



For Hometown News

VOLUSIA COUNTY - They've been called the greatest generation. Once nearly 16 million strong, U.S. veterans of World War II now number less than 2.3 million and are dying off at a rate of 900 per day, the Department of Veteran Affairs estimates.

Many, such as South Daytona resident Merle Walston, 89, have not yet had the opportunity to visit the National World War II Memorial which opened on April 29, 2004, more than 60 years after the U.S. entered the war.

Thanks to Volusia Honor Air, Mr. Walston will join other veterans in May to finally see the monument honoring those who served and the more than 400,000 who died.

Sponsored by the Rotary Club of DeLand, the Downtown Rotary Club, and the DeLand Breakfast Club and supported by private donations, the program arranges day-long visits to Washington, D.C. at no expense to veterans to thank them for their service to the country.

Members in the three DeLand Rotary clubs found a common bond in wanting to honor the men and woman whose numbers are fast dwindling.

Bill Mancinik, member of the Honor Air committee, said he admires the grit and purpose of those who served.

"These veterans came back from the war and went back to work. They came back and built America" he said. "Once you start looking at their stories, you realize how truly heroic they are."

Navy veteran Walston said he is thrilled with the opportunity to visit the memorial. The trip will likely trigger memories of his service in North Africa and Southern France, he said, but December 7, 1941 is a date that is forever etched in his memory.

Training as a Naval Corpsman in Brooklyn, N.Y., Mr. Walston and a friend were attending a national league football game that Sunday afternoon. His friend brought a quart of whiskey and a portable radio, Mr. Walston said. Around 3 p.m., news of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor was broadcast over the radio. The pair didn't believe what they were hearing at first, he said, thinking it was a simulated news broadcast similar to the 1938 broadcast of Orson Welles' *The War of the Worlds*.

Once they left the stadium, however, the grim reality sunk in.

"We were terrified," Walston said.

Other South Daytona residents such as Lloyd D. Moulton and George R. Hunter Jr. said they were honored to attend previous Honor Air flights.

"It was fabulous. We had a wonderful time," Mr. Moulton said. "Everywhere we went there were flags waving. There was a water salute at the airport. Nobody would let you spend any money."

Hunter, a 24-year Navy and Naval Reserve veteran, said he never would have had the opportunity to visit Washington on his own and was overwhelmed by the greeting the veterans received, especially by the Volusia County Sheriff's Office honor guard.

"I've never had a welcome like this before," he said. "Everywhere we went people were waving, clapping and saying thanks. I couldn't have asked for a better welcome."

The City of South Daytona recently donated \$500 to the organization and Mayor Blaine O'Neal will volunteer his time as a guardian on the next trip scheduled for May 8, 2010.

"These veterans are heroes," Mayor O'Neal said. "This is a way for me to show my gratitude for their bravery and sacrifice."

All ambulatory World War II veterans are eligible. Each Honor Air flight costs \$75,000 and veterans are accompanied by chaperones, known as guardians, a physician, two paramedics and a documentary film crew.

For more information on Volusia Honor Air or to sponsor a veteran, go to www.volusiahonorair.org or call (386) 738-5500.