

WWII veterans honored here in 2017

BY BILL JONES
STAFF WRITER

American Legion Post 21 here honored local WWII veterans for their service during a noon Saturday, Nov. 4, 2017, ceremony.

Post Commander Cathy Groff and Dennis Elkins, the post's first vice-commander, presided during the service as the WWII veterans who were able to attend sat in folding chairs at the front of the meeting hall on Saturday afternoon.

Veterans' family members, along with Post 21 members and then-County Mayor Melville Bailey, Road Superintendent Lowell Bean and State Representative Gary Hicks, Jr., watched from the audience as the ceremony unfolded.

The event began with the pledge of allegiance led by Groff and a prayer by Post Chaplain Gary Snyder.

The names of the WWII veterans being honored were read aloud by Elkins.

Plaques, certificates and commemorative booklets that contained local WWII newspaper clippings and photos of local military personnel were distributed by former Post 21 Commander Ray Hice and Post Adjutant Dave McCauley to those being honored.

Most were U.S. Army veterans, but Leon Gladson, a U.S. Marine Corps veteran of WWII, and Roosevelt Smith, 97, a U.S. Navy veteran also were among the members of "The Greatest Generation" who took part in the event.

Many of the veterans sported baseball caps emblazoned with the words "WWII Veteran." The oldest veterans present were 97 years of age and the youngest, at a sprightly 88 years of age, was retired U.S. Army Sgt. Major Ralph Bass who wore a full dress U.S. Army uniform for the ceremony.

Elkins said a number of the veterans who were honored were current, or past, members of Post 21 and had been invited to attend.

Post members who were invited were John Arnott, 90; Charlie McLain, 92; Isaac Price, 90; James Alley, 95; Larkin



WWII veterans conferred at American Legion Post 21 while waiting to be honored. Photo by Bill Jones

Delph, 90; Leon Gladson, 92; James Klepper, 92; Jack Smallwood, 90; Joseph Baker, 93; Albert Horne, 92, Ralph Bass, 88; Dana Fields, 92; and Everett Hatch, Sr., 90.

Elkins said all other area WWII veterans had been invited, via articles in the Rogersville Review, to attend the ceremony as well. Non-Post 21 member WWII veterans who came to the Saturday event included: Sherman Whitaker, 97; Lawrence Shoemaker, 97; Roosevelt Smith, 97; and Stokely Trent, 90.

POW among those honored

Lawrence Shoemaker, a Kingsport resident who came to the ceremony with his friend Dana Fields, said he was taken prisoner by the Germans during the Battle of the Bulge on Dec. 18, 1944, and

while serving in Company K of the 2nd (Indian Head) Infantry Division's 9th Infantry Regiment.

Shoemaker said he was held prisoner in Germany and Czechoslovakia until the war ended. "They (the Germans) told us the war was over," he said. "Seventy-three of us (POWs) started walking (away from their POW camp) about 6 p.m. on May 7, 1945. We found two Americans (soldiers) on guard duty about 3 a.m. May 8, 1945."

He noted that German soldiers were making their way back into Germany as he and his fellow prisoners were walking in search of the American lines.

"I talked to one of them who spoke a little English," Shoemaker said. "I wished him luck and he did (the same) to me. I felt sorry for him."

Refreshments, including cake and ice cream, were served after the program in which the veterans were honored concluded.

More than 16 million served

The U.S. Dept. of Veterans Affairs says that a total of 16,112,566 men and women served in the U.S. military services during WWII. Of that number, about 1,711,000 were believed to still be living, according to recent estimates.

Post 21's Ray Hice said 13 WWII veterans who are, or formerly were, members of American Legion Post 21 were known to remain alive in 2017.

The U.S. government says that, as of April 2017, there were still 120,240 WWII veterans receiving benefits as a result of their wartime service.

"I want the people of our town and county to get involved in the effort to honor our POWs and MIAs in some way. Their families have gone all these years without any closure (in the case of MIAs)."

American Legion Post 21 First Vice Commander Dennis Elkins

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