IRON COUNTY—For Iron County veterans, this fall's Honor Flight can be summed up in one word: awesome.

"It was really something," said Navy veteran Emil Bicigo. "The way everything was organized and the way they treated us was just awesome. It was amazing."

"I think it's unanimous," Crystal Falls native Norbert Dishaw said. "It was a great trip."

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For Anselm "Sam" Franz of Iron River, there's no doubt of what the trip's highlight was.

"The memorials were incredible," Franz said. "Especially the changing of the guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier; placing of the wreath by four members of our group. When the bugler played taps, it brought tears to everybody's eyes."

"To me, it was a step back in time," Augusta "Gussie" Houser said from her residence at the Victorian Heights Assisted Living Center. "A lot of memories were brought back and shared. It provided a great opportunity to talk with some of the other people who were there with me years ago and experienced the same things I experienced."

Houser served in the U.S. Army Air Corps during the war.

"Back then, there was such a difference between the roles of men and women, so it was also interesting to hear what all of the men did as their service compared to the women's roles," she added.

The trip also gave some veterans a chance to get closer to family.

Houser's guardian was her daughter, Joyce. "Joyce learned things from the experience that she never knew about me," she said. "We never talked much about my experiences from the war. It was a great opportunity to share pieces of my past, which are pieces of me, with my daughter."

Bicigo was joined by his son, Larry. Bicigo, 86, joined the U.S. Navy in October 1944 and was at first assigned duties as a cobbler on a hospital ship, the USS Repose, but quickly found duties in charge of food stores. After ports of call including Panama and Pearl Harbor, Bicigo spent a few months in Shanghai, China. His ship was the first to enter the port of San Francisco on V-J Day in 1945.

Dishaw, 87, shipped out to the European Theatre of Operations in December 1944, joining the U.S. Army's 87th Infantry Division as a replacement light machine gunner in January 1945 during the Battle of the Bulge. Dishaw was most impressed by the Korean War Memorial, which depicts a squad of larger-than-life poncho-clad soldiers in a scene depicting troops on patrol.

Because he was not yet 18 in February, 1945, Franz's father had to sign his U.S. Navy enlistment papers. After completing basic military training at the Great Lakes Naval Training Station, Franz was aboard ship between Hawaii and Leyte en route to the planned invasion of Japan when the first nuclear bomb was dropped on Hiroshima on Aug. 6, 1945.

The WWII Veterans Memorial is dedicated to the 16 million American men and women who served in the armed forces and the more than 400,000 who died. It is located near the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial amidst 56 identical pillars in two semi-circles. Each pillar represents each state and protectorate of the United States at the time of the war. The Freedom Wall stands nine feet tall and bears 4,043 gold stars—one star for every 100 soldiers, sailors and Marines who died during the war.

Veterans gathered at 4 a.m. Sept. 27 at Delta County Airport in Escanaba for the 90-minute flight to Dulles International Airport in Washington, D.C., where they were greeted by three

charter buses and a police escort to various memorials and a very full itinerary.

The 77 veterans toured the Lincoln and Washington memorials, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, and monuments dedicated to Americans who served during conflicts in Vietnam and Korea. One memorable stop was at Arlington National Cemetery. “That was just incredible,” Dishaw said. “To look out and see all of those white crosses. Just everywhere … white crosses.”

Each veteran received gift bags including a cap, jacket and shirt with the Honor Flight logo along with a commemorative medallion, veterans’ Bible and booklet.

The only glitch to the day was a two-hour delay flying out of Washington, D.C. But the veterans passed that time as so many in the armed forces have passed spare time over the years: mail call. Prior to the trip, organizers had contacted the veterans’ friends and family, arranging letters from home plus notes and art work from schoolchildren.

“There were a lot of teary-eyed people on the plane as they enjoyed the letters from home and a joyous reflection of the time on the honor flight,” Houser said.

The flight is paid for by donations from individuals, business and fraternal organizations. There is no charge for WWII veterans to take the Honor Flight.