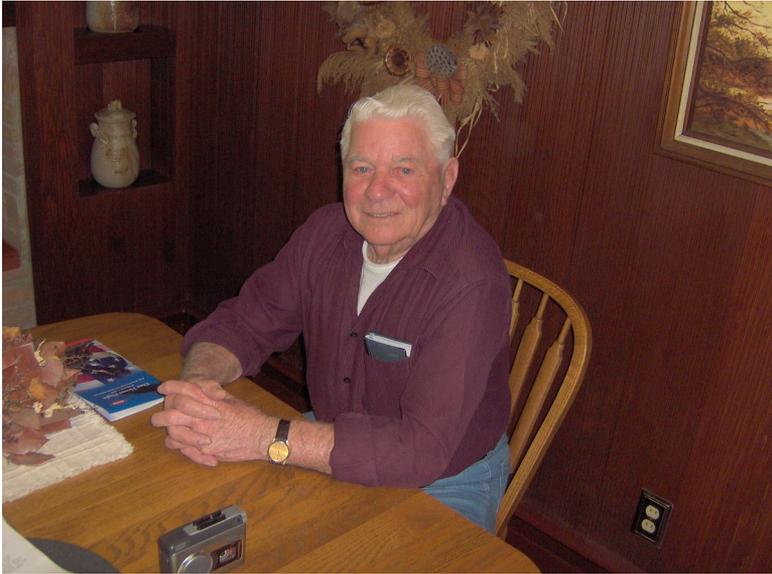


## ROBERT WHISLER – One of Gladwin's Honored Few



*Of the 16 million men and women veterans of WWII there are only approximately 3 million still alive. Most of them now are over 80 years old and few will ever get the chance to see the memorial in Washington, D.C. dedicated in their honor in May 2004.*

*You may have heard or read about Dow Chemical Company sponsoring an Honor Flight last November to send Dow retirees who served in WWII to Washington. A total of 93 WWII veterans left MBS Airport very early on a journey of emotion. Robert Whisler, a Gladwin resident since 1953, was one of those chosen to take that flight on November 7<sup>th</sup>, 2007.*

*Robert was a seventeen year old who volunteered for service in the Navy (with his parents permission) not too long after Pearl Harbor was bombed. For the next three years and nine months he served as a deckhand primarily on the USS O'Bannon, a Fletcher-class destroyer, in the Pacific Ocean.*

*The O'Bannon was engaged in many of the major sea battles including probably the two largest surface battles in Guadalcanal and the Battle of Leyte Gulf. This little destroyer received a Presidential Unit Citation and seventeen battle stars for service in WWII (more than any other ship except the aircraft carrier USS Enterprise). Because of the ship's heroism under fire, Admiral William Halsey chose the O'Bannon to lead the USS Missouri battleship into Tokyo Bay for the surrender ceremony at the conclusion of the war.*

*Robert, like most of the other Honor Flight veterans, went to work for Dow Chemical upon returning to Midland. "The company was very good to us returning vets," he recalled. For the next 37 years he returned the favor working for Dow's Research Division and Dow Well until he retired in 1982.*

*Shortly after his start at Dow, Robert met a good-looking telephone operator named Lucille Koontz, a native of Gladwin. "She started flirting with me," he said. "He was pretty sharp looking himself and he asked me if I wanted to go for a motorcycle ride," she said. They were married in 1950.*

*Earl Morse, a retired Air Force Captain and Physician's Assistant founded the Honor Flight Network. He personally flew the first veteran, one of his patients, to see the WWII memorial in December 2004. The concept has grown nationwide now and each flight features one major stipulation – for each veteran, the trip is free.*

*Dow Vice President David Dupre approved the expensive tab for Robert and the 92 other veterans to take their Honor Flight. While visiting Washington, the vets also had an opportunity to meet with Michigan's two Senators, Carl Levin and Debbie Stabenow and a special guest, also a WWII veteran, Senator Robert Dole. They went to see the Marine Corp Memorial (the Iwo Jima statue), Arlington Cemetery and they laid a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.*

*On Thursday, April 10<sup>th</sup> they all gathered again at the Midland Center for the Arts to watch a movie documentary called "What Free Men Will Do: The Veterans of Dow Honor Flight 2007." There weren't many dry eyes in the house that day.*

*I sat down with Robert recently, now a youthful 83 years old, to get his thoughts and experiences from WWII and the Dow Honor Flight.*

**ROR: War is a scary experience for anyone, let alone a seventeen year old. Would you share some of those times with us?**

**Robert:** Most of the time in battle, you are too busy to be scared. But two times really come to mind. Once we dropped off the Marines to rescue some survivors on the Japanese-held island of Munda. The shore batteries opened up on us and we had to just sit there and wait for them to return. I was standing on deck just watching those shells sail over the ship. That got my blood pumping. Another time we were in a big surface battle and the USS Chevalier got torpedoed in front of us and we couldn't stop in time and ran into her. It smashed the bow of our ship almost back to the first gun turret. We picked up the survivors of the Chevalier and crept into a cove. That night the Japanese Fleet retreated and went right past us. Everybody held their breath 'cuz we were dead in the water.

**ROR: What was your assignment during a battle...”all hands on deck, battle stations!”**

**Robert:** I was on a gun crew (5-inch barrel). In the battle of Kula Gulf we fired over one hundred rounds. That gun was red-hot. The breech got jammed and they had to come in with big mauls to hammer it shut before it exploded. That was kinda hairy. Another time we got in so close to a Japanese battleship (which is like a tugboat next to an oil tanker) they couldn't depress their guns low enough to fire on us. We put 8 torpedoes into her and was credited with helping to sink it.

**ROR: Were there any humorous times?**

**Robert:** I almost missed the war. We were escorting a gasoline tanker through the Panama Canal and the cook ordered me to wait on the dock for the milk and ice cream. He told me to come back to the ship when the whistle blew. Well, it blew and by the time I got back the ship was leaving. I didn't have any money, clothes, nothing. I flagged down a whaler boat, caught up and got back on board. The Captain called me to the bridge and chewed my ...(behind) out. I believe he's exact words were 'I woulda left ya!'

**ROR: What was it like coming home after the war?**

**Robert:** It was an unbelievable celebration. I feel so sorry for those Vietnam vets that never got to experience that. The same goes for the men and women serving overseas today. We had a choice of remaining in the Tokyo harbor for the surrender ceremony or sailing home with the Victory Fleet. "It was virtually unanimous, we wanted to go home," said Whisler. "We sailed under the Golden Gate Bridge and into San Francisco Bay to a hero's welcome. Every bar or restaurant we went into, we couldn't pay for anything."

**ROR: Did you experience that feeling when you went on the Honor Flight?**

**Robert:** Yes, it was very emotional. They had an orchestra playing at Reagan Airport in Washington. All of the airline and airport employees lined the concourse. They were cheering, waving flags and shaking our hands. That was one of the best parts of the trip.

**ROR: Did you know any of the other veterans who went on the flight?**

**Robert:** Yes. They put us in groups of three and I went with Harold Walters of Beaverton and Frank Neering. When I met Frank at the airport I said there used to be a Frank Neering in the Employment Office at Dow and he said, 'yes there was...that's me.'

Senator Dole's aide asked me if I'd like to have my picture taken with the Senator. Well, you just don't say no to THAT! And I was behind Senator Stabenow in the food line and I said 'would you be from Gladwin?' and she whirled around with a big smile and said 'I sure am.' You know the O'Bannon never lost a man all during the war.

**ROR: It must have been a blessed ship.**

**Robert:** I guess it was. I've lived a blessed life ever since then too.

**ROR: I'm sure the USS O'Bannon has reunion gathering. Have you ever been to one?**

**Robert:** They have a reunion every other year but I've never gone to one. I left my war back there in the Pacific.

**ROR: We all can never say thank you enough but for what its worth, it has been an honor and thank you.**

*It has almost become a cliché claimed by many different groups these days but the fact is Freedom Isn't Free. After a little research I discovered that statement is credited to Anonymous, which seems appropriate. So many of the soldiers and sailors of war are the anonymous heroes who helped to preserve our freedom. The veterans on the Dow Honor Flight were given hats and a sweatshirt. On the back of the sweatshirt it said, "If you can read this, thank a teacher. If you can read this in English, thank a veteran." If you see Robert Whisler be sure to shake his hand and say thanks.*