

HONOR FLIGHT 21

Freedom

Is Not Free



HONOR FLIGHT 21

Amy Weirich

I was surprised when my dad, Dan Richards, asked me to be his guardian on an Honor Flight. An Honor Flight is a Free, all expense paid trip to Washington D.C. to visit memorials and other sites. WWII, Korean, & Vietnam veterans are eligible to apply; from their website "Honor Flight Network is a national non-profit organization comprised of independent hubs working together to achieve the Honor Flight mission. In furtherance of this common goal, we have the enormous privilege of showing our nation's veterans the appreciation and honor they deserve". Our independent hub is Honor Flight of Southern Colorado. A Guardian must be between 18-70 years old and able to assist the veterans.



It started with an orientation lunch on Sept. 14th at the Colorado Springs Christian School. We learned about the trip itinerary and received our backpacks which contained our shirts and jackets that we were to wear on the trip. The veterans received red shirts & jackets, while the volunteers & guardians received blue shirts & jackets. After we ate, I had guardian training where I learned what my duties would be on the trip.

We left early in the morning on Thursday, October 2nd. Jan drove us to the Colorado

Springs Christian School. We arrived an over an hour early, but there were already plenty of people in the parking lot waiting. When it was finally time, we entered the school auditorium, where we received our lanyards with our name badges. Lanyards were either blue or red to indicate which bus we would be riding on. We were on the red bus. There were close to 130 people on this trip, including the veterans, medical staff, bus leaders, a photographer & journalists from KOAA. Like my dad, most of the veterans served in the Vietnam War.

At 9:45 am, it was time to board our designated bus. As we exited the parking lot, the kids from the school, family & friends cheered us on waving American Flags & hand-painted signs. We were escorted to DIA by the Colorado Springs Police Department, Colorado State Patrol, & Colorado Freedom Riders. The Colorado Springs Police were replaced by the Douglas County Police, who saluted the veterans from the side of the highway before taking over.

At DIA, we were met by the TSA & the Denver Police Department, who escorted us through the airport. We had our own train to take us to the C Concourse. As we waited for our plane, lunch was provided for us by Modern Market Eatery, a vendor at DIA. We boarded our Southwest Plane to Dulles International Airport at around 12:30pm.

As we left our plane at Dulles, we were greeted by volunteers from Honor Flight. These folks come out to welcome every Honor Flight that comes in from all over the country. We made our way through the airport with the



aid of these volunteers to board two more busses, again separated by red & blue.

We arrived at the Westin Hotel around 7:00 pm eastern time. We had dinner & were given our room keys. My roommate was Ellen, a young lady who is active duty army. She lost her grandfather before he could make the trip, so she decided to volunteer to be the guardian for someone else's grandpa.

The next day, Friday, was the big day of touring the monuments in & around D.C. We had breakfast & were on our way by 7:30 am. Our first stop was Arlington National Cemetery. Here, we witnessed the Changing of the Guard Ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. This is a moving & very precise ceremony, definitely one of my most memorable moments from the trip. Afterwards, an off-duty soldier spoke to us about the ceremony. They perform this ceremony & stand guard at the tomb 24 hours a day 365 days a year regardless of the weather. Their uniforms are made of wool and they can get very hot during the summertime. After the veterans posed for a photograph at the Memorial Amphitheater, we boarded the busses & headed to the National Mall.

At the Mall, we first visited the World War II Memorial. There was one WWII veteran on our trip, Les Messamer, who is 99 years old. The memorial was opened in 2004

(can you believe that it took that long to have a WWII memorial?). It is a large oval memorial with a stately fountain in the center. You walk through the tall "Pacific" entrance arch; an "Atlantic" arch mirrors it on the opposite side. On the long side of the oval as you face the Lincoln Memorial, there are just over 4000 stars,

each one representing 100 Americans who died in the war. Fifty-six columns surround the "Pacific" & "Atlantic" arches and represent the 48 states and 8 territories at the time of the war.

After the WWII Memorial, dad wanted to go to the Vietnam Memorial. On the walk over, we passed in between the Lincoln Memorial & the Reflecting Pool. We spent a few solemn moments at the memorial with other veterans. We were reminded of all of these young men (& eight women) whose names are on the wall that never got the chance to be grandparents & great grandparents.

The Korean War Memorial is on the opposite side of the Lincoln Memorial. At this memorial, we are reminded that "Freedom is not Free." The most prominent feature is the "On Patrol" statues that look like they are trudging through the rugged Korean terrain in windblown ponchos. There was a tour group there from South Korea who were so very thankful when they there were Korean Veterans touring at the same time.

It was time to rest while we waited for our busses. As we sat on the benches, I made a new friend named Al who is a retired professor from the Air Force Academy. We then loaded the busses and made the trek back across the Potomac River to the US Marine Corps War Memorial also known as Iwo Jima. This is an awesome thirty-two foot high bronze

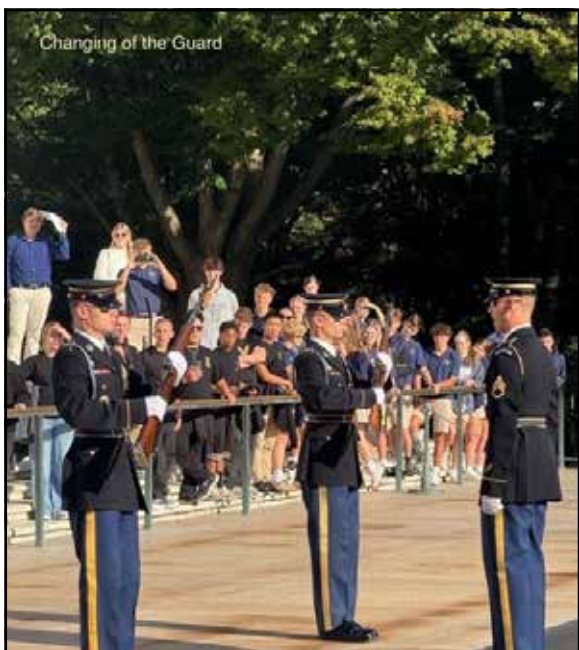
statue depicting six men raising the American Flag on the small island of Iwo Jima after an intense battle in February 1945. We ate lunch here and the veterans had their picture taken. We then headed to the Air Force Memorial.

The Air Force Memorial is a newer memorial dedicated in 2006. It sits atop a hill with a breathtaking view of the city & Arlington Cemetery to the north. It consists of three stainless steel spires reaching two hundred & seventy feet into the sky, befitting the men & women of the US Air Force.

We all loaded back on to the bus. It is here that I will thank the men & women of the medical team who thoughtfully aided the veterans on & off of the bus. We took a short bus ride around the city with one of our bus leaders, Cindy, giving us a guided tour. We took in sites such as the Thomas Jefferson Memorial, the Smithsonian, various government buildings, the Capital, the Navy Memorial & as close as we could get to the White House without getting shot.

Next we headed to the Udvar-Hazy Air & Space Museum. This Museum is located near Dulles Airport & is part of the Smithsonian. The highlights of the museum for me were the Discovery Space Shuttle, the actual Enola Gay, & a Concord. I'm sure the veterans enjoyed the many fighter jets & bombers that were on display. This was the end of our tour of D.C. and the surrounding areas. It was a meaningful, exhilarating, & exhausting experience.

The day was not over though. We headed back to the hotel where we had about forty-five minutes to change for dinner. We had a nice meal & a time of camaraderie for the veterans. After the meal was an open mike for the veterans to talk if they wished; not many took them up on this. Memorable moments for me were Peter Choi from KOAA & Emmanuel Jeanmarie, both veterans and immigrants who are thankful for the opportunities that



their adopted country affords them.

Saturday was the last day, time to go home. We enjoyed our breakfast & were to leave at 8:00 a.m. The busses were packed and we were about to load when it was discovered that the Red Bus had a flat tire. A new bus was brought in & with a quick change of luggage & wheelchairs, we were off to the Baltimore/Washington International Airport. This airport was about sixty miles away. TSA agents again helped us navigate our way to our gate, where we were provided with lunch while we waited for our plane. After we had been on the plane for about an hour, Ali Wheeler, a board member for Honor Flight of Southern Colorado & a volunteer on this

trip, stepped up to the front of the plane & announced "Mail Call." Each veteran was surprised with a manila envelope full of letters from home. I wasn't surprised. I had received an email more than a month earlier asking for these letters. There were also letters from school children.

At DIA, we made our way back through the airport to our busses. The veterans received many "Thank you for your service" comments from fellow travelers. As we passed by one gate, a young man on crutches stood at attention & saluted the veterans as they passed by.

Once we were on the bus, we were provided with yet another meal, this one from

Chick-Fil-A on Garden of the Gods Road. We again had a police escort as we made our way back to Colorado Springs Christian School. As we approached I-25 from E470, the biggest surprise of all; the Douglas County Police Department had I-25 completely blocked off & we had the highway to ourselves until we reached the El Paso County line.

Back at the school, we were welcomed home by many family members, friends, & community members. There was a short ceremony in the school auditorium where the veterans received a plaque commemorating their journey.

I am grateful that I got to go on this journey with my dad. I



hope that this was a healing time for all of the veterans. I would encourage all of the veterans from Vietnam, Korea & the few we have left from WWII to sign up for this trip. You do not need to be a combat veteran. If you feel moved by this story, you can also donate & volunteer with

Honor Flight of Southern Colorado. Their website is honorflightsoco.net.

Photos:
Amy Weirich-
Dan Richards-
Honor Flight of Southern Colorado Inc

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Vietnam Wall



Air & Space Museum



Air Force



nd]] at the WWII Memorial



Welcome Home