

World War II wives recall combat as husbands travel with Never Forgotten Honor Flight

Written by

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As a young woman, Betty Skare tried to be patient. She was 18 and in love with a man thousands of miles away in a war. She checked the mail daily for a rare postcard from her then boyfriend, Norm Skare, to arrive.

But most days, the mailbox was empty. She was left to scan newspaper headlines or listen to the radio, waiting for any news of what Norm might be doing.

Sixty-five years later, Betty relied upon more modern technology and instant communication -- the cellphone in her purse Monday -- for news that Norm now

Washington, D.C., where the veterans visited the World War II Memorial and other monuments to their service. Monday's flight was the sixth organized by Honor Flight for World War II veterans in north central Wisconsin.


Skare, like millions of others, waited for weeks during World War II for news of husbands, boyfriends, brothers, fathers and grandfathers as they fought in the European or Pacific theaters. On Monday, Skare and the other women watched their spouses leave for another war adventure, but one from which they knew the men would return.

The wait of just hours was far more bearable than the slow spread of news families endured in the 1940s.

"I wrote a letter to (Norm) every night," Skare said after spending part of Monday with the 25 women at a luncheon at the Woodson Art Museum in Wausau. "He would write whenever he could."

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Betty Skare, 83, of Wausau, was lucky. Norm Skare, who dropped out of high school at 17 to join the Navy, still was in boot camp when the Germans surrendered, Betty Skare said of her now 83-year-old husband. He was in training to be a medic for the invasion of Japan when the Japanese surrendered several months later. Because he wasn't in combat, he was able to write home with some frequency.

More often than not, other women, such as Rita Gassner of Wausau, waited and hoped that bad news wouldn't arrive.

She remembers long stretches of time without hearing from her two brothers and several cousins while they served in World War II. Gassner, who grew up in Marshfield, said her family would read newspaper accounts of the war and scan the lists of local soldiers missing or killed in action.

"All those years, Mother's stomach was tied up in knots wondering," Gassner said as her voice trailed off.

It's hard for some to imagine today, as American servicemen and women in harm's way are able to communicate almost instantly with friends and family members back home. Between email, satellite phone

limited. Jeanne Harris of Lakewood recalled Monday reading letters her uncle sent from Europe to her parents that had portions blacked out by military censors. As a teen, Betty Skare's best source of information on the war were reels of war footage shown before movies at the Cosmo Theatre in Merrill.

Audrey Ek of Merrill said one of her two brothers was critically injured on a Navy battleship in the Pacific and died two years later from his injuries. Ek's husband, Woody, whom she met after the war, also was in the Navy and the couple have a son and a grandson who have served overseas in the military. None of the three has been injured in combat, she said.

"I wouldn't want to know when they were in harm's way," Audrey Ek said of her family.

While the soldiers reminisced Monday in Washington, the spouses shared their own war stories with new friends made while touring the Woodson. Gassner said she could rest easy Monday knowing that her

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Navy-vet husband, Jim, whom she met after the war would be home in a few hours.

"He's in good hands," Rita Gassner said.



A group of World War II veterans from central Wisconsin watch the guard at the Tomb of the Unknowns at Arlington National Cemetery. / Dan Young/Wausau Daily Herald

SERVING VETERANS

The Wausau-based volunteer organizers of the Never Forgotten Honor Flight serve World War II veterans in 12 counties in north central Wisconsin.

The organization formed in 2009 and Monday's flight was the sixth trip for World War II veterans at no cost for them to visit the World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C.

To learn more about the organization, visit www.neverforgottenhonorflight.org or call 715-573-8519.

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