

Group plans 3-day celebration to salute Connecticut veterans

By JOHN PENNEY

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Hartford, Conn. — A state veterans group is working to make sure a three-day event planned for September goes off without a hitch.

The Veterans of Foreign Wars will host "A Salute to Connecticut's Veterans," designed to honor and celebrate the continuity of state military service from World War II to today's conflicts in the Middle East.

"This is an opportunity for a grandpa to stand next to an M-1 tank, or a C-47, with his grandson and talk about what it was like to drive it," said Ron Rusakiewicz, state VFW general chairman. "We want to give the younger generation an idea of what a veteran is."

But funding for the living history lesson isn't assured, Rusakiewicz said, since several Connecticut companies that make military equipment did not come through with as much sponsorship money as was expected.

"We want to keep the weekend free for visitors, so we've sent requests out to every municipality in the state," Rusakiewicz said. "We're hoping towns and companies step up and buy ad space, so we can make this a great experience."

The event, run in conjunction with the state Department of Veterans Affairs and Gov. M. Jodi Rell's office, is expected to pull in between 40,000 and 60,000 visitors to the Brainard Airport in Hartford. There will be a display of dozens of vintage military aircraft and vehicles, along with a Korean War-era medical tent, helicopter rides and history lessons from veterans.

In addition, the group is attempting to have live transmissions set up to allow communication between guests and Connecticut soldiers serving in Iraq.

Raymond Evans Jr., who served as an airman during World War II, said keeping the younger generations aware of the sacrifices made by veterans is vital.

"It's important everyone remains mindful of what was involved in keeping this country free," said Evans, 86, of Putnam. "And that means not taking service for granted. That's something that should be brought up as often as possible."

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WHAT'S NEXT

— The VFW Salute to Connecticut's Veterans event is scheduled for Sept. 26 to Sept. 28 at the Brainard Airport in Hartford.

— To make a donation or for more information, visit www.veteranssalute.org

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