

By Alan Reed

Utter the phrase “mail call” and watch the eyes of any armed forces veteran light up.

Mail call is one positive veterans remember from their service days, as it momentarily brought them back in touch with home. So it’s only fitting the Roughrider Honor Flight conducts mail call as it transports North Dakota World War II veterans to and from Washington, D.C.

Patsy Thompson coordinated the collection of letters written by students that are then given to the Roughrider Honor Flight veterans. Thompson personally visited every school where students wrote letters and has read each and every student message.

“I read these letters and I have to put them away. It just about brought me to my knees,” Thompson said of numerous student letters that are filled with respect, emotion and thanks for what the veterans did for their country and the world.

“When we started that component, we had no idea what we were going to get,” she said. “It’s unbelievable.”

Thompson gave students insight into honor flight and the veterans who are recognized by showing them a video about the effort.

“They would see exactly what they were going to do,” Thompson said of the students witnessing the veterans’ experience on honor flights.

About 700 letters from students in Bismarck and Dickinson were written for the WW II vets who traveled on the fifth and final Roughrider Honor Flight May 6-7. The students range in age from grades 2-12 and Thompson said generally, the letters are very well written.

One such example is from Bismarck’s Kendra Schlosser, who thanked a WW II veteran for his/her honor and dedication.

“Thank you for helping save the world. I know it was hard leaving your family to go to war and wonder what will happen,” Schlosser wrote. “Here you are today after the war is over. I can’t imagine what you went through, but I know it was hard and scary.”

She continues by writing, “You mean a lot to our country and the world. I respect you for all you have done for our freedom. Thank you once again for what you have done, it means a lot.”

Thompson said after working with this project for a while, she realized these youngsters have grown up with war.

“We’ve been engaged in one war or another throughout their entire lives,” Thompson said.

Many of the students have family members or friends who have served in recent years, including some soldiers who have died.

“They’re fully affected by all of this,” Thompson said of ongoing global conflicts.

Bismarck's Alyssa Seitz is another student who wrote a veteran letter.

"Thank you so much for serving our country. It means a lot to me and a million other Americans. I really appreciate you risking your life to fight for your country," Seitz wrote.

"I can't imagine what you and millions of other men went through. I hope you enjoy your time in Washington, D.C.," Seitz concluded. "Thank you again so much."

During Friday evening's banquet for the veterans, a copy of two special letters was included in the evening program. One letter was written by a Bismarck Century High School foreign exchange student from Germany and another Century foreign exchange student from Slovakia, formerly Czechoslovakia.

"My family and especially my grandmother told me a lot about World War II and I learned that it was a very hard time for everybody," German Franzisha Eibenstein wrote. "I know you fought for freedom and for the rights also of Germans and I'd like to thank you for that!"

"You did an awesome job and that's the opinion of many Germans – that's what we get taught in school," Eibenstein concluded.

Zuzana Prostednikova of Slovakia wrote, "Your work wasn't important just for U.S. citizens, but for the citizens of the world too. Since I am from Slovakia, I have a different point of view on your service. One thing stays the same – no matter if I am an American or Slovak. You deserve a big thank you from the whole world."

Thompson said at times, she wishes copies of all the student letters would have been kept to be published in a book.

"On the other side, it's a private matter between the students and the vets. Some of the vets will write back," she added.

Thompson expected some of the students to be at the Bismarck Airport on Saturday when the veterans return.

The veterans also received copies of letters from the North Dakota congressional delegation. Sen. Kent Conrad said the WW II vets are called the "greatest generation" for good reason.

"You understand the simple but powerful virtues of duty and honor. When our nation called upon you to step forward and battle the evil forces of tyranny and oppression, you respected that call to duty and responded without hesitation," Conrad wrote.

"You and your colleagues left your farms, businesses and schools, your families and friends and you went off to lands far away to defend the ideals in which we believe," Conrad continued. "You fought and won for the cause of liberty and freedom and for that you should be proud."

Newly elected Sen. John Hoeven wrote the freedoms Americans enjoy are a direct result of the sacrifices of WW II vets.

"Our nation is forever indebted to you and your comrades for heeding the call to serve. You gallantly fought to protect our values and the American way of life," Hoeven wrote.

“You defeated our enemy and ensured a brighter future not only for our country, but for millions of others in the entire postwar world,” Hoeven added.

Newly elected Rep. Rick Berg wrote the duty WW II veterans showed and the sacrifices they made aren't unnoticed.

“You carried a weapon or a stretcher, and sometimes each other, and with all this, you also brought the ideals of liberty and justice and in the end, you ‘carried the day.’” Berg wrote.

“For your ready answer to duty's call, your selfless service to your country and the sacrifices you made, we extend our deepest and eternal gratitude,” Berg concluded