

OUR TOWNS

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2 Local Veterans Wait For Wings

Gayville Legion Works To Send WWII Vets On 'Honor Flight' Journey To Washington

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Each year, Honor Flights take World War II veterans to Washington, D.C., to visit the city's memorials free of cost.

Two area veterans — Orvin Oien of Volin and Gerald Jepsen of rural Meckling — are among those who plan to attend one of the upcoming flights, courtesy of the Gayville Legion.

However, although the money has been raised with the help of benefits hosted by the Gayville Legion, neither man knows when the flight is going to happen.

"I called up there three times, and I can't get (anything) out of them," Oien said.

"They've been dragging this on so long I don't know if it's ever going to happen, really," Jepsen said.

The changing weather is also a concern.

"This is getting kind of late in the fall to be going to Washington," Jepsen said. "By the time we get there, it'll be who knows when. And we're getting to be a bunch of old whatever-you-want-to-call-it."

Due to some ongoing health problems, Jepsen is still waiting for confirmation that he will even be able to go. He said he's planning to bring one of his adult grandsons along to assist him should the need arise.

"If I have some problem getting around, he could help me, so I'd like to have a definite time so I could tell him when it would be," he said.

Oien is planning to bring his 13-year-old grandson. "It should mean something to him, I hope. He's been kind of interested in the stories I've had," he said.

Regardless of when the flight does take place, both men said they are looking forward to it.

"It's quite a deal," Oien said. "I'd like to see it."

The men served in different parts of the world during the war, Jepsen in the South Pacific and Oien in Europe.

Jepsen served on a troop transport. On his first trip, troops were unloaded at Okinawa, and several thousand Japanese prisoners of war were brought on. They were then transported to Pearl Harbor.

"I think the next time we were headed out to sea we ended up in the middle Pacific, and we ran into the tail-end of a typhoon that lasted 2 1/2 days," Jepsen said. All of the ship's water-tight

doors had to be closed, and luckily it didn't sink. However, there were problems with objects on board jarring loose during the storm. One of these was a refrigerator.

Jepsen, who was at that time serving as a metalsmith, said, "A buddy and I rigged a line down into that area there, and when the thing got to standing up where it belonged, I welded it down. ... We opened the door, and somehow, nothing was broken."

On another part of the ship, a piano broke loose.

"It was down in the mess hall, (moving) 50 feet from one side of the ship to the other," Jepsen said. "Some guys carried it up on one deck and threw it in the ocean. Thank God that was the only thing that happened."

Oien served as a frontline mechanic with the 90th Infantry Division, along with his friend Merrill DeWald of Wagner.

Oien said, "Some people have asked me, 'How many people did you shoot?' I didn't shoot anybody. I was working on trucks."

That's true, but the trucks he was working on happened to be in the middle of some major battles. In all, Oien received five Bronze Stars for serving in five major battles, along with a Bronze Arrowhead for spear-heading.

"We had 196 percent turnover due to death," he said. "That's a lot — second-largest in all the divisions that were over there."

One of Oien's duties was to prepare military vehicles for the 1944 D-Day invasion.

"We had to get (them) ready so they'd run under water," he said.

They were successful in this task, he said.

"(They) put the ramps down, and they drove off into the water, and the jeeps out there were about completely covered with water," Oien said. "I had a maintenance truck ... and I was in water up to my waist. We didn't lose any — luckily we didn't fall in a shell hole."

Once everything got up on the shore, it took two days before the vehicles could be driven on land again.

"We had everything waterproofed, and we had to get all that off," Oien said. "The engines would run too hot with all that stuff on them."

One of the things Oien remembers most vividly about the D-Day invasion of France is the planes.

"Boy, there were a lot of them," he said. "They just droned when they went over. They were dropping bombs there behind us. They weren't very far from us."

After D-Day, the 90th moved on to Metz, France, once encountering a "Big Bertha," a heavy-duty howitzer used by Germany. It was fired only once on them, as the Germans were afraid they would be seen by air if it was fired more.

"Shrapnel didn't land too far from where I was standing," Oien said. "Shrapnel was flying all over — some of it I'd hear buzz right by me. All you do is just stand there. You don't know what to do. I stood there and it hit the ground — ploop — there in the mud."

They also saw the battle at Falaise Gap, which resulted in more than 10,000 German casualties.

But during that battle, friendly fire was just as much of a concern for Oien.

Two American planes opened fire on him when he was driving an ammunition truck. Oien said he could see the bullets hit the ground beside the truck.

"One of them came down, the other one stayed up," he said.

"We had an anti-aircraft gun behind us, and they were firing on them, but they couldn't reach them. That guy must have gotten hit or something, because he crashed."

Oien said the plane went down just 10 feet above his truck.

"He missed the next truck, but he got the one up ahead of it," Oien said. "It killed five guys up there. I think they were just trying to jump out, and they got hit. It wasn't the gunfire. The plane hit these people."

Oien said he stayed with his vehicle, "but the friend I was with, he ran up there. One of them was laying under the truck. I don't know how he got under there. My friend picked him up and held him in his lap. He said, 'Help me, help me,' and he didn't have nothing inside of him. His insides were all gone, and he was still talking. That didn't last long."

Into the fall and winter, the 90th went to the Battle of the Bulge, following Gen. George S. Patton.

Oien said the cold posed one of the biggest threats to the troops, who had to sleep outside in eight inches of snow and a temperature of 10 below zero.

"A lot of people froze to death," he said. "They just hauled them out of there by truckloads."



KELLY HERTZ/P&D

World War II veteran Orvin Oien, Volin, displays some of the medals he received for service to his country. Arrangements are being made for Oien and another area veteran — Gerald Jepsen, of rural Meckling — to go on an Honor Flight in Washington, D.C.

the United States.

That Christmas, Oien remembers another near-miss when a German plane began circling overhead dropping hand-bombs by the kitchen trucks.

"Somebody must have (shot it down), because it crashed not even a block away from where I was standing," he said. "It hit this tree right at the base, so that's a definite stop. And then of course it broke out in flames. Shells started going off."

Not far away stood a house, out of which ran a woman who wanted to help the pilot get out of the plane.

"My buddy that could speak a little bit of German told her to get back in the house and stay there so she wouldn't get hurt," Oien said. "Those bullets were flying all over. That was a Christmas dinner I'll never forget."

Eventually, Oien ended up in Czechoslovakia. Shortly after arriving, he was listening to the radio in his truck.

"There was this lady who had a house not too far from where I had my truck parked," Oien said. "She came out of the house and was listening to that radio that I had on. I was going to change stations because I couldn't understand it, but she (motioned) that she didn't want me to change it. ... Finally, she got the word to us that the war had ended."

After spending 28 days in Paris recuperating from back injuries, Oien was sent back to

Day veterans by Normandy, France.

"They wanted to do something for the veterans," he said. "I had to go out to Fort Meade National Cemetery to get that. John Thune presented that to me."

Oien said the presentation was "real impressive." "I felt kind of honored, I guess," he said.

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HONORS OF THE DAY

The Gayville American Legion Post No. 237 held a brief Veteran's Day ceremony Wednesday at the war memorial. An honor squad fired a 21-shot salute to the fallen, followed by the playing of "Taps." About a dozen people attended the event. (Kelly Hertz/P&D)

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