

## Our Own Honor Flight

I wrote this last spring upon returning from a trip with my Dad. I wrote it for someone to possibly post on their blog site. At least that was my excuse. I actually wrote for me, to kind of put my thoughts on paper about the trip. I am posting it today on Veteran's Day as a tribute to my Dad. I hope that you read it and reflect on my Dad not only as a World War II veteran, but as an example of all veterans. I hope that you enjoy-

So what were you doing when you were sixteen? For me, it was just getting my driver's license and getting ready for the next year in high school. And, of course, girls. Standard teenage boy stuff. Not much beyond that. But for a generation of Americans, it was completely different. The world was at war once again, and that generation decided that they needed to be a part of it, and to make a difference. They have been called the Greatest Generation, and with good reason. I am proud to say my dad, Charles Edwin Hand, is part of that generation.

My father had asked me approximately two years ago to fly with him to Washington, D.C. on an Honor Flight. If you are not familiar, Honor Flight Network is a non-profit organization created solely to honor America's veterans for all their sacrifices. They transport our heroes at no cost to the veteran to Washington, D.C. to visit and reflect at their memorials. Top priority is given to the senior veterans – World War II survivors, along with those other veterans who may be terminally ill. For more information on this great organization, go to <http://www.honorflight.org/>.



My Dad with his mother at 16



Machinist Mate 3rd Class Hand

However, it always seemed that my father was unable to go for one reason or another. One time he was ill, another time he was out of town. But he always talked about doing the trip. In the past year, however, my dad had begun to walk less and less and use a powered chair more and more. I began to think that we might never make the trip as I saw his health declining. Not homebound, but definitely slowed by age, and health issues. He emailed me this winter, and told me that he finally was ready to go on the Honor Flight scheduled for June 4, 2014. One problem, though, was that I was unavailable on that date. He was noticeably upset by this, so I called him and we decided to go to Washington, D.C. to visit the World War II Memorial on April 8 and 9 on our own. Our own little Honor Flight. I wanted to make this trip special, so I planned it to be a combination trip and birthday celebration for my dad. He will be 88, or 89 if you believe his Navy service records, on May 24th. I planned the trip to include several surprises, as I wanted to make it memorable for him.

Without going into too much detail, I will summarize things by saying my dad tried to back out of the trip about a week before we left. At first he blamed it on my mother's health, but with further digging it came out that he did not want anyone to push him around in a wheel chair "as if he was helpless." I assured him that we could take his

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electric scooter on the flight, and that he could drive himself around, and with that and a little more coaxing, the trip was back on. So, with the trip back on, I continued to plan a series of surprises. I was worried that my dad could not travel on two different flights on the 8th (Oklahoma City to Atlanta, then Atlanta to Washington, D.C.) without being completely exhausted, so I scheduled him to come into Atlanta on the 7th where we would spend the night at a hotel near the Atlanta Airport, then get up the next day for a flight to Washington. The first surprise for my dad was when my sons and I picked him up at the airport (he only expected me), and we went to dinner. I gave him his first birthday present - a ball cap that simply said "Seabees, World War II, 1941-1945." (For those of you who are not aware, The Seabees were the Naval Construction Battalions formed at the start of World War II. Their job was to go in and build the roads, airstrips and infrastructure required to fight a war. The plan was for them to go ashore after the initial assault, but it rarely worked out that way. More often than not, they were doing their job in the thick of battle. This was where my dad served.) As my dad looked at the cap, he smiled, visibly surprised at the gift, and I told him that it was mandatory that he wear it the entire trip. To my own surprise, he agreed. He put it on and would not take it off, even in the restaurant. Afterward, we went to the hotel, and my dad found out that my youngest son, Jay, would also be going with us on the trip (surprise #2). We woke up early the next morning, and my dad said to me, "I am almost 88 years old, and I couldn't hardly sleep all night, excited like a little kid. What is wrong with me?" I told him that there was nothing wrong with him. 88 year old men were allowed to be excited about a trip. The next surprise (#3) came when, later that morning, my brother, Pat, met us at the Atlanta Airport to go on the trip as well.

I have to say at this point, I began to compare the trip and the logistics of getting everyone together and on the same flight as being much like a major combat operation. I read once that combat operations were intricate plans put together by hundreds of people over a period of months, but that, 30 seconds after crossing the Line of Departure, the plans went out the window, and that the success of the operation was totally dependent on reacting quickly to the conditions that came into play. I felt that this was much the same as the bad weather and cancelled flights of the previous day made flying to Washington, D.C. on flight passes with my air line almost an impossibility. There were no seats to fly standby due to all the misconnected passengers flying. Not panicking, but thinking on my feet, I quickly got us rebooked from Atlanta to Dulles Airport instead of our original destination of Reagan National Airport. My nephew, Jon, and his six year old son, Cohen, met us to be part of the trip (surprise #4 for my dad). So with 4 generations of Hand men together, we set off for the hotel and then to the World War II Memorial.

My father has really spoken little about the war over the years, other than the occasional funny stories of such things as blowing up fish with dynamite one time in the lagoon so that they could have something to eat besides chipped beef. He had other stories like the time he ran into an airplane sticking out of a revetment while driving a truck in black out conditions one night, thus tearing up both the plane and the truck pretty badly (I told him that if he had done that four more times he could have been a Japanese Ace. He laughed). But he never shared much



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beyond that. so I did not know just how he would react to seeing the World War II Memorial? Would he simply stare? Would he break down in tears over lost friends from 70 years ago? I just did not know.

After riding the Washington Metro and navigating our way from the hotel, we found ourselves at the World War II Memorial. Dad began to go around the circular Memorial looking at the pillars that had been engraved with the names of the states and territories, and he stopped for us to take a photo at the pillar representing each state with which he was associated. He stopped first at the Oklahoma pillar (his home for the past 35 years) for us to take a picture. We then stopped at the Washington State pillar (he had enlisted in Seattle), and then to the Texas



pillar (where he had grown up). At one point a group of young teenage kids came up and asked my dad if he had been in World War II. He said yes, and they asked to have their picture taken with him, and they then thanked him for his service. He was, I think, a bit surprised that they even cared.

I asked my dad why he thought that the Greatest Generation (his generation) had been so willing to fight in the war. His answer surprised me. He said that he and his contemporaries had just gone through the decade of The Great Depression, and had been through really rough times. He said that, having gone through that, that it had created a toughness that kids today just don't typically have. He and his generation had all been toughened by life. Someone was trying to take away what little they had left, and they weren't going to let that happen. I don't know why, but that was not the answer I expected.

I then asked my father how the Memorial made him feel. Happy to be there? Sad over the past? He shrugged the question off by saying that it was a nice place to help today's generation remember the history of it all. It was a pretty place, but for him, when the war ended, he had done his best to put it behind him and had moved on with life. He said it was a part of his life (3 years) that occurred over 70 years ago that he almost could not even remember any more. It reminded me of a similar attitude the author, James Bradley, in his book, Flags Of Our Fathers had explained that his father had felt after the war was over. Again, I did not know what to expect, but that those words were not it. At one point in the day I told my dad that he was like an open book- the only problem was that the book was shut with a couple of layers of duck tape wrapped around it. Later we strolled over to the Lincoln Memorial, and by then I could see the battery on his electric scooter was not the only thing beginning to fade, so I suggested we head back to the hotel and then to dinner. We stopped by the hotel (for me to pick up one last surprise), and then it was off to dinner.

Let me interject another little explanation here before continuing. It is a tradition in Navy and Marine Corps units that when they deploy for long periods of time that they create a record of the deployment for unit members to have. They are generally called "Cruise Books" and they can best likened to a small high school yearbook. They are usually filled with pictures of people and places, with written recollections of things that had happened during the deployment. I personally have my cruise books from my two shipboard deployments over 30 years ago. I did



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not realize, however, that Cruise Books had been made as far back as World War II. While searching for a memorable gift for my dad on eBay of all places (I had hoped for a patch, or piece of uniform, or even a unit plaque of some kind from his unit, The 40th Naval Construction Battalion - the 40th Seabees), that I found of all things, my dad's cruise book. It covered the period of his Battalion's deployment from 1942-1944 to the South Pacific. I called my mother to see if he had one, and she said that she had never seen one. I had to have it, so my brothers and I purchased it.

We went to dinner, and, while waiting for our food, I told my dad that I had one last present, and then there were no more surprises. I handed him the gift and he opened it. In the dim light of the restaurant it took him a moment to focus on the cover of the book. His cruise book. Then he looked at me in an almost stunned way, and he asked me where I had gotten it. I told him how I had found it and my brothers and I had bought it. A look of shock combined with disbelief wrapped in wonder came across his face. He told me that he didn't even know such a book existed. It apparently had not been published until after he had left the Battalion in late 1944 upon returning to the States. As he looked through it he said, "Why, there's Scotty McEwen! He won the Bronze Star at Los Negros, you know." "There's Roger Hellgren. He was my best buddy", and "There was a dad and a son in my unit, Chief Otis Page, Sr., and Petty Officer Second Class Otis Page, Jr. They were both killed and didn't make it home." All of a sudden those years that "he almost could not even remember any more" came flooding back. Names came out even more once we were back in the hotel room. "It says here that the photographer was Maurice Bailey. He was a Chief Carpenter's Mate from Hollywood. I don't know. Maybe he was in the movie business before the War." More memories came out. We continued to look at the pages as other memories came back. He finally closed the book and got into bed, but before he went to sleep he looked at me and said, "This is the best birthday I have ever had." I said that I doubted it after having had 88 of them. He disagreed.

I have one last story that I will share, and it sums it up for me. My dad shared this just before he went to sleep. On one night while in the Pacific he was especially hot trying to sleep in his tent. Unable to sleep, he decided to go out and sleep in what he called "the pan", a box plow sort of grading equipment that was pulled behind a bulldozer for leveling coral used in runways. He was asleep when another guy crawled in the pan, woke my dad up, and either pulled rank, or age (my dad was barely 18 at that point and the average age of a World War II SeaBee was 37) and told my dad to "shove off", that he was sleeping there. My dad grouched about it, but got up and left. A few minutes later he heard an explosion and ran back to the pan. A Japanese soldier had snuck into the camp and had thrown a grenade in the pan, killing the other sailor. How do you deal with that? For my dad, it was to (figuratively) put it in a book, and wrap a couple of layers of duck tape around it. And go on with life.

I would love to tell you that my father woke up the next morning and decided to share his deepest thoughts about the war with me, but life doesn't always go like some feel good movie script. He didn't really share much more. Will he open up more? I don't know. Was it worth going with him to Washington? It was, without a doubt. So what is the point of the story? You help me figure it out, but I take away this- this is simply the story of one man who served by choice, did what was asked of him, came home, and raised a family. And for a day I was privileged to pull the duck tape off, open up a book and read a little of what is inside. So for that I am grateful.



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If you would like to see a copy of my dad's cruise book online as well as a history of his unit, Please click on the following links-

[http://books.google.com/books?id=WaczOiG73nIC&pg=PT119&source=gbs\\_selected\\_pages&cad=3#v=onepage&q&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=WaczOiG73nIC&pg=PT119&source=gbs_selected_pages&cad=3#v=onepage&q&f=false)

<http://www.history.navy.mil/museums/seabee/UnitListPages/NCB/040%20NCB.pdf>