

Reception for WWII vets on target...this time
By Elaine Johnson

It's been a long time coming, but the heroes of World War II are finally getting their due.

Heroes like Doug Thaxton, Donald M. Van Devander and four other residents of Fairview Village, who boarded a flight out of Midway Airport Oct. 22 for a whirlwind tour of Washington, D.C.

The trip was sponsored by Honor Flight Chicago, www.honorflightchicago.org, a fledgling non-profit organization that takes aging veterans to visit Washington's World War II memorial and other shrines as a way of thanking them for their sacrifices on behalf of this nation.

Thaxton, 88, served in the Air Force as a ground crew chief in England and officer in the Air Transport Command during World War II and with the Army Corps of Engineers building the Distant Early Warning line during the Korean War.

Van Devander, 87, was a surgical technician on Tinian Island, from which the Enola Gay made its fateful flight to Hiroshima. He remembers the plane's crew being brought back to the hospital to be tested for radioactivity after dropping the atomic bomb.

Both of the men had been to Washington before, but neither had seen the World War II memorial, which was dedicated in 2004. When an Honor Flight Chicago co-founder made a presentation at Fairview Village in September, Thaxton, Van Devander and the others signed on.

Little did they anticipate how meaningful the 18-hour trip would be. "It was one of the most unexpected surprises I've ever been involved in," Van Devander said. "It was so amazing to go on such a flight."

The adventure began at 3:30 a.m. when a bus whisked them off to Midway Airport where a chartered flight awaited them.

Acknowledging the challenges of their passengers' advanced age, Honor Flight provided a team of guides, nurses and medics to look after the men during the trip, including one-on-one staffing for those in wheelchairs or walkers.

Each of the volunteers paid their own way, but the trip was free to the veterans. "They wouldn't let us pay for anything," Thaxton said.

Upon landing in Washington, the jet was greeted by the fire department throwing an arch of water over the plane. Then the bus tour began. They saw the White House, Arlington National Cemetery, the Lincoln Memorial, the First Division Monument, the Korean Memorial, the Iwo Jima monument and the Vietnam Memorial, where Thaxton was able to trace his only son's name. David Thaxton died in combat during that conflict.

The highlight of the trip, the World War II memorial, "was absolutely breath-taking," Van Devander said. "One wall had 4,000 stars for the 408,000 men who died," he said. "You sat there and could not believe they were memorializing that many men."

The experience brought up emotions that hadn't been triggered for decades. "It was kind of tear-jerking," Van Devander said. "There were so many of our own people we remember personally who were killed in the war."

Thaxton, a young man of 20 when he enlisted in 1942, downplayed his own service. "I wasn't in the infantry. I wasn't being shot at," he said. "You were doing your duty. That was it."

If Thaxton was matter-of-fact about his service—"don't make me out to be a hero"—so was the welcome he and so many vets got upon their return from the war.

Van Devander recalls getting off an aircraft carrier in California and onto a train that brought him to St. Louis. "Nobody greeted us," he said. "I collected a little paycheck and got on a bus and went home."

So when the Chicago fire and police departments greeted the returning Honor Flight vets with more arching streams of water, salutes, cheers and bagpipes, it was hard for many of the old-timers to keep the tears in check.

"We heard cheering and it got louder and louder and louder," Van Devander said. "And at the end of the line there were many, many friends from Fairview Village and family members."

"It was wonderful, just wonderful," Thaxton said.

Both of the men couldn't say enough about the experience, which was more than 60 years coming.

"We wanted for nothing," Van Devander said. "This whole flight was so much beyond what I anticipated or could have expected it to be."