

Robert H. Oliver: reflections of an Honor Flight volunteer

By Robert H.
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Sixty-eight World War Two veterans from the San Joaquin Valley — many in wheel chairs and all participants in the Central Valley Honor Flight No. 6 — moved slowly toward the WWII Memorial in Washington , D.C.

On that sunny April morning, large groups of school children were also there to visit this memorial to the 16 million servicemen and women who answered the call of their country from 1939 to 1945 — and the more than 400,000 who paid the ultimate price.

An active-duty soldier greets a World War II veteran from Central Valley Honor Flight at Arlington National Cemetery on April 29. | Michael Doyle McClatchy

As the veterans and their guardians neared the entrance, the clusters of these young Americans spontaneously moved aside and broke into continuous applause. Adults, likewise, stopped to place a hand on a veteran's shoulder, kneel and shake their hand and quietly speak these simple words: "Thank you for your service to our country."

That heartfelt and moving scenario was repeated at each memorial as respects were paid to those who served. This included the laying of a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown at Arlington National Cemetery, and at the Iwo Jima, Korea and Vietnam memorials. For some of our veterans this was their first trip to Washington, D.C., and for many the first time they had seen the memorials to their service and those of their comrades in arms from other wars. It was a visible tribute and thank you from a nation that remembers.

For many of these veterans it was the first outpouring of thanks they had received since their service long ago. Most were not greeted upon their return with a ticker-tape parade, bands and bunting. They came back to their cities and towns, perhaps met at the train or bus station, or often, left to find their way home. They went on with their young lives; back to the farm, store or factory; beginning or continuing an education; some seeing a son or daughter for the first time.

The Honor Flight program, with chapters in more than 130 communities across the nation, is a nonprofit dedicated to providing veterans with honor and closure, by flying them to Washington D.C., and providing them with what may be for many a last opportunity to be around fellow veterans and reflect on their time and service when our nation and way of life was at risk, all at no cost to the veteran.

The origination of the Central Valley Honor Flight was due to the vision of Paul Loeffler with the able planning and execution of retired Fresno VA Hospital Director Al Perry and other volunteers. It has enabled hundreds of Valley WWII veterans to take part in what is truly a pilgrimage.

The next Honor Flight from this area is scheduled for mid-summer. The planning process is ongoing. This privately funded 501(c)(3) organization (www.cvhonorflight.org) is in need of donations to continue the mission of honoring our veterans while they are still with us, as well as seeking applications for veterans who would be eligible to take part.



Each veteran is accompanied by a “guardian,” often a son, daughter or grandchild, but in other cases a volunteer to be with them every step of the way throughout this fast-paced three-day journey from Fresno and back. A chartered plane, a welcoming BBQ at a Baltimore American Legion Post and visits to the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum, the Air Force Memorial and the Women in Military Service to America Memorial added to the busy and meaningful schedule of activities that made this trip meaningful.

Will Rogers said, “We can’t all be heroes — some of us have to stand at the curb and clap as they walk by.” So today we clap, and by word and deed reach out to those who served and say, as did the children and adults who spontaneously honored our veterans on those sunny days of this past April in Washington D.C., “We thank you for your service.”

Yes, this was an Honor Flight — to honor our Valley veterans. But in a very real and moving way, for the sons, daughters, grandchildren and volunteers who were able to accompany these men and women of the greatest generation; for the children who stepped aside and applauded, the adults who stopped and commented, the honor and privilege to be among them was ours.

Robert H. Oliver was a volunteer on the latest Central Valley Honor Flight. He is a retired Fresno County Superior Court judge and served in the U.S. Air Force/Air National Guard for 22 years, retiring as a Lt. Col.