

## **A Drink For Those Departed**

**THE JOURNAL & TOPICS NEWSPAPERS | WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 2004**

When Des Plaines resident Vince Powers started organizing his Defense Battalion Reunions after World War II, the 300 marines made a pact.

They agreed to save a bottle of alcohol and pass it through the ranks so that surviving marines always possessed it as the years passed.

The very last surviving marine was to drink the bottle.

Early this month, Powers organized the final battalion reunion in Washington D.C. with about 50 surviving marines. The marines shared the original bottle and toasted their fellow servicemen and women.

"Whatever it was, it was strong stuff," Powers joked.

"It was hard to keep your composure," he said, describing the emotional moment. "It's hard to explain, seeing all the old people you knew when they were young, and we were all together."

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.

At the 35th and final battalion reunion Aug. 4 to 8, the surviving marines were treated to a four-hour tour of Washington, D.C. and a White House tour, thanks to the efforts of **U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-IL)**

The veterans especially appreciated the Iwo Jima memorial, the World War II memorial and an impressive marine drill at the Marine Barracks "8th and I," Powers said.

A banquet for the battalion featured Des Plaines musician Tim Vana, young marines who presented the colors and a roll call of the battalion's men and women who have died.

Citizens native to Wallace Island attended the recent reunion, and the marines presented them with a battle flag and a plaque. The individuals were building a museum on Wallace Island to commemorate the World War II veterans.

They wanted to "honor the marines they say saved their island," Powers said.