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Princeton Union-Eagle

WWII veteran attends war memorial dedication

By Joel Stottrup

When Americans and other Allied troops landed on the beaches at Normandy, France, in 1944, George Beck of Princeton was among the troops in the second day of the invasion.

He revisited the D-Day site at Normandy during the 50th anniversary 10 years ago.

This spring, shortly before the 60th anniversary of D Day was being observed, Beck visited Washington, D.C., for the dedication of a memorial to Americans who served in World War II.

The 85-year-old Beck traveled with his son, Mike, Mike's wife, Fae Ann, and their daughters, Elizabeth, Rachel and Sarah, during the last week in May for the dedication.

The state of Minnesota had authorized veterans organizations that run charitable gambling to expend \$1,500 for each of two World War II veterans to send them to the dedication.

Beck's trip was aided by \$1,500 from the Princeton VFW Auxiliary.

The trip was "great," said Beck last Friday at his apartment in Princeton as he recalled the trip that included sightseeing around the capital and watching the monument being dedicated.

Beck said the monument looked different than he had envisioned, explaining that he had anticipated it being more like the Vietnam War Memorial. That memorial consists of a long black wall with names inscribed on it of about 58,000 Americans who were killed in that war.

But Beck called seeing the new World War II Memorial an "extraordinary moment."

Beck served in an antitank company in the 90th Division when he fought in Europe during World War II. The division had many soldiers from Texas and Oklahoma and was nicknamed the Tough Hombres.

Beck landed at Normandy on June 7, 1944, the second day of the D-Day

invasion, an invasion that sped up the ending of the war in Europe in 1945.

Beck was not very specific 10 years ago when he spoke about his experiences in Europe during the war and when interviewed this week didn't provide much more.

He told how his antitank company skirted around the sides of cities as it moved forward in the invasion. He ended up going through Germany and was at the German border with Czechoslovakia when the war ended. He left Europe in October 1945.

He remembers seeing a lot of dead livestock in the battle zone. His thoughts during the fighting, he said, consisted of wanting to "stay alive," and that everyone was afraid to a certain degree.

"If you weren't afraid, something was wrong with you," he said.

Experiences in D.C.

The dedication of the World War II Memorial was the afternoon of Saturday, May 29. The Beck group had already toured the White House as part of a tour set up by Rep. Betty McCollum from Minnesota for veterans in her U.S. House district. The Beck family had also toured famous sights at the capital such as Arlington National Cemetery and had watched the changing of the guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

The daughter of the World War II veteran who initiated the idea of the memorial spoke at the dedication. That veteran took up the idea 17 years ago and died a year ago, Mike Beck said.

Among those participating in the ceremony were President George W. Bush, the president's father, former President George Bush, as well as former President Bill Clinton.

The World War II Memorial sits on one end of the capital's Reflecting Pool and between the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument. Congress authorized the American Battle Monuments Commission in 1993 to build the monument.

Mostly private donations funded the construction of the monument which was designed by Friedrich St. Florian. The placement of the memorial where it is was by design to be symbolic of the fight during World War II to preserve and internationalize democratic ideals won under George Washington and defended under Abraham Lincoln.

The new memorial has a part called the Freedom Wall with 4,000 gold stars commemorating the more than 400,000 Americans who lost their lives in World War II.

Fifty-six pillars on the monument stand for the 50 states, U.S. territories and District of Columbia. Each pillar has an inscription of the name of one of those. An inscription at the base of the pavilion fountains at the monument

mark key battles in World War II. Twin Atlantic and Pacific pavilions symbolize a war fought across two oceans.

George Beck posed for a photo by his family in front of the monument's pillar marking the state of Minnesota.

It took 60 years to get such a memorial but the product couldn't have been better, said Mike Beck after the trip. Mike Beck was also pleased how accommodating the airline was in making the ride for George Beck the most comfortable possible. George is in a wheelchair and the airline upgraded from coach to first class for George and Mike.

Mike said one of the great stories he heard was of a flight with veterans headed for the memorial dedication and the plane's pilot coming into the passenger area to shake hands with veterans. When the nonveterans in the first class section saw that, they offered their seats to any veterans sitting in coach, Mike said.

One of the memorable moments for George Beck was a stranger at the dedication coming up to him and introducing himself as a veteran of the 90th Division in which Beck served. The stranger said to George, "So, you think you're a tough hombre."

Mike said that all the veterans had some kind of t-shirt or cap that showed to what unit they belonged.

Mike spoke proudly of his dad's military service and what the 90th Battalion did. He noted that George went into the Normandy invasion as a tech sergeant and by the end of war had become a first lieutenant in a battlefield commission.

Mike said that a group of military experts on World War II used a point system to grade the military divisions during World War II and recognized three as the greatest. Mike said one was an American division, the 90th, and the other two were German divisions.

Mike noted that George has a bronze star for his performance during the war and that when he asked George about it, George only "hemmed and hawed."

Then, according to Mike, George said that it was likely for taking over his company after some top officers became casualties. George also has five battle stars.

Asked if attending the dedication revived memories from the war, George said it did.

"I was looking for someone [in my company]," he said. "Anyone in the 90th Division, I would've shook their hand."

George added that there are not many left from his company who he was close to. George was in his early 20s when he took part in the famous invasion.

He remembers sitting on his ship bobbing around in the water waiting to go ashore at Utah Beach at Normandy.

“You didn’t know what to expect or anything,” he said.

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