

HONOR FLIGHT #27

By Jack Joyce

I thought, at my age, there would be no more accolades but was I ever surprised at what happened to me on Sept. 20th of this year. (2016)

I will go back a few weeks when I was approached by a friend of mine who said to me “Jack you were in during Korea weren’t you?” I answered yes. In fact, I graduated from high school on June 22nd 1950, and on the 24th, my closest friend and I enlisted in the U.S. Navy, and the next day the 25th, hostilities broke out in Korea, and I soon found out where Korea was.

Getting back to the person who asked me about my time frame in service, he then said – “Have you heard of the Honor Flights?” I said yes I have. These are flights that fly vets to DC to the 3 War Memorials. He said they are almost through with the WWII guys and are now starting with the Korean vets. He brought me an application, I filled it out, returned it to him, and a few weeks later, I received a call from a woman asking me if I was available on the 20th of September. I replied I was, and she then said she would be getting back to me.

I received a letter asking if I could be in Clearwater on Saturday the 17th of September for indoctrination. I replied, sure can. We drove down, my friend, both wives and myself. Upon arriving, we were greeted by volunteers and were shown to a table to register, then given a hat, a collared shirt and a travel bag. I was told to report to table #10. A short time later, I met my guardian, each vet is assigned one. She was a young lady, and I mean young, not yet 29. She had volunteered to do this and she had to pay \$400 for the privilege. I kiddingly said to her, I probably have sweaters older than you, and most likely still wearing them.

My friend and I were the only ones from the Spring Hill area, and they did not want us to drive down to the airport for the flight out on Tuesday. My guardian volunteered to come to Spring Hill and pick us up, and she lived in Tampa. My friend’s guardian lived in Brooksville and offered to take us down and back. It would have been too much for the young lady to make that trip, but she was more than willing to do so.

I was picked up at 2:15 a.m. and we arrived at the St. Pete/Clearwater airport about 3:15. There were already a few people there, and we checked in, and they told us we were on the white team, which meant we would be on the white bus for the tour of the monuments in D.C. We were then treated to breakfast compliments of McDonald's, and promptly took off at 6 a.m.

When we arrived at BWI International, we were taken to our buses. There were 3 buses as there were well over 100 vets making the trip. We first went to the Air Force Museum and had a box lunch, then off to the WW II, Korea, and Vietnam memorials. I had been there before and seen it, but this was different, people young and old stopping us, shaking our hands, and thanking us for our service.

We then proceeded to the Lincoln Memorial and if any of you have been to it, there are quite a few steps to climb. My guardian said "I spoke to your wife and cardiologist, and they told me you were to climb those steps." Now, I suffer from some COPD from the smoking I did years ago, and even after being off them close to 39 years, I did do some damage. When I got to the top, I was a bit winded but not much. One of the men at the top step said "Great job, Vet – did you know there was an elevator that you could have used?" My guardian and I had a big laugh over it.

It was then time to board the buses and head back to the airport for the flight home. Another box lunch was served before boarding the plane. When we touched down in St. Pete, we were ushered off the plane and separated into groups of 10. As we approached the long corridor, my guardian said "Are you ready for this?" I couldn't imagine what transpired as we turned onto the main corridor in the airport. There had to be at least 500 people there – men, women and children waving flags and shaking our hands and saying thanks.

A four-man Honor Guard preceded us, there were Boy Scout troops there, veteran's organizations, K of C people, etc. My hand was actually getting sore from all the shaking. They had an orchestra there and 5 young ladies dressed up in WW II WAC uniforms doing Andrews Sisters songs, and I had my picture taken with them. I also had it taken with a four-star general from the South Korean Air Force. I was so emotional, tears welled up in my eyes and my guardian said

“Go ahead and cry, you guys deserve this.” I hated to see the day end. I said goodbye to my young guardian, and we arrived home about 10:15 so it was a long day. Erin (my guardian’s name) promised to keep in touch and so far we have.

You know, my war, or as it was called, a “police action,” was Korea also known by many of us as “The Forgotten War.” They never had a declaration of war sent to North Korea. We came back, went to school, married, got jobs and raised families.

In the year 2000, on the 50th anniversary of the start of Korea, I received a letter from the President of South Korea, in Korean and in English, thanking me for my service during the Korean War – first time I heard the word “War” mentioned. A short time after we were discharged, my friend and I went to our local VFW Post in Elizabeth NJ, only to be told by some WW II guy sitting at the bar, that we weren’t in a f—g war. I think I replied – “Oh, but they were shooting at us, doesn’t that mean something?”

Things are different, now I am a member of the VFW here in Florida, and people are always thanking me for my service. As my dear guardian said to me – “Jack, better late than never.” This will go down as one of the greatest days of my life. God bless the Honor Flight volunteers of West Central Florida for making this day happen for me and a lot of other vets. The shame is that many of my friends who fought in that war are no longer with us. I know they would have felt honored but who knows, maybe they were looking down at us saying – “Hey fellows, a job well done.”