

# THE LAST WITNESSES



Pendleton veteran Vern Kube traveled to the Capitol with a group of 50 other World War II veterans with the Honor Flight program. Staff photo by E.J. Harris

## Local WWII veterans honored from coast to coast

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Vern Kube can't think about certain moments of his recent Honor Flight to Washington, D.C., without choking up.

The Pendleton man traveled to the Capitol with a group of 50 other World War II veterans who together experienced monuments and memorials, Arlington Cemetery and the Changing of the Guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

Kube, a Navy seaman from 1945 to 1947, said his wonder grew from the moment he arrived at the Portland International Airport on May 13 and joined the group that included 10 other Pendleton-area veterans.

Soon, brand-new ball caps with the words "WWII Veteran" and their names stitched into the cloth were nestled on their heads and they had donned Honor Flight T-shirts. Kube was shocked to see that a group of people had come to the airport to see them off. He reacted with amazement when, shortly after their plane landed in Chicago for a layover, two fire trucks shot streams of water over the aircraft from opposite sides. The tribute was repeated in D.C. and again



World War II veteran Vern Kube poses with a Marine at the Iwo Jima Memorial after a drill session, who allowed Kube to hold his gun. The stop was one of many during last month's Honor Flight tour in Washington, D.C., for WWII veterans. Photo by David Kube

when they landed at PDX.

The most emotional moments, however, weren't on the formal itinerary, such as an encounter with a policeman.

"He came up and grabbed me," Kube said. "He thanked me for my service and cried on my shoulder."

Kube, moved, pulled a minia-

ture flag out of his bag and gave it to the officer. The veterans carried the tiny flags to wave or give away whenever the mood struck. Kube presented most of his flags to children, but only after securing a solemn promise.

"I'll give you this flag, but you've got to do one thing for me,"

he told each child. "Honor this flag for the rest of your life because a lot of good people gave their lives for this flag."

On one of their two days of touring, the veterans lined up in front of the Lincoln Memorial and

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sang "God Bless America" as tourists stopped to listen.

Many of the veterans traveled to the Capitol despite physical ailments. Some rode in wheelchairs. Some required oxygen. One man, on hospice care, was accompanied by his nurse. It was a somber reminder that World War II vets are becoming fewer and fewer. According to the National WWII Museum, about 855,000 WWII veterans still live, but are dying at a rate of 492 per day. Roughly 16 million served during the conflict.

Kube said he still feels good at age 87, despite radiation exposure while helping with hydrogen bomb tests at Bikini Atoll in 1946. He witnessed two blasts, one bomb dropped by aircraft and one detonated underwater beneath derelict ships. During the first explosion, the sailors of the USS Haven were ordered to stay on deck with their hats pulled down, collars up and heads between their knees. When he finally looked, Kube could see the mushroom cloud 13 miles away. For the underwater

blast, the ship stayed eight miles away.

"The water went 7,000 feet into the air," he said. "Some of the battleships looked like toothpicks."

He came home to work as a butcher, plant nursery owner and Pepsi Cola plant manager. He has pastored the Mission Assembly of God church for 19 years.

During the tour, people often came up to the veterans to shake their hands and say, "Thank you." One of the veterans, a nurse who had been at Iwo Jima, broke down crying as she sat in her wheelchair at the World War II memorial. Kube and other veterans asked if she was hurting. She shook her head.

"In 70 years or more, I haven't been honored like this," she said. "It just hit me."

Dick Tobiason, chairman of the Bend Heroes Foundation that manages Honor Flights from Eastern Oregon and Portland, has witnessed many of these moments. He remembers one veteran at the Iwo Jima Memorial who walked a short distance away and fell to his knees.

"He sobbed and sobbed," Tobiason said. "He finally

got up with tears all over his face and said, 'The demons are gone.'"

Tobiason said the foundation is committed to providing expense-paid trips to as many World War II veterans as possible. He said each veteran has a guardian during the trip to push wheelchairs, offer water or take care of any need that comes up. Kube's guardian was his son David. Tobiason, a Vietnam veteran who lives in Bend, said the foundation rents 30 to 40 wheelchairs just in case veterans become fatigued. Doctors travel with the group.

The veterans are a humble lot and genuinely taken aback at all the attention. Tobiason said many had agreed to go only after another vet had pushed them. Some had started out with a degree of skepticism.

"On the airplane going east, they're kind of a stoic group. They're looking straight ahead and they're very quiet," he said. "On the way home, they're smiling and telling stories."

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