

By Alan Reed

Scott Nelson really doesn't like flying in airplanes. Ironically, he is completely enthralled by aircraft, especially those that flew in World War II.

The Flasher rancher, who is a self-taught artist, put his passion for airplanes and his deep respect for veterans to work in creating a commemorative painting for the Roughrider Honor Flight. The all-volunteer honor flight committee is taking its last group of North Dakota WW II veterans to Washington, D.C., on May 6-7.

The primary purpose of the trip is to take the veterans to the National World War II Memorial, which happens on Saturday. Other major sites the veterans visit during the trip include the Lincoln and Iwo Jima memorials and Arlington National Cemetery. The trip is completely free to the veterans.

Nelson honestly can't tell you how he came to love airplanes. Nelson's uncles who served in WW II were in the Navy and the Army, which makes his interest in aircraft even more unique.

"It seems like all kids kind of like airplanes when they are little and I never grew out of it," he said. "I had an opportunity to fly in a P-51 but I turned it down because I get air sick."

Nelson's interest in WW II aircraft goes back many years. In 1995, he got an opportunity to visit with a fighter pilot and thought it would be neat to do a painting.

"I did a painting from one of his experiences, thinking it would be the only one," he said. "I kept meeting more of these guys. There were so many of them around. I even found guys in my hometown who were pilots."

Honor flight committee member Alan Butts knows Nelson and approached the artist as the committee was getting organized for its first flight in May 2009. The committee asked Nelson to create a painting as a keepsake for the veterans who participate in the trip.

"They could have gotten a lot better artist to do it," Nelson said. "I still look at it and think I could have done a better job, or if they had gotten a real artist, they really could have gotten a painting."

His love of airplanes is depicted in the honor flight painting, as there are 18 overall aircraft, including the largest plane in the center of the picture that represents the honor flight.

"Of course, I wanted the ground troops and wanted to include everything," he said. "I tried to include everybody."

It's no accident that the line of soldiers depicted in the painting is led by a private.

"That war was fought on the backs of just your common, everyday citizen soldier that came in at the lower ranks," Nelson said. "They were the ones that won the war. He is the only one you can really see what rank he is."

The honor flight painting also has a special emphasis on a medic, an influence from an interview of Nelson's interview with Flasher resident Bob Feland, a medic who served in North Africa. Nelson has interviewed numerous veterans, and his notes from those interviews are shared on his Web page, along with the paintings that resulted from those visits.

In his original concept, the plane depicting the honor flight was much larger with a lot more detail, he said.

“When we talked at the meeting, we decided it was to be a bit more subdued, but it was the center of the painting to represent honor flight,” Nelson said.

Nelson has since added a couple more soldiers to the original painting, which is now housed in the Minot Air Museum.

The honor flight committee invited Nelson to fly along with the veterans during the second flight to Washington, D.C., an invitation he initially hesitated to accept. But he ultimately did say yes and “I was sure glad I did because I sure did enjoy it.”

He especially enjoyed watching the veterans on the trip and their appreciation for the opportunity to visit Washington, D.C. After returning from that trip, Nelson encouraged WWII vets he knew to participate.

“The ones who were so apprehensive about going were so glad they went,” he said of the veterans he encouraged.

He remembers other visitors to Washington, D.C., lining up to thank the honor flight veterans for their service.

“It just kind of blew their minds a bit. They just weren’t expecting that,” Nelson said. “Some of them were even brought to tears.”

He said being able to help on the trip was special, “and what an honor it was to wheel these guys around.”

“I hope my paintings can help the stories a little better,” he said. “Some of the things I will visit with them and talk with them and get some information and I’ll start reading in books and I’ll start coming across these guys.”

Meanwhile, he encourages the honor flight veterans who receive his painting to share their personal stories by writing down critical information about their service on the border of the painting.

“Then it is something that can be passed down. It is something that is more than a print,” he said. “Then it is actually an historical document.”

He hopes that history shared by the WW II veterans can be retold 50 years from now when somebody pulls out the painting and reads what is on it.

To find out more about Nelson, including his interviews with WW II veterans and the resulting paintings, go to scottnelsonart.com

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