

Blue Ridge Honor Flight of April 23, 2022

It all began two weeks before the flight when a meeting for all veterans selected for this flight, including one Korean War and nine Viet Nam Veterans from the High Country, was held in Asheville. We met our Guardians, who would shepherd us throughout the entire experience. My guardian was CDR Mark Guidry USN Ret. and we hit it off right away, finding many parallels in our Navy careers. After coffee and donuts we were briefed on the details of the trip, what to bring, what would be provided, etc. By noon, I was on my way home. Of course, there are numerous distractions in Asheville and between, so my route was not direct.

On Friday, April 22nd, Mary Kay and I had a leisurely drive to Asheville and checked into our complementary room at the Biltmore Park Hilton which was ours for both Friday and Saturday nights. This was an extra benefit offered only to those of us from Watauga and Ashe counties. At 0545 Saturday we met one of the Guardians in the lobby and were taken by the hotel shuttle to the Asheville airport. We were checked in and issued a badge which also served as our boarding pass and seat assignment. Mark met me and we partook of a breakfast of McDonald's sausage biscuits, egg biscuits, McGriddles, coffee, OJ, etc. A well organized, no hassle boarding went smoothly, and all 282 seats were filled with veterans, guardians, five paramedics and two doctors. In slightly over an hour, we landed in Baltimore and disembarked to a greeting committee of USNA Midshipmen and an ROTC Color Guard along with various civilians cheering us. This greeting was the norm at each stop we made, people welcoming us, showing respect and gratitude and cheering. Incredibly moving!

We boarded four charter buses and, with an escort of ex-military bikers. We had Arby's sandwiches and sides on the way and made great time to the Lincoln Memorial. There the Veterans stood on the steps for photographs and a welcoming speech by Brigadier General (recently promoted to Major General) Rebecca Vernon and Chief Master Sergeant Ty Haskins, both from the Judge Advocate General Corps. Beautiful challenge coins were handed out to each veteran, then we were free to walk (or use wheelchairs pushed by our guardians) (*I walked*) to visit the Korean War Memorial and the Viet Nam Wall. Everywhere were helpful people greeting us, answering questions, helping with rubbings and passing out cold bottles of water. Constantly pausing for photographs, we then walked the length of the Reflecting Pool to the WWII Memorial. Along the way we met Veterans from other Honor Flights from Tennessee, Orange County California, Michigan and several other places.

At the appointed time we reboarded the buses and traveled to the Marine Corps/Iwo Jima memorial for a brief stop before continuing to Arlington National Cemetery to view the changing of the guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Upon the advice of the staff, I requested a wheelchair so I could be on the front row and not have to stand. As soon as I sat down in the wheelchair, I realized I was exhausted and actually needed it. The ceremony there was impressive, not only for the precision drill, but also for the complete silence as the observers showed respect for "*Hallowed Ground*".

Back on the buses for sandwiches and sides from Chic-Fil-A during the trip back to the Baltimore Airport. This time we had a police escort shepherding us through traffic. They did pretty well but I think the bikers on the inbound trip were better. Again, there were people cheering us into the airport

and a well-organized boarding process. During the one hour flight back to Asheville they held "Mail Call" where we were each given a 18" X 15" X 5" box filled with letters and notes from our families, friends, school children and total strangers honoring us for our service. I'm still reading through them. At Asheville we disembarked into the biggest welcoming group yet. A drum and bagpipe band led us through the airport. It was amazing, hundreds of people cheering, clapping, shaking your hand and shouting "Welcome home" and "Thanks for your service". It took me at least half an hour to get through this reception and I was near tears all the way. I think this was the strongest memory I will take away from the whole trip. After a reluctant farewell to Mark, Mary Kay and I went back to the hotel for the sound sleep of pleasant exhaustion.

It was great having the hotel room so we didn't have to drive home that late at night, plus Mary Kay enjoyed the use of it while I was gone as a home base for her visits to every quilting shop and fabric store in Asheville. To complete the trip, a leisurely drive home Sunday morning then a chance to recuperate and reflect on the experience.

If you are a WWII, Korean War Or Viet Nam war veteran and you get a chance to go, **GO!** The easiest way to apply is at their website: www.blueridgehonorflight.com. You can fill out your application online. Ms. JoAnn Naeger at 828-776-0650 is a great source for information and help (email: janwville453gmail.com). She will mail you an application if you prefer not to use the online version. I am profoundly grateful for this opportunity and for the members of Blue Ridge Honor Flight who worked so hard to make this event possible. This is an impressive, efficient, and dedicated group worthy of our support. See the website for opportunities to help them with their mission