THE DAILY —DISPATCH

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VICTORY ON PARADE

Legion family members commemorate the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II – and Indianapolis turns out to participate in the salute

It was 9:04 a.m., Sept. 2, 1945. Japanese government officials stepped forward on the deck of the *USS Missouri* and signed the surrender document, officially bringing the most catastrophic war in history to a close.

Fifty years later at the same time and date, the 54-bell carillon at the Scottish Rite Cathedral in Indianapolis began to ring, recalling that historic moment aboard the *Missouri*. Later in the day, thousands of American Legion family members and spectators stood beneath a blue canopy of sky and remembered the American men and women who served, fought and died in World War II.

"Kilroy" was everywhere at The American Legion's 77th National Convention Parade. WW II veterans were at the head of the parade, waving tiny American flags and to the crowd who turned out to honor them. They ranged from Walter Palmer, who flew with the African-American Tuskeegee Airmen in Europe, to women who served in the various military service branches.

"We love you guys! We'll never forget what you did for us!" a young woman spectator shouted to a bus filled with WW II veterans from a local VA hospital.

There was a float depicting the *USS Indianapolis* – the heavy cruiser that was sunk by a Japanese submarine after delivering atomic bomb parts to the island of Tinian during the closing days of the war – and a variety of tanks and other armored vehicles, courtesy of local collector Fred Ropkey.

And Gen. Douglas MacArthur did return, this time in the form of a re-enactor, snapping a salute to National Commander William Detweiler and other dignitaries on the reviewing stand. Other re-enactors wore the uniforms and carried the weapons of all service branches.

Indiana Legionnaire Max Loy, Post 222 in Flora, Ind., was attending his first National Convention Parade, and came down early to view the display of vintage military equipment near American Legion National Headquarters.

Loy served as electrician's mate, second class, aboard the amphibious landing craft *USS Harry Lee* (AP-10). He took part in the invasion of Sicily in July 1943, and later at "Bloody Tarawa" in the Pacific theater.

"I wanted to come see the guys parade one last time because this is it for a lot of us," said Loy. In Philadelphia on V-J Day, Loy recalls having a great time, though the details escape him.

Another veteran at Saturday's parade scene was concerned too many younger Americans won't remember the lessons of World War II, or be taught them. As he watched the parade swing down Meridian Street, Florida Legionnaire Melvin Pfohl seemed to recall past parades he's attended the past 20 years.

"This is great, it's a wake-up call to people that they've got to get out and support those who served," said Pfohl, a member of Post 273, Madeira Beach, Fla.

Pfohl, a National assistant Sergeant-at-Arms at every convention since 1974, served in the 519th Port Battalion during the D-Day landings, and later helped supply troops with equipment and other gear through the port of Antwerp, Belgium.

LIGHT MUSIC: SkyConcert '95 drew thousands of Legionnaires and their families to the dowtown area.

The old soldier would like to fall in and join his fellow veterans on the march route, but the years have winded him.

"I can't march because my lungs won't let me," said Pfohl.

American Legion Department contingents also were in the parade, as were marching bands, drill units and a variety of floats.

Several hours later, SkyConcert '95 lighted up the night skies over Indianapolis, featuring a synchronized fireworks and music show. Legion family members gathered near The American Legion Mall at National Headquarters and at Roudebush VA Medical Center, the latter location being a front-row seat from where the fireworks were launched. At the end of the show, spotlights forming the letter "V," signifying the Allied victory over the Axis powers, reminded spectators what the special day was all about. But American Legionnaires and their families didn't need a reminder.

Sept. 2, 1945, will forever be in their memories. ❑

VA's top doc: Health care at crossroads

The VA should heed the lessons the railroad industry learned too late, the VA's chief medical officer cautioned Legionnaires Friday.

"We have to get out of the mindset we're just in the hospital business," said Dr. Kenneth Kizer, undersecretary for health with the Veterans Health Administration. In viewing VA's future, Kizer cited the choices faced by the nation's railroad industry in the early 1900s at the advent of the automobile age.

"They had to answer one question: are we in the railroad business or are we in the transportation business? They decided they were in the railroad business and you know the result," said Kizer. The changes in eligibility and funding needed to make VA competitive with commerical health-care providers make the railroad analogy one veterans should keep in mind, he said.

"So we have to ask ourselves, are we in the managed care business? Are we in the hospital business? Are we in the outpatient business? We're in the health-care business. Our job is providing care to veterans in a user-friendly, accessible manner at a reasonable price, not running hospitals," said Kizer.

Kizer admitted the VA faces a "critical juncture" as lawmakers, administrators, health industry professionals and veterans service organizations try to position the department to meet veterans health-care needs in the 21st Century.

Though Kizer danced around the obvious, other VA officials have hinted that without reform or additional funding sources, the VA will be forced to close facilities, chop staff and turn away more veterans seeking care.

The former U.S. Navy diver and diving medical officer is responsible for managing the nation's largest health-care system, with 171 medical centers, 360 outpatient clinics, 130 nursing care facilities, 35 domiciliaries and various other special treatment facilities.

"We're in the health-care business. Our job is providing care to veterans in a user-friendly, accessible manner at a reasonable price, not running hospitals."

Allowing the VA to compete in an incentive, market-based environment requires a statutory remedy only Congress can provide, said Kizer, whose prescription echoes many provisions in the proposal outlined in the Legion-backed Partnership for Veterans Health Care Reform.

As Kizer spoke, the pressing need for VA reform was clouded in an ongoing congressional budget deficit reduction drive.

The budget resolution process the House and Senate approved June 29 will lead to a staggering $894 billion in federal spending cuts by 2002 in a Republican-backed effort to balance the budget for the first time since 1969.

Kizer admitted making VA competitive in the health-care market must be accomplished with appropriated funds. Worse, he said, some in Congress are, "calling for dismantling the system as too big, too inefficient. The VA system faces unprecedented challenges, threats if you will, to its existence."

The House recently approved $16.8 billion for the VA's fiscal 1996 medical care budget, more than $1 billion under the administration's request, and nearly $3 billion short of levels The American Legion recommends. Veterans' advocates fear the Senate may trim the measure further when it takes action on the VA's budget later this month.

Kizer said in adapting to meet patient needs, VA will seek congressional approval to expand its sharing agreements with other agencies, and contract for more services to save on capital costs.

The VA, which spends an estimated $2 billion a year on diabetes research, and the Juvenile Diabetes Foundation have embarked on a joint research project, with the foundation matching VA research funds dollar for dollar.

The VA also is working to improve clinical guidelines to improve staff quality and efficiency in caring for patients. Creation of the Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) represents another attempt by VA to cut middle management layers and improve operations. ❑

Legion seeks help for veteran business owners

The Economic Screening Committee has recommended passage of **Res. 147**, supporting efforts to increase federal assistance to veteran small business owners.

Also, commission members repeated their stance in support of transferring responsibility for small business programs from the Small Business Administration (SBA) to the VA.

Last month Legion officials testified before a House subcommittee to advocate moving the SBA's Office of Veterans Affairs to the VA's Office of Small and Disadvantaged Business Utilization.

Due to budget cuts, SBA's Office of Veterans Affairs staff has been cut to three from six members, and SBA offices no longer are required to have full-time Veterans Affairs officers.

In addition, SBA has been rumored to be among the federal agencies Congress may target for extinction.

The commission also honored a California Legionnaire who is getting the job done in helping veterans find jobs. Charles Martinez, California's director of Veterans Employment and Training, was presented with the commission's annual Sam Murphy Award. The Department of Labor award is named for the prominent Legionnaire who served as the VETS' regional director for New England.

The commission learned veterans' advocates dodged a legislative bullet that nearly killed the Disabled Veterans Outreach Program (DVOP) specialists and Local Veterans Employment Representatives (LVER) program.

Funding for the LVER and DVOP programs was zeroed out in a bill introduced last March by Rep. Bill Zeliff, R-N.H. Fortunately, funding for the programs in fiscal year 1996 was restored during the amendment process, thanks to Rep. Tim Hutchinson, R-Ark.

The Legion recommended $98.3 million in DVOP funding for FY 1996, and $83.6 million for the LVER program. On Aug. 2, the full House approved $79.7 million funding for DVOP and $73.5 million for the LVER program. The measure is awaiting approval by the Senate. ❑

Spend a buck, drive a Buick

Some lucky American Legion family member may be driving to next year's National Convention in a 1996 Buick LeSabre Limited. That is, if their name is selected in a drawing next Wednesday.

For the third year in a row, Buick Motor Division has supplied a car to The American Legion, which is selling chances on the LeSabre. Proceeds will go toward scholarships for American Legion Baseball program.

Tickets may be purchased at the Buick booth in the Exhibit Hall for $1 per chance. Tickets also are available in books of five.

To be eligible for the drawing, all tickets must be purchased before **9 a.m., Wednesday**. The winner will be announced from the convention stage. American Legion employees are not eligible for the drawing.

Actual delivery of the LeSabre will be made by a Buick dealer of the winner's choice following the convention. The winner is responsible for taxes and other expenses not included in the package.

Nat'l cemetery funding facing grave future?

When it comes to funding national cemeteries, VA officials say they sometimes feel like they're heading down a dead end.

"I have to say 'ifs' when it comes to future budgets," said Roger Rapp, the VA's National Cemetery System's head man.

As director of the Office of Field Operations, Rapp is in charge of the nation's 114 National Cemeteries, along with various Confederate cemeteries and other military monuments nationwide.

The House recently approved $73 million for the system in fiscal year 1996, beginning Oct. 1, $2 million less than The American Legion's recommendation.

In remarks Friday before the National VA&R Commission, Rapp promoted the state cemetery grant program, a 50/50 sharing agreement between states and the VA.

"It's a good program – where it works," said Rapp. He cited examples of state legislatures in Tennessee, Maryland, North Carolina, Hawaii, all of which have entered into sharing agreements with VA to ensure veterans' burial benefits are maintained.

State or local governments can apply for funds to build or expand state veterans cemeteries; or states can share maintenance and land acquisition costs with VA to keep open existing national cemeteries. It's easier, said Rapp, "To keep *open* cemeteries *open*" than it is to secure funds from Congress for new facilities.

> "I have to say 'ifs' when it comes to future budgets."
> ROGER RAPP

VA has been active in recent years acquiring cemetery sites in underserved urban areas. Rapp said that 10 to 12 percent of all veterans who die nationwide are buried in a national cemetery; but the percentage in St. Louis, for example, is closer to 50 percent.

The same holds true for cities like Chicago, Dallas, Cleveland, Seattle and Albany, N.Y., all of which have expansion or new cemetery projects on the drawing board, and slated for completion within the next four to five years.

The VA offers a pamphlet containing information about its grant program and other cost-sharing arrangements. For more information, write: National Cemetery System, Department of Veterans Affairs, 810 Vermont Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20420. The National VA&R Division also has information about the cost-sharing program.

In response to a question from a New Jersey Legionnaire about flag placement at national cemeteries, Rapp said "only 25 to 30" of the system's 114 cemeteries don't place flags by veterans' graves on Memorial Day.

He said he wasn't happy with the situation, but suggested Legionnaires mobilize scouts and other civic and youth groups to make up the shortfall so veterans can be remembered properly on Memorial Day. ❑

U.S. bombs with its lack of missile defense

On a quiet morning at Pearl Harbor 54 years ago, the U.S. government was given a deadly wake-up call for not being prepared to defend the country against foreign enemies. Today, the government still sleeps when it comes to protecting its citizens against a ballistic missile attack.

"Our government is playing a deadly game of Russian roulette with inscrutable and dangerous powers around the world," said Frank Gaffney, executive director of the Center for Security Policy, speaking before a joint session of the National Security and Foreign Relations commission Friday. "We simply cannot protect ourselves from a missile attack."

Gaffney said most Americans erroneously believe they are protected against the threat, charging that since 1975, the nation's leaders have deliberately chosen not to establish a missile defense system.

"If a missile is launched against the United States today, it's going to arrive where it is aimed – and there is nothing we can do about it," Gaffney said. He said that countries such as Iraq have developed missile technology that can deliver a deadly punch of biological and chemical agents, and may not be far off from having nuclear weapons.

Gaffney, a former adviser to the late Sen. Henry "Scoop" Jackson, D-Wash., said the United States has the technology and resources to mount an effective defense, citing the use of Patriot missiles against Scud attacks during the Persian Gulf War.

Also, Gaffney said the Navy's Aegis weapons system aboard ships could be adapted as part of the overall defense for $2 billion.

"But this is not an issue about cost or technology. This is an issue of national will."

Gaffney encouraged Legionnaires to urge their U.S. senators not to support **Senate Bill 1026**, which is scheduled for a vote later this week. According to Gaffney, the bill would postpone earlier decisions to move ahead with plans to bolster the nation's missile defense systems.

"Many of you sitting in this room understand how the nation's perceived deterrence against attack in 1941 failed," Gaffney said. "As you gather to commemorate the end of World War II, I cannot think of anything more appropriate than for you to consider we are in a situation not unlike what we faced in 1941." ❑

STREET SALUTE: Legionnaires took to Indianapolis' streets Saturday for the annual convention parade, which played on the WW II victory theme.

Hoosier hurler makes big hit as 'Good Guy'

Every day, Carl Erskine sees something in his hometown of Anderson, Ind., that reminds him of the lasting effects of The American Legion. It could be youngsters at play on a ball diamond, or it might be a community project that local Legionnaires tackled.

"Keep supporting the programs and many good works you perform. That's what will keep America strong," said Erskine, who earned fame on the pitcher's mound, playing for the Brooklyn Dodgers and later in Los Angeles.

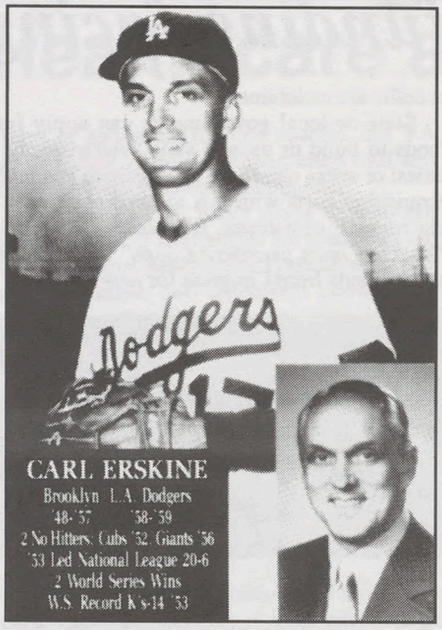
Erskine was presented with the James V. Day "Good Guy" Award Saturday at the Past Department Commanders Club Banquet. Erskine, who played in five World Series and held the strikeout record (14) for a single game in the series, said the Legion made an impression on him early in life.

As a high school student, the Legion provided the school with athletic equipment. But his view of the Legion was strengthened when he was presented with an athletic award by Anderson Post 127 in 1944.

"It means a lot to me and it still does," he said, holding the medal up to show the 400-plus audience. "It reminds me of what your organization stands for and who your people are.

"America keeps trying to return to the values The American Legion represents," Erskine said.

Erskine retired from baseball in 1960, but he peppered his remarks with numerous anecdotes about his career with the Dodgers and



fellow legendary teammates, Gil Hodges, Pee Wee Reese, Duke Snyder, Roy Campanella and Jackie Robinson, the latter of whom became the first African-American to play in the major leagues.

"He was an extraordinary individual, but it wasn't easy for him," Erskine said. "He suffered many indignities in many of the places we played. But players accepted Jackie because he did his job. If you want an excellent example of affirmative action, look at what Jackie did."

In accepting the "Good Guy" Award, Erskine said there may have been many batters who didn't share the view that he was quite so good.

"They might have thought I threw the ball too close to them when they crowded the plate; maybe a little too much saliva," he said, drawing laughter from the audience. ❑

Film fest delivers up-front view of key WW II battles

From the air, the sea and ground. Convention visitors can get those range of views of what life was like for GIs who fought in World War II.

The History Channel is running documentary films from World War II in Rooms 148 and 147 from now until the end of the convention.

Among the films are: *Churchill and War Cabinet Rooms; Okinawa: The Final Battle; Showdown at Leyte Gulf; Iwo Jima: Hell's Volcano; and VE Day Special.*

The Military Channel is screening its films in Rooms 160 and 162. Its lineup includes: *50 Years Ago Today* (including episodes on the assasination plot against Hitler and the role of African-American troops); *Flight Path – Victory in Europe*; and *VJ Day: A Sailor Remembers.*

Times are posted at the screening rooms, convention officials report. Sunday screenings will end about 11:30 a.m. because of the Indianapolis Colts game at the RCA Dome.

The film festival, which is free to the public, will end Monday.

Many Legionnaires packed into the theaters Saturday, an appropriate day marking the 50th anniversary of Japan's formal surrender that ended World War II.

WW II veterans from American Legion Departments also have been sharing their war-time experiences with film crews from the Military Channel, which will be aired later for an upcoming series, *War Stories.*

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Progress made in reducing claims backlog

Technological advances should speed staff training and further reduce the claims backlog the Veterans Benefits Administration handles, an official told Legionnaires.

"We're over the hump now," said John Vogel, the VBA's undersecretary for Benefits. He said modernization measures have made it possible for the agency to mail out 2.7 million compensation and pension checks to veterans every year, and he pointed to progress in other areas.

"The case pending workload has been reduced markedly," said Vogel, speaking before the National VA&R Commission meeting Friday.

BVA's goal is to reduce the number of claims pending to 250,000, a sizable number but nowhere near today's figures or ones in recent years.

In 1993, Vogel said, 570,780 "comp & pens" cases were pending at BVA, with an average turnaround time of 213 days.

Currently, VBA is dealing with a load of an estimated 390,000 cases, 70,000 of which are cases in appeal status. Vogel said the agency's goal is to cut processing time to 100 days. Modernization is leading the way, according to Vogel.

The onset of satellite communication is allowing VBA to save money in 22 of its 58 regional offices equipped for video teleconferencing.

"We'll be able to address a lot of our training needs through satellite teleconferencing," said Vogel. The service eliminates extensive travel time and reduces costs for staff education and training.

The agency also has formed "health teams" to oversee case production at VA Regional Offices, and is spreading the workload among Regional Offices to increase efficiency. He also vowed to improve claims forms. ❑