

Vietnam Veterans...



A TRIP TO REMEMBER - Members of NESD Vietnam Veterans Chapter 1054 visited Washington, DC this spring. The group visited the Washington Monument, Arlington National Cemetery, Vietnam and WWII memorials and many other sites. While the sites were very meaningful, just as important was the reception they received. Many times throughout the trip, they were greeted with applause and thanked for their service.

DC Trip Brings Honor, Memories & New Bonds

Old memories and new ones, old war buddies and new friendships... a once-in-a-lifetime trip brought it all full circle for veterans who traveled to Washington D.C. earlier this spring.

Thirty-one members of the Northeast SD Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 1054, along with 19 guests and Dr. Clark Likness, left Watertown on April 25, to travel to Washington D.C. on the five-day journey that was a dream come true for many.

We started talking about it almost a year and a half ago, said Veteran Dennis Solberg. We needed commitments from those who wanted to participate and we needed to raise money. Once the Watertown Community Foundation awarded the \$9,000 grant to help them make the trip, it seemed doable. It was a multi-step process and it was worth every part of it, Solberg and others said.

Four of the veterans, Solberg, Steve Stregge, Darrell Berning and Jim Hanson, were able to participate in the wreath ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery. The group also visited the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the American History Museum, the Washington Monument, Korean War and WWII Memorials and many other sites.

Each held special meaning in its own rite. One instance that was extra-special for veteran Leonard Blain of Watertown was coming face to face again with one of the helicopters he piloted in Vietnam.

"A year ago, I read in my Vietnam helicopter magazine that the helicopter was in a museum in D.C.," said Blain. This particular helicopter brought back memories in more ways than one. "The helicopter's engine exploded," Blain remembered the



Leonard Blain with the actual "Huey" he flew.

fateful day. "I was piloting the helicopter behind it. We had a lot of training on what to do if your engine quits. They were about 3,000 feet high and descending about 1,500 feet a minute. You need to rotate down to the ground to the grass. Take the pitch out of the blade to slow down and hold momentum...it works good if you do it right. The pilot did fine and once they landed, the guys in the back jumped out and hit the ground running. I bet they are still telling their grandkids about it."

Blain exclaimed, "What a day to remember?!" no doubt, about both the day 40 some years ago and the day he visited that helicopter in the museum.

The trip was memorable in many more ways and brought the veterans a special pride that seemed long overdue. "Several times when young grade school kids or high school students would see us they would come up to us and thank us for our service," Blain said. "Many cheered for us when they saw our Vietnam Veteran hats. Several of the guys in our group had tears in our eyes during that time." Finding the name of someone we knew on the Vietnam wall brought more tears.

"People opened up about things that bothered them for 40 years," Solberg added. Some wounds were healed and some closure was made.

"I knew they would struggle with some post-traumatic stress," Dr. Likness confirmed. "There were a lot of emotions and successes during the trip." Forty-seven years ago, people spit at the veterans, called them pigs and threw things at them when they came home from Vietnam. The welcoming they receive now is phenomenal as it should be, he said. "Their service allowed us the freedom we have today. It was my privilege and my pleasure to volunteer as the medical provider for their trip."

Blain counts Dr. Likness among the people who made the trip extraordinary. "The very special people who made this trip made the whole experience wonderful," Blain continued. "It reminded me of 'Home on the Range,' never was heard a discouraging word. Two of us were in wheelchairs and there was no end of people volunteering to push us. The people we went with are just like family...we are so supportive of each other - it just warms my heart."

That family extends to a total of 330 members in NESD Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 1054, including associates said Blain, who is a charter member. "I just look forward to every meeting. I always try to sit at a different table to meet someone different because every person you meet has something special about him. "There were a lot of new bonds," since the trip, he added. One of those bonds is with Dr. Likness. "When we got back we voted to make Dr. Likness a life-time associate member... so I guess now we have 331."

There is always room for more in the family...the group whole-heartedly welcomes all Vietnam-era veterans to attend their meetings. "You need to have a network of people that truly know how you're feeling and what your experiences are," Solberg said.

