

By: James Salamon, President and Director of Honor Flight Dayton, Inc.



They have been called the Greatest Generation... the 16 million American men and women who served during WWII. Over 404,000 paid the ultimate sacrifice doing what they were called upon to do — stop two tyrants bent upon taking over the world. They were just doing their jobs.

Most of you have seen the photograph of the sailor kissing the girl on Times Square when it was announced that Japan had surrendered. That was a great day of celebration for America, a celebration most who served never received. With the massive number of military members overseas it took months, and for many more than a year to return home. For nearly four years, the entire country supported and sacrificed for the war effort and people wanted to get back to living normal lives. Until recently, there was no opportunity to thank the Veterans for their sacrifices and a job well done.

In May of 2005 Earl Morse of Enon, Ohio, an Air Force Veteran and Physician's Assistant for the VA, joined with some of his flying club buddies to take 12 WWII Veterans on a one-day trip to Washington, DC. They flew in four-seater planes and finally gave the Veterans the opportunity to visit their Memorial and receive the thanks they so richly deserved. The entire trip was free for the Veterans. That is how the Honor Flight Program was born. During that first year 137 WWII Veterans made the trip, and since that first flight the program has expanded to 42 States and over 134 hubs. Each city (hub) operates independently and many of the hubs are now taking Korean War Veterans and Vietnam Veterans. The Honor Flight Program (honorflight.org) has flown over 138,817 Veterans to visit their Memorials.

The entire Honor Flight Program is privately funded by donations from individuals, Veteran organizations, schools, various social groups, small businesses and corporations. The guardians that travel with the Veterans pay their own expenses to have the honor and privilege of escorting the Veterans. Throughout the country there are literally thousands of volunteers putting in tens of thousands of hours helping to transport Veterans to DC as well as making the day memorable. For many Veterans, this is a trip they may never have been able to make, with many not having the financial and/or medical resources to make the journey.



Why is this program so important? Why are there so many volunteers working hard to get the Veterans to DC? There are several reasons, and a primary one is that time is not on our side. When the Memorial opened in May of 2004 the VA estimated that 4 million WWII Veterans were still alive. They further estimated that over 640 WWII Veterans were dying each day. On multiple occasions Honor Flight Dayton (honorflightdayton.org) has scheduled Veterans for a flight only to receive word shortly before the flight that the Veteran had passed away.

Everyone involved in the Honor Flight Program feels a sense of duty to see that the WWII Veteran — indeed all Veterans — deserve a “Welcome Home”, one that they never received. They have earned our undying thanks and respect for risking their lives to protect the freedoms we have enjoyed for over 225 years.

Many people involved with the Program, myself included, have not served in the military. In some small way this is our way of paying back to the Veterans. As of this writing, I have taken 58 flights and had the honor of being with over 2100 Veterans. I have witnessed what this Program means to the Veterans, both emotionally and mentally. The trip to DC has changed the lives of the Veterans and in turn the lives of family and friends. All of the Veterans have shared similar thoughts on the Honor Flight experience. They are overwhelmed by the greetings at the airports and Memorials. They cannot believe that volunteers would spend their own money and time to help, greet, escort and thank them. Many of the Veterans are somewhat isolated and what they see and hear on television is their impression of our country and especially of our youths. The Honor Flight trip shows Veterans that this is not the case. They have a renewed faith in our country and the younger generation because of the response they receive from kids, teenagers and young adults.

After the flights, I often get phone calls or letters from Veterans. Some stories in particular have really touched me and I would like to share some of my most memorable and emotional experiences.



On a flight in 2011 we had a terminally ill Vietnam Veteran; very quiet and introverted. After the flight I received a call from one of his caregivers at the VA. The Veteran was an artist and prior to the flight he painted very dark colors and dark subjects. After the flight he started painting in bright colors about cheerful subjects. Seeing “The Wall” changed his mindset. He was able to live his last days happier, perhaps because he was able to release some of his demons.

A WWII Veteran on a flight in 2010 had served as a bombardier. He had deep regrets about what American bombers did at the end of the war in Germany, i.e. the carpet bombing of Germany where the targets destroyed resulted in both military and civilian deaths. On the return trip home from DC, this Veteran told me that because of the trip he realized that what he did, what the Allies did, was necessary to stop Hitler. He said he was able to let go of regrets he had been carrying for over 65 years.

After a November, 2008 flight, a WWII Veteran wrote to me that for many years his self-esteem and morale was very low. He believed that what he did in the war did not matter. After all, he was only in the Normandy Invasion, Battle of the Bulge, and liberation of concentration camps, just to name a few of the trivial “conflicts”. When he got to the Memorial he saw what America thought of WWII Veterans, both the Memorial and the people there. He was overcome by the attention from both adults and children who thanked him for his service, what he did, the sacrifices he made and risking his life to help protect our freedoms. After the trip he felt better about himself. The following December I received another letter from him stating that the past year his self-esteem and morale was now high. He felt good about what he did and was able to talk to his family about his time in the service. He said “I feel now that I have left a legacy for my children and for my children’s children to follow”.

Above all, my most profound experience was a phone call from a WWII Veteran after a May 2008 flight. The phone call from him that went like this:

Vet: “Hi Jim, I wanted to thank you for the trip.”

Me: “No, you deserve the thanks for what you went through at Normandy, Battle of the Bulge and the liberation of concentration camps”.

Vet: “No, you do not understand. For many years I have been seeing a psychiatrist.”

Me: “Why”?

Vet: “I felt guilty”.

Me: “Why did you feel guilty”? (Since I never served I could not understand this)

Vet: “I survived! I never talked about the war, my experiences and how I was feeling. But being at the Memorial

seeing that my buddies will not be forgotten, that they are memorialized and that America will never forget the ultimate sacrifice that so many made I was able to let go some of my guilt. When I returned to Dayton and my home I spent the rest of the evening and well into the morning talking to my wife of over 50 years about the war, my experiences and how I had been feeling for so long. I felt that a huge burden was lifted from me”.

Me: “You are very welcome.”

We said good bye.

I was speechless! Here was a man that kept all that guilt bottled up inside him for over 60 years... a man who experienced some of the worst fighting in American history and saw horrible events and atrocities. HE wanted to thank ME for taking him on a one-day trip, a trip that changed his life dramatically. These are the priceless moments. How can you not be moved by the response from the Veterans?

After all these years sometimes it is still hard to believe that something so simple as spending some time with the Veterans, showing that you care and appreciate what they did can mean so much and that it changes their lives. After all these flights, all these years and all these Veterans I still get emotional when I tell the stories. The title of this article is *Feeding the Soul*, referring to the Veterans, but in reality many volunteers also get a lot out of participating in the program. Please get involved with an Honor Flight Program in your area. I guarantee you will not be sorry.

