

WWII Memorial Tours for Dummies
or
How You, Too, Can Honor the WWII Veterans in Your Community

On September 23rd and 24th and November 4th of 2006, three hundred and seven veterans of World War II residing in Henderson County, NC, flew to Washington DC with escorts to visit the World War II Memorial. Our trip was all-inclusive. These folks ranged from 79 years old to an incredible 102. They were men and women of diverse ethnic backgrounds; they fought in the bloodiest combat or held behind the lines support jobs; one was a post librarian employed by the Marine Corps; two were war widows escorted by daughters who were named for their fathers who never got to hold their little girls.

These one-day, all expense paid, chartered flights, dubbed *HonorAir*, were the culmination of an extraordinary vision of one man and the efforts of a small committee of friends and community leaders over the previous six to eight months. Our visionary, Jeff Miller, is a local businessman and history buff who volunteers his time to talk about WWII to middle schoolers. Inspired when he ran across a similar effort, named *Honor Flight*, founded and still continued by Earl Morse in Central Ohio, he thought that maybe we could do it, too. The *HonorAir* committee is planning two more flights for the Spring of 2007 and already has over 100 veterans signed up.

We did, and so can you!

Once started, you will be amazed at the support you will receive. You will also be daunted at times by the challenges. And we promise you will be overwhelmed by the gratitude of your community and especially your veterans for giving them the chance to visit their Memorial, which was only opened in 2004. Most of them would never have been able otherwise to visit the Memorial on their own, due to health, financial, family, or motivational limitations. Knowing they would be among brothers and sisters for the pilgrimage, they were ready to go.

If you decide to go forward in your community, **adopt a sense of urgency** based on the following:

Approximately 16 million Americans answered the call to arms in WWII.

400,000 made the ultimate sacrifice.

An estimated 3 million are alive today, but they are dying at the rate of 1200-1500 per day.

HOW TO GET STARTED

1. Web Sites. Take a look at our web site (www.honorair.com) and that of the Ohio *Honor Flight* organization (www.honorflight.org).

2. Form a Core Group of Willing Volunteers. Before jumping into this, make sure you have a cadre of willing and able volunteers. The vision sounds great to everyone, but ensure the folks who buy into your vision are also committed and competent worker bees. There will be lots for them to do over a drawn-out period of time. In addition to bi-weekly meetings which later became weekly, many of us found ourselves using work time and/or burning the midnight oil to ensure a first class and painless experience for our vets. For some volunteers, it will become like a part-time job as the trip nears.

3. Survey Your Veterans. It is important early to gauge the interest of your community's veterans to understand the scope of your project. We first asked our local newspaper to run an article requesting responses from veterans who had not visited their memorial but who would be interested if a trip were provided. This generated about 40 calls. At our request, the paper ran a more extensive follow-up article a couple of weeks later on a Saturday, above the fold in the local section. By the end of the weekend, we had 98 voicemails, which filled our machine. At that point, we were a go. We found it important to have a trusted, recognizable point of contact for them to respond to. For us, it was our County Veteran Services Officer, retired Marine MSGT Mike Murdock. Mike was the primary contact for our veterans throughout. The American Legion's early commitment to our committee also gave us credibility with the veterans.

4. Formalize Your Charter and Expand Your Committee.

- a. Develop a focused mission or vision statement that states your goal. Ohio's Honor Flight has a great Will Rogers' quote on their web site: "We can't all be heroes. Some of us have to stand on the curb and clap as they go by." From day one, our focus was the veterans; our community's job was to stand on the curb and honor them one more time. Our mission statement was prominently displayed on the home page of our web site: *HonorAir 2006 – celebrating Henderson County's own – their courage, their valor and their sacrifice in WWII.*
- b. Brand your project. We came up with the *HonorAir* name and logo early on and displayed them on our web site, press releases, banners, stationary, etc. Local media picked this up and consistently used the name and logo where appropriate.
- c. Ensure you have the right people. We had a great mix from the get-go:
 - Jeff has always been extensively involved in the community and its causes. This provided us with a wide range of contacts and brought already-established respect to the table.
 - Ditto for our recently-retired Sheriff.
 - A travel agency owner brought incredible energy and expertise that we couldn't have matched or done without.
 - Our County Veterans Services Officer was a critical player. Many of the veterans already had dealt with him and trusted him, and he became the point of contact for our veterans.
 - Our local State Senator brought a set of contacts outside the community that were key to our success.
 - Our finance guy manages large budgets and projects in his day job, and his extensive history with our local Boys and Girls Club contributed needed nonprofit expertise.
 - The American Legion rep handled all funds (receipts, deposits, and disbursements) under their nonprofit umbrella.
 - A local mayor, a retired Air Force colonel who also retired from our United Way director's position, contributed additional organizational and fundraising expertise.
 - Four dynamic ladies, two who are marketing professionals and two who could be, brought critical skills in web site, graphics design, advertising, and funds solicitation to the table.
- d. We used a committee and chain of command structure including: Fund Raising, Marketing, Veteran Coordination, Guardian Coordination, Airline Liaison, Ground Command (DC), Flight and Guardian Leaders, Memorabilia, Food/Drink, Predeparture Meeting, Airport Check-in, etc.
- e. We incorporated and obtained officers and directors liability insurance for committee members.

5. Fundraising and Budget. We all thought this would prove tough. In retrospect, raising the money was a piece of cake. Virtually no one said no, and many sought us out to donate. To set a goal, we developed a line item budget, solicited bids from two airline charter services, and tried to anticipate all expenses. We set an initial goal of \$100,000 to cover the major expenses (chartering a US Airways 737 and three tour coaches for two days, later upped to three days) plus incidentals. We have ended up raising over \$160,000.

- a. Get a nonprofit fiscal agent. We obtained the services of our local American Legion post, which almost immediately became a full-fledged partner, holding fundraisers of their own.
- b. Engage local businesses and foundations. Our Community Foundation made a \$7,500 lead grant, and a number of businesses/individuals contributed from \$1,000 to \$5,000 each.
- c. Our official fundraising window was from Memorial Day weekend until the 4th of July, 2006, but many contributions were made outside the window and continue to come in. Aside from direct

solicitations, our Boy Scouts solicited at tables outside Wal-Mart; our American Legion post held a spaghetti dinner; restaurants donated profits for a particular day; etc. Many in-kind donations were made including communication radios, disposable ponchos, free kennel boarding for travelers, free airport parking, etc.

d. Everyone but vets paid their own way. We wanted at least 40 guardians (escorts) and another ten or so support folks (doctors, EMTs, media, etc.) to accompany the 100-plus veterans on each day's trip. These folks paid \$300 each, which took care of about \$40,000 of our budget needs. And we were really over-subscribed here. We believe one guardian for every three veterans is a good ratio. We had some family members as guardians, but there are pros and cons to this. Some veterans would have otherwise not made the trip, but some guardians needed to be one on one with their veteran, which reduced the overall number of seats available for veterans.

e. Keep good records. The donors will all need to be thanked and provided a receipt for tax records.

6. Partnerships. This was a community wide effort. Key partners included or should include:

a. Media including our local newspaper, radio, and television stations. We also had great national coverage from the CBS *Sunday Morning* show. Though covering such events is their job and gave each a great news story, some local media also participated with in-kind donations of ad space, etc.

b. Local veterans organizations including the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars.

c. Local community foundation or other charitable foundations.

d. Local National Guard or Reserve units. If you are near a military base (we aren't), their participation would also be invaluable.

e. Public safety units, especially our fire departments which volunteered and paid for EMTs to go.

f. Small businesses to large corporations.

g. Local, state, and federal elected officials.

h. Local airport management, TSA staff, and airline station personnel. We had two meetings at the airport with these folks, and their buy-in and support was critical.

7. Logistics. This was the killer and became increasingly intense as the trip(s) drew near.

a. We collected applications from all interested veterans, soliciting basic contact information, WWII service experience, medical conditions, etc. We asked for WWII biographical information (branch, unit, theater, campaigns, etc.) and compiled a summary book, which was given to each veteran prior to the flight. Additional information that would have been very useful later included exact name as on their photo ID, detailed medical or physical limitations (not a disqualifier, only for planning purposes), and emergency contact and/or guardian requirements.

b. All information was put into a database, which changed at least weekly as names were added or subtracted (several interested veterans died during the planning phase). Managing the constantly changing database and keeping up with everything from seat assignments (wheelchair-bound folks in first class, e.g.) to keeping certain folks together was demanding.

c. Knowing we had enough bodies to fill three coaches in DC each day, we organized our veterans, guardians, and support folks into three zones (red, white, and blue). For each day's trip, we appointed an overall flight leader and three guardian (zone) leaders, and ensured that aircraft seating was by zone and that each bus was filled by zone assignment.

d. We held a mandatory briefing meeting for all veterans and guardians several weeks before the trip. We collected liability waivers and confirmed ID information from all. We explained TSA security rules (some of the vets had not flown in anything since the war), went over the itinerary, and

emphasized the critical showstoppers time and again, i.e., when they had to be at the airport, that they must have an approved photo ID, and rules for carryon medication. A short briefing on the Memorial layout and what to look for, including pictures or a short video, will be helpful. Also, become familiar with the veterans registry at the Memorial and ensure all your veterans are entered into it before the trip. Some were disappointed when they could not pull up their name.

e. Flying from a regional airport, the US Airways charter folks were wonderful to us. However, if you are traveling from a large city or hub, don't forget the discounters. If using a discount airline, we recommend you contact the *Honor Flight* folks in Ohio (www.honorflight.org) who have had more experience with them.

f. If taking a large group via a charter or scheduled discount airline, recommend you send an advance party to DC to personally coordinate all local arrangements (airport arrival, ground transportation, routes, meals, etc.) to include on site visits.

g. Recommend you travel on the weekend to avoid DC weekday traffic. Also, some airlines, particularly the discounters, may offer great Saturday-only fares.

8. Itinerary. Our project involved two 1-day trips from Asheville Regional Airport (AVL) to Reagan National Airport (DCA) in Washington DC.

6:30 airport arrival for guardians/staff at AVL

7:30 airport arrival for veterans (no later than)

9:00 departure from AVL to DCA

10:30 arrival at DCA and board busses for Mall

11:00 – 2:30 (approx) visit WWII Memorial and other memorials

3:00 – 4:30 Arlington National Cemetery and Tomb of Unknown Soldier for Changing of the Guard and Wreath Laying, as appropriate. Depart on busses to DCA.

6:00 Depart DCA for AVL

7:30 Arrive AVL

9. Outside Support.

a. Your local Congressional delegation can be invaluable for help on the DC end of it. Not only did our Congressman's office make many special arrangements for us (greased many skids), but Representative Charles Taylor (R-NC, 11th District), was with us both days in September, all day. It was also nice that he ensured his presence was apolitical, even though in a hot race for his seat.

b. Media. We had regional (local market) TV station crews with us each day; a college documentary film crew with us each day; and great national coverage from CBS. Plus, we now have a million photos to sort out. At least, it seems like a million,

10. Your Turn. This should get you started. For those of you who decide to go forward, we will try to provide additional advice, documentation, etc., if you request it. Specifically, we can provide our veteran application/questionnaires, liability waiver forms, various checklists, pre-departure letters, sample database products, etc. However, we ask that you please establish your committee and formalize your commitment before requesting detailed documentation from us. Most of us have day jobs that have been neglected for a while that we are just getting back to. Good Luck and Godspeed!

Henry Johnson

HonorAir '06 Committee, Henderson County, NC

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