

My Special Day

I have just completed accompanying my three months short of 91 year old father to Washington, D.C. on the Never Forgotten Honor Flight with 87 other 80-90 something WWII veterans and 65 other guardians to see their WWII memorial as well as other memorials. The night before we were to leave, the organization had a nice dinner get together with a little entertainment, ending early, of course. That night, my dad and I did talk a little about that time, so many years ago. It was a subject, which in all of my 56 years, he never brought up, and I only learned bits and pieces. We got up at three thirty in the morning to get to the airport and leave tiny Central Wisconsin Airport at 6:30 A.M. The morning went like clockwork; our organizers, being well drilled in this, their seventh flight carrying precious cargo, and all systems were go for a flight to be on schedule. When we arrived at Reagan National Airport, there were many people waiting to lavish their appreciation and applause on our surprised veterans. We had had our first taste of Washington, D.C. hospitality. We boarded buses and our first stop was the WWII memorial. I remember being glad we came here early in the day before the weather deteriorated. As we walked down into the memorial, many classrooms of Washington school children greeted and thanked our veterans as a welcoming committee. We got to walk around and check it out in all of it's stone, sculpture, bronze, gold stars, eagles, and laurel wreath glory. It was very, very impressive. We were able to get a group photo of the veteran's before it really started to get colder, windier, and rainier, which is exactly what we now faced for the rest of our day. We ate lunch and supper out of boxes in our seats on the bus. We were chauffeured around the city by the sweetest little powerhouse of a woman named Patrice, behind the wheel of a huge lumbering tank disguised as a charter bus so adeptly, it was a joy to ride. We had a tour guide pointing out all of the pertinent factoids; Capital, Pentagon, Smithsonian, Ford Theater and behind the scenes stories. We stopped and got out at the Lincoln Memorial, and the Korean and Viet Nam Memorials. Of course, we could see the Washington Monument. At some stops, the weather was too relentless for some take on. Every time we got off and back on the buses, we, of course, took roll call... every time. We stopped to see the remarkable Air Force Memorial with it's three appendages reaching up toward the

sky, and calling out to enjoy the great vistas over the whole city from its very windy and rainy perch. We visited Arlington National Cemetery, and arrived at the time to experience the approximately 30 minute Changing of the Guard ceremony while quietly standing in the pouring rain. We wore disposable ponchos to try to fend off the attacker. Afterward, the director of the Guard program came out onto our buses and talked to us about the Guard and the Cemetery. As he covered the various details, all I could think was how well spoken he was, and how very young he was. We finished up our early evening at the very striking Iwo Jima Memorial, and listened to the details and biographies of the story behind the flag raising. We were relieved to get back on the buses for the final time to warm up and make our way back to the airport to return to Wisconsin, where, ironically, it was a beautiful day. As we flew home, the organization set up what was to be called "my favorite part" by my dad: a little rendition of mail call on the airplane. Veterans received letters and cards from friends and relatives and students and politicians. It was a joy to see. It rivaled the incredulous expressions and sheer overwhelming happiness to tears that was to be experienced by the veterans when they were welcomed back to tiny Central Wisconsin Airport in Mosinee, WI by more than a thousand well wishers.

My father traveled by ship to the port city of Marseilles, France near Thanksgiving of 1942 at the tender age of twenty one after working away from home in an ordinance plant in Burlington, IA. The city of Marseilles was being shelled at that time, so the mother ship had to dock out of the harbor, and the soldiers had to go over the side, down the ropes into smaller boats to go ashore. My father was a gunner. In his 30,000 men Division, his company was the one that gave support to the front lines with mortar fire. There was the artillery at the back, sandwiched by his company in the middle, giving support to the front lines. They needed to carry the gun that fired the mortar on a jeep. He was the man who fired that gun. My dad fought in France, Italy, and Austria for 365 days through winter, spring, summer, and fall, then 365 more days in trenches with mud and rain and snow covered with branches, and 365 more days with heat and boots, and more days shooting men that he could not have known living in Genoa City, WI. He was a part of the Battle of the Bulge. He listened intently as he heard when their divisions' front lines had met up with the Russians. His company got all the way to

an empty Hitler's Eagle's Nest. He said the living room was massive and the kitchen was almost as big. The good stuff, he heard, was in the underground rooms, and only officers were allowed down there. He and a buddy were given a five day pass to go to Venice. They had just arrived on the street in Venice when a jeep drove up. (How did anybody find anybody back then.) The soldier said, "Hey, you've got to come back." And that was the end of the pass. When they returned, they were told they would be leaving for Japan the next day. For some reason, they did not go the next day, and the day after that, the A-bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. My dad returned to New York City shortly into the year 1946. When I said I had no clue he had been over there for four years, he said it wasn't four years, it was really three and a half. The celebrating had all been over when he returned to New York. He made it back to the Great Lakes Military Base in Waukegan, IL where my grandma and grandpa picked up their youngest of nine children.

As we sat in the hotel room after returning from that amazing day, he looked up and said, "there had to have been thousands of people there", as if he didn't remember that I had just been there also. As I feebly tried to tell remind him of the enormity and importance of his contribution, he recalled that it truly didn't feel very good when there was absolutely nothing upon his return in 1946, but tonight had made up for it all.

If, on any given day, in any given circumstance, you have a chance to thank a veteran for his service; please, go ahead and do it. After today, the memorials will be around for all future generations to enjoy, but the warmth of human touch can be showered on the well deserving now.

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