

Honored for a dream that took flight

Written by KRISTYN HALBIG ZIEHM
Wednesday, 12 June 2013 18:42 -

<http://www.ozaukeepress.com/images/061313/honorSM.png> **Five years ago, Joe and Jane Dean** launched the Stars and Stripes Honor Flight program to fly veterans to the World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C. On Tuesday, they were recognized with prestigious Rotary Club awards and by Gov. Scott Walker for a mission accomplished.

Five years ago, Joe Dean had a dream — to fly World War II veterans from southeastern Wisconsin to see the memorial built in their honor in Washington, D.C., at no cost to them.

The Port Washington man and his wife Jane worked tirelessly to make that dream a reality, forming the Stars and Stripes Honor Flight, which has taken almost 2,700 veterans to the nation's capital since November 2008.

Their group inspired a documentary that's won national awards, and the movie's premiere at Miller Park in Milwaukee set a Guinness world record for attendance at a film screening.

And the Stars and Stripes Honor Flight has helped numerous other Wisconsin honor flight hubs organize.



“Never underestimate the power of one person to make a difference, and the power of positive thinking,” said Renee Riddle, a member of the Stars and Stripes Honor Flight board of directors.

“Joe Dean is a force of nature. We are where we are because of his sheer will and willingness to do anything to make it work. He has a unique ability to make other people believe in something and to think big.”

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Lest anyone question how important Dean is to the Honor Flight, just ask Joe Demler, a Port Washington veteran who took the inaugural trip with the group.

“It’s one of the greatest things to happen in my life,” he said. “It meant everything to me to go on the Honor Flight.

“And he (Dean) means everything to the Honor Flight. He puts his body and soul and everything into it.”

Dean, who stepped down as chairman of the board on Memorial Day, and his wife, who remains the group’s first vice chairman, were feted by the Port Washington-Saukville Rotary Club, which awarded each of them the prestigious Service Above Self award and a Paul Harris Fellow recognition.

Gov. Scott Walker, a longtime friend of the Deans, was also awarded a Paul Harris Fellow by the club.

Both awards honor people who have provided exemplary service to their community. Rotary District 6270 Gov. Rick Debe noted that the Service Above Self is an honor “given very rarely.”

“We feel you have gone well beyond what is expected,” he told the Deans. “You exemplify the very best.”

Club President Ruth Lansing, who nominated the couple for the awards, said the fellowship is seldom given to people who aren’t Rotarians, although clubs are encouraged to recognize people who have made an impact on their community.

“When it’s given to someone in the community, it’s because they did something substantial,” she said.

In recognition of the fellowship, the Port-Saukville Rotary made a donation to the Rotary International Fund on behalf of the Deans, Lansing said, while a club member made a donation to the fund on behalf of the governor.

Lansing, who went on a Stars and Stripes Honor Flight trip in 2009, said “it was just an amazing experience for me personally.”

“I just really wanted our club to recognize the efforts of Joe and Jane,” she said. “What they’ve done is outstanding. They’ve given so much of their time and energy and compassion to this effort. And when I proposed it to the club, everyone agreed.”

The idea for the Stars and Stripes Honor Flight came when Joe Dean — whose father David served in the Navy during World War II — saw a news program on the inception of the Honor Flight.

He said he thought someone should start a chapter in southeastern Wisconsin, and woke the

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following day committed to the challenge.

He called “the busiest people he knew,” and they formed the nucleus of the Stars and Stripes Honor Flight. By the group’s second meeting, with only \$250 in the bank, it booked its first flight.



That trip on Nov. 19, 2008, sent 70 veterans to the nation’s capital.

While that would have been enough for some people, it wasn’t for the Deans and the board of directors. They saw how much the trip meant to the veterans, and vowed to continue until they provided an Honor Flight for every WWII vet who wanted to take one.

That goal was reached Saturday, when the 18th Honor Flight took off. Of the 109 veterans on the Honor Flight, nine were Korean War veterans — the beginning of the organization’s new mission to provide trips to veterans who served in that conflict.

It’s been a long, rewarding ride, Riddle said.

“Joe has been so pivotal in all things Stars and Stripes Honor Flight,” she said. “In the beginning, it was all Joe and Jane at their kitchen table, getting everything organized. I think Jane and Joe have done every job associated with the Honor Flight.

“When all of us had doubts, Joe didn’t. He has an extraordinary vision, and a way to make that vision become reality.”

That vision sometimes seemed audacious, like when Dean suggested they charter 747s for the flights so they could accommodate more veterans, she said. Or when he proposed renting Miller Park for the premiere of the documentary “Honor Flight” and trying to set a world record for attendance.

“Sometimes, we sit back and go, ‘Did we just do that?’” Riddle said.

In addition to being a tireless advocate for the Honor Flight and the face of the Stars and Stripes hub, Dean has helped raise significant amount of money to help finance it.

His wife has taken on a more of a behind-the-scenes role, Riddle said. She handles phone calls and e-mail for the organization, a huge job in itself, but her most visible role is working on the mail call — organizing all the thank you letters and notes from veterans’ families and friends

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that they receive on the flight home — with fellow board member Liane Baranek.

“We call them the magical mail call ladies,” Riddle said. “Even if someone gets added to the flight the night before it leaves, they make sure they have letters for mail call. They’ll e-mail people, family members, and print it out. They’ll meet people at the airport and pick up the mail.

“The mail call means so much to these veterans.”

The decision to step down from the Stars and Stripes Honor Flight seemed like the right one, Joe Dean said.

“After five years, we resolved our waiting list of World War II veterans, so Operation Resolve became Operation Resolved,” Dean said. “It was simply time for me to move on.

“We have an extraordinary team in place, and I know they’ll continue to be successful.”

Riddle said Dean recognized he needed to step back to prevent burning out.

“He needed to stop thinking about it 24-7,” she said, noting it isn’t unusual for Dean to send out mass e-mails to board members at all hours of the night.

Dean said he will continue to work on projects for the Stars and Stripes Honor Flight.

He’s already working on one — a coffee-table book of photographs taken on the Honor flight trips, Riddle said. Half the proceeds from the book will go to the Stars and Stripes Honor Flight and half to the Fisher House.

“It’s like a Ronald McDonald House for the VA,” Riddle said of the Fisher House, which is expected to be built next year and opened in 2014. “We want to make sure they have enough funding.”

But Dean’s influence won’t end there, Riddle said. For example, she said, the film “Honor Flight” has prompted new hubs to be started across the country.

“I think we’re just starting to see the effect,” she said. “Everyone has just embraced this culture Joe built, and it will endure. That’s an awesome legacy.”

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Image Information: GOV. SCOTT WALKER (left) presented a State of Wisconsin citation to Jane and Joe Dean for founding and leading the Stars and Stripes Honor Flight program during a Port Washington-Saukville Rotary Club event honoring the couple at the Ozaukee County Courthouse Tuesday night. Photo by Sam Arendt

(Bottom photo) LOCAL VETERANS POSED for an Ozaukee Press photographer at the World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C., during the inaugural Stars and Stripes Honor Flight trip on Nov. 19, 2008. Ozaukee Press file photo