



1st Lt. Tom Bussjaeger, center, is welcomed home by residents at Lindbergh Field. Bussjaeger, a 91-year-old Encinitas resident, was part of a veterans group who received an all-expense-paid trip to visit war memorials in Washington, D.C. as part of San Diego Honor Flight. Photo by Jared Whitlock

Encinitas veteran receives a hero's welcome

By Jared Whitlock

SAN DIEGO — Encinitas resident Tom Bussjaeger remembers approaching San Diego's shore on the deck of an aircraft carrier during a cold November night in 1945. The glowing lights of the city came into view, marking his and other troops' return.

There weren't many waiting for them at the dock.

"We couldn't communicate with family to let them know exactly when we were getting back," Bussjaeger said. "The times were different back then."

On Oct. 20, nearly 68 years later, 1st Lt. Bussjaeger and 82 other veterans received a much-deserved hero's welcome. Near the entrance of Lindbergh Field's Terminal 2, hundreds clapped, waving American flags. Patriotic music blared from the speakers. Boys and Girls Scouts saluted.

Bussjaeger, 91, and the vets had just returned from a three-day trip to the nation's capital as a part of San Diego Honor Flight. Paid for by donations, Honor Flight gives veterans the chance to visit war memorials at no expense to them. Several days before leaving on the charter plane, Bussjaeger said the experience was a tribute to not only those who survived the war, but to the men who paid the ultimate sacrifice.

Bussjaeger saw combat in Saipan as a member of the Second Amphibian Tractor Battalion. During D-Day, while just offshore of Okinawa, a Kamikaze

pilot hit the LST 884 ship he was on. Bussjaeger said he "immediately became a combat veteran" after abandoning ship.

"The real heroes of the war are still laying out there," he said.

Bussjaeger enlisted in the Marine Corps Reserves in 1942 at the age of 20 while living in Los Angeles. Not long after, he met his wife Dawn at the Los Angeles Post Office.

"We would always tease each other — she was a real cutie," Bussjaeger said.

At the time, the country was very different. A gas-rationing mandate was in effect. Parts for machinery and cars were difficult to find. Many kinds of food weren't available. Bussjaeger said the entire nation deserves credit for aiding the war effort — not just the troops.

"Everybody was in the ballgame," Bussjaeger said. "Your parents were in the war; the kids were in the war; the women and men were in the war. Everybody pulled together and that's what made the nation great."

"In addition to the combat veterans on the recent honor flight, there were also heroes at the home front," he added.

Bussjaeger married Dawn before shipping out to the Pacific in 1944.

"We were married 68 years," Bussjaeger added. "We had the happiest life that anybody could have. We just loved each other the whole time so much."

Given the heavy casualties, he wasn't certain he'd see her again upon joining an outfit in Saipan.

The Kamikaze strike on D-Day was yet another reminder of the war's heavy toll.

Several months after the Japanese surrendered in 1945, Bussjaeger was on his way back to San Diego.

A tiring 21-day boat ride from Guam to Pearl Harbor ensued, and then six days on an aircraft carrier to San Diego. Yet Bussjaeger said reuniting with Dawn and his 7-month-old baby girl made the trip more than worth it.

"It was like the movies," Bussjaeger said.

David Smith, who founded the San Diego chapter of Honor Flight, said many World War II veterans came home and quietly, entering the workforce with little community recognition.

"They just continued on without a huge reception," Smith said.

The inaugural Honor Flight took place in Ohio in 2005 with 12 veterans

visiting the nation's capital. Since then, the non-profit has expanded across the country. Currently, it's focused on World War II veterans.

World War II had 16.1 million veterans, and an estimated 1.2 million are alive today. However, they're passing away quickly — at a rate of 600 per day, according to the U.S. Department of Veteran's Affairs.

"The least we can do is let them know how much we appreciate them before it's too late," Smith said.

Bussjaeger said Honor Flight has surpassed its goal. The gathering at the airport was particularly great, he said.

"We're proud to have served, and we appreciate that people recognize the sacrifices that we made," Bussjaeger said.

After the war, Bussjaeger got his degree in political science at the University of San Francisco. Later, he worked in sales at Weiser Lock, getting promoted to president near the end of his 30-year career with the company. In 1972, he and Dawn purchased a home in Leucadia, where he currently lives.

Age hasn't slowed him down much. He recently signed up to volunteer at a hospital. And on Sunday, he strolled through the celebratory Honor Flight crowd, shaking hands with those who lined up to thank him for his service.

Donations can be made to San Diego Honor Flight at honorflight-sandiego.org.

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