

# ★ HONOR FLIGHT ★



by Duane Harris

Tom Brokaw called them “The Greatest Generation.” Their accomplishments during World War II, as well as their successes following military service, are well chronicled.

On a Saturday in September, I had the unforgettable opportunity to spend the day with 24 members of “The Greatest Generation” - veterans of WW II and the Korean War.

They call it Honor Flight, with the mission to “fly America’s veterans to Washington, D.C. so they may visit the memorials built and dedicated to honor their sacrifices in past wars. This service is provided at no cost to the veteran and is funded entirely by private and corporate donations.”

What an honor it was to serve as a guardian for my 90 year-old father, Herschel “Tex” Harris, during this Honor Flight trip. Dad was a career Air Force officer who retired from service in 1963. Serving during WW II and the Korean War, knowing that his duty was to save our freedom, he humbly recounts stories that depict meritorious acts.

Our group consisted of 24 veterans, 15 guardians, a flight director and a physician. Nine of the veterans were in wheelchairs. All were wearing shirts presented by the Honor Flight Network appropriately imprinted with these words: “If you can read this, thank a teacher. If you are reading it in English, thank a Veteran.”



As we departed the Savannah airport at 5:30 a.m., the following announcement was read by the flight crew and this was repeated on each flight that day:

"Ladies and Gentlemen, we are pleased to have on board today 24 heroic veterans of the Second World War and the Korean War. These veterans range in age from 77 to 94 years old. They served our country in the U.S. Army, the Army Air Corps, the Woman's Army Auxiliary Corps, the Air Force, Navy, and the United States Marine Corps. These heroes currently reside throughout the coastal areas of Georgia and South Carolina. They are going to Washington, D.C. to visit the World War II Memorial and other historic sites as guests of the Savannah/Beaufort Chapter of the Honor Flight Network. Please join me in recognizing and thanking these brave heroes for their service to our country."

The applause on each flight was emphatic and prolonged. Every time I heard the recitation, I was moved and honored to be sitting with my dad as he received this recognition.

When we landed in Baltimore, a crowd of Honor Flight supporters numbering over 100 broke into cheers and applause that brought tears to these courageous old-timers and their guardians. We were serenaded with a beautiful rendition of "Proud to be an American" and at military band played as we reached the end of the concourse.

The first stop on this picture perfect D.C. day was at the World War II Memorial. We were met by active duty representatives from all the branches of our military services, including a Lieutenant General from the U.S. Air Force and a representative from Congressman Jack Kingston's office, who presented each veteran with a personal letter thanking them for their service.

We then traveled across the Potomac River to the Air Force Memorial high on a hill over-

looking Arlington National Cemetery on one side and the Pentagon on the other. Central to this inspiring memorial are three stainless steel spires rising upward 270 feet to symbolize the starburst pattern created by the Air Force Thunderbirds precision flying team.

The Marine Corps Memorial was our next stop. Also known as the Iwo Jima Memorial, it is the largest bronze statue in the world. Depicting five Marines and one Navy Corpsman raising the American flag at Iwo Jima, there are 13 hands sculpted on this memorial – the 12 hands of the six men, with the 13<sup>th</sup> representing the hand of God.

Many of the veterans wore American Legion hats, some of which listed the campaigns where they served during the war. One gentleman named "Hawkeye" wore a hat with three of the major Atlantic campaigns – North Africa, Italy, and the Battle of the Bulge. I can only imagine the trials he faced and the stories he could tell.

The Tomb of the Unknowns in Arlington National Cemetery is guarded 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, by specially trained soldiers of the 3<sup>rd</sup> U.S. Infantry – The Old Guard. We were honored to witness the solemn Changing of the Guard Ceremony. These guards are never to be distracted from their solemn duty but as the Old Guard sergeant departed the memorial, he did a shuffle step which is his way of recognizing and honoring the veterans in the audience.

Afterwards we visited the Korean War Memorial, with the nineteen stainless steel statues of servicemen cloaked in ponchos beyond a granite wall with a sea of faces looking gratefully at these soldiers for the sacrifices they made. From there we traveled to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, with the stark black granite wall engraved with 58,267 names of those killed or missing in action during the Vietnam War. Lastly, we visited the U.S. Navy Memorial with its Lone Sailor and twin mastheads.

The melancholy realization of the true price of freedom was felt by all. One cannot pass by these memorials without feeling the pangs of loss – feelings the Greatest Generation buried for years, disinterred on this day of venturing into the heart of memory. Feelings mitigated by pride and a sense of duty and a knowing

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that they and the friends they have lost, and the families they loved, made our country and the world a better place to live.

After this full schedule, it was time to renourish and where else would a group of retired service personnel go but to an all you can eat buffet. Our home-style dining occurred at the Old Country Buffet before proceeding back to the Baltimore airport.

Our very long day, returning to Savannah at 11:30 pm, was a rewarding one. On the drive back to St. Simons, I asked my dad what his most memorable experience of the day was. Without hesitation, he said the reception we received at the airport in Baltimore.

We thank the Honor Flight Network for this treasured experience. This Network was formed in 2005, shortly after President George W. Bush dedicated the World War II Memorial on May 29, 2004. The Honor Flight Network is a non-profit corporation. If you are interested in Honor Flight as a veteran or a volunteer or if you wish to make a donation to support future travels for veterans, go to [honorflightsavannahinc@gmail.com](mailto:honorflightsavannahinc@gmail.com)