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Sept. 27 proclaimed Collier County WWII Veterans' Day, WWII Capture Living History Project commended

By Andrea M. Galabinski

Collier County commissioners recently proclaimed Sept. 27 as Collier County World War II (WWII) Veterans' Day.

A large crowd of veterans attended the meeting, both to accept the proclamation, and support the new WWII Capture Living History project, which was recently started by the county communications office. The goal of this oral history project is to capture the memories of these veterans and share with the community personal stories that reflect the tremendous sacrifices this generation made so that we could continue to live in a free nation.

Formally accepting the proclamation were Gary Shanabarger, commandant, Senior Marine of the Marine Corps League of Naples; Jim Elson, Veterans Council of Collier County; Peter Kraley, Veterans Services Department and Jack Hild, 14th Air Force-Flying Tigers World War II Veteran. Commissioner Chairman Fred Coyle made a special announcement concerning the event. He asked the crowd attending the meeting to "pay particular attention to this particular presentation. Many years ago these veterans were fighting overseas defending our freedoms. Our children and our grandchildren will conduct a ceremony like this for those young people who are fighting overseas now to protect our freedoms. We must remember them."

Jack Hild thanked the commissioners for honoring the Living History Project on behalf of the approximately 30,000 county veterans. "This is a challenging project," said Hild. "Justifying WWII veterans willing to share their war experiences is not an easy task. I'm deeply saddened when I read the obituaries and I see death notices with WWII veterans."

He talked about how hard it is for veterans to relive those moments. "It is very humbling as an interviewer to listen to these stories that even a family member may not have heard. War is not pleasant. Those of you who stand, we salute you."

The project itself has several goals. It works to identify Collier County WWII veterans and coordinate interviews to record their war experiences on audiotape, so future generations can hear first-hand the sacrifices made by the "Greatest Generation." The driving force and creator of the project is Sandra Arnold, public information coordinator for the county. Arnold was recognized by the commissioners at the meeting.

In a separate interview, she talked about how the project got started. "In late April of this year I was invited to the luncheon honoring Ernie Pyle who was a famous WWII correspondent who was killed during the war by a Japanese sniper. I was a Navy journalist for five years. Two WWII veterans were speakers at the luncheon, and had the group on the verge of tears with their stories."

Arnold was so moved, that when she came home that evening, she told her husband about the experience. "Everyone needed to hear these stories because they are so moving and it is such an important part of our history," she insisted. "He told me if I felt so strongly, to do something about it. So I went to my boss John Torre, communications director, who told me to pursue it, and got a proposal together to do this."

Since the department had never participated in an oral history project, staff searched the Internet for organizations that specialized in oral history projects and contacted the Women in Military Service For America Memorial Foundation, in Arlington, Va. to learn more about how to conduct a successful oral history project. Additionally, staff contacted the Department of Veterans Affairs in Washington, D.C. to find out how many WWII veterans reside in Collier County. The department had not budgeted for this project, so the Communication and Customer Relations' staff developed a marketing plan that included the production of 2,000 WWII posters and nomination forms to distribute to various veterans' organizations, 13 Publix supermarkets, 37 nursing homes, two Veterans Affairs medical facilities, numerous government buildings, nine public libraries, three museums, three colleges, 26 churches and three medical facilities. In addition to the mailing, a summary of the project was included in two county e-newsletters, which were distributed to more than 5,000 e-mail addresses.

The project's information was also displayed on the county's Web site at www.colliergov.net/ communications and a scroll that ran 30 times per day for two months was placed on the Collier County government station, Channel 11/16.

To date, nearly 100 veterans have signed up to participate in the project, and nearly 60 interviews have been in process. 10 volunteers, mainly veterans themselves, have spent over 150 hours on the project.



This group gathered at last week's County Commissioners meeting to proclaim Sept. 27 as Collier County World War II Veteran's Day and to celebrate the "Capture Living History" project.

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