

A Sentimental journey

I am a 95-yr. old World War II veteran who was invited to join 86 other veterans and their guardians in an honor flight to visit several war memorials in our nation's capital. The list was indeed comprehensive: the WW II, Korean and Vietnam War Memorials, memorials to Franklin D. Roosevelt and Martin Luther King, a sculptural group of servicemen raising the flag at Iwo Jima, the Lincoln Monument, and, to complete the day, an emotionally moving Changing of the Guard at Arlington National Cemetery. It was a full day, to say the least; yet as the day wore on, the mixture of new sights and old memories and the constant attention showered on us kept reviving us and reminding us that this was a once-in-a-lifetime occasion.

We left from the Marion IL Veterans Airport on 9/28/21 before the sun was up and returned that evening after an unusually short hour-and-26-minute flight home. As we approached the airport we were greeted by a blazon of flashing firetruck lights and what looked like at least 300 welcomers lining our exit from the plane, applauding and thanking each veteran individually as he passed. The return to reality wasn't going to be easy after all this attention, especially since it had started the same way when we arrived that morning at Regan Terminal in DC.

Not only were we pampered from morning to night, every detail of the trip had been planned and executed meticulously. Four buses met us at the airport and drove us to every site, each stocked with volunteers, donors, and a nurse, even a wheelchair for any veteran who requested one. Every person on the trip was served food several times a day, including hot soup, baked goods, and dessert, each conveniently boxed so we could gather at picnic tables or on the lawn if we wished, all this without a cent from any vet. Fortunately, the weather was perfect the whole trip.

Each veteran savored something special he had experienced that day, from what I could gather, something associated with his particular military branch, or maybe resurrected memories of a lost comrade. For me, the most impressive experience of the day was climbing high up in the Lincoln Memorial to contemplate for a spell this giant among men, warts and all. The other, surprisingly, was watching the Changing of the Guard at Arlington, a rather simple ceremony, actually, an exercise in discipline, primarily, combined with an expression of order, dedication, respect, so many things

that are in short supply in a time of riots, mayhem, indiscriminate violation of private and government property, political hate, desecration of the flag.

Nevertheless, as I observed the transformation on every veteran's face as he watched the young servicemen perform guard duty, I couldn't help from thinking of a poem by the Scotch poet Sir Walter Scott which we learned eighty years ago in Mr. Smith's class at Christopher High School:

"Breathes the man with soul so dead,
Who ne'er to himself hath said,
This is my own, my native land.....
Whose heart hath ne'er within him burned.
As home his footsteps he hath turned
From wandering on a foreign soil?"

Thank you, Honor Flight, for remembering the vets. Thank you, John Mark Smith, for being my guardian on the flight. Thank you, Heartland, for your big heart. Patriotism, i'm glad to see, is still with us.

Carl W. Lutes