

MEMORIES OF MADE OF THIS.....VETERANS HONOR FLIGHT....APRIL 20, 2019

This is Monday, two days after one of the most memorable events in my lifetime. I want to put into writing some of the things that have gone through my mind 48 hours ago and to answer those that asked questions of me on how my day was on the Honor Flight.

A few years ago, it was suggested to me by other veterans that I knew, that I should consider going on an Honor Flight as they have. The flights then were comprised largely of the very deserving second WWII vets and I felt it was not my time. These reminders came a few times recently also and I felt that I need to at least look into the program. This time a very good friend, Dr. Bob Keith had taken the flight in October last year and he and wife Careen invited me to a luncheon where long time volunteer for this group by the name of Bea Patterson presented a program and urged me, and other Vets to make an application.....and I did. It wasn't long after that I was notified that a flight would be available and I was asked to go.

I looked at this as a nice thing and agreed to sign on. It turned out to not be just a nice thing, it was a BIG DEAL! I followed through and chose my eldest son, David to be my guardian and his brother, Michael as a backup if necessary, to also attend the training day March 16th in Madison. It was then I began to realize what a remarkable opportunity this would be. The turnout of nearly eighty volunteers were there to get us started! Pretty amazing already.

The next weeks passed and the Flight day arrived with strict instructions to begin at 4:00 AM at the Madison airport. The amazement continued with a HUGE welcoming by the volunteers, band, American Legion officers from Waunakee, the Red Cross volunteers and the list goes on! It would become evident that this organization missed nothing! Nothing! Food. Beverage. Care. Smiles. Handshakes. And other non-stop courtesies. Dave and Michael were as impressed as I was for sure.

The flight was a good one and the arrival in Washington DC was met with their DC fire department giving our aircraft a water cannon reception at the gate. Inside, the amazing reception of more DC volunteers amongst the hundreds of people welcoming us with "Thank you for your service", along with genuine handshakes, flags, décor, smiles again, with Welcome to DC"from all these people, many appearing to be from the likely countries of Korea and VietNam, none of whom we knew or knew us! Their sincerity was on full display.

The day in our Nations' Capitol was sunny, warm and beautiful. Everything on schedule . Police escort wherever our four busses had to go. No stopping for traffic signals or congestion. Sirens blaring and in ten minutes we were at our next destination of wonderful Memorials throughout DC with our volunteer bus captains giving explanations of the landmarks. Again, nothing seems to be overlooked. Wheelchairs for everyone that needed one, or even if you didn't need one as was the case sometimes. Snacks of food and beverage all the time and great consideration of your comfort and safety.....even a fine box lunch from Arbies owner "Ace" for all Honor Flights! Many memories flow as we visit the five war memorial parks with certain

ones provoking more emotion than others for private reasons no doubt. The final visit was to the Arlington National Cemetery grounds and visiting the changing of the guards at the tomb of the unknown soldiers. This solemn and beautifully executed ceremony was a great way to depart from this busy day in Washington DC area. But the people of DC were not done yet as we got a warm and sincere sendoff when we returned to Reagan Int. Airport.

By now I was thinking, "what a great day this has been". A while after becoming airborne and about to doze off, we received a sack lunch and snacks with beverage. Almost simultaneously the announcement of "mail call" was made. The Vets were then handed a package of mail to open and remind us of the joy it was while in the service to have "mail call"; always a special day when letters from home arrived. I was pleasantly surprised when I had mail from so very many people and family, and several letters and cards from folks I've never known! The messages were filled with sincerity, kindness and love and will be treasured forever. Thank you, each and every one of you that took that time and shared your gratitude and said so with "Welcome Home".

Now for the last chapter of this wonderful day. Upon arrival at Madison Municipal airport, we were ushered off methodically to a large group of MORE CITIZENS, MORE VOLUNTEERS, MORE SERVICEPERSONS, THE NATIONAL GUARD, SHERIFF MAHONEY OF DANE COUNTY, MISS WISCONSIN, A LARGE RAMBUNCTIOUS BAND, CAPTAIN AMERICA, FLAG BEARERS, MEDICAL PERSONNEL, ETC. (Sorry, I know I missed other groups too). We then were guided down the midway to a HUGE mass of people that stretched the entire length of the air terminal! Lots of cheers, celebration noise of all kinds that included hoots and hollers and whistles and you name it! Wow! Then came the most (I must use a lot of adjectives) gracious, sincere, heartfelt, genuine, caring, emotional thank you for your service and welcome home messages that no one can imagine. And way down the corridor of people was my family with the second greatest welcome home I can imagine!

Now to explain the first great welcome home. After following my wish to join the Navy in November, 1952 and serving aboard the newest, finest aircraft carrier in the entire fleet at the time, the USS Coral Sea CVA 43 from March 1953 through October of 1956, I returned to my home in Madison, Wi where I would rejoin my family and my high school girl friend, Jo-Ann Mary Keleny, whom I grew to love very much and would soon become my bride. I married that high school girl friend in November, 1958 and have endeared our relationship for more than sixty years with four wonderful children, eight grandchildren and one great grandson.

How can anything get better than that ? Thank you one and all for caring so much for our military and our veterans and for the memories of the Badger Honor Flight.

Sincerely, with love.

Husband, Dad, Sister, Brother, Grandfather, Greatgrandfather and friend.


Steve Esser

Many thanks to many people! Your generosity and kindness are "over the top".
Sincerely,
Steve Esser