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U.S. Ambassador Touts War Veterans, Dad

By Justin Varilek

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U.S. Ambassador John Beyrle raising a toast at a celebration of the U.S. holiday Veterans Day, which falls on Friday, at his Spaso House residence. Open-faced sandwiches transfigured with turkey and c
Igor Tabakov

Move over stuffed turkey.

The U.S. Thanksgiving favorite was replaced by *buterbrody* transfigured with turkey and cranberries to act as the unlikely symbol of U.S.-Russian friendship at a Moscow celebration of the U.S. holiday Veterans Day, which falls on Friday.

But the celebration, hosted by U.S. Ambassador John Beyrle at his Spaso House residence Wednesday night, kicked off with a perennial Russian favorite.

"To our friendship, our partnership and our spirit of alliance," Beyrle declared, raising a shotglass of vodka. He then clinked glasses with two stately World War II veterans with rows

of medals cascading off their chests.

Beyrle also spoke of his father, Sergeant Joseph Beyrle, one of a handful of U.S. troops who served in both the U.S. and Soviet military during the war. He died six years ago at the age of 81.

"I regret that he didn't live long enough to see me become ambassador, host a reception like this at Spaso House, inviting veterans from World War II who may have been his comrades, to raise a toast," Beyrle said. "It is in a way not only raising a toast to my Dad, but with my Dad."

Beyrle's father was captured by the Germans after parachuting into Normandy and, on his third attempt, escaped to the Soviet forces and joined a tank brigade. A historical exhibit to Joseph Beyrle opened in St. Petersburg last year, and it has been traveling throughout the United States this year, most recently opening at the Strategic Air and Space Museum in Omaha, Nebraska, on Oct. 20.

"Sergeant Joseph Beyrle stands out as the highest example of partnership between the U.S. and the Soviet Union," former U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union Arthur Hartman said last year at the St. Petersburg opening of the exhibit, titled "Beyrle: A Hero of Two Nations."

About 300 people, half of whom were Russian veterans and their families, gathered Wednesday evening at the fourth annual Veterans Day reception, a U.S. Embassy spokesman said.

"To me, the size doesn't matter," Beyrle said in his speech before his toast. "What matters is that the people who came here ... all hopefully reflect on a common history we have and use those reflections to build something stronger between us today."

After his remarks, music broke out in the main hall as Vil Akhmetov of the Russian Central Military Orchestra sang a medley including the Soviet wartime song "Katyusha" and "Blue Suede Shoes," popularized by Elvis Presley. When his fellow soloist Sergei started singing Frank Sinatra's "New York, New York," a laughing group of Russian, Indian and American military wives linked arms and started dancing the can-can.

U.S. military officers joined their Russian comrades in sampling the turkey treats, which were served alongside Siberian dumplings and chicken fingers.

In a side room of Spaso House, images of Soviet soldiers from various wars were juxtaposed with their American counterparts to accent the commonalities of all veterans. Next to one display, a hunched-over Russian World War II veteran spoke with a young U.S. Army officer and presented him with a lapel pin from his veterans organization.

Five Russian veterans later gathered around Beyrle to fight over turns to toast and praise him for all he and his father have done for Russia.

The U.S. Senate is holding confirmation hearings for Michael McFaul, the top Russia adviser for U.S. President Barack Obama, to replace Beyrle, who has played a major role in steering the U.S.-Russian "reset" in ties during his three years here.

"We have high hopes for our relationship with the new ambassador but, of course, we have

had a special relationship with Beyrle," said Alexander Lavrentyev, deputy chairman of a local war veterans organization. "He holds a unique place in the hearts of veterans here."

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