

By Alan Reed

Consider professional baseball players Joe DiMaggio and Jackie Robinson, acclaimed American authors Kurt Vonnegut and J.D. Salinger, longtime former United States Sen. Bob Dole and current Sen. Daniel Inouye, cartoonist Charles Schultz and former President John F. Kennedy.

They are just a sampling of the tens of thousands of individuals who are forever connected to over 120 North Dakotans heading to Washington, D.C., on May 6-7. That's when the fifth and final Roughrider Honor Flight pays tribute to another group of men and women with North Dakota roots who served the United States during World War II.

Organizing its first group of WW II veterans to fly to the National World War II Memorial and other Washington, D.C., memorials in 2009, the Roughrider Honor Flight concludes its volunteer efforts this month. In doing so, the Roughrider Honor Flight has taken 500-plus WW II veterans to personally experience their memorial, at absolutely no charge to them.

Looking back over the Roughrider Honor Flight Committee's efforts and experiences, Chairman Kevin Cramer said one thing continues to stand out.

"The thing that still strikes me the most and touches me the most are the spontaneous expressions of gratitude that these veterans encounter from total strangers," Cramer said. "And then to watch this humble response from these men and women."

Committee Treasurer Doug Prchal said when the veterans are at the National World War II Memorial, it gets very emotional.

"When the people from anywhere in the United States and internationally come up to them and thank them for their service, that is overwhelming," Prchal said. "It's overwhelming for them and for the committee."

Prchal's wife, Tara Holt, is the committee's vice president and remembers the first trip when it encountered a group of tourists from Italy. A translator talked back and forth between the North Dakota veterans and the Italians, she said.

"They thanked the veterans for saving their country. I don't think people realize what these veterans did, not only for our country, but for the entire world. That was pretty spectacular," Holt said.

She said the veterans were applauded when they walked by students. Prchal said respect is truly bestowed upon the veterans, who are easily identifiable by their age, and also by the fact they wear honor flight T-shirts, hats and coats.

"I'm heartened by the fact there is a genuine appreciation for the significance of that event," Cramer said of people's responses to WWII and its vets. "They associate these guys were out there fighting for the world."

Holt and Prchal easily embraced the idea of organizing a group to take WWII veterans from western North Dakota to see their memorial when they were approached with the suggestion by neighbor Clare Carlson. Holt's father is a WWII vet and Prchal served in the Air Force in Vietnam.

"I thought it would be great for some people who were never thanked," Holt said.

"For me to assist these WWII guys was an easy decision," Prchal said. "It's an honor to give these WWII veterans, these heroes, a visit to the memorial, in honor of their service and sacrifice."

When Cramer agreed to chair the effort, he knew there would be a first flight and was pretty sure there would be a second flight. But even he is amazed the committee is organizing its fifth flight.

"We were all pretty excited and very touched by it all," Cramer said. "I made the statement that I'm going to do this while there is a veteran able and ready to go. I'd be ready for another if we had a long enough list."

The Roughrider Honor Flight is part of the national Honor Flight Network that's based in Ohio. The committee reviewed guidelines from the national network and Holt also researched Web sites of existing honor flight groups across the country.

The first trip was publicly announced in December 2008 for that following May. Prchal said the committee wondered if it would even get 100 applications.

"Low and behold, all of a sudden in February we were over 100," he said. "So then we said we better get ready and raise the money and we did that. We took that maiden flight and now we are taking the fifth flight."

Prchal said the WWII vets are very humble, as they continue to ask why they are being honored.

"They say we really didn't do anything other than what we were asked to do," he said. "They're also a bunch of smart alecks. That is part of this era too. They love to kid each other. It is an honor to be with these people. They are very easy to deal with."

Cramer said there is indeed something about the humility exhibited by the generation that served in WWII.

"These are guys that came right back and went to work; in many situations hitch hiked back and went to work," Cramer said.

He said one of the most interesting things committee members hear from family members of the vets is how the veterans open up about their service experiences upon making the trip.

"All of a sudden late in life, they have come to life and are sharing about these experiences," Cramer said. "That has been rich, because with that comes more of a first-hand experience with history."

Holt said being together on the trip provides a safety net of sorts for the veterans.

“They feel trust when they talk to one another,” she said. “They talk to us about things their families say they never heard before.”

Holt remembers a veteran who suffered from dementia and Alzheimer’s and questioned if he should be taken, but went on the trip because the committee felt he had a right to go.

When the veteran returned to the nursing home after the trip, life had changed, she said.

“He kind of opened up after he went on this trip,” she said.

Prchal said being at the national memorial unlocks something.

“That is a reward that you would never expect. You simply take that veteran on this trip. But I’m sure his family has rewards now,” he said.

“For us, it is such a reward to see these people and hear those stories. They really did benefit from this in many ways, as did their families and the communities,” Holt said.

For many of the veterans, the honor flight trip is the first time in years that they have traveled.

“That is a culture shock. They haven’t flown on an airplane in a lot of cases,” Prchal said. “They really don’t want to be catered to. But it does become a big deal.

“They are the honored guest. They like to play that down, but they really enjoy every moment of it,” he added. “I think they like the fact they are being recognized.”

As the fifth and final trip is now just days away, Cramer admits to developing a mindset that he didn’t originally expect.

“The urgency that we feel because they are still with us and the opportunity is fading quickly,” he said. “So many of the people we have taken on the first four flights have since died.”

The committee members now have a large, extended family that is based upon a very emotional connection.

“It’s hard to look at the obituaries every day,” Cramer said.

Holt looks toward the last flight with mixed emotions because of the friends she has made and the work the committee has successfully completed.

“I personally feel we will have accomplished our mission, which was to take all applying World War II veterans,” she said. “We have done that, we have done a good job. We have never had a complaint...A lot of things just present themselves and you answer a need.”

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