

Bob Dole's final mission

By [Steve Hendrix](#) [Email the author](#)

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Air Force veteran James Howerton, left, reacts as Navy veteran Leon Brooks of Nevada — with son Jerry — greets former senator Bob Dole at the National World War II Memorial in Washington. (Cheryl Diaz Meyer for The Washington Post)

Each Saturday, before Bob Dole sets off on his latest vocation, he has cornflakes, a little sugar on top, and a bottle of chocolate Boost.

It takes less time to get dressed now that the 94-year-old finally allows a nurse to help him, but it remains a rough half-hour on a body racked by injury and age. The blue oxford has to be maneuvered over the dead right arm and the shoulder that was blown away on an Italian hillside. The pressed khakis over the scarred thigh. A pair of North Face running shoes, the likes of which his artillery-blasted hands have been unable to tie since 1945.

Then comes the hard part — getting there. On this particular June Saturday, the Lincoln Town Car with the Kansas plates is

unavailable, so Nathaniel Lohn, the former Army medic who serves as Dole's nurse, helps the nonagenarian into Lohn's Honda Insight. It's tight, but good enough for the 20-minute drive to a monument the former senator all but built himself.

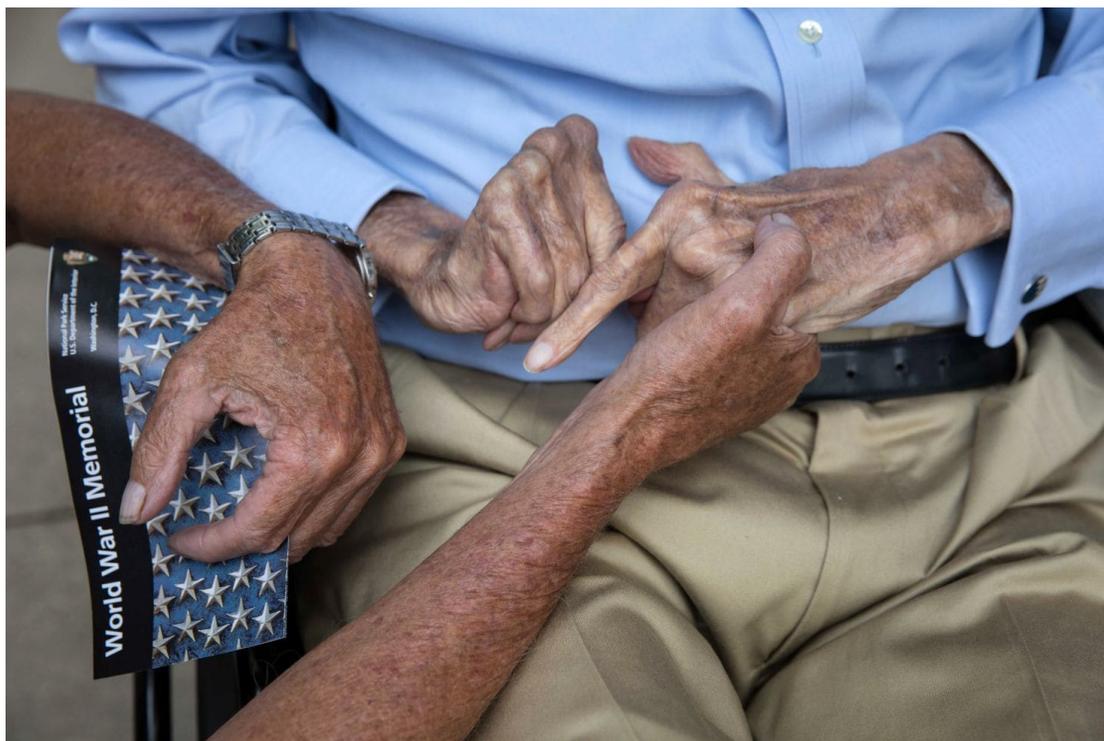
There, from a handicapped parking spot, he eases into the wheelchair as the greetings begin — “Oh my gosh, Bob Dole!” — finally rolling into his place in the shade just outside the main entrance to the National World War II Memorial.

And then they come, bus after bus, wheelchair after wheelchair, battalions of his bent brothers, stooped with years but steeped in pride, veterans coming to see their country's monument to their sacrifice and to be welcomed by one of their country's icons.

“Good to see you. Where you from?” Dole says, over and over, as they roll close, sometimes one on each side. New York, Tennessee, Nevada, the old roll-call once again. “Let's get a picture.” “Thank you for your service.” “What about *yourservice*?” “How old are you?” “I'm 90.” “I'm 94.” “Where you from?” “Good to see you.”

He'll do it for more than three hours on this muggy day, more than six hours on others, staying until the last veteran has gone on by to see the grand columns and fountains behind him. They pump his left hand — the one with some numb feeling left — and squeeze his shoulders, and sometimes he gets home not just tired but gently battered by humanity and humidity alike.

“Physically, it takes a toll,” Lohn says, watching his charge from a few feet away with a waiting bottle of water. “I may find five new bruises on him tonight. But he won't miss it.”



Dole and Vietnam veteran Luther Cole, who was in the Army, thank each other for their service at the World War II Memorial. (Cheryl Diaz Meyer for The Washington Post)

Dole has been coming for years — weather and his health permitting — to greet these groups of aging veterans, brought at no cost from throughout the country by the nonprofit Honor Flight Network. As the many missions of [a mission-driven life](#) have faded into history — combat hero, champion for the disabled, Senate majority leader, [1996 Republican presidential candidate](#) — this final calling has remained, down to just Saturdays, sometimes derailed by the doctors, but still a duty to be fulfilled.

“It’s just about the one public service left that I’m doing,” he says. “We don’t have many of the World War II vets left. It’s important to me.”

[\[A World War II vet's body lay unclaimed at the morgue. Then his neighbors did something remarkable.\]](#)

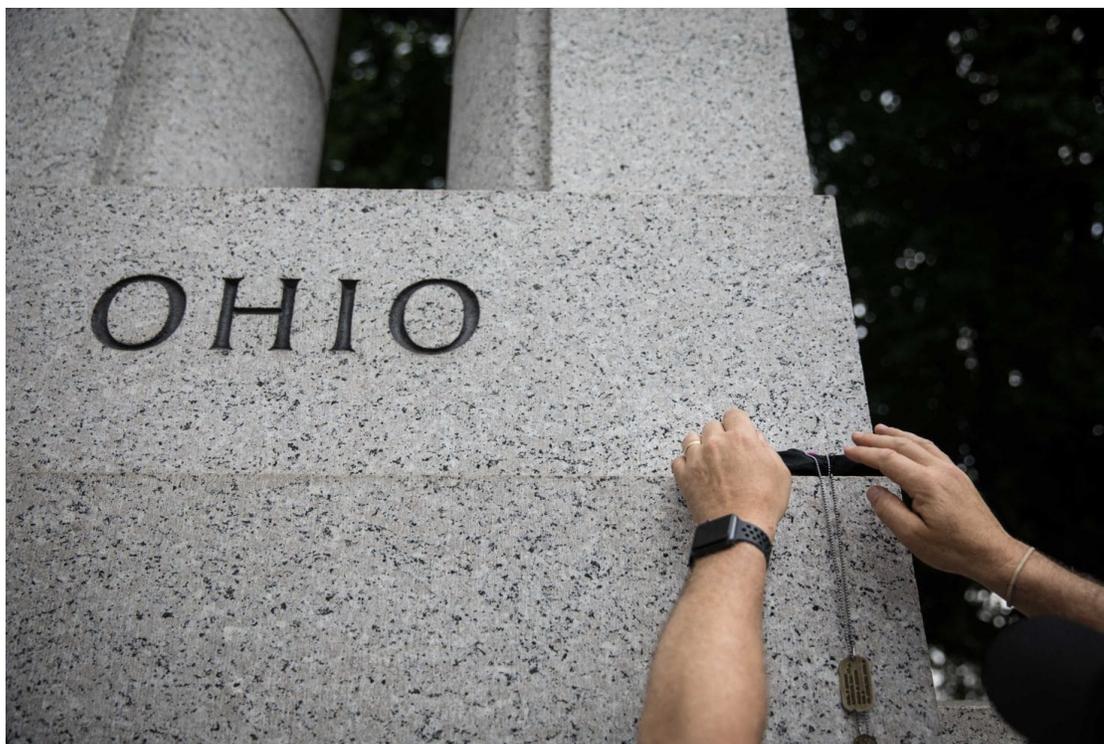
But it’s important *for* him, too. He seems to get more energized with each encounter, frail in his chair but his still-bright eyes

locking in on the next old tail gunner or rifleman or supply corps clerk trundling toward him.

“I tell them it doesn't matter where you're from, what war you served in, whether you were wounded or not wounded,” Dole says. “We're all in this together.”

He has watched the proportion of World War II veterans fall over the years, from half the bus to just a few per group, the sun setting on the generation that saved the world. “I just met a fellow who was 103 years old,” he says. “Sometimes I'm the kid.”

Maybe it keeps him young, these Saturdays in the shade of history and heroism. Lohn thinks they do, with this year a vast improvement over 2017, when serious health problems kept Dole grounded for months. Dole's wife, former senator Elizabeth Dole, says her husband is wired to serve.



Army veteran Bill Houser hangs dog tags that belonged to his father, Carl Houser, at the World War II Memorial during an Honor Flight Network visit. (Cheryl Diaz Meyer for The Washington Post)

She joins him frequently on the Saturday outings, helping to direct the receiving line, sharing the tears, doubling the number of Senator Doles in the pictures and stories visitors take home.

“It’s great, all these tremendous men and women,” she says. “Bob has a goal. He wants to make a positive difference in one person’s life every day.”

One Saturday this month, it was Willis Castille, who walked into a Navy recruiting station when he was 15 and spent six years at Saipan, Iwo Jima and other Pacific hot spots. A lot of years in steel mills and auto factories have passed since, and the 90-year-old wasn’t so sure he was up to a one-day flying visit just to see some fountains. (“Hate airplanes. Would rather come by ship.”)

[\[Americans gave their lives to defeat the Nazis. The Dutch have never forgotten.\]](#)

At his home in Indian Mound, Tenn., he keeps an article about Bob Dole, detailing how the Kansan was struck by a shell while aiding a radioman in Italy’s Po Valley. He earned the Bronze Star for valor and was awarded the Purple Heart for injuries that hospitalized him for 2½ years. Sitting in a wheelchair just outside the memorial, Castille found a story more moving than any marble wall.

“He made this worthwhile,” Castille said after his chat with Dole, the senator’s injured hand resting on Castille’s arm while they talked of age and life and the Navy. “The only person I’d rather meet is [Fleet Adm.] Chester Nimitz. But he’s dead.”

Some give Dole military “challenge coins,” which Lohn puts in his backpack to be stored — or displayed — in the Watergate apartment where the Doles have lived for more than 40 years.

Mostly they just swap niceties. “I’m 95. I’ve got you beat,” one says, before his escort leans down to correct him. “Oh, I’m 94. We’re both 94.”

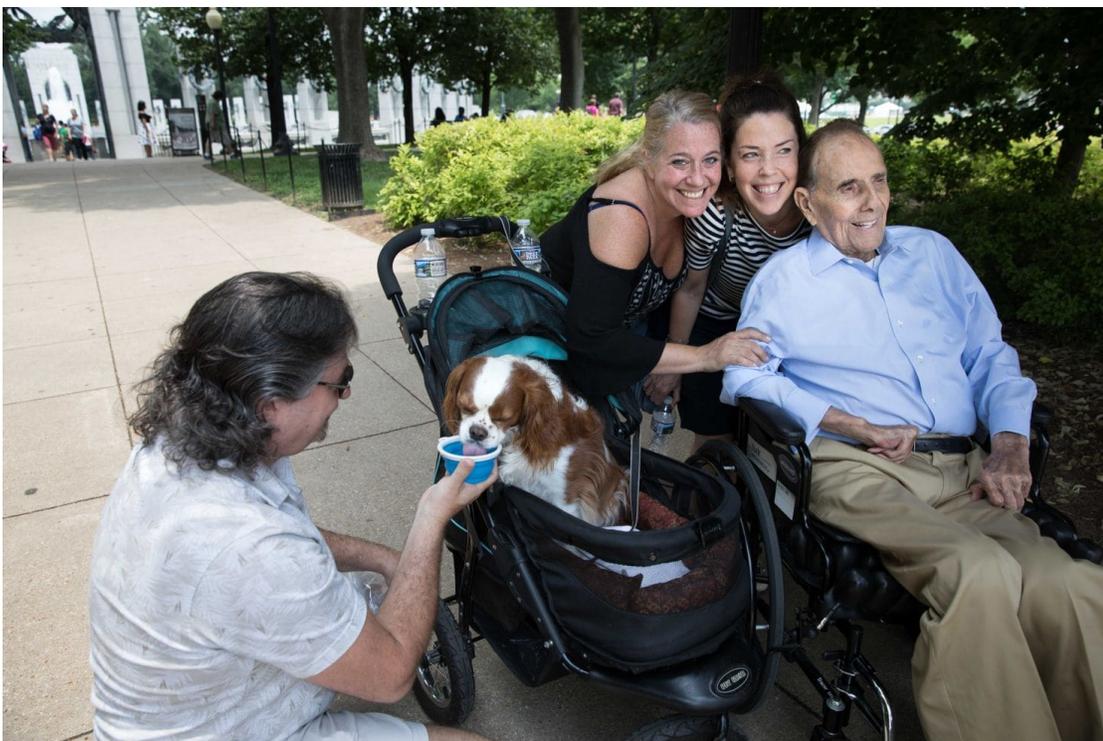
“Let’s get a picture,” Dole says.

“I voted for you,” say more than one. A Korean War vet from Nevada asks Dole his opinion of that state’s Republican senator, Dean Heller.

“I think he’s all right” is all Dole will say, still the laconic Midwesterner and practiced pol.

He prefers to leave the politics outside this shrine to national unity, where “E Pluribus Unum” is carved in a nearby wall. But one tourist asks about President Trump, whom Dole endorsed when he clinched the Republican nomination. “What about all the tweeting?” she asks.

“I thought tweeting was for birds,” Dole says. “But he loves it, and he’s not going to quit.”



Dole poses for a photo with Michele Menkes, left, and Tara Brooks while Higgins, Brooks's service dog, gets water from Jeff Menkes at the memorial. (Cheryl Diaz Meyer for The Washington Post)

Even two hours in, Dole perks up at the passing of any dog or a pretty woman, asking their names (the dogs), leaning up for a peck on the cheek (the women).

“Oh, you want a kiss,” cries Lisa Velez, a middle school teacher escorting a student group from San Clemente, Calif. “Oh, another one? You’re delightful. Thank you, Senator!”

He says he has more fun when his wife doesn’t come with him.

“That’s okay,” Elizabeth Dole says. “When I’m there, I’m hugging and kissing all the men coming through.”

These outings are the highlight of his week, she says. They make it to brunch many Sundays, the Hay-Adams or the Palm. During the week, while she’s busy with the Elizabeth Dole Foundation, which supports military caregivers, he may go into his office at Alston & Bird, an international law firm, for a few hours. Until recently, [he was raising money for the Dwight D. Eisenhower Memorial](#), just as he led the campaign that raised more than \$170 million for the World War II Memorial, which opened in 2004.

But if his dialing-for-dollar days are largely over, his duty post at the grand marble pond he had built on the Mall endures.

“I sort of have a proprietary interest in the place,” says retired 2nd Lt. Dole of the 10th Mountain Division. “It’s another opportunity to say thank you.”