



Goodland World War II veterans (above) Harold VanVleet, Stanley Wolak and Leonard Kashka, Sr. stood in front of the Kansas pillar at the World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C. during their Honor Flight trip in April. The first stop for the three buses of veterans was the World War II Memorial (right) which has pillars for every state and the Kansas veterans spent several hours touring this memorial and the nearby Korean War Memorial and the Vietnam Wall Memorial.
Photos by Harold VanVleet/The Goodland Star-News



Three Goodland vets take Honor Flight

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needed, were driven to the World War II Memorial where they were dropped off and given time to tour that memorial and the nearby Vietnam and Korean War memorials. The veterans gathered at the Vietnam Wall and reboarded the buses to view the Navy and Air Force memorials and the Pentagon. The buses then went to the Marine Iwo Jima Memorial.

VanVleet said when they were at the Marine memorial a teacher and class of students asked who they were and he said they told them about their trip and Wolak's background in Poland and being a prisoner of war before coming to the United States.

The next stop was at Arlington National Cemetery where the veterans watched the changing of the guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, and several members placed a wreath at the tomb.

Back on the buses the vets got a box supper and returned to the WWII memorial for a prayer vigil and service. Kashka said the vets got to see the memorial after dusk, and all three agreed it was a beautiful sight with all the lights.

The veterans were to spend the night at the National 4-H Center in Chevy Chase, Md. Kashka said the veterans had to wait to get a room number, and it sort of reminded him of when he was first in the U.S. Army. He said he finally got the number and found the room. Inside were two sets of bunkbeds.

VanVleet and Wolak ended up in the same room and were not sure if more were coming so they drew straws for top or bottom bunk. VanVleet said he got a bottom one, but no one else showed up so they both had bottom bunks.

Wolak said he slept better that night than the night before in the hotel in Garden City. Kashka said he ended up being alone and had a good night's sleep.

Kashka said there was a good breakfast buffet the next morning before the veterans loaded on buses again.

VanVleet said while they were at breakfast a teacher and students from Canada talked to them and asked questions.

For the next morning the veterans had three choices. One bus went to the Quantico Marine Museum. Another bus went to the Dulles Air and Space Smithsonian Museum. The third bus dropped the veterans at the Holocaust Museum and the Air and Space museum on the Mall.

The three Goodland veterans chose the bus for the Holocaust. They said the bus driver had grown up in Washington and drove them by the Department of Agriculture building and the Teamsters National headquarters.

Wolak said the Holocaust museum reminded him of the Prisoner of War camps he was in from 1940 to 1944.

The last stop for all three buses was Fort McHenry. Kashka said it was great to see the fort, and as the

group at the fort was unfurling a 30x40 flag it started to rain. He said it was not a real heavy rain, but they all got wet.

Following the special program at Fort McHenry the veterans reboarded the buses and headed to Baltimore to board the plane back to Garden City.

The veterans were treated to "mail call" on the plane and everyone got at least one letter. Kashka said he got letters from Atwood and Scott City. Wolak and VanVleet said they got letters from Sandy Rogers.

VanVleet said when the plane arrived in Garden City they were welcomed by hundreds of people waving flags and lined up waiting for them to land.

"It was something we appreciated," he said, "and I think there were about 100 motorcycles to escort us into town."

Rogers asked the three veterans to pick out one thing most memorable from the trip.

VanVleet and Wolak both said it was the World War II Memorial.

Kashka said the thing that stood out the most for him was the laying of the wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

Wolak said he was glad he had help with a guardian being pushed in a wheelchair, and felt it was the only way he could do the tours.

Kashka said he had not used a wheelchair, but when they got to Ft. McHenry and looked at the hill he had to climb he was glad when a guardian put him in a wheelchair and went up the hill.

He said there were 95 veterans on the trip and the oldest was George Elliott, 95, of Colby.

Nemecheck said a reporter went with the group and each veteran would be receiving a memorial book and disk of photos sometime in the next few months.

He said another smaller flight is being planned for June, and another of the larger flights later in the year.

"We want names of veterans who would like to go," he said.

Rogers said the RC&D needs to raise money for the trips, and she and Greg were looking to organize something in the Goodland area.

The veterans who go on the trip do not pay for anything except getting to Garden City and then back home.

She said she and Greg are available for programs, and the three veterans said they were willing to help when they could.

Nemecheck said the Central Prairie Honor Flight group is the main organizer, but the Western Prairie RC&D is trying to help the group get more veterans from northwest Kansas involved.

"We are on our own," Rogers said. "We have no federal funding."

"We are trying to keep going and believe the RC&D has good programs," Nemecheck said. "Hard to go on, and we lost the office in Colby and the director. It will be a challenge. Not sure what is going to happen."

Navy veteran served on battleship, destroyer

By Tom Betz

nt.betz@nwkansas.com

Goodland veteran Harold VanVleet served in the U.S. Navy at the end of World War II and again in the Korean War before returning to Goodland.

VanVleet went into the Navy in 1945, and was assigned as a boatswain mate on the battleship USS IOWA (BB-61).

The battleship was part of a task force that left Oakland, Calif., and arrived at Japan about Christmas of 1945. He said the ship returned to Bremerton, Wash., in June of 1946, and unloaded all the ammo and then went to Seattle where the ship was taken out of commission and the sailors all got off.

He said he had moved from boatswain mate to the torpedo department, and was ready to qualify as a Torpedoman Third Class when they said he could get out and he said OK.

VanVleet said the sailors were put on trains in what looked like cattle cars and traveled to Norman,

Okla., where he was discharged in August 1946.

"I stayed active in the reserves," he said, "and went back in in 1950."

He was assigned to the destroyer USS Stormes (DD780) home based at Norfolk, Va. He said the destroyer went through the Panama Canal and crossed the equator twice on the way to Korea and the way back.

He said the captains he served under were good men and both were initiated as part of the Shellback ceremony going across the equator. VanVleet was initiated during his first crossing of the equator, and was part of the initiating crew the second time across.

He said the destroyer Stormes sat off Wonsan Harbor above the 39th parallel in North Korea. He said the destroyer was on duty for 30 days at a time on the blockade line, and at night would get close to the shore and shell the coast.

He said the destroyer would stand off during the daylight, and once in a while the North Korean shells were close and the captain would move the

ship further out to be out of range.

He said one day a bomber crashed about 300 yards from the ship and the ship's crew was able to recover all of the bomber crew, but one of them was dead. He said the airmen were kept aboard until the destroyer went back to refuel. He said he never heard what happened to those men.

VanVleet was inside the 5-inch gun turret as a boatswain seaman and was an ammo loader.

He said when he was being discharged he returned to the west coast on a destroyer escort, which he described as being much smaller and cramped than the destroyer. He was discharged in San Diego.

He took a train with many other veterans and it was the California Zephyr that dropped him in McCook, Neb. He said he got some souvenir playing cards from the train.

VanVleet was born in Brighton, Colo., in 1927, and then the family moved back to Goodland and he has been here ever since.

He graduated in the Goodland

High School class of 1945. He said just after graduation he went into the Navy with eight classmates. He said he was 17, and had to talk his mom into signing to let him join. He said his father had been in World War I, and did not want to sign the papers.

Coming back to Goodland VanVleet met Emma in September of 1954, and the couple were married in July 1955.

VanVleet worked on a farm and moved into town in 1965. He said he worked for the county and then went to work for the Agriculture Stabilization and Conservation Service office and retired out of there in 1989.

He said when he worked on the farm he was a crop reporter and went out and measured the wheat fields.

He went to work in the ASCS office for Lowell Chatfield who was easy to get along with, and when Chatfield retired VanVleet worked with Michael Campbell. He said it was an enjoyable job, and it was easy because he new farming.

Polish veteran came to Goodland with wife

By Tom Betz

nt.betz@nwkansas.com

The Goodland veteran said he had been born in Poland, was in the Polish Army, and spent 4.5 years in a Germany prisoner of war camp.

Stanley Wolak was born in Poland and joined the Polish Army in 1939 when World War II broke out. He said the Germans did not catch him until Jan. 2, 1940.

"They knocked on the window and gave me five minutes," he said. "They took me to a freight depot and had box cars full of others in the Polish Army. They loaded us up and sent us to Germany. I was past 19 then."

He said the train took them to Stuttgart, Germany and he was in a prisoner of war camp for four and one-half years.

He said at first his work was blasting rock to be crushed and put on the roads. He said the Germans were short of labor on the farms and would turn them loose to help. He worked for a lady until the first troops liberated the town and the camp. He said the troops were French and the first division to get into Germany.

"You had to have numbers and letter P," he said. "You could not go anywhere without numbers."

He said the French stopped in the village for two days and he met a mess sergeant who spoke Polish. He talked to his captain, and they said he could join the French Army. Three days later he was in a French uniform and had been sworn in. The division went towards Berlin, but were stopped in the Black Forest.

"We never did go to Berlin," he said. "After we turned around we went back to the same village

and was there for eight months."

He said he found a friend from Poland who had been in the same company. He said Wolak should come to the American Zone and join a Polish company under American control. He went from the French and joined the Polish company in the American Zone.

"We transferred SS troops to camps and did that until 1947," he said.

At one point he was stationed in Nuremberg where he was a guard during the war crimes trials.

He was in Heidelberg, Germany and met a Polish woman, Janie Malek, in Ludwigsburg, Germany. She was from Poland and had been working in a labor camp. He said they got married after he was discharged.

After his discharge he drove a jeep for American officers, and after eight months, worked in a fuel depot and later was in charge of the fuel depot.

He said a priest came to town once a month, and one time said he had applications for 32 families to go to the United States. He was asking for volunteers and Wolak said he didn't think he had anything to lose and signed the application. He said about a month and a half later his wife Janie, met him half way home from work and said they got the papers to go to the USA.

He said they were coming either way because he had an aunt in Baltimore and his wife had an aunt in Chicago. They took the offer from the priest.

He said they had to go through the whole investigation process before they could go.

"No one can come who cannot read and write,"

he said. "We passed everything and then have to wait. It took three months to get it all done."

He said when they were coming on the ship he thought they were going to North Carolina, but when they were halfway between England and New York they were told there had been a change and they were going to Goodland in northwest Kansas.

When they landed in New York they headed west and stopped in Chicago and met the wife's aunt. They asked if they could stay there, but were told they had to go to Goodland. So they arrived in Goodland after Christmas in 1949 and he worked on a farm three miles south and one mile west of Goodland.

Walter Taylor was the sponsor for the couple. Wolak worked there until October 1952 when he and his wife moved to town. He worked many different jobs, and in 1953 went to Chicago where he got a job as a maintenance man in a factory.

He said he was there for three months and his wife got sick so they came back to Goodland where they had a house.

"I never went back to Chicago," he said.

He started working for the city, and retired in 1985 after 31 years.

Wolak said the Germans hardly fed you in the prison camp. They gave you a small piece of bread and a soup that was not very good.

When he was at Nuremberg they said if you lost a prisoner you had to take his place for six months. He said he knew it happened to one man.

He had four children, Beverly, Helen, Eddie (who has passed away) and Steve.

Army veteran served in occupational forces

By Tom Betz

nt.betz@nwkansas.com

He was a senior in Atwood High School when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, but did not enter the U.S. Army until 1944, and ended up on a ship at Leyte, Philippines on V-J Day.

Leonard Kashka, Sr., was born in Atwood in 1924, and was a senior in high school when World War II started.

"Most of us seniors knew where we were headed when we got out of school, he said. I had a farm deferment, and went into the U.S. Army in 1944."

He was inducted at Ft. Logan in Colorado. Went to Ft. Leavenworth, and then Camp Hood, Texas for six weeks of basic training. He had a week delay in route to Camp

Funston at Ft. Riley. From there he went to Ft. Ord, Calif., and loaded on a ship in Oakland to go to the Philippines.

"We were one day off Leyte when V-J Day (Victory over Japan, Aug. 15, 1945) was declared, he said. We went into Japan as occupational troops."

He was stationed at Yokohama, Japan, and was a mechanic in the 829 Transportation Group with the Eighth Army. It was an amphibious truck company. He said they started with the amphibious ducks and changed to Jeeps and 4x4s and 6x6s. Kashka was a mechanic in the shop on the center pier of Yokohama. He said he was six blocks from Lou Gehrig Stadium.

"I was in the first and only earthquake I was ever in, he said. I

was on the third floor and woke up to see the lights swinging. It was not a big deal."

Kashka went from buck private to Sergeant while in Japan. He said it was hard to get ratings in small units. When he came back to Oakland he was on a troop ship with 5,000 other soldiers.

He came back to Atwood by bus, and remembered going through Reno, Nev., because that was the first time he had ever been in a casino. The bus went through Salt Lake City and Denver before getting to Goodland.

He went with his wife, Antoinette, when he got back and they were married in Goodland have have been here since.

He said when he came back he did several things including work

for Handy Chevrolet and the Dodge and Plymouth dealer. He said he farmed and worked for Rudy Gemmer who had Allis-Chalmers. He started driving truck, and taught at the Northwest Kansas Vocational Technical school for nine years. He went to work for Yellow Freight and retired in 1990.

He had a house on Harrison Ave., in 1974, built another house on Harrison and sold it when he bought the house at 304 E. Eighth in 1989.

Kashka and his wife had three children two girls and a boy. The two girls teach at Grant Junior High, Threse Armstrong and Toni Becker, and the son is Leonard Kashka, Jr., who farms west of town.

The two daughters will be retiring from teaching this year.

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