

Honor Flight organizers make thanking WWII vets their mission

By Robert Mentzer • Wausau Daily Herald •
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Two men who worked tirelessly to honor central Wisconsin's World War II veterans with fully funded trips to view a national memorial have been named the Wausau Daily Herald's 2010 Persons of the Year.

The newspaper's Editorial Board chose Jim Campbell and Mike Thompson for the annual recognition from among dozens of nominees and 10 finalists.

Campbell and Thompson founded the Never Forgotten Honor Flight program, which this year flew hundreds of local veterans on day trips to the National World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C. For those veterans, along with their families and the many community members who helped to make the flights possible, the experience was deeply moving.

"We are very humbled," said Thompson, 60, of Lake DuBay.

The two have been working since the fall of 2009 to create a local chapter of the nationwide Honor Flight Network. In April and again in October, the local efforts literally took wing.

One of the veterans who made the journey this year, Robert Tierney, 85, of Wausau, was among several community members who nominated Thompson and Campbell for the award.

"To me, the program they put on was absolutely flawless," Tierney said.

Tierney had been scheduled to take the first flight in April, but health problems interfered. Campbell called him, he said, to tell him that he would be first on the list for the October flight.

The experience of the flight "brought a few tears to a lot of old vets," Tierney wrote in his nomination.

The veterans on the flights, Campbell said, are "so appreciative."

"They keep thanking us and thanking us," he said. "We say, 'Stop doing that! We're doing this for you!'"

Tierney said he felt the support of the entire community when he saw that hundreds of people had shown up at Central Wisconsin Airport in Mosinee, both to see off the Honor Flight and to welcome the veterans back home.

"I was amazed at the number of people there," Tierney said. "These young kids (Boy Scouts), 11 to 15 years old, they came up and saluted. That was emotional."

Thompson and Campbell spent thousands of hours in preparation for the first flight, and they continue to rally support for the organization, speaking with community groups, business leaders and school groups about what they're doing, and why. They have two more flights planned for next spring, and at least one in the fall.

And they're focused on the reasons why. According to 2008 statistics from the Department of Veterans Affairs, about 1,000 World War II veterans die each day.

"We know the urgency of our mission," Campbell said.

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Jim Campbell, left, and Mike Thompson, the organizers of central Wisconsin's Never Forgotten Honor Flight program, were selected as the 2010 Wausau Daily Herald Persons of the Year. (Corey Schjoth/Wausau Daily Herald)

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