

OUR VIEW

We should help send vets to war memorial

The image of an exploding land mine and the deaths of his fellow soldiers seared its way into the memory of a Valparaiso man.

Les Haas, a World War II veteran, was haunted by the specter until he completed an oil painting of the vivid flash of light from the explosion that killed three men.

Now, Haas, 84, has another mission to complete.

He's among a group of 40 World War II veterans, family members and volunteers who plan a journey to the World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C., Oct. 4 to 8. Called The Tour of Duty, it's an all-expense-paid trip for veterans like Haas, an Army combat engineer who was a demolition specialist in Europe during the war.

Haas now lives in the Pines Retirement Village in Valparaiso. The Tour of Duty idea came from Pines Village CEO Laurie Mullet and events director Tracy Huyvaert. Pines Village, a not-for-profit agency, is trying to raise \$115,000 to finance the trip for the veterans who will also stop at Arlington National Cemetery, the Korean War Memorial and other sites.

"I have a responsibility to go," Haas said in recognition of his fallen comrades.

About 1,200 World War II veterans die each day. The chance to visit Washington and pay their respects is an opportunity they should enjoy and not have to pay for — they've sacrificed enough.

To help out with expenses, here are two fund-raisers coming up soon:

■ Sept. 8 — Popcorn Festival, Valparaiso, cookie sales, 7 a.m. to 6:30 p.m.

■ Sept. 15 — Tour of Duty Benefit Dinner and Dance, Wanatah American Legion, 6 p.m. to midnight

Tour of Duty cookies also can purchased at the Campbell Street Cafe, 4285 Meridian Woods Drive, Valparaiso, 531-1800.