

'Pentagon Pops' salutes military heroes

By Linda D. Kozaryn

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WASHINGTON -- It was a night for heroes, and they came here, more than 60 strong, wearing blue-ribboned awards of valor -- the Medal of Honor.

Some bore canes, their walk no longer steady. Yet all proudly stepped on stage, glad to be among comrades-in-arms once more.

"Tonight we celebrate the American heroes," NBC Nightly News anchor Tom Brokaw proclaimed. "We celebrate them at a time when so many in America are (asking) 'Where have all the heroes gone?' Tonight, in this hall, that is a question that we need not ask."

Brokaw was among the celebrities, entertainers, military chiefs, congressmen and other government officials who took part in the second annual Pentagon Pops, a tribute to "The Hero of the Century — the American GI."

The Feb. 21 concert, hosted by Defense Secretary William S. Cohen and his wife, Janet Langhart Cohen, was dedicated to service members and their families. The Cohens had invited all living Medal of Honor recipients to attend the President's Day concert at the Daughters of the American Revolution Constitution Hall.

"We are paying tribute to those whose ingenuity, patriotism, valor, during the most defining moments of the 20th century quite literally changed the entire course of history," Cohen said at the start of the show.

The Pentagon Pops is part of the Cohens' initiative to "reconnect" America and its military.

The U.S. Marine Band opened "Pentagon Pops 2000," which included performances by the Air Force Silver Wings and the Army's 82nd Airborne Division Chorus. Country music's Shane Minor,

rhythm and blues singer Ruth Pointer and jazz trumpeter Phil Driscoll performed, and "Downtown" Julie Brown of MTV fame attended the celebration.

Prior to introducing author historian Stephen E. Ambrose, the evening's keynote speaker, NBC's Brokaw noted that the nation is losing its World War II heroes "at a fast pace."

With a backdrop of uniformed troops denoting GIs from World War II to the present, Ambrose, whose books include "Citizen Soldier" and "Undaunted Courage," hailed the global accomplishments of America's armed forces.

"There are millions of people today who owe their freedom to GI Joe," the author said. "People in Europe, Asia and the Middle East need to say thanks, every day, to the American service men and women, and their allies, for the sacrifices they made to ensure the triumph of freedom and democracy."

Army Gen. Hugh Shelton, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, commended both Brokaw and Ambrose. "Through the power of the written word," the general said, "these two great Americans have helped keep America connected to its military heritage."

Sen. Chuck Hagel of Nebraska, a Vietnam veteran who leaped into a burning armored personnel carrier to pull his brother to safety and Sen. Daniel Inouye of Hawaii, who lost an arm during World War II also took part in the event.

Hagel praised America's military men and women for their selfless sacrifice and for serving as national role models. "The essence of a great democracy, a great nation, is service — as Bill Cohen said — to something bigger than oneself," Hagel said.

"Your honorable service anchors who we are as



Photo by Linda D. Kozaryn.

MTV's "Downtown" Julie Brown gets acquainted with Tuskegee Airman Willie Selden Jr. at the Pentagon Pops concert at DAR Constitution Hall, Washington, D.C. Several of the black World War II fighter pilots were among the special guests at the Feb. 21 salute to the American GI.

a people, first, and as a nation, second," the senator said. "On behalf of my colleagues and my friends in the Congress, I'm privileged to be able to share with you some thoughts and bring to you our thanks, and salute you for what you do every day."