

VA staffer takes poor vets to WWII memorial

Ex-airman sees it as mission of mercy

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Physician's assistant Earl Morse knew how to ease the physical pain of World War II veterans at the VA hospital in Springfield. But he wanted to quiet an ache he could not cure with medicine.

He tested his idea on one of his favorite patients, 80-year-old Leonard Loy, who had spent nearly four years aboard a Navy ship.

What if I could arrange for you to visit the World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C., with all expenses paid? Morse asked him. Would you like to go?

He expected Loy to say yes.

"I wasn't ready for him to start crying," said Morse, 46.

Those tears have sent Morse on a mission.

Since May, the retired Air Force captain has transported Loy and more than 100 disadvantaged veterans to Washington for the day. The vets travel for free, thanks to pilots who donate their time and airplanes and veterans groups that pick up the tab for buses, scooters and lunches. The nonprofit program, called Honor Flight, operates out of the Springfield airport.

But time is of the essence. The average WWII veteran is 80 years old, with at least 1,000 vets dying each day. As the Honor Flight waiting list grew - "I hope I'm still here," callers would say - Morse decided to expand his mission with a second organization, the for-profit Veteran Tour Services.

For \$249, Morse will fly a veteran to Washington for the day. All transportation and meals are included. If needed, Morse will even pick up the veteran at his house. The flight is open to family members and friends.

Morse has operated his tour service out of Dayton International Airport but will add flights from Cleveland and other cities in the spring.

“World War II veterans are the most humble, stoic, appreciative people you will meet,” Morse said, aboard an 8 a.m. flight to Washington last month.

He told the veterans to bring photographs and other memorabilia, and strangers quickly forged bonds at the airport gate.

Former Marine Sgt. John Griggs pulled out black-and-white photographs of his boss, Adm. Chester Nimitz, and politely answered questions as the photographs moved around the room.

“That one is after curfew,” Griggs joked, as a photograph of a Hawaiian dancer was passed around.

In another corner, Fred Sparks showed visitors a commemorative silver dollar he received after 23 months and 17 days aboard the USS Nevada. Have you talked much about the war? the 79-year-old Sparks was asked. “Very little,” he said quietly, as his eyes filled with tears and he turned away to compose himself.

The airport ticket-taker came across the loud speaker asking for a round of applause before the 15 Ohio veterans and a couple of dozen relatives boarded the plane.

As the commercial flight landed in Baltimore, a woman leaned over to the veteran behind her and saluted him. “I want to tell you how blessed I am to be flying with you,” she told Lawrence Mikalauskas.

Mikalauskas, 86, said it was only a few years ago that someone finally thanked him for his military service.

As the bus rolled up to the National Mall memorial, the veterans gathered jackets and cameras. “I want to get a lot of pictures, but I don’t know where to start,” said Clifford Apgar, who, at 90, was the senior member of the party.

Pauline Puterbaugh knew where she wanted to start.

Puterbaugh, the widow of an infantryman held as a prisoner of war for 788 days, wanted to see her husband's name in the computer registry. Morse walked to the registry center with the 85-year-old woman, who supported herself on a walker.

She broke down as she looked at Raymond Puterbaugh's name. "That's wonderful," she said. "That's wonderful. I wish he could have lived to see it."

The focal point of the memorial is a circular pool with fountains, surrounded by pillars belonging to states, territories and the District of Columbia. At the Ohio pillar, Morse placed a framed U.S. flag from another widow, whose ex-POW husband died before he could see the year-old memorial. Morse's wife, Clarice, kept watch over the flag while Morse and the veterans strolled around reading inscriptions and pausing at the pool.

Sparks wandered over to the pillar belonging to Nevada, the namesake of his ship. The site brought more tears. "It's pretty hard to see people buried at sea," Sparks told the others.

Some veterans visited other war memorials, and everyone met back at the World War II site for a parting ceremony in front of the bus.

Gene Shay played taps on the fluegelhorn as his wife and 20-year-old granddaughter looked on. Earlier, the 82-year-old ex-POW talked about the thoughts that would run through his mind as he played.

"I think of all these younger men and women . . . they never had a son or daughter. That's always on my mind," Shay said.

As the weary veterans waited for the return flight at the airport, they talked about the extraordinary day. Garnard Littlejohn, who was sitting in a wheelchair, said it was impossible to find the right words to describe how he felt.

Morse recently quit his job at the VA hospital so he can devote his time to ferrying vets to the memorial. His wife has scaled back her hairstyling business so she can help, too.

"I'd like to say it's a calling, but it's more like an obsession," Morse

said, "because that's all I think about, is getting these guys to the memorial."