

By Alan Reed

As Americans prepare for the 145<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Memorial Day later this month, 125 North Dakota World War II veterans reflected on their service, renewed acquaintances and remembered fallen buddies as the Roughrider Honor Flight arrived in Washington, D.C., early Friday afternoon.

The anxious veterans and numerous escorts received a water-canon salute from Washington firefighters upon landing at Dulles International Airport. They were then personally welcomed on the tarmac by newly-elected Sen. John Hoeven upon disembarking the Delta Airlines 757 jet. While governor, Hoeven sent off or welcomed back every Roughrider Honor Flight at the Bismarck Airport.

A half-hour bus ride brought the contingent to the Lincoln, Vietnam and Korean memorials, where they had an hour to tour.

Kenmare's Russell Anderson is one of the hundred-plus vets on this fifth and final Roughrider Honor Flight, and he said there was quite a bit to see in a short period of time Friday. He especially enjoyed the Lincoln Memorial.

"It's just nice all of the way through," he said of memorial which features a towering Lincoln looking down from a large chair.

Anderson is one of six brothers who served in WW II and is the only one living. Anderson was a tank mechanic and tank commander who landed on Normandy Beach in WW II. The tanks came ashore after the first wave of infantry hit the beaches there.

"By the time we hit the water close to France, it was not a pretty sight," Anderson said.

Anderson was injured by shell shrapnel, which imbedded a half inch from his spine up in his shoulder. He rejoined his unit after three months in a hospital in England.

Maintaining the tanks while being on the move all of the time was a huge challenge, Anderson said. One time when he was working under a tank in the mud, Gen. Dwight Eisenhower approached him.

"I didn't know who was talking to me," he said. "Ike was a good guy."

To work on the equipment and not be seen by the enemy, he said they usually worked at night with a flashlight. Remarkably, Anderson said finding the necessary items to fix things wasn't that difficult.

"There were ammunition trucks and parts trucks, so you could get the parts," he said.

Anderson followed his Normandy experience with participating in the Battle of the Bulge.

"It was so damn cold you damn near froze to death. Riding those tanks, there was no heat in them," Anderson said. "You did whatever you could do to try to keep warm."

Anderson wears a rope tie to signify his involvement in the Battle of the Bulge and has talked to quite a few veterans who participated in the earlier Roughrider Honor Flights. He's looking forward to seeing the National World War II Memorial, the focal point of the trip that occurs first thing Saturday morning.

Mary Jane Burger of Bismarck is another veteran on this final trip, having served in the WAVES from 1943-45. She followed the footsteps of a sister who had earlier entered the WAVES.

Burger became a control tower operator, following the advice of another woman who also was in the service as a control tower operator.

"There is lots of responsibility," she said of being a control tower operator. "I knew I was capable of handling it."

Burger helped guide the fighter planes that practiced at a naval air station in Klamath Falls, Ore.

"They were always in a group and they'd scramble and up they went," she said of working with the fighter planes.

Burger remembers one pilot who didn't put down his landing gear, despite her attempts to talk him in to doing so.

"He belly landed the plane and went all the way to the end of the runway and the plane flipped. That only happened once thank goodness," she said.

Burger said the trip to Washington, D.C., so far is "magnificent. Everybody's taking care that everybody gets to see everything."

She said the memorials are very, very beautiful.

"We've been taking pictures like crazy. The day couldn't have been nicer," she said. "I didn't realize so many trees were in this city."

Her favorite of the three memorials Friday was the Korean display. She said the soldier statues that are the focal point of the memorial are "so lifelike and so true to form."

Burger is looking forward to Saturday, especially the stop later in the morning at Arlington National Cemetery.

Former speaker of the North Dakota House of Representatives Howard Bier of Bismarck also is one of the veterans on this final Roughrider Honor Flight. Bier served in the Army Signal Corps as a radar technician.

"We went to school at night in a fenced-in area, fence with barbed wire and gates on it. We were not supposed to talk about it or mention it to anybody," Bier said of his training, as radar at the time was a secret.

In training, Bier and his fellow trainees were told they were part of an elite group that would never have to serve KP or as camp guards.

“But it didn’t quite turn out that way,” he said with a laugh. “I never complain about my service. We were not really in any danger.”

Bier said Friday’s visit to the memorials was very interesting and the trip is very well organized.

“I can’t believe how everybody is so courteous and helpful,” he said.

Bier also was most impressed with the Korean Memorial.

“It’s that eeriness of the soldiers and the ponchos,” he said of the realistic statues.

North Dakota National Guard former Maj. Gen. Michael Haugen also is along on this trip, serving as one of several helpers, while also giving the speech at Friday’s banquet. He said the WW II vets who have gone on previous honor flights that he’s talked to still think they’re basically 18 years old, and relive a flood of memories while on the trip.

The service these veterans put in over two to four years had a huge impact on the United States and the world at large, Haugen said while on the flight to Washington, D.C., Friday morning.

“What we really don’t value really is what they did when they came back,” he said of returning right to work to help rebuild the country.

The children these veterans then had and raised and their grandchildren “have been my soldiers and they are pretty damn good too,” Haugen said.

Saturday morning begins by first visiting the WW II memorial, followed by a stop at the Marine Corps Memorial and then arriving at Arlington by 11 a.m. The contingent is to then tour other parts of the area before arriving at Dulles to prepare for a 6:30 p.m. departure back to Bismarck to complete a whirlwind 36-hour adventure.