



Local WWII veterans travel to Washington

By Doris Sorg

The Gyp Hill Premiere

How can a nation show honor, respect and gratitude to a generation of men and women who sacrificed years of their youth, their health and general well-being, and for over 400,000 soldiers, their lives?

Hank Hart of Medicine Lodge and Estel Gibson of Wichita (previously of Medicine Lodge), V.J. Kimsey and wife Vi of Medicine Lodge and daughter, Kay Kimsey Jones of Hutchinson, were recent participants in one man's desire to recognize veterans for their exceptional contributions towards maintaining the freedom of our country.

Retired Air Force Captain and Physician Assistant Earl Morse was hired in 1998 by the Department of Veterans Affairs to work in a small clinic in Springfield, Ohio. After the World War II Memorial was completed and dedicated in 2004, he noticed the memorial was a subject discussed quite often among his patients that were World War II veterans.

He asked his patients if they felt that they would someday visit the memorial constructed in their honor. The veterans felt that whether with family or friends, they would eventually visit Washington, D.C.

As these same veterans returned to the clinic for follow-up visits, he once more asked about their plans to visit their memorial and by that time reality had settled in for most of the veterans. His patients were realizing that because of either financial or physical limitations, they would never make that journey.

When Morse recognized that most of the veterans he came in contact with had given up all hope of making the trip, he decided that there had to be a way to get these senior heroes to D.C. to see their memorial.

Morse was also a private pilot and a member of one of the nation's largest aero clubs located at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio. In December of 2004, Morse asked one of his World War II veteran patients if it would be okay if he personally flew him out to Washington, D.C. free of charge. The man cried knowing that it would probably be his only opportunity and he accepted the offer.

A week later, Morse made the same offer to a second World War II veteran and received the same response. Knowing that many veterans would have the same reaction, he began asking for help from other pilots to make these dreams become a reality.

In January of 2005, Morse addressed approximately 150 members of the aero club. He outlined a volunteer program to fly veterans to their memorial. One stipulation he requested was that the veterans would pay nothing for their trip and the entire aircraft rental (\$600 to \$1200 for the day) would have to be paid solely by the pilots. The second stipulation was that the pilots would personally escort the veterans around Washington, D.C. for the entire day.

Eleven pilots volunteered to provide transportation for veterans wanting to see the memorial and Honor Flight was born. Other volunteers soon joined the group, a board was formed and funds were raised. In May of 2005, Honor Flight flew six small planes carrying 12 veterans on a trip that was made possible by these volunteer pilots. The responses from both the pilots and veterans were of experiences never to be forgotten.

The names of veterans wanting to go escalated and by the end of the first year, Honor Flight had transported 137 World War II veterans to the World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C.

They began to use only commercial flights in 2006 due to the number of veterans on the waiting list and the restrictions on small aircraft in unfavorable weather conditions. They sent 300 more veterans in their second year and their mission began spreading across America with many more fulfilling their Mission Statement, to *Transport America's veterans to Washington, D.C. to visit those memorials dedicated to honor their service and sacrifices.*

In February of 2006, the Honor Flight Network was co-founded by Morse and Jeff Miller from Hendersonville, North Carolina and by the end of the year, 891 World War II veterans across America realized their dream of visiting their memorial.

The Central Prairie Honor Flights is a program of Central Prairie Resource Conservation and Development out of Great Bend. Part of the Honor Flight Network, they understand that with the recent statistics reporting that the nation is losing approximately 1,200 of our WWII veterans every day, the importance of the Honor Flight Network's Priority: *Top priority is given to America's most senior heroes—survivors of World War II and any veteran with a terminal illness who wishes to visit THEIR memorial. The program will naturally transition to Korean War, Vietnam War and all other veterans who served on a chronological basis.*

The Kimsey's daughter, Kay Kimsey Jones had read about the Honor Flight and sent an application to her father V. J. He made copies for Hank Hart and Estel Gibson so they could also apply for the trip. Hart had previously sent his application to another state and he received word that his application had been transferred to the Kansas hub and the planning stage began.

Estel Gibson served with the Army Engineers from 1943 to January of 1946.

Hank Hart, whose father had served in World War I, joined the Navy with his father's permission in his senior year of high school. He left in May of 1944 and served until July of 1946.

V.J. Kimsey served with the Army Air Corp from November 28, 1942 to November 26, 1945.

Hart met up with a group in Harper and left by bus to Wichita at 3:30 a.m. on October 5th. Meeting Gibson at the Wichita Airport, they flew to Chicago and then on to the Baltimore Washington International Airport. Arriving at their destination, they were guests at a banquet before retiring for the night at the Hilton.

The hours of the following day were filled with sight-seeing starting with the World War II Memorial.

The ground-breaking ceremony for the memorial was held on Veterans Day, November 11, 2000, with the actual construction beginning in September 2001. The memorial opened to the public on April 29, 2004 and was dedicated one month later on May 29. It is located between Constitution and Independence Avenues in between the Washington Monument to the east and the Lincoln Memorial to the west. Operated by the National Park Service, it is open to visitors 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

The idea of a WWII Memorial was first brought to Congress in 1987 by Representative Marcy Kaptur at the suggestion of World War II veteran Roger Dubin. President Clinton signed Public Law 103-32 on May 24, 1993, authorizing the American Battle Monuments Commission to establish a World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C. The memorial honors the 16 million who served in the armed forces of the United States during World War II, the more than 400,000 who died, and the millions who supported the war effort from home.

The memorial was funded primarily by private contributions. The fund-raising campaign was led by Senator Bob Dole, a World War II veteran and Fed-Ex founder Frederick W. Smith. The memorial's estimated cost was \$175 million which included future maintenance fees. The memorial received an astounding \$197 million in cash and pledges which included \$16 million provided by the federal government.

After careful consideration, the design by architect Friedrich St. Florian was chosen. The design consists of the Rainbow Pool in a sunken plaza, surrounded in a circular pattern with 56 pillars (each 17 feet high) which represent the unity of the U.S. States and territories during the war. Those entering the sunken plaza on ramps pass by two giant arches (each 41 feet tall) that represent the two fronts of the war. Inside, there is a Freedom Wall covered with 4,000 gold stars, each representing 100 Americans that died during World War II. A sculpture by Ray Kasky stands in the middle of the Rainbow Pool and two fountains send water more than 30 feet into the air.

Hart's emotionally charged comment describing the memorial was "beautiful"! While at the Vietnam War Memorial Wall, he searched out the name of A1C George Long of Medicine Lodge and was surprised to find that only Medicine was inscribed. After returning to Medicine Lodge, Long's sister, Vickie McDonald told him that it was a mistake the family had been trying to correct for two years.

Another highlight of the trip for Gibson and Hart was the Changing of the Guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Their group was honored by having four chosen to lay a wreath on the tomb.

Gibson and Hart's group had 165 veterans touring the area. Wheelchairs were available for those not physically able to walk the distances between the memorials. They came home with pictures that included the Vietnam War

Memorial Wall, Korean Memorial, Washington Memorial and Lincoln Memorial.

Hart said about the memory making two days, "They took good care of us, very good care of us."

Due to having the wrong contact information on his application from his move from Medicine Lodge to Wichita, Gibson only had five days to prepare for his first airplane flight. He learned that the difficulties in traveling by plane took place maneuvering in the airport more than the actual time in the air. Gibson shook his head and found it hard to find words to explain his feelings when he saw the memorial. "It's awfully hard to describe, it sure was something else."

V. J. and Vi Kimsey and their daughter Kay Kimsey Jones left on their honor flight on October 6. Their itinerary followed much of the same schedule with a banquet on their arrival and the luxury of the Hilton to rest up for the long day ahead.

They found themselves in a group of 171 veterans as they toured the World War II Memorial and other sites. Kimsey's almost three years of service included six months as a Prisoner of War, a situation he could not speak of to anyone for several years for security reasons.

They toured the Holocaust Memorial Museum and were sickened at the information contained within those walls. They visited the National Air and Space Museum which was a walk down memory lane for Vi. In 1944 and 1945, she worked on the P-51 Mustang and the P-38 Lightning in California. She described her task of taping the seams of the planes before they were covered with a coating and loaded on a carrier. This coating kept the planes from eroding from the salt water. She was excited to be able to purchase a small replica of each of the planes she had spent so many hours working on.

Vi had her picture taken by an inscription on a wall of the World War II Memorial. It said: *Women who stepped up were measured as citizens of the Nation, not as women. This was a people's war, and everyone was in it.*—
Colonel Oveta Culp Hobby

On hearing Vi recalling her duties of those two years, Hart laughed when he shared his explanation of "that's what cut them (women) loose."

Due to her husband being unwell, Elizabeth Dole met with and welcomed the groups. Congressman Jerry Moran also spoke with the groups and welcomed them to Washington, D.C. Among the many pleasures of the day, the Kimseys met up with Vernon Meckel, a previous resident of Medicine Lodge.

The horrible memories from World War II still linger in the minds of the veterans as they each deal with them in their own personal way. Many of the soldiers were fresh from high school and even after serving their time and returning to the United States, they were still too young to get married without their parent's permission. Hart remembered having to have his father accompany him to get his marriage license. He smiled as he recollected that he had forgot his wallet that day and his father also had to pay for the license. Hearing Hart reminiscing brought back similar memories for the Kimseys, six months as a Prisoner of War, but not old enough to get married without his mother's permission.

Gibson found that youth sheltered him from the realization of the seriousness of the situations he was in until

reading about the battles years later.

Having the opportunity to tour the World War II Memorial reminds these veterans that their time of sacrifice and their commitment to their country is appreciated and the memorial will stand to testify to the future generations of their unselfish actions in the fighting for the future of America.

Honor Flight provides transportation to these Veterans at no cost to the veteran. Nearly 20,000 veterans have been able to make the trip since the beginning in 2005. All donations to the federal, nonprofit, 501(c) 3 organization are tax deductible. The goal of the Honor Flight Network is to have more than 90% of their expenses go towards safely transporting the veterans and associated costs. Their Annual Report for the fiscal year ending in October 2008 showed that 92.7% of every dollar spent went directly to the operational expenses of transporting veterans.

To make a donation, make checks payable to the Central Prairie RC &D Honor Flights and send to 1817 16th Street, Great Bend, KS 67530 or call 620-792-6224. To volunteer or for more information, e-mail Dan Curtis, Project Coordinator at dan.curtis@ks.usda.gov or check out their website at www.centralprairiehonorflights.org.

The motto of The Honor Flight Network is: *We can't all be heroes. Some of us have to stand on the curb and clap as they go by*.—Will Rogers

This generation must never forget the sacrifices made by the generations before us. In the upcoming weeks, *The Gyp Hill Premiere* will be sharing a few of the memories of Gibson, Hart and Kimsey as they did their part in American's fight for freedom and democracy.

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