

Veterans return tired, inspired from Honor Air trip to Washington, D.C.

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It was the experience of a lifetime, participants agreed. The first Volusia Honor Air Trip to Washington, D.C. is over — completed May 17. The memories will last much longer.

The trip was a joint effort of the DeLand Breakfast Rotary Club, the DeLand Rotary Club and the DeLand Downtown Rotary Club, whose members put in countless hours to arrange the trip to Washington, D.C., so Volusia's World War II veterans could see the memorial built in their honor.

Bill Mancinik, one of those volunteers, said, "It was absolutely fantastic."

The Honor Air group's day started at 5 a.m. May 17 — a 15-hour day, Mancinik said. The veterans and their escorts arrived back in Volusia County a little after 10 p.m., landing to a cheering welcome organized by the Elks Club.

A cadre of volunteers went along to look after the 100 veterans' needs. The youngest World War II vet was 80, and the eldest was 92.

The primary purpose of the trip was to assure veterans could see the National World War II Memorial constructed in their honor. A 23-item agenda assured they did a lot more.

One of the day's most touching events for Mancinik was the wreath ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknowns in Arlington National Cemetery.

"That truly grabbed everyone's heart," he said. *The Beacon's* own columnist Sam Roth, one of the World War II veterans honored by the flight, helped lay the wreath, and there were no dry eyes.

"We had five guys pretty much in wheelchairs all day, but during taps and the salute, everyone stood. It was the most moving part of the day. These men may not stand again," Mancinik said.

Roth said the experience was emotional for him.

"It brought back a lot of memories," he said.

Roth said the changing of the guard ceremony at the tomb was impressive. So was the World War II Memorial.

"It was better than all the others put together," he said.

"You get older, and you don't think you'll have any more experiences, then you have another one," Roth said. "I did a little dance on the plane."

"Bill Mancinik and the Rotary did a fantastic job. It was a great day. Everybody gave us a great welcome, everywhere we went," Roth said.

He added, "It was an emotional, once-in-a-lifetime event."

John Cheney said he felt drained, physically and emotionally, but moved, after the trip.

The National Symphony met the group, playing patriotic songs to herald the veterans' arrival in Washington, D.C., and set the tone for the day.

"It was an honor and a privilege to be with that many heroes in one place. It was definitely awe-inspiring," Cheney said.

He gave praise, echoed by the others, for Congressman John Mica, who spent the day with the veterans and "rolled out the red carpet."

Cheney also thanked the Sheriff. "Sheriff Ben Johnson arranged for a police escort everywhere we went. People were stopping on the street and looking at us, trying to figure who these people were, on the buses. We turned heads."

Cheney, too, was moved to tears by the wreath ceremony and the changing of the guard at the Tomb of the Unknowns.

"I've seen it on film, but to watch the precision — the training those guards go through — it's very inspiring."

Cheney thanked USAir, which provided the charter flight and arranged for the symphonic greeting.

It was the thoughtfulness of the West Volusia community that moved him the most.

"I can't thank the community enough for the support they gave us — that made it happen," Cheney said.

"All three Rotaries worked on this," Cheney noted. "It opened our eyes to what we can do when we work together. There are a lot of possibilities."

When asked if there would be more great things to come, he replied, "Oh, yes. We hope to put together another flight in the fall, and get more Rotary clubs in the county involved in planning and putting the trip together for this next one."

The Rotaries are working on another Honor Air Flight, set for the fall. They want to take another 100 World War II veterans to see the memorial.

Anyone interested in supporting or taking part in the fall trip may visit the organization's [Web site](#), where applications for prospective veterans and guardians can be downloaded. Donations may also be sent to Volusia Honor Air, c/o DBR Charities Inc., P.O. Box 1346, DeLand, FL 32721.