

## **Honor Flight Chicago – WWII Veterans July 14, 2010 By Herschel (“Rusty”) Leffingwell**

**We arrived at Midway Airport 4:35 A.M....**

**I entered Midway Airport baggage area #7 as instructed. The first thing I noticed was more wheel chairs than I had ever seen before in one place. Suddenly it made sense since all the WWII veterans had to be 80 years and older. At this point in our lives we may be ambulatory one day and wheel chair bound the next day. The area was nearly filled with volunteers helping to get us registered with the right group, since we would fill 4 huge buses in Washington, D.C. Our neck ribbons were divided into 4 colors, which determined to which bus we were assigned. Upon finding my right group, I registered and was given my nametags. I was then presented with my Honor Flight Chicago polo shirt and ditty bag with my name on it and was escorted to a cubicle where I changed my shirt. I stuffed my own shirt into the ditty bag. That ditty bag was to hold our shirt, camera, and anything else we had arrived with. Most of the veterans had a cap with WWII Veterans on it. We all soon added our own insignia depending on what branch of the service, along with individual service pins that we had brought. Mine carried a U.S.N. pin on one side along with the submarine emblem on the other side.**

**About that time one of the volunteers let out a whoop saying, “Here is another Herschel”, when he saw my nametag. His name is Herschel Lukenbill, rather uncanny that being close to mine. Suddenly all the volunteers in that area descended to shake hands with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Herschel. The big groups of volunteers were absolutely fabulous getting us registered, our shirts changed and doing whatever else needed doing. Many of them were just there to help us at that time in the morning. About 5:00 AM I was given my boarding pass and given to a Navy Seaman to help me get through security and get my belongings together again. We walked down to Gate 18. We shook hands as he departed to find his own outbound flight. There were some veterans already drinking coffee and having a donut. Veterans, ambulatory and wheel chairs kept arriving. About 5:20 AM, delicious huge hot ham, cheese and egg sandwiches arrived for all of us. About 5:45AM three ladies arrived and started singing songs made famous by the Andrews Sisters back in the 40’s. The group is known as the Legacy Girls. They present this type of entertainment to all the Honor Flight Chicago groups. Their last number was The National Anthem. About the end of the first phrase, suddenly the veterans all realized what they were singing. Ambulatories stood at attention, wheel chair veteran’s shoulders came back straight, and all hats were off. It was a beautiful thing to be a part of. After they finished they stayed around for pictures and conversations about the old songs we had all heard lots of years ago. That was certainly a fitting send off as we started loading for Washington, D.C.**

**Ambulatories boarded the plane first, filling the rear of the plane so our wheel chair buddies could fill the front of the plane. We had 95 veterans, 43 volunteers**

who traveled with us, and 1 nurse along with 5 family members who attended to their family wheel chair veterans.

After a smooth flight into the early morning sun, we landed at Dulles. Before we arrived at the gate the Captain suggested we look out either side of the plane. There was a huge fire truck on either side shooting water into the air over the plane. He said that is done only for VIP's upon arrival. That was just the first courtesy we encountered that day. As we deplaned, there must have been at least 40 people greeting us as we moved over to the people movers. Several service men, police officers, and volunteers all extended their welcome to Washington, D.C. When you walk through a group like that realizing they are there to greet you just because they want to be there ...well that brought a lot of tears to the eyes along with the handshakes and lots of hugs.

The people movers took us to the main terminal building at Dulles. We were in a large open area. We started moving around getting in a group with the same color I.D. holders. We all had a volunteer to be with us the rest of the day. A blond with her hair flowing out the back of a visor cap approached me bringing another veteran with her. With a three-way hug, she explained that we were a three-some for the rest of the day. The other veteran was Stanley Wojack from West Chicago. The volunteer's name was Renda. She wore a big infectious smile all the time. She was from Georgia, but had worked in Washington, D.C. for several years. She is the head of the personnel department at a major aircraft supplier firm. I asked how she was able to get time off to volunteer. She said, with a big grin, "When I interviewed for the job, I explained about my volunteer work and the Honor Flight Chicago and they bought the whole package". We later found that she was the director of the Washington, D.C. volunteers that help with all the Honor Flight Chicago. Honor Flight Chicago started with five (5) flights in 2008, nine (9) flights in 2009, and eleven (11) flights are targeted for 2010. The current waiting list is 1300. However, the numbers of WWII vets are decreasing rapidly. We had one veteran that was 96 years old. His granddaughter was with him. They sat across the aisle from me on the bus. All the buses had equal numbers of ambulatories, and equal number of wheel chair vets. Our 96 year old was reasonably mobile getting on and off the bus, but required a wheel chair beyond that. The youngest veteran in the group was 82 years of age.

We proceeded to load onto the buses, with a box lunch, and headed to the Iwo Jima Memorial. That memorial had a special meaning for me. In 1945, four of us from the submarine squadron based on Midway Island had been chosen to return to the U.S. to begin officers training. We had been released from our submarine squadron, with our orders in hand, and had been given 45 days to report to Princeton University for our indoctrination period. We obtained a ride from Midway to Pearl Harbor on a Marine mail plane. We then boarded a hospital ship that was loading the first group of wounded from the battle of Iwo Jima. The Executive officer was pleased to have four more people to help. That meant carrying food supplies from the various holds on the ship to the main galley. All food was prepared in the galley for wounded soldiers, all of ship's company as well as we four hitchhikers. We had contact with many of the wounded, thus my interest in the Iwo Jima Memorial — seeing that memorial brought back many memories of the ship-load of wounded being brought home to the U.S. for whatever treatment that was available.

There was light rain falling while we were at the Iwo Jima Memorial, seeming to cast some gloom over the magnificent statue, which is 78' tall. You cannot look at that memorial without tears starting to flow.

Our next stop was at the World War II Memorial. A slight drizzle met us as we got off the buses but it soon quit, leaving a cloudy sky rather than the intense heat.

The WWII Memorial encompasses seven (7) acres, lying directly between the Washington and Lincoln Memorials in the distance. Early in our stop, we gathered for a Wreath Laying Ceremony. A large color guard appeared and came to attention. Then three of our veterans, one lady nurse, one wheel chair veteran and one ambulatory vet laid the wreath, followed by taps being played. It was a very moving time for all the veterans assembled. Following the presentation, we had the opportunity to wander around the memorial. There is a granite marker about 12' high with the name of each of the states, along with the other Island's that were U.S. territories surrounding the perimeter. There is a Star Wall with four thousand stars arranged on it. Each star represented one hundred casualties. The wall is very beautiful, but it is also imposing on your mind, remembering the total number of casualties it represents. You cannot walk away from the wall without remembering the fallen heroes and considering your own individual fortune of living.

As I moved away from the wall, I was approached by a much younger veteran. He had noticed the submarine insignia on my hat and stopped and shook hands. He had just completed 20 years in the Submarine Service and had just recently retired from duty. He genuinely expressed his appreciation for the ingenuity of all the submariners who served before him.

Nearby we noticed a female Lieutenant Commander having a conversation with a foreign family. When they completed their conversation and picture taking, I approached and saluted. She returned the salute immediately, with a broad smile crossing her face. I suggested to her that if our officers had been as attractive as she was, I would probably still have been in uniform. She laughed and asked if I would like to have a picture taken with her. We posed and then parted, with her thanking me for my service.

About 2:15 PM we boarded our buses and proceeded to the Lincoln Memorial, the Korean War Memorial and the Vietnam Veterans Wall Memorial, along with an outstanding group of statues depicting Vietnam. These memorials were all within walking distance of each other.

The Korean Memorial consisted of twenty or so statues of service men in foul weather gear walking through tall grass up a slope. They were all separated from each other over an area of about an acre of terrain. Each statue's face had their individual expressions carved into them. We could get close enough to one or two to get a relatively close-up photograph. Their expressions soon brought tears to our eyes as we looked at the sculptures. Nearby there was a long granite wall, which is part of the Korean Memorial also. As I touched the wall, there were very shallow creases carved into the wall. Being close to the wall you could notice no particular composition or personal features. I backed away from the wall probably 12' to 14' and still nothing to notice to the naked eye. I took a picture of the wall and when it was developed, I could see faces and features of many, many people coming toward me. It is very fascinating to spend time with that photograph, seeing some

reflections of the people standing in front of the wall while seeing the other background images.

As we neared the Vietnam Memorial area, I noticed an empty bench in the shade of a tree. I told Renda and Stanley that I was going to rest while they toured the area. Renda took my camera along and said they would be back in probably 15 minutes. Within a couple of minutes, the volunteer who had a wheel chair with two First Aid Kits and pulling an oxygen tank on wheels appeared and asked if I needed help. I declined, but she sat with me a few minutes until she saw Renda and Stanley coming back our way. She suggested we start back toward the Lincoln Memorial. We walked slowly and soon Renda and Stanley caught up to us and then she turned around and floated into the area looking for anyone who might need help. It made you realize just how prepared these trips are for the aging veterans under their care for the day.

Facing toward the Korean Memorial was the Lincoln Memorial. The huge area in front of the Lincoln Memorial was dotted with many groups of people, taking in its beauty, while full well realizing the importance of what it stands for in today's world.

At the airport, our bus was the final one to unload and proceed to clear security. After clearing security, we boarded the people movers and were taken to the outlying terminals where all planes are parked. In the gate area, we were given a box lunch along with a container of water. We relaxed there for probably 45 minutes before we were given our boarding passes to board the Southwest plane for our return to Chicago. A lot of tears were shed and a lot of hugs were given to our escorts who shepherded us throughout the day. Renda gave us a big last smile as we started down the walkway to the plane.

Our return flight was uneventful until we got to lower altitude. The weather and winds on the ground made for a most bumpy landing. After touch down the pilot announced that as we started our turn to go back to the terminal, "Please, everyone look out the left side of the plane". Lined up at the edge of the taxi-way were 10-12 fire engines and ambulances with all lights on, along with probably 100 firemen standing at attention, greeting our Honor Flight Chicago back home. Rousing applause ensued along with a lot of trying to blink back the tears.

Our off loading instructions were that the ambulatory vets could mix in with the wheel chair veterans coming off the plane. Inside the terminal, probably 50 Navy lady students from Great Lakes Naval Training Station, along with more volunteers, were waiting to escort each veteran from the gate area up to the end of the concourse. There we were met by bagpipes. I was one of the earlier ambulatory and was escorted by one of the Navy students. I asked her where she was based. She was amazed when I told her I had my basic training at Great Lakes back in 1943. I told her that I had to make a trip to the men's room. She replied, "Hurry back, there is more to come". She then joined the rest of her group back at the gate as some veterans were still deplaning. We were gathering in the secure area at the beginning of the concourse.

I returned to the area a few minutes later. I walked to a spot behind the closest wheel chair. Almost immediately, I felt that someone was standing close to me on the left. I turned part way to my left; my eyes met the eyes of a young lady standing close to me. Quietly she asked, "May I walk with you?" I responded quickly,

**“Most certainly you may”. She took the bag I was carrying in my left hand with her left hand. I extended my arm and she placed her hand under my arm and placed her hand with all four fingers on the back of my left wrist. After a minute or so I asked, “What brings you to Midway this evening?” She replied, “My Father told me many of the things that my grandfather had done in World War II. I became interested and I decided I wanted to become part of it”. At that time I placed my right hand on top of her hand for a few moments.**

**About that time the bagpipe group started playing and led the group back to the area where we could turn and start over toward the baggage claim area. The bagpipe group turned facing the veterans and stood at attention. The veterans proceeded slowly across the area way towards the baggage area. Following slowly behind the wheel chair veterans, I could see ahead a group of American flags. There were about 10 in a perfectly straight row on our right with another group of different flags facing them on our left. As we approached the row of flags, the first flag dipped slightly and then back straight. A big right hand came out to shake hands and the man said, “Thank you, Herschel for your service”. The lady next to him reached out with both hands over mine repeating his greeting. Then the first man in the other row of flags extended his hand with the same greeting. They were a group of motorcycle people with each one giving the same greeting. When the U.S. Flag is dipped to you, your eyes will fill with tears so it was a slow journey through the flags.**

**The hand of the person on my left stayed in the same position throughout the time. We were guided into an elevator which dropped us to the same level as the baggage claim area. I could hear a band playing in that area but it stopped as the first veteran entered the baggage area. The entire baggage claim area was crowded with people welcoming our group home. We moved into the area between two ribbons with a multitude of hands to shake, each one thanking us for our service. Shortly after entering the area, a volunteer on the right, shook my hand then moved inside the ribboned walkway. She took the bag I had on my right arm and hooked her left arm to my right upper arm so that I could still shake the hands of all the well wishers. All during this time the hand on my left wrist remained exactly where it had been placed before this journey had begun.**

**The ribbons led us most all the way around the entire baggage claim area. All ages, youngsters, teenagers, and a multitude of 40 to 60 year olds wishing us well, many with tears in their eyes along with mine. The hand on my left hand had never moved and we never touched shoulders, even though our walk was very slow and erratic due to the hundreds of people that had greeted me personally. At the far end of the baggage claim area, the ribbons were no longer there and I saw an open bench. We stopped in front of the bench and the volunteer on my right placed the one bag down. I then took the bag from the person on the left and placed it on the bench. I turned to face the person on my left; we both had tears as I looked into her eyes. I took both her hands in mine and said, “Thank you for walking with me”. Her reply was, “Thank you for allowing me to walk with you”. We hugged each other briefly and she turned to walk into the crowd. I turned and sat on the bench, and the volunteer sat down also. She inquired, “Who was your friend?” I replied, “I don’t know”. She replied, “That was the most gorgeous face I have ever seen in all of my life”.**

The whole final event had lasted very nearly an hour. The volunteer on the bench inquired if anyone was meeting me and I told her I was waiting for a regional bus at 9:30PM. I was the only veteran from outside the Chicago area. We visited a few minutes, she stood up and said, "You wait right here. I will be back". About 10 minutes later she returned and asked what time I wanted to go outside to catch the bus. I said, "I would like to go outside about 9:15 PM". She looked at her watch, stood up and said, "Sit still, I will be back". About 9:10 PM she reappeared pushing a wheel chair. I said, "I have walked all day and I can surely make it out to the bus stop". She took my hand, picked up the two bags I was carrying, and said, "Please sit in the wheel chair. I'm going to push you out to the bus stop". I sat in the wheel chair and she pushed me to the bus stop where there was an empty seat. I placed the bags on the seat, stood up and walked around the wheel chair. She asked, "Have you had a good day?". I replied, "Fantastic"! We were both crying and hugged. She dried her eyes and started back into the terminal pushing the empty wheel chair.

I will never forget the person on my left appearing seemingly out of nowhere saying, "May I walk with you?" Her hand resting on the back of my wrist throughout the nearly one hour period, never moving, or bumping as we went through the crowds. Only God and my family knew I would be alone after our return. I now realize that she was an angel sent to be with me during the time of our wonderful welcome back in Chicago. I will never forget the touch of her hand, Thanks be to God.

**Herschel Leffingwell**  
**A proud Veteran of WWII**