

Ok so I know this is a long post but here is my view as a guardian from the Honor Flight! Thank you for giving me the opportunity and i can't wait to be able to be a guardian in the future!!!

On August 25, 2015 I was given an opportunity I will never forget. On July 29, 2015 I received an e-mail that stated "Dear Guardian, the Board of Directors has reviewed your application and you have been approved and accepted for the Honor Flight that will take place on August 25, 2015." This began an experience that not only impacted me but also allowed me to partake in an amazing day that touched many including myself. The first step was to raise the funds needed to attend the flight. I created a fund raising page not really expecting to raise much. Little did I know how blessed I was. In the course of three day several friends, co-workers, and family donated over \$525 dollars. I was able to cover my cost for the flight as well as donate the extra to the Honor Flight program. I would like to say thank you to everyone who assisted!

On August 16, 2015 I attended a meeting at the Springfield Branson Regional airport, it was here I met my veteran. As they began to call names I sat in the back of the room anxiously waiting for them to call my name. It was about half way down the list I hear "James (Jim) Smith and Lorenzo Valdivia" I quickly scanned the room and saw an older gentleman waiving his hand in the front of the room. I quickly jumped up and went and met this hero. James and his daughter, Jane Maloney, were waiting, just as excited as I was. Jane would later inform me James went by the name Jim and that I would call him for the rest of the flight. It was here I learned Jim is a World War 2 (WW2) Veteran, one of only a few WW2 veterans that would be attending this Honor Flight. Jim was an MP; he was stationed in Arlington but left before the memorials were built. It was here he also met his wife, who passed away about a year ago. We exchanged contact information and answered a few questions about each other. Shook hands and departed the airport to head home.

Over the next few days I thought a lot about how the flight would go, what Jim would talk about, would he even talk to me, a stranger who he has never met but for 5 minutes. As the days passed by waiting for the flight I called Jane to see how Jim was doing and let them know I was looking forward to the opportunity. She told me that Jim was so excited to go on the flight and he even slept with the backpack they gave him cause he was ready to go.

August 25, 2015 the day had finally come. I could barely sleep. I was afraid of sleeping through my alarm; I probably woke up about 10 times. Around 0245 I couldn't sleep anymore. I arrived at the airport around 0330 waiting for Jim to arrive. Jim arrived around 0345 we gathered his bag and into the airport we went. The day started with Coffee and Krispy Crème doughnuts. Jim informed me that this was his first flight since leaving the service. He was very nervous about flying again. I reassured him everything would be fine and he would be taken care of. They did roll call, and announced one of many secrets they had kept from the veterans about the trip. They had 12 first class seats; Jim was given one of them! We gathered our belongings and onto the plane we went.

We arrived at Dulle's Airport around 0920, once we unloaded we were greeted by about 100 people, veterans, families, children, Vietnam Vets Motorcycle club and Legacy Vets Motorcycle Club, Active duty enlisted and Officer from various branched too. We loaded the buses and were on our way to Washington, D.C. while enroute we were told we would be getting a police escort through D.C. We arrived to the memorial around 1000 and were greeted and welcomed by a bagpipe player in full dress. He escorted the veterans to the WW2 memorial playing the hymn's from each of the branches.

We walked around at the conclusion and took in the memorial. What an amazing site to see. Now Jim had seen this particular memorial before from when he was stationed in Virginia, however, the other memorials were not built when he left Virginia. We walked around took a few photos, talked to a news crew and then Jim just wanted to sit on the available benches and just take in the moment and the memorial and that we did. Sitting there looking at the wall of gold stars, each one represents 1,000 service member who gave their lives in the war. 405, 399 service members lost or are missing while serving their Country during WW2, something that is hard to take in when looking at the stars on the wall. Our time was nearing to head to the next memorial, we loaded the buses around 1245 and once again were escorted to the next stop.

Next stop, the Korean memorial, Vietnam Wall, and Lincoln memorial. Wow what a sight to take in and see! Our first stop was the Korean memorial. So much detail, time and effort were placed into the wall and statues to pay respects to those who lost their lives. Pictures were etched into the walls, photos of service member who were actually there in the war. Now a majority of the veterans we brought were Koreans veterans. I heard on story of a gentleman that was there and he had a very good and close friend who passed away some years back, he made promise that he would get him to the memorial. Unfortunately he was called home to be with the Lord before that could happen. However he had a promise he made, there in hand with him was a picture of an older gentleman, the friend he promised he would get there. He did it he kept his promise even if it was a picture of him there at the site of the memorial. Here we would learn that 33,686 service members were Killed in Action and 8,177 are still missing.

Vietnam Memorial, WOW nothing can describe seeing the names of 58, 286 men who fought and gave their lives in one of the most controversial wars. Walking the 493.8 feet of the wall was too much to take in. Feeling the engraving of the names and knowing some of them were not there by choice but fought with all their might and until their last breath to keep our country free. Seeing the statue of the three service member at the center of the wall over looking it was a sight.

Next stop, the Marine Corps memorial. This was by far my favorite memorial. So much detail was placed in the memorial. The largest pieces of marble made into a memorial in one place. Seeing what MY brothers and sisters before me gave. Remembering my brother that I lost in the war on terrorism. This one for me was a tough one.

Arlington National Cemetery, walking and seeing the guards protecting the tomb of the unknowns. Jim sat and watched two changings of the guard; we all sat in complete silence as we observed the changing. This is something that EVERY American should see! Walking around the cemetery and knowing you were in the presence of so many American heroes, knowing you were walking on sacred ground, a place that had so much history and if you could hear the stories of all the resting how you would hear stories of heroes, men who gave their all for people they never met and will never have the chance to meet.

Our day was coming to an end. Time to return to the airport. Once we arrive at the airport the Honor Flight revealed their second surprise to the veterans. MAIL CALL. It was amazing to see how Jims face lit up as he read his letter. He was so surprised by some of the letters he received. He looked at me while reading a particular letter and said, " I didn't even know they thought about me." My response, "Jim you are loved by your family, even those you might not hear from daily." He was so excited to get home and read the rest of the letter. I wish I could have sat there with him while he

opened each one and see his expression for each one.

Probably the highlight of the entire trip.....The WELCOME HOME!!! If I had to guess there were over 1,500 people waiting at the airport to "Welcome Home" all the veterans as they arrived from their flight. I have some pictures you will see in the album of Jim and the HUGE smile on his face. He wanted to shake every hand he could. I don't think he ever stopped smiling until we departed our separate ways.

This trip for me was amazing, for the last eight years I have been on the receiving side of the "thank you for your service" but for once since joining the Marine Corps I was on the opposite side and what a sight and feeling it was. I can't wait to go on another Honor Flight in the future to serve another veteran as their guardian. I could write for days what this meant to me and how it felt.

Jim, Thank you for giving me the opportunity to serve you, to honor you, to share a moment in your life, for the stories, the memories and the impact you made in the brief 20 hours we spent with each other. I thank you for your service and giving me the opportunity to do what I do today. I look forward to getting to know you more and visiting with you in the future.

-Lorenzo