

STORIES OF HONGR

Stories of Honor 2019 wraps up with section and event

STORIES OF HONOR RECIPIENTS:

- Jessica Ball
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- · Richard Rajkovich
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- Jay Vermillion
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BY SARAH GERREIN, BRAND AVE. STUDIOS

In its fourth year, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch Stories of Honor series tells the stories of local heroes. The series contains accounts of military service, ranging from historical actions during WWII and Vietnam to present day duty in Iraq and Afghanistan. The entries we received described the military service of men and women and their noble actions for freedom's sake.

The 20 unique individuals featured were Purple Heart recipients and tenured veterans of multiple branches. There was a helicopter pilot, a meteorologist and even a Holocaust survivor. No two stories are alike, but they all share courage, dedication, sacrifice and service to our country.

Honorees gathered together at The National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis for a celebratory dinner ceremony surrounded by friends and families on July 18. Each honoree watched a video conveying their own story of service and sacrifice before publicly accepting an award for their courageous acts.

The backdrop for the event was the National Personnel Records Center's incredible log of over 100 million personnel files dating as far back as the mid-19th century. Each day, they receive 4,000 to 5,000 requests for military personnel records.

Several partnerships and sponsors allowed service men and women from different eras, wars and branches to join together and celebrate one another.

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Community Coffee Company has been operated by four generations of the Saurage family since its inception, and they understand the importance of family and giving back. Community Coffee has shipped more than 7 million cups of coffee overseas to military personnel.

Soldiers Memorial Military Museum is dedicated to telling the diverse stories of St. Louisans who served their country, and highlighting their contributions to the nation's military history. Soldiers Memorial offers programs and outreach services including special exhibits, tours, services for the military community, school programs and lectures.



HONOR GUARD AT 2018 EVENT. PHOTO BY MICAH USHER

Stories are told from the nominee's point of view. This content was produced by Brand Ave. Studios. The news and editorial departments of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch had no role in its creation or display. For more information about Brand Ave. Studios, contact tgriffin@stitoday.com.

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2018 HONOREES MEET. PHOTO BY MICAH USHER

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STORIES OF HONOR





JESSICA BALL

U.S. ARMY



JESSICA BALL, AIRBORNE.
PHOTO PROVIDED BY JESSICA BALL

BY LORI ROSE, BRAND AVE. STUDIOS CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Despite being injured in a deadly explosion during her first weeks deployed in Iraq, Jessica Ball went on to overcome fear and face new challenges as one of an elite group of U.S. Army Airborne jumpmasters.

Over her 10 years served in the Army, the St. Louis native achieved the rank of staff sergeant, served three overseas deployments and jumped out of the sky as part of an Army skydiving team. As one of the few women to earn the coveted jumpmaster rating, she helped train more than 10,000 parachutists at the Army's Airborne School.

During her four years as an Airborne instructor and with the Silver Wings parachute team, Ball jumped out of airplanes at elevations ranging from 800 feet to 18,000 feet. At 5-feet-tall, she wore thick-soled boots in order to reach the top of the plane's doorway to complete the safety check each time she jumped. But her small stature made for comfortable landings.

"I was never injured — just bumps and bruises," she said. "When you're lightweight, you land like a feather."

A BRIDGE TO A BRIGHTER FUTURE

Ball, now 37 and a resident of Maeystown, Ill., enlisted in the Army in 2005. She was a single mom hoping to build a brighter future for her young daughter.

"I knew there was a war going on but I was excited to travel the world and provide a better life for me and my daughter," she said. "I wanted to show her what she could do and give her the tools to do whatever she put her mind to."

The Army trained her as a bridge crew member and assigned her to an engineering company based at Fort Hood, Texas. Her unit deployed to Iraq in October 2005 and arrived at Habbaniyah, west of Baghdad, tasked primarily with keeping bridges over the Euphrates and Tigris rivers open.

Almost immediately, she said, the company came under fire. "We lost two soldiers the first day," she said.

Days later, a roadside bomb exploded beneath Ball's vehicle, killing the four other soldiers aboard. Ball suffered a concussion and was airlifted to a hospital where she spent weeks recuperating before returning to the field. Today she is considered 100 percent disabled due to PTSD and the traumatic brain injury that still causes memory issues today.

"It was horrifying," she said. "I have bad dreams a lot. I deal with it still on a daily basis."

Ball completed another year-long deployment to Iraq in 2009 and then was accepted into the Army's Airborne School—also known as Jump School—a three-week course at Fort Benning, Ga., to train soldiers as paratroopers. She was one of only four women in her training class of 300 soldiers.

EARNING HER WINGS

Despite her initial fears, Ball said she learned to love jumping out of airplanes.

"After the first couple of jumps I started to respect that fear," she said. "I kept telling myself that I needed to be a leader. I was a sergeant and I didn't want to show any fear, and I really did trust in my training."

After training, she was assigned as an Airborne instructor, the only woman in her unit for two years, she said. As one of the so-called "Black Hats," she led recruits through the basics of safely jumping out of airplanes, starting with practicing on the ground, then jumping from a 34-foot tower and finally from an aircraft in flight. From there she advanced to jumpmaster — the paratrooper responsible for managing jump operations.

"That's what I loved about the Army the most: Helping people learn to jump out of airplanes like I did after getting over my fear," she said. "You pretty much have control of every person on the aircraft to make sure they get out safely."

Ball also was a member of Fort Benning's

Silver Wings parachute team, which traveled around the country giving demonstrations at air shows and free-falling into stadiums before big events like football games.

"It's the coolest thing," she said. "You're up there and there's total silence and then you float into the stadium and hear all the people and it's just roaring, like a train. I loved it."

In 2015, Ball decided to leave the military to focus more on her family. By then she was raising her sister's three children as well. "I took them on a year before I left the Army," she said. "I don't know what I'd do as a soldier as a single parent of four children."

She said the Army taught her to not to back down from challenges and not to dwell on the negative.

"The Army taught me to live every moment," she said. "I've seen so many bad things, but it made me realize I could get through the darkest days."



JESSICA BALL, AIRBORNE. PHOTO PROVIDED BY JESSICA BALL

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FREDERICK CARPENTER

U.S. ARMY NATIONAL GUARD & ARMY RESERVE



FRED CARPENTER WITH HIS BRONZE STAR CERTIFICATE. PHOTO PROVIDED BY LORI ROSE

BY LORI ROSE, BRAND AVE. STUDIOS CONTRIBUTING WRITER

rowing up in Illinois, Fred Carpenter wanted to serve his country but he also wanted to go to college. So at age 17 he joined the Army National Guard, launching a 26-year civilian-soldier career that ultimately earned him a Bronze Star in Iraa.

"I thought about going active duty but I always wanted to go to school," he said. "That's what I tell kids today, if you think you might like the military, join the Guard or the Reserve to try it out."

Carpenter found that he liked serving in the military so much that he stayed in the Guard for 12 years, then served in the U.S. Army Reserve for another six years, all while working his way up the ranks at the ConocoPhillips oil refinery in Wood River and earning a bachelor's degree in business administration and two master's degrees in human resources.

Then, nearly 20 years after enlisting, Staff Sgt. Carpenter chose another challenge: at age 37, he entered logistics officers training had been damaged — along with the

at Fort Lee, Va., alongside recent West Point graduates more than 10 years his

"That's unusual," he said. "I was one of only four in the school who were in their 30s."

DEPLOYING TO IRAO

He found the experience differed from basic training and advanced infantry training. "I was shocked when I went to officer school because no one was yelling at you," he said.

Shortly after earning his commission as a second lieutenant, the Edwardsville resident was deployed to Kuwait and Iraq as the contracting officer and pay agent for the 917th Corps Support Group, a Reserve unit based in Belton, Mo.

It was 2004, the early days of Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Carpenter had been warned, "Don't unpack your bags, you're going over."

We pulled people off and got everybody out. It was scary. I was proud of myself and all the guvs because we did everything we were taught to do. ""

After several months in Kuwait, Carpenter and his unit traveled by convoy to Mosul and to Oayyarah Airfield, known as Q-West, a former Iraqi Air Force base. While there, his civilian expertise and connections were integral to the establishment of a safe water supply for several hundred fellow soldiers as well as nearby Iraqi villages.

Carpenter said that the water treatment facilities and pumping station at Q-West

airstrips and the control tower — during the early months of the war as coalition forces seized control. Untreated water flowing through mostly grade-level pipes from the Tigris River was being illegally siphoned off by local farmers for their families and livestock in the surrounding desert.

MERITORIOUS SERVICE

Carpenter's work getting the water treatment project up and running safely was just one aspect of his service in Iraq that earned him the Bronze Star Medal. awarded for meritorious service during combat operations. He was also praised for his role in safely moving his unit into Iraq by convoy, managing military contracts in northern Iraq, and helping to rescue a number of service people after the crash of a C-130 transport plane.

About a month after arriving at the logistics hub, Carpenter and his roommate were in their quarters at night when they heard something that sounded like a helicopter crash. When they looked

out toward the darkened landing strips they saw flames.

"We grabbed our weapons and took off," he said.

They alerted the rest of the company as they ran across the base to where the plane carrying Special Forces had gone nose-first into the runway when its landing gear hit a hole in the pavement that was under repair. The rotor blades were striking the ground, sparking flames, and jet fuel was all over the place, he said.

Several dozen soldiers aboard had been thrown to the front of the plane by the force of the crash, he said. The plane was damaged beyond repair.

"It was a tangled mess," he said. "We pulled people off and got everybody out. It was scary. I was proud of myself and all the guys because we did everything we were taught to do."

Carpenter, 53, retired from the Reserve as a captain in 2009 after leading several commands, most recently a public affairs company based in St. Louis. Today he works for Winchester Ammunition, where he serves as director of HR, security and medical, with oversight of facilities at East Alton, Ill., and Oxford, Miss.

In addition, he serves as a volunteer ombudsman for Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve, a Department of Defense program established to promote cooperation and resolve employment conflicts between citizen-soldiers and their civilian employers.

Carpenter said, "I was always taught in the military if you feed them, house them and clothe them, vou'll have no issues. I use that in everyday life."



FRED CARPENTER IN KUWAIT. PHOTO PROVIDED BY FRED CARPENTER

STLTODAY.COM/STORIES OF HONOR BRAND AVE, STUDIOS PG 6 I SUNDAY, JULY 21, 2019

JOSEPH CARRETERO U.S. MARINE CORPS, MARINE CORPS RESERVE & ARMY RESERVE



JOE CARRETERO PHOTO PROVIDED BY JOE CARRETERO

BY LORI ROSE, BRAND AVE. STUDIOS CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Toe Carretero missed his youngest son's J first steps. He missed birthdays and family parties, anniversaries and holidays.

It was part of the price for serving 40 continuous years in the U.S. military, first in the Marine Corps, then the Marine Corps Reserve and the Army Reserve.

"I missed a lot of family things," said Carretero, who retired from the Army Reserve as a sergeant major and continues to serve today as a sergeant with the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department. "When I got back from Desert Storm, my youngest son, Erik, was real little. He didn't know who I was and he didn't want anything to do with me for about two weeks."

Multiple deployments overseas and training exercises far from home kept Carretero from his family but allowed him experiences he won't forget. And In 1990, then Staff Sgt. Carretero and his for another 13 years,

wasn't born in.

"I've been all over the world and this is the greatest country on Earth," he said.

JUST AS AMERICAN AS EVERYONE ELSE

Carretero, 60, was born in Madrid and moved with his family to the United States after his father fell in love with this country while working at the Spanish Pavilion at the 1964 World's Fair in New York.

Eleven-year-old Joe was not happy to be leaving his friends and boyhood home, but soon grew to love the United States as well. His family settled in St. Louis, and after graduating from Bishop DuBourg High School, Carretero joined the Marines in 1977.

"I think what motivated me the most was I just wanted to prove something to myself, to say, 'hey, I'm just as American as everyone else," he said.

His parents were not happy with his decision to join the Marines. "They didn't understand," he said. "Back in Spain, military service was mandatory. Here, it was not mandatory. They wanted me to get a college degree."

After arriving at boot camp, Carretero began to have some doubts himself. "It was rough," he said. "I'm not going to sugarcoat it. We had drill instructors right out of Vietnam. They were hardcore. I was so proud when I completed Marine Corps boot camp. I love the Marine Corps. I love the U.S. military, period. It was one of the best decisions of my life."

After completing his three-year enlistment, including assignments in Japan as part of a supply company, Carretero joined the Marine Corps Reserve and continued to serve, heading off to drill with fellow Reservists one weekend a month and two or three weeks a year.

Shield and Desert Storm and deployed to Saudi Arabia. As a platoon sergeant, he spearheaded the logistical support to Reserve Marine infantry units all over the combat zone in the Arabian Peninsula, Kuwait and Bahrain.

a real eye-opener."

Back at home, like all Reservists, Carretero continued to work full time in the civilian world. In 1994 he was hired by the St. Louis Police Department and today serves as a sergeant in the Second District.

"I love being a policeman," he said. "I've always been drawn to the patrol side. I like to engage with people. I feel like when I'm

on patrol I have my feet on the ground and I'm where it's happening."

I STILL WANTED TO SERVE

Carretero served 24 years in the Marine Reserve, taking on new roles and assignments as he rose through the ranks until reaching Marine service limitation in 2004. Rather than leave military service in the middle of the global war on terror. Carretero requested a transfer to the U.S. Army Reserve.

"I didn't feel like I was done," he said. "The war was going on and I still wanted to serve. The military relies on Reservists to pick up the shortages of activeduty personnel."

Carretero served in the Army Reserve

it reaffirmed his love for a country he unit were activated in support of Desert including deployments to Iraq, Kuwait and Afghanistan as well as extended assignments stateside. In 2010 he was promoted to sergeant major, the highest rank possible for enlisted noncommissioned personnel. Only a few active-duty soldiers or Reservists ever reach this level.

> "It was a very scary time," he said. "It was Carretero said he never regretted the time he committed to serving his adopted homeland, but he couldn't have done it without the support of his wife and his extended family.

> > "My two kids have grown up without their dad at a lot of significant events in their lives," he said. "It's hard if you don't have the support of your family. I don't think a lot of people would be that supportive for so many years."



JOE CARRETERO IN 1977. PHOTO PROVIDED BY JOE CARRETERO

BRAND AVE, STUDIOS STLTODAY.COM/STORIES OF HONOR SUNDAY, JULY 21, 2019 I PG 7

DARNELL COOPER

U.S. ARMY



DARNELL COOPER WITH HIS TWO PURPLE HEARTS.
PHOTO PROVIDED BY DARNELL COOPER

BY LORI ROSE, BRAND AVE. STUDIOS CONTRIBUTING WRITER

It was the middle of the night when a U.S. Army reconnaissance team spotted two suspicious figures near a main road in Tal Afar in northwestern Iraq. That meant it was go-time for Sgt. Darnell Cooper and his fellow soldiers manning a nearby checkpoint.

Suddenly, an explosion rocked their Stryker armored vehicle as it rumbled over a hidden roadside bomb.

"I just remember a bright light," Cooper said. "It was a moment of calm. It seemed like time slowed down a little bit. I don't remember much after that."

It wasn't the first time Cooper was injured in an explosion while serving in Iraq.

The two-time Purple Heart recipient had also survived a car bomb that blew up near his vehicle earlier in his deployment. That time, a piece of hot metal flew through the air and sliced his neck. He didn't realize he'd been hit until a buddy told him he was bleeding.

"The doctor said I was extremely lucky," Cooper said. "But as an infantry soldier, you go right back in."

Cooper, now 36 and a resident of St. Louis, works for the Department of Defense as a military analyst and has traveled three times to Afghanistan in support of U.S. soldiers there. He's also working toward an online degree in intelligence studies through the American Military University.

THE QUEEN OF BATTLE

Raised by grandparents in Belize, Cooper would travel each summer to the United States to be with his mother, a school teacher in Brooklyn, N.Y. Each visit reaffirmed his dream of serving in the U.S. military like an older cousin who had joined the Marines.

"It was always my dream to be in the infantry, the 'queen of battle," he said. "I remember seeing my cousin in uniform and I wanted to be like him. Every year in high school I would tell my mom, 'I'm one year closer."

After graduating in 2000, Cooper moved to the United States and enlisted in the Army in August 2001. One month later, terrorists struck the twin towers of the World Trade Center, and Cooper knew he would soon be in the heart of the fight.

"I was in training at Fort Benning and we were getting a briefing when someone came up to the stage and whispered in the drill sergeant's ear, and he passed out," Cooper said.

WE WANTED TO DO OUR JOBS

The news galvanized Cooper and his fellow recruits.

"That [9/11] was an emotional experience," Cooper said. "We were the ones who were going to be sent to war. That was personal. We wanted a piece of the action. We wanted to do our jobs."

Cooper was deployed to Iraq in 2003 and served as a machine gunner attached to the 3rd Infantry Division. His unit was involved in hundreds of fire fights and more than 1,500 raids over the next few months as they

hunted for Saddam Hussein and his arsenal.

"It was a lot of fire fights, a lot of raids trying to find the ace of spades [Saddam Hussein]," he said. "We wanted to be the ones to find him, to be the ones to really deliver a message."

They didn't find Saddam, but Cooper's unit was nearby in Baghdad when the king of spades in the deck of most-wanted Iraqi playing cards, Ali Hassan al-Majid, Saddam's cousin, was captured as he tried to leave the city. Majid was known as Chemical Ali for his use of chemical weapons against Iraqi Kurds.

After re-enlisting in Baghdad, Cooper was attached to the 25th Infantry Division and sent to Fort Lewis, Wash., where he helped train other soldiers on a Stryker brigade.

I THOUGHT I WAS DONE FOR

As violent as the first deployment was, his second deployment in October 2004 was worse, he said. Cooper's unit took part in major combat operations, including Operation Phantom Fury, one of the bloodiest battles of the Iraq War. His unit suffered multiple fatalities and injuries.

Cooper was standing in the rear of the Stryker that night in 2004 when the IED exploded beneath him.

"I thought I was done for," Cooper said. "Surprisingly, I was the only one injured."

Cooper suffered head and back injuries and was transported back to the States to heal. His injuries still give him trouble and keep him from physical pursuits such as running that he used to enjoy.

Those injuries didn't keep him from volunteering as a civilian employee of the Department of Defense for three separate missions to Afghanistan to provide operational support to U.S. soldiers between 2011 and 2017.

He said it hurts to think of fellow soldiers who were killed or disabled, and those who have suffered since the war with mental health issues including post-traumatic stress disorder.

"It's PTSD that's killing my friends now," he said.

He spends time reaching out to veterans he served with and tells them: "It's OK to talk about it. Just because someone wasn't in your shoes doesn't mean they're not in a position to help you.

"War isn't fun. Even the toughest of the tough have issues processing it. But you'd be stupid to think you can forget about it."



COOPER IN 2011 DURING DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE CIVILIAN
DEPLOYMENT TO FOB SHARANA.
PHOTO PROVIDED BY DARNELL COOPER

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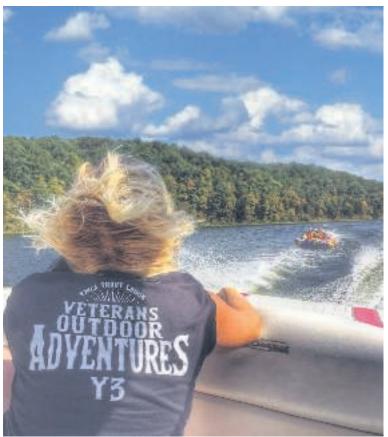
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PAUL DIXON

U.S. ARMY



PHOTO PROVIDED BY PAUL DIXON

BY LORI ROSE, BRAND AVE. STUDIOS CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Tollowing his Christian Science beliefs while serving in the U.S. Army for 30 years was a personal balancing act for nowretired Col. Paul G. Dixon.

As a company commander, he was wellknown among his soldiers for abstaining from alcohol — the "forever designated driver," he joked. But less obvious was his daily reliance on his faith to serve others and to survive the horrors of war in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"I should have been dead six times over there," Dixon said. "I can tell you prayer is the only reason I lived."

As a Christian Scientist, prayer is first aid, he said. "Medical treatment — that's The promotions kept coming as Dixon second aid to me."

When Dixon was wounded in Afghanistan in 2013 in an accident that left him with pain and the lasting effects of a traumatic brain injury, Dixon's faith carried him through, as it does today, whenever the memories of serving in a war zone resurface.

supposed to be," he said.

MILITARY PROVIDED DIRECTION

Dixon, now 55 and a resident of Chesterfield, graduated from Principia School in 1983. Though his friends were heading off to college, Dixon had no plans of his own. When a family friend sent him an application to the New Mexico Military Institute, he applied and was accepted.

He soon found himself at boot camp at Fort Knox, Ky. After eight weeks at Fort Knox, he was on a bus to Roswell, N.M., where the boot camp experience started all over again. "It was rough," he said. "But I needed it. I needed to grow up. I had no other direction in life."

Dixon graduated from the Institute with an associate's degree and a commission as a second lieutenant, yet he still didn't see the military in his future. It wasn't until he moved home to St. Louis and got married three years later that he thought about his commitment to the service. A search at the National Personnel Records Center turned up a surprise: Dixon had already been promoted to first lieutenant.

I should have been dead six times over there," Dixon said. "I can tell you prayer is the only reason I lived. 77

served the next 30 years in the Army and the Army Reserve, completing six tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan and earning the Bronze Star for meritorious service and leadership in combat.

As company commander of the 318th Psychological Operations Company

"I pray every day that I'm where I'm (PYSOP), he and his soldiers were deployed to Iraq in February 2003 for 14 months. He led some 60 soldiers from Kuwait all the way north through Baghdad to Mosul, engaging in hundreds of firefights along the way but never losing one of his own, he said.

> As a PSYOP company, their goal was to attract the enemy into areas where the main infantry could engage them in battle, he said. Inevitably, that meant he and his soldiers were the first contact with the insurgents they were fighting.

WHEN YOU CALL THE ELEPHANT

"It happened all the time," he said. "When you call the elephant to come running, you can't always get out of the way."

After returning home from Iraq, Dixon returned to active duty and went to work at the U.S. Transportation Command at

Scott Air Force Base, then deployed to Afghanistan in 2012 as part of the U.S. Special Operations Command of the 9th Psychological Operations Battalion. He later served with the Army's Center for Lessons Learned. traveling throughout the region to meet with commanders and study what worked and what didn't in battle.

While traveling to a base in southern Afghanistan, Dixon was injured when a C-130 airplane ramp failed to fully open. He was hospitalized for much of the next year and retired from military service in 2015. Today, he works for a company that is supporting the new building project for the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency.

Dixon said he rarely talks about his experiences overseas, even with his own family. They've gone through enough, he

Through his deployments when contact with home was infrequent, his wife and two daughters only had access to the news reports of fighting and casualties. "That can wear on you," he said. "PTSD affects the whole family. Even though I never talk about the horrors I saw, they have their own feelings of depression and loss and abandonment."

He relies on prayer and follows the advice of his grandfather, who served as a Marine in World War II.

"He never talked about it," Dixon said. "All he said was, war is hell. Suck it up and take it to your grave."



PAUL DIYON (R) AT FORT RRACG REFORE SHIPPING OUT PHOTO PROVIDED BY PAUL DIXON

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HAROLD DUANNE EIFERT

U.S. AIR FORCE



HAROLD EIFERT.
PHOTO PROVIDED BY LORI ROSE

BY LORI ROSE, BRAND AVE. STUDIOS CONTRIBUTING WRITER

From his desk at Scott Air Force Base, meteorologist Harold Duanne Eifert can see a troublesome sandstorm brewing in the Middle East.

"I can see typhoons in Japan, I can see a thunderstorm in Texas, I can see a dust storm in Afghanistan," Eifert said. "On the same computer, at the same time — I can see it all."

Watching the weather in far-flung corners of the world has been Eifert's job in the U.S. Air Force for years. Though he retired from active duty after 20 years of service, Eifert continues to work as a civilian meteorologist with the 618th Air Operations Center, keeping an eye on weather conditions that may affect military missions near and far.

His role is crucial to the 618th, formerly called the Tanker Airlift Control Center, which manages a fleet of more than a thousand aircraft involved in moving troops around the world, mid-air refueling of fighters and other aircraft, aeromedical

evacuations and other support operations.

"We give hundreds of briefings a day," Eifert said. "It's 24/7, 365 days — it doesn't stop."

Eifert, 57, of Mascoutah, Ill., grew up in Michigan and joined the Air Force before he graduated from high school in 1980. He said he knew he couldn't afford college but he wanted to serve his country and get an education, too.

Initially, he was trained as an auto mechanic and was assigned to Davis Monthan Air Force Base in Arizona, then to Osan, Korea. He'd always been fascinated with weather growing up and when he learned that the Air Force had a meteorology program, he requested to cross-train.

He trained first as a weather observer at Chanute Air Force Base in Rantoul, Ill., and then was stationed at Ellsworth Air Force Base in South Dakota before returning to Chanute for an extensive, eight-month training program as a weather forecaster.

After graduating at the top of his class, he then returned to Ellsworth, which is where he experienced firsthand some of the severe weather he had studied. He remembers one storm in particular that was accompanied by baseball-sized hail that totaled his car and broke out windows at his home.

A PROTECTOR OF RESOURCES

Though they work behind the scenes, meteorologists play an integral role in not only military missions around the world but also in protecting personnel and resources here at home, Eifert said. At Ellsworth, for example, the safety of aircrews, combat-ready bombers and missile silos was at stake. When aircraft and personnel deployed to Desert Shield and Desert Storm, he and other Air Force meteorologists provided weather briefings to help ensure their

safety en route and on the ground.

Eifert later spent two years at the Joint Typhoon Warning Center in Guam, which was responsible for issuing tropical cyclone warnings to military personnel throughout the Pacific and Indian oceans.

MOTHER NATURE DOESN'T READ WEATHER CHARTS

Though he retired from active duty in 2001 as a master sergeant, he still enjoys keeping an eye on the weather and helping train younger weather forecasters at Scott Air Force Base. Through the years, he said, meteorologists have had to adjust to rapidly changing technology, which has led to numerous advances in developing accurate forecasts.

Still, it's impossible to get it right consistently.

I can see typhoons in Japan, I can see a thunderstorm in Texas, I can see a dust storm in Afghanistan. 77

"We all get it wrong sometimes," he said. "We can't be 100 percent no matter how much the technology has improved. It's impossible. Mother Nature doesn't read weather charts."

But he's right often enough that his wife, Ila, has learned not to worry about overly dramatic snowfall predictions she hears on TV

"They'll say 8 inches of snow and I'll ask him and he'll say, 'two, trust me,'" she said. "And he's rarely wrong. I've stopped listening to them and life has been easier. But if he tells me to take cover, I'll take cover."



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KARA GRADY

U.S. NAVY & NAVY RESERVE



KARA GRADY. PHOTO PROVIDED BY KARA GRADY

BY LORI ROSE, BRAND AVE. STUDIOS CONTRIBUTING WRITER

ara Grady's service in the U.S. Navy took her to parts of the world she never dreamed she would visit. But these days, her dreams center on a quiet pocket of mid-Missouri land where she hopes to build a retreat for veterans, cancer patients and their families to take a break from their worries.

"The battles are similar — they're fighting for their lives and they're fighting for others," she says. "They're all warriors."

As a veteran herself, the wife of a veteran, and the mother of a son who endured years of chemotherapy to shrink tumors growing in his brain, Grady knows about such battles.

"Everyone is a warrior of something," she says. "The financial and mental toll that go along with these struggles — we want to give families an opportunity to leave it all behind for a few hours or a day."

Grady, 48, joined the Navy in 1989. She served as a radioman (now called an

information systems technician) and was assigned to the USS Hunley in support of the Atlantic submarine fleet. When her enlistment ended, she joined the Navy Reserve, then returned to active duty in 1996. That's when she met and married her husband, John, a Seabee.

Grady first went to Naples, Italy, and later San Diego, where she was assigned to a beach master unit attached to the USS Tarawa, an amphibious assault ship. During Grady's first deployment, the Tarawa traveled to such far-ranging locales as Australia, Thailand, Bahrain and the Seychelles.

In October 2000, the ship was steaming through the Strait of Hormuz on her way into the Persian Gulf when word came that the USS Cole had been attacked by a suicide bomber while refueling at Yemen. Seventeen Americans were killed and 39 injured.

The financial and mental toll that go along with these struggles — we want to give families an opportunity to leave it all behind for a few hours or a day.

"We were one of the ships that went to assist the Cole and carry the crewmen home," Grady said. What she remembers most about that time are the stories the survivors told, of little decisions that saved their lives, like staying behind for five more minutes to watch a movie.

SMALL DECISIONS, BIG IMPACT

It taught her that small decisions can have a big impact.

After leaving the Navy in 2001, she put

that knowledge to work as a military spouse, managing the everyday decisions that running a young family of three requires while her husband continued to serve. She also returned to the Navy Reserve.

When the Gradys' son Charles was diagnosed at age 5 with neurofibromatosis, those home front duties ramped up as Grady oversaw a challenging regimen of medication and doctor appointments. Charles endured years of chemotherapy to attack tumors growing on his optic nerves, his brain and spine. The genetic

disorder left him legally blind, though his condition has been stable now for three years.

Today, Grady's positive energy is making a difference in the lives of the special needs students in the Wentzville School District where she works as a classroom aide.

"She is, as we used to say in the Navy, a 'hard charger,' always working to help others," said her husband, John. "She amazes me with all she does."

A RIPPLE EFFECT

Today, the Gradys hope to create a ripple effect in the lives of veterans, cancer patients and their families through a foundation they launched last year, called A Thousand Ripples Warrior Retreat. They are working to turn a 10-acre wooded property near Hermann into a retreat center — a place for relaxing, a place for sharing, a place for learning from each other.

"We're hoping to eventually have five to 10 cabins, so that we can bring families in," Grady said. She envisions themed weekends and classes on gardening or healthy eating, movie nights under the stars, campfires and cookouts and games played in the quiet of the countryside.

Where differences are shed and the battles faced serve to unite.

"We want to make it a retreat so they can forget about their troubles. We want to bring them together — they could actually give each other support in ways that others cannot."



KARA GRADY. PHOTO PROVIDED BY KARA GRADY

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THOMAS KREYLING

U.S. ARMY



TOM KREYLING.
PHOTO PROVIDED BY TOM KREYLING

BY LORI ROSE, BRAND AVE. STUDIOS CONTRIBUTING WRITER

The scars have faded for a Vietnam veteran but the memories haven't.

Two months after arriving in Vietnam as part of the U.S. Army Signal Corps, Spc. Tom Kreyling was heading stateside with severe burns that covered much of his body. He was injured while working on crucial underground communication cables linking Army base camps in South Vietnam.

For years, the scars and the residual pain from second-degree burns on his hands, arms, chest and face reminded him of his service in Vietnam, but he rarely talked about the accident that changed his life forever.

It wasn't until he was invited on a recent Honor Flight with other military veterans that he opened up to his daughter about the details of his service.

"I had no idea just how intense the nightmares are that he's been hiding to protect my siblings and me," said his daughter, Laurie Hollenberg, who accompanied her dad on the trip to Washington, D.C. "He fought to give us a life full of happy memories while burying the scary ones."

RELIVING A PAINFUL MEMORY

For Kreyling, 70, the Honor Flight was an experience he'll remember forever. "Anybody that can go, should go," he said. "It's going to bring back memories, but you also are received so warmly that it makes you feel good. It's a thank-you that you will never forget."

The experience also helped offset some of the painful memories from Vietnam.

"There was someone in the ward across from me in a lot of pain. I found out later he had 98 percent of his body burned and he died that night. That man's never left my mind."

Lt's going to bring back memories, but you also are received so warmly that it makes you feel good. It's a thank-you that you will never forget.

GREETINGS FROM YOUR DRAFT BOARD

Kreyling was 19 years old, engaged to be married, and working as a cable splicer for Southwestern Bell in St. Louis when he received his draft notice in 1967. He was surprised because he had already signed up to join the Air National Guard.

Still, he figured that the Army could use technicians with his training to help build and maintain its huge communications networks at home and abroad. So when he reported to the enlistment office he told the person in charge he was a trained cable splicer.

"He had no idea what a cable splicer was so he put down that I was a laborer,"

Kreyling said. "I didn't realize the impact of that until later."

The impact was that after completing boot camp at Fort Leonard Wood, Kreyling was sent to Fort Polk for infantry training. Again, Kreyling was surprised; so was his father, who had served in the Signal Corps in World War II.

"My dad came unglued," Kreyling remembered. "He wrote letters to everybody from the president of the United States all the way to Leonor K. Sullivan about how in the world could they do that after the phone company had spent three months training me."

The message must have gotten through to someone because midway through advanced infantry training, Kreyling was transferred to Fort Bragg, N.C. as a lineman. "I didn't know the first thing about being a lineman," he said.

By the end of 1968, orders came for Vietnam and Kreyling arrived at Long Binh, a logistics and command center for the Army. His job was soon changed to cable splicer and he set to work connecting cables to a new telephone central office that was under construction.

About a month later, Kreyling was sent to a second military base to repair defective underground cable splices. Local Vietnamese workers dug up the cables, and Kreyling and his partner respliced the wires and sealed them with aluminum coverings to prevent water damage.

But they didn't have the correct equipment for the job and on April 25, 1969, two months to the day since he had arrived in Vietnam, flames suddenly flared up.

HE SAVED MY LIFE

"The next thing I knew I had fire

from the waist up," Kreyling said. "My buddy Rick grabbed me, threw me down and rolled me in the dirt. He saved my life."

Kreyling was airlifted to Long Binh and then to a military hospital in Japan for several weeks before being flown home aboard a medical transport. He finished out his service at Fort Lewis in Washington, then returned to St. Louis and his old job with the telephone company, where he stayed for 33 years.

Through all those years, his burned hands continued to bother him, an ever-present reminder of Vietnam, he said.

A few years ago he visited the Traveling Vietnam Wall when it was displayed near his home in Arnold. He found the name of a soldier who died April 25, 1969, and he wonders if he was the young man with the terrible burns, the man Kreyling had never forgotten.

"It ran chills through all of us," he said.

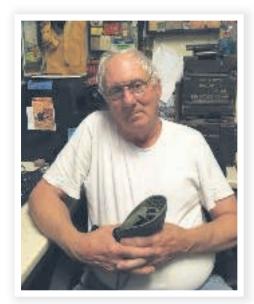


TOM KREYLING IN WASHINGTON, D.C. WITH DAUGHTER LAURIE HOLLENBERG. PHOTO PROVIDED BY TOM KREYLING

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MICHAEL LAVIN

U.S. ARMY



MICHAEL LAVIN'S OFFICE AND MILITARY COLLECTIONS. PHOTO BY MICHAEL LAVIN

BY LORI ROSE, BRAND AVE, STUDIOS CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Army veteran Michael Lavin wanted to put Vietnam behind him, but after all these years, the soldiers who served under him are never far from his mind.

"It's a mission," he said of his efforts to re-connect the 155 men who were part of the transportation company he led during the last major offensive of the long drawn-out war. "If you haven't served, you don't understand that bond."

Lavin, now 73, has devoted many hours to tracking down the members of the 515th Transportation Company. As part of the 39th Transportation Battalion, the truck drivers of the 515th played a major role in moving supplies to the Laotian border in support of Lam Son 719, the South Vietnamese military's 1971 invasion into Laos.

In all, the trucks of the 39th hauled thousands of pounds of cargo and encountered more than 20 enemy ambushes over the 2 1/2 month operation. Twelve men were killed, 35 were wounded and 40 vehicles were damaged or destroyed.

formerly abandoned camps along the North Vietnamese border, the truck drivers rose to the challenge and pushed their vehicles and supplies forward," wrote Richard Killblane in "Lam Son 719, The Cargo Must Get Through," a book Lavin contributed to about the Lam Son convoy operations.

HOPING FOR AN EASIER PATH

When Lavin graduated from Brentwood High School in 1963, there were already thousands of young men serving in Vietnam. He didn't want to be one of them. He enrolled at Westminster College and completed ROTC, hoping that entering the military as an officer "would make my life easier."

For a while that was the case. After officers' basic training, Lavin was sent to Germany where he served as a platoon leader with a mechanical maintenance battalion responsible for jeep and truck repair.

For two years, life was good. Lavin spoke fluent German thanks in part to his studies at Westminster, lived off base and traveled around the country in a 1967 Mustang Fastback he had shipped from home.

"All I did was drive around Germany and have a good time," he said. Then at the end of 1969, orders came for Vietnam. "I knew it was coming, but to be honest I liked my life the way it was. I prolonged leaving Germany as long as I could."

Capt. Lavin was sent first to Camp Eagle in South Vietnam, where he served on the headquarters staff with the 39th Transportation Battalion. In December 1970, he was ordered to take charge as commanding officer of the 515th — a group of guys who were used to doing things their own way.

The 515th and its 67 five-ton flatbed trucks were tasked with hauling ammunition and food to the fire bases of the 101st Airborne. When Lavin arrived, the company was not meeting military standards, he said.

"I was a paper pusher, and now I'm around "Living like moles from day to day in a bunch of guys with loaded guns," he said.

"There were two heroin addicts, potheads, alcoholics and a pimp."

Lavin immediately passed out 13 Article-15 disciplinary actions, maximizing the punishment to show he meant business. Six weeks later the company was sent into the field as part of Lam Son 719. During those weeks of hauling cargo along the Demilitarized Zone, the company jelled into a cohesive group that took care of any problems "our own way," he said.

"We knew what our mission was and we will achieve it all costs," he said. "It doesn't matter if you're a private or a captain, I'm watching your back and you're watching mine."

SOMETHING CHANGED

When Lavin returned home after Lam Son, he rarely spoke about his experiences to family and friends. About 15 years ago, something changed.

Long interested in World War II as an amateur historian, Lavin began to talk to high school students about Vietnam. And then a few years ago he decided to track down all the men who served in his company. He found that almost 50 of them were already dead; some didn't respond.

"I talked with 70 on the phone," he said. "It was amazing. Most of these guys had never talked to anybody. They were crying on the phone. I said, 'I'm not going to hang up. I'll talk as long as you want."

Lavin made notes as men shared their memories. The Army sent someone to interview them for the U.S. Army Transportation Museum at Fort Eustis in Virginia. Today, Lavin has five boxes filled with notes and records and memories stored in his office. Using those notes, Lavin helps fellow veterans fill out paperwork for disability claims.

He continues to speak at area high schools about his experiences. It is stressful to relive the memories, but it's important they understand the realities, he said.

"It does me good, even though it makes me suffer," he said. "At the end of the day I am emotionally and mentally spent."



MICHAEL LAVIN (C) IN VIETNAM. THIS PHOTO WAS PUBLISHED IN A BOOK BY ARMY HISTORIAN. RICHARD KILLBLANE ABOUT THE LAM SON CONVOYS. PHOTO BY MICHAEL LAVIN

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GUY LEONARD

U.S. MARINE CORPS



GUY LEONARD.
PHOTO PROVIDED BY GUY LEONARD

BY LORI ROSE, BRAND AVE. STUDIOS CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Bleeding from multiple shrapnel wounds from a grenade blast that knocked the weapon out of his hands and the helmet off his head, Pfc. Guy Leonard zigzagged blindly along a trench dug into a red dirt hilltop outside Khe Sanh in South Vietnam.

As he ran and wiped blood from his eyes, Leonard suddenly encountered a North Vietnamese soldier, or NVA. From beneath his flak jacket, Leonard pulled an aluminum mess kit knife and fought his way past one enemy soldier, then another.

It was Feb. 8, 1968, and 64 Marines from the 1st Battalion 9th Marines were hunkered down on a small outpost atop a hill about half the size of a football field, trying to fight off hundreds of North Vietnamese soldiers who launched a full-out attack in the hours before dawn.

"I had just gotten up from my sleep," Leonard said. "Mortars and rockets and everything started coming in."

Badly outnumbered, the Marines on Hill 64 were soon overrun by enemy soldiers

swarming their trench lines to fight in brutal hand-to-hand combat.

Leonard, along with most every other survivor, was severely wounded. More than 20 Marines were killed before a relief squad from base camp fought their way up the hill to help secure it.

THE WALKING DEAD

Leonard, now 70 and a resident of Sunset Hills, had been working as a typesetter in St. Louis when he joined the Marines in 1967 at age 18.

After training, he was attached to the 1/9, an infantry division nicknamed The Walking Dead for its high casualty rate, and sent to Camp Evans in Vietnam. He soon found himself boarding a Chinook helicopter headed to Khe Sanh, south of the demilitarized zone near the border with Laos.

The Hill 64 Marines spent the first couple of weeks chopping out a 7-foot-deep trench, lining bunkers with sand bags filled with the hunks of the hard earth they dug up, and surviving on little sleep, not enough water and two C-rations a day. Thousands of North Vietnamese soldiers, meanwhile, had already begun a massive artillery bombardment on Khe Sanh Base Camp and the surrounding hillsides in a battle that would rage for 11 weeks.

Leonard and the other Marines on Hill 64 were dodging artillery and sniper fire but it was nothing like what was to come.

In the foggy hours before dawn on Feb. 8, a reinforced battalion of an estimated 600 NVA soldiers attacked Hill 64 with a barrage of mortar rounds and rockets and rocket-propelled grenades.

Leonard and another soldier were on the back slope of the hill when the assault began. Soon they were crawling across the rocky hilltop to fire down at the enemy. Visibility was so poor they were forced to wait for the illumination from explosions in order to see where to aim. Mortar rounds and rockets were so loud that both of Leonard's ear drums burst.

"They were landing so close they would throw us off the ground 18 inches or 2 feet and then slam us back down to the ground," he said.

A BIG, COLD SHOVEL

As dawn broke, the two men moved into the trench line on the other side of the hill and were hit by enemy grenades. Shrapnel struck nearly every part of his body not protected by his flak jacket, Leonard said.

"The second grenade blew my rifle away and blew my helmet off," he said. "It felt like being hit by a big, cold shovel."

With blood streaming down his face, Leonard reached into his flak jacket and took out the mess kit knife he had sharpened

on rocks and fought his way back to where he'd begun. He jumped into the bunker next to a fellow Marine, who stared at him in horror.

"I guess I looked kind of spooky," Leonard said. "I thought, man I guess I must be hurt pretty bad."

A medical corpsman gave him morphine and sent him on foot amid sniper fire down a steep trail to a waiting "mule," a small flatbed vehicle that would carry him to the aid station. From there he was shipped by helicopter to Da Nang Air Base. His wounds were so severe, he said, the crew put him in a basket on the outside of the chopper, usually reserved for fatalities.

"They thought I was dead because I was on the outside of the chopper so they left me in the hall for a long time," Leonard said. "Then I felt somebody messing around with my foot and I said, 'hey!' They were getting ready to put a toe tag on me."

Leonard spent eight months in hospitals and then finished out his military career as a corporal stationed in Cuba. After he returned to St. Louis in 1970, he worked again as a typesetter but spent most of his career in government jobs, including as a park ranger with the National Park Service.

Vivid memories of Vietnam remain fresh more than 50 years later, Leonard said. He finds solace in the peacefulness of nature and enjoys spending time at a second home in Montana.

He always carries a knife, though.

"Because you never know when you might need it," he said.



GUY LEONARD, LEFT, IN CUBA.
PHOTO PROVIDED BY GUY LEONARD

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JOSEPH MIDDENDORF

U.S. ARMY



JOE MIDDENDORF.
PHOTO PROVIDED BY JOE MIDDENDORF

BY LORI ROSE, BRAND AVE. STUDIOS CONTRIBUTING WRITER

For 48 hours of fierce fighting in a battle to retake Nui Yon Hill in Vietnam, U.S. Army Sgt. Joe Middendorf had his medic's back.

As "Doc" weaved through crossfire to treat and retrieve fallen comrades in the "kill zone" during an ambush in which the Americans were grossly outnumbered, Middendorf and another machine gunner did their best to provide covering fire and prevent the medic from being hit.

In the chaos, Middendorf was struck in the head from shrapnel when a rocketpropelled grenade exploded nearby. But he refused a ride on a medevac helicopter that would have whisked him away from his comrades on the front line.

"I just wasn't going to leave them," Middendorf said. "They needed everybody they could get."

OUTNUMBERED BY THE ENEMY

Middendorf, now 70, says it's painful to remember the losses from those two days in

May 1969 near the South Vietnamese village of Tam Ky. Out of 89 men in his company, 13 were killed and many more wounded in close combat against an estimated 1,800 to 2,000 NVA and 700 Viet Cong.

Now a retired electrician living in Hazelwood, Middendorf said he bottled up the memories of his 12-month tour in Vietnam and never shared them with family or friends until about 10 years ago. That's when, out of the blue, "Doc" called him on the telephone and said, "remember me?"

Doc, as he was known to the men of Charlie Company, is James C. McCloughan, now a retired educator from Michigan. McCloughan had joined Middendorf's unit in Vietnam as a private first class just a few months before Nui Yon Hill. He was on a mission to reconnect with the battlefield buddies he served with 40 years before.

Two years ago, McCloughan was awarded the Medal of Honor — the U.S. military's highest award for valor in action. He is credited with rescuing 10 Americans and treating some 50 wounded during the battle despite being wounded himself. He credits Middendorf and another machine gunner, Sgt. Doug Hatten, now deceased, with his life.

"I would never have been able to do it without the expert shooting by Sgt. Joe Middendorf and Sgt. Doug Hatten," McCloughan said. "I would have been killed or I would have been taken prisoner."

A LETTER FROM THE DRAFT BOARD

Middendorf was a college golfer at Northeast Missouri State when he was drafted into the Army. "I happened to drop one class and that put me to part-time status," he said. Within weeks, the draft board sent him a letter.

"I was sitting in my driveway and I saw the mailman coming and I said, 'well here comes my draft notice," said Middendorf, who grew up in Alton, Ill. "And sure as heck it was." The 19-year-old reported in April 1968 and shipped to Vietnam in October.

"They fly you out to your unit out in the field by helicopter," he said. "It was hot, hot, hot. The first day I got shot at by snipers. I said, 'boy, this is going to be fun'. You learn pretty quick."

By March 1969 when Pfc. McCloughan joined the company, Sgt. Middendorf already had months of on-the-job training, thanks to repeated ambushes and skirmishes, land mines and incoming mortar rounds.

On May 13, 1969, the company was transported by helicopter to a spot near Nui Yon Hill. As the helicopters prepared to land, they immediately began taking on enemy fire, and two were shot down. Middendorf and McCloughan had to jump to the ground from about 10 feet because the Hueys were not going to land in a hot landing zone.

Soon the soldiers were taking cover in tree lines and trenches surrounding dry rice paddies.

SAVE THE LAST ONE FOR YOURSELF

"I was wounded the first day, and Doc was wounded three times," Middendorf said. "If you screamed 'medic,' Doc was coming. He was running out there, and picking up guys and running back—it was crazy."

By the morning of the third day, the enemy had retreated. "They just disappeared," Middendorf said. "Luckily, because we were almost out of ammunition and word was sent down: save the last one for yourself."

Despite still carrying the scars of shrapnel that pierced his head, Middendorf did not receive a Purple Heart. When he and McCloughan started pursuing the honor in 2012 they were told the medal was denied because there was no record of

Middendorf having been seen by medical personnel.

McCloughan wrote a letter detailing how he had picked pieces of shrapnel from Middendorf's head and treated him until the wounds healed and how Middendorf had refused to be evacuated. But it wasn't until 2017 when McCloughan was set to receive the Medal of Honor that the Purple Heart was secured for his friend.

"A panel looked at what I submitted before and they asked, 'Why has this taken so long?" McCloughan said. "Can you imagine going 48 years after being wounded to get your just reward?"

The night before Doc's Medal of Honor ceremony, the Purple Heart was pinned on Middendorf by Gen. James C. McConville, the Army's vice chief of staff, at his own ceremony attended by his three grown daughters, McCloughan and 10 of their fellow survivors from Nui Yon Hill.



JOE MIDDENDORF.
PHOTO PROVIDED BY JOE MIDDENDORF

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WILLIAM NEWTON

U.S. NAVY & ARMY NATIONAL GUARD



WILLIAM NEWTON. PHOTO PROVIDED BY WILLIAM NEWTON

BY LORI ROSE, BRAND AVE. STUDIOS CONTRIBUTING WRITER

fter 14 years in the U.S. Navy, William A Newton was finally back in civilian clothing. But it didn't last long — at an age when some soldiers are looking forward to retirement, Newton decided to enlist again, this time as a combat medic with the Army National Guard.

"I missed the military," he said. "The Navy taught me who I am as far as discipline, and the Army reinforced that. It's nice having that structure again."

Newton, a resident of Troy, Ill., grew up in St. Louis and attended Cleveland Junior Naval Academy. He joined the Navy while still in high school under the delayed enlistment program. Soon after graduation in 1999, he was on his first airplane ride en route to Naval Station Great Lakes. He was 19 and starting boot camp for the first time, though it would not be his last.

"I was scared out of my wits," said Newton, now 38. "I didn't know what was in store."

bus that day, all the yelling started, he said. "From day one to almost the end of basic training, everything was yelling. I understand it now; they were trying to break you down so they can build you up the way the Navy wants you."

I'M NOT READY FOR THIS

On Sept. 11, 2001, Newton's assigned aircraft carrier, the USS Abraham Lincoln was in port for routine maintenance when terrorists attacked the World Trade Center, Newton, who was assigned to aviation supplies, was arriving for breakfast when the news broke.

"We were all thinking, 'How does this happen?" he said. "And then we saw the second plane hit. My heart sank. My stomach dropped. I thought, 'I'm only 21, I'm not ready for this."

By July 2002 the Lincoln was heading for the Persian Gulf in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. But its routine six-month deployment was extended to 10 months when it was called back to help deliver the first airstrikes of the Iraq War.

"We were two days from hitting Guam on our way home," Newton remembered. "And that's when President (George W.) Bush declared war. You had that sinking feeling: This is it. We're at war now."

The Lincoln set a record for the longest deployment of a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier. And it made history again when President Bush made a dramatic landing on its flight deck aboard a Navy jet in May 2003 — the first time a sitting president had landed on a carrier in a fixed-wing aircraft.

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

Standing on the four-acre flight deck before thousands of cheering sailors and a huge red, white and blue banner proclaiming "Mission Accomplished," Bush announced the end of major combat operations in Iraq.

After the ship docked in San Diego, Newton took a commercial flight home As soon as the recruits stepped off the to St. Louis for two weeks of leave. He

said he was surprised and humbled by the reactions of strangers who saw him in uniform — there were cheers, handshakes and thank-you's from airline employees and fellow passengers.

His next assignment was aboard another aircraft carrier, the USS Carl Vinson out of Virginia, followed by duty stations at Air Station Patuxent River in Maryland and the Naval Construction Battalion Center Gulfport in Mississippi, where he served as a Seabee and was deployed to Spain and Kuwait.

Newton left the Navy in 2013 as a petty officer second class and returned to St. Louis

where he now works as a field technician for Spectrum.

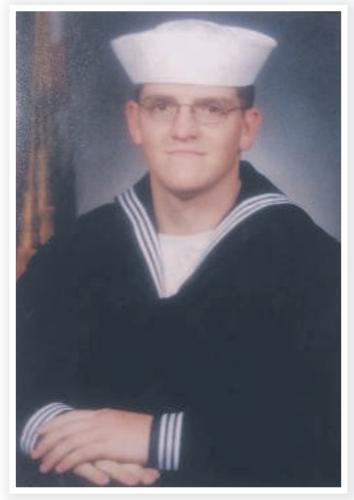
But he missed the military and talked often with his wife, Amy, about re-enlisting. Amy wanted to join the Air National Guard herself but was ineligible due to college athletic injuries. Instead, she became an EMT, and the more she talked about her job, the more Newton knew he wanted to do something similar to help people.

Last year, he enlisted in the Illinois Army National Guard and found himself at basic training again after almost 20 years. But this time, most of the recruits were about half his age.

"My second time through was a little more difficult physically," Newton said. "Mentally, I had better prepared myself because I knew what to expect. But I was the oldest person there. They called me Old Man or Navy."

He then completed combat medic training at Fort Sam Houston in Texas. This summer. Spc. Newton will be one of three medics assigned with a company from his unit to participate in training exercises in Japan. Sometime next year, he expects to be deployed to the Middle East, and he hopes he will be seen as a leader, but not just for his age.

"I know that leadership comes with time, not time in the service but time in the unit, when you have proven yourself," he said.



PETTY OFFICER WILLIAM NEWTON. PHOTO PROVIDED BY WILLIAM NEWTON

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Missouri Veterans Endeavor is honored by, and proud of the veterans featured in the ongoing profiles in Stories of Honor.

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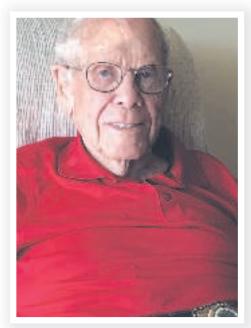
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R.P. LUMBER'S MILITARY DOUBLE BEST REWARDS PROGRAM.
PHOTO PROVIDED BY R.P. LUMBER.

WINSTON "RUSTY" PENDLETON

U.S. ARMY



RUSTY PENDLETON.
PHOTO PROVIDED BY RUSTY PENDLETON

BY LORI ROSE, BRAND AVE. STUDIOS CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Winston "Rusty" Pendleton remembers the brutal cold and the snow, stained red from the bloodshed. It was December 1944 and the young St. Louisan was a gunner atop an Army half-track as American soldiers struggled to hold on to a small but crucial crossroads in Belgium.

Known as the Siege of Bastogne, the week-long struggle was part of the larger Battle of the Bulge, Hitler's last-ditch effort to halt the Allied Forces' advance across France to Germany during World War II.

Sgt. Pendleton had been driving a horse-drawn milk truck in Maplewood, Mo. before he enlisted in August 1943 at age 19. By late 1944, he was part of the 575th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Battalion attached to Gen. George S. Patton's 3rd Army, streaming north to relieve Bastogne.

"It was a frightening time, because Patton was worried we were going to lose," remembered Pendleton, now 94 and a

resident of Des Peres. "I was on the perimeter at Bastogne but not out of the range of the bullets."

"I saw a whole hillside turn red. I got upset with humanity that we couldn't get along better than this," he said.

PUSHING ON TO THE SIEGFRIED LINE

After the Germans were pushed back from Bastogne, Pendleton's battalion continued east through the Ardennes forest toward the German defensive line called the Siegfried Line, clearing roads and liberating villages in Belgium, then Germany and Austria.

"It was the most severe winter that Germany had faced," he said. "Nothing less than two feet of snow anywhere, and temperatures of 20 or 30 below."

It was a frightening time, because Patton was worried we were going to lose ...
I was on the perimeter at Bastogne but not out of the range of the bullets. 77

Unprotected atop the Army vehicle as he helped man its big guns, Pendleton could do little to protect himself from the bitter cold. "I had an overcoat but I couldn't cover my shins," he said. "We had wool underwear, but I'm telling you, when that wind blew it didn't make a bit of difference."

As Pendleton and his fellow soldiers scanned the skies for German Luftwaffe, they also had to keep an eye trained on the roadsides as they passed. "The woods were full of Germans sniping at us," he said. "We got baptized good with the field artillery. They had mean, mean field artillery."

"We were in danger of dying every second,"

he said. "But that infantry fighting out front I really admire. I can't believe the punishment those men took."

A HORRIFYING SIGHT

By late spring, Pendleton's unit encountered Mauthausen, a prison camp in Austria where some 190,000 prisoners had been held, mostly political prisoners but also Jews from Poland and Hungary and other concentration camps. Untold thousands of prisoners died due to starvation, disease, forced labor or the gas chamber.

The Nazis had fled and what they left behind horrified the Americans: emaciated survivors and thousands upon thousands of bodies.

"You could stand in one place and see

thousands of people stacked up like cordwood," Pendleton said.

Following Germany's surrender that May, Pendleton remained in Europe as a military policeman, guarding German prisoners. It had been six months since he arrived in Europe and would be nearly a year before he returned home to marry his sweetheart, Dorothy, whom he had met at a barn dance at St. Albans in 1940. He and his late wife were married for 72 years.

For many years, Pendleton worked as a professional carpenter. He built a home for Dorothy and their son in Wildwood. He fell in love with airplanes during the war and decided he wanted to learn to fly. He bought a small plane, a Piper

Tri-Pacer, and loved to take Dorothy sightseeing.

"I was crazy about it," he said. "We'd take afternoon trips of 200 miles or more and be home for dinner."

He said he never liked to talk much about the war and he felt no hatred toward the German soldiers. "They were just people," he said, following orders like he was.

Years after the war, he saw a familiar face among his coworkers in a carpentry shop in St. Louis.

"I saw a face I recognized but it took me a while before I remembered — I had captured him," he said. "We worked together for two years."



RUSTY PENDLETON IN GERMANY.
PHOTO PROVIDED BY RUSTY PENDLETON

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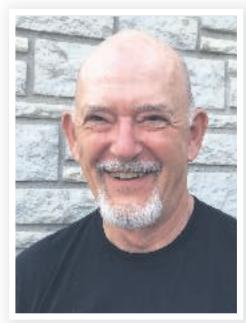




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RICHARD RAJKOVICH

U.S. MARINE CORPS & MISSOURI ARMY NATIONAL GUARD



RICK RAJKOVICH. PHOTO PROVIDED BY LORI ROSE

BY LORI ROSE, BRAND AVE. STUDIOS CONTRIBUTING WRITER

For 34 years, Richard "Rick" Rajkovich kept alive a family tradition of military service and inspired his daughter to follow in those footsteps.

Rajkovich, 72, enlisted as a Marine during the Vietnam War and later served 28 years in the Missouri Army National Guard, including multiple overseas deployments. His grandfather and both parents served in the Army, his brother served in the Marines and his wife is a National Guard veteran as well.

Rajkovich, a Washington, Mo., resident, also served 24 years as a reserve sheriff's deputy while working full time as a road mechanic for a trucking company, so there were countless days and nights when there was an empty chair at the supper table back home.

"I had no doubt in my mind that I would end up in the military," said his daughter, U.S. Army Pfc. Rachel Gerrein.

"Everything that my dad embodies as a soldier and as a father helped form my decision to enlist. You're helping others and keeping your family safe."

EITHER JOIN OR GET DRAFTED

Rajkovich might not have served in the military at all had it not been for the draft. It was 1966, and Rajkovich's birthdate put him at the top of the list.

"I had no intention of joining the military," he said. "My birthdate was number one in the fishbowl so I didn't have much choice. It was either join or get drafted."

Despite the fact that both parents served in the Army in World War II and his grandfather was an Army veteran of World War I, Rajkovich chose the U.S. Marine Corps. The Marines trained him as a heavy truck driver, then sent him to Vietnam with an infantry battalion fighting the North Vietnamese along the demilitarized zone.

His duties included delivering mail and supplies by jeep to fellow Marines at fire bases such as Khe Sanh and Cam Lo where heavy fighting occurred. "It wasn't pretty," he said. "I'd come back with bullet holes in the vehicle. They would use me for targets."

A DIFFERENT HOMECOMING

Like many battle-weary Marines, Rajkovich expected to be greeted with the thanks of a grateful nation when he returned to the States. But that wasn't the case, he said. "It's still a bitter feeling. I went and I did what I was supposed to do for my country and it wasn't appreciated," he said.

Still, 12 years later he joined the military a second time, signing on with a military police company of the Missouri National Guard based in St. Clair. Over the next 28 years, Rajkovich rose to the rank of first sergeant, serving alongside friends and neighbors — and wife, Cindy — responding to emergencies at home and abroad. This time, the homecomings felt different.

"It was to the point where we'd walk through the airport and people would be lined up in the aisles cheering," he said. "I felt I was doing my part for my community."

In addition to multiple overseas deployments, Rajkovich spent weeks at a time on domestic missions. During the flood of 1993, he spent more than a month sleeping on a gymnasium floor in St. Charles while taking turns with other soldiers standing guard in flooded-out neighborhoods.

"There were sleepless nights and irritated It's a family tradition.

people," he said. "I had sympathy for them some of the guys in our unit who were on duty were flooded out at home, too."

A FAMILY TRADITION

Rajkovich's first overseas deployment with the Guard came during the U.S. invasion of Panama in 1990, followed by Desert Storm in 1991. when his company spent six months filling in for active-duty soldiers stationed in Europe. Later came two deployments to Kosovo and one 18-month stint in Iraa.

After both deploying to Desert Storm, he and his wife decided that for the sake of their daughter, it would be better if they served in separate companies. Still, there were times their missions overlapped and Rachel was cared for by her grandparents.

"They always made sure I understood why they were leaving, when, how long, and made sure I was comfortable while they had to be gone," Rachel said. "There was never a time when I resented their service. They were helping other families that may not have the means to help themselves."

These days, it's Rachel's turn to lean on her parents, as they help care for her daughter while both she and her husband. a soldier in the 10th Mountain Division, are away from home for extended Army training.



RICK RAIKOVICH IN THE MARINES PHOTO PROVIDED BY RICK RAJKOVICH

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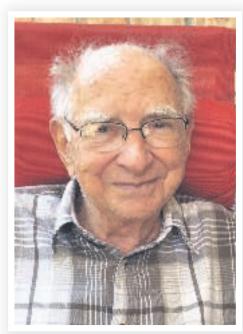
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MENDEL ROSENBERG

U.S. ARMY



MENDEL ROSENBERG.
PHOTO PROVIDED BY LORI ROSE

BY LORI ROSE, BRAND AVE. STUDIOS CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Holocaust survivor Mendel Rosenberg was liberated from a Nazi concentration camp by American soldiers. It wasn't long before he became one of them.

With the end of World War II and his liberation from Dachau, Rosenberg and his mother — all that was left of his family — found their way to cousins in the United States. They settled in Ohio, where the young Rosenberg went to work during the day and attended classes at night in hopes of earning a high school diploma.

It was 1947. Less than four years later, though not yet a citizen and before he could complete his high school diploma, Rosenberg was drafted into the U.S. Army after the outbreak of the Korean War.

"I could barely speak English," he said.

But he didn't dare refuse. "I thought if they drafted me I'd better go and pay attention. If I didn't go I'd never be able to become a citizen."

THEY WERE SHOCKED, WE WERE SHOCKED

Rosenberg, now 90, was born in Germany and raised in Lithuania. He and his mother and older brother were forced into concentration camps in 1944 after his father was shot and killed by the German Army.

After months of hard labor, starvation and sickness, Rosenberg was among thousands of Jewish prisoners ordered by the SS into rail cars as the Americans approached the infamous Dachau and its network of subcamps in the spring of 1945. For 10 days, Rosenberg traveled in a packed cattle car with no food and little water.

The train finally came to a stop on May 5. The doors were opened and the Americans were there. Rosenberg was 16.

"They were shocked, we were shocked," Rosenberg remembered. "And then they said the war was over."

The Creve Coeur resident has told his story hundreds of times as a volunteer at the Holocaust Museum and Learning Center. He recently published his story, entitled "Thriver: My Journey Through Holocaust Nightmare to American Dream," which recounts his comfortable upbringing in a Jewish community in Lithuania and the horrors his family faced after the Russians arrived in 1939, followed by the Germans in 1941.

Rosenberg's father was shot and killed by the Germans in 1941 and his family was forced into a ghetto before they were transferred to Stutthof, a concentration camp in Germany. From there, Rosenberg and his brother were sent to Muhldorf, a subcamp of Dachau, where his brother was beaten to death in 1945, just weeks before the end of the war.

After the war, Rosenberg stayed with thousands of other refugees in a displaced persons camp in Germany for more than a year until his mother could work her way back to him. With no other family remaining, she wrote to cousins in America and the two made plans to emigrate.

I VERY MUCH WANTED TO SERVE

In January 1951, Uncle Sam came calling. "Given that I wasn't yet a citizen, I possibly could have opted out of the draft," Rosenberg wrote in his book. "But I very much wanted to serve the nation that had come to my rescue just six years before."

After boot camp at Fort Knox, Ky., Rosenberg was sent to military intelligence school at Fort Meade, Md. He figured he would be sent to Europe as an interpreter, since he spoke several languages, including German and Russian.

Instead, he was sent as an MP to guard

American soldiers imprisoned at a stockade in Pennsylvania. Once, when several servicemen escaped, he was told to find them and shoot them if necessary.

Rosenberg said he couldn't do it. He went to his commander and handed him back the rifle and the ammunition and said, "There is no way I'm going to shoot an American soldier after they had liberated me from the concentration camp."

Two weeks later he was made a company clerk, he said.

Later he was assigned overseas and volunteered to go to Europe but was instead stationed in Tokyo, where he needed a translator to help supervise Japanese mechanics working to repair the Army's halftracks and tanks and returning them to Korea.

After his two-year enlistment was up, Pfc. Rosenberg

returned to Ohio, married and became a naturalized citizen. His employer transferred him to St. Louis, where he went on to build a successful window company, complete his high school diploma and raise a family.

For years, he never spoke of the horrors of his earlier life, though his children knew he suffered from nightmares. Then a friend asked him to speak to students of his religion class.

"That put an end to the nightmares because I started talking about it," Rosenberg said. "So I decided to keep on speaking because I wanted everybody to hear the story. I wanted them to hear firsthand exactly what happened so it won't be repeated."



MENDEL ROSENBERG.
PHOTO PROVIDED BY MENDEL ROSENBERG

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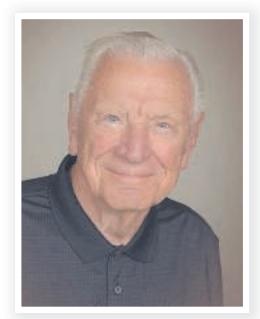


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ROBERT SCHULTZ

U.S. MARINE CORPS



BOB SCHULTZ.
PHOTO PROVIDED BY BOB AND SHIRLEY SCHULTZ

BY LORI ROSE, BRAND AVE. STUDIOS CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Thank Hollywood for Robert "Bob" Schultz's decision to join the U.S. Marine Corps.

Schultz was a 20-year-old machinist in Wisconsin when "To the Shores of Tripoli" came out in movie theaters in the months after Pearl Harbor was attacked.

"I saw it and was impressed enough to want to be a Marine," said Schultz, who remembers admiring the famous Marine Corps Blues uniform. "It was the esprit de corps, the uniform, the idea of being in the Marines."

The Marines are said to have credited the film for a surge in recruitment about that time. The movie featured John Payne, Maureen O'Hara and Randolph Scott and was filmed in part at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot San Diego, where Schultz and thousands of other recruits would go through boot camp.

"[Actor] Tyrone Power was there at the same time I was," Schultz remembered. "I never met him but everybody knew it."

A SEAGOING MARINE

After boot camp, Schultz went on to Sea School, which prepared him to serve as a Seagoing Marine, a small detachment of Marines that served alongside hundreds of sailors aboard the huge naval warships. In addition to manning anti-aircraft guns, the duties of the Seagoing Marines included guarding the brig and protecting the ship's captain.

Schultz, now 97 and a resident of Belleville, was assigned to the USS California, a battleship that had been sunk at Pearl Harbor but was rebuilt and ready for action again by January 1944. With Schultz aboard, the California went on to play an important role in defending the islands and atolls of the Pacific Ocean.

"We saw a lot of action," Schultz said. "Before the landings, we would bombard the beaches with the big guns and clear out any Japanese that might be waiting there."

After ground forces went ashore, the Seagoing Marines helped man the anti-aircraft guns to guard against enemy aircraft. "But there wasn't much because we had so much firepower," Schultz said.

The California was armed with a battery of 14-inch guns that helped clear the way for landings in Saipan, Tinian, Guam and later the Philippines, including the Battle of Surigao Strait.

"The 14-inch gun, that's a huge gun," Schultz said. "They're very loud. We were subjected to a lot of noise. For ear protection we were given a little wad of cotton and it got pretty scuzzy after a while."

A KAMIKAZE ATTACK

In January 1945, while providing shore bombardment at Lingayen Gulf in the Philippines, the ship was hit by a kamikaze, killing 44 and wounding 155.

"One was coming from behind and it missed us and landed 20 feet away from us and blew up," Schultz said. "The next one hit us.

Fortunately, I had a bulkhead between me and where he hit, but I felt the heat."

What he remembers most about that time was the smell of burned flesh and the smell of Aqua Velva. "We were still in action and we didn't have time to bury the dead," he said. "In the South Pacific it's hot and dead bodies don't smell good."

The bodies were stored in the ship's barbershop and aftershave was liberally doused throughout. Schultz said he still has an aversion to that particular scent.

He also remembers how the men were eventually buried at sea after a few words from a chaplain.

"When you're buried at sea, you're gone," he said.
"They sew you into a canvas bag, the apparatus tilts and off you go. That's one of the things that I had bad dreams about is these guys in their canvas bags at the bottom of the ocean."

After the kamikaze attack, the ship returned to Bremerton, Wash., for repairs and then rejoined the fleet in June in time to support the troops fighting in Okinawa. Later, Schultz and the crew of the California were among the first Americans in Occupied Japan. "The people were very friendly," he said. "They wanted to sell anything or buy anything."

The ship finally arrived home to its new port in Philadelphia on Dec. 7, 1945, after sailing from Japan to Singapore, through the Straits of Malacca, to Ceylon and Cape Town, South Africa.

Schultz went on to build a career in the insurance industry and has lived for the past 30 years in Belleville. He has enjoyed traveling the world with his wife, as well as attending reunions with his fellow Marines, including the commissioning of the new USS California, a nuclear-powered submarine.

"The guys gave the captain a piece of the teak deck from the decommissioned ship," he said. He hopes it serves as a reminder of the Seagoing Marines, whose duty aboard warships continued until 1998. "Seagoing Marines don't get a lot of publicity."



BOB SCHULTZ.
PHOTO PROVIDED BY BOB AND SHIRLEY SCHULTZ

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BEN STABLER

U.S. ARMY



BEN STABLER.
PHOTO PROVIDED BY BEN STABLER

BY LORI ROSE, BRAND AVE. STUDIOS CONTRIBUTING WRITER

When U.S. Army veteran Ben Stabler talks to high school students about his experiences while serving in Iraq, he doesn't sugarcoat anything.

He tells them he celebrated his 21st birthday with a can of Coke in a plane over Kuwait, rather than at a party with friends.

He shows them the scar on the back of his head from the traumatic brain injury he suffered in an accident soon after he was deployed.

He talks about the 19 fellow soldiers his battalion lost during the 15 months he served overseas.

And he describes the post-traumatic stress disorder he deals with today.

"I think the students are very impacted by how direct he is," said Bradley Durnell, a history teacher who invited Stabler to participate in a History Alive program at Lindbergh High School. "They say, he spoke to me like I was an average person, not like someone talking down to a kid. He's very straightforward and expresses himself with passion."

Students really listen to him, because he's closer to being a contemporary, Durnell said.

"I think the students are excited about the Iraq and Afghanistan session because the veterans are closer to their age and because those topics are more prevalent in conversation and in their lives. For them, most things in a history textbook just live in the textbook, but conversations about Americans fighting against terrorism right now in the Middle East, those are things that are still happening."

I'LL JUST GO AND SEE FOR MYSELF

Fenton resident, Stabler, now 33 and a maintenance engineer and father of two, tells students that he was a "troublesome" teenager growing up in suburban St. Louis, a "skateboarder, punk-rock kid" who got into fights at school and trouble with the law.

Most days were pretty boring, driving around in a Humvee, sweating it out ... it's hot, over 100 degrees, and you've got to keep the windows up because windows stop bullets.

After graduating, he worked a couple of odd jobs and didn't have a plan for the future. It was 2005 and the Iraq War was in full swing, and Stabler thought: "I'll just go and see for myself."

He enlisted in the U.S. Army and was assigned to the 12th Infantry, training as a marksman and an EMT.

Serving in the Army changed his life, he said. It gave him opportunities and taught him discipline, teamwork, communication skills and persistence.

It also took him directly into danger, when his battalion was sent to Dora, a Baghdad neighborhood known for violence.

"The idea was to clean out the bad dudes from the area and retake it," Stabler said. That meant developing information, searching for terrorists and weapons caches, and engaging in firefights with insurgents as the Americans sought to bring stability to the area.

"Most days were pretty boring, driving around in a Humvee, sweating it out," Stabler said. "It's hot, over 100 degrees, and you've got to keep the windows up because windows stop bullets."

LONG. HOT DAYS PUNCTUATED BY VIOLENCE

But the long, hot days on patrol were punctuated by violence as the terrorists' explosives grew more sophisticated with armor-piercing ammunition that could do plenty of damage inside a Humvee.

The 2nd Battalion, he said, lost 19 soldiers while he was deployed.

Stabler himself was injured while unloading supplies from a shipping container near a helicopter landing pad. When a Black Hawk came in low, the rotor wash blew a large steel door into the back of his head, knocking him out and leaving a traumatic brain injury and a wound that required nine staples to close.

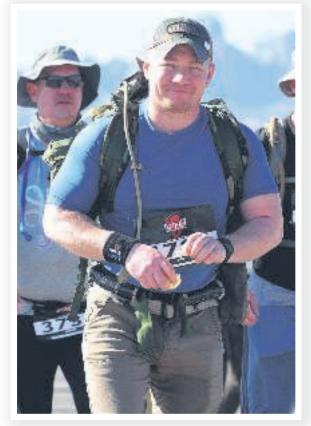
Stabler served 15 months in the Middle East before returning to the United States and finishing out his active duty in Colorado. He served three more years in the National Guard, attaining the rank of staff sergeant and working toward a degree in industrial technology. Today he works for a chemical company and is married with two small children.

When he talks with high school students about his service, he brings some of the awards he earned, such as the Army Commendation Medal, which he received after he narrowly missed being shot by snipers while providing security for an Iraqi family that had been targeted by extremists.

"It was like in the movies where the bullet whizzes by your head," he said. "You could hear it."

He remembers another time when a group of civilians was hit by a mortar intended for his Humvee. The image of the wounded children stays with him and is the reason he sought counseling for PTSD.

"At the time, it looked bad, but it just affected me a lot worse after I had my own kids," he said. "I would say going to the Vet Center (for counseling) is the best thing I've ever done."



THE BATAAN MEMORIAL DEATH MARCH.
PHOTO PROVIDED BY BEN STABLER

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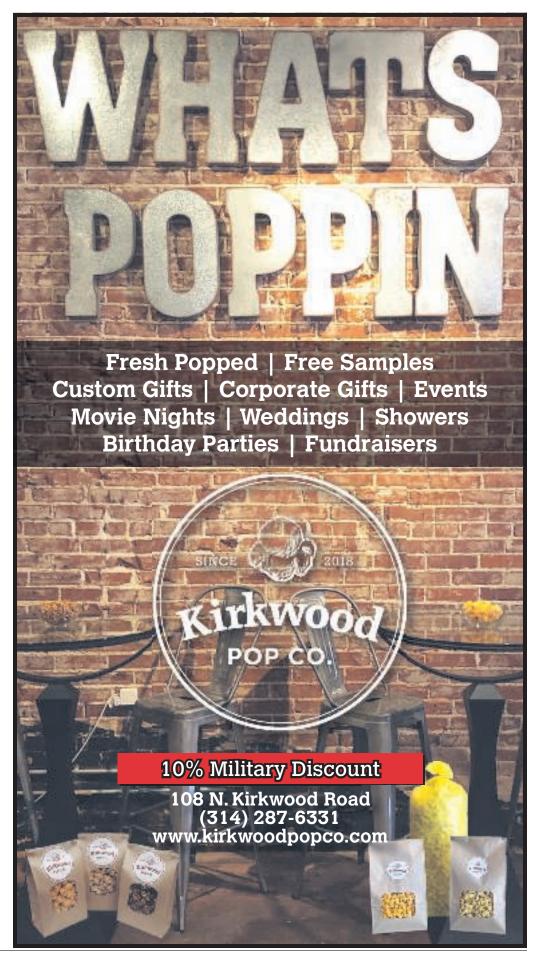
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EUGENE ULRICH

U.S. ARMY AIR CORPS



EUGENE ULRICH. PHOTO BY EUGENE ULRICH

BY LORI ROSE, BRAND AVE. STUDIOS CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Through 50 missions on a B-17 out of North Africa during World War II, a young Missourian named Eugene Ulrich carefully jotted down in his diary what he saw, heard and thought from December 1942 until September 1943.

"I knew I was going to keep a record of everything I did," said Ulrich, a Spanish Lake resident who recently celebrated his 100th birthday. "I thought it was important."

Ulrich, who grew up in Cape Girardeau, enlisted in the Army Air Corps in 1941 and by Christmas 1942 was en route to North Africa as part of the 301st Bombardment Group. Over the next nine months, Lt. Ulrich chronicled each of his 50 missions as a navigator on a B-17 Flying Fortress nicknamed Dirty Gertie.

His entries detailed the successes and failures as his crew dropped thousands of pounds of bombs on rail yards, shipping docks and airfields throughout Northern Africa and the Mediterranean.

But he also chronicled the mundane tasks of daily life between flights: from getting a haircut to keeping his tent warm, dry and free of sand. He sketched drawings to go along with some entries, jotted down song lyrics and jokes, and wrote about the ways he and his fellow airmen amused themselves during downtime, such as volleyball games, movies and parties with Red Cross nurses.

NUMBER 50

What he remembers most about his time in North Africa, he said, was that final mission to bomb an airfield at Marseille, France. He knew Number 50 meant he would soon be going home. Sadly, that mission is remembered more for another reason.

"I lost one of my very best friends on my last mission," Ulrich said. "He was a navigator in another squadron. A shell hit and blew the whole nose off of his plane."

"I'll never forget that," he said. "It was the hardest thing in the world for me to go tell his girlfriend in the Red Cross she wouldn't see him anymore."

CHANCES ARE HOPELESS

In his journal, he wrote: "Well, today was Number 50. This makes me a senior birdman. Our main target was really hit. I can say I was really sweating until the wheels of our plane were on the ground. I saw one of my best friends, Robert Michael, go down. Seven chutes were seen. Chances are very hopeless for Michael. I am so happy to have finished my missions, but so sorry about the bad luck today."

It was August 17, 1943, not quite seven months after Ulrich's first bombing mission over Bizerte in Tunisia.

Several days later the squadron ran into a "furious" fight with the German fighter planes. One of the bombers lost two motors, another lost its waist gunner to enemy fire.

"Looking up the barrels of machine guns and 30 mm cannons that are puffing at you is not my idea of fun," Ulrich wrote. "I just sit behind my gun as did all the other men, sweating out who would hit who first. Our top turret gunner is living on borrowed time. A 20 mm hit and exploded not 6 inches from his head, leaving a hole big enough to stick your fist through. He didn't get a scratch and now has the end of the shell to wear around his neck."

A PURPLE HEART

Ulrich had a close call of his own when he was injured while on a bombing raid to Palermo on the island of Sicily.

"A shell exploded and all those little pebbles jumped out and hit me in the face," Ulrich remembered recently. "I've still got a fragment in my upper lip. I can still feel it."

In his journal, he wrote: "Twenty minutes off the target we were attacked by ME110s. A plane was knocked out of the (squadron)

that was trailing and he was gliding for the water the last time I saw him. Flak was really heavy, 30 caliber bullets tore from one wing to the other. A piece of flak tore through Sgt. Drewes' foot and just as our bombs were dropping, a 20 mm shell exploded and one fragment went through my oxygen mask lodging in my upper lip. Blood really spurted out due to pressure. I tore off my oxygen mask and grabbed a spare. It would not fit due to not being adjusted. About this time an ME110 was in. so I fired the gun in his general direction with one hand, holding the mask on with the other hand."

The crew made it home, and after a few days in the hospital, Ulrich received his Purple Heart in a field ceremony. "The medal is really beautiful and I am very proud of it," he wrote.

Ulrich, who also earned a Distinguished Flying Cross for his service, arrived home to the States just a month after his final mission. He was stationed at Army air bases in Tennessee and New Mexico before being discharged in September 1945. He went on to a career as a custom home builder and later worked for the government helping to build missile silos at White Sands Missile Range and other facilities.

He said he never really thought about the dangers he faced when he was overseas but was amazed by all that he was able to do and see. In his journal in March 1943, he summed up his adventures: "A person can sure do a lot of things in a few months. This old world has a lot of strange and interesting places for one to see. I've learned lots more since I have been out of school than I did in school."



EUGENE ULRICH. PHOTO BY EUGENE ULRICH

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JAY VERMILLION U.S. MARINE CORPS



JAY VERMILLION HOLDS THE HELMET HE WAS WEARING WHEN HE WAS INJURED IN AFGHANISTAN. PHOTO PROVIDED BY JAY VERMILLION

BY LORI ROSE, BRAND AVE. STUDIOS CONTRIBUTING WRITER

ay Vermillion's father served his country Jas a U.S. Marine and hoped Jay would choose an easier path in life.

"I would say, 'Dad, I want to be a Marine,' and for years he would say, 'Pick something else. You can be anything you want to be in this world except a Marine," Vermillion remembered. "It just made me want to be a Marine even more."

After graduating high school, Vermillion went against his father's wishes and enlisted. He was assigned to the 1st Marines, just like his father, who served in Vietnam, and his grandfather, who served in World War II. Through tears, his father told him he was proud.

"My dad never cried," Vermillion said. "He told me I'd never know how happy I made him. He said, 'You'll make a great Marine."

NEVER GIVE UP

What he learned over the next 11 years through deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan helped Vermillion survive not only the horrors of war, but serious injuries from an exploding IED, the struggle to learn to live again after a traumatic brain injury and the loss of his wife to leukemia.

"I just kept relying on what the Marines taught me: Never give up," he said.

Today, Vermillion tries to use what he learned to help the young men he coaches on the Eureka High School varsity football team.

"I try to use honor, courage, commitment and pride and to develop small unit leadership and responsibility," said Vermillion, a defensive line coach. "I believe it's going to make them better citizens in life."

Now 40. Vermillion lives in Wentzville and is studying to become a physical education teacher. He also mentors other wounded warriors through the Focus Marines Foundation, which helps veterans transition to civilian life.

THIS IS IT. I'M DYING

He almost didn't make it to this point, he said.

On a patrol in Fallujah in Iraq in 2005, Staff Sgt. Vermillion suffered a concussion when a "triple stacked" IED comprising of three 155 mm artillery shells exploded near his vehicle.

"I remember going black for a while," he said. "My ears were ringing, my head was hurting, but I was worried about my guys in the truck."

Though he now thinks that was the beginning of his brain injury, he quickly returned to duty. Later in that same tour, his vehicle was hit by another explosion.

Then in July 2010, while deployed in Afghanistan, Vermillion and two others were seriously wounded in a blast from a homemade explosive device that "peeled our truck in half."

"I just remember waking up on the Black Hawk," he said. "It was the worst pain I'd ever felt. I remember being scared and thinking, 'This is it, I'm dying.'"

Vermillion spent the next two years in Balboa Naval Hospital learning to walk and talk again.

THEY SAVED MY LIFE

When he finally was released from the hospital, Vermillion was still dealing with pain and the ongoing effects of the brain injury such as nausea, vertigo and memory loss. He struggled to handle civilian life — managing his emotions, figuring out his finances, buying groceries, and staying on top of all the appointments that were part of his recovery.

Then his wife, MacKinzie, was diagnosed with leukemia, and between his therapy appointments and her new regimen of cancer treatments, he was barely hanging on, he said.

That's when a nurse introduced him to the Focus Marines Foundation, which was founded in 2010 by Marines who served in Vietnam

and understood the issues associated with transitioning back to civilian life. Nearly 800 veterans have attended a week-long program the foundation developed to help these wounded warriors regain self-respect and purpose.

"Had it not been for them, I would not be here," Vermillion said. "I was so mad at God, and I had so many questions. They saved my life."

Focus and the Joshua Chamberlain Society, another charity that supports wounded veterans, helped Vermillion get a job as an assistant football coach in his hometown of Jackson, Mo. After MacKinzie died in 2017, they also helped him move to the St. Louis area and connected him with Eureka Head Coach, Jacob Sumner.

"He brings a lot to our program," Sumner said. "With his background of brotherhood and his passion and work ethic, he does a good job motivating those kids. They love him. He's a humble guy, so he doesn't necessarily get into his story, but the kids know quite a bit about it and they respect him completely."

Today, Vermillion is engaged to be married to a woman he met through Focus. The couple are raising Vermillion's two sons and a daughter and recently welcomed a baby girl.

Vermillion recently had neck surgery and expects to have more surgery on his back to help alleviate pain, but he looks forward to getting back on the field with the football team and giving back to Focus.

"My biggest satisfaction comes from coaching and helping at Focus," Vermillion said. "I feel so much better in my heart."



JAY VERMILLION. PHOTO PROVIDED BY JAY VERMILLION

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RAY ZEPP

U.S. ARMY & ARMY RESERVE



RAY ZEPP WITH MEDALS.
PHOTO PROVIDED BY RAY ZEPE

BY LORI ROSE, BRAND AVE. STUDIOS CONTRIBUTING WRITER

The first time Ray Zepp took command of a medevac helicopter in Vietnam, he was shot down.

It wouldn't be the last time.

"When you went out to pick up the wounded you automatically knew you were going to get shot at," Zepp said. "Almost every time we got a call, our soldiers were in the middle of a firefight. I was shot down numerous times and shot up just about every time I went out."

Many of the details of those rescue missions over two tours in Vietnam are lost to time and the inherent chaos of war. But the first mission after being promoted to pilot from co-pilot stands out, Zepp said. Despite the large Red Cross marking it as an air ambulance, the Huey was a target for the enemy.

"The very first mission I went on as the commander, we picked up two wounded soldiers who had been shot in the head and were severely wounded," Zepp said. "We

had just lifted up and the enemy started firing at us. They weren't supposed to shoot at us. But I don't think they ever read the Geneva Convention."

Zepp managed to land, despite the motor being shot out. "We auto rotated to the ground and two other helicopters came in and rescued us." he said.

A LIFE OF SERVICE

Zepp, now 71 and a resident of O'Fallon, Mo., served two tours as a rescue pilot with the 1st Cavalry in Vietnam and Cambodia from 1968 to 1970, earning numerous medals and commendations — including a Silver Star, two Bronze Stars, three Distinguished Flying Crosses and a Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry with Silver Star.

When he returned to St. Louis, the chief warrant officer served three years in the Army Reserve and went to work as a firefighter. He retired after 34 years with the Black Jack Fire Department.

Almost every time we got a call, our soldiers were in the middle of a firefight.

I was shot down numerous times and shot up just about every time I went out.

Today, Zepp continues to devote time and talent to helping people in need. As a member of his church's international service team, he travels the world to provide relief after natural and man-made disasters, from hurricanes to wars.

One mission took him back to Cambodia, where his church team built an orphanage.

"It seemed like things hadn't changed hardly at all," he said. "It all looked the same, from the water buffaloes to the rice paddies."

DREAMED OF BEING AN AIRLINE PILOT

Zepp grew up in Florissant and was a freshman at the University of Missouri-St. Louis when he enlisted in the U.S. Army. He dreamed of being an airline pilot and was taking flying lessons in his free time. When he found out the Army would send him to flight school as part of his enlistment, he figured that would be the quickest and easiest way to earn his wings.

After basic training at Fort Polk in Louisiana, Zepp was sent to Texas for helicopter training and then to Georgia for advanced helicopter training. In Vietnam, he served first in a gunship squadron but soon volunteered for a medevac crew, where pilots were in short supply. After one day as a co-pilot, he was promoted to the commander's seat.

YOU'RE OUT THERE BY YOURSELF

It was a deadly job, but the military depended on the rescue crews to

depended on the rescue crews to quickly reach critically wounded soldiers on the front lines — from densely forested mountaintops to swampy lowlands and rice paddies, in poor weather conditions, and often at night.

"It was a completely different way of flying from a gunship," Zepp said. "On a gunship, you're always flying with other helicopters, but when you're on a medevac flight, you're out there by yourself."

Some rescue missions involved repeat trips, because the helicopters had room for only six wounded. And it wasn't like the movies where the wounded are delivered one by one on stretchers, he said.

"It doesn't happen like that," Zepp said. "The enemy is shooting at you. The Americans are throwing their wounded into the helicopter. There's a pile of them in the back and the medic is

trying to sort it all out. It was very tense."

Other rescues required the pilot to hover over the jungle and drop a cable through the treetops to hoist an injured soldier to safety.

Zepp said pilots risked their lives every time they flew a mission. "When you landed you always tried to put your tail toward the enemy because they would try to shoot into the cockpit. It was on-the-job training," he said.

"I remember that first time crashing — the bullets coming up at me were probably an inch long but they looked like soup cans coming at me," he said. "But you didn't have time to get scared, you just reacted."

"I'm just thankful to the Lord I made it through because I should have been killed many times."



ZEPP IN UNIFORM.
PHOTO PROVIDED BY RAY ZEPP

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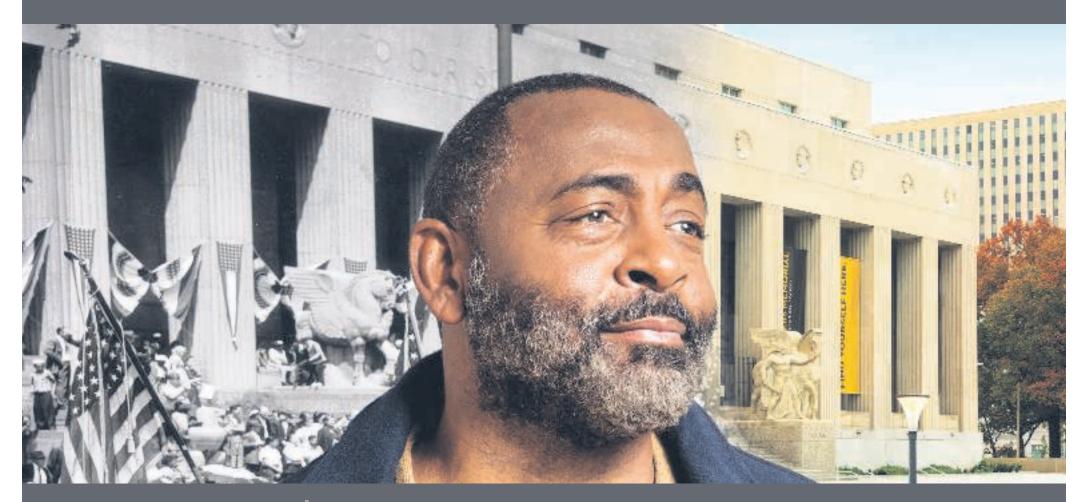


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