

# Second wave of Central Valley Honor Flight veterans visits WWII Memorial

By Michael Doyle

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WASHINGTON — The Valley's most seasoned veterans battled unsentimental weather Tuesday when they disembarked at the World War II Memorial.

Rain lashed the 68 men and their guardians, participants in the second Central Valley Honor Flight trip. It was wet and unwelcoming, and would not be wished away. Soon, too soon, the World War II vets whose ages ranged from 87 to 99 retreated to their buses for an unscheduled drive about the city.

And yet, for some, it was still mission accomplished.

"I was in tears out there," said Robert Ashburn, an 89-year-old Atwater resident and Navy veteran. "I had been through all of those invasions listed on the memorial. We went to hell on some of them."

Here's a partial roll call, from Ashburn's time as an electrician aboard the USS Tisdale, a 283-foot long destroyer escort that earned four battle stars in the Pacific.

Tarawa. Eniwetok. Kwajalein. Saipan. The Philippines. Tinian. Okinawa. The list is incomplete; the memories, for the survivors, indelible.

"I remember, in the war, I didn't think I was going to make it to 18, but I did," Ashburn said. "Then I was 19, and I didn't think I was going to make it. And then I was at Okinawa, and I didn't think I was going to make it."

The retired telephone maintenance man and the other 67 World War II veterans, including several women, arrived in Washington, D.C., on Monday for the three-day Honor Flight program. Throughout, there were reminders that it's a small world; or maybe, it was just a big war.

Turns out, for instance, that while Ashburn was offshore of Okinawa with the Navy, Milburn Holt was on the island with the 165th Infantry Regiment, 27th Infantry Division. Holt, now an 88-year-old Fresno resident, still carries remnants of the battle; he's 90% deaf in his right ear.

"When you've got small arms fire on one side, and machine gun fire on the other side, and artillery going overhead, after a while it gets to you," Holt said. "It's just so much noise."

Since a modest beginning in May 2005, when a dozen vets were flown in from Ohio, Honor Flight has expanded into a national network that essentially goes non-stop. In just the past month, more than 50 Honor Flight tours have taken place, from areas including Kern County, Northern California and the state's North Coast.

All told, more than 100,000 veterans have participated. The first Central Valley Honor Flight took place last October, and the next is planned for June.

For the veterans like Holt and Ashburn, Honor Flight is an all-expense paid journey. Their guardians pay \$1,000 each, while various donations fill in the rest of the approximately \$150,000 total cost.

Led by Al Perry, an upbeat Army veteran who formerly directed the Veterans Administration's Central California Health Care System, the group this week also includes several staffers who tend to various needs. One, Bob Small, is an Army and Marine Corps veteran; now he's a pastor at Fresno's Northwest Church, pulling chaplain duty with the men he calls his heroes.

"I'm 79," Small said. "I'm the young guy on board."

Everyone's got a story; one need only take a seat next to them and ask.

Gordon Scott, for instance, is a 92-year-old Kingsburg resident who plunged into the Pacific in May 1942 when his aircraft carrier, the USS Lexington, was sunk during the Battle of the Coral Sea. After a while -- it wasn't that long, he says -- a destroyer fished him out of the drink. The Navy fixed him up and then sent him back to war.

Bud Erickson, a 94-year-old Visalia resident, was also fighting the Japanese, as a communications man with the 2nd Marine Division at Saipan and places of that sort. It's a funny thing, Erickson says now. The war he lived through has only in recent years begun to make sense to him, thanks to authors like Tom Brokaw.

"When the war was over, we got home and forgot about it," Erickson said.

Some of the stories were hinted at this week by clothing, a fashion statement. Back at their northern Virginia hotel, where the veterans repaired for quick recuperation, a man wearing a 10th Mountain Division hat rolls past in a wheelchair. Back in the day, those guys were fearsome.

Another man, 99-year-old Hanford resident and former Navy commander Jack Schwartz, was wearing a cap marking his time as a prisoner of war. The Japanese held him for three-and-a-half years.

The Central Valley Honor Flight returns to California on Wednesday, following a visit to Arlington National Cemetery.

"You can't replace their horrific memories," Perry said, "but you can give them another experience."

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