

Coastal Georgia Honor Flight receives encouraging donor gift

By ANNA HALL The Brunswick News | Posted: Tuesday, February 17, 2015 12:00 am

Four years ago, Duane Harris experienced one of the most memorable and magical days of his life.

He joined his then 90-year-old father, Tex Harris, an Air Force veteran who fought in World War II and the Korean War, on a flight to Washington, D.C., where the two joined a cohort of veterans to view the World War II memorial.

“The whole thing was amazing, simply life-changing,” Harris said. “When we got on the plane, the pilot gave a speech about the significance of these veterans to our privileged world. And when we got off the plane, there were some 200 people waiting at the gate to cheer for them. There wasn’t a dry eye among us.”

The trip, organized by the Savannah charter of Honor Flight, was one of the last memories Harris has of his father, who died shortly thereafter.

It, too, has been a major catalyst in a new crusade Harris and a host of other volunteers are undertaking.

The Coastal Georgia Honor Flight team is hoping to send nearly 30 World War II veterans to the nation’s capital to see, first-hand, the memorial erected to commemorate their service to their country.

Honor Flight organizers are trying to raise funds to support the trip.

Valerie Hepburn, former College of Coastal Georgia president who is now the director of Communities of Coastal Georgia, is among those helping Harris.

“These are men and women who fought to save the world,” Hepburn said.

The national Honor Flight program was launched in 2005, after completion of the World War II Memorial. To date, through some 130 hubs across the country, more than 100,000 veterans have traveled to see the memorial and other military sites in Washington.

The Coastal Georgia Hub, one of only three in Georgia, was formally recognized by the national organization last September.

The Coastal Georgia Honor Flight will depart from Brunswick Golden Isles Airport and will be the only state hub providing a chartered flight travel for veterans. Twenty-six veterans already

have registered or expressed an interest in the flight, with more than 100 individuals signing up to volunteer.

Earlier this week, Harris and Hepburn received more encouraging news: an anonymous donor has volunteered to match every donor gift to the organization up to \$10,000. The match offer will be good until the end of March.

With the price tag for the trip estimated around \$65,000, the extra support is certainly appreciated, Harris and Hepburn agreed.

“That means every dollar is doubled,” Harris said. “This is going to make a major difference and have a huge impact in making this dream a reality for so many deserving veterans.”

With the World War II memorial opening in 2005, many veterans have never had the chance to make the trip.

This opportunity is an outstanding effort to help honor these individuals, Hepburn said.

“Without the service of these individuals, just think of how different our lives would be today,” she said. “This one trip can make a small impact on their own lives and help them feel how much we as a nation appreciate them as veterans.”

Since these veterans are elderly, ranging around 80- and 90-years-old, the trip needs to accommodate their health status. To make efforts easier for them, the flight and tour will occur within a single 24-hour period, leaving at 5 a.m.

Though the journey may seem quick, it will nonetheless have a lasting impact on the veterans and their accompanying party, Harris said.

“We are seeing a tremendous response already from the community, with people willing to help,” Harris said. “I think people are truly recognizing the importance of this journey to these veterans.

“We are losing around 640 veterans a day. It’s time we take time to honor them and all they have done to protect and serve our country.”