

## HONOR FLIGHT

# Local veteran honored after six decades

By **CHRISTINA WILSON**

For the Greer Herald

Six decades since serving in WWII, Greer's Carroll Durham heard something he never expected: "Thank You." It came in the form of waving flags, hugs, salutes and tourists clamoring for pictures with Durham when he last month visited Washington D.C. courtesy a program called Honor Flight that was created by Senator Bob Dole.

"It was a little emotional for me," said Durham who lives off of Wade Hampton Boulevard in a tiny brick ranch, one of four on family-owned property. His neighbor is his sister. "I lived all these many years and never had any of that. It was special and unusual for me. It was a sad reflection to think people were telling me 'Thank You' for what I had done for the first time."

A retiree battling eye and leg ailments who uses a wheelchair to get around, Durham's



**Durham**

life today includes church on Sunday and visiting with neighbors and his relatives next door. He shared the details of his Honor Flight journey after sharing breakfast with friends at a Blue Ridge diner, a weekly event to which his brother-in-law drives.

# Local veteran honored after serving six decades earlier

>>DURHAM from A1

waiting to buy a ticket back to South Carolina. When I got up in the front of the line I was told to get out and go to the back and wait in line with the rest of the colored people. That was a real hard thing for me."

After graduating from South Carolina State College with a degree in Industrial Education, Durham spent several years teaching fellow veterans vocational agriculture at Spartanburg District 2.

After moving in 1949 to Washington D.C., he continued his work with veterans and enlisted military as an orderly at Walter Reed Army Hospital. He joined the Naval Reserve program in 1955. A year later he was put on active duty and was sent first to Camp LeJeune in North Carolina, then to a Key West Naval Hospital during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

From 1964-1965 and again 1967-1968, Durham served in Vietnam as a hospital corpsman in an artillery unit on an aircraft carrier. "There were people serving right next to me who would be shot and it was my job to take care of them, these white soldiers who maybe didn't like me because I was black. The only thing that kept me alive sometimes was their body in front of mine. I don't know what to think about that," said Durham, who now is partially blind due to cataracts. He stared often into space while recounting his tale.

He left the military in 1973 and became a Spartanburg Corrections officer, a job he kept until retiring in 1985.

"I've pondered these things often through my life," Durham said. "Every time I locked someone up I thought 'That could have been me' if things had been different," Durham said. "I've heard all my life the story of Job and know that if you're supposed to get something it will come to you. But getting the hugs and the thanks and the people with their cameras on that trip, that was real emotional."

## Pomp and circumstance

Honor Flight South Carolina was started in 2004 after completion of the WWII memorial in Washington D.C. as a means for the veterans it honors to actually go and view it, according to the non-profit organizations website, [www.honorflightsc.com](http://www.honorflightsc.com).

About 100 veterans are flown to the nation's capital each month for a daylong tour of the city's monuments that starts at the memorial. A military band plays the honorees as they board their aircraft in Columbia. Another band greets them in D.C., hailing their arrival while an airport fire truck shoots water over the

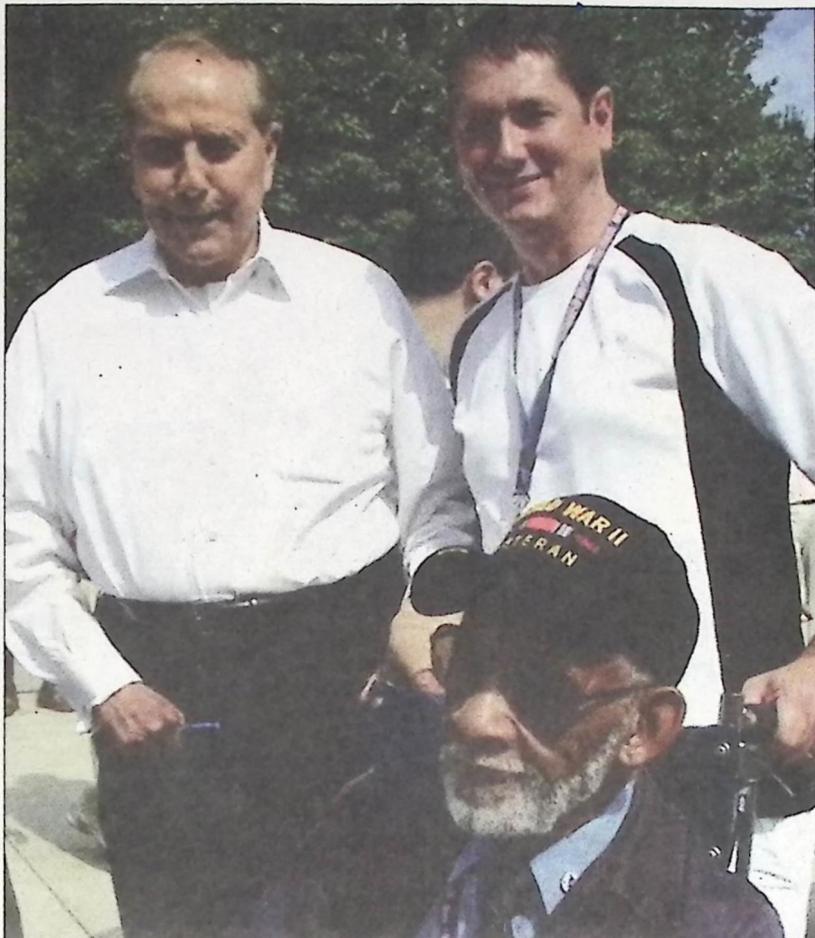


PHOTO PROVIDED

Carroll Durham with Greer PD Sgt. Mark Justice and Bob Dole in the capitol.

plane, considered a high honor.

"We got off the plane and there were lines of people on both sides waving flags, shaking their hands and thanking them. There was a military motorcycle escort in Columbia and D.C. and a police escort to the WWII Memorial," said Greer Police Sgt. Mark Justice, who helped Durham apply for Honor Flight and was his escort for the 19-hour whirlwind trip. "Then all these tourists who didn't even know why we were there would come up and shake their hands and want pictures. It was like they were celebrities."

## A rocky journey to recognition

Durham and wife Wilda, who now lives out of state, have two sons and two daughters. Another son, Albert, was killed while serving in the Marines when he was 19. Durham rarely sees his grandchildren, all of whom live in Pennsylvania and Virginia.

He met Justice after his oldest son, Carroll Jr., fraudulently withdrew all of his savings from the credit union. Justice was the detective in charge of building the case that led to reclamation of

most of the money.

"I had gone out to meet Carroll to talk about his case and thought it was so strange that here's a man who gets out of WWII, worked at Walter Reed hospital taking care of the soldiers from Korea and then goes to Vietnam," Justice said. "The story was so surreal. I was just really amazed by him. It took more than a year from when his case was resolved for him to come and apply for Honor Flight."

After Durham was accepted for the Sept. 6 trip to D.C., one of the program directors asked Justice to accompany him. "When I asked Mr. Durham if he would mind if I went, he said he didn't want to inconvenience me. He told me he was absolutely shocked I would put myself out there to do that. I was humbled by it.

"This guy served in Vietnam when they put black soldiers on the line. In WWII he was filling up gas cans to load them up to take them to the front line to get the tanks going forward. I wasn't looking at the race he was. I was looking at this guy who's done things no other person can lay claim to. He's an American hero. Those are the people we should take care of."