

## Military families fighting cancer get escort to Walt Disney World

Military and Veterans Initiatives manager Randy Stillinger helps coordinate American's support of veterans, active military members and their families by supporting various nonprofit organizations and events, including special charter flights. Here, he shares his story of a recent Honor Flight to Walt Disney World for families facing their toughest battle yet – cancer.

There have been several eye-opening experiences since I was hired by American almost 18 months ago. The most recent one occurred the weekend before many Americans gathered at the lake to barbecue and watch fireworks light up the night sky to celebrate our nation's independence.

On June 29, 19 military families boarded an Envoy aircraft at DCA bound for Orlando, Florida (MCO) on an Honor Flight unlike any other. Waiting for them on the ramp at MCO were two buses that would whisk them away for four days of fun in the sun at Walt Disney World. What made this flight so special was that each of the families is fighting a battle that's far from the wars in Iraq or Afghanistan. The battle these military service members are fighting now is cancer. For several of the passengers, the illness was in its later stages.

The common denominator for each of these military families was that either the service member or their spouse is a patient in the Oncology Department at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center outside of Washington, D.C. The trip's mission was not only to thank them for their service to our nation, but also to give them respite from rigorous treatment and provide valuable vacation time together as a family.

Although this is the second year that American's Military and Veterans Initiatives team has coordinated this trip, known as Salute to the Troops – Orlando, I was unable to go along last year. This was actually my first experience working with late stage cancer patients, so I was a little unsure about what to expect.

Planning and coordination started several months ago as we teamed up with like-minded organizations and companies. It was truly a team effort that involved American, Envoy, the Gary Sinise Foundation, USO of Metro Washington, D.C., the Tug McGraw Foundation, the Airpower Foundation and of course the Walt Disney Company.

Walt Disney World pulled out all of the stops to ensure that these special families had a memorable experience unlike any other. The first indication that Disney cared was the warm welcome as cast members from the Boardwalk Resort came out in droves to cheer the special guests as they got off the buses. From there it was first class service all the way.



Among other amenities, Disney provided VIP tour guides for the families. This service allowed our families to maximize their time, avoid the long lines, get a view of Disney behind the scenes and cram as much fun into those four days as possible. But while there was plenty of fun enjoyed by the families, the cancer diagnosis shared by 19 of our guests was never far away.

Besides the physical appearances of baldness and frailty, fatigue and sickness took a huge toll in the heat and humidity of central Florida. Some of the patients used canes, others required wheelchairs to cover long distances across four separate parks.

The moment that had the most impact on me occurred during lunch on our first full day. I watched as a father of two young girls, a veteran of the U.S. Navy, made the tough decision to leave the park and return to their hotel room. Brain surgery had already taken a toll on his body, causing significant memory loss. I wondered how much of this trip he would actually remember, but the weather and long walking distances were just too much for him. I noted the looks on the girls' faces as they realized that dad wouldn't be spending the rest of the day with them and their mom. It was heartbreaking because they probably understood how special this vacation was, and more importantly, they probably understand how precious time with their dad is.

In addition to my experiences with these families battling the toughest fight of their lives, the trip helped me realize that you can provide charter flights with extra snacks for the kids, awesome resort hotel rooms, great food, unlimited Fast Passes to bypass long lines, and VIP access to one of the best vacation spots in the world, but there are some things that money just can't buy.

It reminds me of a saying that we used often in the Army when planning missions: "The enemy always gets a vote." In this case, that enemy is cancer and the brutal treatment in the attempt to eradicate it from the body. You can provide a VIP experience for families who undoubtedly deserve it, but cancer is strong and fights back.

As we pulled out of the parking lot on Sunday, the buses slowed down as we passed a group of Disney cast members who had stopped what they were doing to wave goodbye to our guests on their way back to the airport. Some donned the white, over-sized Mickey Mouse gloves as they waved goodbye. Others waved American flags in salute to their service to our nation and their sacrifice. Those on the bus waved back in appreciation for an incredible trip.

And as we drove back to the airport, I recalled what we were told a week before as we made final preparations for this trip. We were told that two of last year's guests had passed away and that another had recently entered hospice care. It reminded me that for some of those on the bus, this may be their last vacation together as a family.

In addition to my appreciation for the support from great companies and organizations, this trip helped me appreciate simple things like spending time with my family, even when it's not under ideal conditions. I also appreciate our fellow team members, who volunteered their time to be away from their families to fly the charter flight, coordinate logistics or even act as babysitter for young children which allowed parents the opportunity to ride some of the big kid rides.

Finally, this trip helped me appreciate our company, which not only supports those who serve and sacrifice for our nation through organizations like Snowball Express, the Gary Sinise Foundation and the Medal of Honor Foundation, but also Stand Up To Cancer, an organization that is taking great strides in fighting this fierce enemy.



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