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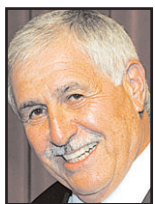
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Meeting members of the 'The Greatest Generation'

BY ERNIE SOCHIN

Vice Mayor



I recently was invited to a special program at Homestead Air Force Base that was intended to be a welcoming, and a meet and greet evening dedicated to military men who served in World War II. The event was sponsored by the

Military Affairs Committee of the South Dade Chamber with the assistance of Kurt Kadel and the ever present Chris Himmel.

As most of you know, although I was too young to have served in the military during the years between 1941 and 1946, I was very much involved with the war as everyone who lived in those years was.

Virtually everything you did in some way involved the war, whether it was using your ration stamps or gasoline designation to make limited purchases; everything was in short supply at that time. Nearly everyone, including my family had members serving in the war at that time and we proudly hung a flag with a blue star in our window for each member in the military. Occasionally the stars were turned to gold when that particular member gave the ultimate sacrifice. You could walk down the street and look at each home and have some idea of what those parents, brothers, and sisters were going through.

As a result of living through those days I became an avid amateur historian and have read literally hundreds of books about the conflict. I have a special room at home dedicated to World War II, which I proudly show to anyone who visits and has an interest. To my wife's displeasure I have visited many of the famous battle grounds — from Pearl Harbor to the Normandy beaches and everything in between. I have spent mournful hours touring the various concentration camps in Europe.

When I went to this event in Homestead I found that there were approximately 50 living veterans of the war present, each with incredible stories to tell. I was not the least bit hesitant in engaging as many in conversation as I could.



Army CW5 Brian Masterson awards Navy veteran Jack Benham a WWII medal and personalized certificate from the Military Affairs Committee.

Each one of them had individual stories of heroism and were able to bring home to me what actually took place at these incredible places.

For example there was one soldier who fought in the battle for Monte Casino in Italy. I had visited there and seeing the fortifications and the terrain I could only get a small idea of what these guys actually went through to capture that location.

I am fortunate enough to have been given a gun taken from a German officer in that battle which is one of my World War II treasures. It was given to me by one of my old radio listeners named Bernie Fienberg who survived the battle and was part of what I recall was the 3rd Army, where the term Dog Face originated. Bernie would call my show and use the name "Old Dog Face."

I met one Navy guy who served on an LST (Landing Ship Tank) and heard his fabulous stories. One guy had a jacket full of patches from his heroic days. He survived 25 bombing raids over Germany. As I recall, that was the most that the Air Force would allow because of the horrible statistic of any who flew more than that.

There were quite a few Marines there. (Don't ever call them Ex-Marines. They will tell you there is no such thing.)

Talking to some of the Navy guys who attacked the Japanese-held islands and suffered under the famous Kamikaze attacks made me sit up and take notice. One guy spent over a year on Peleliu, where some of the fiercest action in the Pacific took place.

When it finally became time to leave after stuffing my face with the great assortment of food that they had there, I began reviewing in my mind all of the incredible conversations that I had and realized that few people will ever get to hear these stories first-hand. Remember most of them were in their late eighties or mid-nineties and I frankly doubt that they will be around for many future awards ceremonies. I couldn't help it but tears came to my eyes and I began thinking once again of "The Greatest Generation" and how lucky I am to have at least gotten to know some of them. As little as it means I once again want to thank them all for the sacrifices.