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Service in Air Force helped Peters find footing in life

By Ryan Spoehr / Thistle Staff
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Paul Peters stands in front of the Table of Honor at the American Legion in McFarland, which is to honor everyone who was in the military that did not come home. Peters donated the hat he was issued in the Air Force as a tribute to all those who made the supreme sacrifice.

Photo by Ryan Spoehr / Thistle staff P



After graduating high school in McFarland, Paul Peters didn't really know what to do in life. Before long the decision was made for him.

He ended up being drafted and went into the Air Force in Sept. 1966. He spent time in various places across the globe including Vietnam, Korea and the Philippines before leaving the Air Force and returning home in 1970. The last 13 months of his tenure overseas was in the Philippines.

"I got to see the world at the expense of the government. That's not such a bad gig," Peters said.

But it was much more than just that, he said, because he learned discipline, how to take care of himself – both physically and mentally.



Peters worked maintenance while in the Air Force. He worked on the F4 Phantom, one of the most high-profile aircraft during the Vietnam War era, and the work would include maintenance on radar, missiles and other parts of the aircraft. He prepared the aircraft before it went into battle. If things that needed to be fixed could not be done during the day shift or the flex shift, tasks absolutely needed to be finished during the night shift, Peters said.

"That stuff had to be right. That was one hell of a responsibility," Peters said.

His time in the service also showed him the struggles others throughout the world are faced with.

"You saw the best and you saw the worst in the world," Peters said. "As they say, 'it's an experience you couldn't buy for \$1 million, but on the same token, you couldn't pay me \$1 million to do again.'" 

Upon returning home, Peters realized he had just accumulated experience. That experience, four years worth, was in electronics, which included knowledge of state of the art electronics at that time, he said. Peters added his tenure in the military set him on the right course for life.

“I got to work for a fortune 500 company,” Peters said.

That fortune 500 company was Xerox, a name that became synonymous with the printed copy. He continued maintenance work on electronics with Xerox. He moved up the rankings, seeing promotions come his way until he retired about four years ago. He said it was a rewarding career.

“It is probably something they would want a degree for today, but still, the knowledge the military gave me was as good as anything on the outside,” he said.

Peters remains a part of the American Legion and VFW today. He said he is involved with those organizations in part because of what he saw when he came back to the U.S. in 1970. The Vietnam War is one of the most controversial wars in history and Peters said he felt that when he returned home.

“The Vietnam era was not popular. It was a political boondoggle. There was great discontent. The politicians were telling us what and what not to do and limiting our resources in the process. When you go to war, you go into war and seemed like we weren’t doing that,” Peters said. “It was like the people were protesting us instead of the politicians.”

Peters added he felt as though there wasn’t as much of a welcome back as there was after World War for him and his fellow Vietnam veterans. He said he stays active in organizations to help ensure that never happens again.

“I want the people who have been overseas whether it be in Iraq, Afghanistan or wherever to be recognized when they come home,” Peters said. “I don’t want them treated like I was.”

Peters remains passionate on what the military can do or any type of service people can do for their country or others.

“I think everyone should give time like that and it doesn’t have to be in the military. It could be in hospitals or schools or things like that,” Peters said. “It just should be some sort of volunteering to earn your way in this country and help giving that sense of pride of being a part of this country.”

Although he may be looking to pass on the reigns, Peters is a part of several things including the chicken barbecue at the Legion and is on the committee that handles baseball.