

Dozen of veterans visit D.C. in successful Mid-Michigan Honor Flight Mission 26

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WASHINGTON D.C. -- Mid-Michigan Honor Flight Mission 26 is a piece of state history. One World War II veteran, six Korean war veterans and 69 Vietnam w\War veterans traveled to Washington D.C., some for the first time, with their guardians and the Honor Flight team. They experienced the memorials, monuments and museums built to honor their service. Emotions were riding high even before takeoff of Mid-Michigan Honor Flight Mission 26 from Flint Bishop International Airport.

"I'm glad we're being recognized for the service we provided," said Vietnam War Veteran Bob Olson. "He's an amazing person so to share this with him is pretty special," said Sharon DeVries, Bob's daughter.

The hero's welcome started early at Dulles Airport and continued throughout the journey. These middle school students and educators from Jackson, Missouri formed a line of appreciation for the brave Michiganders at the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial. The sound of precise footsteps brought in the Changing of The Guard at the Tomb of The Unknown Soldier, which was a time for the brave Michiganders to reflect on their service. The crowd watched as Michigan veterans and brothers Richard and Larry Gaubatz were two of four honorees at the laying of the wreath ceremony. At the National Air & Space Museum, Larry, the only World War II veteran on board, who found himself in the middle of combat, helped us understand the depth of the conflict.

"I was in the Marines, but I was on a navy ship and we had to worry about being attacked by all the different planes. we had to learn the silhouettes of all the planes because they didn't have radar back then," said Larry Gaubatz, WWII Veteran.

Lifelike figures at the National Museum of the United States Army created awestruck moments for veterans Bob Haldane and Dan Little of Bad Axe, who went to high school together and were in the same unit in Vietnam.

"It's great and I've got my son with me and he's got his son with him and it's fantastic," said Army Veteran Dan Little with Army Veteran Bob Haldane.

The Vietnam Memorial serves as a solemn reminder of loss yet opens the door to healing for Army Veteran Thomas Malotke and his guardian Jodie Emerson.

"I basically looked up the information, knew where to find it on the wall, purchased the supplies and we're making tom, a dream come true for him," explained Jodie, Honor Flight Guardian. "These are all from '68. Had 24 of them who died in my outfit. 144 were injured," added Army Veteran Thomas Malotke

Nearby, a garden of memorial benches honors the lives lost when American Airlines Flight 77 hit the Pentagon. Those who have served and stand by these veterans know their visit to Washington D.C. is changing. "It doesn't matter the time you served. All of our generations are connected, whatever theater you served in, whatever campaign you served in. We're still part of each other and we've learned from the generations ahead of ours," said Tony Negron, Air Force Veteran and featured speaker for Mission 26.

"I went on the Honor Flight with my father as a guardian. I got to see a side of my father I had never seen before and I want other people to be able to experience that," said Bob Green, President, Mid-Michigan Honor Flight Board of Directors.

The hero's welcome at a packed Flint Bishop International Airport is a happy ending for many sacrifices during their military service.

"It was the highlight of my life, except for my honeymoon. I loved it. Thank you. Thank you," enthusiastically explained Army Veteran Mike Bowen.

The flags, smiles and cheers for these 76 Michigan veterans is a thank you from the hearts of many and for some, gratitude never truly felt before this homecoming.

Mission 26 was a truly meaningful experience for the veterans, guardians and many others, including me.

They were thankful for the opportunity to feel appreciated and loved.