

30 DAYS OF HONOR ★ *A Salute to Local Vets*

Called quickly into duty

Ralph Swanson drafted to serve in WWII shortly after graduating college

By Dan Richter

For Gannett Central Wisconsin Media

Originally from Iron Mountain, Michigan, Ralph Swanson was drafted into the Army Corps of Engineers immediately upon graduating college at the age of 22.

"I was at my graduation from Michigan Tech, got my diploma and in the next line I was told I had three days to get my affairs in order and report to Fort Sheridan for duty," said Swanson. "Weeks later, when we passed the Statue of Liberty on our way out of New York Harbor, I thought I'd never see it again."

Now living in the community of Winchester in Vilas County, Swanson, 94, recently talked about repairing roads and minesweeping in Europe and Africa and going on the Honor Flight in 2012 with his wife, Harriet, who was profiled in Sunday's edition of 30 Days of Honor.

Q: What did you do in the service and where were you stationed?

A: I was stationed in England, north Africa and Italy. We had to repair roads so they could get equipment through, we built bridges and we swept for mines. Through one pass in Italy, we found 33,000 mines. We didn't think anything bad would ever happen to us because we were young, but we still had some awful experiences. Being in rain for days, wearing wet clothes, sleeping in wet pup tents.

Q: What is your most enduring memory from your time in the service?

A: In Italy, near Florence, our captain asked if anyone would volunteer to take a blood bank through the front lines, so I said I'd do it. We loaded the blood bank onto an equipment trailer and we started across the Ponte Vecchio, a bridge built hundreds of years ago. It was midnight and after we crossed the bridge, we had to find our way through without setting off any mines. At one point, we heard something blow up near us and we didn't know what it was.

Q: What do you most want people to know about the conflict in which you served?

A: When we came back, no one knew what we'd seen or been exposed to. Everyone was busy with their own affairs, so we just melted back into society and let it go at that. I hoped we could avoid any future wars because there were millions of men who died in the war.

I just think of all the little kids and the people living in Japan, how they were trying to defend their own country. The dropping of the bomb was terrible, but I can't imagine how many lives that bomb actually saved.

Q: Tell us about your life after the service and how your time in the military affected your civilian life.

A: I was hired almost immediately by a paper company and was given a job in northern Wisconsin running a logging camp. They still had horses moving the lumber and small trucks and graders making ice roads. My degree was in forestry, so I always gravitated toward logging and the removal of trees. Eventually, I went to Wisconsin Rapids because they had a new pulp mill called Consolidated Papers Inc., which was later bought by Stora Enso. In 1972, I was picked to run the timberlands department, which covered 300,000 acres of land, and later retired after 39 years with the company.

Q: What did going on the Honor Flight mean to you?

A: It was an emotional day. Everyone on that flight shared a similar experience, and it bonds you. I spent some time talking with the other men on the flight about what they'd seen and done. And I got to go on the flight with my wife, who also served, so that meant a lot.

ABOUT RALPH SWANSON

Age: 94

Residence: Winchester

Conflict involved in:

World War II

Military branch: United

States Army Corps of

Engineers

Years of service: 1942

to 1946

Rank upon discharge:

Captain



CONTRIBUTED
Ralph Swanson is shown in his military uniform.



DAN YOUNG/GANNETT
CENTRAL WISCONSIN
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Ralph Swanson at
his Winchester
home.



A FLIGHT TO NEVER FORGET

The Central Wisconsin chapter of Never Forgotten Honor Flight celebrates its fifth anniversary this spring. Since April 2010, the Honor Flight program has taken more than 1,700 veterans of World War II, Korea and Vietnam from Central Wisconsin Airport to Washington, D.C., to view the memorials built in honor of their service.

30 Days of Honor is a project of Gannett Central Wisconsin Media to profile veterans who have taken an Honor Flight, or are scheduled, and to encourage more veterans to do so. Profiles will appear each day April 26 through Memorial Day.

Veterans may apply for a free Honor Flight (or loved ones may apply for them) by filling out an application. The only qualification for a veteran to take an Honor Flight is to have served in any branch of the U.S. military during the periods of World War II, the Korean War or Vietnam War. Veterans do not have to have been in combat. The applications and more information are available at <http://www.neverforgottenhonorflight.org>

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