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## An honor 12 years in the making

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Jordan Spence/ New-Review Gordon Wiitanen will travel to Washington, D.C., for the Veterans' Disabled for Life Memorial on Oct. 5.

Posted: Saturday, May 31, 2014 7:00 am

Jordan Spence (231) 439-9397

Something in the mail brought tears to Petoskey veteran Gordon Wiitanen's eyes: an invitation to the dedication ceremony for the American Veterans' Disabled for Life Memorial in Washington, D.C.

With efforts from Disabled Veterans' Life Memorial Foundation, veterans and citizens, it took \$85 million and 12 years to bring the memorial to fruition.

"When I got the invitation in the mail I was thrilled," Wiitanen said. "It's about time we got a memorial for these people."

He spent time over the years to raise awareness and money for the memorial, including handing out flyers at the post office and connecting with fellow veterans.

Wiitanen, 87, began his service after he was drafted by the Army in 1945 for World War II at the age of 18. During this time he worked on amphibious boats with the 592 Engineer Battalion.

One of the most memorable experiences he had during his service wasn't overseas.

"In 1948 or '49 there was a barge in New Jersey that was carrying anti-personal mines to Pakistan," he said. "Somehow it blew up and killed 38 civilians. We spent two weeks picking up the mines that were scattered all over the town."

After he was discharged as a corporal, he worked at a couple different factories in Detroit, but he decided it wasn't for him.

He re-enlisted in 1947 and served during the Korean War where he was shot in the chest at the Yellow River.

"During the war I was part of combat engineers," he said. "We did a lot of demolition work, blew up bridges and things the Chinese could use."

He returned home in August 1951 and after 22 years of active duty service he retired from the Army July 1, 1966, as a first sergeant E-8.

Wiitanen grew up in Houghton and is one of nine children, six of whom were in the military.

"I realized our country needed a strong military force and I wanted to be a part of that," he said.

He has five children with his deceased wife, Catherine, and three of them have retired in the military.

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It was during his time as a recruiting sergeant when he met Shirley Neil.

"He was in recruitment and I worked for selective service," she said. "Us couples used to chum around when my husband and his wife were still alive."

After their spouses died, the pair reconnected and have been together for 14 years.

"He takes good care of me," Neil said. "He's a good person."

Whiitanen plans to travel to the dedication ceremony with his daughter and sons.

The site of the memorial is located on 2 acres between Washington Avenue Southwest, C Street Southwest and Second Street Southwest. The memorial will be adjacent to the National Mall and across from Independence Avenue and the United States Botanic Garden.

It was built to honor living and deceased disabled veterans.

The memorial will include a star-shaped reflecting pool, with an eternal flame at the surface. There is a grove of trees beside the pool to symbolize the "persistence of hope."

Wiitanen said despite his age and health he will make sure he attends the dedication.

"When I told my daughter about it she said, 'You will be going to that dedication. I'm a nurse and I will make sure you go,'" he said.

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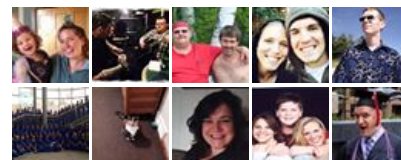
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