

# WELCOME HOME, SIR

## THANK YOU FOR YOUR SERVICE



**A FRIEND WHO WORKS FOR A SENIOR CARE FACILITY** called asked me if I wanted to fly to Washington, DC for the day to shadow a group of World War II veterans. My first instinct was to say 'yes,' but when she said it would mean being at the St. Petersburg airport by 4am, I began having second thoughts. I'm a newscaster for a local TV station and she wanted me to do a story about the two local vets who live at "Pines of Sarasota" and were part of the contingent.

"So, I'd have to get up at 2:30am...fly to DC...shadow 80 veterans and then come back the same day?" I began to politely decline.

But Lis is persuasive and since our respective late-fathers were good friends from Buffalo and both WWII vets, I decided to go against my comfort zone and think about that phrase, "Risk and reward are tightly tied." (There was no "risk" in this, just the promise of a long day.)

I checked in with the Honor Flight organizers, got my lanyard name-tag, and boarded a full-sized charter plane for the Baltimore-Washington International Airport.

My first clue that I had stumbled onto something larger

than I realized was when we landed and firetrucks sprayed a ceremonial arc of water over the fuselage from either side. People inside the airport greeted my fellow passengers with great enthusiasm and I later heard from a friend who happened to be flying from BWI that morning, that her fellow-passengers clapped when they were told who was on our arriving plane.

Our first stop was the Air Force Memorial near the Pentagon where cameras greeted us. Turns out a production crew was filming a commercial for the Air Force and incorporated our arrival in their project. Younger vets in fatigues saluted and then socialized with the older vets, some of whom were near 100-years old.

From there it was on to the World War II Memorial on the Mall between the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial. I had lived in DC years earlier but I—like man of these vets—had never seen this relatively new large tribute to the "Greatest Generation."

Many of the tourists at the memorial stopped to greet our vets, shaking their hands and thanking them for their service.



This continued throughout the afternoon—climaxing at the Korean Memorial when an Asian man who spoke little English exchanged salutes and a hand-shake with one of our vets. It was a moment I'll never forget.

When we arrived back at the Baltimore airport and the Honor Flight vets were being wheeled toward the gate, we heard a loud burst of applause one-floor below. It was a coincidence that was poetic: The airport's layout allowed us to see down below where families and friends were enthusiastically welcoming home some active military veterans who were arriving back from Germany. Unfortunately, time and logistics prevented any interaction between the two groups.

By the time we landed back in St. Petersburg, it was pushing 9pm, and if I was tired, I can't imagine how fatigued our vets had to be. (Most were in their late eighties or nineties.) But organizers on-board hinted at a final surprise in the airport.

When we got off the plane, there were a dozen military men, standing in formation, saluting our jet-lagged contingent. I thought it was a nice finishing touch.

How wrong I was!

As we walked out of the initial boarding and deplaning area, a line of well-wishers came into view along the long hallway to the main lobby. Hundreds of people had come out on a weekday evening to greet these strangers rolling off the plane in their wheelchairs.

I walked behind one of the vets who was moving slowly,



dressed in khakis, suspenders, a golf shirt and a hat. One by one, supporters shook his hand, looked him in the eye and said, "Welcome home, sir. Thank you for your service."

Over and over again I watched this beautiful innocent salutation repeated-- and each time it gave me the chills, walking behind the vet. I felt like I was immersed in the end of a tear-jerking military movie on one of the channels you watch when it's raining outside.

When we reached the main lobby after 10-15 minutes of greetings, it was full of people as well! Hundreds more had been waiting for our return from Washington. There was a band playing music from the 1940's (I think it took a week to get "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy" out of my head), and young women dressed in brown skirts and tan blouses from the 1940's and posed as a group with each vet individually.

It was loud, crowded...and emotional.

When I got back to the car I had parked 18 hours earlier before the sun had come up, I realized how much I had experienced that day.

Not only did I enjoy the sights and sounds of my day-trip to the nation's capital, but I also gained even more respect for these—mostly men—who fought for our country, whose lives then shaped the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and were now quietly leaving the stage...marking the end of an era.

It was an honor to be part of the Honor Flight. – Ray Collins

