



## Free because of the brave

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5/25/2010 - HURLBURT FIELD, Fla. -- As this Memorial Day weekend unofficially kicks off the summer, many people are eager to embark on their family vacations, pack the cinemas for the latest blockbuster or just sit back and relax at an outdoor barbecue.

There's no doubt that many of us will be among the millions of airline passengers this weekend who will have to go through the tedious, uncomfortable security checkpoint before getting on a plane.

The process of removing your shoes, jacket, belt and any metal objects or liquids is time-consuming, and standing in line for nearly an hour is hardly considered fun. In the past year, I've missed two flights due to waiting in that line at different airports. No matter how early I arrive, I always seem to end up in a 500-meter dash to get to my gate on time.

But on one special occasion, I observed the check-in process from the perspective of the Transportation Security Administration officials when I volunteered for the Emerald Coast Honor Flight at the Northwest Florida Regional Airport May 5.

While the signature moment of the event was the hundreds of adoring well-wishers welcoming World War II veterans back to Florida that evening, a small group of Hurlburt Airmen and I arrived there at 5 a.m. before takeoff. Our job was to help the veterans through the pre-screen process at the terminal's security checkpoint.

Many of the volunteering Airmen had endured deployment lines and tours in combat zones, but something as simple as asking people to remove their shoes and belts for the metal detector seemed like the most awkward thing they had to do.

TSA screeners may regularly screen passengers of all demographics, but our time was solely reserved for elderly people with canes and wheelchairs. Requesting complete strangers to undergo what some consider a momentary hassle is one thing; assisting them with removing their shoes and helping them stand up takes more time and greater care.

I was also acutely aware of the irony of asking people who fought for freedoms on other continents so long ago to submit to the uncertainties and measures of today's world. I half expected one of them to tell me sarcastically that he fought at Normandy so some little "A1C" wouldn't have to tell him to take off his belt at the airport 65 years later, but that never happened.

Rather than making a fuss or complaining about how times have changed, they empathized and thoroughly complied. Once in a while, some would even thank us for our service--an act that's meaning was not lost on us, since we were so much in their debt.

And it was in the veterans' steadfastness and acceptance in getting through something as minor as removing their shoes earlier that morning that afforded me a brief glimpse into why our society writes books calling them the "greatest generation" and makes movies hailing this heroic "band of brothers."

While few of us knew the men and women personally, we knew of them and, more importantly, what they did. In their moment of calling, they faced an insidious evil that sought to subject the globe to fascism and totalitarianism. They toiled in trenches and beaches against an enemy while dealing with segregation and rationing back home.

In spite of all this, the veterans understood their resolve and ability to defeat the hardship, no matter how



A World War II veteran salutes as he is escorted by a U.S. Navy officer through a saber cordon at the Northwest Florida Regional Airport in Eglin AFB, Fla., May 5, 2010. Several hundred citizens welcomed the veterans back to Florida from their trip to Washington D.C. (DoD photo by U.S. Air Force Senior Airman Matthew Loken)

severe, was greater than any foe's army or arsenal, and would outlast any temporary inconvenience. They knew they were fighting for something larger than the problems they were confronting and had a chance to build a freer world and a better future.

Their ordeal at the checkpoint lasted about an hour, and it was largely overshadowed by their visit to the World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C., and the joyously emotional homecoming later that night. For some of the veterans, the event may have rivaled the outpouring of support during their original return home after seeing that great conflict to its conclusion.

And just as they overcame the tribulations of that decades-old conflict, they knew the lesser inconvenience of passing through the checkpoint was a necessary stop on the way to a greater, more meaningful experience later that day.

Witnessing this made me feel small when I complained about standing in line too long or having to take off my shoes. Although I missed my flight in the past, I still eventually made it to my destination in a trip that lasted hours, not days. Much of that progress and expediency existed because of the likes of the very same people I escorted through security that morning.

This Memorial Day weekend, as we head out on vacations or go to the movies or visit with friends and family over a meal, we should take the time to realize we are free to do so today because of the character of the men and women who fought in that war and the succeeding generations that followed in their footsteps.

As citizens of this country, we are immeasurably grateful for their sacrifice. As Airmen in today's fight, we are forever indebted to their example. No matter where you are or where you will be going May 31, pause to reflect on the fact that you are free because of the brave.