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VETERAN'S DAY BRINGS BACK MEMORIES FOR WWII VET

Orlando, FL – Robert Cooke enlisted at the age of 17 in the U.S. Air Force in 1942 to save the world. The 90-year-old Orlando man is still working full time at Workforce Central Florida saving people from unemployment.

Cooke was stationed at Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands and Okinawa from 1943 to 1946. He worked in meteorology and cryptology decoding weather information in an effort to take the Pacific back from the Japanese during World War II.

“I was in my first year of college at the University of Detroit and was bored stiff,” said Cooke, who earned two bronze battle stars, a victory medal, three overseas service bars and the good conduct medal. “I enlisted to save the world for democracy.”

The young soldier was in Okinawa when the atomic bomb was dropped Aug. 6, 1945 on Hiroshima, 622 miles away. The sergeant remembers having great expectations after the bombing about what would happen next.

After serving his country, Cooke owned his own import/export business for 40 years living mainly in Caracas, Venezuela until the age of 80 when he moved back to the states and decided he didn't want to sit around the house.

Cooke was hired in 2003 at the age of 80 to work 20 hours a week at WCF by Experience Works, a nonprofit that helps employers take advantage of senior's talents. Cooke started as a resource room attendant helping job seekers find jobs. His bilingual abilities were also used to teach computer seminars. His work ethic and drive impressed his boss and he was hired full-time. The grandfather is currently a customer service representative working with WCF customers to verify they've found employment.

“Working keeps my mind sharper,” said Cooke, who still drives but walks to work most days. “Now I have an extended family in the office that I wouldn't have sitting around watching TV.”

Cooke is one of two dozen vets who work at WCF, which has a team of nine veteran service representatives who help veterans write resumes, find jobs, improve their computer skills and enroll in training programs to enhance their careers.

Two out of three (66 percent) veterans consider finding a job their greatest challenge in transitioning to civilian life, according to a 2011 Veterans' Employment Challenges study by Prudential.

“Workforce Central Florida connects unemployed vets with businesses that value loyalty, dedication and the leadership qualities veterans possess,” said Joe Patton, veterans' program manager.

Photos of Robert Cooke are available upon request.

Workforce Central Florida offers tools for residents of Lake, Orange, Osceola, Seminole and Sumter counties to find a job and advance their careers. WCF provides nearly 27,500 job seekers with services such as an online job bank, career counseling, recruitment events, training, financial aid, career assessments and internships each month. WCF also assists an average of 1,120 employers monthly with recruitment, retention and training. For more information, visit www.workforcecentralflorida.com.

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