



■ It was a day that will be remembered for the rest of their lives as Veterans traveled to and subsequently from Washington D.C. on Tuesday, May 2. The Veterans were honored at the WWII Memorial as well as at the Korea and Vietnam Memorials. Special flag folding and honor ceremonies were held at the memorials as well. Surprises were around the corner at every turn for the Veterans complete with a Welcome Home Celebration filled with gratitude from more than 1,000 fellow community members. Another surprise was in the top right corner of this page – Jim Handlon, uncle to Misty Nichols, was on the flight as well. Photos by Dusty, Caroline, Matt and H Wetzel

**Honor flight**

From **PAGE 1**

and Cheryl were on was sponsored and organized by Southwest Florida Honor Flight. Veterans from Charlotte, Sarasota, Desoto, Hardee, Hendry and Highlands Counties and immediate surrounding areas are included in the group's programs.

Other counties are served by similar groups. There is also a Collier-Lee Honor Flight hub, serving those two counties. Both the local hubs are part of the national Honor Flight Network, based in Arlington, Virginia but managed locally by hub directors.

Honor Flight programs are totally volunteer organizations, and all donations go toward their mission. That mission is "to safely transport our veterans to Washington, D.C., to be honored at their memorials and receive the welcome home they deserve."

In Florida, the trip is a one-day excursion, flying out early in the morning, spending time at each military memorial and returning back to the local airport in the evening.

Tuesday's welcome home ceremony at Punta Gorda Airport took place close to 10 p.m. On their return the honorees gathered in the airport's boarding area and then proceeded to parade through the large baggage claim area. Blue tape marked off the route for the honorees, with more than 1,000 family members and other well-wishers of all ages greeting them, dressed in patriotic colors, holding signs and waving flags.

The parade was led by Guns N Hoses Pipes n Drums of SWFL, a fully uniformed bagpipers group. They were followed by several local color guard teams, along with scout troops. Friends and strangers shook the participants' hands, gave hugs, expressed thanks and celebrated as one big family.

Participation in the Honor Flight is by application, which can be found on each individual hub's website (locally, that would be [swflhonorflight.org](http://swflhonorflight.org) or [collierhonorflight.org](http://collierhonorflight.org)). All branches of military service are welcome, and first preference goes to World War II veterans and veterans who have a terminal illness, regardless of when they served.

Veterans are treated as VIPs on the Honor Flight, paying nothing for the day. Guardians do pay \$500, but most expenses are covered by donations. All Honor Flight groups are 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations, so donations are tax-deductible.

Prior to the establishment of the Honor Flight Network, many veterans had given up hope of seeing their memorials. Now they have hope, but time is running out for some veterans, and there are never too many expressions of "thank you" for those who are willing to put their lives on the line for

the rest of us.

It wasn't an easy trip for many. Memories of war can be painful and are often suppressed. There wasn't any way to suppress much on this trip, as memories surrounding all of the vets who took part in this flight. Some, like Dusty, didn't feel like the public honored Vietnam vets as much as others. This flight changed their mind a little ... we hope.

"Because the time I served was in Vietnam, it felt like a lot of people said, 'So, what?' Then we had this flight, and suddenly we were 'found.' I can now proudly say that my service was important. Thank you, to everyone, for reminding me of that."

For more information or to donate, contact [swflhonorflight.org](http://swflhonorflight.org) or check out the Honor Flight Network at [honorflight.org](http://honorflight.org).

See the November/December 2023 issue of Gasparilla Island Magazine for more of this story.

**A Premier Mercury Service Dealer**  
Fully Certified Mercury Technicians

- Ship's Store has fuel, bait, clothing, snacks and boating supplies.
- Wet & dry boat storage available on a daily, weekly, monthly, and annual basis.
- Daily Dockage, Storage & Detailing are available for those arriving at The Inn by boat.

**Open: 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Daily**  
**941.964.4620**

THE INN MARINA  
BOCA GRANDE, FLORIDA

MERCURY  
"1 On The Water"