

Never Forgotten Honor Flights offer unique experience

By Jerry DeRoche

IRON RIVER—As our country finds different ways to pay tribute its veterans, honor flights have become a popular means to do so.

Around the country, organizations are supporting the flights, which are designed to provide veterans of World War II, the Korean War and now more commonly the Vietnam War with a no-cost trip to Washington, D.C., to see the memorials that have been built in their honor.

The Honor Flight Network, based out of Ohio, took its first flight in May 2005, one year after the National World War II Memorial was completed. And as time went on, other organizations picked up on the idea and added their own unique touches to the experience.

One such organization is the Never Forgotten Honor Flight, an affiliate of the Honor Flight Network that formed in 2009 and is based out of Wausau, Wis. Never Forgotten Honor Flight makes four flights per year in April, May, September and October and serves 12 counties in northern Wisconsin and Iron County in the Upper Peninsula.

What Never Forgotten Honor Flight offers, in addition to the flight, is a two-night stay in Wausau, a banquet, a USO-type show and even a mail call during the flights themselves, all at no cost to the veteran. Six veterans from the area, sponsored by the Sons of the American Legion of Reino Post 21 in Iron River, have participated on the flights since last September. The most recent was World War II veteran Joseph Provost.

"It's very important to the vets," said Jim Wicklund,



World War II veteran Joseph Provost and his son Raymond went on the 24th Never Forgotten Honor Flight out of Wausau, Wis., on Sept. 28. Raymond called it "a trip of a lifetime."

Sons of the American Legion of Reino Post 21 commander. "A lot of veterans would never have the opportunity on their own to get there and see the memorials that were put up in dedication to them. And it's a pet project that we've kind of adopted at the Sons of the American Legion. This is what we wanted to do. All the money that we raise, we want to send the veterans there."

The partnership between Never Forgotten Honor Flight and Post 21 began when Wicklund was looking for an alternative to the Honor Flight out of Escanaba, simply because the Wausau flight offered the two-night stay. He contacted Jim Campbell, the co-founder and director of the Never Forgotten Honor Flight, and the two struck up a conversation.

"What's so unique about this situation and why we send our veterans there is that there is a man in Wausau who is a veteran himself, who owns four motels, and he donates a room Sunday and Monday night for the veterans, free of charge," Wicklund said. "It's a long day and he doesn't want any of them driving, so they get two nights at a motel."

Wicklund said the veterans arrive on a Sunday, attend a banquet in their honor on Sunday night along with the USO show. The flights leave in the

Raymond Provost said when the veterans landed in Washington, D.C., they were met with quite a greeting.

"The reception was phenomenal, people were giving our vets a standing ovation as we walked through the airport."

Provost said the group boarded three buses that were waiting and then rode to the memorials with an escort from the federal forest park rangers.

"All day long we never had to stop at stop signs," Provost said. "They escorted us with their lights and sirens on."

The group first arrived at

Continued on page 5

Honor Flight to D.C. . . .

Continued from page 1

the World War II Memorial, where the vets were greeted by more people thanking them for their service, Provost said. The group also visited the Vietnam Wall, the Korean War Memorial, the Air Force Memorial, the Lincoln Memorial, the White House and Arlington National Cemetery, where they witnessed the Changing of the Guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

Afterward, the group rode back to Reagan National Airport to return to Wisconsin.

"When we got off the plane, we were greeted by at least 300 people clapping their hands and cheering our vets," Provost said.

Never Forgotten Honor Flight gives first priority to World War II veterans, then to those from the Korean War and then to Vietnam vets. If a veteran is certified terminally

ill by a doctor but is still able to travel, that veteran moves up the priority list regardless of when they served.

Wicklund said five of the six from Iron County who've flown are World War II vets. The other served in the Korean War.

"We wanted the older guys to go first," Wicklund said. "Now, we have a bunch of Vietnam vets in their upper 60s who are interested."

The Never Forgotten Honor Flights are supported by private and commercial donors, according to its website, neverforgottenhonorflight.org. Veterans and civic organizations, schools, churches, foundations and other individuals have also supported the cause.

The Reino Post 21 has donated \$3,000 to the flights. It raises funds on a regular basis through its breakfast on the first Sunday of every

month. Also, Post 21 has held raffles, including the most recent when the post raffled off a guitar signed by country star Miranda Lambert. The post will offer a guitar signed by country star Tim McGraw in its next raffle.

All profits from the breakfasts and the raffles are donated to the honor flights, Wicklund said.

The veterans fly for free, while the guardians must pay their own way. Wicklund said the next local veterans that are scheduled to go are James Spicer and Keith Erickson, who will take the Oct. 22 flight.

Reino Post attempts to make the experience a personal one from home, too.

"They have a mail call on the flight, just like (the vets) had in the service," Wicklund said. "We always send a card from the Sons so they always have a piece of mail at mail call when they're coming back."

Never Forgotten Honor Flight has transported 1,909 veterans as of Sept. 28, its website said. And local veterans have enjoyed being part of the effort and experience.

"It's going very well," Wicklund said. "They do an 'A' No. 1 job with it. Every veteran that comes back says it's something they will never forget. They come back and they're almost in tears when they talk about it."

Raymond Provost and his father agreed.

"What a trip of a lifetime," Raymond Provost said.