



## Hudson Valley Honor Flight (HVHF)



## Mission #22, Saturday, April 13, 2019



by **Ralph J. Ferrusi**

**September 27, 2014**

I flew to Washington DC on Hudson Valley Honor Flight "Mission # 5" as a "guardian" for World War II veteran Master Sergeant Freddie Kratzer. He was quite a guy, and we both enjoyed the powerful, very moving experience. We're still in touch: occasional phone calls, Christmas cards.

Every chance I get—tipped off by their Army/Navy/Marine/Air Force/Coast Guard/Sea Bees caps—I thank veterans for their service, and I always say "Welcome home" to Vietnam vets. A while back I saw a guy with a "Vietnam Era" cap: I'd never seen this before. I served in the US Army National Guard from 1959 to 1965: after Korea and during Vietnam.

reasonably dry, and boarding—on three big LEPRECHAUN buses—83 vets, many of them wheelchair-bound, and their 83 (or so???) guardians.

At 6:30 AM our "convoy"—in an "envelope" of red-and-blue-flashing-lights police vehicles and (seemingly) hundreds of motorcycles—headed to Stewart. Every intersection along the way was blocked off by police, who saluted us. We arrived at Stewart Departures right after the bagpipes, to a HUGE cheering, flag-waving send-off.

After some wonderful speeches by HVHF Board of Directors Chairman Frank Kimler and board member—and former Executive Director—Beth Vought, we boarded an American Airlines A320 Airbus and taxied out to the runway in pouring-down rain. Partway down to D.C. the skies miraculously began to clear, and we landed at Reagan in clear, t-shirt-weather skies, and were greeted at Arrivals by a huge crowd of cheering, flag-waving well wishers. Amazing. Our escorted motorcade through DC was a hoot: blasting through red lights and intersections, all side road blocked off until we passed. Arby's supplied generous box lunches on the buses.

We arrived at the World War II Memorial on a blue-sky, picture-perfect, warm, green, early Spring Day. I headed right for Bataan, and Guadalcanal. Jasmine, a DC-based volunteer, told Spencer and I that—unbeknownst to most—there were two "Kilroy's" in the monument, and directed us to them!

Then it was on to Vietnam. Marianne, the Honor Flight head nurse (there was at least one nurse on every bus) had bought my World War II "Uncles..." book well before the flight, and I said I would autograph it

for her. She brought it to DC, and, quite amazingly, I signed it at the Vietnam Wall: certainly my most memorable book signing. She then surprised me by asking if I would say a few words at the "farewell dinner" in DC at the airport Holiday Inn. I said I would think about it. Then we walked to Korea, drove to the always-impressive Changing of the Guard at Arlington, and finally, our last stop in DC, dinner at the Reagan Airport Holiday Inn.

**My Saturday, April 13, 2019 words at the "farewell" dinner**

At the dinner, one of the HVHF volunteers, Carol Smith, who knows my wife Kathy, came over to me and asked if I was ready to talk (for "two minutes"). Ya gotta go for the moment...

I have no fear of speaking to big groups: I have presented my Appalachian Trail slides to over 10,000 people. So, I stood up in



I contacted the Hudson Valley Honor Flight and asked if I was eligible for a flight, even though I hadn't flown in B-17's or B-24's, or had landed on a beach on a Pacific island.

They said yes, and sent me an application.

**April 13, 2019**

On Saturday, April 13, 2019 I flew to Washington DC on Hudson Valley Honor Flight "Mission # 22" as a "Cold War"—Post Korean War/Vietnam Era—veteran. Spencer Effron was my guardian. We set the alarm for 4:00 AM on the 13th; it was raining—hard. At the 5:45 AM check in at the Shop Rite in Montgomery—Shop Rite has been a major supporter of HVHF—it was still pouring, and the Honor Flight staff and volunteers did a heckuva job signing in, feeding, keeping

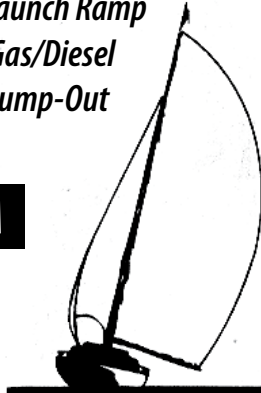


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*"Give me a call; you have nothing to lose and everything to gain"*

front of the huge ballroom full of vets and volunteers, said, "OK..." and asked if they could hear me. They responded with a resounding "NO...". I adjusted the microphone, put on my "speakers voice", and talked about them, not me. Here's (from memory) what I said:

First I introduced myself as Ralph Joseph Ferrusi Jr., Honorably Discharged Radio Sergeant, 156th Field Artillery, then proceeded:

*My Dad, Corporal Ralph Joseph Ferrusi Sr., served in the Philippines in World War II.*

*Fourteen family members—Dads, uncles, cousins—served in World War II, and we have four Purple Hearts in our extended family.*

*This is my second Honor Flight: I flew on Mission #5, September 27, 2014, as a Guardian for World War II vet Master Sergeant Freddie Kratzer. Five years later, I'm here as a Post-Korean-War/Vietnam Era veteran.*

*I was asked to say a few words about today's experience. I have become a "semi-famous" author—books, newspaper columns, magazine articles—with over a half-million words in print.*

*I cannot think of words to describe today.*

*The veterans—the "Blue t-shirts"—and the guardians—the "Grey t-shirts"—have been acknowledged all day long, from the time we arrived at Stewart International in Newburgh this morning. I would now like to thank the "Red shirts": all the "behind the scenes" Hudson Valley Honor Flight staff, and volunteers, for everything they have done for us today.*

*One last thought: I have always been very proud of my military service.*

*But, today is the very first time I have been honored for my service.*

*Thank you.*

Several people afterwards said that I "nailed it", a couple of women said I (almost) moved them to tears, and when I got back on the "Blue Bus" (one of five buses) a lot of the guys on the bus congratulated me.

One last thought: this being my second Honor Flight, knowing how the vets and their guardians are showered with sincere congratulations and praise, all the way from Shop Rite in Montgomery, to the Stewart International Airport departure, all the way through the Reagan Airport arrival, and, finally, at the stupendous, overwhelming late-evening arrival at Stewart—hundreds of people, young and old, chanting "USA, USA, USA"—I made an even stronger effort this time to thank as many of the people—men, women, and children, who took their time to greet us—for "being there" for us, particularly some of the people that might not otherwise be noticed in the general hub-bub of the moment.

Whadda Day.....

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