

LOCAL NEWS

Lessons from World War II

Veterans share experiences with students

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Lincoln Middle School students heard some personal experiences from two Battle of the Bulge veterans and got an up close look at World War II artifacts Friday. The veterans were a part of a presentation given by re-enactors from the 2nd Ranger Infantry Battalion of St. Louis.

Jeff Germer, an Edwardsville resident and volunteer for the 2nd Ranger Infantry Battalion in St. Louis, explained that their organization's primary purpose was to honor the veterans and educate the public. "We're continuing the message," Germer said.

Pointing out that just last week they had lost a local veteran from Caseyville he added, "These gentlemen are passing away and we're kind of carrying the flag for them. It's a way of educating the public about what they've done and the sacrifice and the valor."

The 2nd Ranger Infantry Battalion members use a collection of articles (clothing, location, weapons, hair style, etc.) that represents a person in a specific historical time period to make, what they call, an "impression." Using this "impression" they live the history of that era speaking to the students.

Germer accompanied by volunteers John Bell (Granite City), Brian Stacks (Bethalto), Patrick Bennett (O'Fallon), Mike Lavin (St. Louis), and David Paterline (Mascoutah) demonstrated to the students in different "impressions" the equipment and attire that individual soldiers wore during the war and the importance of each one. The presenters showed and explained to the students a variety of actual equipment used including boots, tents, jackets, helmets and artillery. The students also viewed displays of items that the soldiers would have valued during their days at war such as pictures of their families, sticks of gum, razors, bandages and a pack of cigarettes.

"What you see here is what people have collected over the years," Germer said.

Patterline, doing a British impression, gave an in depth look into the soldiers of the U.S. ally while Lavin, in a German impression, told about life as a German soldier. Lavin also spoke about his time serving the U.S. in Germany and also during the Vietnam War saying that "military life changed my life profoundly."

Although this was the first time the group had presented a program about World War II in Edwardsville, Germer, having an eighth grade daughter at Lincoln, was especially pleased to be part of the day's presentation.

Germer was quick to point out, however, that he was not a veteran and, in fact, had not served in the military but was extremely interested in the country's history and hoped to pass that interest along to the next generation. "We try to encourage kids to get interested in history," he said.

World War II veterans Kent Stephens, Billy Stiegemeier and Speed Barton were also at the presentation. Both Stephens, from Glen Carbon, and Stiegemeier, from Staunton, spoke about details of the Battle of Bulge which they experienced as soldiers.

Stephens pointed out the great sacrifice that both sides had made noting that "America lost over 80,000



Jeff Germer, portraying a U.S. Army Ranger from World War II, informs students at Lincoln Middle School about the history of items on display following a presentation Friday. Photo by Marci Winters-McLaughlin.

killed/wounded and Germany suffered over 100,000 casualties.”

Stiegemeier noted that the Battle of the Bulge was “the coldest and bloodiest battle of World War II” He estimated that the wind chill during the battle was well below a negative 18.

Stiegemeier illustrated the point of the significant loss of life saying that “I graduated from an ammo carrier to a head gunner in 24 hours because of the casualties that we lost in that short of time.”

He explained to the students how difficult life was in those days. “I was 54 days without a bath, and in fact, I was 130 days without a bed,” Stiegemeier said. “If we got a real good chance to find a hayloft, that was a good bed for us.” The majority of the time they spent days and nights in a fox hole that they had dug or a barn.

Stiegemeier emphasized the importance of World War II by telling the students, “As they say, freedom isn’t free. For goodness sake you guys need to remember that that flag represents freedom.”

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