

Iwo Jima veterans honored

Luncheon marks 70th anniversary of savage World War II battle

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On Feb. 19, 1945, thousands of members of the U.S. armed forces stormed the beaches of Iwo Jima.

Among them were Cpl. Benedict E. Bellefeuille, Cpl. Joseph Hale and Lt. Col. Bob Beckham, all of the Marine Corps, and Petty Officer 2nd Class Kenneth E. Morehouse of the Navy.

On Thursday, the four veterans sat on stage at Fess Parker's Doubletree Resort to be honored for their service. They accepted the honors with humility and in solemn remembrance of the friends and comrades they saw perish.

The Pierre Claeysens Veterans Foundation, in collaboration with the Channel City Club, hosted the luncheon, called "70 Years On: Sands of Iwo Jima." The foundation also acknowledged five additional Iwo Jima veterans: Cpl. Karl Apel; Dr. Robert Meghreblian; William Swanson; and Ken Whitney. All stood for a round of applause at the beginning of the presentation. Cpl. William Wayne of Orange County was not able to attend the luncheon.

Retired Marine Brig. Gen. Frederick Lopez, who served in Vietnam, related the importance of recognizing the service of the World War II veterans.

"Their valor, courage, sacrifice and just the willingness to succeed set a new baseline, a new standard for all of us that wear the Eagle, Globe

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An event marking the 70th anniversary of the Battle of Iwo Jima included local residents who are veterans of the fight, seated from left, Marine Cpl. Joseph Hale; Navy Petty Officer 2nd Class Kenneth E. Morehouse; Marine Lt. Col. Bob Beckham; and Marine Cpl. Benedict E. Bellefeuille. Standing, from left, are retired Navy Lt. Stephen Penner, retired Marine Brig. Gen. Frederick Lopez, and retired Air Force Col. Phil Conran, who are presenting honors to the Iwo Jima veterans.

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and Anchor," Brig. Gen. Lopez said, referring to the emblem of the Marine Corps. "We owe them a great deal of gratitude, one that can never be repaid."

The Battle of Iwo Jima was the deadliest combat mission in the history of the United States Marine Corps, as more than 6,800 of its members were killed in action. Of the 27 Medals of Honor that were awarded on Iwo Jima, 22 went to Marines and five went to Navy sailors.

As a pharmacist's mate in the Navy, Petty Officer Morehouse tended to the countless Marines who were wounded during the battle.

When the American flag was raised atop Mount Suribachi on Feb. 23, 1945, a moment immortalized in a famous photograph, Petty Officer Morehouse was amputating a young Marine's arm with a pair of scissors. He expressed reluctant gratitude for his honor.

"It was really a nice program," he said. "Everybody's been so good."

Brig. Gen. Lopez, along with fellow Vietnam veterans Col. Phil Conran and Lt. Stephen E. Penner, gave an extensive overview of the history of the battle, including the strategic implications that led up to it and the impact it had on the war.

The general spoke about the perseverance of both the U.S. and Japanese soldiers, the latter of whom were instructed to fight to the death to defend the island. About 19,000 Japanese soldiers were killed.

"This was their homeland," he said. "This was a matter of honor, that they defend this island."

After receiving his plaque and sitting through multiple rounds of applause, Cpl. Bellefeuille had tears in his eyes.

"It's overwhelming," he said.

While Cpl. Hale appreciated the honor, but remained modest about his service.

"I don't really think I deserve it," he said.

After the presentation, many attendees took the opportunity to shake the veterans' hands.

"We revere these men and will to the end of their days," Brig. Gen. Lopez said.