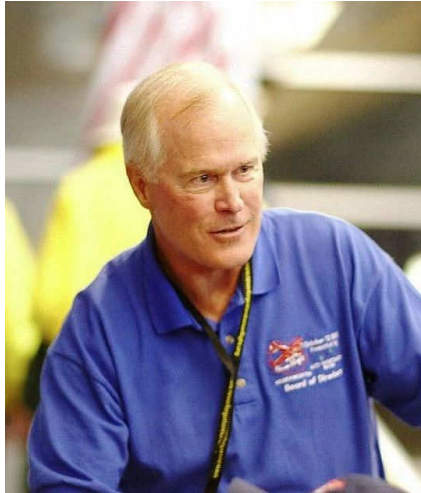


# To Honor Our Veterans – The Never Forgotten Honor Flights



Dave Junion photo



Paul Nelles photo

## Never Forgotten Honor Flight co-founders Mike Thompson, left, and Jim Campbell

By Paul Nelles

When Mike Thompson and Jim Campbell first proposed a Wausau based hub of the Honor Flight Network in 2009, there were 3 million living American veterans of World War II. By last month, when the most recent Never Forgotten Honor Flight took off from the Central Wisconsin Airport, that number had receded to 1.8 million. They estimate that in our area, we lose one such veteran, per county, per day.

So the race is on. The stated goal of the Never Forgotten Honor Flight is simple: "To fly every World War II veteran (in the region) who is able and willing, out to Washington to visit "their" memorial before all our veterans of that war pass away."

Since April of 2010, six flights have transported 578 vets from the 12 county region, including 16 from Mosinee, to the nation's capital at no expense to them. It is estimated there are 8,000 living WWII vets

in this region. A WWII veteran is defined as anyone who served in the U.S. Armed Forces from December 7<sup>th</sup> 1941 through December 31<sup>st</sup> 1946.

Thompson, who is a Lake Dubay area resident, is a veteran of the Iowa Air National Guard. Campbell is a former Marine Corps helicopter pilot and lives in Rib Mountain. Both had fathers who served in WWII, but neither got to see their memorial as both died before it was built.

The Honor Flight experience begins the night before the flight with a banquet where the veteran meets his or her assigned volunteer guardian for the trip. There are between 80 and 105 vets on each flight and from 60 to 65 guardians depending upon each vet's degree of independence. Out-of-towners spend the night at Howard Johnson's in Wausau, compliments of the Ghidorzi Companies.

The next day the vets arrive at CWA around 5:00 am. They require only a picture

ID to pass through TSA security, and take off around 7:00am. About one hour and forty minutes later they land at Washington's Dulles Airport from where they are transported by three busses to the World War II Memorial on the National Mall.



**The chartered flight carrying 85 World War II veterans takes off for Washington D.C. against the backdrop of a pre-dawn October sky.**

The highlight of the 90 minute visit to that site is an emotionally moving "Fallen Comrade" ceremony where a wheelchair, carrying a folded American flag, is paraded in front of the veterans, then rolled up to the Wisconsin pillar in memory of their deceased brothers and sisters-in-arms.

From there they enjoy a box lunch while being taken on a short bus tour of the major buildings and sites in Washington D.C.

The next stop is the western side of the Mall where the Vietnam, Korea, and Lincoln Memorials are located. This is the only opportunity the veterans have to spend their own money, as there is a small souvenir stand there.

They then proceed by bus across the Potomac River to the Air Force and Marine Memorials, Arlington National Cemetery, and the Tomb of the Unknowns where they witness the changing of the guard, a ceremony which has been conducted continuously for the past 75 years.

Thompson and Campbell said one of their most memorable events took place at Arlington. Two groups of middle school students, one from Sturgeon Bay and the other from Boise Idaho, after meeting the veterans at the guard changing ceremony, changed their plans to lay a wreath the Tomb of the Unknowns in favor of placing it on a randomly selected WWII grave. The students then lined both sides of the street and applauded the Honor Flight vets as their busses departed.

The vets eat dinner on the 40 minute bus ride back to Dulles. A surprise on the return flight comes when Campbell announces "Mail Call". Each vet is given a large manila envelope containing about 15 letters written by local students. For many this is an emotional experience. Thompson recalled how on one trip, the wife of the veteran placed a Christmas card, recovered from their attic, with the letters. The card was dated December 1945, and was from the vet's mother, who had passed away in 1958.

The second surprise of the flight is the welcome home waiting for the vets as they return to CWA. Fireworks, a band, honor guards from several patriotic organizations, and a crowd of about 500 to 1000 family members and well-wishers greet them.



**As many did 66 years ago, the wives of the Honor Flight veterans await the return of their men.**

Campbell addressed the three main reasons veterans don't take advantage of the trips. One is fear of incontinence. He said this should not be a concern as this happens on every trip, and is handled with professional discretion by the medical staff, which is headed by three or more physicians. A second is an unwillingness to re-visit a traumatic chapter in his or her life and re-open painful memories. Campbell says that veterans who feel this way should make the trip for their "buddies" who never had the opportunity.



**Above and right: WWII Honor Flight Veterans being welcomed home.**

However, Campbell claims the most common reason that a vet doesn't go is that he or she served stateside during the war or never saw combat, and therefore feels that his or her contribution was not that great.

His response to them is, "When you entered the service, a contract was made between you and Uncle Sam that effectively said he can do anything he wants with you, up to and including... take your life. You all signed the same blank check." He adds that during the war, for every combatant, there

were 11 non-combatants in essential supporting roles.

The veterans do not pay for their trips. They are absolutely free. The program is funded entirely by contributions, corporate and private. The Never Forgotten Honor Flight is a tax-exempt 501(c)3 organization. An entire flight can be underwritten for \$70,000 to \$80,000. Mid Wisconsin Bank sponsored the entire October 17<sup>th</sup> flight. A single veteran can be sponsored for \$500. Guardians pay their own way.

For obvious reasons, priority is given to World War II veterans. If a veteran is certified terminally ill by a doctor but able to travel, he or she moves up the priority list no matter what the era of service.

When the Honor Flight's initial goal of transporting all willing WWII personnel has been met, the priority will shift to the veterans of the Korean War, and after that, Vietnam.



The next flights are planned for April 23<sup>rd</sup>, May 7<sup>th</sup>, September 24<sup>th</sup>, and October 22<sup>nd</sup> 2012. Applications and more information about the program can be found at <http://www.neverfoughtonhonorflight.org>.