

Holland vet chosen to lay wreath at WWI Memorial in Washington D.C. this weekend

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James Van Splunder of Holland will play a special part in Memorial Day services next Monday in Washington D.C. The 91-year-old World War II veteran has been chosen to represent all the veterans from that war and place a wreath at the National World War II Memorial during the ceremony.

"The whole family is excited," Van Splunder said.

They are not the only ones. Along with the 35 expected family members coming in from all over the country to join him, the Holland American Legion will charter a bus with 36 people from town to attend.

"It's one hell of an honor. It really is," said Gary Kingston, commander of the Legion. "I just got goose bumps when I heard the news."

The honor came through Van Splunder's son, Timothy, a retired Air Force colonel. Tim was at a military class reunion when a former classmate who is in charge of finding people for such ceremonies, asked if anyone had a parent involved in World War II. Tim was one of only two people to raise their hands. He was asked to contact his father to see if he would be interested in making the trip.

Van Splunder's wife, Ruth, said the call came a few months ago. She, too, was elated to hear the news and said her husband accepted right away.

"It was awesome," she said. "I'm a dyed in the wool patriotic person...it was so exciting. It's a great honor for him."

Van Splunder joined the Merchant Marine in October of 1941, and stayed until 1946. Originally stationed at Sheepshead Bay in Brooklyn, he would eventually travel the world. In fact, he would circumnavigate the globe in 1945 during a six-month tour aboard the SS Santa Clara Victory. He started in New Jersey, went through the Panama Canal, was held over in the Philippines for some time, and then went through the Suez Canal and back home.

His first tour overseas was in 1943 on an ammunition supply ship, with the Strait of Gibraltar as the first destination. Along the way he said it was calm sailing, but the ship was regularly turning, zigzagging every few minutes to avoid detection from enemy submarines. When they reached Europe, he recalled one incident where the Nazi front was preparing to attack the ships, but a huge storm came through and pushed them back.

During that first trip, he says his ship secretly picked up some French dignitaries, including General Charles de Gaulle, who would later become prime minister. The passengers were taken to Algiers to meet with African forces.

Van Splunder said he enjoyed his service most of the time. He noted that he always had two meals a day, and he was able to visit different countries and see the landscapes and architecture.

But being wartime, there were problems and close calls. The Merchant Marine lost 738 ships during the battles, he said. Many were slow moving cargo ships, easy targets for the submarines.

"It was quite a war, I'll tell you that," he said.

After his time with the Merchant Marine, he would meet his wife, Ruth. The couple has been married for 67 years. He worked as an electrician for several companies, and was involved with wiring the buildings for the Lake Placid Olympics in 1980.

He's also been quite active throughout the Holland community. A member of the Holland Kiwanis for 56-years, he volunteered for many years with the town's summer youth recreation program and he takes time to speak with Boy Scouts and students about his time in service.

Several people noted that Van Splunder may have slowed down a little with his age, but he still tries to help out with town activities when possible. Kingston said he was in town one day a few years ago when he saw Van Splunder helping the Highway Department hang flags.

"He's always been up to help everyone," Kingston said.

Kingston has been a Legion member for 34 years, the last 24 with Holland, and he said he has never known anyone in the area to be involved with such an important ceremony. He said Van Splunder is deserving of the recognition, and he's looking forward to this weekend's trip to Washington D.C. After the ceremony, the group will tour the U.S. Capitol building.

"We're thrilled with the community of Holland at how many people are going down on the bus," Ruth said. "It's quite an honor to think about that — that people want to share in this."

The ceremony starts at 9:00 a.m. on Monday, May 27. Van Splunder said his two sons, Timothy and James, who both served on submarines with the Navy, would stand at his side. He is proud to have the honor of placing the wreath at the memorial, and also proud that his family will be there with him.