

# Honor Flight vets rekindle memories on D.C. visit, return to Fresno today

By Daniel Desrochers Bee Washington Bureau

Clovis resident George Hansen, 91, spent some of his time at the World War II memorial in Washington on Wednesday teaching history to some boys from a local school group.

Hansen has good credentials for explaining World War II — he was there.

“I chased Germans across Germany with my machine gun squad,” Hansen recalled of his service in Gen. George Patton’s 3rd Army during the war.

Now, Hansen is remembering his service; he joined other veterans aboard the seventh [Central Valley Honor Flight](#) in two years, which took off from Fresno on Tuesday. They’re scheduled to return to Fresno Yosemite International Airport on Thursday evening.

Run by Alan Perry, Central Valley Honor Flight provides free trips to Washington for veterans so that they can see the war memorials.

For Hansen and the other 64 veterans visiting with the group Wednesday, those memorials brought back a mix of emotions.

The veterans, wearing red shirts and hats, were greeted by applause as they entered the memorial, which almost brought Clovis resident Ed Wood, 89, to tears.

Afterward, he sat at the [Battle of Peleliu](#) memorial, fountains bubbling in front and behind him, as he watched people wander around.

The word elicits a very distinct memory for Wood. He fought in that battle in the Pacific.

“It was a mess and it was all for nothing,” Wood said. “They never used that island.”

The veterans didn’t have the monuments to themselves Wednesday. Tourists and school groups were visiting, too, reading the quotes inscribed on the walls and trying to understand the history.

“I wonder if all the kids walking around really know what it’s all about,” Wood said. “It’s something to look at for them. For us, it’s memories.”

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World War II veteran Ed Wood of Clovis

The World War II veterans weren’t the only ones with memories. Visalia resident Lee Irwin served with the Marine Corps in Korea and stood in solemn remembrance at the Korean War memorial.

“We didn’t get food for five days,” Irwin said, looking out at the gray statues. “But we got some ammunition. I think the ammunition was more important.”

Seeing the memorial meant a lot to Irwin.

“When we first came home, the Korean War was called the unknown war,” Irwin said, “and this proves that wasn’t true.”

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Lee Irwin of Fresno upon seeing the Korean War memorial

The trip brought veterans from all fronts of the wars, including five women.

One of the women on the trip was Porterville resident Blanche Gilbert, 91, who served in World War II right across the street from Arlington National Cemetery.

“I’m trying to recognize a few places,” Gilbert said Wednesday, “and I haven’t found one yet.”

Gilbert did office work for the military “before there was computers” and lived in a hotel in front of the Capitol.

While she was stationed here, one of her brother’s friends had just been sent home after losing an eye in the war. When he was ready for it, she took him out to a restaurant.

“He managed very well,” Gilbert said, although she had to help him read the menu.

Gilbert kept a scrapbook of her time in Washington, and one of the last pictures is of her with her friends in front of the Washington Monument, holding a newspaper announcing the war’s end.

Wednesday’s travelers were honored by members of Congress from Central California and were treated to lunch at the National Air and Space Museum. They’re scheduled to visit the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery on Thursday, as well as the Women’s Military Service Museum.

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Central Valley Honor Flight returns

The 65 veterans and their guides who are visiting Washington, D.C., this week are scheduled to return to Fresno Yosemite International Airport on Thursday at 6 p.m.

For more information about Central Valley Honor Flight, including how to apply to join a flight, go to [www.cvhonorflight.org](http://www.cvhonorflight.org)