

180th member guides heroes on 1st Honor Flight

By Tech. Sgt. Annette Kornasiewicz,
Public Affairs Editor

As the inaugural Honor Flight of Northwest Ohio taxied down the runway at Toledo Express Airport April 30, 2008, 29 veterans looked out the plane's windows to see a line of 180th members, along with our Honor Guard, come to attention and render a respectful salute from the tarmac.

"That just brought smiles and tears to those veterans," said 1st Sgt. Norman Drzewiecki, Information Protection Manager here.

The mission of Honor Flight of Northwest Ohio, one of six Ohio hubs in the national Honor Flight Network, according to their website, is "to fly American veterans to Washington, D.C., for the day completely free of charge, and operating solely from contributions of time, money and effort of its associates, guardians and donors." Drzewiecki was one of 23 volunteers to escort these World War II soldiers on their pilgrimage to visit the war memorials. He enlisted the help of his American Legion Post 553 - Adam's Township, to donate the \$350 he needed for the flight.

"Your job as guardian was to be at the beckoned call of those you are assigned to," said Drzewiecki. "I walked along and listened to them. You just were there for them as a companion for the day. It was an honor."

The veterans visited the World War II memorial in the morning, then had lunch with the Honorable Marcy Kaptur, Congresswoman, and former Senator Bob Dole. They also viewed the Korean and Vietnam memorials before traveling back to Toledo.

"They seemed to want to talk about their experiences," said Drzewiecki.

One veteran, Merle Altaffer, a former Army infantry soldier, particularly touched Drzewiecki with his recollections of time spent in the Battle of the Bulge.

"He said that he spent the entire winter of 1944 outside. He never once went in doors," said Drzewiecki. "He said, 'Some days, you woke up and death was all around you.'"

Still, Drzewiecki said the main sentiment expressed by the former



Photo by Tech. Sgt. Annette Kornasiewicz, Public Affairs Editor
Merle Altaffer, an Army infantry veteran of World War II, waits to board the inaugural Honor Flight of Northwest Ohio from the Toledo Express Airport April 30, 2008. Several 180th members, including our Honor Guard, were on hand as the vets prepared to journey to Washington, D.C.

soldiers was a sense that they were just doing their jobs, fulfilling their duty to their country back then.

"They never looked at the despair and shock of war as a stopping point. They just kept pressing forward," said Drzewiecki.

The Honor Flight of Northwest Ohio is planning to continue the flights monthly, from April through November. Veterans are taken in the order the applications are received. Because it is estimated that we are losing 1,200 of these heroes daily, an exception is made for any terminally ill veteran, as they are given top priority on the first available flight.

"Some of these vets never got a welcome home after the war," said Drzewiecki. "I think the whole experience was deeply satisfying for them."

To learn more about this organization, you may visit their website at www.honorflightnwo.org.



Photo by Tech. Sgt. Annette Kornasiewicz, Public Affairs Editor

1st Sgt. Norman Drzewiecki, 180th Information Protection Manager, enjoys breakfast with Merle Altaffer, a former Army infantry soldier and veteran of World War II and the Battle of the Bulge, just before boarding the Honor Flight. Drzewiecki was a guardian to four veterans on their journey to view the war memorials in Washington, D.C.