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(Editor's and News Director's Note- The Never Forgotten Honor Flight Hub based in Wausau serves veterans in these 10 counties: Vilas, Price, Oneida, Rusk, Taylor, Lincoln, Langlade, Marathon, Wood and Portage. The following article defines a few of the many volunteer tasks that take place before, during, and after an Honor Flight. The Never Forgotten Honor Flight Board of Directors works tirelessly to make sure each flight goes smoothly. In addition to the board, many other volunteers and businesses help out. A list of board members with contact information is attached. Please feel free to run this article, edit as you wish or use as background for a future story on the tremendous volunteer effort that is required to make sure 100 World War II veterans in their late 80s and 90s have an enjoyable and safe journey. You can find out more about the Honor Flight at www.neverforgottenhonorflight.org or feel free to contact any of our board members or volunteers to find out more about why they do what they do. Kirk Howard)

How a Never Forgotten Honor Flight Happens

(Wausau) The volunteer directors on the Never Forgotten Honor Flight board devote hundreds of hours of personal time to make each flight they organize a success. "The board reflects a wide range of skills and talents," says Mike Thompson, board president and co-founder of the organization. "Each board member plays an important role in our mission to honor our veterans with a free trip to Washington, D.C."

In addition to Thompson, board members who help direct the organization's efforts include: Jim Campbell, Jim Coleman, Joe Gehin, Ryan Gossett, MD, Kirk Howard, Dick Jarvis, Roger Knuth, Richard LaCerte, Cindy Martin, Bill Nietert, MD, Pat Puyleart, Ralph Sliwicki, Donna Strek, Bob Weller and Jeff Zriny.

Planning for each trip begins approximately six months in advance, and the first step is budget planning. Treasurer Pat Puyleart, whose management experience and leadership have guided much of the organization's success, spends many hours each week managing the organization's finances, planning budgets, and forecasting expenses for the \$80,000 per flight cost. Puyleart was one of the original organizers of the local Honor Flight program, along with Thompson, Jim Campbell and Jeff Zriny.

The board's fundraising efforts have been led by Jim Campbell with assistance from Puyleart and Board Member Roger Knuth. Knuth also shares profits from his Kettle Korn business and helps spread the word about the organization to prospective veterans, guardians and sponsors who visit his popcorn stand at numerous locations throughout north central Wisconsin. "Financial contributions from businesses, individuals and organizations have been phenomenal," Campbell says. "Every week, several businesses, groups or individuals from all over our region step up to organize a fundraising event or to make a donation that helps make these trips possible for our veterans."

All sponsors and contributors to the Honor Flight are recognized on the organization's website that has been set up and maintained at no charge for almost two years by Board Member Kirk Howard and his staff at Kinziegreen Marketing Group who also donate public relations and media services.

When enough money has been raised, Mike Thompson signs an agreement to charter a jet, schedules a flight date and begins finalizing details for transporting 100 veterans (well past the age of 80) and 50 guardians through the streets of Washington, D.C. to as many as five different memorial sites.

Once the itinerary is in place in Washington, the Never Forgotten Honor Flight board and volunteer work crew in Wausau kick into high gear. Board Member Bob Weller has set up a comprehensive operations plan that includes well over 200 tasks that need to get done for each trip. Each task is assigned to a board member or other volunteer with a deadline date for completion. From making meticulous arrangements for security and boarding procedures with airport officials at CWA and in Washington to picking up WWII props for the Sunday evening pre-flight dinner, nothing gets overlooked on Weller's list—and every board member gets involved.

About three months in advance, Board Member Donna Streck, lines up board members and other volunteers to call each of the 100 veterans selected for the trip to make sure they can travel on the date the flight is scheduled and to find out what special needs they might have. Thanks to the efforts of Ralph Sliwicki, about 60 wheelchairs are rounded up from area health care providers and veterans organizations to assist those veterans who need them. Arrangements are made to load and unload all the wheelchairs at both airports and onto the busses in Washington, D.C. Extra wheelchairs are available to any veteran who may need a ride towards the end of the day.

Special medical needs are noted and carefully reviewed by Board Members Dr. Bill Nietert, MD and Ryan Gossett, MD, who work with several other physicians on the flight to ensure that the vets receive the medical assistance they need on flight day. Gossett also spends hours organizing and updating the databases for veterans and guardians who make each trip.

A week or two after the vets have been notified of the trip, board members and volunteers contact the guardians who have been selected to accompany and care for the vets. Each guardian not only volunteers their time to make the trip, but also pays \$500 for the privilege—and that money (in addition to the contributions from many area organizations and individuals) helps cover the cost of each flight.

In the weeks leading up to each flight, Board Secretary Jeff Zriny is busy making final arrangements for the guardian orientation that takes place on the Sunday morning prior to the Monday flights. Zriny, Puyleart and other board members do a thorough job of training each guardian with a two hour presentation the morning before each flight takes place. "We want to make sure guardians are well informed so they can take good care of the vets," Zriny says. "We tell them about everything that's going to take place and review all the safety and medical resources we have available."

Board Member Cindy Martin's volunteer efforts peak a few weeks prior to the flight as she works diligently to verify that all passengers' names are accurately recorded on flight and bus manifests so check-in on the day of the flight goes as efficiently as possible. Martin also makes sure veterans and guardians have proper identification cards with emergency contact information as well as free parking passes for the Central Wisconsin airport.

Following the guardian orientation on the day before the flight, Volunteers Mary Weller, Christine Anderson and Amy Tallitsch and others are ready to register and check-in veterans who begin arriving at the Howard Johnson's hotel in Rib Mountain around noon on the day before the flight. Free rooms are provided at the hotel (compliments of Ghidorzi Companies) for about 50 out-of-town veterans, who will join other area vets and their spouses for a free 1940's style pre-flight dinner and program. Mary Weller oversees nearly all the pre-flight social activities from the moment vets check in through the Sunday evening program and the Monday morning hospitality and snack vets receive at the airport starting at 4:30 a.m on the day of the flight.

Other board members plus as many as 85 other volunteers make numerous contributions before, during and after each Honor Flight. Board Member Dick Jarvis's specialty is tracking down and packaging more than 1,300 letters that ultimately will be shared with veterans. Richard LaCerte arranges monthly meeting locations and coordinates flag-raising activities and support from the Boy Scouts and the American Legion. Board Members Joe Gehin and Jim Coleman assist Weller with the extensive signage, stage and equipment set-up and take down that takes place at the pre-flight program and on flight day at the airport.

Many board members also serve as guardians for the vets and pay the \$500 guardian fee each time they fly. But board members who don't fly aren't done with their duties when the Boeing 737 takes off from CWA at 7 a.m. They'll be back at the airport later that night making sure the 10 p.m. Welcome Home ceremony, complete with honor guards, bands and hundreds of cheering supporters is ready to go when the vets arrive home.

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