

## **A DAY FOR HEROES: Dow hosts its 2nd Honor Flight, sending area World War II veterans to D.C.**

**By KATLYNN LANHAM | Posted: Monday, September 26, 2011 2:00 am**

**WASHINGTON, D.C.** — For Ben Townes, service on the front lines of Normandy ended with two shots: one to his shoulder, one to his hip.

“I was in the wrong place at the wrong time,” Townes said. After waiting on the ground for three days to be rescued, he woke up in a hospital in France with injuries that earned him a Purple Heart.

On Saturday, Townes, 91, visited the World War II Memorial with other veterans. He was somber as he talked about his experiences.

“I’ve just always wanted to see it,” Townes said of the memorial.

Townes and 41 other World War II veterans flew on two jets to the nation’s capital as part of the Dow Honor Flight on Saturday. A nationwide program, Honor Flight brings veterans from their hometowns to war memorials in Washington. This is the second time Dow Texas Operations has participated in the program.

For almost all the veterans, it was the first time to see the memorial, a large fountain surrounded by pillars with wreaths, dedicated in 2004.

Veterans and their guardians — Dow employees who are veterans of later wars who spent the day helping the World War II veterans — started gathering at the Texas Gulf Coast Regional Airport a little before 4:30 a.m. Saturday.

It was 30 minutes earlier than they had been told to start arriving, and they used the time to share stories.

“It’s a great privilege to take everybody out to Washington,” said Gary Hockstra, outgoing Texas Operations site director. “This is a very, very small way for us to say thank you.”

Veterans walked quietly down a red carpet lined with flags to the waiting planes early Saturday morning.

About six hours after they arrived at the Texas Gulf Coast Regional Airport, they climbed off a bus at the World War II Memorial, where other honor flights happened to be visiting. The large, circular monument fits around fountains and features pillars for each U.S. state, territory and the District of Columbia. The pillars each have wreaths of oak and wheat to symbolize the nation’s industrial and agricultural strength.

Veterans made a point to stop by the Freedom Wall, where there are 4,000 gold stars commemorating the more than 400,000 Americans who gave their lives in the war.

Charlie Phillips was a submariner who rescued pilots who had to abandon their planes in the Pacific. Tommy Schwarz Jr. was on a ship headed to invade Japan when the atomic bombs were dropped. He ended up being a member of the occupying force. Claude Cheatham was working in the boiler room of the USS New Orleans, sitting in Pearl Harbor when it was bombed.

The stories continued to flow all day.

Veterans then visited other memorials in Washington.

Some traced the names of loved ones at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, some watched their reflection as they walked along the Korean War Veterans Memorial. Others took pictures of the Lincoln Memorial.

“There’s so much history in just a few minutes,” said Lafe Burkett, World War II Army veteran.

Then the bus took them for one last stop. Veterans quieted as the bus entered Arlington National Cemetery. More than 14,000 veterans are buried there, with the military-standard white marble gravestone placed at the head of the grave.

The rows and rows of white marble prepared veterans for what was to be one of the most solemn events of the day: the changing of the guard.

As one soldier dressed in full military regalia took 21 steps, paused 21 seconds, switched his gun’s position and took 21 steps the other way, veterans watched, stoic.

The soldier guards the Tomb and as veterans who knew others who gave the ultimate sacrifice, they understood the importance of the occasion.

“I think they show a lot of respect for the ones that have gone on before,” Navy veteran Bill Denton said.

Back on the plane, Dow employees surprised the veterans with letters from friends, family, community members and other veterans thanking them for their service.

Wives wrote of the wonderful lives they had lived together, children wrote of their respect for their grandfather and co-workers wrote of the integrity with which many of the veterans live their lives. The veterans were touched by the letters.

Guardian Stephen Neighbours read out loud a letter from an elementary student named Tyler addressed to Army World War II veteran Wyndell Rouse.

“I’m proud of all veterans,” the letter said.

Rouse said he just wished he knew the boy.

The day ended with hundreds of people lined up at the airport, ready to welcome the veterans home. People clapped and cheered as veterans left the plane. They shook their hands as they came down the red carpet.

“What did I do to deserve this?” Rouse said.

**NOTE:** The Facts is publishing a special section about the Dow Honor Flight on Sunday that will include World War II stories, the veterans’ thoughts about the memorial and why the day meant so much to them.

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