



Nationwide

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Healing and Honor

“I know I’m going to hell for that,” a teary-eyed WWII veteran confided to Bob Horner as they traveled home from Washington, D.C., after visiting military monuments on the National Mall.

Horner, the executive director of Honor Flight Columbus, tried to comfort and assure the soldier that he was just doing his duty and had saved many lives by doing so.

The aging veteran carried a burden dating back to the Battle of the Bulge—the final Nazi counteroffensive in Europe in 1944. Then a young man, he found himself somewhere in Belgium, behind enemy lines, struggling to communicate with a farmer and his family. The farmer seemed very agitated as he led the soldier by the hand to the second floor of the farmhouse.

The farmer pointed down to the haystacks in the field. Finally, the soldier understood. He took aim with his rifle and fired tracer rounds into the stacks to set them and the Nazis hiding in them on fire. As the burning enemy soldiers emerged, several Allied soldiers gunned them down.

“Some of these men and women have been carrying this baggage for their entire lives,” Horner said recently. “There are hundreds of stories like that.”

Once-in-a-lifetime experience: Honor Flight Columbus has been providing healing and honor through once-in-a-lifetime trips to Washington, D.C., since the early 2000s. The one-day flights provide veterans with the opportunity to experience the honor and appreciation of their fellow countrymen.

A typical flight leaves Columbus, Ohio, early in the morning and includes visits to the memorials for WWII, the Korean War and the Vietnam War, as well as a stop at the Tomb of the Unknown soldier at Arlington National Cemetery.

The day is capped off with a homecoming celebration attended by nearly 2,000 supporters at John Glenn International Airport. It’s a welcome home that many of the veterans never received—and for which they are deeply grateful.

What’s next: As the population of WWII veterans decreases, the need for Honor Flight persists. Horner says the organization is already serving veterans of the Korean and Vietnam Wars, and will add service for those who served in the Gulf War and in Iraq, Afghanistan and other countries in the Middle East after 9/11.

“Every year, we expect to be serving somewhere around 700 to 800 veterans in the future,” he said.

Flights fueled by donor power: Honor Flight Columbus is powered by a wide range of individual donations and volunteer efforts. The support of local corporations who sponsor flights is the backbone of the operation.

“Our corporate sponsors have established a sound foundation that will allow us to operate for years to come,” according to Horner, helping the organization underwrite the cost of the flights, training and other expenses.

Over the past decade, the Nationwide Foundation has provided nearly \$700,000 to sponsor 11 flights, serving more than 1,000 veterans from central Ohio and around the country. The company's foundation sponsored the most recent flight on November 10. More than a dozen Nationwide associates volunteered to support the mission. "The Nationwide Foundation is one of the top Honor Flight sponsors in the country," said Horner, himself a Nationwide retiree.

"When you see how powerful the experience is for these men and women who have sacrificed so much for our country, every dollar of support that we can provide is worth it," said Chad Jester, president of the Nationwide Foundation. "Supporting Honor Flight aligns with our company's long-held support for the veteran community."

As for the healing and catharsis that seems to come with each Honor Flight?

"We didn't start off thinking that this was going to be a central component of these flights," reflects Horner, "But it's turned out to be something that is a common part of the experience. We're honored to be able to provide that service."

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