American Airlines Newsroom

NEWS RELEASE

Stories of sacrifice and valor told on the trip of a lifetime

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Soaring Valor flights are life-changing trips for those who volunteer. The special charters fly World War II veterans to New Orleans to visit the museum built in their honor. As they are escorted on a three-day trip, including a patriotic send off, celebratory welcoming and recognition dinner, it is the moment the veterans enter the National WWII Museum that volunteers begin to understand the importance of the journey.

The veterans' eyes widen and you can see the memories flood them. And then, they begin to talk, some of them telling their stories for the first time.

For 21-year-old Flight Attendant Tyler Rawlings, the chance to join and serve these heroes was an amazing opportunity.

Tyler, who is based out of Chicago, was the first to respond to the email soliciting volunteers. He has strong family ties to the military, including two veterans of WWII who have since passed away.

> "My family was a part of this war and had a connection with these veterans. They are the last part of this generation. It's a privilege to be able to connect with them and hear their stories."
> — Tyler Rawlings, Flight Attendant, Chicago

Through the partnership with the Gary Sinise Foundation, American has flown hundreds of WWII veterans to see their museum on charter flights, staffed with volunteers. The trip from Chicago is the fourth of five trips scheduled this year.

Gary Sinise invited students from his alma mater, Highland Park High School, as well as Deerfield High School to participate. As part of the Soaring Valor program, 32 high school students were coupled with a veteran partner and given the privilege to listen to first-hand accounts of war. It was a living history lesson. The goal: Bridge the gap between the Greatest Generation and younger generations, preserve these stories and memories of valor and celebrate those who fought for the freedom we enjoy today.

On board the flight, Gary passed out lunch to each passenger, pausing to chat and listen to their stories. American team members saluted the heroes over the public address system. Some of the team members who volunteered were fueled by their own military connection. Flight Attendant Nikki Romero served in the Navy for more than three years. Humbled by the modesty of our heroes, she thanked the veterans onboard for paving the way for her in the military.

Tyler forged a special connection with 96-year-old U.S. Army veteran Eddie Rollins who was a baker in the war. With both hands on his cane and eyes welled up with tears, Eddie described how grateful and blessed his life has been. He said that Soaring Valor is one of the highlights of his life.

Eddie said that he hopes no other generation has to go through what he went through, but he anticipates that the accounts of war will have an impact on Tyler and the students. “[Tyler’s] my friend. He’s like a sponge, and he’s absorbing what I’ve been telling him,” he continued. “I’ve been through a lot in my lifetime, and I hope I helped him. I want him to treat everybody like he wants to be treated.”

The high school seniors, who all had to earn their way on the trip, learned valuable lessons, too.

“Wow, we learned about that in history class. That was one of the craziest days,” exclaimed Aaron Epstein, a Deerfield senior, as he leaned over the interactive display with his assigned partner, U.S. Army veteran Dick Grout.

The memories rushed back as Dick watched an interpretation of the Battle of Normandy, or D-Day, on the screen below him. Dick was part of one of the first platoons sent to Omaha Beach on the heavily fortified beaches of Normandy to fight Nazi Germany June 6, 1944. Dick’s platoon was tasked with the mission to open an exit for vehicles through a concrete wall that separated the beach from the hills where the Germans were firing. It was his first experience under heavy fire, and he was only a few years older than Aaron at the time.

“Remember that you and I are all beneficiaries of the freedom that was fought for by the actions and sacrifices of honored men in this room,” Gary said to the high school students during a welcoming dinner. “Had the Allies been defeated, and the evil powers prevailed, we would all be living in a much different world. You have the tremendous opportunity to get to know your veterans. Listen. Learn. And, write your story down about what you learned here and the veteran you are so fortunate to spend time with.”

Aaron said he has a momentous duty to pass these stories down to future generations. He plans to take good notes, write about his experience and keep in touch with Dick. “This experience has made the World War II era feel a lot closer to reality,” Aaron said.

Dick said he hopes Aaron walks away with a newfound respect for America and the reason the United States joined the war. When asked if he considers himself a hero, Dick took one long, deep breath. Emotion flooded his face, and he said, “There were a whole bunch of them … Not one guy, not one guy.”

Soaring Valor arrived back to Chicago carrying an aircraft full of new friends — each passenger connected by their shared freedom, the understanding of its price and how that sacrifice links us all.

“That was a smooth landing, by the way,” U.S. Navy veteran Archie Holte joked to his nephew, Captain Kirk Holte, who volunteered to fly the charter’s return flight. Archie is one of five Holte brothers who served in WWII. He spent the trip recounting war stories and educating Kirk on several topics, including the submarine that he was aboard during the war.

The museum had an old submarine on display, like the one Archie fought aboard in the 1940s. He even saw a photo of a good friend who had since passed away, sparking memories of camaraderie and friendship. But, his favorite part was the quality time spent with his nephew.

“American does a great job of honoring our veterans,” Kirk said. “Like I told all of the veterans: I didn’t serve, and I wish I would have. I was glad to do this small thing to serve them. It’s very little for me to give back to those who gave so much. So, it’s an honor.”

WWII veteran Eddie Rollins and Flight Attendant Tyler Rawlings made a special bond during the trip.

WWII veteran Dick Grout and high school senior Aaron Epstein look at an exhibit at the National WWII Museum.

WWII veteran submariner Archie Holte poses with his nephew Captain Kirk Holte, who volunteered to fly the charter.

Team members who volunteered to work the charter flight, from left: Flight Attendant Tyler Rawlings, Flight Attendant Nikki Romero, Captain Craig Miller, Flight Attendant Rebecca Doyle, First Officer Tom Meagher and Flight Attendant Benjamin Blais.