

Memories of an Honor Flight

By **David W. Deuth**, President of Weerts Funeral Home

It was meant to honor them. Their service. Their valor. Their sacrifice.

And the freedom they fought to protect.

Nearly 200 of us – both veterans and guardians – boarded a chartered 737 jet early Saturday morning, October 10, 2009 at the Quad Cities International Airport. It was another Quad Cities Honor Flight, a free trip for WW II veterans to visit the national memorial created in honor of their service to God and country. Each veteran received a special “Honor Flight” dog tag before boarding the airplane.

As we taxied to our arrival gate at Dulles International in Washington, D.C., the pilot stopped short of the jet bridge while two airport fire department tankers doused the aircraft with water from either side – a “water salute” to our QC area veterans, an honor typically reserved only for pilots as they complete their final flight on the day of their retirement.

Inside the terminal, a contingent of D.C. locals – cheering and waving flags – shook the hand of every veteran as they came off the airplane. Heading toward the buses, each vet was personally greeted by a Lt. Colonel from the Pentagon.

Situated midway between the Lincoln and the Washington Memorials, the WW II Memorial is a sprawling monument of granite columns. Stout granite pavilions on either side of the memorial commemorate the Atlantic and the Pacific Theatres of operation; the remaining granite columns represent each of the states and the American territories our soldiers call home. Greeting us upon arrival were Senator Bob Dole and his wife, Elizabeth.

Looking toward the Washington Memorial, the dome of the Capitol breaks the horizon in the



distance. Turning toward the Lincoln Memorial, a stunningly solemn display of 4,000 gold stars in a tight rectangular formation symbolizes the 400,000 U.S. war dead – each star representing one hundred lives.

After a group photo of our QCA veterans at their WW II memorial, we boarded the buses to visit the new Air Force Memorial, dedicated just three years earlier. At the Iwo Jima memorial, we gathered our veterans for another group photo beneath the familiar monument that has become a universal symbol of the American freedom they fought to preserve and protect. As



Honor Flight Hub Director Bob Morrison recalled significant details of the Iwo Jima battle, one veteran firmly clutched his dog tag; memories all too real more than 50 years later.

We made our way to Arlington National Cemetery, where we witnessed the solemn changing of the guard at the Tomb of The Unknowns. In silence, we witnessed the sacred tradition of utmost loyalty, respect and honor – sheathed in precision military movement – for our unidentified and unknown war dead.

A final stop brought us to the Lincoln Memorial and the adjacent memorials to the Korean Conflict and the Vietnam War. Climbing the steps to pay homage to our nation’s 16th President, I approached the behemoth marble likeness

of Lincoln. The sheer size of the statue and its uncompromising countenance commanded both awe and respect for this uncommon man who, upon an unwavering foundation in the belief that all are created equal, anchored his intentions squarely in the noblest of beliefs that our nation would survive if united, fall if divided...

Standing in the shadow of his memorial, on this, the 200th anniversary year of his birth, I took pause to consider once again this remarkable man whose prominence was established only in his death. Like many of our soldiers in the generations before and since, Lincoln died defending what he believed in: the American dreams of freedom, equality, peace and promise.

As we boarded the buses to head back toward Dulles International, a picture perfect sunset fell behind the Lincoln Memorial. Exhausted but bursting with American pride, we boarded our aircraft to head for home.

The Patriot Guard Riders, who were there to send us on our way early that morning, were the first in line to welcome our heroes home. One by one, our vets passed through their flag-lined honor guard as family and friends snapped photos, waved flags and cheered. Amid the smiles and the tears, the hugs and the handshakes, I knew our vets were proud. And they had every reason to be.



It was meant to honor them. Collapsing into bed nearly a full 24 hours after the day began, I had but a few moments to recollect this amazing day before I dozed off.

It was meant to honor them, I reminded myself. It was meant to honor them. But it became a tremendous honor for me. I shall always remember well.

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