

On Honor Ryan Eisenman

On October 22, 2012, I was given an opportunity that, for many, is an opportunity of a lifetime. I accompanied 99 World War II, Korean, and Vietnam War veterans, and their guardians, to visit seven national monuments and memorials in Washington D.C., as part of the Never Forgotten Honor Flight. The Never Forgotten Honor Flight is called such because it honors the men and women who devoted their lives to their country by giving them a chance to visit the memorials built for them. This chance is proof that their community is still grateful for their actions fifty, sixty, even seventy years ago, and for their willingness to sacrifice themselves for the freedom held so dear by this nation. And while seeing the World War II or Korean War Memorial may be the primary vehicle for honoring America's veterans, other examples of honor received during this one day are more important, and more profound, than any veteran could ever anticipate.

When the veterans arrived at Central Wisconsin Airport at 5:00am, they were greeted not only by other veterans, but by other spouses, other family members, and even other community members who had volunteered their day to accompany men they had never met to Washington D.C. These volunteers, called guardians, formed a special bond with their veterans. The guardians on the Never Forgotten Honor Flight give their veterans just as much honor, if not more, than a visit to a memorial does. Deb Kosobuski, whom I had the great fortune to be seated next to on the flight to Washington, D.C., had given up two days of work in order to go on the flight. She was there with her father Richard, but also had another veteran for the day, Alvin Bornbach. As Deb pointed out to me on the early morning flight to our nation's capital, she and Alvin had only known each other for 15 hours, but they chatted and told stories like they had known each other for years. The fact that Deb had formed such a relationship with Alvin, and that she was willing to make such a small sacrifice of her time, compared to the sacrifices made by American veterans, is proof that the veterans fortunate enough to go on the Never Forgotten Honor Flight are recipients of more honor than they originally believe.

More honor came to these veterans upon our arrival in Washington, D.C. The greeting received at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport was one that I had never expected. Total strangers, ones who could only be seen for a few seconds at most, spent the 15 minutes that it took for us to debark clapping and cheering for the veterans on the flight. Many took that time to shake the hand of each veteran. One woman took the veterans' hand in both of hers, shaking it vigorously, telling every one, "Thank you for your service. God bless you." This line of well wishers continued far past the gates, far past the terminal, far past the security checkpoints. The sea of people that would have normally flooded an airport had parted and extended their hands to greet the veterans, leading right to the exit of the airport. These people only knew them for their service to the country. Such a spontaneous outpouring of honor was unexpected, but certainly added to the honor given the men on the flight that day.

Even the veterans themselves on the Never Forgotten Honor Flight honored those who are not here to receive honor themselves. For Alvin, it was a close friend who was killed during the Korean War. Whenever the subject of death came up in my numerous conversations with Deb and Alvin, he would become quiet, lowering his head and telling us, "We'll talk about that later." Deb later revealed that Alvin returned home for the funeral of a high-school friend who had also been to basic training with him. "When he went home for the funeral...the father said, 'Why are you here and my son isn't?' [Alvin] said, 'I felt so bad. I felt so much guilt that it was me still alive and my friend dead.'" While Alvin never said anything else about him, I knew that when we visited the Korean War Memorial, he was thinking of his lost friend as he pensively wandered the path around the memorial. At that moment, it seemed to me that the chance to see Washington's memorials is not only important to honor the veterans who came home, but for those veterans to honor their friends who did not come home.

I came away from this whirlwind day with a newfound concept of honor. Like so many other ideas that we try to compartmentalize today, honor cannot fit into one, singular definition. The gift of honor, like the gift of sacrifice that the veterans of the Never Forgotten Honor Flight gave a half-

century ago, can come in many shapes and sizes, but all with the same result: a feeling of appreciation, and a knowledge that what they did in the service has made a difference today.