

SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS

Local

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Nearly 20 veterans rose Wednesday as about 50 civic leaders and community members applauded during the launch of an exhibit known as the "Hall of Heroes" at the Veterans Memorial Building.

"We applaud you and we say "Thank you," Peter Bie, president of the Santa Barbara chapter of Vietnam Veterans of America, told the veterans.

The new exhibit features framed displays for each of about 100 local veterans from the various military branches, including the Merchant Marine and the Women Airforce Service Pilots.

Featured veterans include those who served in World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, Bosnia, Iraq and Afghanistan, according to John Blankenship, founder of the Pierre Claeysens Veterans Museum and Library, in a statement to the News-Press. "It's a tribute to all veterans and we're very proud of it," said Mr. Blankenship, who, along with wife, Hazel Blankenship, has been working on the \$225,000 exhibit for the past eight years. "It's taken me eight years to sort of get it assembled and work on it," Mr. Blankenship said, adding some veterans were hesitant to hang their stripes on the wall.

"These men and women deserve no less than the very best this country has to offer, especially since it is we that send them into harm's way," Mr. Bie said.

The exhibit was made possible in part through a \$1 million donation from war veteran and Santa Barbara



Fred Lopez, a retired Marine Corps general, views displays in the Hall of Heroes on Wednesday at the Santa Barbara Veterans Memorial Building.



Retired Army Sgt. Maj. Robert Forties, who served with the 82nd Airborne Division in the Normandy invasion during World War II, presents plaques to Santa Barbara County supervisors for restoring a Veterans' Services Program officer.
STEVE MALONE/NEWS-PRESS

philanthropist Pierre Claeysens, who in 2001 entrusted the money to John W. Blankenship to found the Pierre Claeysens Veterans Museum and Library, Hazel Blankenship, a member of the museum's executive committee, told the News-Press.

The branch of each veteran is easily identifiable thanks to the color-coded frames. The medals and photographs of the servicemen and women were framed by Richard Wagner of Frame Maker on Chapala Street.

Included in the "Hall of Heroes" is a painting of local paratroopers who landed in Normandy during World War II, said Mr. Blankenship, whose uncle, Charlie Blankenship, was among those paratroopers who died that fateful June in 1944. "Thank God it was instantly, but all his ammunition went off and his explosives," Mr. Blankenship said. "So, this is a tribute to all of them."

The Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors last month voted unanimously to restore a Veterans' Services Program position that had previously been eliminated due to budget woes. Consequently, the supervisors were recognized during the exhibit launch by the Pierre Claeysens Veterans Museum and Library, which represents more than 35,000 veterans in Santa Barbara County.

"As a veteran, obviously it gives me much joy that we are able to not only restore the position that we were deficient in, but to actually augment it to its full capacity that we were at over a year ago," said First District Supervisor Salud Carbajal, who served as a Marine Corps sergeant during Desert Storm. The Board of Supervisors, he said, needs to continue to fight for veterans, as they "have and continue to pay a high price" for freedom. "We need to be responsible when (veterans) come back - to be able to provide them the support that they need to continue to live full and productive lives."

There are now three Veterans' Services officers in Santa Barbara County, Mary O'Gorman, chief of staff for 2nd District Supervisor Janet Wolf, told the News-Press.

Mo McFadden, spokeswoman for the Pierre Claeysens Veterans Museum and Library, said she has seen a number of museums dedicated to commemorating veterans of a specific military branch, but Pierre Claeysens is one of the few that recognized veterans across the branches.

"That's what makes this different," she said. "This is the big picture."