

## HonorAir includes Oak Ridge Manhattan Project workers

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on November 11, 2016)

On October 5, 2016, Fanny and I went to McGhee Tyson Airport to join hundreds of others as we welcomed the return of HonorAir's recent flight to Washington, DC. Our reason for being there was to meet our good friends Ed Westcott, Virginia Coleman and Peggy Stuart as well as Christine Higginbotham.

In the huge mass of humanity completely filling the entire area from the security gates to the escalator leading down to the baggage claim area, we were hard pressed to even find a spot where we could stand to see the passengers as they came through the balloon arches. In fact, we missed Christine completely.

Among the many passengers beaming with pride to be welcomed in such a grand fashion, we soon saw Ed's son-in-law, Don Hunnicutt's, beaming face smiling from ear to ear. He was pushing Ed through the narrow passageway of people reaching out to shake his hand. If you know Ed well, you know that shaking hands is not the easiest thing for him to do using his right hand. But you would never have known that on that special evening!

Don later told me that Ed tried to shake hands with EVERY CHILD or YOUNG PERSON there. That is just the way Ed is, he loves the kids and reaches out to them in his special way. What an adorable man!

When Jim Dodson asked me if I could arrange to have Ed come to his Jefferson Middle School class and interact with the students, I knew Ed would love it. So, I quickly agreed to help.

Jim expressed his appreciation later for me helping get Ed there...really all I had to do was contact Ed's daughter, Emily Hunnicutt, and she took care of all the details. Ed had taken time with each student showing appreciation for their art. Jim had had each student select a photograph that Ed had made during the Manhattan Project and to recreate that photographic image in some fashion using their art.

The class had an art show as a finale to the experience. Then Jim arranged for their art to be displayed at several venues and included in The Oak Ridger. Now, how's that for a unique and creative approach to teaching our Oak Ridge history...using Ed's photographs!

I have used many of his black and white photographs for years and would literally be lost without them. I often say that without Ed's photographs, I would not be able to tell our history nearly as well as I can using them as props.

Soon we saw Virginia Coleman coming through the crowd. Virginia was not a Calutron Girl during the Manhattan Project, she was a chemist. She is a very smart lady! She worked in the main uranium assay laboratory and worked for Roger Hibbs who later became president of the company managing Y-12. She tells of the approach Roger took to show the importance of her work when he would be in a meeting with the "big-wigs" and would call her to have her report the most recent assay of the uranium being separated at Y-12.

So, Virginia knew she was working with uranium (although that very word was classified and could not be spoken at the time). Don't you know General Groves was frustrated when he learned that the folks here in East Tennessee at the Y-12 electromagnetic separation plant were numbering all their uranium

# HonorAir includes Oak Ridge Manhattan Project workers

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on November 11, 2016)

processing buildings starting with the number, "92!" He had classified the word, yet they were using the atomic number for uranium to identify the buildings where that secret material was being processed.

Virginia worked in Building 9203, a uranium processing laboratory at Y-12. She expressed much pride in her work and in her career as a chemist.

Virginia also has developed a strong friendship with Denise Kiernan, author of "Girls of Atomic City." When Denise was spending a lot of time in Oak Ridge interviewing the "Calutron Girls" and other women and even some men for her book, she and her husband, Joe, would spend their nights in Virginia's home. She made them feel right at home there and Denise speaks highly of the quality time she was able to spend with Virginia.

Finally, near the end of the line of passengers, we saw Peggy Stuart! Peggy was smiling broadly and enjoying the greetings. Peggy is a "hugger" and so many people were accommodating her that we thought she might never get through the line to reach us. We were standing near the end of the long line.

Peggy said she sure was glad she had gone on the trip but she was really tired. It makes for a long day as it was close to 10 PM when Fanny and I reached home, so it was the same for those passengers who had left Knoxville very early in the morning. Yet, I dare say not a single one of them minded it in the least. I never saw as many veterans happy to be met by such an adoring crowd.

I am a Vietnam veteran. I well remember the manner in which many of my fellow veterans were received when they returned to the states. I was focused on my family and at the time did not care if anyone else was there to meet me or not. Yet, as I look back now, something was missing.

But, I still knew there was a lack of encouragement or thanks for the sacrifice we had made for our country. I was proud to do it then and I am still proud of my service in the U.S. Air Force to this day! Our freedom is not maintained without personal sacrifice on foreign soil doing the difficult but necessary tasks required to assure our nation's continued survival and continued advancement of a free and honorable society. I want that for my children and grandchildren and their descendants. It is too important to leave to chance!

Fanny asked me on the way home, "Ray, do you want to go on an HonorAir flight?" I said, "No." But later thought, maybe that would be a good experience for me to consider at some point. It is not that I have not visited all the memorials (and photographed them!) in Washington, DC. I have done that numerous times, even in the snow. I must admit the idea of being given special recognition as a Vietnam veteran has an appeal for me...

Yes, there is something very special about HonorAir flights! It is a really valuable message that is being sent to these veterans and I am proud of Eddie Manus and what he has caused to become a standard approach to recognizing and honoring these veterans who have served our country. It makes me proud to be even a small part of it!

## HonorAir includes Oak Ridge Manhattan Project workers

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on November 11, 2016)



Ed Westcott coming through the line



Virginia Coleman coming through the crowd

## HonorAir includes Oak Ridge Manhattan Project workers

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on November 11, 2016)



Peggy Stuart being welcomed home by Tom Row



The airport was completely filled from the security gates to the escalator to the baggage claim area