

SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS

Local

70th anniversary of key WWII battles marked

By HANNAH RAEL NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT

August 17, 2012 6:07 AM

Two World War II battles waged 70 years ago forever changed the course of history, an attentive audience was reminded Thursday night at the Santa Barbara Maritime Museum.

In cooperation with the Pierre Claeysens Veterans Museum, more than 100 people - many of them veterans - honored the memories of those who fought in the crucial 1942 battles of Midway and Guadalcanal.

"(The battles) were the turning point in the war of the Pacific. They started the process on the road to Tokyo," Navy Lt. John Blankenship, founding director of the Veterans Museum, told the crowd.

The event, featuring informative video and oral presentations, recognized the 70th anniversary of both battles and honored the memories of those who fought.

Two featured guests who saw combat at Guadalcanal were present Thursday. Marine Col. Paul Dupre, 98, and Marine Col. Harvey S. Walseth, 100, were on hand to recount their experiences.

"It brought back many memories," Mr. Dupre told the News-Press. "I hope people will take away the sacrifices and difficult times we knew."

Lt. Blankenship and Marine Brig. Gen. Frederick Lopez presented accounts of each battle.

"Japan believed their navy was invincible and could not be beat. They had never lost a battle in history," said Lt. Blankenship of the precedent set before the Battle of Midway.

He said the U.S. needed a victory to prove the Japanese were not invincible, but the Japanese had the strongest weapon at the time, the kido butai, a fast attack carrier group with aircraft.

"(Isoruko Yamamoto) truly believed we had no stomach to fight them," said Lt. Blankenship of the commander-in-chief of the Japanese combined fleet. "He believed in the intentions of America, not our capabilities, and that was a major flaw."

While their weapons were strong, they were not without weaknesses, said Lt. Blankenship. Their only allies - Germany and Italy - were far away and they had put all their resources in their navy and not in an army. He said they were also not very industrialized and were unprepared for global war.

The U.S. considered Midway Island vital, a key location to prevent invasion of Hawaii. The island also allowed submarines from Pearl Harbor to refuel and reposition.

When the Japanese launched attack at 4:30 a.m. June 4, 1942, they did not know that the American military, under Adm. Chester Nimitz, had intercepted their radio communications and broken their code. Adm. Nimitz knew the date and place of attack, set up an ambush and stopped and sunk the entire kido butai.

U.S. installations on the island were destroyed, but the Allies emerged victorious. The results caused Winston Churchill to comment "It's not the beginning of the end, but it is the end of the beginning," according to Lt. Blankenship.



Navy Lt. John W. Blankenship explains the history behind the battles of Midway and Guadalcanal. Seated nearby are Paul Dupre, left, and Harvey S. Walseth, Marines who fought at Guadalcanal.

MIKE ELIASON/NEWS-PRESS

Brig. Gen. Lopez said, "Midway significantly reduced the offensive capability of Japan's carrier forces."

Just two months after the Battle of Midway, combat began on the island of Guadalcanal, located in the Solomon Islands, a protectorate of Great Britain at the time. Japan had been constructing airfields there to threaten northeastern Australia.

While the Battle of Midway was over in a day, Guadalcanal lasted nearly half a year. The fight began Aug. 7, 1942, and lasted until Feb. 9, 1943.

The jungle environment, consisting of rugged terrain, swamps and rivers, fragmented the units and made it hard to fight as a unified force. The surroundings did more than complicate combat. The conditions were so dire that 9,000 Japanese died from disease alone.

Mr. Dupre told the News-Press he will never forget the mosquitoes with "voracious appetites" that plagued Marines and soldiers.

He said that during Japanese air raids, they would have to take cover in holes they dug. Often, the holes were filled with water due to frequent rainfall, making the six-month-long battle one of endurance.

When the battle finally concluded, the Allied forces had proven they could take the offensive against the once-strong Japanese, who had suffered serious losses that affected the outcome of the war.

Members of the audience left with new knowledge and reverence for the stories of battle and men who fought in them.

Jack Harris, a board member of the Pierre Claeysens museum and a World War II veteran, said he enjoyed seeing the actual footage from two major battles. Aside from fueling his general interest in World War II history, he said the event provided a chance to do more.

"I came to support the effort for recognition of veterans and what they did for us from World War II on," Mr. Harris told the News-Press.