

Lest We Forget hosts modern conflicts classes

By **JOHN MATUSZAK**
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BENTON TOWNSHIP — They've served from Haiti and Afghanistan, Beirut to Baghdad, from Desert Storm to the Iraqi Surge and beyond. They're still serving, often invisible to most of the country.

Lest We Forget, which has held classes on the experiences of veterans of World War II, Korea and Vietnam, will focus on the modern conflicts of the last 40 years with a series of presentations at Lake Michigan College beginning Tuesday and continuing through May 17. The 7-9 p.m. sessions are being offered in conjunction with the Whirlpool Corp. Veterans Association.

The first session will be hosted by James Smither, a professor of history at Grand Valley State University, and Joe Landgraf, a Whirlpool employee and 25-year Marine veteran who served tours during Desert Storm and in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Smither will provide an overview of the last four decades of military conflicts. He said one of the distinguishing aspects of the modern era is that the U.S. now has an all-volunteer army. Because military service falls on a relatively small group of people and their families, it creates a disconnect with the larger population, Smither said.

Landgraf, who had three deployments to Iraq and two to Afghanistan, agrees that the majority of citizens don't understand what today's veterans are experiencing.

"So many people don't have a clue," Landgraf said.

Landgraf said he hopes the sessions will be a way to raise awareness about the sacrifices that have been made by America's service men and women.

Smither directs a veterans history project, and he and his assistants have recorded interviews with about 1,300 veterans who served from before World War II to present day. During the second part of

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Tuesday's session, Smither will conduct an interview of Landgraf.

These interviews allow the veterans to tell their personal stories, and connect to other veterans, and they will be available hundreds of years from now, Smither said.

The March 22 session will focus on Desert Storm, with veterans Paul Scroggins, Mac Case and Steve Alsbro.

On March 29 Todd Herrick will talk about the U.S. military's efforts to prevent the collapse of the government in Haiti in the 1990s. Also during this session, Joe Landgraf will discuss the Battle of Al Fallujah in Al Anbar Province in Iraq.

On April 5, Kent Lauderdale will discuss Desert Storm, and Rich Matthews will talk about "Afghanistan: A Day in the Life." Marian Cioe and Tala Welch, retired Navy nurses and officers, will offer information about medical treatment aboard the USS Mercy and Comfort. Cioe, from Union Pier, served 23 years as a Navy nurse and retired as a commander. Welch, of Niles, retired as a captain.

On April 12 retired FBI agent Al DiBrito will lecture on FBI support for combat forces in Iraq, and Dwight Blackledge, a Whirlpool employee and West Point graduate in field artillery, will relate his experience as part of the first wave during the Iraqi surge of 2007.

On April 26, Kieon Douglas discusses "Iraq

and Afghanistan: Fighting on Two Fronts." Rebecca Payne, a Purple Heart recipient who served two tours in Iraq and was involved in two bomb attacks, will speak about women in modern conflicts.

On May 3 Kevin Jiggetts will talk about the 1983 Beirut bombing in which 299 American and French servicemen were killed by a terrorist bombing during the Lebanese Civil War. Doctors Scott Davidson and Bryan Dykstra, surgeons at Bronson Hospital, will provide information on medical evacuations. Dykstra conducted hundreds of medical evacuations from Iraq and Afghanistan to Germany and Walter Reed Hospital in Washington.

On May 17, Lee Scherwitz, retired director of the Southwest Michigan Regional Airport, will lecture on "Desert Storm 100 Hours: From Invasion to Redeployment."

Smither said that many people ask how they can thank veterans for their service.

"The best thing you can do is listen to them, and take them seriously," Smither said.

The cost is \$30 for the series, and \$10 for walk-ins. All sessions will be held in the Blue Lecture Hall on Lake Michigan College's Napier Avenue campus.

Information about Lest We Forget activities, including its veterans gathering and World War II re-enactment June 24-26, is at www.lestweforgetusa.org.

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