

WWII Veterans Receive Airborne Salute

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By James Callahan Special to The Observer



PORT ORANGE - Most were just boys when they enlisted in the armed forces, fought World War II, and quite literally saved the world. Today, those remaining veterans are in their 80's and 90's. Last week at the Port Orange City Commission meeting, Bernadette Britz-Parker appealed for the community's support. Oct. 3, Volusia Honor Air will commemorate the service of 100 local veterans with an all-expense-paid, one-day trip to the World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C. This will be the Honor Air's fourth such trip, the World War II vets will visit the Tomb of the Unknowns, and other Washington landmarks.

Volusia Honor Air, a program started by the Rotary clubs in DeLand, will charter a US Airways Airbus 320, and arrange for a day of honor and remembrance. The fire department at Daytona Beach International Airport will provide a departing ceremonial water canon shower for the plane as it taxis out to the runway.

The mission of the group is to extend a deep appreciation and gratefulness to the WWII heroes for their bravery and sacrifice. "The day is to be all about them," said Ms. Britz-Parker. "It's our intention to wow them." The veterans, along with more than 33 volunteer chaperones, a physician and two paramedics will depart Daytona Beach International Airpost and arrive at Reagan International, where chartered buses and a police escort will transport them to the memorial. The itinerary includes a stop at the Capital, Arlington Cemetery, and lunch at The Library of Congress.

Looking back at his day in the sun earlier in the year, W.W. II veteran Gabriel "Gabe" Maioli was clearly touched. "It was the most honorable time I have had in my 83 years of life - "THE BEST", the Port Orange resident reflected, "We all were treated honorably and shall live with that memory for the rest of our lives. Again, many, many thanks."

U.S. Congresswoman Suzanne Kosmas (D-FL) will greet them, and spend much of the day escorting the veterans. The flight home will arrive back in Daytona at about 9 PM. "It will be a long day, but I'm really looking forward to it," said retired Maj. Edward "Paul" Valaer, 89, who lived a real "Saving Private Ryan" scenario when, as a communications officer during World War II, he was sent home after two of his brothers died in combat.

“The stories you hear are incredible,” said Ms. Britz-Parker. “Before the last trip, during the application process, my 89-year old uncle, Henry Parker, mentioned that he had gotten a Silver Star. No one in the family knew. He never wore it.

He never talked about it,” said the flight coordinator, “It had been in a safety deposit box all these years. He had never been able to tell his story,” said Ms. Britz-Parker. “But he got to that day, when a group of eighth graders at the memorial wanted to hear it.”

World War II veterans are dying at a rate of 1200 a day. “Time is not on their side,” said Ms. Britz-Parker.

To date, the group has taken 314 area veterans on earlier trips, and plans to keep going until “there are no more to take,” said Britz-Parker.

Each year, an estimated 4.4 million people visit the memorial, which opened to the public in 2004.

“May 9th, 2009 was one of the most memorable days of my life,” said Navy veteran and Port Orange resident, Richard H. Coombs, “Visitors at the memorials were very impressed and interested, asking us many questions. Even the children were eager to hear of our experiences and seemed genuinely interested in what we had to say.”

“This was a day I will always remember,” said Mr. Coombs, “and I want to give the Rotarians my sincere thanks for giving me this opportunity.”

A host of volunteers help support this program. If you wish more information or want to apply to go on one of the flights, visit www.volusiahonorair.org.