

The Badger Honor Flight Program

Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

Saturday, April 17 was a day like no other in the lives of nearly 100 of Wisconsin's World War II veterans. It was the first, for the Madison area, of programs in which veterans of that war are flown to Washington to see the World War II Memorial and others.

Actually the proper name is Badger Honor Flight, and selection is pretty much based on the age or terminal illness of an applicant, not on a veteran's ribbons awarded for battle participation. Although the war ended 65 years ago, the Washington World War II monument was completed only recently, so most veterans have not seen it.

The Honor Flight program was organized a few years ago on a national basis to provide a visit before time took its final toll on veterans of that war. Indeed, and sadly, four men who had been chosen for this Madison flight passed away between the time they were invited and the April 17 departure.

At the Airport

Since the day began at 4 A. M, at the airport and ended that evening at 10:30, it was especially rigorous for the vets, whose average age was approaching 90. However, the staff was specially trained to make the visit as smooth as possible.

Not enough can be said for the dedication and thoughtfulness of the Badger Honor organization and what seemed like hundreds of volunteer assistants. Indeed, every two vets were accompanied by a guardian, really a facilitator. Some guardians cared for only one veteran if he/she was in a wheel chair.

It was a day filled with surprises for the vets, and the first was the airport reception at 4:30 A.M. Instead of a virtually empty lobby with perhaps a small registration table, some 300 trip personnel greeted each arriving vet with "Thank you for your Service", a phrase he would hear hundreds of times during the oncoming day.

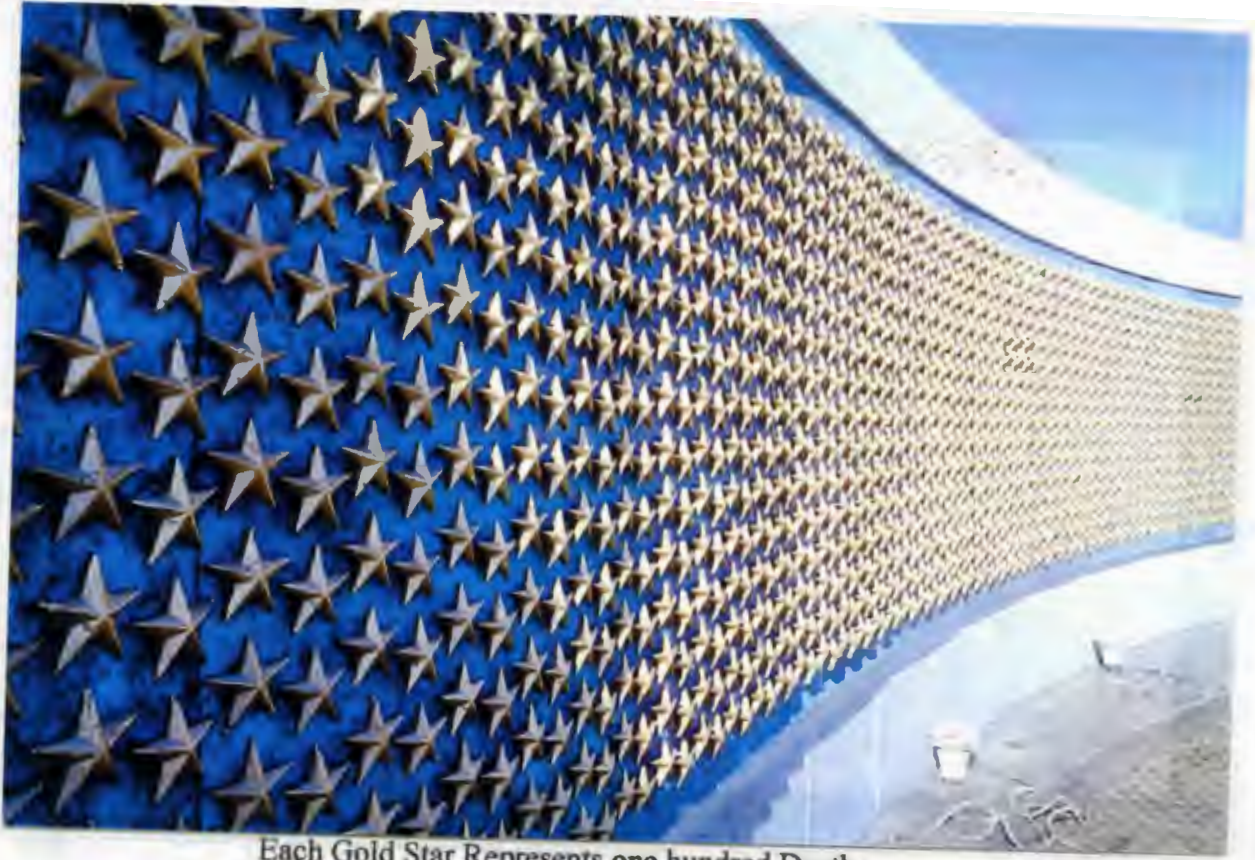
Included in the reception materials was a wind and rain jacket, color coded—red for vets, blue for guardians, and yellow for medical staff. Many facilitators were identifiable with yellow T-shirts, so it made for a colorful aggregation. The day is totally free for the veteran.

The Flight to D.C.

After coffee and rolls, the flight occurred, with a surprise welcome from two Washington fire department trucks on arrival, the plane passing through a high cascade of welcoming water. Security was rigorous both in Madison and D.C., and they cut the veterans no slack as shoes were removed and all articles x-rayed.

A police motorcade cleared the way for the buses to Arlington National Cemetery, where endless rows of gravestone markers reminded the old soldiers of friends lost in battle. A crowd of perhaps 1000 voluntarily maintained relative silence before, during, and after the Changing of the Guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

After a visit to the Iwo Jima Memorial (of four soldiers raising the flag) came a full two hours at the World War II Memorial, a large area on the Mall with pillars



Each Gold Star Represents one hundred Deaths

The Nearby Korean Monument is a Somber Reminder





My Daughter, Shirley, welcomes me back



representing each State. Etched into granite around the large pool were names of battles of the War, and veterans could seek the particular battle areas which applied to his area of service.

Honor Flights from several states were present, this being the largest such a gathering on one day on the history of the operation. Happily the weather was mostly sunny, and the breeze brisk but acceptable in the red wind jackets. This was followed later in the afternoon with stops at the Korean and Vietnam Memorials.

To save time for the Memorials, meals consisted of a sandwich, a small amount of canned fruit, and a cookie both morning and afternoon. To some, it was a reminder of the famous K-Rations that overseas vets remembered with varying degrees of fondness.

The Return

Because of the logistics of managing the flight of the large and somewhat immobile group, only 10 of the 18 hour experience were spent at the memorials, and to many it seemed that much of the time was spent shaking hand of strangers with the words "Thank you for your Service". At the Memorials, civilian persons or families would approach a veteran with words of appreciation. It was an emotional experience.

The surprises were not over, for after the plane reached cruising altitude there was Mail Call, with each soldier receiving a packet of well wishes from family and friends as secretly arranged by a family member.

With each old soldier tired but on cloud nine, the descent onto the main areas of the airport lounge was spectacular, with some 1200 Madisonians present and cheering, a band playing big band songs, and soldiers at attention. More gifts and a medal were presented as the veteran arrived on the main floor from the escalator, with greetings and "thank you" from the crowd as each soldier found his family or friends in the group.

It was an emotional day, one never to be forgotten, but cherished as a heartfelt recognition from those for whom the war was just something in the history books. Its Victory has been called the defining moment of the Twentieth Century. It was a war in which nearly every American had a physical part of some nature. This day honored those whose fate it was to be soldiers, away from friends and family.

A Personal Note

And so, to the young men of that fated generation, to the friends of my youth who did not return: to Frank and Swede, Julius and Wayne, Dearsch and Durant, Brooks and Arne, Don and Marsh and Irv, and Omar, Bill and Howie, and Gert Morrow...and also to the dozen or so men whose mangled and frozen bodies were stacked like cordwood in the bed of a 4 x 8 on that Christmas day in God-forsaken Surburg on the German border.....

I don't have the audacity to dedicate a measly newspaper column to you guys, but know that I salute you, and that you were well remembered at the Memorial.....rest well, guys.....re-enforcements are on the way.....