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Retired sheriff's deputy served in Army during Persian Gulf War

by [Jeremy Amick](#) | Today at 4:00 a.m.





Russellville resident James Flessa enlisted in the U.S. Army in early 1986. He served for 10 years, which included a deployment for the Persian Gulf War. After leaving the service, he completed a career in law enforcement and retired from the Cole County Sheriff Department in 2022. (Courtesy of Jeremy Amick)

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Editor's note: The interview for this article was conducted days prior to the unexpected death of James Flessa on Oct. 18.

James Flessa acknowledges he was not known as a model student and may have possessed a little bit of rebellious streak while attending classes at Russellville High School.

When graduating in 1985, he resolved to give back to his community and country by joining the military and, in later years, added to his public service by completing a career as a deputy sheriff.

"I lived in Russellville my entire life and worked briefly for the Missouri Department of Conservation after high school," Flessa said. "Then, in February 1986, I enlisted in the U.S. Army and was sent to Fort Benning, Georgia, for my basic training and to become a heavy anti-armor weapons infantryman," he added.

At the conclusion of the training, he volunteered to remain at Fort Benning for the opportunity to attend Airborne School, making five successful parachute jumps during the three-week course.

"That's when I received orders for Germany and was assigned to the Third Infantry Division in Kitzigen, West Germany," he recalled. "For the first several months, I traveled with a crew around Germany to help clean the streets because of the debris left behind from military vehicles after REFORGER, which was a major NATO training event."

The dullness of his new assignment soon evaporated when he was sent to the border separating East and West Germany and performed guard duty in an area on the frontline of the Cold War.

"Where I was located, there was a razor wire fence dividing East and West Germany, with a minefield on our side," he said. "My job was basically to carry a radio for one of the sergeants and the East German guards were often taking photographs of us from their elevated guard towers."

He was granted the opportunity to return home on leave in February 1987, and married his high school sweetheart, Becky Crain. She was able to join him in Germany for the final year of his initial overseas assignment.

"In August of 1988, they sent me to Fort Campbell, Kentucky, as a squad leader in a light infantry company," he said. "We trained in several locations like Panama and the National Training Center in Fort Irwin, California, but the most notable moment from that timeframe was Desert Storm," he said.

The invasion of Kuwait by Iraqi military forces began in early August 1990. In a matter of days, Flessa was aboard a U.S. Air Force plane heading to the Middle East. Initially staging in Saudi Arabia, his company was soon sent to an area known as "FOB Cobra" to establish an operating base and observe Iraqi troop movements.

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"We were essentially out in the middle of nowhere," Flessa said. "Eventually, we were sent to an area 40 miles west of Basra in the oil fields -- everything was burning, and it was cloudy and black."

The air and ground war brought a swift end to the conflict, and by March 1991, he was on his way back to the states.

"We got there fast, moved fast and left fast," he remarked.

Flessa remained only briefly at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, because he soon received orders to deploy to Korea. For the next year, he trained with a light infantry unit at a military base located 10 miles from the demilitarized zone. While in Korea, he made the decision to re-enlist.

"After returning from Korea in the spring of 1993, I was assigned to the 82nd Airborne at Fort Bragg," Flessa said. "While I was with them, we did a lot of training jumps, and I also deployed to Panama for three months for Operation Safe Haven to help guard Cuban migrants."

Twice during this period, his unit was alerted to deploy in response to the unrest in Haiti, but both times were recalled prior to their departure.

"I was discharged in March 1996, and I decided to leave the Army after 10 years because I was never home and had no quality of life with my two young daughters and my wife," he said.

Following his return to Mid-Missouri, Flessa completed the police academy at the University of Missouri in the July 1996. Weeks later, he was hired by the Cole County Sheriff Department, where he remained until his retirement in April of 2022.

"I left the Army to have more time with my family and then spent the next 26 years in law enforcement doing shift work," he said with a chuckle.

Both the decade he served in the U.S. Army and his extensive career in law enforcement are not what he views as "jobs," but instead provided him with exciting opportunities to be of service to others.

"First, I must say that none of this would have been possible without the support of my wife, for which I am most grateful," he said. "And when I am asked why I decided to be in the military and then enter law enforcement, it reminds of someone who once told me. 'It's better to do something than nothing at all.'"

Smiling, he concluded, "As I said, I wasn't the greatest citizen I could have been when I was younger, so I wanted to do something to serve the community and that I could enjoy. The way I see it, I never had a job because it was always fun, and I certainly had a lot of great experiences along the way."

Jeremy P. Amick writes on behalf of the Silver Star Families of America.



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