

N.H. senator leading D-Day, Battle of Bulge fetes

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SALEM, N.H. -- As New Hampshire's District 22 Republican state Sen. Michael Downing left town Thursday for an historical two-week visit to western Europe, he put on a hat (literally) that most of his constituents in Pelham, Salem, Atkinson and Plaistow probably don't know he wears.

Downing, a Cold-War veteran of the U.S. Army's 82nd Airborne Division, is the 2009-2010 "Captain Commanding" of the 371-year-old Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company of Massachusetts. Through Oct. 12, he is leading an AHAC-member delegation of 143 U.S. military veterans on a 10-day trip to France, Luxembourg and Belgium to commemorate the 65th anniversaries of both the D-day Invasion of Normandy (June 1944), and the Battle of the Bulge (December, '44).

"Forgive me for not being able to talk long, I've got some more phone calls to make to France," Downing said on Wednesday, as he tended to the last-minute details of an extensive itinerary that he spent four years planning along with the Boston-based Artillery Company's resident historian, Brigadier Gen. Emery Madducks.

Upon landing in France, Downing's group was to be joined by 20 British military veterans for a series of events that include a ceremony in Normandy, wreath-laying in Belgium at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, meeting with generals from various countries at NATO headquarters, dining with foreign dignitaries and ambassadors, and a grand memorial observance at the large American cemetery in Luxembourg, where part

of the Battle of the Bulge, the last major Nazi offensive against the Allies in World War II, was fought.

Three members of the Downing-led Massachusetts delegation are World War II-Europe veterans. Those men were to receive special recognition from their French and Belgian hosts, according to Madducks.

"The medals and parades are very nice, but in the end, the greatest reward that any veteran can ask for is just that somebody remembers," said Madducks, who is the full-time caretaker of the Artillery Company's museum on the fourth floor of Faneuil Hall in Boston.

"We see ourselves as guardians at the watchtower of history and tradition," said Madducks. "Our core mission is to keep the memory of these historical military events alive, so people can remember the sacrifices made by our soldiers."

As the 301st member-elected commander of AHAC, the world's third-oldest chartered military organization, Downing was the ideal person to lead this 65th anniversary delegation to two of World War Two's greatest battles sites, according to Madducks.

"Mike Downing is very thorough, very military, and methodical, and totally committed to maintaining the traditions and histories of the United States and the commonwealth's military organizations," said Madducks.

Downing said a highlight of the trip will be a ceremony in France honoring the life of 82nd Airborne paratrooper Bob Murphy of Dennis, who died last October at 83. Murphy, a past commander of AHAC, is believed to have been the first American soldier to set foot in France on D-day.

"Bob Murphy had really been looking forward to this trip, but cancer caught up with him," said Madducks.