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Veterans Reunite; Honored By Astronaut Akers

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*By Annabeth Miiler,
ShowMe Times Editor*

There were plenty of big handshakes, pats on the back, and broad smiles as the men who were part of this spring's Honor Tour came back together Thursday for the Honor Tour Reunion Luncheon.

The luncheon was held at Wesley Hall on the campus of the First United Methodist Church in Dexter. The men were all a part of the Honor Tour group that left for a "tour of duty" – a specially designed tour of Washington, D.C. – on April 29 from Dexter's Bearcat Event Center.

The luncheon was a special time for the veterans and their families to come back together, see a specially made video of their journey, and to receive special mementoes of the tour.

Guest speaker for the event was Tom Akers of Eminence, a former NASA astronaut with four Space Shuttle missions under his belt.

Akers is a graduate of Eminence High School and received both bachelors and masters degrees in applied mathematics from the University of Missouri at Rolla (now Missouri University of Science and Technology).

“I’m humbled to be in the presence of so many of you World War II vets,” Akers said. Akers spent 20 years in the Air Force. He was selected for the astronaut program in 1987 and is a veteran of four space flights, accumulated over 800 hours of space flight including over 29 hours of space walking experience.

“Many times when I speak someone will introduce me as ‘one of our local heroes.’ I have a problem with that,” he said. He explained he feels people today overuse the word ‘hero’ – that baseball players, movie stars and others are all considered today by many to be heroes.

“I think a real hero is somebody who sacrifices for others when they would really rather be somewhere else,” Akers said. “I doubt very many of you really wanted to be were you were back in the 1940s. But you did the right thing and went and served your country. Every time I went up in the Space Shuttle there wasn’t anywhere else I want to be.”

Akers talked to the veterans and their family about being in space and about his four missions on the Shuttle.

During his career with NASA he was on the responsible for the primary payload in 1990 – the Ulysses spacecraft the went on a four-year journey to Jupiter and investigated the Sun’s polar regions; a member of the crew on the maiden flight of the Space Shuttle Endeavour, was a part of the crew that captured the Hubble Space Telescope and restored it to full capacity through a record five space walks by four astronauts. He also visited the Russian Space Station Mir.

“I felt very fortunate and blessed,” he said to be a part of the Space Shuttle program.

Akers showed the group a number of photos from his travels in space.

“Launch is, I think, probably the most exciting part of going to space. It’s a lot like riding a ride at Six Flag – a lot like a roller coaster. There’s a lot of shaking and rattling. There’s nothing violent; it’s really not that scary. When you take off it’s about like somebody running into the back of your car in a parking lot,” he said.

Akers has three separate space walks, including a time with two other astronauts to repair the Space Shuttle Hubble. Akers said “walking” in space is a truly unique experience.

“When you’re out there in space you’re totally oblivious to what’s going on except what’s

right in front of your face,” he said. Therefore, oftentimes the crew in the shuttle would tell those outside to take a break and take in the view around them.

The shuttle would orbit the earth over 90 minutes, so there 16 sunsets and 16 sunrises ever 24-hour period. Akers photos were remarkable, showing scenes of earth that are unbelievable.

One of the photos showed Akers in the shuttle, complete with an Eminence High t-shirt and a University of Missouri – Rolla banner in the background.

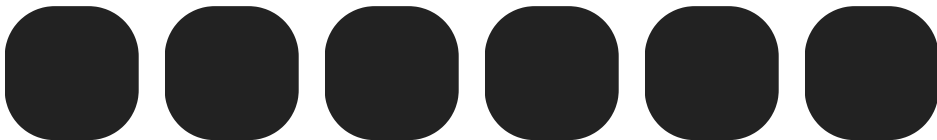
Master of Ceremonies for the luncheon was Rob Callahan of First Midwest Bank. Callahan is the founder of Honor Tour, and has planned each of the Honor Tour journeys.

Photos Above: Top Photo - Tim Akers of Eminence was the guest speaker at the Honor Tour Reunion Luncheon held Thursday at Wesley Hall on the campus of the Dexter First United Methodist Church. Akers is a veteran of four NASA Space Shuttle flights. Bottom Photo - Veteran Chet Medler of Dexter (seated) with former U.S. Senator Bob Dole and his wife, former U.S. Senator Elizabeth Dole, on this spring's Honor Tour in Washington, D.C.

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