

3,000 attend Medal of Honor ceremony

By MSG Matt Prout
Editor

Over half of the living Medal of Honor recipients attended the dedication of a \$1.7-million memorial for the 3,400 Americans who've earned the U.S. military's highest award for bravery.

"Dwight has incredible signature of those few from that wall," Defense Secretary William Cohen said before 3,000 people who attended a two-hour ceremony Nov. 2 at Ronald Reagan National Cemetery. "This national expression of appreciation for America's greatest heroes will reach beyond the bounds of this city, this state and this generation."

The observance was a highlight of the Congressional Medal of Honor Society's week-long convention, which ended Sunday. In November, President Clinton signed legislation Oct. 28 making the site the only federal Medal of Honor memorial.

Of the 150 surviving medal recipients, 87 attended the service. They dedicated a memorial site for 14 medal recipients who died since the group's last convention in 1997. Representatives placed 14 white crosses on a site and a plaque on a stone bell tower next to each one.

"Medal of Honor recipients are ordinary Americans challenged in extraordinary ways," said Rep. Ron Calio, whose congressional district includes Mount Field and the adjacent cemetery. "And they rise to meet the challenge."

He saluted Yvonne Villegas of Illinois, who received the Medal of Honor posthumously for actions during a World War II tank battle in Italy. As Army staff reported, Villegas died saving 10 squad members after her tank was hit on her 21st birthday. He is buried in the national cemetery and honored with a monument in Veterans' Park in Rockford City, Ill.

The observance is an open-air plaza bounded by the flags of the 50 states and U.S. territories. One of the main features is a representation of nine soldiers. The black granite pillars include the names of recipients in the center of all Medal of Honor recipients, in the order that they received the award. A water sculpture in the center features 15 jets representing the surviving medal recipients. An interactive computer kiosk contains information about the men and women who've earned the



Left: A portion of the Wall of Names, listing 14 Medal of Honor recipients who died since the group's last convention in 1997. Right: Secretary of Defense William Cohen addresses the observance.

(Photo by MSG Matt Prout)

Right: Peter DeVos, Lt. John Peck, who was killed during the October 9 attack on Okinawa, is the oldest surviving Medal of Honor recipient at 87.

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Left: Secretary of Defense William Cohen addresses the observance during induction of the newest Medal of Honor recipients. (Photo by MSG Matt Prout)

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medal.

"In their following hours, they would calculate just how strong enough to withstand it," said Cohen. "They reached very quickly a decision to achieve what now, they would consider to be impossible."

The secretary urged them to immediately remember the families and friends of veterans.

"America is eternally indebted to you. To honor you has to teach us to say we remember your love, we respect your sacrifice, and we thank and thank you."

The observance concluded with a

salute from each of the seven men being inducted into the ceremony. Retired Navy Lt. John Peck, the oldest living recipient of the Medal of Honor, dispensed the first salute. Peck, 87, was assigned to submarine H-38 off Eniwetok Atoll, July 7, 1944, during the Japanese attack on Okinawa.

"Men of World War II stand tall and strong. They overcame the momentous just before them, were allowed their final glimpse of it during the retreat."

"I would like to add a little more," said Cohen. "Remember there will never again be that Germanic culture of the Nazis, but we have seen that the implications of the Hitlerites. We have the clear and direct language of leadership to inform."