

By Alan Reed

Harry Houdini and David Copperfield may be the best known American magicians during the past century, but Roughrider Honor Flight organizers use their own magic in taking World War II veterans on a special trip to our nation's capital.

The fifth and final Roughrider Honor Flight leaves at 8:30 a.m. on Friday, May, 6, from the Bismarck Airport for Washington, D.C. Over the ensuing 36 hours, 120-plus WWII vets in their mid-80s to early 90s are the guests of honor, with the primary objective being Saturday morning's visit to the national World War II Memorial.

Making the trip with the veterans are numerous veteran escorts, medical people, helpers, organizing committee members and others. Planning a chartered trip for 220-plus overall people takes a little magic, a little luck and having the right people working together.

"We really didn't run across anything that is insurmountable because people see a lot of value in this project," said Roughrider Honor Flight Committee Vice-President Tara Holt.

Holt's husband, Doug Prchal, is committee treasurer and said three things have to come together before the real work begins.

"Pick your dates. Then you call the airlines and you call the hotel and you have to have those match," he said.

A call to the national Honor Flight Network in Ohio is also made, as Prchal said the national group has people tasked in Washington, D.C., to work with chapters like the Roughrider Honor Flight.

In their professional careers, Prchal and Holt needed excellent coordinating skills, which came in handy in working with these trips.

"It really isn't that much more different," she said. "You are more cautious about your precious cargo. You take precautions in those areas."

Holt was scared to death during the first trip in 2009 that transported almost 100 veterans.

"You don't always know what to expect. But if you have the right people ready to act, you can pretty much handle anything that comes your way," she added.

Prchal said the federal Transportation Security Administration staff at the Bismarck Airport is critical in getting the trip started right.

"I can't say enough about them in Bismarck. Really, it is an honor for them to serve these people," he said of the TSA. "They treat them with a high degree of respect when they go through."

The TSA also provides a big assist at Dulles International Airport in Washington, D.C., where honor flight passengers now deplane on the tarmac directly onto waiting buses. Honor Flight participants also are loaded on the tarmac when they leave on Saturday.

Prchal said the airlines work with the airport to coordinate unloading and loading the plane on the tarmac.

“They contract with a company with two or three people who come out. I think they really cut us a lot of slack,” he said. “I believe that connection with the Honor Flight Network, once they know what they are doing and so forth, they clear all of that and the airport clears all of those buses.”

The first couple Roughrider Honor Flights did have to go through the Dulles terminal to get off the plane and leave. Holt said moving a large group of elderly individuals, a large number of them in wheelchairs, can be an extremely difficult task. But unloading and loading on the tarmac “really works nice.”

Working through an airline agent, the group has used Allegiant and Sun Country airlines on previous flights, and this trip is its first flight with Delta.

“One of the flights, the stewardess looks at all of the elderly and says, ‘Holy buckets!’” Prchal said. “When we told her there were five medical people, there was this big sigh of relief.”

He said the airlines have been great and it’s also nice to have a direct flight. However, rising fuel prices are likely to result in a \$14,000 surcharge for this trip, he added.

The organizers’ experience with the bus company in Washington, D.C., also has been positive, Prchal said.

“The bus company has the itinerary. They know what we are doing. They have been wonderful,” he said.

You also learn traveling on a bus where the restrooms are along the way, Prchal said. He’s developed a little map that shows where these facilities are in relation to the sites the group visits.

“Where we are dropped off is where we load the buses,” he said of another important piece of information that is shared with the group. “It’s a very simple, little map, but having those little guides and aids help with the logistics.”

The group is again staying at the Hyatt Regency Crystal City Hotel just south of Washington, D.C. Holt said when the group loads onto the buses for the first time, room keys await each person on the trip.

“We have an envelope for each bus. They give us the keys based upon the manifest,” she said.

A lot of the veterans at first think the plastic room key card is a credit card.

“We kind of wander the halls to make sure everyone gets into their room, knows how to use their key.” Holt said.

The inside of the doors to some of the hotel rooms have signs that say the rooms cost \$600 a night.

“Some of these guys are high on the fact they stayed in a \$600 room,” Prchal said.

With this being the committee’s fifth flight, Holt believes they know their customer.

“If we don’t know them by now, we have a problem,” she added.

Holt said the group learned after the first trip the veterans eat breakfast early.

“Those guys get up, they are down there by 6 o’clock to eat breakfast. So why not hit the road early,” she said of the start on Saturday morning.

Saturday is the big day with the first stop the World War II Memorial, followed by the Iwo Jima Memorial and Arlington National Cemetery.

“It’s nice to be there when there aren’t a lot of other tourists around,” Holt said of the visit to the World War II Memorial. “One of our crown jewels is our group picture at the memorial. It’s easier to get them all together with fewer other people around.”

The veterans spend 90 minutes at that memorial before loading onto the buses again

“When we go to Arlington National Cemetery, we load onto these great big trams and haul on all of these wheelchairs and water,” Holt said.

She said every trip to Arlington has seen quite warm weather.

“Moving the wheelchairs around during the changing of the guard, bringing them right up so when they are sitting they can see what is going on, that is one of the most difficult things to do,” she said. “Some people don’t really move for people in wheelchairs. For me, it’s one of the most special times on the trip. It’s one of the most sobering, I think.”

From his experience on their first trip, Prchal said it would be a grave error not to include the Arlington visit on the trip.

“They can pay respect to those buddies who didn’t come back,” he said. “It is quiet. It is reflection.”

Lunch is waiting on the bus for the flight participants when they land on Friday and when they leave Arlington on Saturday. Prchal said Arby’s has a contract with the Honor Flight Network and delivers the lunches to the busses.

“Arby’s knows who their customer is, so they make sure the food is appropriate for this age group,” Holt said, adding there is always more food available than most of the veterans can eat.

Roughrider Honor Flight Committee Chairman Kevin Cramer said it’s the incredible commitment made by the committee members that allows the logistics to be handled successfully.

“The calls, taking the applications, going through them so thoroughly, calling the vets themselves and family members, all of that takes a real diligent effort,” Cramer said.

“It comes off without a hitch. One of the things that people are always impressed with is how organized we can be. I never feel like we are,” he added. “But, it all falls into place because everybody does their thing. And if there is a job that needs to be done, someone just steps in and does it.”

The organizing committee consists of fewer than 15 people, but there are a lot of additional volunteers who help make it all happen, Cramer said.

“We work very hard at is giving the veterans the hero’s treatment that we feel they deserve,” Cramer said. “For 36 hours, they are the stars.”

Alan Reed is a North Dakota native who is a longtime, award-winning journalist residing in Dickinson.