

'Amazing experience:' Blount WWII veterans flown to visit Washington memorials

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WASHINGTON, DC -- The day was full of honors worthy of a five-star general, but it was the rank and file -- who laid their lives on the line during World War II -- who were in the spotlight.

HonorAir Knoxville escorted 110 World War II veterans and one USO performer to Washington, D.C., to tour military memorials during a whirlwind trip Wednesday. The veterans, who live in Blount, Knox and Anderson counties, represented every branch of the military. They were combat engineers, bomber pilots, radio operators, welders, motor machinists, automatic riflemen and infantrymen, and most of them were teenagers.

Men like Clemeth Willocks, Clayton Narveson, Clarence Lawson and John Steiner, who all live in Blount County, served their country willingly and with distinction. The trip wasn't only about visiting memorials. It gave the veterans a chance to reminisce and bond with one another and share their stories with others.

The veterans were flown on a US Airways chartered flight in an all-expense paid trip by HonorAir Knoxville, a program established and offered by Prestige Cleaners of Knoxville. Covenant Health Systems and Home Federal Bank were also major sponsors.

Eddie Mannis, president and owner of Prestige Cleaners, said he participated in a similar event hosted in North Carolina by a friend of his and decided to offer this for East Tennessean veterans. The first trip was last October, and Mannis is planning two more trips in the fall. He noted that he is dedicated to taking as many veterans as he can.

"It's an amazing experience for them," Mannis said, adding that it affects those who serve as guardians almost as much, if not more than the veterans. Thirty volunteers served as escorts for the veterans.

At McGhee Tyson Airport, dignitaries and corporate sponsors greeted the veterans, who were ushered through an honor guard just before the security check point.

All along the trip route, the veterans were received with applause and tears. US Airways' employees decorated the Airbus 320, the Jet ways and themselves with red, white and blue streamers and ribbons, American flags and other patriotic symbols.

When the veterans disembarked at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport, student ambassadors from local high schools and colleges, along with members of the American Legion Auxiliary, waved American flags and cheered the men. Two women who lined the exit area said they were waiting for their own flights. They clapped as their eyes

brimmed with tears. Veterans received small folded flags and red paper carnations. A band played patriotic songs as the men made their way to waiting buses.

Their stories

The flags presented to the veterans have a special meaning for Narveson, who was in the U.S. Marine Corps. Narveson, of the 4th Marine Division, was fighting on Iwo Jima when the American flag was raised, an event captured in an immortal photograph and the basis for the Marine memorial.

"The American flag meant something to the people," and Americans at home flew the flag regularly, he said. "So when that flag went up, that was something that was so meaningful to us."

Officers had binoculars and were watching for the flag to be raised. When it was raised, the whistles of the destroyers and cruisers blew continuously. Narveson, 84, said he was about 150-200 feet from where the men with the flag were.

"It (the whistles) rang for 10 minutes. I could see the red of the flag - that's all I could see because of the shells. I'll never forget that day."

Fighting was ferocious on the islands, resulting in the deaths of 7,000 with another 18,000 wounded.

"I carried a rifle on my shoulder and a .45 on my hip," Narveson said, adding that he didn't know what he hit and is glad for that lack of knowledge.

Lawson served on the USS Freemont APA 44 in the Pacific as a welder. He enlisted as an 18-year-old and was sent to Hawaii, where he attended welding school for six weeks. Lawson, now 81, was waiting to be shipped out when the war ended. However, his ship was sent to Japan to pick up and transport 2,500 servicemen home to Washington. As a welder, he was responsible for repairing damage and making routine checks for leaks.

Willocks served with the 20th Army Air Corps, 513th Wing, 9th Bomb Group, 5th Squad and was stationed on the island Tinian. His job was repairing radios and keeping them operational for B-29 bombers. Each squad had numerous planes that had about 15 radios each. It was back before transistor radios, and the tubes would blow out regularly, which kept him busy.

Willocks, 82, volunteered while still in high school but was also drafted a short time later. He left "right in the middle of my senior year, but I did come back and graduated."

Steiner joined the U.S. Navy and was assigned as a motor machinist in the amphibious force, serving on the USS Wheatland AKA 85.

"Our ship was one of the first ships to go into Sasebo, Japan as one of the occupation ships," said Steiner, 82. "We were right there in the harbor, and all the warehouses were leveled by bombs, but the harbor and the docks weren't touched. I think that says a lot about the accuracy of our bombers."

In caves on the hillsides, they found machine shops with huge lathes and milling machines that had been built in Toledo, Ohio.

"We noticed that nobody was around, and the rice was warm where they had been eating."

After the amphibious force was dissolved, Steiner was transferred to a YP19 ship. Six of those ships left Saipan together, headed for the states. That first night, two of the ships sank. Later, engine problems forced his ship to drop out of the convoy. The ship was stranded alone in the ocean until they could resolve the problem. Steiner said a lesson from his high school physics class helped him find a solution to fix the engine.

"We were the only ship to come into the United States under our own power, and I feel pretty good about that - being a motor machinist mate. I was the ranking petty officer for the engine room."

Narveson said that during the war, everyone contributed to the cause - those working behind the scenes, those providing support to the combat units and even the women back home. The women worked in the aircraft factories and helped turn out the tanks, and they flew the bombers to England and North Africa to deliver them to the Army Air Corps.

"They had women working in these shipyards," Narveson said. "They didn't get paid much, but they were dedicated."

Congressional greetings

A police escort led the three buses to the World War II Memorial, where they were met by U.S. Sens. Lamar Alexander and Bob Corker. After lunch and a visit, the procession traveled to the Lincoln, Korean and Vietnam memorials, where the men spent some time.

An overheated bus slowed the group down temporarily when a motor belt caught on fire. But it didn't dampen the spirits of the veterans, who had to exit the bus and wait a few minutes for a replacement. Despite that delay, the tour continued on its route to the Air Force Memorial, built not far from the Pentagon.

The entourage arrived at Arlington National Cemetery in time to watch the impressive changing of the guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. The emotional ceremony brought tears to the eyes of several of the observers.

After a brief trip around the U.S. Marine memorial, the group headed for the airport for the return trip home. US Airways employee Patty Pryor greeted tired but jubilant veterans as she had earlier that morning. Pryor had a boom box playing Glenn Miller tunes to which this writer and Lawson danced while waiting to board the Airbus.

Narveson recalled that he cried while standing in the mess hall at Pearl Harbor when he heard the news that Miller's plane had gone down.

After a day filled with adventures, veterans said it was one they would never forget. They arrived home met by family and friends with "Welcome Home" signs and red, white and blue balloons.