

Honor Flight 2023

We, as Americans, regard few places in this country as truly sacred. Places where a tangible connection can be felt with the past and our nation's heritage. Many of these sites have a religious affiliation or mark a specific historical event, but they all elicit a strong emotional response from those who visit. You will likely observe visitors silently pausing to reflect due to the gravity of what these places represent.

My name is Ryan Grebe, and I'm a Fire Captain for the CAL FIRE - San Luis Obispo Unit. Last month, I had the honor of accompanying 92 veterans to Washington, DC, with my friend and fellow Fire Captain Josh Lorenzo, as a guardian for Honor Flight Central Coast. Over three days, we toured several of our nation's memorials and historic sites. I was paired with two Vietnam-era veterans, Jim Hanto, an airman with the US Air Force, and Joe Rodriguez, an infantryman with the US Army. Our job as guardians was to ensure our veterans' needs were taken care of so their trip could be as memorable as possible.

As veterans of Operation Iraqi Freedom, Josh and I have always wanted to visit these memorials in Washington and pay our respects to the millions of men and women who have fought and defended this country before us. For Veterans of the armed forces, our national memorials represent something far more than stone plaques and curated gardens. They represent an acknowledgment from a grateful nation of the ultimate sacrifice one could make: to give one's life in service of others. To forfeit personal safety so others might live in a country free from tyranny and oppression. For Veterans, visiting these memorials is a profoundly personal and meaningful experience.

Some might not fully understand why veterans are revered by so many. These people are the reason we still enjoy the freedoms we do today. They represent the strength, perseverance, and grit that America was built on, and they shouldered immense burdens for us because our country was **and still is** worth fighting for. Most Americans have no idea how lucky they are to live in a free country protected by these brave men and women, most of whom they will never know. When most of our wars are fought on foreign soil, it is easy to forget that these brave Americans paid a price for the prosperity we enjoy today.

As we toured the different memorials, I felt a sense of pride that was hard to articulate. I felt proud to be an American veteran involved in an experience that allowed

me to meet and hear the stories of so many amazing people, including the real heroes of this country. I saw healing occur when men and women, now in their seventies and eighties, approached the memorials of a war they fought as young adults. I saw them weep as they courageously approached the Vietnam wall and found the names of their friends who didn't make it home. To say it was a powerful experience is a severe understatement, and we owe these veterans our deepest gratitude.

You may wonder why this trip was sponsored by Local 2881, the union representing CAL FIRE firefighters. What is the connection between two firefighters embarking on this journey and our fire department? If I had to summarize what I gained from this trip in one word, it would be perspective. Hearing stories from real combat veterans and how they speak about the adversity they faced during various conflicts gave me a new perspective on the challenges I face in my own life. And while our lives as firefighters differ significantly from those who served so long ago, what might happen if we applied a different perspective to the problems we all face every day?

So, after thinking about this idea on the five-hour flight home, I consolidated my thoughts into five lessons these veterans taught me through their stories and honorable service to our country.

1. We are here to serve others, not ourselves.

When I get wrapped up in anger, frustration, and resentment due to things that negatively affect me, I should remember why I am here and what it means to be a public servant. It's not about me; it's about the people I serve in my community and those I lead. It's about making every interaction as good as possible despite how I "feel." I should allow my work to create meaning by truly serving others who need help. Just as our military requires selfless service to accomplish the mission, I should strive to put the needs of those I serve before my own.

2. Take pride in your service, regardless of assignment.

I overheard several veterans feeling guilty for taking a spot on the Honor Flight. They would say, "I wasn't in combat; I shouldn't be here," or "I never left the States during Vietnam, but so many others here were fighting in the jungles, I feel like an imposter." It broke my heart to think that so many veterans who contributed to the protection of our country feel this way, and it reminded me of how I've felt at times during my career. We don't always get to choose our ideal assignment. Sometimes, we work at a slower station or hold a position that doesn't have the admiration and

glory that others might. This should not affect the pride we take in our job. We all contribute to the mission and have a role to play. Instead of comparing our roles to one another, we should do our best where we are and know that our contributions matter, even if it doesn't feel like it. They keep the machine moving, and regardless of our assignment we will be ready when we are called on to perform.

3. It should be better, but it could be worse.

Things aren't always easy working for CAL FIRE; we work long hours away from home and sacrifice time away from our hobbies, friends, and families to perform this job. But when I find myself complaining and giving in to toxic negativity, I should remember that it could be much worse, and it has been for so many others before me. The working conditions have improved significantly in the 20 years since I joined CAL FIRE. This is not to say the work is done; we all know there is a long way to go and several things that need to change, but being grateful for what we do have and how far we've come is a powerful antidote against culture destroying pessimism. Talk to a Vietnam veteran about the working conditions they endured, and I guarantee your perspective will change; it could always be worse.

4. You are stronger than you think.

Sometimes, this profession pushes us to the breaking point and, unfortunately, sometimes past it. While we must recognize our limits and look out for one another's mental health and well-being, there is also an element of resilience that comes from doing hard things. When I was deployed overseas in 2005, there were many things I never thought I would be able to do, including leaving behind my entire life for over a year, but as a result of facing those challenges head-on, I became stronger. I still have to remind myself that I am capable of more than I realize. Like the veterans I met on Honor Flight, when we are oriented towards a meaningful goal alongside a determined team of like-minded individuals, we can accomplish great things.

5. Evil prevails when good men and women do nothing.

I often talk to my coworkers about what's not working and what should change in our unit or department. These conversations are typically filled with a decent amount of criticism and a hint of arrogance. Whether we are talking about how our staffing models should change, our lack of fair compensation, or some other problem at the local or state level, these conversations are more about venting than an-

anything productive. But what the veterans reminded me of is that we have a responsibility to either accept our problems or take action to change them. When true evil threatens America again, and it will, every service-aged adult must answer the age-old question. Will I step up to defend America or will I defer this responsibility to someone else? It made me think about the problems I am neglecting that I actually *could fix*. We don't have to be promoted to Chief or elected to a position in our Union to effect change; we can lead from where we are, in any rank, by focusing on improving what we can. But if we sit idly by as problems remain unsolved, it's on us to either leave, accept them, or take the actions necessary to mitigate them and move the department forward.

These five lessons aren't intended as criticisms of others or the paths they decide to take; we are all accountable for our decisions in this career and life. They are merely a collection of reminders from observing our veterans and reflecting on how I can improve my own mindset. No doubt, I will fall short of these ideals, as we all do occasionally, but like you, I am dedicated to the endless pursuit of improving as best I can. I encourage you to seek an opportunity to serve others in a different capacity, whether serving in another position within our department, volunteering for a good cause, or even as a guardian with Honor Flight. I promise that if you pay attention, you will learn a thing or two and see the world through a different lens, enabling you to serve with greater empathy, gratitude, and confidence.

Thank you to L2881 for sponsoring Josh and I, allowing us to be a part of this powerful experience; serving the men and women to whom we owe so much was truly rewarding.