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Another call of duty: KC area veterans flown to WWII Memorial to honor their fallen comrades

By Brian Burnes ■ photos by keith myers

The operation had been planned for weeks.

Organizers held a pre-mission briefing days before. Forty volunteers received regulation apparel and instructions to be in place by 5 a.m.

But many deployed before that. At 4:40 a.m. several of them — all Kansas City area veterans of World War II — stood in the lobby of Terminal A, supervising the opening of the newsstand near the U.S. Airways counter. One veteran already had visited the Cinnabon stand and was scraping together the last of the white frosting.

The flight wasn't scheduled to depart until 6 a.m., so for the 40 veterans it was just like the old days — hurry up and wait.

But this was not a problem.

The Sept. 30 Honor Flight from Kansas City International to Washington, D.C., was worth waiting for.

These 40 veterans lined up with 14 escorts for a trip to the National World War II Memorial, paid for by a local chapter of a national nonprofit group.

Several of the veterans had been awake for hours already.

"That happens a lot," said Gary Swanson of Leawood, one of the trip's organizers. "These veterans are in their 80s and 90s, but they get younger for this."

Honor Flight represents a cinnamon-sweet sentiment with a sell-by date.

The nation's surviving World War II veterans are dying at a rate of perhaps 1,000 a day, according to Department of Veterans Affairs' estimates. Many of the approximately 2.3 million remaining, Honor Flight founders believe, still would like to visit the memorial dedicated in 2004 on the National Mall in Washington.

Yet many do not have the physical or financial ability to do that.

The reaction among the veterans who fly to Washington on Honor Flights often is profound, as it appeared to be for many of those Kansas City area veterans who returned just before 10 p.m. While a few were visibly fatigued, many more were buoyant, greeting families with beaming smiles and grinning in the face of flashing cameras.

Mission accomplished.

"It is the most noble, most honorable thing I have ever done in my life," said Earl Morse, the Springfield, Ohio, physician's assistant and pilot whose original efforts to fly Ohio veterans to the Washington memorial in 2005 now has evolved into the Honor Flight Network.

For some veterans, it also can be among the most exhausting.

On this trip five of the 40 veterans requested wheelchairs. Trip organizers brought 10, and by late that afternoon, all 10 had been spoken for. To keep costs down and logistics reasonable, many Honor Flights are completed in one long day. Morse, curious as to how long a walk an Honor Flight visit represented, has placed pedometers on some visiting vets.

"Four miles," Morse said. "That's four miles, on average, all day long, on and off the bus, walking around airports and navigating restaurants. Many of these veterans haven't walked four miles in a long time."

Yet, there's a waiting list.

Reveille

The September flight was the third trip organized by Kansas City Metro Honor Flight.

Much of the planning was done by Helen Matson, volunteer coordinator for the city of Independence, and Swanson, who is especially familiar to area veterans. He now has interviewed about 960 of them as part of the Library of Congress Veterans History Project. Retired in 2000 from Data Systems International of Overland Park, Swanson solicits Honor Flight contributions and also collects completed applications from area veterans while conducting his interviews.

The application asks specific health-related questions, including whether the veteran uses a cane, wheelchair or colostomy bag, and whether they can walk the length of a football field.

It's the football field question that seems to give many veterans pause.

Ben Santillan had thought hard about it. But, he remembered, on Sept. 12 he had marched in the 32nd annual parade organized by the Central Area Betterment Association in Kansas City, Kan.

"I think I can do it," he said.

So did Margaret Davisson. But her children insisted she request a wheelchair. After all, a visitor told her a few days before the trip, four miles would be challenging for someone who is 88 years old.

"Every day is challenging," Davisson said.

Honor Flight volunteers have faced several issues over the years. One is sheer anticipation.

Karen Miller of Overland Park, who set her alarm for 2:30 a.m., awoke to find her father, Bud Hoeflicker, dressed and ready to go. During World War II her father flew 51 missions as a radio operator on B-17 bombers flying out of North Africa and Italy.

"He had been up since midnight," Miller said.

Honor Flight organizers have discovered that some veterans have driven themselves to the airport and then slept in their cars overnight, apparently fearful of missing their flight.

"We discourage that," said Morse. "But it's like they realize this could be their last chance."

Last chance for what?

Maybe camaraderie.

Some of these veterans are active with service organizations. Hunter, for instance, is a member of Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 4043 and American Legion Post 95, both in Liberty.

Yet others are not and also suspect that they are among the last living members of their particular unit, platoon, ship or aircraft. For years Davisson had corresponded with friends with the 174th General Hospital, populated largely by nurses from New England.

"I've heard nothing from those friends over the last two years," she said.

Santillan, at first, tried to round up a group of other friends from the Argentine area in Kansas City, Kan., all of whom enlisted at about the same time.

One didn't want to leave a sick spouse.

Others were noncommittal.

So Santillan drove himself to KCI, leaving at 3:45 a.m. before parking in a satellite lot and riding a shuttle bus to Terminal A.

He had no problem with the airport. But that's not always true for others. Morse is often surprised by how many World War II veterans have not flown on a commercial airliner, ever. Those veterans, he said, are unfamiliar with airports.

“Depth perception begins to go at around 80, and the curbs at some airports can be unusually high,” said Morse. “So we instruct our guardians to make sure the veterans cross streets at the crosswalks, where the sidewalks have a downward grade.”

Then there is the airport security gate.

Veterans, often with artificial hips, prosthetic limbs or even shrapnel from violence more than 60 years distant, present a special challenge to airport security personnel. But many of those same security officers, Morse said, have military backgrounds themselves and usually know who they are dealing with.

At about 5:20 a.m., the 40 veterans formed two lines at the U.S. Airways gate. At this moment, each of the 14 volunteer escorts reached inside an envelope and pulled out individual boarding passes for each veteran, as well as a name tag inserted in a plastic sleeve and hanging from a red, white and blue lanyard.

Dogtags.

Outside the gate, several children of these veterans watched. Some volunteered the sometimes-heard “camp” metaphor, as in, “This feels like I am dropping off my kid at camp.”

That was ridiculous. These were veterans of Okinawa and Omaha Beach.

And yet the analogy held. All of the vets wore the same gray Honor Flight T-shirts and many also were sporting stars-and-stripes caps handed out in the airport lobby. The hats, while festive, also served another purpose: quick identification in large public places.

The veterans’ daytrip apparel was considered at length by some offspring.

“We discussed his clothing much more than really was necessary, about how many layers to wear with his T-shirt,” said Laurel Green, daughter of Charles Nevins, 92, of Overland Park, a former Army Air Corps staff sergeant.

“He was a good sport about it,” added Marlys Fitzsimmons, another daughter of Nevins. “He said, ‘I’ll do whatever you tell me to do.’ ”

“We were well-intentioned but unnecessary entertainment,” Green said.

The aircraft pulled away just before 6 a.m.

It didn’t take long for emotion to surface. On the way to Washington, Mark Martin, a Lee’s Summit physician who was flying his third Honor Flight as a volunteer escort, spoke with two veterans.

Both began crying, Martin said, talking about friends they had lost.

“This wasn’t about friends who had died recently,” Martin said. “This was about friends who died about 65 years ago, during the war.”

Shared stories

In Washington, a bus took the veterans first to the World War II Memorial.

Several had photographs taken with former U.S. Sens. Bob and Elizabeth Dole, who had come to greet the group.

Others went to different locations on the memorial, which includes 56 separate 17-foot granite pillars devoted to each state and territory involved in the war effort. Still others sought out the “Kilroy Was Here” etched into the granite in memory of the graffiti so often left by American soldiers in the Atlantic and Pacific.

Wopata went to the memorial in the same maroon sportcoat that he wears when attending meetings of the Heart of America chapter of the American Ex-Prisoners of War.

Then he pulled out a sheet of paper and began reading aloud the names of those killed, wounded and lost when he was taken prisoner.

"Many of them are dead now," the Independence man said. "It seemed the right thing to do."

Later, in an effort to include the word "Missouri" in a photograph of the memorial's pillar bearing the state's name, Wopata — 6 feet, 3 inches tall — climbed up on a small ledge.

Other veterans often are less active, Morse said.

One unexpected source of trouble: twist-off tops on plastic bottles. Morse discovered this one day while handing out bottles of drinking water.

"Then I noticed this one veteran was following me," Morse said. "Finally he asked, 'Could you please open this for me?'"

"The youngest World War II veterans are now in their early 80s, and many have arthritic conditions. So now, during our training for guardians, we always tell them not to hand out the bottled water without first twisting the caps a little bit."

The only mishap on the Sept. 30 trip was a scraped elbow suffered by a veteran who stumbled.

And then there was the rain. After visiting the World War II Memorial the veterans were taken to other locations such as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Tomb of the Unknowns at Arlington National Cemetery, where a sudden cloudburst caught veterans by surprise.

Many of them huddled under a tree.

From there it was back to the bus, then to dinner, then to the airport. There have been times, said Swanson, when the return flights have grown quiet.

But there was a surprise this night. Helen Matson of Independence had brought along 40 large envelopes. She asked a flight attendant to turn up the cabin lights and call out names.

Mail call.

For weeks prior to the flight, Matson had contacted friends and family members of the veterans and asked them for letters that the veterans could read while flying home. These were supplemented with letters written by area schoolchildren.

Greiner pulled out a letter from his daughter, Pamela Loveland, a missionary in Taiwan.

"You are my hero," Pamela wrote. "Thank you for your brave service, for withstanding difficult and harrowing circumstances, for dangling mid-air amidst flak and bullets, for looking the enemy in the eye and giving it back to him."

The letter included an illustration of a disabled B-17, much like the one Greiner and his fellow crew members had landed behind Russian lines on Dec. 25, 1944.

"I'm not one for crying," Greiner said days later, the sentence trailing off.

Wopata received an envelope containing more than 50 letters, from family members, friends and his three children. One of his sons, in his letter, recalled a long-ago moment at Boy Scout camp, decades before, when they heard the sound of taps being played at the end of the day and how Wopata had stopped and stood at attention.

"How he remembered that, I have no idea," Wopata said.

Days later, Ira Hunter still was finding audiences for stories about the Honor Flight.

"I was telling the ladies up at the Price Chopper," he said. "There were other people in line. I said, 'I better go.' But the other people wanted to hear about it, too."

Home port

By the end of October, Honor Flight volunteers across the country hope to have flown about 4,000 veterans to Washington. Through the end of 2009, about 42,000 veterans will have flown.

That represents not quite 2 percent of surviving World War II veterans.

It's a start, Morse said. But how much time remains is uncertain.

"Just in the last few years, the disability levels of veterans as a whole has started to increase," said Morse.

About 16 hours after their children and spouses had dropped them off at Terminal A, the returning veterans walked into the lobby and were greeted by cheering friends and family members. Many veterans were asked about the rain.

Santillan shrugged.

"Just a little shower," he said.

Davisson laughed.

"We didn't melt," she said.

The lobby cleared. By 10:15 p.m. the last veteran had been picked up. Near the gate, hanging on a metal sign, was one stars-and-stripes cap.

Kilroy had been there, too.

THE BRIEFING

Honor Flight Network, a national organization based in Springfield, Ohio, maintains 86 chapters, or "hubs," in 33 states.

There are two Kansas City area hubs organizing Honor Flights. For information about Kansas City Metro Honor Flight, contact Gary Swanson at gswanson@kc.rr.com. To learn about Honor Flight Network of Kansas City, call Erin Winstead at 816-468-8282.

There are other Honor Flight Network chapters across Kansas and Missouri. More on them, as well as the national Honor Flight Network, at www.honorflight.org.

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Among those present and accounted for on the Sept. 30 Honor Flight...

Margaret Davisson, 88, Lenexa.

Graduating in 1943 from what is now Kansas State University with a degree in dietetics and institutional management, Davisson enlisted the next year and landed on Omaha Beach that October. One of two Army dieticians assigned to the 174th General Hospital in La Haye Du Puits, near Cherbourg in northwestern France, she did the best she could with Army rations to improve the constitutions of hospitalized soldiers.

When the first shipment of bananas arrived at the hospital, Davisson posed with them for a photographer. That picture is in her scrapbook today.

Ben Santillan, 84, Kansas City, Kan.

He enlisted in 1942 at age 17, forging his parents' signatures. Arriving at the Navy's Great Lakes training facility near Chicago, Santillan paused over a question on another application form: Was he familiar with guns?

As a teenager growing up in Argentina, for both fun and food, Santillan hunted rabbits with a small shotgun along the Kansas River. Yes, he wrote, he was familiar with guns.

The Navy assigned him to gunnery school. On April 1, 1945, Santillan participated in the Invasion of Okinawa as a crewmember of the troop ship USS Sarasota.

Ira Hunter, 85, Liberty.

Like some African-American enlistees, the Lexington, Mo., native went to Europe in 1944 as a member of a quartermaster unit, distributing supplies. Then German troops that December pushed forward in a surprise offensive today known as the Battle of the Bulge.

"We became infantry then," said Hunter.

On a wall of his home, an "Outstanding Missourian" certificate signed in 2006 by Rod Jetton, then Speaker of the Missouri House of Representatives, saluted Hunter's volunteer work teaching flag etiquette to school children.

Richard Greiner, 84, Lee's Summit.

On Dec. 25 1944, Greiner, a ball turret gunner on a B-17 bomber, left from his Italy base for a bombing run over oil refineries in Czechoslovakia. That January Greiner's family in Ottawa, Kan., received a telegram saying he was listed as missing in action. They didn't know that Greiner's crew — their aircraft damaged by German flak and plummeting at one point from 30,000 feet to 5,000 feet — had managed to land behind Russian lines.

They flew their repaired bomber back to base 23 days later.

Gene Wopata, 83, Independence.

In January 1945, less than a month after arriving in France, Wopata had been wounded and captured by German troops near a forest in northeastern France, near Strasbourg. He spent almost four months as a prisoner of war before being liberated by Russian troops. Wopata ever since has thought about the five men killed in his company over those two days, along with the 16 who were wounded and 20 who later were listed as missing in action.

On Sept. 30, he brought a list of those names with him to Washington.



Members of the Honor Flight posed with Bob and Elizabeth Dole on Wednesday, Sept. 30, 2009, at the World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C.