

# The Real Heroes

By Jennifer G. Williams

As my grandfather looked up at the Iwo Jima Memorial this fall, he did something I'd never known him to do.

He talked about the war.

"Eleven of my buddies didn't come back," he said, with tears in his eyes. "People call us heroes, but the real heroes are the ones who didn't get to come home."

My grandfather was 17 when he joined the Navy in 1943. He started out as a gunner on a merchant ship (a steam ship no less) in the Atlantic. He ended up on the USS Terry near the small Japanese volcano island in February 1945. His ship was tasked with clearing the beaches for landing at Iwo Jima in what became one of the most iconic battles of World War II. His ship was hit by gunners from the shore and several Sailors were killed.

My grandfather, Kirtley Green, was born on a Kentucky farm in 1926, the youngest of 11 children. His older brother, Michael, had already joined

the Navy, but my grandfather was too young to join without his parent's permission. He begged and pleaded with his parents until one morning, he says his father came in and told him to get his hat and coat, as he was going to take him to the local recruiter's office to "ease your damn pain."

I had seen my grandfather's Navy photo, the proud young man smiling back at the camera. I knew he had served in the Pacific. But until that day, I did not know the details—details that mean so much to us as family members and Americans. Details I wanted my children to hear. Details that, unfortunately, are becoming harder to come by.

Statistics show that we are losing our veterans of World War II at a rapid rate. My mother's father died



My Grandfather at 17 and today. Photo by Jennifer G. Williams

a few years ago after a battle with Alzheimer's. He never got to see the World War II Memorial, which opened in 2004. Thankfully, I had the chance to interview him while I was in college and recorded his story of being shot down over Austria and being a POW for 13 months in Stalag 17. Now I was hearing my other grandfather's story, in the shadow of the very memorial erected in honor of his service.

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## An Idea Takes Flight

After retiring from the Air Force in 1998, Earl Morse worked at a small VA clinic in Springfield, Ohio. When the National World War II Memorial opened in May of 2004, Morse started asking his aging patients if they were going to see their new memorial.

But Morse soon realized that it simply wasn't financially or physically possible for most veterans to make the journey. In December, Morse, who also was a private pilot, asked one of his World War II veteran patients if he could personally fly him to D.C., free of charge, to visit the memorial. That veteran broke down and cried, accepted, and an idea was born.

The inaugural Honor Flight took place in May of 2005. Six small, private planes flew out of Springfield, Ohio taking 12 World War II veterans on a visit to the memorial. In August of 2005, an ever-expanding waiting list of veterans led to the transition to commercial airline carriers to accommodate as many veterans as

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Veterans, Guardians and representatives from the Honor Flight Bluegrass Chapter on their recent trip to Washington, D.C. Photo by Jennifer G. Williams

My grandfather flew to D.C. as part of Honor Flight, an incredible, non-profit organization with 113 chapters across the country. Honor Flight flies (for free) veterans of our wars to see the D.C. war memorials. Since its beginning in 2005, Honor Flight has flown between 70,000-75,000 veterans to D.C., according to Chairman of the Board Jim McLaughlin. Each veteran has a guardian who flies with him or her, often at a reduced cost, thanks to corporate and private sponsors.

My father says his Dad has really opened up recently in talking about his experiences in the war — sharing that he was one of the ones tasked with cleaning up after the shell hit their ship and blew some Sailors to bits. McLaughlin says that is common. “Most of our veterans, particularly from World War II, never talk about what happened to them during the war. But after they come and have this experience, they often share things with their friends and family that they have kept inside for more than 60 years.”

McLaughlin said the veterans are usually astounded at the number of strangers who approach them while they are visiting the memorials and thank them for their service. “Most of them never expected anyone to thank them for what they did,” he said.

A lot of our veterans have carried around what we refer to as “survivor’s guilt,” especially if they witnessed a buddy die in battle, said McLaughlin. “But once they come to the memorials—particularly World War II—and they see the gold stars...you can see it in their faces. They let go of that guilt. It’s like they see that their friends will always be remembered in this beautiful way and it comforts them.”

The Freedom Wall at the National World War II Memorial has 4,048 gold stars, each representing 100 Americans who died in the war.

As we walked around the Iwo Jima Memorial, my grandfather told me something else I’d never known: he saw the flag when it was raised at Iwo Jima. “Somebody called into the ship and said that they’d raised the flag,” he said. “I grabbed some binoculars and looked, and there it was. We had done it.”

One last story I’d never heard made me smile. After my grandfather hurt his arm while serving on the ship, there was talk about nominating him for a Purple Heart, but my grandfather refused. Apparently, he did not feel that his injury merited that honor.

He had fallen down while having a potato fight with some of his friends. ●

possible. In 2008, Southwest Airlines became the official commercial carrier of the Honor Flight Network, donating thousands of free tickets for veterans in the program.

Chairman of the Board Jim McLaughlin said each of the now 113 chapters for Honor Flight has its own geographical area of responsibility. The amount of donations received determines how often a chapter makes the trip with interested veterans. “Some go twice a month, some twice a year,” he said. All trips are scheduled between April and November, to avoid bad weather.

Interested veterans are placed on a first-come, first-serve waiting list, with priority given to older veterans of World War II and those with terminal illnesses, said McLaughlin.

The national organization does try to help coordinate visits on busy days, he said. “We may have 1400-1500 people coming in on a busy day,” said McLaughlin. “We talk to the different chapters and see if they can stagger their itineraries, so that it is not too crowded at any given time.”

For more information on Honor Flight, please visit their website at [www.honorflight.org](http://www.honorflight.org) or call 937-521-2400 to find a chapter near you. ●



My Grandfather, Kirtley Green, and my daughters, Alleigh and Katie Beth, at the Iwo Jima Memorial. Photo by Jennifer G. Williams