

# Physicians Honor Veterans as Medics on Flights to DC Memorials

Lisa Hildebrand

Like the military veterans they care for, Bill Nietert, MD, and Ryan Gossett, MD, are rather uncomfortable receiving recognition for their efforts. The family physicians with Aspirus Clinic in Mosinee received the Wisconsin Medical Society's 2013 Physician Citizen of the Year Award but reserve the accolades for the hundreds of veterans they've accompanied to Washington, DC, as part of the Never Forgotten Honor Flight.

"We are deeply honored, but frankly, we try to stay in the shadows because we don't want to pull any of the attention away from the veterans," said Dr Gossett "It's nice to be recognized, but it's really about them."

Doctor Gossett has accompanied more than 1100 veterans from northern Wisconsin on all 12 flights, and Dr Nietert has flown on all but one. Both of the family medicine physicians have served on the Board of Directors for the Never Forgotten Honor Flight (<http://www.neverforgottenhonorflight.org/>) since its inception in 2009. The organization is one of the 5 Honor Flight Network hubs in Wisconsin.

Earl Morse, a physician assistant and retired Air Force captain in Ohio, began the Honor Flight Network ([www.honorflight.org](http://www.honorflight.org)) shortly after the World War II memorial was completed in Washington, DC. The first flights took place in May 2005 when 6 small planes flew 12 veterans to visit the memorial. By the end of 2012, the nonprofit organization transported more than 98,500 World War II veterans to Washington, DC, out of 121 hubs in 41 states.

In 2009, one of Dr Nietert's patients told him about a "nearly religious experience" accompanying his uncle on one of the first Honor Flights from Iowa. "He came back, and he basically said 'this is what I'm going to do with whatever life I have



Photo courtesy of Dave Junion

## Never Forgotten Honor Flight

This Wausau-based organization was formed in November 2009 as an affiliate of the national Honor Flight Network. Its goal is to fly area veterans who served during World War II, the Korean War or the Vietnam War to Washington, DC, to visit the memorials erected in their honor. Visit [www.neverforgottenhonorflight.org/](http://www.neverforgottenhonorflight.org/) to learn more.

### Upcoming flights:

- Mission 13 – September 9, 2013
- Mission 14 – October 21, 2013

left," Dr Nietert recalled Mike Thompson as saying. When Thompson told Dr Nietert that they would need medical people for their Honor Flight hub, he quickly agreed to help.

Doctor Nietert was medical director of the Aspirus Kronenwetter Clinic at that time, and he

said it was "serendipity" that he hired Dr Gossett, whose grandfather was a naval aviator in World War II. "He, like a lot of World War II veterans, didn't feel like he did anything special," Dr Gossett said about his grandfather, who passed away in 2001. "That's one of the struggles we find when trying to get veterans to sign up for the trip. They all feel like they were doing their job. I think he felt the same way. The nation called his name, and he signed up and did his job."

Patrick Bradley, whose father was one of the soldiers who raised the flag during the Battle of Iwo Jima during World War II, accompanied the veterans from the Never Forgotten Honor Flight earlier this year. "After spending the day with 100 veterans, he started to understand why his father didn't think he was anything special," Dr Gossett said. "There are all kinds of ways to be touched by this event, but I don't think anybody comes away as the same person that showed up at the airport in the morning."

Doctor Gossett said his work with the Honor



Photo courtesy of Dave Junion

Flight gives him a sense of completeness and purpose. The physicians and at least one other medical person accompany about 100 veterans and more than 50 guardians throughout the day-long trip, which begins when they arrive at the Mosinee airport before 5 AM. "The flight days are exceedingly long, and they're a lot of work," Dr Gossett said. "But I'm not sure that I've ever done anything that's more personally rewarding."

Often, there are close to 1000 people welcoming the veterans back to the Mosinee airport around 10 PM. "A lot of people are under the assumption that all these vets had this big, huge welcome home party," Dr Gossett said. "They didn't. Most of these guys were over for a while as occupying forces and slowly trickled home. If you talk to the veterans, the welcome home celebration (after the Honor Flight) is probably one of the most emotional events for them."

Doctor Nietert recalled one veteran who didn't want to leave the airport after the trip to Washington, DC, and welcome-home celebration.

"There's this one old codger who didn't want to get on the bus to go back to the hotel," he said. After a bit more encouragement, the veteran finally said to Dr Nietert: "Today, I'm a hero. If I get on the bus, I'm going to wake up a nobody. I want this day to last forever."

In addition to their flight day responsibilities and Board meetings, Drs Gossett and Nietert spend countless hours reviewing each veteran's medical form to identify any possible problems that may occur during the trip. "If we feel like we need to, we will call the veterans or their physicians to get a better sense of what their needs will be and figure out how to get that arranged," Dr Gossett explained.

Much of the care they provide on the flight day is routine – checking oxygen levels and giving insulin shots, and treating cuts and bruises. "We'll basically fly anyone whose oxygen levels can tolerate it," Dr Nietert said, adding that a local hospital donated a simulator to help determine if a veteran will be able to tolerate oxygen levels at 8,000 feet.



Photo courtesy of Dave Junion

Top photo: Ryan Gossett, MD, front left, and Bill Nietert, MD, second row with red cap, chat with other participants on a recent Never Forgotten Honor Flight to Washington, DC.

Bottom photo: The Iwo Jima Memorial at Arlington National Cemetery provides a fitting backdrop for a photo of Bill Nietert, MD, and dozens of veterans from north-central Wisconsin.

Opposite photo: Bill Nietert, MD, and Ryan Gossett, MD, arrive at the airport in Mosinee, Wisconsin, by 5 AM on flight day to make sure the veterans receive the care they need during their trip to Washington, DC.



“We’ve had 2 or 3 veterans who had to be seen in emergency room where we had to do rapid landings,” Dr Nietert said. “We haven’t had to divert, but we’ve had ambulances meet us at the airport a couple of times.”

They also educate community members about the organization and recruit others to serve as guardians and members of the medical team. The day before the trip, they join the guardians and family members at a banquet honoring the veterans.

Both physicians consider the Never Forgotten Honor Flight a natural and logical extension of their work with local nursing homes. Thompson and Jim Campbell, co-founders of the local hub, believe the physicians go far beyond serving as the veterans’ medics and say that’s why they nominated them for the Physician Citizen of the Year Award on behalf of the organization’s Board of Directors.

Drs Nietert and Gossett said they were humbled when they learned they would receive the honor, with Dr Nietert saying: “The only way we’re content accepting any of the recognition is that it brings attention to the Honor Flight in general.”



*Photo courtesy of Dave Junion*

Ryan Gossett, MD, of Aspirus Kronenwetter Clinic talks with some of the veterans on a recent Never Forgotten Honor Flight to Washington, DC, to visit the memorials built in their honor.

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