

U.S. Rep. Schakowsky Honored By Veterans Group

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In today's world of terrorism alerts and high security, even World War II veterans need to cut through a swathe of red tape to tour the White House. Des Plaines resident Vince Powers learned that immediately when he tried to book a White House tour for the final reunion of the 8th Defense Battalion veterans in August.

Seeking help with the surprising security regimen, Powers contacted the office of U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-IL). Schakowsky's office collected the soldiers' security information and submitted the official request forms to the White House.

To show their gratitude, survivors of the 8th Defense Battalion ordered Powers to present Schakowsky with a plaque of appreciation at the Des Plaines City Council meeting last week.

"It was horrendous getting the information from all our people," Powers said. "They needed everyone's name and social security number to check the background of each and every one."

The White House does not allow family drop-in tours anymore, and all attendees must be pre-registered for a background check, Powers said.

"Even when we got there, they got on the bus with sniffing dogs," Powers said. "They're cautious, and in today's light they certainly have to be."

Schakowsky's office also obtained tickets so the veterans could watch a world-class marine drill at the Marine Barracks "8th and I."

The veterans gathering in August marked the battalion's 35th and final reunion. Right after World War II, the 300 marines made a pact to save a bottle of alcohol and pass it through the ranks for the last surviving marine to drink as a tribute to the deceased soldiers. At the final reunion in Washington, D.C., the 50 surviving marines shared the original bottle.

Powers was 17-years-old when he left high school on his birthday to join the marine corps.

He joined the 8th Defense Battalion and landed at Wallace Island in 1942. The U.S. military had learned that the Japanese planned to invade Wallace Island to choke off supply routes to the United States, but the 8th Defense Battalion beat them to it and invaded the island first.

The marines went from Wallace Island to Gilbert Island and others in the Pacific until they were stationed in Okinawa.

The soldiers were preparing at Okinawa to invade Japan when the U.S. dropped the atomic bomb in 1945, Powers said.