

Making Our Way



A McMAHON / CHEYNE PODCAST

Season 2 - Episode 11

11/20/24

Honor Flight

Our Hosts

Janet Cheyne McMahon is a lover of family, dogs, nature, travel, books, and music. Born south of the Mason-Dixon line, she left after 9 months for parts north, landing eventually in Michigan, which will always be “where I’m from.”

Love of learning led Jan to a Bachelor of Arts (History, Political Science) at the University of Michigan-Dearborn (Go Blue), and a Master of Arts (Library and Information Science) at the University of South Florida. Amid all that, studied for a time with Rob at Colorado State University, a pivotal time in their lives.

Worked at the U of M-Dearborn Library, and then The Salvation Army Florida Divisional Headquarters, with the greatest reward being in serving as the Divisional Librarian. A librarian is who Jan is “in my soul.”

Jan and Rob have made our home in Florida since 1983, and live now in retirement with their dog, Skye, who makes it all the best adventure. They travel as much as possible, spending time in nature and in diverse places on this amazing planet. It has all been, and continues to be a fascinating journey, with hope of making a difference, in small ways, by being brave enough to speak and act on behalf of others.

Rob McMahon is a native Michigander, born in Saginaw and raised in the suburbs of Detroit. Rob attended Michigan State University, graduating in 1978 with a Bachelor of Science degree. He did graduate studies at the University of Michigan and the University of South Florida. Rob is retired, having spent 36 years in public education teaching both high school chemistry and biology and middle school science. He worked as a total quality management trainer for the Pinellas County School District and served four years as the president of the Pinellas Classroom Teachers Association. Rob cofounded a non-profit total quality management training center, The Learning Co-op, for Teacher Unions interested in applying the W. Edwards Deming continuous improvement principles to their day-to-day operations. He worked with teacher unions in Colorado, Maryland, New Mexico, North Dakota, Texas and Michigan. He also worked in a similar capacity with Jim Shipley & Associates. In retirement Rob has written a series of science related children’s books, and enjoys traveling with his wife, Jan, and their black Labrador Retriever, Skye.

Deanna Cheyne, born in St. John’s, Newfoundland, earned a Bachelor’s Degree in Vocal Performance from the University of Toronto (1996), studying with such luminaries as Elmer Eisler, Doreen Rao, Greta Kraus, Lois Marshall, and Rosemarie Landry.

Dee taught music at Mississauga Christian Academy, served as music director for Meadowvale Bible Baptist Church (Mississauga, Ontario), served as Assistant Divisional Music Director for The Salvation Army in Florida, is a former member of Tampa’s Master Chorale, and, for the past 18 years, has been a public school teacher.

Dee has visit 36 of the 50 U.S. states, and 12 countries. Her favorite destinations include France, Prague, New Orleans, National Parks, & Hawaii.

Dee & Jim live in Florida with Brigus (Golden Retriever) and Pip (Teacup Yorkie).

James Cheyne, born in Galesburg, Illinois, earned a Bachelor of Music degree (Theory and Composition) from Michigan State University (1978); and a Master of Music degree (Theory and Composition) from the University of Illinois - Urbana/Champaign (1981), studying with David Liptak, Salvatore Martirano, and Ben Johnston.

Jim has served as music director for The Salvation Army in Central Illinois & Eastern Iowa, Orlando Area Command, and the Florida Division, served as a pastor with The Salvation Army, and was a public school teacher for 17 years.

In travel so far, Jim has visited 50 states and 27 countries. His favorite travel destinations include National Parks, New Orleans, Newfoundland, Argentina, Prague, & France.

Jim continues to write music and support Dee’s musical endeavors, and cooks whenever absolutely necessary. Jim & Dee live in Florida with their dogs Brigus & Pip.



L-R: Brigus, Jim, Deanna, Skye, Jan, Rob.
Inset: Pip

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Honor Flight

Season 2; Episode 11

11/20/2024

Hosts: Jan, Rob, Dee, & Jim

Guests: Mark Welsh (Honor Flight), Master Sergeant O'Neil Ducharme (U.S. Marines - retired, WWII veteran)

Neil Ducharme outlines his family's history in the military. Mark Welsh presents the Honor Flight program. And we have some ice cream.

ROB: I was just gonna say, Jan and I were there the night you came back from your...

NEIL: Yes.

ROB: Honor Flight.

NEIL: I saw Jan, but you disappeared.

ROB: Well, I was there.

NEIL: I thought you were carousing.

[Laughter]

JIM (voice-over): That gentleman to whom Rob is speaking is O'Neil Ducharme, retired US Marine, and veteran of World War II. When Neil was a boy growing up in a small town in Maine, he lived next to a firehouse, so he had always wanted to be a fireman, but then on Easter Sunday, April 1st, 1934, 8-year-old Neil saw a Marine for the first time. "That," he thought, "is what I want to do." So, fast forward 11 years, again Easter Sunday, April 1st, this time 1945, and 19-year-old Marine O'Neil Ducharme sets foot on the shores of Okinawa for the invasion known as Operation Iceberg.

In our last episode, titled "And they were heroes," we heard how Neil survived the battle of Okinawa, where stretcher bearers were succumbing to enemy fire, so Neil volunteered for stretcher duty, thereby helping many others survive the battle as well.

Today we focus on the organization called Honor Flight, whose mission is to make sure all of our veterans are recognized for their service to our country, and to give them the welcome home they deserve. Our guide for this tour is Mark Welsh.

[Music]

JAN: That was our first Honor Flight when you...

ROB: Yeah.

JAN: ...when you flew, and that was our introduction to what was an incredible experience...

ROB: Yeah.

JAN: ...in our lives, and we have Mark here who who dragged us to the first Honor Flight. Now we go willingly.

ROB: Yes.

JAN: But it would be really great if you could talk a little bit about how you got involved in Honor Flight, what the purpose is. Because, until I met you, we didn't know what honor flight was.

MARK: The genesis was two guys in Dayton, Ohio. Took their dads to the opening of the World War two Memorial in 2004, I think it was. They were so impressed and taken back with how the families and kids and everybody reacted to their dads. They got back, and these guys are movers and shakers, and they said, "We've got to expose more people to this opportunity." So, you know, they began, and the next flight was ten people, the next flight was a plane, and now we have 120 hubs, or chapters, around the country.

First of all, it's an honor to be here, and you could segue into another whole session talking about [to Neil] your family's military history. O'Neil has a very deep - O'Neil, if we could regress for just a second, your family's history in the military starting with your dad.

NEIL: My dad - World War One? He should have been a priest, but he gave that up to join the Canadian Army. So he got into France after the basic training in Canada. And he got hit by a five-inch shell that took the crown of his head - skull - off clean, shattered his left arm, shattered his left hip, and they took him off the frontline and brought him into our hospital, and the German surgeon that they had captured took over my father and saved his life. And he made the crown for his head - the steal bent to wrap it around - yep - and he recuperated for one year outside of Paris. Now I know why I'm here.

MARK: Okay.

ROB: Yeah.

MARK: Including Patricia, how many brothers and sisters on both sides in the military?

NEIL: Well, I had five brothers. My wife Pat I had her two brothers, one who was with Patton from North Africa until he died in Germany. All through day [?] he was a medic. Dick was a Navy fireman - on a - a destroyer man, and so Dick worked his way up as a Chief Master Sergeant with the white hat fire marshal. He did very well. And Chuck was recruiting - all his life as a recruiter. And they both retired from the Air Force. Of course, now they're both dead. So we at one time we had 17 of us during World War Two to Korea. I have four first cousins. They were Spitfire pilots. They went in in 1939, joined. In 1940, they went to Europe.

Now out of 17 of us - and I had two more who were in New Jersey, they were merchant marine officers. So, we come from a long family. Of all these people during World War Two, how many do you think of them got wounded?

ROB: None?

JAN: Zero.

NEIL: We all came out alive. I, uh - I had a minor scratch, but I didn't report it. It's right here. It's right here on my knee. I could still walk and wanted a corpsman to patch me up with three stitches. I wanted go.

MARK: Is it too late to apply for your Purple Heart?

NEIL: Ah, I don't need that. The only real heroes of World War Two never came home.

MARK: What was your welcome home like? Did you come home to parades and celebrations?

NEI: No, no, no; I came home to nothing.

MARK: The reason I want to bring that up is that people had the perception of Times Square - it was actually on VE Day - of the sailor kissing the nurse or whatever. No, it wasn't that way. They came home at different times to different places. 16,100,000 served - that's what we call it the greatest generation, is that those who didn't serve, served in a different way. They contributed to the war effort in many different ways. So everybody was connected and involved, and when they came home, it's, "Let's get back to business as usual." Go to school, use the new - newly formed GI Bill, get married, have a family, etc, etc.

The genesis of Honor Flight is linked to that in that we want to recognize not just World War two veterans, but Korean War, Vietnam War, any veteran of any period, wartime or not, for the contribution they've made. Our hub has taken 51 we call them missions or flights. We've taken about 3850 veterans, and we actually broached the issue a few years ago when we were running out of World War Two veterans, we said, "Can we continue this? Will guardians want to contribute money to spend the day with a veteran if they're a Vietnam veteran? We found out, resounding answers is, "Yes."

When World War two came back they came back to business as usual.

NEIL: Nothing.

MARK: The Korean War, which used to be the Korean conflict or police state - keep in mind that that was the first time that the proliferation of communism was stopped and halted by the allies. There were, I think, 34 countries. There's - it wasn't just us. A lot of countries were involved in the Vietnam - or the Korean War. 37,500 casualties in the Korean War. When they came back, it was ambivalence at best. There were even some stories of - and don't take this wrong O'Neil, but World War two veterans saying, "You guys didn't win." It was pretty heartbreaking. When Vietnam veterans came back, we know what that was. They came back to disgust and ridicule. If we can do one thing at Honor Flight, it's to assure every veteran we take, and every veteran that we come in contact with, that their service was appreciated, that they're appreciated, and we can't eradicate the feelings that they have from when they did come home, but we certainly can reinforce, "Today's a different day, America does care, and America does appreciate you."

JAN: What happens in a day in Washington, like, from beginning to end? They get on the flight, what happens next?

MARK: In our case, we have 75 veterans, 75 guardians. We have an orientation - a mandatory orientation - for all of them on the Saturday before the mission, or the flight. We go over protocols, rules, regs., and kind of what to expect during the day. Then on Tuesday morning

- and it's going to depend on your part of the country when your flights depart - we charter a plane St. Pete-Clearwater Airport, we meet at the airport at zero three thirty, or 3:30 in the morning Mickey time, and it's always dark, and we have a breakfast, a little bit of song, celebration, getting to know one another, board the plane at approximately five o'clock. It's usually wheels up at about 5:30 to 5:45, get into DC at about 8:30. We have three buses waiting for us. Each bus is equipped with wheelchairs for every single veteran that would like them. So you do not have to be totally ambulatory to partake of this mission.

We encourage Veterans who don't think they can or should to absolutely go, and if you're a family member, please encourage them to go. O'Neil - his wife had passed away two months before...

JAN: Right, I remember.

MARK: ...and we had to almost coerce him, and I thought, "Here's a gentleman that is in a pretty deep state of depression," and lay - and logically so, and and it I'm not gonna say it transformed your life, O'Neil, but it certainly did. It was a turning point.

NEIL: Well, the turning point of my life was the 25th of April, 2016, when I walked through to the center and I ran across my first volunteer worker was, was Karen, and Mark, of course, brought me over and I met Karen, and she and I have been *cher ami* ever since. *Cher ami* means "dear friend." In fact, I'll see Karen tomorrow. So it's such a close family. I - I can't explain it, because...

MARK: Well, we board the buses at about 9:15, 9:30, because we have a long walk through the airport. As we go through the airport, what's exhilarating and touching is, people like us, who are business people, will just kind of observe, and get up from their chairs - their seats, and just start clapping.

ROB: Yeah. That sounds...

MARK: And it's an ovation going through the airport. And people will come up and say, "Thank you for your service and sacrifice."

ROB: That's cool.

MARK: We get on the buses. The buses are equipped with wheelchairs, oxygen if need be, and a lot of water, because whether it's a cold day or a hot day, we make sure that our guardians know that the care of their precious veteran is number one, and hydration is probably the most important thing.

We usually do a roundabout at the Marine Corps Memorial, which many people know as the Iwo Jima statue. Then we go on to the Air Force Memorial. In the past, we'd have lunch there. Now we go from there to Arlington National Cemetery to see the changing of the guard, and then on to the World War Two memorial, where we have a catered lunch, spend about an hour and a half, and then on to a point central to the Korean War Memorial, Vietnam Wall, and Lincoln Memorial, spend about an hour and a half there. Then on the way back, we get on the bus again, go through Washington, DC. About - what would you say, O'Neil, maybe 10% of our veterans have never been to Washington, DC?

NEIL: Now, the veteran that my son took - he had been assigned to him - came from nine miles from my own town. He came from Westbrook, Maine. He said, "Dad, he's from

Westbrook.”

MARK: But then, you know, the throngs of people that meet you at the airport is one thing. But what’s even more powerful, I think, is the people that say hello at the airport on the way in, at Baltimore-Washington...

NEIL: Right.

MARK: ...at the Memorials that we go to visit. Just kids and families...

NEIL: Oh, god.”

MARK: ...spontaneously coming up and saying...

NEIL: Unreal.

MARK: “Thank you.”

NEIL: Unreal.

MARK: “Can I get a picture with you?”

ROB: That’s cool.

MARK: Yeah, it’s - it’s moving. It really is powerful. Then on the way home, do you want to share what we do as our surprise on the way home?

NEIL: Oh, my god. It makes you cry. We have mail call. Oh!

JAN: Oh, goodness.

NEIL: Mail call.

MARK: Mail call during wartime, guys, was a big deal.

ROB: Big deal.

MARK: We didn’t have internet, and FaceTime, and that kind of stuff. How long would it take for a letter to get from your parents to you?

NEIL: Well, I’ve been waiting for you to ask me that. Nine weeks.

MARK: And the same going back.

NEIL: Same there going back. Now, next time it comes, you’re not here. You’ll be here, because you’ve been - like, say, you’re trained for the invasion - for - and you’ll [at] sea, all over the place, on...

MARK: Mail call sounds a little bit, you know, weird, but it’s one of the more emotional times...

NEIL: Yeah, it is.

MARK: ...because they get letters from their family members, from politicians - always - but the most powerful are sometimes from school kids, and churches, that are spontaneously writing these letters anonymously to the veterans, and that’s where you see probably more tears than at any other point. Then, when we get off the plane, they’re expecting somebody

to take 'em home, and so O'Neil said, he said, "Mark go this way. The car's quicker over here." And we take them through a gauntlet of about - what? - hundred and fifty yards at least, of five to seven hundred people - military dignitaries, different groups, boy scouts, girl scouts, Knights of Columbus, you name it - paying tribute to our veterans saying, "Thank you for your service, and welcome home."

And at the conclusion, those that go with us are ambassadors. Some take it very seriously and show up for every flight, and some even go above and beyond the call and try to find more guardians, more veterans. This gentleman has dedicated his life to Honor Flight in terms of his just outright contributions to Honor Flight, sponsoring of guardians, and everybody - we'll go through Publix and it'll take us an hour to get a box of cereal because he's talking to anybody with a cover that says military, trying to encourage them to go on flights. There's nobody that's done more for Honor Flight in our area than O'Neil Ducharme.

This gentleman has seen in his lifetime, and I know to you listeners it sounds like he's probably 70. He's 99. He's seen 16 presidents; 3 major wars; the Depression; the spoils of World War One; the spoils of Spanish flu; the atomic bomb; the Cuban Missile Crisis, which didn't sound like that big a deal to anybody listening, it was the only time that I saw my father genuinely scared, there was a very, very frightening period; the Cold War; the Kennedy assassination; and the Twin Towers. There used to be a book - there still is a book - called "Future Shock" by Alvin Tofler.

JAN: Yeah.

MARK: I'd read that in college - to show you how old - but it was so relevant to the lives of these wonderful people that we have the privilege of getting to know a little bit. And it's been the greatest privilege of my life to get to know O'Neil Ducharme. He's the - he's my inspiration to be a better father, a better husband, a better patriot, a better Christian. And then, for that, I thank you.

NEIL: Thank you so much. You're making me out like I'm running for the presidency of the United States.

MARK: I wish you were.

[Laughter]

JIM: And Mark..

MARK: Yes, sir.

JIM: Thank yo.

MARK: It's my honor.

JIM: There's seems to be a lot in your life that has to do with service and giving: your church, to the Honor Flight Can you tell us what a *guardian ad litem* is?

MARK: Um, we're all motivated to do things for different reasons - right? - and I've always tried to - I've lived in eight different states, and in every different state, whether it's a volunteer probation officer, or Big Brother, or *guardian ad litem*. *Guardian ad litem* is similar to what some people may be familiar with as CASA [Court Appointed Special Advocate], and our role - again, it's totally volunteer - is to assist in visiting kids who are in foster care to

assure that their foster care environment is nurturing, healthy, safe. And It's not really so much of a mentor although that's a byproduct of it. We report to the *Guardian ad litem* professional group, and we also appear in court. and what's interesting is the judges will listen to us more attentively than they do to either the attorneys for the kids or the attorneys for the parents who are trying to retain custody -uh, *regain* custody. But you visit the child at least once a month. All different environments. Mobile homes that have no air conditioning in the summer, but a very nurturing environment. I've been into very nice homes where the foster parents were doing it for all the wrong reasons, and I recommended that they - that the child be re-placed at a different location. So that's that's our role, is to make sure - it's totally 100% what's in the interest best interest of the child for their nurturing and for the development.

If I could just say one more thing. Well, one of the other objectives of Honor Flight is, that frequently we're with people who really are not sure about what's going on. They may have a little chip on their shoulder, kind of a jaded view of the public, of civilians, who would not appreciate what they've done, and, again, our primary objective is to re-instill - we can't eradicate feelings - but to re-instill their knowledge and feeling that America does care. And another, maybe, sidebar for your future 'cast is to give people a sense of purpose .With - I've worked with a lot of elderly folks, and those that have kind of shrugged their shoulders and said, "Well, you know, it's just a matter of time," or, "I've got no value to anybody anymore. I can't do this. I can't do that," Well, O'Neil could have done that 10 years ago if he wanted to. He had every reason to. He had cared for his wife for four years, not gotten out of the house, not been social, but he chose to reinvent himself.

If each of us can maybe help one person in our lives have a passion, to look forward, and to have a positive attitude, then "mission accomplished." Okay, so that might be something to explore in the future. How can we all just touch somebody?

As we wrap, I applaud each and every one of you for taking the initiative to undertake podcasts like this, to make people aware of the things like Honor Flight. We're not the only thing out there, but anything that will honor our veterans and even first responders. Do it. So thank you all for your initiative.

ROB: And, Mark, what if listeners want to know where they could find an Honor Flight near them, what's that, uh...

JAN: The website.

ROB: ...site?

MARK: Go to <www.honorflight.org>, and one of the prompts will be find a hub or a chapter. Hit on that. It'll show you a map of the United States. Go to your state and it'll give a list of those hubs within that state. Find one that's close and convenient to you and contact them. There'll be phone numbers and emails and so forth.

JIM: Dot orgs sound like they should have a donate button on them.

MARK: It's so funny you said that. What a - what a segue. We are a 501c3 nonprofit. We have zero paid employees, and as nonprofits go, there a lot of them out there, boatloads of nonprofits, but look for how they run themselves. 98 cents of every dollar that we take in as a contribution goes to our veteran and veteran activities. We have zero paid employees,

and most of the hubs are just like us. You can go to your chapter closest to you - like, in our case in West Central, Florida, it's <honorflightwcf.org>, and there will be a conspicuous button for donate. That's what keeps us going. Each flight costs us about \$85,000. Contributions from our Guardians offsets about \$40,000, so the balance has to come from contributions. Please let us continue to take these veterans to pay honor to them, and let them know that America does care.

JAN: When we're done with this podcast on the transcript,, we will include some websites where you can go to listen to veterans stories. There are some very good resources. I listened to O'Neil's leading up to this, and I learned things, I and I know the man, and I learned so many things I did not know about his story. So anybody can go and listen to these stories. We'll include that information.

MARK: It's called the veterans history project.

JAN: Yes.

MARK: It's a national program, and I would again encourage anybody listening to - can contact your library as a first source. They may or may not be familiar with it, but they could direct - direct for you appropriately to take audio and video histories of veterans.

JIM (to Neil): There was one little thing that you skipped over. I want to come back to.

NEIL: What?

JIM: Around the Korean conflict, you mentioned again your return to Camp Lejeune. What was your role there in Camp Lejeune?

NEIL: They found a regiment for me, now. They found an ice cream plant for me to run. Hey...

JIM: So you're gonna run an ice cream plant.

NEIL: So, I ran the ice cream plant there for - till 1953 till that was done.

JIM: This is - this is a thing, because you have - we started with Operation Iceberg, and we wanted to finish with Operation Ice Cream.

NEIL: There you go.

JIM: So we do have some ice cream here, and we're trying to do this patriotically. So it's vanilla ice cream with strawberries and blueberries, so there's your red white and blue.

NEIL: Right.

JIM: I would love to say I contacted Camp Lejeune and they'd had some leftover ice cream from when you were there.

NEIL: Yeah, I was eating it.

JIM: Yeah. I don't know that they have the plant anymore But there it is. The ice cream plant manager in Camp Lejeune is not something that I would have guessed for a marine coming from Okinawa, but what a amazing career.

ROB: Yes.

MARK: When we're speaking to school groups - high schools, middle schools - and he does this little "funzy" segue of, "Then I returned, and when I went to Camp Lejeune, guess what I was doing," and they thought machine gun operator...

NEIL: Yeah.

MARK: ...bomb inspector, or whatever, and he said, "It would be something each and every one of you would enjoy..."

NEIL: That all...

MARK: ...and he said, "Ice cream."

NEIL: That all started at Shangri-La [Camp David] when they asked me if I could help to cook.

ROB: Yeah.

JAN: O'Neil.

NEIL: What?

JAN: Master Sergeant O'Neil Ducharme.

NEIL: I wish you would just call me Neil.

JAN: I want to thank you...

NEIL: Why?

JAN: ...for your service and your sacrifice.

NEIL: It's like I told him before now. Don't take me too serious. You're not only beautiful, you're precious.

JAN: [laughing] Well, then, thank you for that. Thank you for your friendship...

NEIL: Okay.

[Music begins]

JAN: ...and taking the time to do this with us today.

ROB: And welcome home.

NEIL: Thank you. Thank you.

JIM (voice-over): December 7th 1941 changed everything for a whole generation. When the Empire of Japan lit a fire that would consume over 30 million soldiers and civilians as it burned across the Pacific. Master Sergeant O'Neil Ducharme of the United States Marines did his part to help extinguish that great conflagration, and so it could be said that the 8-year-old boy who lived next to a firehouse in a small town in Maine grew up to be a fireman after all.

Until next time.

[Music ends]

Links mentioned in this podcast:

Honor Flight: <<https://www.honorflight.org>>

Honor Flight, West Central Florida hub: <<https://www.honorflightwcf.org>>

Veterans History Project at the Library of Congress: <<https://www.loc.gov/programs/veterans-history-project/about-this-program/>>