he’s thinking about starting a new book, and notes that his writing has improved over the years.

“I’ve been writing since I was 15 years old, (initially) ghastly stories about Russian women,” he said with a smile. “Luckily, after the age of 70, I wrote a couple of good ones.”