

Never Forgetten Honor Flight,

We do not know quite how to thank you enough for this Honor Flight experience. The treatment we both received was so very awesome from the start to finish. The banquet, the ladies breakfast, the ladies lunch, the trip to DC and return home, unforgettable! What you do is extraordinary! And kudos to all the volunteers that help with all these Honor Flights!

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Thank-you again so much!

Ronald + Carolyn

VERY MUCH

Ronald + Carolyn Decker  
Honor Flight #35

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# Vietnam veteran gets 'royal' welcome in D.C.

By Kevin O'Brien

When Ron Decker returned to Wisconsin from Vietnam in 1967, he needed a police escort. Just so he could safely leave the airport in Milwaukee and make it to a nearby relative's house.

War protesters were everywhere, he recalls, and he and other recently arrived veterans were advised not to simply try leaving in a taxi.

"We would have gotten killed at the airport," he said. "So, they called a policeman and he picked me up at the airport and took me to Butler, where I had a cousin."

The following day, he returned home to Dorchester after his one-year tour of duty in Vietnam, but there was no parade or other big celebration waiting for him. "The only welcome home was family," he said.

Over 50 years later, Decker and several of his fellow Vietnam War veterans got a different type of police escort — this time, it was around Washington, D.C. as part of the 35th Never Forgotten Honor Flight. Decker was one of over 100 area veterans who took off from the Mosinee airport on April 8 for a daylong trip to the nation's capital in order to see all the war memorials built in their honor.

After they arrived at Reagan National Airport, Decker said he and the other veterans were loaded onto four buses, which were followed around by three squad cars throughout the entire day.

"We had a police escort wherever we went," he said. "They never had to stop for a red light or anything. Pennsylvania Avenue, we just flew right down it."

Decker said it was like being a foreign dignitary with an official entourage.



**WELL WISHERS** - Decker holds up a drawing, created by a student somewhere in Wisconsin, that was taped to his hotel room door the night before the Honor Flight. TP STAFF PHOTO/KEVIN O'BRIEN

Hundreds of people greeted them at the airport, and every detail was taken care of for them.

"The way you're treated, it's like royalty," he said.

Decker and another veteran were accompanied by his daughter, Stacey Christianson, who as served a volunteer "guardian" on the trip.

While touring the various war memorials, Decker said he sought out one name in particular on the Vietnam Memorial Wall — Victor Tomczyk of Stetsonville, a friend about his age that never made it back from Vietnam. Tomczyk began his tour of duty in November of 1967, shortly after Decker returned home.

A native of Dorchester, Decker graduated from Dor-Abby High School in 1963, and was drafted into the U.S. Army two years later. He completed basic training at Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri and was trained as a supply clerk before ship-



**IN WASHINGTON** - Ron Decker, right, poses for a picture with fellow Vietnam War veteran Glen Simons next to the Washington Monument during the Honor Flight trip on April 8. SUBMITTED PHOTO

ping off to Fort Campbell in Kentucky.

"Fort Campbell is the home of the 101st Airborne," he said. "We weren't airborne. We were what they called 'legs.' We stayed on the ground."

Decker said the camaraderie among soldiers starts right away.

"You make friends pretty quick," he

said. "You help each other out when you're in basic training."

From Fort Campbell, they took a train to San Francisco and boarded a ship for San Diego. The ship took them on to Hawaii, then to Midway Island, Guam, and finally, Vietnam.

"We could never get off the ship, though," he said. "The whole trip was 23 days on the ship."

The ship stopped a ways off the coast, and the soldiers came ashore on duck boats like the ones you might see in an old World War II movie. Decker said stepping off that boat for the first time was a bit nerve-wracking.

"We had to go up a hill, and we didn't know what to expect, because we had our rifles and all our gear on our back," he said. "We got to the top of the hill, and there were trucks up there waiting for us. It was a secure area."

Decker's unit was stationed in Pleiku, a village in central Vietnam that served as a supply station for infantry divisions. He spent a little less than a year there.

"I would say 90 percent of the time you felt safe, but on deliveries, you got shot at," he said. "And they always tried to blow up our supply yard."

While he was there, the supply yard was attacked three times with mortars and satchel charges, a crude demolition device made of dynamite and white phosphorus, wrapped in banana leaves.

"White phosphorus will burn right through metal," he said. "If it landed on our containers, it would burn right through it."

Decker said it "felt good" to fly back to the United States after his tour ended in September of 1967. He arrived in Fort

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# Flight

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Lewis, Wash., and stayed for a mandatory 12-day quarantine before being discharged.

More than a half-century later, Decker said Vietnam veterans are treated completely different than when they first came home from the unpopular war.

"It changed a lot over time," he said. "You weren't welcomed back in '67, and now everybody's just the opposite."

As evidence of this, Decker has a plastic tote filled with letters of appreciation written by school children and others, which were delivered to him and other veterans during a "mail call" on the return flight. At the hotel they stayed at in Wausau, every veteran had his room door decorated with a hand-drawn sign.

Decker said they were also treated to a banquet meal the night before the flight, complete with a performance of old war songs by a trio of lady singers.

Everything along the way was paid for, he noted, and he came back with all sorts of memorabilia.

"They said 'Bring no money,'" he said. Decker said he has encouraged other veterans to sign up for then Never Forgotten Honor Flight.

"They've got to go; it's a really good experience for them," he said. "You're treated altogether different than when you (first) came back."