

Honor Takes Flight

Area Nonprofit Gives Veterans Lasting Memories

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by Preston Knight, SVEC Writer

“It wasn’t a setup.”

Dan Fines repeats himself a few times, and reiterates those words again in an email later. What unfolded was a chance encounter, he says, and his evidence is that it went too perfectly to have been orchestrated.

Fines, a Frederick County resident and co-founder of Honor Flight-Top of Virginia, is passionate about his volunteer work. The national Honor Flight is a nonprofit that takes veterans from World War II, as well as the Korean and Vietnam wars, on free trips to memorials in Washington, D.C. Given the proximity of the local chapter to the nation’s capital, bus rides are booked, as opposed to the plane rides



arranged by groups across the country.

In discussing the program over lunch recently, Fines talks loudly enough to catch the attention of a couple at a table nearby. It’s a Korean War veteran and his wife. Before the couple gets up to leave, the wife apologizes for eavesdropping and then expresses her appreciation for Honor Flight.

Her husband would enjoy such a trip, she says, though they’ve visited most of the sites mentioned. That is a verbal invitation for Fines to go into sales-pitch mode.

“You haven’t been while you’ve been with me,” he said. “We’re going to put you back in uniform. We’re going to treat you with honor. We’re going to make memories that last a lifetime.”

The veteran’s wife says she’ll sign up her husband, and probably his brother, for a trip in the future.

“So many people will come up to you. They’re going to want to shake your hand, take a picture,” Fines said to the veteran. “I guarantee you’ll get some lipstick on your cheek, too.”

No, it wasn’t a setup at all, but it showed how easy it is to get onboard with Honor Flight’s cause.

Honorable History

Honor Flight started as the brainchild of Earl Morse, a retired Air Force officer and physician’s assistant in Springfield, Ohio. After the National WWII Memorial was finished in Washington in 2004 — some

60 years after the conclusion of the war — he asked his veteran patients if they were going to visit it.

Many expressed they would like to go, but the distance and their age was a tremendous detriment.

As a private pilot, Morse met with other pilots in his club and suggested that they arrange to fly some of these WWII veterans to their memorial. Their first trip of six planes from Springfield to Manassas brought 12 veterans to Washington, prompting a movement that spread across the United States.

As of September, Honor Flight nationally has transported over 185,000 veterans of WWII, Korea and Vietnam to Washington at no cost to the war hero.

Preference is given to WWII veterans.

Groups now exist in 45 states, with hubs in 131 cities regularly flying into Washington. The Top of Virginia chapter took its first trip in October 2016.

A 'Moving' Experience

Most organizers of the local club, including Fines and Dianne Klopp, started as greeters or guardians, meeting flights coming into Washington and assisting veterans throughout the day.

"I noticed Dan as being someone I had seen in Winchester. So I went up to him and introduced myself. In the course of our conversation, I said, 'It's great that we're doing this for vets coming in from across the country, but why aren't we doing this for the guys in Winchester?'" Klopp said.

A small group began meeting in 2016, setting up the local chapter and securing funds for bus trips. Larry Schrock, a Korean War veteran and owner of Schrock Travel, provides transportation for a discounted price, Fines said.

On that first trip, Top of Virginia was selected to lay a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery and witness the changing of the guard. Visitors also greeted and thanked the veterans for their service at the WWII Memorial.

"I get more out of it than they do," Fines said. "I think most of the companions, we get a lot more out of it than the veterans.

Tourists want to hug them, take pictures with them. It's really moving to see the tears in their eyes."

Top of Virginia has now taken three trips, including one in early October, with a fourth planned in the spring of 2018. As many as 60 veterans, filling two busloads, have gone on a single trip.

"It was a long day; however, everyone in our group had a great time and enjoyed the day immensely," wrote Lew Ewing, a Winchester resident and the national secretary for the Korean War Veterans Association who participated in a trip this spring with his 21-year-old grandson. "All of our WWII veterans, who unfortunately are dying at an alarmingly rapid rate, deserve the opportunity to see their memorial. Without the work of the organizers of the Honor Flights, many of them would never have the honor of visiting their memorial and reflect for a moment, remembering their involvement in the war and remembering some of the other young men they served with and in many instances were casualties of the war. The same is true for the Korean War Veterans.

"I strongly recommend that any qualified veteran who has not participated in an Honor Flight trip to Washington, plan to do so as soon as possible. You will not regret it!"

How You Can Help

Each veteran must have a "guardian" with them for the trip, responsible for taking care of the veteran during the day's activities. The guardians, who can be relatives or simply volunteers from the community, do not pay for anything, either. They must be at least 18 years old.

If you are interested in being a guardian, or know a veteran who could be served by Honor Flight, email honorflighttov@gmail.com or visit www.honorflight-tov.org for more information.

Fines said the local chapter is open to serving any Shenandoah Valley veteran. Veterans must get their own transportation to and from the bus, which leaves from the Winchester area.

Also, on the trip home from Washington, there is a "mail call" in which letters of appreciation from the community, such as from scout groups or churches, are handed out. Letters can be sent to P.O. Box 163, Middletown, VA 22645 for distribution on the next trip.

Financial contributions are also appreciated to pay for trips and other plans, such as purchasing a defibrillator for the buses.

"We give them a full day of honor," Fines said. "It is a wonderful day."

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