



WANTED: World War II Vets, Able to Fly **An Honor Flight Experience**

by **Jim Kenerson**

The sleek Airbus jetliner was full. There were no bawling toddlers or harried mothers trying to soothe their children. The mostly male and decidedly elderly passengers sat patiently while others boarded, settled in, and waited for takeoff. There was no luggage in the cargo hold, but an abundance of wheelchairs.

This was a special flight, with special passengers, an *Honor Flight*, a flight full of veterans of World War II en route to Washington, DC, to view, in their final years, the Memorial erected in their honor and dedicated in 2004 on the National Mall between the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial. Unfortunately, most of the veterans of that great conflict passed on before the Monument's dedication, so to some it became a crucial matter to see that those surviving veterans get to see the monument while they still are able. And this is done at no expense to the veteran.

Arrival at Reagan National Airport was auspicious, indeed. The plane was presented the signal honor of being met on the airport taxiway by the Fire Department's water cannons, and baggage carts bedecked with the Stars and Stripes, the Palmetto flag, and those of other states, and the POW-MIA flag. *What a welcome!*

Inside the concourse, the veterans were greeted by a loud, rowdy, proud, and thankful group of travelers, military service members, a band, and airport personnel. They were escorted through the lobby by the area members of the Rolling Thunder motorcycle club who would provide a rolling escort with local police for the veterans' four buses from Reagan National Airport, across Memorial Bridge and past the Lincoln Memorial to the Mall and the World War II Memorial.

Special moments followed for each veteran, he or she in his or her own memories. There were photos galore at the beautiful memorial for each and all veterans.



The author (center) with two WWII veterans participating in the Honor Flight (Photo: Perry McLeod)

One of the War's more notable heroes, former Senator Bob Dole met the group at the Memorial and shared in the storytelling and photo ops. It is said that Senator Dole, or his wife, former Senator and former Director of the American Red Cross, Elizabeth Dole, try to meet and greet every Honor Flight of WWII Veterans to visit the Memorial.

Departing from the WWII Memorial, the four motor coaches took the vets on a rolling tour of Capitol Hill, Pennsylvania Avenue, and The Mall with a stop to visit the Viet Nam and Korean War Memorials and the Lincoln Memorial. There was also a drive-by of the Navy Memorial across from The National Archives on Pennsylvania Avenue, and stops at the new Air Force Memorial and the USMC Iwo Jima Memorial in Arlington, VA. One of the highlights of the trip (*the entire trip was a highlight!*) was a ride through the shaded roadways of Arlington National Cemetery to the Amphitheater where the Vets were able to visit the Tomb of the Unknowns and witness the solemn Changing of the Guard ceremony. It was a profound moment for all.

The buses then returned to Reagan National Airport where the vets re-boarded their jetliner after passing through security and the concourse in a little more subdued manner than upon their arrival earlier in the day. Although some took advantage of the smooth flight to grab a quick and hard earned nap, many did not, due to the heightened excitement level of the day.

If one had been napping, the “welcome home to Columbia” reception was enough to arouse even the soundest sleeper. The Fort Jackson army band, Cub Scouts, Rolling Thunder and Patriot Guard motorcycle riders, military service members, police, and ordinary travelers, US, SC and POW-MIA flags, patriotic music --- all arrayed to welcome each and every honored traveler home again. The pride of the welcoming party was exceeded only by the pride of those honorees being welcomed.

To a man, and the two women, these veterans experienced an overwhelming emotional outpouring of gratitude and patriotism from the folks they encountered that they had never suspected before. Some had remained silent about their service and experiences for over 60 years, yet many today shared their stories with total strangers, kids and adults, just merely for the asking. It was a day full of events that were fulfilling, rewarding, exciting and intensely emotional for all involved.

Honor Flight has only one goal: to transport FREE of CHARGE as many World War II veterans to see the World War II Memorial as are able. Any person who has a family member, or friend that is a veteran of World War II that has not visited the Memorial in Washington is encouraged to put that person in touch with Honor Flight South Carolina or the national Honor Flight organization to get that loved one on board a flight as soon as possible. Time is of the essence for many of them. And remember, many of this generation will not make a big deal of it and may even express a reluctance to make the flight because they don’t want to be fussed over. On the other hand, some unfortunately are just too physically impaired, but the Honor Flight organization is experienced in performing the proper screening to determine who is and who is not able to undertake such a flight.

It was ironic that the date on which this Honor Flight from Columbia took place, September 5, 2009, was the 70th anniversary of the date on which the United States declared its neutrality following Hitler’s invasion of Poland.



Former Senator Bob Dole (in white shirt) greets the WWII veterans from South Carolina participating in the Honor Flight