



## WE HONOR VETERANS

### **Words of Thanks**

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On October 19, 2013 I travelled the 153 miles from my home in Williamsburg, Virginia to Washington DC and it took me 68 years to make the journey.

I was on a bus filled with WW II veterans through the courtesy of the Honor Flight Historic Triangle Virginia organization, a wonderful caring organization of volunteers dedicated to making sure that veterans of that war get to Washington to see their memorial. Everyone on the bus, most of who had never met before the day, had all grown up together. The whole bus load was about the same age, some very healthy, some doddering a bit, more than a few in wheel chairs, but they made the bus. A few weeks before us the government shut down the memorial but the busloads of veterans breached yet one more barrier and charged through the demolished fencing to their memorial. Veterans together again were taking a hill, moving forward and clearing the way for the Hampton Roads contingent to arrive.

The journey was amazing, the memorials we visited were overwhelming but most of all was the care and courtesy of the people, all volunteers, who made the day truly important by ensuring that their self-anointed title – HONOR FLIGHTS -was exactly that. Each of us was assigned a ‘guardian’ and mine, Betty Hand, a retired Navy chief, was not only warmly attentive but managed to laugh at my jokes, comfort me on the few times during the day when the occasion overcame me, and true to her role as guardian, stayed with me for every moment of the trip. Well, she did stand outside the restrooms but I bet she had checked the windows to ensure there was no escape route. She was, and is, great.

The day began at 5:30 a.m. at the Historic Triangle community center where we had boxes of Dunkin Donuts and coffee, a Dixieland jazz band and a brief ceremony with a trooping of the colors. The buses from Virginia Beach and Norfolk were right on time. As we left the Historic Triangle community center an honor guard lined the walkway to the buses.

Leaving Williamsburg we were escorted not only by two police cars with flashing lights but also by a dozen bikers, their motorcycles stretching up the road in front of the police cars. During the break at the Dale City truck stop, the bikers thanked us for our service with the occasional ‘God bless you,’ and then lined the roadside to wave goodbye. This was just a hint of the wonders of the human spirit that were to come our way.

Our first stop in Washington was at the Korean War Veterans Memorial which portrayed the close to battle action which we had all avoided since serving. Yes, there is a wall of honor and remembrance, but most stunning is that the memorial itself was a troop of battle dressed soldiers, on an even plane, in a large field of brush and trees, all life size and on a realistic mission, guns at ready, separated for safety, walking through their field surrounded by walkways that allowed us to look into their faces. Betty snapped a picture of me talking with one of these soldiers as he faced the sidewalk, we were that close, I looked into his eyes, and they were that real. It was stunning.

We ran into Honor Flight participants from all over the country, most flown into Washington by their own local chapter, but all on the same mission. With a police car ahead of us, we went to the World War II Memorial and it was there that the full impact of the occasion struck us. As we approached the entrance people lined the walkway, all applauding, some coming over to shake our hand, thanking us, blessing us, families, service people, some children holding signs saying, 'thank you.' Some folks, just enjoying the park, or jogging through, stopped to thank us, shake our hands. People not organized, just aware of who we were and joining in this celebration of what had happened so many years ago. And I was told that Bob Dole was somewhere, in a wheel chair, greeting some of the buses.

The welcome we received was overwhelming, as was the memorial itself. It was large, a water pool in the center, the European War Theater on one side, the Pacific on the other. Etched into the stone surrounding the theatre monuments were the names of the battles. We could all pick out where we had been and remembered. Standing in this enormous memorial area we could remember not only where we had served but what we had done there.

We later drove by the Iwo Jima statue, a replica in mammoth splendor of the famous photograph of the flag being raised. Believe me, as inspiring as is the photograph, nothing can compare to the sheer power and resolution of the men involved displayed in this statue. And it is visible from the road, that's the way we saw it and that's how powerful it is.

We went to the Marine Museum for dinner, getting on to the end of the day and here is where the effect of the sheer human and genuine affection being poured upon us was the most stirring.

The approach to the Marine Museum is as large as a football field and it was lined with people, hundreds of people, some gold star mothers, many soldiers and marines, all applauding us and coming over to us and blessing us for our service all those many years ago. Little children with their signs of gratitude, parents holding babies up for us to see and overwhelming us with grace and kindness and generosity of spirit that will never be erased from the memory of this writer.

But it was not all over, even as we settled in for the ride home our Red Bus Captain, or bus boss, Kelley Hall, under whom I would serve any day, announced that we would now have mail call. We all received the most amazing package of letters, each of us; even though when she announced my name, she immediately shouted that I was not really on the bus: My buddy.

My package had letters from some of my own children and then several dozen letters from mostly little children, each in his or her own way had decorated their single pages with hearts and smudges and colors and all with thank you. All signed dear veteran, some signed I love you, each of them genuine, I was assured, and providing a very touching and tangible token of affection, so many generations separated, and yet their reach out to me so palpable and strong.

I have been fortunate to have lived many lives during my so far allotted time, but this day will stand for me, and I guess for all of us on the Honor Bus, as proof that regardless of all the other things we did or didn't do in our lives, we did fulfill way back then our mission of a life fulfilled and that we did justify our existence. We should all be comforted.

-Anonymous