

New Veterans Memorial Plaza saluted
Those at dedication event call the site 'phenomenal,' 'amazing' and 'stunning.'

After nearly three years of planning, fundraising, waiting and construction, the Veterans Memorial Plaza on Dubuque's Chaplain Schmitt Island received a collective thumbs-up. More than 1,500 people attended the formal dedication ceremony on a sunny Wednesday afternoon. "This is amazing," said Adam Green, of Dubuque, who served with the U.S. Army's 82nd Airborne Division in Iraq. The 82nd's soldiers were among the first ground forces who entered the country in 2002. "It is absolutely one of the most phenomenal places that I've seen. Thank god Dubuque did something for them (veterans). It's good to see it, and good to see that they care. A lot of people in the community donated their time and energy to it, and the result is stunning."

Jason Cluff, a U.S. Navy vet who served with naval air squadrons in the mid-1990s, volunteered his electrician talents to the project. "For the area, this is something you would see in Washington, D.C. -- as nice as it is," he said. "I have to admire Louis (Kartman) and rest of them for all the time they spent. When they first started, there was a lot of doubt from people, 'You'll never get something that nice to go in Dubuque.' After almost three years, look at what it's come to. "Kartman, a Dubuque Korean War veteran, initially proposed the project after seeing a similar monument in Park Rapids, Minn. He thought if Park Rapids, with a population of 3,900 (it quadruples in the summer), could build a monumental memorial, so could Dubuque. "I'm pleased beyond words to see it completed," Kartman said during the dedication.

Numerous families bought brick pavers inscribed with the names of their veteran loved ones. Mike Ellis and Keith Ellis, two U.S. Navy father-son generations, have a family paver. The size of the crowd impressed Mike Ellis, who did a tour in Iraq in 2006 with a Navy Seabee unit. "It brings a tear to my eye to see all these folks here," he said. "I'm just proud of everybody."

Keith Ellis served aboard the USS Gunston Hall LSD-6 (a dock-landing ship) in the Pacific during World War II. "It's quite something to see all these old veterans and that we're still alive to see this," he said. "Most people ignore monuments, unless they are veterans. I really like it and appreciate it." Among those who served was Danny Hefel, who survived 1,143 days of captivity by Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces during Vietnam. Hefel raised the American flag during the ceremony. "Somebody out there cares," he said. "It takes a lot to put something like this together, and the people who did it -- my hat is off to them."

