



PHOTO | TALONS OUT HONOR FLIGHT

WRITER | JULIE FORD

From healing collective grief to educating future generations, veteran memorials are a place to reflect and remember our military personnel who have served and continue to serve our country. In cities and towns across Michigan and throughout the U.S. and beyond, veteran memorials are a permanent symbol of sacrifice, often central to a community and a place for ceremonial events or silent gratitude.

When we think of veteran monuments, we often think of the iconic memorials of the National Mall and Memorial Parks in Washington, D.C. Each year, there are more than five million visitors to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Visitors make the trek using various modes of transportation, but there is one national organization doing everything in its power to send World War II, Korean War and Vietnam War veterans to see their monuments in Washington, D.C.

Honor Flight Network is a national nonprofit with a series of hubs throughout the U.S. that transport veterans from WWII, the Korean War

and the Vietnam War to see their monuments in our nation's capital at no charge to the veteran. Michigan has three hubs: Upper Peninsula Honor Flight in Gladstone, Mid-Michigan Honor Flight in Mecosta and Talons Out Honor Flight in Portage, helping veterans from Michigan's 83 counties to experience the honor, gratitude and celebration that many have never had. The Honor Flight Network of hubs is 100% volunteer-run and depends on donations. There is no funding from the government.

Each Honor Flight hub requires a mighty force of donors and



PHOTO | DAVID LOW

volunteers to carry out each flight, called a Mission. No veteran is too old or too frail to see their memorial. Veterans of any service era who are critically ill are eligible for the Honor Flight TLC program of the Honor Flight Network.

"We give priority to WWII, then Korean War, then Vietnam War veterans from 1941-1975," Scott Knauf, Upper Peninsula Honor Flight president, says. "It doesn't matter if they served during peace or war, here or abroad, we go by the date we receive their application."

The application process is straightforward across all three Michigan Honor Flight organizations, including the number one rule: no spouse is allowed to accompany their veteran.

"This isn't a free mini-vacation or for the spouse to tell the veteran what he can or cannot eat," Bob Green, Mid-Michigan Honor Flight president, says. "This is about the veteran." Green recalls a Mission where a veteran broke down at breakfast because it was the first time in decades he had biscuits and gravy two days in a row.

Each veteran is accompanied by a guardian who can be a family member, just not a spouse.

For Vietnam veteran Clay Maxwell, who was accompanied by his daughter on the spring 2025 Mid-Michigan Honor Flight, his visit to the Vietnam War Memorial was especially memorable.

"When we got to the 'wall' in D.C., there was a contingent of Vietnamese Americans because it was the 50th anniversary of the Americans leaving Vietnam," Maxwell says. "They were paying tribute to the Americans who helped them get out of Vietnam. They were waving Vietnamese flags in their traditional dress — it was just fine, they were there to thank the Americans."

Maxwell, a Huey Cobra pilot for the U.S. Army, who was awarded two Distinguished Flying Crosses for extraordinary aerial achievement, says he had his eldest child accompany him. He emphasized how she learned things about him she didn't previously know because she listened

and observed his interactions with other veterans on the Honor Flight trip. Throughout the trip he overheard her say, "Well, I never knew that about my dad."

WWII veteran David Low participated in the May 2024 Talons Out Honor Flight and says it was an unbelievable experience.

"You actually got goosebumps the morning you left," Low says. "The people that were there, the honor that they showed you, it was unbelievable. But the two things — leaving and coming home, made you feel really proud you were in the service."

For Low, who thanks President Harry S. Truman every day for ending the war, which meant he narrowly escaped becoming "cannon fodder," he encourages every veteran to apply for an Honor Flight.

"For some, they didn't want to go and were talked into it and now they're so glad they went," Low says.

Low has also been instrumental in raising funds for the Talons Out Honor Flight organization. Just last year, at age 97, he raised \$5,000 to help fellow veterans see their memorials and experience the honor and gratitude he received in his Honor Flight experience. When asked what projects he's planning next, he nonchalantly says he plans on snowmobiling somewhere very snowy for his 100th birthday.

Depending on the Honor Flight organization, the chartered flights on commercial airlines can be one- or multi-day excursions, scheduled two or more times per year. Veterans can fly just once as an honored veteran but may choose to fly again as a guardian when availability and personal funding allows. Itineraries typically include a welcome dinner the night before the flight, and a warm send-off by dozens of family and volunteers before heading to the airport. There, veterans, their guardians and Honor Flight staff are screened through security, and off to Washington, D.C. Airports will also announce an Honor Flight is in the terminal for departure and arrival.

"You'd be surprised how many people leave their gates to welcome the veterans at their gate," Green says.

The day is long, emotional, and for many, very healing.

"Most guys will tell you it's the best day of their lives," Karen Braddy Lambert, Talons Out Honor Flight director of corporate fundraising, says. "We know for Korea and Vietnam, it's the thanks they never got. It's healing, it's raw, it's joyous — especially for the Vietnam wall — they look for specific names. It's a really emotional stop."



PHOTO | UPPER PENINSULA HONOR FLIGHT

During or after the Honor Flight home, there's a surprise — a mail call — where no veteran is without a pile of mail from family, friends and community members thanking each for their sacrifice, their service and welcoming them home.

"So many veterans say they got more mail call from their Honor Flight than they did from their entire time in the service," Knauf says. Braddy Lambert adds, "On-the-ground volunteers, donations, mail call, quilts — we can't do this for our veterans without community support and community help."

When they arrive at the home airport, hundreds of people, including police, firefighters, family, friends, community members, volunteers and many more, greet each veteran with applause, banners and signs, welcoming them home with the honor and gratitude they deserve.

"Honor Flights exist because of the healing that occurs on a flight and the respect and honor we give to the veterans," Green says.

Green recalls the wife of a Vietnam veteran telling him that her husband shipped out after just two months of marriage. She said after he came home, he was never the same — all 55 years of marriage — until the Honor Flight. "She said to me, 'You healed him, you guys healed him.'"



PHOTO | MID-MICHIGAN HONOR FLIGHT

"Some guys never could shake it," Maxwell says. "If you asked him, 'When were you in Vietnam?' he'll say, 'last night'." □

Honor Flight Network: HonorFlight.org

Upper Peninsula Honor Flight: UpHonorFlight.org

Mid-Michigan Honor Flight:

MidMichiganHonorFlight.org

Talons Out Honor Flight: TalonsOutHonorFlight.org

National Mall and Memorial Parks: nps.gov/nama

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