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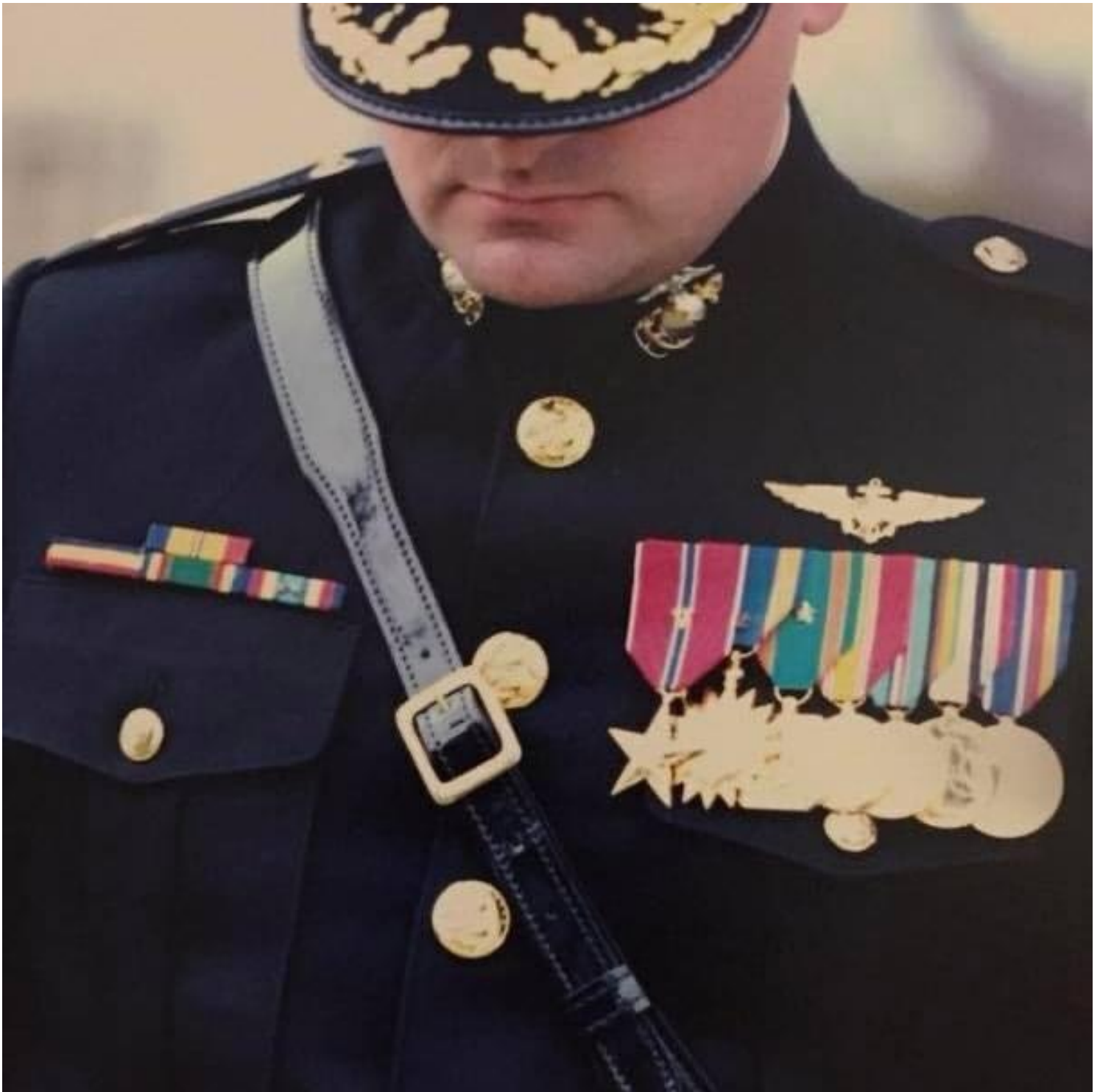
FEATURED

McFarland veteran serves two decades as Marine pilot

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Pictured above is Brian Gilbertson of McFarland, a veteran who served more than two decades in the Marine Corps as a pilot. Below: Gilbertson holds his son's hand as he prepares to leave for one of his four tours deployed with the Marine Corps.

Brian Gilbertson

When Brian Gilbertson decided to become a pilot in the Marine Corps, he had never been on a plane before.

His first time ever flying, Gilbertson said, was traveling from Milwaukee to Washington D.C. to begin officer training in Quantico, Virginia.

He remembers thinking “what if I get airsick? That’s going to be the worst decision ever,” he said.

Gilbertson grew up in Waukesha, and enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1995, while attending UW-Madison. He initially signed up to be a machine gunner.

Two weeks before boot camp, Gilbertson received a call from another Marine, based in Milwaukee, asking if he was interested in becoming a pilot.

“He changed the dynamic and the direction that I was going,” Gilbertson said. “Instead of going to boot camp to carry a machine gun, I was going to Officer Candidate School.”

Gilbertson completed Officer Candidate School in 1996, graduated from UW-Madison in 1997 and was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Marine Corps.

“Then the journey began,” Gilbertson said. “It was 21 years, ten moves, six states, four combat deployments, one healthy and successful marriage and two kids later, I came back to retiring back here, where it started.”

Early in his career, Gilbertson trained as a pilot for three years, in three different states, on three different types of aircraft. He chose to specialize in the KC130 aircraft, a four-engine cargo plane, used for “air-to-air refueling, aerial delivery of people and cargo,” and short, unapproved landings.

He called it a “really diverse mission, really fun mission, challenging but rewarding.”

“Rotating into the air, and flying away under my authority, my control, for the first time was just a rush. It was so exciting,” Gilbertson said. “During my time in the Marine Corps, I flew around the world...What an incredible opportunity.”

to see the world in a snapshot.”

Gilbertson joined his first unit, VMGR 352, stationed out of San Diego, California beginning March 2001.

He married his wife Darcy on Sept. 1, 2001, and was flying back from their honeymoon on Sept. 11, 2001.

“We got home just hours before the towers fell,” Gilbertson said. “Specifically veterans, people who were serving...their lives were radically changed.”

Gilbertson’s first combat tour put him in the Middle East for the invasion of Iraq in 2003, piloting KC130 aircrafts.

On his second tour, he deployed back to Iraq in 2005, as part of Operation Steel Curtain. It was an effort to decrease foreign insurgents in Iraq, and Gilbertson’s unit worked to clear some of the cities on the Euphrates River and Syrian Border.

During this deployment, Gilbertson took on a new role as a Forward Air Controller, or “the guy on the radio talking to the airplanes above, calling in close air support when they are pinned down and they need to call in the jets and helicopters,” Gilbertson said.

“I was boots on the ground, shoulder to shoulder with those guys, walking through those same Iraqi cities, and minefields,” he said.

“It was an incredibly challenging but rewarding experience being down on the ground with the Marines,” he continued. “Everything that we do in aviation is to support those young Marines on the ground that are getting shot at.”

Gilbertson’s unit experienced an ambush during his second tour. Gilbertson earned the Bronze Star Medal with V for his efforts during the ambush. The Bronze Star is the fourth-highest award for valor in the country, awarded for heroic achievement in a combat situation.

During the ambush, Gilbertson said he called in for air support and worked to evacuate the wounded, among other things.

“I always feel goofy talking about it,” Gilbertson said. “It was a really bad day, frankly.”

Gilbertson added that on that day, he saw the importance of aviation, after a KC130, the cargo plane he specialized in, refueled a fighter jet that later came to their aid during the ambush.

After returning from that tour, Gilbertson became a senior instructor, teaching people how to fly. He was then deployed again in 2008 as a pilot, flying KC130 planes. There was “much more time to enjoy it, much less time to be terrified, being up in the air flying,” he said.

He then deployed for the fourth and final time in 2010, for a tour around the horn of Africa. Gilbertson said he found out he was deployed the same day he found out his wife was pregnant with their daughter.

Brian Gilbertson 2.JPG

The Gilbertson family moved to Virginia following Gilbertson’s last tour. He earned a master’s degree in military studies, then worked at special operations command in Hawaii, writing speeches and traveling to work on counterterrorism efforts.

Gilbertson said his military journey was full of full-circle moments. In 2014, he became the officer in charge of the KC130 aircraft training he had gone through to start his career. And he retired in 2018, as the commanding officer of the first unit he ever joined.

Now he’s a commercial pilot for United Airlines, flying out of Chicago O’Hare Airport across the country and to some international destinations.



He says he loves to “go coast to coast and see the country from 37,000 feet...Seeing the world from up above just gives you a really wonderful perspective.”

Like flying on July 4, watching each Midwestern firework show from the air. “That just took my breath away,” he said.

Gilbertson shared that despite the challenges caused by COVID-19, the chance to stay home with his family was a gift.

“I didn’t take a minute of that for granted, it was awesome to have that extra time after so many years of being called away for the Marines,” he said. “To take in the soccer games, to take in the swim lessons, to make that grilled cheese for lunch, it’s been really incredible.”

Gilbertson said his second deployment “was definitely the most challenging personally, I was in the most danger... It was the most critical thing that I did. (But) after we had our first child, that deployment was so, so much worse, leaving home and leaving a child here. It made it so much more difficult.”

“Deployments are hard on everybody, the people who stayed home, the spouses of military folks and their kids. They don’t get enough credit for what they do...They didn’t sign up for it, they didn’t raise their hand and say ‘I’m going to go fight for my country,’ but their spouse did and they still have to live with those same challenges,” he continued.

During his service, Gilbertson said he learned several lessons, including his mantra to “be a good person, be good at what you do and have fun.”

“Nothing is stronger than what you can do when you love the people next to you...The guys who are out there in combat are working for one thing, and that’s to save each other, and that’s strong,” Gilbertson said.

“Don’t sweat the small stuff,” he continued. “Nobody is shooting at me today, and I’m not walking through a minefield, which I’ve had both of those experiences. So what am I worried about? Things are going to work out if we just keep working together.”

Gilbertson is one of eleven veterans from the McFarland, Monona and Cottage Grove areas who will be featured in the 2021 edition of “We Shall Not Forget,” an annual salute to local veterans published each November.

Madeline Westberg