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News - McHenry County

More than 50 veterans honored in McHenry after returning from Honor Flight trip

“When you see a Vietnam vet, the best thing you can say to them is ‘welcome home,’” one presenter said

By James T. Norman

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Lee Ellington, a member of the Navy, receives a rose from senior cheerleader Morgan Nosalik on Sunday, Aug. 28, 2022. Ellington was one of 51 veterans who went on the Honor Flight over the weekend to visit war memorials in Washington D.C. and were welcomed home at McHenry High School. (James Norman)

It's been nearly 60 years since veteran Donald "Butch" Kribbs found himself in Vietnam as part of the Air Force, and in that time, a lot has changed.

Having participated in the Tet Offensive in 1968, which was a military campaign launched by the Viet Cong and North Vietnam in an effort to destabilize South Vietnam and the U.S. war effort to trigger rebellion, he said the country has come a long way in how it treats its veterans from that era.

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“It really started to change after [the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks],” he said. “Before then, people didn’t care [about veterans].”

As part of that newfound support over the past two decades, several organizations, including one called Honor Flight, have been created. Honor Flight is a non-profit organization that offers paid trips for veterans to see the war memorials for their respective war in Washington D.C.

More than 50 veterans, including many from McHenry County, returned home from one of those flights Sunday afternoon and were greeted by more than 300 people at McHenry High School.

Sunday’s event to welcome the veterans home, taking place in the gym at McHenry High School’s upper campus, included performances by the school’s orchestra, choir and cheerleaders, as well as a video pieced together by several journalism students who went on the trip with the veterans. After the performances, the veterans arrived on two buses behind a police and motorcycle escort, and were cheered on as they walked in.



Bill Sensor, an army veteran, waves and cheers after being welcomed into McHenry High School. Sensor was one of 51 veterans who went on the Honor Flight over the weekend to visit war memorials in Washington D.C., Sunday, Aug. 28, 2022, and were welcomed home at McHenry High School. (James Norman)

While those in attendance held up signs and greeted the veterans, school cheerleaders handed roses to each passing veteran, who then took their seat next to the stage and listened to a few speeches. Opening up those speeches was a presentation of the colors courtesy of the McHenry VFW Post 4600.

“This whole trip is about honoring our veterans,” said Aaron Stain, board member of the Veterans Network Committee of Northern Illinois, which had a hand in organizing the event. “The reason I do this ... is so their stories go on.”

For some, like Wayne Muehlbauer, who also served in the Air Force during Vietnam, it was their first time taking the trip. One thing that stuck with him during the trip was when the group arrived in D.C., there was a throng of about

500 people who stood out the gate to greet the veterans. It was a similar story when the group landed in Milwaukee, he said.

“I never thought I’d cry,” he said. “It was an awesome experience to see that.”

Vietnam Marine Wayne Koster of Crystal Lake participated in Honor Flight for the first time as well.

“It was totally awesome,” he said. “It was very busy. We got to see a lot of cool stuff. ... All the different services and their museums.”



Families and children stand ready to welcome more than 50 veterans on Sunday, Aug. 28, 2022, at McHenry High School. (James Norman)

Being tasked with documenting the trip and its veterans, their stories was something the school’s journalism teacher Mitch Stengel was focused on. Stengel, who also attended D.C. with the veterans, said his favorite quote, which he heard

from Stain, was that a veteran dies twice. First when they pass away, and second when they're forgotten, he said.

"It's our job to keep their legacy alive," Stengel said. "It's going to take me months to process the moments, the events and the experiences of the past four days."

Journalism student Cooper Ten Bruin, a senior, said she had been to D.C. before, but she described going with the veterans as almost like a "fever dream." With tears, she said it "hit so much harder" when she saw the veterans trace their names and names of those they knew at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

"It makes you appreciate the things they did," she said. "And it makes you angry that they didn't get appreciated the way they are now."

As several of the veterans in attendance were from Vietnam, one of the major themes of the event was to repay them for not only their service, but to make up for what several called the vitriol those veterans saw when returning from combat back in the 1960s and 70s. During that period, it wasn't uncommon for veterans to receive insults, be spat on and be called derogatory names, such as "baby killers."

"When you see a Vietnam vet, the best thing you can say to them is, 'welcome home,'" Stain said.



Attendees wait local veterans to arrive on Sunday, Aug. 28, 2022 at McHenry High School. More than 50 veterans who went on the Honor Flight over the weekend to visit war memorials in Washington D.C. and were welcomed home at McHenry High School. (James Norman)

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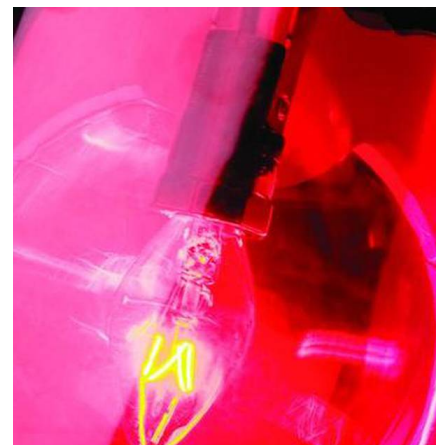
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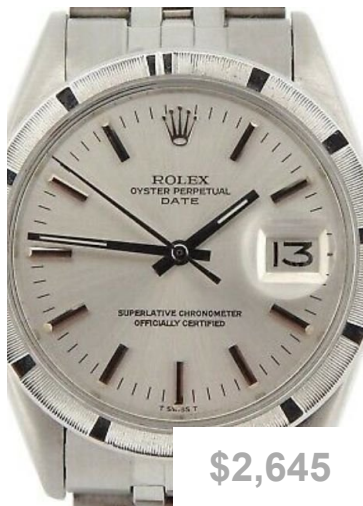
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