





Veteran Lemoyne Ezell, seated, receives his World War II medals at the Florida Seminole Veterans Building in October 2014. From left are Elaine Westermeyer, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs; Dan Hunt, Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) Okeechobee Chapter; Marc McCabe, regional director VVA; and Ray Worley, Sons of the American Legion.

BRIGHTON — It's been 67 years since World War II veteran Lemoyne Ezell's service in the U.S. Navy ended, but it took until last October for the Okeechobee resident to receive his discharge papers and service medals, which were officially presented to him at the Florida Seminole Veterans Building in Brighton.

Capt. Ronald K. Williams, of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), presented Ezell the medals with help from Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) regional director Marc McCabe and VA outreach coordinator Elaine Westermeyer.

"He's severely ill and only wanted his WWII Victory Medal, but he got seven others," McCabe said.

McCabe and Westermeyer work with veterans at the Brighton building every month. Ezell's situation was brought to their attention through the Sons of the American Legion's Ray Worley.

In addition to the WWII Victory Medal, Ezell earned the American Campaign Medal, Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal, Navy Occupation Service Medal (with Asia Clasp), China Service Medal (Extended), Discharge Button and the Honorable Service Lapel Pin (Ruptured Duck).

"I didn't even know I deserved them," said Ezell, 86. "I joined the Navy at 16 years old, and at 17 I got rid of two Japanese mines; two shots and I got rid of them both. After that I was the No. 1 gunner on the USS Gendreau. I was very expert in marksmanship - over 500 yards I could shoot anything and take it out."

As a child in 1935, Ezell helped his father build a schoolhouse in Brighton. His father, an electrician, sent young Ezell up to the roof to hand drill holes for wires and feed them through. His fifth-grade education didn't qualify him to be an electrician as an adult, so he spent his postwar years as a laborer in the Okeechobee area.

McCabe and Westermeyer also procured a new wheelchair and more monetary benefits from the VA for Ezell.

“He’s the vet who fell through the cracks and nobody ever cared for,” McCabe said. “That’s why I come out to Brighton – to facilitate all these claims for vets who don’t have anyone else to speak for them.”

Ezell wanted to enlist in the Navy but knew he was too young, so he lied about his age. He was a seaman 2nd class in the Navy, qualified as a Blue Nose for crossing the Arctic Circle and served on the USS Cole, USS Wiltsie, USS Gendreau and USS Fechteler. After he left active duty, he served in the U.S. Navy Reserve until 1955.

McCabe, who has worked out of the Florida Seminole Veterans Building for about five years, said he has seen many cases like Ezell’s. McCabe’s efforts have helped Seminole veterans, tribal employees and veterans in the tri-county area and in towns near Lake Okeechobee. Typically, McCabe sees 40 to 50 vets in Brighton each month.

“We’ve recovered over \$45 million in earned benefits for veterans this year alone in Florida,” he said. “If I see a wrong I’m going to bring it to attention and right that wrong. I fight for the vet who can’t fight for himself and get him the highest amount allowed by law.”

A broad range of benefits and services from the VA are available to all veterans, but McCabe and the VVA are frustrated with the backlog of claims. As a result, veterans can wait for more than five years for an accurate decision to be made in their cases, according to a recent press release on the VVA website.

Illnesses are paid based on a VA rating system, which McCabe believes is problematic.

For example, post-traumatic stress disorder is always underrated and the VA often only pays 30 percent of the allowable amount, McCabe said.

“It is an earned benefit, not a handout,” he said. “There needs to be a set of accountability rules determining everything within the VA system. But no one is held accountable. The staff is overwhelmed and backlogged. They are dedicated employees, some are veterans, but the system holds them back.”

For Ezell, the process to receive his medals stalled 67 years ago, but the effort that resumed in March 2014 was finally completed six months later. Now he can display the medals on the Navy shirt he wore when he was 17.

“It feels good to have my medals,” he said. “They (McCabe and Westermeyer) helped me a lot and they are still helping me.”

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