

May 19, 2008 - Nearly 900 Vets Attend Local WWII Tribute

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BY TED POTTS

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— Nearly 900 World War II veterans turned out Sunday as the guests of honor at the Cambria County World War II Recognition Ceremony in downtown Johnstown.

An estimated 3,800 family members and friends of those who served also attended the event at the Cambria County War Memorial Arena, which organizers and veterans called an overwhelming success.

The event had its beginnings more than a year ago, when State Rep. Ed Wojnarowski, D-Johnstown, proposed holding a ceremony to honor the county's World War II veterans.

The ceremony became a joint venture of Conemaugh Valley Veterans, of which Wojnarowski is chairman, and fellow state Reps. Gary Haluska of Patton and Tom Yewcic of Jackson Township and state Sen. John Wozniak of Westmont, all Democrats.

U.S. Rep. John Murtha, D-Johnstown, was the featured speaker.

"All of you (World War II veterans) brought peace and hope to a world ravaged by the darkness of war," said Murtha, who served 37 years in the Marine Corps and Reserve, retiring as a colonel.

"You defeated tyranny and oppression and you made a difference in the lives of every citizen of this great country and world," Murtha said. "Every American owes you all a debt of gratitude."

The veterans were seated on chairs set up on the arena's floor. Each was presented with a medal and a citation and was recognized by name. The reading of the names from the stage took about 45 minutes, with cheers and applause coming from the spectators after many of the veterans' names were called.

The veterans were saluted in a toast proposed by Joseph Latch, himself a World War II veteran and a member of Conemaugh Valley Veterans.

"Today, we toast the greatest generation of all time," Latch said as everyone stood and applauded.

"This ceremony is a great thing for us," said Leroy Malzi of Cover Hill, a Navy veteran.

"It's nice to see all of the people here together," added Malzi, who served in the Navy's Air Division.

Michael Paskowski of Mundys Corner, a Navy veteran, said the ceremony was "wonderful."

"It is good that people respect we veterans," he added.

Asked what went through his mind when he received his medal and citation, he responded, "I was thinking of the fellows on board the ship that lost their lives in the war."

Wilfred Frombach of Moxham, an Army veteran of World War II, said Sunday's tribute was a long time coming.

He said the ranks of those who served in World War II shrink each year. He felt "fantastic," he said, when he learned of plans for Sunday's ceremony.

Francis W. Clark of Belmont, also a World War II Army veteran, said simply the ceremony was a good idea.

Not too much has been done for World War II veterans, said Clark, a medic whose assignments included serving at a hospital in Tokyo.

"I thought today's ceremony was great," said John Huey, a Navy gunner on the battleship USS Idaho.

"I thank the people for honoring us for what we did," he said proudly.

Huey, who resides near New Florence, was wounded in the wrist and knee near Okinawa when a Japanese kamikaze pilot attacked his ship.

He said he still has shrapnel in his left wrist.

“It still bothers me at times,” he said.

Peter Bertolino of St. Michael, a Navy veteran, said the ceremony was well organized.

“It was wonderful,” he added.

Richard McNulty of Franklin Borough, who served in the Air Force in the Korean War and is a member of Conemaugh Valley Veterans, termed Sunday’s ceremony as fantastic.

He said much of the event’s success can be credited to the many volunteers who came out to help.

He said the high point of the ceremony for him was pinning a World War II medal on his brother, Jim, a Belmont resident who served in the Navy.

“Everything clicked, everything was great,” Wojnaroski said after the event. “I can’t say enough about the spirit of cooperation everyone gave. It was strictly a team effort.

“This was the Conemaugh Valley Veterans’ finest hour,” added Wojnaroski, an Army veteran.

Harry Muncert of Westmont, a World War II Navy veteran and member of the Conemaugh Valley Veterans, said before the ceremony began that it was going to be an exceptional event.

If his fellow veterans’ reactions are any indication, he was right.