American Airlines Newsroom

NEWS RELEASE

Soaring into the past

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John Bellefontaine and his son, American Airlines Captain Steve Bellefontaine, share many things — genetics, veteran status and now memories from the trip of a lifetime. Earlier this month, John, a World War II veteran, and Steve, a Gulf War veteran, took part in a Soaring Valor trip, special charter flights that transport WWII veterans to New Orleans to visit the National WWII Museum. A program of the Gary Sinise Foundation, these trips are often an emotional journey for the veterans, some of whom feel like they are reliving their war days while they move through the museum and recall memories long forgotten.

For Steve, sharing the experience with his father was particularly meaningful. In his 28 years with American, Steve never had the chance to pilot a flight with his father on board. Knowing the Soaring Valor charter presented a unique opportunity, as it is staffed by American Airlines team members who donate their time, Steve volunteered to fly the plane from San Antonio to New Orleans.

“It was a big deal for me to fly my dad,” said Steve, who is based in Chicago. “He hasn’t flown for 37 years, and he’s been in his little house in the middle of the country outside of Jacksonville, Florida. In 25 years, he’s probably been out of the house overnight maybe twice, so it took some convincing.” But taking his 93-year-old father to the WWII museum was a bucket list item that Steve couldn’t pass up. So, with the help of his stepmom and sister, and the promise of a rented lounge chair delivered to their hotel room, John finally agreed to come.

“If I [passed] on this chance, I would have regretted it,” Steve said. “I said to myself for years, ‘I never got to bring him to Washington, D.C. I really regret that, but maybe there will be another opportunity.’” And luckily, there was.

Participants of the 14th Soaring Valor trip gather for a gate ceremony at San Antonio (SAT) before their flight to New Orleans (MSY).

ORD-based Captain Steve Bellefontaine and his father, John Bellefontaine, move through a hero's welcome line upon their arrival at MSY.

SHARING STORIES OF SACRIFICE

In San Antonio, 40 WWII veterans were each paired with a high school student from Grapevine Faith Christian School, located near Dallas. As part of the Soaring Valor program, students accompany the veterans on the three-day trip, which is filled with celebratory dinners, guest speakers and entertainment. The goal is simple: thank the veterans for their sacrifice and service and preserve their history by passing down their memories to the younger generation.

John knows all too well how easily history can be lost. His U.S. Army unit during the war — the 551st Parachute Infantry Battalion (PIB) — is commonly referred to as "The Lost Battalion." For more than 40 years, there was little record of its existence until its veterans began seeking recognition.

John's story began in 1943 at age 18 when, a year after immigrating to the United States from Canada with his family, he was drafted, assigned to the Army Infantry and sent to basic training at Fort McClellan in Anniston, Alabama.

"I was due to go to the Pacific theater," John remembered. "And I didn't want to go. So, there were only two options: Either you apply for helicopter pilot or you join the paratroops." John initially applied for pilot training, but at 5'7", he was too short to reach the pedals and didn't qualify. "So then I volunteered for parachute training because I wanted the extra money," John said. "It was hazardous pay. And they accepted me." He was then assigned to the 551st PIB.

On board the charter flight, John and his new travel buddy, high school junior Sydney Mammoser, settled comfortably into the front of first class, where John could keep a close eye on his son. When a group of veterans made their way to the front lavatory before takeoff, John asked, "Are you leaving?" before joking, "I know my son's flying the plane, but that's no reason to get off!"

With Steve busy working, John and Sydney took the chance to get to know one another. Sydney was motivated to participate in Soaring Valor by her own family connection to a World War II veteran, which she wrote about in her application essay. "My dad's dad, my grandfather … died in the '80s, and he was in WWII," Sydney said. "I thought this would be a really great way to learn about someone whom I never met who was really important to my dad."

WWII veteran John Bellefontaine and Sydney Mammoser, a junior at Grapevine Faith Christian School, are paired

together for the Soaring Valor trip.

HISTORY COMES TO LIFE

From the water cannon salute prior to departure to a hero's welcome at every stop, private performances by the Victory Belles vocal trio and police escorts in New Orleans, the veterans were made to feel like royalty. But it was upon arrival at the museum that attendees were truly reminded of what the trip was about.

The visit began with a private showing of Beyond All Boundaries, a documentary produced and narrated by Tom Hanks. The 4D experience uses stories, archive footage and special effects to place viewers inside the battles of World War II. The film transported the visiting veterans back in time, bringing a few to tears.

After the film, the veterans split into groups, each following a museum volunteer through the exhibits. But John had his own ideas. Despite having had surgery a few years ago to remove his hip, he moved faster than any veteran on the trip. Operating a motorized wheelchair, John raced through the exhibits, often leaving Steve, Sydney and their tour guide in the dust. But with limited time to view a museum set on six acres, John was on a mission. "He waits for no one," Sydney said with a laugh.

Once John entered the European Theater Galleries, his memories began to take life. Spotting a map of Sicily, he was reminded of his deployment to Europe in April 1944. "It took 33 days to go by Liberty ship from Virginia to North Africa to Sicily," he recounted. Their ship survived several attacks by Germans in the Mediterranean, he added, as he moved through the installation.

Around each corner of the exhibit space, more artifacts sparked a memory. Pointing to a combat food ration box, he noted, "A chocolate bar was equivalent to a steak then." In a case of weapons, he spotted a Luger pistol like the one he recalled taking off a fallen German soldier. "It's very realistic," John said, taking in the museum surroundings. "I haven't seen anything like this. It's great."

But it was their next stop on the museum tour — the Battle of the Bulge exhibit – that helped tell perhaps the most unforgettable story of John's time in the war. The six-week battle was the U.S. Army's largest in World War II. On Jan. 7, 1944, the 551st PIB was assigned to take over the village of Rochelinval, Belgium. "They assigned us a hill that the Germans had secured very well," John recalled. "And they had Tiger tanks up on the hill — Tiger tanks are 70-ton tanks — and our mission was to secure the hill." With a lack of artillery and proper winter gear for the bitterly cold conditions, it was a brutal battle for the 551st. While they successfully captured the village, by the end, they had lost more than 75 percent of their unit.

“I went to the hospital — I had frozen feet,” said John. Added Steve, “He had frostbite in the hospital for a month. And they didn’t know if they were going to have to amputate his feet.” Luckily, John’s feet eventually regained circulation.

Once John was released from the hospital, he learned his unit had been dismantled, and, along with it — they’d later find out — most of the records of its existence. The remaining soldiers were absorbed into the 82nd Airborne Division, and John was discharged from the Army in December 1945. He would later reenlist and serve in the United States Army Signal Corps from 1947 to 1964.

Coincidentally, Steve, who was a pilot in the U.S. Air Force and later the U.S. Air Force Reserve, was stationed at Pope Air Force Base in North Carolina from 1984 to 1988. While there, he flew the C-130 Hercules aircraft carrying the 82nd Airborne Division.

John Bellefontaine stops at an exhibit on the Battle of the Bulge at the National WWII Museum and shares his memories of the battle with museum volunteer Vaughn Brennan.

A TRIP TO REMEMBER

Today, John is one of six remaining survivors from the 551st PIB. Like many WWII veterans, he didn’t talk about the war for years. But in his 70s, he began to take an interest and learned that survivors from his unit had created a website and were holding reunions. As a result of the veterans’ campaigning, they received a long-awaited honor. In 2001, surviving members of the 551st PIB were awarded the Presidential Unit Citation for their heroism during the Battle of the Bulge.

About a decade ago, Steve accompanied his father on two of his unit’s reunions, where he began to hear his father’s stories for the first time. But Soaring Valor provided him a different perspective. “It’s the little details that I didn’t know about,” he said. “Just listening to him talk to other vets, I kind of got a better idea about what he did.”

Steve said he was touched to witness the connection the Greatest Generation had with the next generation. “Watching the bonding between the high schoolers and veterans — that I was more amazed about. It impacted me more than anything.”

And, of course, that’s the very mission of Soaring Valor. “This is a moment in time you will carry with you always,” Gary Sinise, Chairman and President of the Gary Sinise Foundation, told the students. “Remember what you learn here. Remember what you see here. Remember all of it — what you hear from these great Americans — and carry

these lessons in your heart."

Sydney said she will always treasure her time spent with John. "It's been really life changing," she said. "I could tell that it was a difficult time for [John], and I just thought it was [incredible what all] he suffered through — all of that out of love for our country … I think it's important that my generation knows to never take that for granted and have as much love for this country as the veterans of WWII had to make sure we stayed free."

Sydney Mammoser (back left), Steve Bellefontaine (back right) and John Bellefontaine (front) stop to pose with Gary Sinise while visiting the National WWII Museum.