

**CHAPTER 58 VETS VISIT MEMORIAL DURING WASHINGTON
HONOR TOUR JUNE 28, 2011**

by Louis Arana-Barradas
Tampa Bay Chapter 58

Three TREA Tampa Bay Chapter 58 officers were among 70 World War II veterans who traveled to Washington, D.C., on June 28 to visit the National World War II Memorial.

Retired Chief Master Sgt. Louis Arana, Chapter 58 president, retired Chief Master Sgt. Leonard Black, 1st vice president, and retired Master Sgt. Carlos Barradas, a chapter director, went on the trip. All are veterans of World War II and the Korean and Vietnam wars.

The one-day, whirlwind, all-expenses-paid “honor tours” commemorate the service of World War II veterans, 1st Vice Black said. The Honor Flight of West Central Florida, the regional hub of the national Honor Flight Network, sponsored the flight. He is also the Honor Flight’s vice president.

The vets, all in their 80s and 90s, arrived at the St. Petersburg-Clearwater International Airport before dawn. That is when the VIP treatment started.

A large group of people greeted them, including volunteers, firefighters, police officers, local officials and “guardians” who accompanied them on the trip. A young singer serenaded the vets with melodies from the war era. After a quick breakfast, the vets — about half in wheelchairs — boarded the flight, all wearing their uniform of the day: an Honor Flight polo shirt and ball cap.

“We were issued a carryon bag containing ‘goodies,’ including ball point pens, water, a disposable camera and literature. On board were three doctors and three nurses who volunteered their time,” Director Barradas said.

As the airplane taxied for takeoff, President Arana said, “The fire department gave us a water cannon sendoff. That was very impressive.”

The farewell was just the beginning of a day filled with honor, pride, pomp and memories. As soon as the Allegiant Air charter flight touched down at Washington’s Dulles International Airport, the fun resumed. A welcome party awaited the vets.

“There was a large group of people at the airport waiting for us with welcome signs, waving the American flag, shaking our hands and thanking us for our service,” President Arana said. The reception was quite different from the one he received in 1966, when he arrived in Tampa after a one-year tour in Vietnam. He came home to jeers and curses. “We never got a welcome home after Vietnam,” he said. “The reception we received in Washington brought tears to my eyes,” he said.

Most of the vets had never visited the memorial, which opened in 2004 — nearly 60 years after the end of World War II. First Vice Black said everyone was excited to make the journey, though some were not in the best of health. From the start, a volunteer guardian tagged along with each vet.

After their hero’s welcome, the group boarded buses and went to the U.S. Marine Corps Memorial — the Iwo Jima Memorial. From there, the group visited the World War II memorial. Then they visited the Lincoln, Korean War and Vietnam War memorials. The tour took about five hours.

“The day was very emotional, although very tiresome. But the generosity of the people compensated for the weather and the walking,” Director Barradas said. According to the pedometer he was wearing, “I walked 11,000 steps.”

Director Barradas said one of the most impressive things about the trip was meeting a group of Vietnamese Nuns praying for peace at the Vietnam Memorial. “One of them approached me and thanked me and others for fighting for their country,” he said. Though he didn’t have to go to Vietnam, “I accepted her thanks on behalf of those who did.”

The trip was a success, 1st Vice Black said. The veterans made new friends, took photos, reminisced about their service and marveled at all the fuss made on their behalf. Not one vet was missing a smile, he said. First Vice Black said he would not forget the 91-year-old former Navy Seabee, Thaddeus Pollard. The vet’s son flew in from Illinois to accompany his father. “He told us he wanted to surprise his dad,” he said.

The son, John Pollard, said the Honor Flight was a priceless gift to men who may never have had the chance to visit the memorial. Many of the vets “still bore the effects of wounds they suffered those many decades ago,” he said.

Some of the men had to use canes and others needed walkers. But “every single one had their chest out and head held high,” the junior Pollard said. “Each with the look of a child at Christmas, excited about being granted the chance to see the memorial built in their honor. Their mere presence causes me to mumble under my breath, ‘Thank you gentlemen. Thank you for giving me and my family the gift of freedom.’ ”

It is that kind of reaction that keeps 1st Vice Black volunteering to help other veterans make the trip. “It’s an honor to help,” he said. The organization is considering starting trips for Korean and Vietnam war veterans, too.

After a long day, the vets returned to the airport for a grand sendoff, though bad weather delayed their departure by two hours. But when they arrived back at the St. Petersburg-Clearwater airport at about 9:30 p.m., a crowd of people still waited to welcome the vets back home — as heroes. There were family and friends, plus Honor Flight volunteers, a group of cadets from MacDill Air Force Base, a group from the Patriot Guard and Boy Scouts waiting to greet the vets.

Army Maj. Gen. Mike Jones, U.S. Central Command chief of staff, welcomed the vets home. “I saluted him and he shook my hand. And in his hand he had a command coin that he presented me,” President Arana said. The general presented each vet with a commemorative coin.

“Every where we went, we were greeted by strangers who thanked us for our service to the nation. Needless to say, it was a very emotional day,” Director Barradas said. “I’m very pleased to have attended.” First Vice Black said all World War II vets are eligible to make the Honor Flight, which are funded by private donations. There are about 450 veterans signed up to take one of the flights. The group accepts donations or letters to the veterans. To participate, e-mail the chief at lblack1927@aol.com, or call the flight at 727-498-6079.

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TREA Tampa Bay Chapter 58 members, left to right, Director Carlos Barradas, President Louis Arana and 1st Vice President Leonard Black posed with singer Lisa Catalino at the St. Petersburg-Clearwater International Airport before departing on their Honor Flight, on June 28, 2011. Seventy World War II veterans took part in the Honor Flight of West Central Florida tour to the National World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C. (Photo by John O'Leary)



TREA Tampa Bay Chapter 58 members, left to right, President Louis Arana, 1st Vice President Leonard Black and Director Carlos Barradas stand in front of the Field of Stars at the National World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C., on June 28, 2011. (Photo by John O'Leary)



TREA Tampa Bay Chapter president, Louis Arana, left, and Director Carlos Barradas stand in front of the reflective wall of the Korean War Veterans Memorial on June 28, 2011. (Photo by John O'Leary)



TREA Tampa Bay Chapter 58 Director Carlos Barradas, left, and President Louis Arana visited the pillar dedicated to Puerto Rican troops at the National World War II memorial on June 28, 2011. (Photo by John O'Leary)



The first stop on the Honor Flight of West Central Florida trip to Washington, D.C., was to the U.S. Marine Corps Memorial — the Iwo Jima Memorial. Seventy World War II veterans made the trip to visit the National World War II Memorial on June 28, 2011. (Photo by John O'Leary)