

For immediate release:
Sept. 24, 2018



Honor Flight veterans receive heroes' welcome

Sixty-eight Honor Flight veterans received an enthusiastic welcome on Saturday evening from patriotic, flag-waving citizens who packed the entire terminal at Lexington's Blue Grass Airport.

Honor Flight takes veterans of World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War on a one-day trip to Washington, D.C., to visit memorials erected to honor their service and sacrifices.

Representing 34 Kentucky counties, Honor Flight veterans included 11 from World War II, 24 from Korea and 33 from Vietnam.

Following an early-morning flight from Lexington, the group was greeted at Reagan Washington National Airport by a cheering crowd and a U.S. Military Academy chorus serenading them with patriotic songs. A police escort then guided the group's buses to stops that included the Air Force Memorial, Women in Military Service for America Memorial and the Marine Corps War Memorial.

Veteran Roy Bowling of London was especially moved by the Marine memorial where he remembered his late brother, Troy, a Marine who was in the first wave that landed on the tiny Japanese island called Iwo Jima.

"He was shot bad on the second day, and they had given him up for dead," Bowling said. Troy lay in a mud puddle among dead marines, bleeding from a chest wound, for hours before he attracted the attention of a combat photographer who called for help. He received medical attention on a hospital ship anchored offshore and was later able to watch as the U.S. flag was raised on Mt. Suribachi, the scene that would inspire the Marine memorial.

At the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington National Cemetery, the group watched the changing of the guard and participated in an emotional wreath-laying ceremony. The

Honor Flight participants also visited memorials dedicated to the veterans of World War II, Korean and Vietnam wars. Throughout the day, the veterans were greeted with smiles, photo requests and thanks for their service.

A homecoming reception capped off the jam-packed day of activities. Led by a bagpipe band, returning veterans paraded through the Lexington airport terminal as family and friends clapped and shouted welcomes, waved flags and shook hands to welcome their heroes.

Several veterans said the trip was one of the best days of his life.

This was the eighth Honor Flight sponsored by Kentucky's Touchstone Energy Cooperatives. The mission was coordinated by Winchester-based Honor Flight Kentucky.

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