



Triad Flight of Honor



October 4, 2009 – on the occasion of the Return of Flight 7843 – Triad Flight of Honor
WE MUST NOT FORGET THEIR SACRIFICE
KYLE SWICEGOOD

Dressed like they were preparing for a military inspection, 103 men who served in World War II, ranging in age from 86-98 filed into Order at the Greensboro Airport October 3rd around 6:30 AM. There was an air of excitement that you could feel and see in the eyes of the men.

As was in the 1940s, the minds of these men were channeled in a different direction than home. Only this time, the future didn't hold such uncertainty. It held Celebration of a memorial in their honor. Nonetheless, these men did not expect the grand appreciation they were about to receive.

As we entered the terminal gate, elected officials and reporters were all around. Allen Joines, Mayor of Winston Salem, Congresswoman Virginia Foxx, Senator Richard Burr, State Representative Falwell, Congressman Howard Coble and all the TV personalities on WXII.

Patiently, the men waited for the A320 Airbus to open its doors so we could make the 37 minute flight to Reagan National Airport. Many of our "Davie County Boys" were interviewed by Kimberly Van Scoy, Margaret Johnson, Wanda Starke and Cameron Kent.

Listening to the stories from the Pacific, Tinian Island, The banks of Normandy in the Atlantic and the crystal waters of Pearl Harbor, I found myself there. When John Caudle shared with me about his first 14 hour mission in a B-29, cramped in his tail gunner quarters, I personally felt the fear that he must have had. But then again, maybe I couldn't. He shared with me how the tracer bullets passed by the tail of the plane from the Japanese fighters. Sitting back in that plane, he would open a locket that had a photo of his wife back home in Farmington, NC. Caudle said "that first mission we went on was literally a baptism by fire". The memories that surfaced among the veterans reminded me of something Rotarian Jeff Sims said, "These men gave the United States a blank check and said cash it, even if it means my life".

Taxiing out to the runway, a wreath of water encircled the plane; a water cannon salute provided by the airport fire department. As we prepared for takeoff, sitting in row 9d, I turned around and looked at this band of brothers. Each person proud of their personal branch of the military, but unified by an experience that bonded our nation together. These Americans emerged from the Great Depression to fight and win the most devastating conflict in world history; a world at war. Tyranny was the rule of the day and it was these American boys, yes boys, combined with their allies that brought peace to a tattered world. It was amazing to be surrounded by contemporaries of Ike, Patton, FDR and Truman. I listened intently to the conversations that the soldiers were having with each other. "Where were you stationed?, What year were you called?, What was your rank? All answered their questions with a unique blend of humility, yet pride in their part of the world engagement.

Because of their age, many veterans were in wheelchairs, some on oxygen, and many were very healthy in spite of being in their late 80's and early 90's. The dark heads of hair had turned a silver color. Just as the maple tree gives off its beauty in the autumn, these men in their honor shined with a splendor. The Rotary Club provided guardians for the veterans. But I saw an amazing site during the day. When a guardian (who was responsible for three veterans) was occupied with one of his veterans, you would see someone like J.B. Caldwell, of Mocksville, pushing Chloe Leazer in a wheelchair, anything to help a brother. For just that moment, I imagined soldiers carrying their wounded friends off the battle field.

After the plane ascended the runway to the east, it climbed and turned north towards the nation's capital. Applause erupted as the passengers knew we were airborne. Along the west side of the plane, I noticed a thin cotton blanket of clouds, but literally, as we started our descent into Reagan International Airport, there was a line of emerald green trees you could see. On this day, the God

chose for Washington to have blue skies. Even the US AIR captain thanked the men over the intercom for their service. This was going to be a day these men will never forget. It dawned on me how each one of these men must have felt leaving small communities like Farmington, Mocksville, and Cooleemee for the war. Most left home on trains, some on ships, but unlike this day, their destination was unknown; their duration unknown as well.

When we landed we were once again welcomed on the ground with a water cannon salute. The flight attendant opened the door and immediately, you could hear a band playing. A five piece military brass band was at the gate playing military and 40's music. But that wasn't all. As the men filed out of the plane, there was a tunnel of people. Camera flashes, flags, people clapping and saying "thank you for your service". As each of them turn off of the jetport and into this tunnel, I witnessed the first tears. They were overcome with appreciation. "Thank you for your service" was elevated above the reverberation of the band by onlookers. Then, after we loaded onto three buses, "Rolling Thunder" a Harley Davidson group, wearing Red White and Blue, along with a Washington police officer, stopped traffic on the George Washington Memorial Parkway. No traffic into the city was more important than getting these men to the memorial. As we turned onto the Arlington Memorial Bridge, with the rows of markers behind us in Arlington National Cemetery, the grandness of the Lincoln Memorial stood in front of us. We took the Lincoln turnabout to Henry Bacon Drive and then onto Constitution Avenue. An avenue named after the document that these men vowed to "serve and defend". I knew we were just a ½ mile from the memorial when we turned on to 17th Street SW and then these men witnessed the "Role call of nations", the granite pillars that represented the 56 United States, territories and District of Columbia that were united in a common cause during the war. We parked on the south side of the memorial, and standing there waiting on us was Senators Bob and Elizabeth Dole. Smiles were on both their faces like they were seeing old friends. The men & women (one nurse from the Atlantic theater was part of the group) lined up and were photographed. Bob & Liddy Dole made sure to speak with each veteran. Senator Dole quoted from the Korean Memorial "Freedom is not free". "You men and women paid the price."

Aubrey Gray, a Pearl Harbor Veteran said "This day has been a high point in my life". It was only 10:30 AM.

It would be a mistake not to give credit to families back home during this conflict and the monument appropriately memorizes this. Each state pillar is

decorated with an Oak or Wheat wreath symbolizing the nation's industrial and agricultural strength which were both essential for victory during wartime.

This memorial should be a reminder to our nation that sacrifice for a greater cause is sometimes necessary. British historian John Keegan wrote this was "fought across six of the world's seven continents and all of its oceans". History counts that somewhere around 50 million lives were taken, hundreds of millions were wounded physically and mentally. President Harry Truman said "Our debt to heroic men and valiant women in the service of our country can never be repaid. They have earned our undying gratitude. America will never forget their sacrifice". I have never forgotten the War that my grandmother Swicegood called "the great war", but after a day like October the 3rd, the embers of the stories I've heard all my life became a flame. As these men reach the autumn of their life, we all must commit to ourselves that their sacrifice never dies.

In honor of their sacrifice, "all gave some, and some gave all", a beautiful wall called "Freedom's Wall, stands facing the Washington Monument. When you stand and look at it, you see the beautiful Lincoln Memorial. 4000 gold stars commemorate the more than 400,000 American's who offered their lives for our country.

Every one of the veterans from the Triad visited the "North Carolina" Pillar. The ones who fought in the European theater made their way to the Atlantic side, those who found themselves in the South Pacific, the Pacific side. There were a number of reunions. One notable reunion was Kevin Caudle. Kevin, the grandson of John Caudle flew from Atlanta that very morning to be with his grandfather. This surprise visit was touching. They embraced, locking arms. I could hear the words... "I love you Granddad". It was one of the moments that I personally had to hold back the tears.

Those from Davie County on this first "Honor Flight" of the Triad were Chloe Leazer, Craig Hanes, J.B. Caldwell, John Caudle, Aubrey Gray, Charles Woodruff and James Foster. Leazer was a member of the 509th Composite Group which was part of the first atomic bombardment. His was a firsthand experience of the Enola Gay. Don Wooten, a Rotarian Guardian from Advance heard Leazer say "he did not expect that much appreciation from the people". Leazer and Caldwell both expressed how "grateful they were to the Rotary Club of Mocksville" for making this Honor Flight Possible. J.B. Caldwell on the plane ride home told Don Wooten he was "wanting to get in touch with the only remaining member of his 10 member crew." He was a tail gunner on a B-24.

The experience rekindled so many relationships. Craig Hanes of Smith Grove was in the Air Force. He recounted that on November 11, 1943 he was on the Deck of the USS Juan Juan when a torpedo penetrated the front of the Ship. He was left in a life boat for what he said was "All day and all night and all I had to my name was an oil soaked pair of overhauls". He said "I can still hear the captain saying abandon ship and this is no drill". Charles Woodruff's story found him in New Guinea and Luzon. He recalled, " They called me in December, 1942 and I was discharged on December 23, 1945".

The stories around the Monument are honestly too many to write about. An overriding happiness was among the men. We spent about two hours in the WWII monument. I enjoyed a visit from my nephew, Max Swicegood, a senior at Georgetown University. He too enjoyed witnessing these heroes. A large canvass tent was setup for lunch that day. During lunch, Aubrey Gray shared with Max and me his eye witness account of being shot at by Japanese planes. Literally the concrete just near his feet was shattered by incoming fire. When asked if he is still bitter, he replied "they were just doing their job".

The balance of the day included visits to the Lincoln, Korean War, Vietnam, FDR, Iwo Jima and the Air Force Memorial. The veteran's energy level was greater than many of the guardians; present company included. We were tired. By day's end, the experience was history; it took 64 years for these men to receive the proper appreciation they deserved. Now with the sounds of cannons and guns a distant past, they will remember the sounds of cheers, music and the soft sound of the fountains at the monument. But, what we didn't realize, it wasn't over yet. We received another escorted trip back to the airport and took our short flight back to Greensboro. Quite honestly, there, they received the climax of the day. Literally hundreds of well wishers, family, and color guards were there. Senator Kay Hagan and Representative Watts were there to greet the veterans. As I walked with my two Davie County veterans whom I was a guardian for, I saw them enter the final tunnel of celebration. People they

didn't know cheering, waving, thanking them. Caudle and Aubrey both removed their hats in appreciation. But then, for John Caudle, it was another surprise. A lovely lady, a few years younger than him, stepped out of the crowd into the middle of the walk way. Suddenly, this lady opened her arms to embrace him. It was that beautiful girl that he would open his locket to look at to get a glimpse of home in the B-29 bomber. It was his wife. Time stood still for that moment.

I walked Aubrey Gray outside to the car. I stood there and watched our others make their reunions with family. Craig Hanes and Charlie Woodruff smiled as they received the fanfare. James Foster's wife gave a loving hug to her meek gentle hero. Foster's war story included a medic hospital and a tour on the front lines with the infantry. J. B. Caldwell Shook his guardians hand and said "thank you". Chloe Leazer, a man who has a tough exterior, was glassy eyed from the over-the-top welcome home. All these men had other guardians. I know they could tell you similar stories about their day.

Finally, This Rotarian event was organized like a Marine Color Guard, it was a flawless event. Had it not been for the Rotarians demonstrating their motto, "Service above self", many veterans would have lived their lives and not seen the memorial which was built in their honor. J.B. Caldwell and Guardian Don Wooten shared a comment about the teamwork for the day "it was veterans helping veterans, veterans helping guardians, and guardians helping veterans and other guardians, it was the kind of teamwork that these veterans applied to get through the war". We must never forget their sacrifice. This day was incredibly fulfilling to a 42 year old who has walked in the freedom they delivered. And on this day, I walked in their shadow. It was an honor. If you are interested in helping others experience this memorial, contact a member of the Rotary Club or you can contact me at 336-751-4444.