

Honor Flight Commemorates America's WWII Veterans

By Ellen Manzo, Veterans Memorial & Support Foundation Board Member



Above: The Price of Freedom Wall at the WWII Memorial - Each of the 4048 gold stars represents 100 American service personnel who died or remain missing from the war.

Right: WWII Veterans aboard Mission #14 stand before the WWII Memorial.



"Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for this day. You've just done so much for me. And so much for my life."

- WWII VETERAN MICHAEL ALHANTI

With a cracking voice and holding back tears, WWII Veteran Mike Alhanti, concluded his extemporaneous remarks at the microphone addressing other WWII veteran participants aboard the Honor Flight Mission #14 during dinner prior to leaving Washington DC for the return trip home.

Only weeks before the 75th anniversary of the original bombing of Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1944, Honor Flight Mission #14 sponsored by the Hudson Valley Honor flight Team in Westchester New York flew 125 WWII veterans and their accompanying guardians to Washington D.C. for a day of honor and closure. The Honor Flight program is a privately funded nationwide non-profit initiative with the mission of transporting America's veterans to Washington, D.C. to visit the memorials dedicated to honor the service and sacrifices of themselves and their friends. Today, the Honor Flight treats WWII, Korean War and terminally ill veterans of later conflicts to an all-expenses paid round trip visit to Washington D.C. to see the WWII Memorial and other significant landmarks. The local Honor Flight San Jose chapter plans to sponsor five tours in 2017 to Washington D.C. for veterans.

Participating veterans first meet over a pre-flight Sunday afternoon meet and greet. Weeks later the veterans are flown along with their fee-paying guardians and corporate sponsors, to Washington D.C. where the group will visit the WWII, Vietnam, Korean War, Air Force, Women in Military Service for America Memorials and Arlington Cemetery. They will lay a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, speak to other veterans about their experiences and receive touching letters from family, friends and caring citizens during a "Mail Call" celebration on their way home.

At 6 AM on a Saturday, the day of takeoff for the nation's Capitol, buses transport the veterans and guardians in the company of a 14 Police motorcycle cop escort along with 24 Freedom Riders on Harley bikes to a private airport hangar. There, they are greeted by bagpipers, West Point, Coast Guard and college ROTC Cadets, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, a large brass band, politicians, speakers, and approximately four hundred flag-waving patriotic caring citizens, all who desire to wish the 125 participants well for their Honor Flight adventure.

A water cannon salute creates an arched bridge and hoses the plane as she departs from her gate and heads for the Westchester runway. A second water cannon salute welcomes the veterans as the aircraft pulls into the gate at Washington's Reagan National Airport. Even the jet bridge and plane are in full regalia adorning red, white and blue. Once in D.C., a 20-person wind band, bagpipers, caring Cadets and another host of flag-waving greeters meet the veterans at the arrival gate. Washington D.C. Police escort the Honor Flight buses for the entire tour making way for the visiting vets so that they never once are subject to a red light or traffic holdup during their visit. Every element from start to finish is first class. These men and women are treated with the dignity and glorification they so deserve.

Upon arrival at the WWII Memorial, the trip highlight, the veterans meet up with fellow WWII veteran, Senator Bob Dole, recipient of a Bronze Star, Purple Heart with Oak Leaf Cluster and Presidential Medal of Freedom. Senator Dole takes pleasure in posing for photos and shaking the hand of every veteran and guardian who stops by to say hello.



Saturday morning, 6 AM, October 29th Honor Flight Day. A hangar full of WWII veterans and patriotic visitors wishing the veterans a memorable day are present to launch the day's festivities.

The vets aboard the Honor Flight are the lucky ones. Statistics indicate that 600 WWII veterans die each day in America. It is not unusual that some veterans who are registered to attend, may perish prior to flight day, in which case their service is honored at the WWII Memorial with an honor guard salute. Their closure is in spirit.

I had the privilege to serve as a guardian aboard Honor Flight Mission #14. The veteran I had the privilege of escorting aboard Honor Flight Mission #14 was my own father, the last surviving veteran of seven brothers and brothers-in-law who served in WWII from two families who came together by marriage. Four of the seven family members served in the Navy, three served in the Army Air Corps, the military branch that later became the US Air Force. Included within the seven was a West Point graduate, a second West Point First Alternate, an Army Air Corps pilot who was Killed In Action in flight on one of the most productive nights of the war for America and her Allies, and an Army Air Corps war hero who survived the war to receive his medals of valor. My father considered his Honor Flight participation an opportunity to honor the service of the six other brethren WWII veteran family members in addition to honoring his own service. A few observations...

Most veterans have the reputation of being closed lipped about their military experience and don't enjoy mentally reliving their war experiences by speaking about their deployments. The presence of memorials surrounded by veterans who experienced the same conflict, magically created a comfortable and safe atmosphere for open dialogue amongst the veterans about their military experience.

The vets were tremendously impressed with the memorials. The Vietnam War Memorial visitors touched or etched on paper the names of fellow service members who were killed in action and whose names adorn the Vietnam Wall. In an odd sort of way, touching or memorializing the name of the fallen etched in granite stone made viewers feel closer to their loved one. At the base of the Vietnam Wall were artifacts left by visitors paying their respects to America's fallen service members – boots, dog tags, hats, previously worn by one who served – left behind in tribute to the fallen for collection by the memorial's curator at the end of the day.

The veteran or family member living local to Washington D.C. is fortunate to have the ability to visit the memorials repeatedly and take advantage of the cache of healing monuments. Conversely, the veteran separated by distance doesn't have the opportunity to visit them and is less fortunate; an element that makes the rationale for the Los Gatos veterans memorial compelling.

Overwhelmingly evident was how the presence of memorials served to educate the public on America's history and for reminding visitors of the sacrifices of those who defended the freedom we are fortunate to enjoy daily. The Washington D.C. military based memorials are far more than pleasing-to-the-eye artistic icons. They serve to honor, educate, heal, bring closure, evoke gratitude and respect to those who have given so much for our country. This observation confirmed the importance of everything the hard working volunteers of the Veterans Memorial & Support Foundation of Los Gatos were attempting to do along with neighboring communities who took steps in advance of Los Gatos to build memorials in tribute to those who served.

Not surprising was how the voices in the crowd moved to a sobering silence as viewers respectfully walked past the WWII Memorial Freedom Wall, which beautifully displays 4,048 gold stars. Each gold star represents one hundred American service personnel who died or remain missing from the war. The 405,399 American dead and missing from WWII are second only to the loss of more than 620,000 Americans during our Civil War.

For many, seeing the WWII Memorial in the company of other WWII veterans was an outstanding tribute that delivered closure to a difficult chapter in life that in some cases, resulted in lifetime circumstances. That was certainly the case for WWII Veteran Michael Alhanti, who was asked by the Hudson Valley Honor Flight Chair to comment on his experience following his day in D.C. in the company of other Honor Flight participating veterans and guardians in the room.

As we departed Westchester Airport for Washington D.C., only a couple hours into the program, I asked my father, "What do you think, Dad? What are your thoughts so far?" Filled with emotion he replied, "I'm impressed." And then he paused and added, "And depressed." His voice cracked, "This is too much." Translated, that meant the emotion of the day was a lot to take in. He continued, "What a wonderful day. I'm just amazed at what attention the community has put together. It's something I'll remember the rest of my life. And it's just beginning."

WWII or Korean War veterans and guardians who have an interest in registering for the Bay Area Honor Flight can do so at HonorFlightBayArea.org or contact Judy Scally, Honor Flight Volunteer at 408-529-6247. Parties who desire to contribute talent or make a donation in support of the local Veterans Memorial & Support Foundation's efforts to erect a memorial in Los Gatos are encouraged to visit the Veterans Foundation's website www.honorAvet.org or to directly contact Foundation volunteer Ellen Manzo at honorAvet@gmail.com.