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## WWII veterans visit D.C. memorials via Honor Flight, find nation's gratitude



Arvid Anderson, 86, of Crawfordsville, pauses to read the headstones Tuesday in Arlington National Cemetery. Anderson was one of 90 World War II veterans who made the trip to Washington aboard an Eastern Iowa Honor Flight. / Josh O'Leary / Iowa City Press-Citizen

Written by

**Josh O'Leary | Iowa City Press-Citizen**

More

George Dane says he was one of the lucky ones.

The World War II veteran survived the foxholes of Hurtgen Forest, a series of bloody battles between the Americans and Germans in late 1944, when so many others did not.

He made it through the Battle of the Bulge, the U.S.'s largest land clash of the war in which the Allies thwarted the Nazis' final push against them, when so many others did not.

Dane endured three and a half years of World War II, all told, before returning home to Iowa City, when so many others did not.

In the decades following the war, he would settle into civilian life as a banker and, with wife Marjorie, raise four children.

One of the lucky ones, he says.

"There's always someone who saw more and had it worse," said the 89-year-old Dane. "And those are the guys that didn't make it. I happened to be at the right place at the right time, so I got to come home."

Dane reflected on those hard years on a postcard-perfect fall afternoon Tuesday on the grounds of the National World War II Memorial in Washington. George and his brother, John Dane, 86, were among the 90 veterans of the war to make the trip to the nation's capital aboard an Eastern Iowa Honor Flight, an organization that since June 2010 has coordinated five, day-long trips to Washington, D.C., where veterans tour the memorials with all of their expenses paid.

Bill Dane, who served as his father's Honor Flight guardian for the trip, was wheeling George between the memorial's massive granite columns and inspecting their inscriptions when a stranger stopped the two. It would be one of countless handshakes for Dane and his fellow veterans on this day.

"I want to thank you for all you did," said the man, leaning in to speak with George, who was seated in a wheelchair.

“We just did what had to be done,” said George, who after fighting with the infantry in the war, served for 30 more years in the Army Reserves and retired as a colonel.

“But you did it with honor and pride,” the stranger said.

### **The flight**

Ruth Peacock was seated in the front row of the Honor Flight charter jet that left Cedar Rapids for Washington at dawn Tuesday, awaiting her first visit to the capital in her 89 years.

Peacock, who lives in Coralville with her daughter, served in the Women’s Army Corp from 1941 to 1944 and worked in an office at Second Army Headquarters on Governors Island in New York. She first met John Peacock, who was stationed in Washington, at a reception during the war where she was one of about 200 women in attendance.

“This tall fellow comes over, and that was my husband,” she said.

John and Ruth went on to have three children after the war while living in Buffalo, N.Y., before John’s life was cut short in a car accident in the 1950s.

Ruth, who did not remarry after her husband’s death, said her mind would be with him on this day while touring the memorials.

“I think it’s going to be wonderful,” Ruth said before the plane touched down at Dulles International.

Eastern Iowa Honor Flight, the local branch of the national Honor Flight Network, has raised funds to fly a total of 501 World War II veterans to see their memorial since the nonprofit formed in 2009. The trips, which cost about \$80,000 each, are paid for through corporate sponsorships, private donations, fundraising and a \$550 contribution by each guardian who accompanies a veteran.

With a waiting list for flights and time running out for many World War II veterans who might not otherwise be able to travel on their own, there is an increasing sense of urgency to get as many to Washington as possible, said Roger Uthoff, a Vietnam-era Navy veteran and an Eastern Iowa Honor Flight organizer.

“It’s not long before the World War II veterans are gone,” Uthoff said.

## The memorial

Don Marner was seeing Washington and the World War II Memorial, which was completed in 2004 and is situated on the central axis of the National Mall, for the first time Tuesday. It was the group's first stop of the day, and Don's son, Steve, guided his father's wheelchair around the memorial's fountain — the Washington Monument shining in one direction, the Lincoln Memorial in the other.

A farmboy from the Wellman and Parnell area and the youngest of seven siblings, Don joined the Army Air Force in 1942, winding up in England in the same fighter squadron as Chuck Yeager, whose signature was scrawled on the brim of his hat.

Like seemingly every veteran on the trip, Marner shrugged off his personal contributions during the war and the dangers he faced. Sure, he remembers a couple close calls, including a night in Liverpool when a few dozen enemy planes rained bombs as he laid flat and glass and plaster showered him. But that pales to what others endured, he said.

"I wasn't infantry or on the front lines where I was getting shot at," he said.

Marner, whose wife Marilyn died in June, has fought health problems in recent months and had reservations about making the flight.

"Everybody said I should go, including my doctor," said Marner, 89, of Iowa City. "I wasn't going to go, but my doctor pointed a finger at me and said, 'You're going on that trip.'"

Steve Marner, who served in the Air Force during the Vietnam era, was among the friends and family who urged his father to go to Washington.

"The World War II generation won't be around forever, so you have to enjoy these moments as they come," Steve said.

Later on, Don said he made the right decision boarding the plane.

"I am so glad I went, because it has been a wonderful experience," he said. "I never expected to do anything like this, but I enjoyed it immensely."

## **The memories**

For Larry Parsons, 87, of North Liberty, the day brought back memories of a pivotal time in his life. A member of the Army Corps of Engineers who was deployed to Europe, he was shipped home late in the war and had the intention of marrying his fiancée upon his return.

Instead, a last minute change of orders at sea sent him to the Pacific instead of the States, and he eventually found himself in Tokyo. His fiancée canceled the wedding.

“That was one of the better things that ever happened to me,” laughed Parsons, who a few years later would marry Joan Frohwein, now his wife of 62 years.

Larry Calkins, 88, of Iowa City, joined the Marines because of his proficiency with a rifle, and he was deployed to Pearl Harbor in the later years of the war. He remembers the thrill of arriving at sea in Hawaii and being greeted by a pair of fighter jets that skimmed the water to escort their ship. But he also remembers the heartache of losing a good friend whose plane was shot down at sea.

“It’s an experience I’ll never forget, but I’m kind of glad it’s over with,” Calkins said.

“When they asked me to re-enlist, I decided I had had enough of it. Three years was enough.”

## **The cemetery**

A hush came over the veterans’ caravan of buses as they rolled through Arlington National Cemetery and its seemingly endless fields of stark white gravestones from wars past and present. The solemn mood lasted through a visit of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, where they watched the changing of the guard ceremony.

Trip sponsor Mike Wilson of Cedar Rapids, who with wife Esther donated \$50,000 to allow Eastern Honor Flight to make two trips instead of one this fall, took in the scene from the steps overlooking the tomb. It was his 87th birthday.

A lot of times it’s hard to gauge the impact of a charitable gift, said Wilson, a retired Rockwell Collins engineer who served in the Navy from 1944-46. Not so in this case.

“Every month you put it off, more people don’t make it,” Wilson said.

Delbert Knight, 84, of Coralville, was among the veterans who expressed gratitude to the Wilsons for making the trip possible.

“It was great, absolutely great,” said Knight, who left on a train the day after his 18th birthday to join the Army. He worked in the motor pool during the occupation of Germany from 1945-47. “I was just amazed at how many people helped us do things.”

After the ceremony, Sgt. Dontae Skywalker, a current member of the Honor Guard for the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and an Illinois native, made a point to shake the hand of each veteran before they boarded the bus.

“You all are my heroes,” he told them.

### **The thanks**

Dusk was falling on the capital when the veterans lined up for another group photo, this time in front of the Iwo Jima Memorial — the larger-than-life statue depicting the iconic scene of six soldiers raising the American flag. Bruno Rinas and his daughter, Linda Livingston, were beneath the statue when a group of middle-school students from Ohio came through the line of veterans to shake their hands.

Earlier in the day, Livingston had teased her father, whose eyesight is limited to the periphery at best because of macular degeneration, that she was taking pictures of him sleeping all over Washington so she could prove to him later what a great time he had. But as the students came by and Livingston guided her father’s hand to greet each one, the smile on his face was clear.

Rinas couldn’t see the memorial, Livingston said, but the warmth of the students’ hands meant just as much.

“I think it was pretty moving for all of them to receive those thanks all day long,” Livingston said.

Rinas, who is 92 and lives at Lantern Park Nursing Home in Coralville, is a survivor of the Bataan Death March — the forced 63-mile trek by 70,000 American and Filipino prisoners of war in 1942 by the Japanese. Up to 10,000 soldiers died on the march to the prison camp, and for the next 43 months, Rinas, a member of the Army Air Corps, was held as a POW.

When Rinas was released and came home at the end of the war, he was considered 100 percent disabled after bouts with scurvy, malaria and all manner of tropical diseases, Livingston said. Remarkably, he made a full recovery and went on to college on the G.I. Bill had four children and taught science for more than 30 years in Marion.

“This is true of his whole generation of veterans — they don’t quite get why people make a big deal about this,” Livingston said. “It’s nice they have this memorial, but they just did what they did and never thought of themselves as heroes.”

### **The homecoming**

On the evening flight back to Iowa, just as a large crowd was forming to welcome them home at the Eastern Iowa Airport, the veterans each received a large envelope. “Mail call!” flight organizers announced. Each contained a stack of letters penned by family members and local school children expressing their gratitude.

John Dane of Iowa City, George’s younger brother, read through the dozen or so letters from his children and grandchildren. He was particularly moved by a letter from grandson Tony Ehler, 32, in which he told his grandfather how much the time the spent together growing up shaped him as a person.

“It was so meaningful for me to hear that from him,” said Dane, who served in the Army Air Corps from 1944-45 and was the founder of the Iowa City fixture Dane’s Drive-In Dairy.

What came next, though, trumped all else for John Dane and the others on what had already been an emotion-filled day. When the veterans stepped off the plane shortly after 10 p.m. and through a flag-lined terminal entrance, they were greeted by a throng of cheering friends and family hundreds strong.

The Salvation Army band belted out marching music, the Cedar Rapids Concert Chorale sang patriotic tunes, hugs were shared and flags were waved. For some, it surely felt a bit like 1945 all over again.

John Dane said it was hard not to get teary eyed.

“All those people wishing us well and welcoming us home. ... It was a very moving experience,” he said.

Earlier in the day, George Dane had said that he and the other soldiers who made it home from the war were the lucky ones.

But the airport homecoming scene, where great-grandchildren waved and adults wiped away tears, served as a reminder to the rest of us who the true lucky ones are.