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Aiken area veterans from WWII share memories, meal

By **Bill Bengtson** bbengtson@aikenstandard.com Dec 7, 2018



Aiken resident Doyle Peterson, a Savannah River Site retiree and Army veteran, visits with Frank Buffington, a member of Augusta Elks Lodge 205, and Peterson's caregiver, Lisa Walker, during Friday's luncheon for World War II vets and other local residents who have helped the vets tell their stories in recent years.

Staff photo by Bill Bengtson

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AUGUSTA — The concept of Pearl Harbor Day may be exceptionally meaningful for a dozen men who gathered Friday for a luncheon at Augusta Elks Lodge 205, as the fraternal group played host to World War II veterans from around the CSRA.

Among the Dec. 7 honorees was Ridge Spring resident Joe Watson, who is largely known as a retired farmer. He also saw action in the Battle of the Bulge, one of the bloodiest encounters U.S. troops faced in World War II.

Recalling Friday's gathering, Watson said, "I really enjoyed the fellowship and enjoyed seeing the people, and I really think the Elks are doing great to have us over there."

North Augusta resident Milledge Murray was among several volunteers who were honored for having helped WWII vets share their stories in recent years. He described himself as "thrilled" to participate.

Accolades also went to such volunteers as Hephzibah, Georgia, resident Doug Hastings, who has helped arrange for hundreds of veterans to visit a variety of military memorials and museums in recent years.

Watson, 95, said he was pleased to learn about the chance for local vets to get some help in traveling to New Orleans to visit the National WWII Museum. "I'd very much like to go to it," he said.

Several Aiken County residents were also among the honorees, including Warrentonville resident Julian Proctor, who became a longtime A&P (grocery chain) employee after flying dozens of missions from England while serving in the Army Air Corps.

Aiken residents on hand included three who went on to work at the Savannah River Plant, now known as the Savannah River Site: Doyle Peterson, whose Army time encompassed serving in the occupation forces, performing guard duty over German POWs; Charles Lide, who performed equipment repair in the Philippines; and Mel Knowles, a Navy man who served as a pharmacist mate on attack transport ships engaged in the Pacific. Also visiting from Aiken was Howard Neleigh, who started in the Army Air Corps and wound up, near the war's end, transferring to the Marine Corps.

Among other honorees were Evans resident Tony Ferrara (Army) and Augusta residents Alan Holt (Army), Calvin Jones (Marines), Roy Ottinger (Army), James Stutts (Navy) and Walter (Irby) West Jr. (Navy), with West's record including having been on board two vessels that were sunk in combat – the first by a German U-boat, in the Atlantic; and the second by Japanese kamikazes near Okinawa.

Helping organize Friday's event was Augusta resident Fred Gehle, a history buff who has given thousands of hours over the past decade to the effort of helping WWII veterans share their stories. Gehle's efforts, in harmony with those of the Augusta Richmond County Historical Society, helped lead to a book titled "In Their Own Words: Augusta and Aiken Area Veterans Remember World War II." Also produced was a companion video: "War Stories: Augusta Area Veterans Remember World War II."

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