



NALC members

honor

veterans through

flight

Millions of people visit war memorials in Washington, DC, each year, but many military veterans who fought in the wars the monuments were built to remember have never visited them. With that in mind, the Honor Flight Network works to assure that vets, including many aging veterans of World War II and the Korean War, get to experience firsthand the memorials that honor them.

This non-profit, volunteer-led group transports veterans from all over the country to the nation's capital for a tour of the memorials. Since it was founded in 2005, the network has taken more than 180,000 veterans to see the memorials, giving priority to older or severely ill vets. Most veterans travel with a "guardian" to help him or her handle the logistics of the day. There is no cost to the veterans.

Canoga Park, CA Branch 4006 President **Jill Lemons** learned a great deal about her father's service in World War II when she accompanied him as his guard-

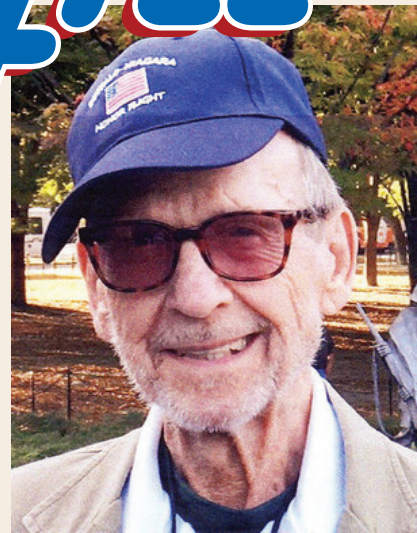
ian on an honor flight for about 80 veterans from the San Diego area in 2015. Her father, Sidney Zimman, was 91 at the time.

Zimman volunteered for the Marine Corps a few months after the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 and was sent to fight in the Pacific. He flew in the back of an SBD Dauntless dive bomber, serving as the aircraft's "radio gunner." Zimman operated the radio when necessary, but most of the time he sat backward to use the aircraft's rear-facing gun to defend the plane against attack.

After several battles, Zimman returned to finish his service on the mainland in late 1944 and was honorably discharged in 1946. A quarter of the flight crew members in Zimman's squadron died for their country and didn't make it home.

When the San Diego-area chapter of the Honor Flight Network asked if he would like to go on a trip to Washington, Zimman said he would go, but only if his daughter came along as his guardian.

"It is an amazing experience," Lemons said. "They treat them so well from Day 1."



Phil Wasiak



Zimman's honor flight experience began with a send-off by the United Service Organizations (USO) at the airport. On the flight, organizers surprised the veterans with "mail call," presenting them first with letters from local students and veterans' group leaders that thanked them for their service, many read aloud by the vets. Next came more personal letters from the veterans' own children and grandchildren.

"The most emotional part of that trip was reading those letters," Lemons said.

Once in Washington, DC, the veterans went on a whirlwind tour of 11 different memorials, monuments and other significant sites, including the World War II Memorial on the National Mall and the Marine Corps Memorial in nearby Arlington, VA.

Though all of the veterans were elderly, they didn't tire, Lemons said. At a dinner after the tour, her father was still swapping stories with fellow veterans and their families when she went to bed.

"It's so rejuvenating for them," she said. "Most of those gentlemen never talked about the war at all prior to this." Lemons said she knew nothing about her father's military service until a family member learned in 1998 that he was entitled to additional medals for his service, including the Distinguished Flying Cross, and he was awarded the medals.

On the way home, the celebration continued as well-wishers gave the warriors a belated heroes' welcome. People dressed in 1940s-era clothes greeted them at the San Diego airport with banners and cheers. "They never had that when they came home from the war," Lemons said.

After the trip, Lemons and her father began helping the Honor Flight Network raise funds for more flights. She accompanies her father at fundraising events, such as golf tournaments and poker runs, and events at local military museums and veterans organizations. At the events, Zimman often speaks about his experiences in the war and on his honor flight.

"It's completely funded by donations," she said, "and it's very expensive to fly 80 World War II vets to Washington, DC," each with a guardian. Such a flight from San Diego can cost \$250,000, she said.

After a trip from San Diego planned last spring

Jill Lemons and her father, Sidney Zimman, took an honor flight to Washington, DC, in 2015.



was canceled, Lemons and her father helped the organization raise enough money to complete the journey last month.

The organization gives priority to World War II and Korean War veterans who are elderly or have health problems to help assure that these men and women get a chance to be honored before they die. For some, the experience comes just in time.

Phil Wasiak, a member of Buffalo-Western New York Branch 3, joined an honor flight that departed from the Buffalo area last November.

Wasiak served in the Air Force as a medic from 1950 to 1954 at the rank of staff sergeant. After he was discharged, he carried mail in the Niagara Falls, NY, area for 30 years until he retired in 1985.

"He was really excited about the trip," said Wasiak's guardian for the trip, Virginia Ellers. "He was so excited he cried." Wasiak had poor eyesight, so he depended on Ellers and members of his family to guide him. He passed away seven months later at age 87.

The Honor Flight Network operates trips from 131 regional hubs in 46 states. More than 27,000 veterans, some of them quite advanced in years, are on a waiting list for an honor flight, the group said. For more information or to donate, go to honorflight.org. **PR**