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TOP STORY

We Shall Not Forget

New American Legion Post 534 commander continues life of volunteerism

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Tom Downs holds double-exposure photograph he took at a Capitol Square rally protesting mandated helmet photography.

Kendra Lamer



Tom Downs arrived in Vietnam on Feb. 13, 1971, the 19-year anniversary of his father's death.

His father was part of the Army Air Corps and worked with B-29 bombers. On the last mission before his retirement, he landed in a railroad yard oil storage pit and drowned after bailing out of a KB29 air refueling mission.

His mother was pregnant with Downs when she got the news of her husband's death that Valentine's Day.

"I never knew him, but I knew he was a hero," said Downs.

Downs, the newly elected commander of American Legion Post 534, enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1969 and served in the Vietnam War.



Downs grew up in a single-parent household with his four siblings in Madison's Marquette and Atwood neighborhoods. He had three uncles and one aunt who served in World War II who were all part of American Legion Post 501 and Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) 1318 in Madison.

"I pretty much grew up in the veterans community," Downs said.

His mother was an active volunteer with Post 501 and volunteered thousands of hours at the VA Hospital. She served as state representative of volunteer services for Wisconsin American Legion Auxiliary at the time of her death. Downs grew up volunteering at Post 501 Friday fish fries, parades on the Capitol Square and the VA Hospital.

Although his mother was highly involved, she disapproved when Downs announced his enlistment in the Army in 1969.

“I got handshakes from the vets, and a scowl from my mom,” Downs said.

Downs began bootcamp Sept. 12, 1969, at Fort Campbell in Kentucky, followed by artillery training at Fort Sill in Oklahoma.

In Vietnam, he spent 27 months as a crew member on a World War II era M114 155mm towed howitzer nicknamed “The Pig.”

“It was real big and dumb and didn’t go too far,” he said.

“The Pig” weighed 14,000 pounds and tossed 100-pound shells 9 miles. The machine was also what the men called “powered by armstrong,” meaning it had no motor and had to be pushed.

Each time the artillery was moved, troops had to refill thousands of sandbags and move ammunition.

“Every gun took about 30,000 sandbags,” Downs said.

Six to eight people filled sandbags for each gun.

He was assigned to 1/82 Artillery, Americal (23 Infantry) Division in I Corps, the northernmost military sector of South Vietnam and Charley Battery on LZ Liz near Mo Duc and Duc Phou.

The Charley Battery supported infantry operations and consisted of six guns positioned in a circle. Guns shot over crews' heads no matter which direction they were fired.

“Try to imagine of how loud a 100-pound projectile propelled out of a cannon with 15 pounds of gun powder fired over your head would be,” Downs said.

Downs calculated that he was in the immediate area of 250,000 firings. He has hearing troubles from his time in Vietnam, and guarantees he is not alone.

“When you meet a cannoneer, speak loudly,” he said.

Downs spent time at roughly 20 locations throughout Vietnam, staying anywhere from six days to six months.

The men refilled sandbags in conditions from over 100 degrees Fahrenheit choking on dust to 23 hours of torrential rains and mud during monsoons. He felt lucky to have two hours of sleep per night.

“Our unit convoyed to Chu Lai just in time for the arrival of Typhoon Hester in October 1971,” Downs said.

The typhoon destroyed Chu Lai, and the men hunkered down in the bunkers.

Downs was reassigned to the 1/21 Artillery, 1st Cavalry Division north of Saigon in III Corps in November where he completed the remaining six months of his deployment.

Normally, tours of Vietnam are one year. Downs enlisted for three years, so he would have left Vietnam in February 1971 with 18 months left to serve in either Germany or Fort Sill.

“Here’s something that’s a little hard for people to understand. When I was in Vietnam, I wanted to be home. And when I came home, I wanted to be back in Vietnam,” Downs said.

He extended his tour of Vietnam three times, totaling 18 additional months.

Downs said he reached the beginning of the end March 29, 1972.

“After 26 months in Vietnam without a scratch, I was seriously injured building ammunition bunkers at a new fire base we had relocated to,” Downs said.

Downs was taken to 3rd Field Hospital in Saigon where he spent four weeks in the hospital.

He took the “legendary freedom bird back to the world” exactly one month later to Fort Ord in California.

“Just like that it was over,” he said.

Upon his arrival in the U.S., Downs had to readjust back to society on his own.

“I went to Vietnam alone, and I came home alone,” Downs said. “Unlike today’s deployments of entire units, most Vietnam soldiers were assigned as individual replacements.”

He said that while he was never spit on or called “baby killer,” he was never offered help or assistance or asked to share his experiences.

“Like most who came home, I thought America just didn’t care,” he said. “I know now America just didn’t know how to deal with our coming home.”

He joined Post 501 and VFW 1318, where he volunteered as a child, the day he got out of the Army. He joined Post 534 after moving to McFarland in 1991.

Downs was elected commander in June.

“I’m trying to get some more programs for veterans going,” Downs said. “We’re there to support veterans and veterans families and the community, and that’s where we’re going.”

The four areas he plans to focus on are children and youths, Americanism, community support and veteran service.

He also volunteers with the VA Hospital on the Madison Veterans Firing Squad. The squad attends about three funerals a week to do the military honors at deceased veteran services. This is his fifth year on the squad.